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## **The Politics of the Self: Stability, Normativity and the Lives we can Live with Living[1]**

**James Lenman**

### **1. Super-Anchorites**

C. I. Lewis, discussing practical reason in the now rather neglected Book III of *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, characterizes 'consistency' as 'the adherence throughout to what we have accepted; or to put it in the opposite manner, the non-acceptance now of what we shall later be unwilling to adhere to.' [2] He goes on to assert:

If it were not true that present valuing and doing may later be a matter of regret, there would be no point and no imperative to consistency of any kind. No act would then be affected by relation to any principle, and no thinking by any consideration of validity. Life in general would be free of any concern; and there would be no distinction of what is rational from what is perverse or silly. [3]

To develop this intriguing Lewisian thought, let me cook up a story.

Imagine, in the first place, creatures perhaps somewhat like ourselves in many ways but differing markedly from us in not being even remotely social animals. Call them *Anchorites*. Imagine a large planet containing some small number of such creatures each living entirely alone at remote distances from one another. Each minds his own business. They form no mutual relationships, never cooperate or interact and have no desire to do these things. We might suppose they reproduce asexually by emitting spores that fly off somewhere and take root, taking no interest in their offspring; or perhaps that they are immortals not reproducing at all.

The Anchorites are not like us. We are social creatures with an urgent interest in sustaining a shared normative perspective to govern our mutual interaction. But these creatures, who have no mutual interaction, would be unlikely to form such a shared perspective and have certainly no need to do so. Because they have no need to do this, normative *commonality*, that hugely important good of social creatures like ourselves who aspire to constitute moral communities is not an important good for these creatures. The broadly political processes by which we seek to engender and sustain such commonalities have thus no echo in their lives.

Now imagine some even stranger creatures. Just as my Anchorites are indifferent to one another, imagine now a set of creatures for whom a similar relationship of mutual indifference obtains between its *temporal* parts. [4] We might suppose the life of these creatures divided into certain

very brief discrete units – call them *moments*. And imagine that the temporal part of a given such creature that occupies any given one of these brief moments has various pro-attitudes respecting what it does and what happens to it at that moment. But the concerns of a given moment simply do not reach out to engage with any others. The mutual indifference of my Anchorites to each other is echoed in the mutual indifference of the momentary temporal parts of these *Super-Anchorites*.

Anchorites were a stretch of imagination. *Super-Anchorites* are still more so. A creature with no interest in its own future would be hard enough to conceive and *very* unlike us. (*You'll die a nasty death in a couple of hours. Ho hum, not to worry.*) A creature with no interest in its own past is even harder. Suppose my past selves failed to work for their exams, failed to look for jobs, failed to save any cash, failed to form and maintain relationships with others, failed to take steps to remain in good health, leaving me today skint, unemployed, ignorant, lonely and physically falling apart. My interest in the *present* would have to be of a very strange sort if none of this bothered me. But, while an imaginative stretch is needed, it is still possible. My profound dependence on the prudent conduct of my earlier selves can be imagined away. We might imagine a creature with extremely simple, wholly material needs. It just wants to keep munching away at this nice plankton – for now - and it lives in an environment where it can reliably expect to find tons of plankton in great abundance all over the place. *Super-Anchorites* take us even further from what we recognize as the human condition than the Anchorites did but it is perhaps not quite an unimaginable place.

To say that is to say that, in the intrapersonal case, the circumstances of justice, or something analogous to them, go even deeper than they do in the interpersonal case. And perhaps that's partly why it's so natural for us to think of the rational credentials of prudential norms as less insecure, less in need of justification, than those of moral norms. But the circumstances in question are nonetheless contingent. We are creatures for whom the question how to get along with our fellows and the question how to get along with ourselves, both inescapably arise. But we might not have been the former and might even conceivably not have been the latter.

Because we are not like the Anchorites, normative commonality is important to us. Because we are not like the *Super-Anchorites*, a certain temporal and intrapersonal analogue to commonality is important to us. This is *stability*, stability in my responses, desires and normative commitments across time. Stability is not an important good for the *Super-Anchorites*, but it is certainly an important good for us. And the reflective processes by which we seek to engender and sustain stable desires, intentions and normative commitments have no echo in their lives. But such processes, comprising what we might call *the politics of the self*, are at the centre of our.

## **2. Conflict and Stability**

We need a politics of the self because our temporal parts, unlike those of *Super-Anchorites*, do not mind their own business. As Lewis notes, my present valuing and doing can be a matter of later regret. As well as a matter of earlier commitment and concern. I don't just care, right now, about what I do and what happens to me, right now. I care today about what I did yesterday and what I will do tomorrow. Indeed I don't just care about my fate at this and other moments. I also care about what, together, all these moments amount to, I care about my career as it extends across

time, about the narrative trajectory of the relationships I form. I care about my whole life.

Such attitudes at different moments directed at the same moments or series of moments are highly liable to conflict and the politics of the self is the attempt to handle intrapersonal conflict of this diachronic kind as well as synchronic conflict just as politics of a more familiar sort is the attempt to handle interpersonal conflict. A vivid example of diachronic intrapersonal conflict is Parfit's notorious Russian nobleman. This guy, remember, fears that when he comes into his estate, his present idealistic commitment to giving it away will have been dissipated by the onset of middle-aged conservatism.[5] He too, has, if his pessimism is warranted, a grave problem. The Russian nobleman fails to have a diachronically stable set of ideas throughout his life: what he values at one time conflicts with what he values at another. His early perspective is contemptuous in prospect of his reactionary later life. His later perspective is ashamed of the naivety and folly of his youth.

Another more complex example is Razumov in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*. In the novel's opening chapter we are offered a vivid depiction of synchronic inner conflict as Razumov, at this point a young student, vacillates over whether to betray to the authorities a fugitive from justice who has taken him, somewhat less than perceptively, for a friend. Less than perceptively not least because Razumov does so betray him, a decision he comes bitterly to regret. The rest of Razumov's life, very like that of Jim in the same author's *Lord Jim*, becomes a prolonged pursuit of redemption from the shame he feels at a youthful act he cannot easily live with. Like Jim, he carries through adult life the intolerable burden of a past act for which he cannot forgive himself.

Smaller toy examples can bring out the importance of stability as in this nice passage from G. K. Chesterton:

Let us suppose a man wanted a particular kind of world, say, a blue world... If he altered a blade of grass to his favourite colour every day, he would get on slowly. But if he altered his favourite colour every day, he would not get on at all. If, after reading a fresh philosopher, he started to paint everything red or yellow, his world would be thrown away.[6]

I think what I am here calling 'stability' is roughly what Lewis in the quoted passage means by 'consistency'. Stability is a better term I think because while, as I have urged, our imperative need for it arises from pretty deep features of the human condition, I don't think it's plausibly regarded as an imperative of *logic*. Chesterton's lover of the blues isn't necessarily bad at logic. But he is bad at living.[7]

I am saying nothing new in stressing the importance of stability. It features prominently in the work on practical reason of Valerie Tiberius and Michael Bratman[8] among others. Indeed such emphasis is a lot older than that. The classic depiction of the pitfalls of instability is of course Plato's famous description in the *Republic*[9] of the democratic man, a helpless prisoner to the whims of the moment, a passage recently recruited by Christine Korsgaard to illustrate her ideas about the unity of agency.[10]

Another recent discussion of the democratic man worth taking note of is Simon Blackburn's in his recent book on the *Republic* who questions, engagingly and provocatively, what is supposed to be

so very terrible about this character.[11] The point is, in a way, entirely fair. To say this kind of stability is important is not to say that appreciating its importance is not something we can overdo. You can have too much of a good thing. Someone who was not given to the odd indulgence of what Plato would consider democratic thought and behaviour would not perhaps be a very attractive or agreeable person. But arguments for the indispensability of the rule of law are not undermined by the observation that there is nothing desirable about authoritarian legal regimes where the law overreaches itself.

### 3. Intrapersonal Contractualism: The Ideal of Normative Unification

The platonic metaphor of the politics of self-constitution invites the thought that central dimensions of intrapersonal normative thought might be conceived in ways analogous to contractualist understandings of interpersonal moral thought. If the core contractualist idea is, to put it at a high order or generality, that I shouldn't treat you in ways that I could not justify to you, its intrapersonal analogue would then be that my present self should be similarly constrained in the choices I now make about the direction I take my life vis à vis my other temporal parts. Fully to satisfy this ideal, what we might call *the ideal of normative unification*, would be to be such that my choices at any time direct my life in ways acceptable to me from my normative perspective at that and all other times. The ideal of normative unification is itself an aspiration to a particular, very strong kind of reflective stability, just as the ideal of a well-ordered moral community is an aspiration to commonality of a particularly strong kind. To arrive at a normative outlook which is stable under reflection and which, if adhered to sufficiently, will result in the choices that comprise my life and the normative and evaluative sensibilities that determine those choices, being acceptable to me in the light of the normative and evaluative sensibilities that inform me at the various times at which I might raise the question: that is a central aim of core parts of my reflective normative thought, the aim, we might say, of living a life that I can live with living.

When I try to meet it I'm more satisfactorily understood as trying to *achieve* a certain normatively unified condition than as trying to *find something out*. What I am trying to achieve, we might say, is a life that meets Hume's standard, a life that is able stably to withstand my reflective survey.[12]

Of course satisfying this ideal of normative unification is so far consistent with being a pretty dreadful person in a whole host of ways. But that's not a troubling concern in this context. Here are four good reasons why not.

1. It's not a troubling concern because not only are we not Super-Anchorites, we are also not Anchorites: our normative thought has interpersonal social and moral aspects though the main focus of this paper is on its intrapersonal dimension. There are certainly unattractive shapes a human life might take where, while the people living such lives may feel very comfortably able to live with *themselves*, there might be a real and serious problem about their living in community *with us*.

That said, I should stress that the intrapersonal should not be conceived of as prior to and independent of the interpersonal, the prudential to the moral. I am in entire agreement with

Scanlon about the unhelpfulness of conceiving personal welfare in this way.[13] The lights which inform the survey I may subject my life to are not exclusively self-regarding. My choices might fail to bear my survey precisely because, as Hume has it, I have been wanting in my part to mankind and society.[14] The standard my choices must meet if I am to live with myself may be a thoroughly moralized standard. Nonetheless it is one thing to think about what standard my choices must meet if I am to live with myself and another to think about the standard our choices must meet if I am to live in community with you and this paper is about the former concern.

2. I don't claim that the value of this sort of unity is meant to be overriding. Suppose Derek[15], as a teenager, falls into moral confusion and bad company and gets sucked into some thoroughly repellent neo-Nazi ideology. Later, as he becomes more mature, he becomes capable of seeing what hateful nonsense such ideology is and starts to consider throwing it all over in favour of more humane and liberal political commitments. But he might then think that would be an unfortunate failure of reflective stability. *How much better to stick consistently to the one ideological outlook throughout my whole life so, having started this way, I'm going to finish this way.* Derek's thought is of course a stupid one. The ideal life is one in which we are decent and wise from the outset and there is no need for the sort of fracture in the stability of our normative judgement that Derek contemplates. But to stick to a stupid set of commitments for that reason is just daft. There's no tension here. It's a really good, very obvious norm of travelling that if you keep changing direction you won't get anywhere very fast. It's an equally good, equally obvious norm of travelling that, if you find yourself going the wrong way, you should turn round.

3. I don't claim that formal, structural aim of normative unification is a kind of master value that alone determines the content of an ideal normative and evaluative sensibility. Kantians might think something like that. Humeans do not. In reflecting on how to live I'm trying to achieve over time a normative sensibility that I can live with given my various contingent concerns, passions and evaluative dispositions. When I look at and condemn some truly awful character who has nonetheless achieved normative unification, I am expressing the normative sensibility I have. And the normative sensibility I have isn't one that cares for nothing except normative unification. It cares for loads of other stuff, all the stuff in fact that rotten and hateful normative sensibilities are rotten and hateful in virtue of not caring for.

4. We might say the following. The decent life Derek goes on to lead after he abandons his neo-Nazi outlook is one that would not bear the survey of youthful fascistic Derek. Youthful fascistic Derek would find the liberal decencies of somewhat less youthful no longer fascistic Derek utterly contemptible. But, on one level at least the mature Derek shouldn't much care. It is useful here to compare the way in which moral contractualism, of the sort familiar from the work of Scanlon, doesn't say I need to be able to justify what I do to *just anyone*. If my failure to justify what I do to you reflects the fact that you are *unreasonable*, your dissent fails to count against my doing it. And the notion of reasonableness here is allowed to be normatively, indeed morally, quite substantive. Similarly in the intrapersonal case, that mature Derek lives in ways that are indefensible to youthful Derek can be discounted if we can, as we can, dismiss them as simply unreasonable.

This can seem like circularity but is really just holism. When mature Derek dismisses, or when you or I dismiss, his youthful fascistic ideals as unreasonable we do so in a way informed by quite

substantive features of our actual, contingent, present normative outlook. That's as it must be. We can, and should, be prepared to take up a critical perspective on the commitments and ideals that outlook embodies but such critical reflection is always of a kind with Neurathian boat-repair. We adopt a critical perspective on particular parts or aspects of our normative outlook in ways informed by the other parts.[16] Such reflection informs our conception of what is normatively reasonable, a conception we hope will be stably sustainable through our lives. In so far as it is not, the self has a political problem.

Compare the interpersonal case. Unlike the Anchorites, most of us have the aspiration to constitute a moral community with our fellows. For this to be possible we have to hope we can come to a shared understanding of what is reasonable that can shape and inform our political conversation. If we can't then to some extent the project fails and when it fails that is a serious political misfortune. And it might fail more or less deeply. Political community is never perfect. At a minimum, there are always going to be a few psychopaths and crooks around the place who just don't want to play ball. That's what the cops are for.[17] A far deeper problem threatens if we find our whole society riven by differences in normative outlook which render political community impossible. In Rawlsian language this would be the catastrophe of finding that the conditions for an overlapping consensus that could shape an objective order of shared political reasons did not and could not be brought to obtain.

Likewise in the intrapersonal case, I might have been such as not to care about achieving the sort of reflective stability of normative outlook that would enable my various temporal parts to share a conception of the reasonable on the basis of which they could seek to act in ways that added up to a life that could bear their respective surveys. As an old Humean, I don't think that would necessarily have made me irrational though it would certainly have made me very odd. But I am *not* like that. I care about living a life that bears my survey and I care about achieving the sort of reflective stability and coherence that allows me to speak unequivocally of there being such a thing for it to bear. Given that, I have a problem if there are fractures. And here again fractures can be of various sorts. There may be stray moments where I forget myself and behave in ways I am more or less stably disposed to repudiate. That's the analogous case to the policing problem, the problem of keeping my tendency to give way to moments of weakness and folly under reasonable control. Of course we all do have such moments but where the weaknesses and follies concerned are not too grave that may not be a problem. In some case, for some people, as in the case of Razumov and Jim, it may be a huge problem. A similar problem faces mature Derek, of having to live with the fact that, however well he is now living, there will always be a chunk of his early life respecting which there is nothing for him to feel but shame and regret. And there is the Russian nobleman's problem of deep and irreconcilable differences in moral and ideological outlook between large portions of his adult life.

#### **4. Meeting Hume's Standard**

Failures of stability make it hard to satisfy the ideal of normative unification. And that makes it hard for us to meet Hume's standard. Indeed such failures can make it hard even to apply it. Thus Tiberius writes:

In order to have a self-survey we must have standards of evaluation. We must have some stable

commitments, values, or ideals which we believe ought to guide our choices.... Without stable commitments or personal ideals to act as standards of evaluation, we could have no self-survey at all.[18]

This is right but a qualification is in order. It's difficult to unequivocally meet Hume's Standard if we don't have stable commitments but that's not always to say we cannot apply it at all. If I am a bit like Chesterton's lover of the blues and wake up each morning with a wholly new set of long term plans, commitments and ideals, that I will, 24 hours later, have in turn substituted for yet another, there is a bewilderingly large number of evaluative and normative perspectives I hold over the course of my life from which we might choose in applying the standard. But we can still apply it very straightforwardly. Just because I am so lacking in stability, I fail to meet Hume's standard by *all* of them. So we can still unequivocally say that I fail to meet it.

Indeed some instability is consistent with *meeting* the standard. Consider the cases of Fred, a right wing Christian conservative and Frank, a left wing, secular-minded liberal. Because of these significant differences in their normative outlook they will find, when they look around the world at the possibilities of human lives, learning from reading and personal experiences about the lives others lead, that there are some people whose lives are admirable and choiceworthy from the perspective of one of them but not of the other. Reading, for example, about some pioneering trade unionist or feminist, Frank may think, that's a fine life to have led, a life he would be proud and content to have led himself, while Fred may find himself wholly unable to agree. There will be many lives of this kind but not all will be. Thus Fred and Frank might agree that the life of even a successful gangster is not a choiceworthy human life, not one they would wish to lead. And when they consider the life of a dedicated doctor or of an honest and hardworking policeman, they might both, even from their different perspectives, consider pretty good lives for anyone to live. Given that, such a life could meet Hume's standard straightforwardly enough even for someone whose normative orientation changed sharply midway through life from being roughly Fred-like to being roughly-Frank-like for, even though we have two normative perspectives to consider, this is a life that meets the standard from *either*, just as that of the lover of the blues met it from *none*.

Noting this might help the Russian nobleman. Even if he is confident his moral outlook will change as he expects, there may be possible lives that are choiceworthy from the perspective of both perspectives. In which case the best solution to his problem might be to think whether any such life is available to him and, if so, to set out to live it. It is of course perfectly conceivable however that there are simply no such choiceworthy lives available to him. In which case he may have a problem to which there is no solution.

## 5. The Constitution of Reason

The basic problem afflicting Chesterton's lover of the blues, the problem also afflicting the Russian nobleman and Razumov, the problem to which the politics of the self is addressed is *conflict*. The plans the lover of the blues makes on one day conflict with those of the next and the result is paralysis of action. Such conflict, I maintain, is a basic source of normativity, a core aspect of what gives normative concepts their point. That's because normative thought is the child of *reflection*. And conflict is the basic problem to which reflection is addressed.



Neo-Kantians such as Korsgaard have emphasized the crucial role of reflection and drawn ambitious Kantian conclusions. But a comparable emphasis is found in philosophers such as Frankfurt and Tiberius who are relaxed, as I am, over the heavy dependency of our normative commitments on the contingencies of what happens to be important to us. In stressing the role of reflection in constituting the critical normative landscape I inhabit, I'm advocating a sort of constructivism. But in allowing that that same landscape is shaped, and properly shaped by the contingencies of what we care about, I'm advocating a constructivism of a distinctly Humean sort.[19]

Reflection is not the *only* solution to conflict. We see this from the interpersonal case clearly enough. Here there is a possible analogue of reflection that we find in the sort of political order most of us would greatly prefer to live in, the sort of political order where we seek to resolve our conflicting aspirations for how we should live in community together codeliberatively, by critically engaging together on how to resolve them harmoniously. But of course we don't have to do this. We could leave it to status hierarchies and power dynamics to sort matters out, letting the prevailing will be that of the party that proves stronger in brute conflict. It is sometimes objected against roughly Humean understandings of practical reason that they rob us of any sense of the deliberative unity of agency leaving us with an impoverished picture of practical reasoning as the mere blind interplay of opposing forces with the strongest winning out.[20] We could view the resolution of intrapersonal practical conflict as proceeding in just this way, as a mere unintelligent play of forces. There could indeed be an animal like that but reflective human beings are plausibly not it and there is no reason why a broadly Humean understanding of practical reason should understand its workings in this way.

Stability of response and attitude has, even before reflection enters the picture, an important and basic role to play in the constitution of an order of reasons. That sounds a bit grand but I mean something quite simple. Suppose I have a more or less stable disposition to like and desire blue things. Suppose then on some occasion I choose some blue thing and then try to make sense of what I have done. Well, I can say, I choose it *because it's blue*, giving a *reason* for my choice. My stable attitudes have built up a little space of reasons in which, for me as the subject of these stable attitudes, blueness has a kind of normative import. Absent any such stability, if my desires and responses were a fluctuating chaos I'd be left with nothing to say about this or any other choice beyond just, *I wanted to*. Only thus does it become possible to speak of what, following Anscombe[21], we might call talk of the *desirability characteristics* in virtue of which we choose to perform the actions we do. Such stable desirability characteristics allow us to talk a normative language where reasons are represented as *world-given* rather than merely *state-given*,[22] as furnished by features of the liked and desired objects rather than the fact of our liking or desiring them. And to this extent they allow our normative thought to take on a certain objective character which, in the absence of such stability it never could.

Stability is important and reflection is important and they are important in interrelated ways. A large part of the best story we are likely to be able to tell about what we need to add to a desire before it can properly be called a normative *commitment* or the according to a consideration of the status of a *reason*, and so can start to play the complex governing role such attitudes enjoy in giving shape to our practical thought over time, in giving shape, indeed, to who we are, is likely to involve stability both on the part of the desire itself and of our reflective endorsement of it as well

as some confidence that both these things would continue to be stable upon further reflection.[23] Moreover, as Tiberius has emphasized, stable reflective endorsement has a particular significance because it is attainable to a greater degree than stability in our fluctuating ground floor pro-attitudes, subject as these are to fluctuations in the face of depression, frustration or distraction.[24]

Accounts that emphasize in this way reflection and the stable higher-order attitudes in which it issues are open to a familiar challenge[25] that they should explain why they should be accorded any greater normative authority than the regular, ground-floor, first order desires with which they may conflict. The preceding paragraph ended however with a fruitful hint as to how we may meet this challenge. We should, I think, following Bratman[26], emphasize the problem of practical conflict to which reflection is illuminatingly viewed as a solution. If at this ground floor level we started out with a fully coherent orderly bunch of desires we wouldn't feel any pressure to engage in reflection at all. But we don't start out like this and we won't end up like that. To be subject only to wholly conflict-free first order desires is not a condition to which humans can remotely realistically aspire to come anywhere near. But to be reflectively settled on a set of higher-order commitments, plans, intentions, policies, commitments and ideals which do hang together coherently is something at which we can sensibly aim. At the higher reaches of what Blackburn has called emotional ascent[27], a reasonably coherent and stable reflective unification of my agency[28] is a real human possibility. At the lower reaches it is not. Perfect unification and coherence remains an ideal of course but at the level of what we reflectively endorse it is not an ideal that the aspiration even to come close to is not simply silly or futile.[29]

## 6. The Categorical Imperative?

Christine Korsgaard and I share a fondness for political metaphor in understanding our normative self-constitution. My view however differs sharply from hers. I've talked about the core goal I suppose we all share of living a life that will stably bear our survey. But I've not said normative unification itself – or anything of comparable formality - is the fundamental norm determining the substance of such a perspective. I'm happy for that to be determined by all the particularities of the stuff we are reflectively disposed to care about in all its substantive plurality. That's not what Korsgaard says. Korsgaard says that 'there is only one law of practical reason, and it is the categorical imperative.'[30] There's nowhere near enough space left to adequately criticize her complex view but I will briefly consider one of the central reasons she offers for believing this and why I think it won't wash.

For Korsgaard the objects of our choices, the choices for which we may offer, and others may demand, reasons are not *acts* but *actions* where by an *action* she means *an act done for some purpose*, so that, for example, if you commit suicide to escape your pain while I commit suicide to save the lives of my comrades, we perform the same act but quite different actions.[31] So my purposes on her account come apart from my reasons. Reasons she thinks are what make the *action* intelligible whereas a purpose, even where the action does indeed further it, may fail to do this where the action fails to embody a good reason. Thus if Arthur travels from Vermont to far off New York City to visit his aunt, that action makes sense, it embodies a reason. But if Arthur travels to New York to buy paper clips, that just makes no sense. Or if Arthur's purpose in visiting Paris is to see the sights, but he goes there in mid-semester when he should be teaching, the

specification of his purpose does not make intelligible to us why he has chosen to go there *now*. So we must sharply distinguish the purpose which is part of an action for the reason which make the whole action, act A done for purpose P, intelligible and see the object of our reason-sensitive choices as actions, not mere acts.[32]

Armed with this piece of conceptual manoeuvring, she then reasons thus:

If the object of your choice is always a whole action – that is an act undertaken for the sake of a certain end – then it seems clear that your choice could not be governed by a hypothetical imperative alone. For the hypothetical imperative concerns only the relationship between the act and the end, and has nothing whatever to say about whether the whole package, the act for the sake of the end, is a thing worth doing for its own sake. If that is what we choose, then choice must be governed by a categorical imperative, for only a categorical imperative governs the choice of actions and not mere acts.[33]

To see why this won't wash consider an example. Suppose Ernest is having lunch at Sheiks and we ask, *Why is he doing this?* Well, we may reply, because it is his purpose to get some food. But that is only the *start* of an answer. As with Arthur's mid-semester trip to Paris, we want to know more. Why he is having lunch specifically here, specifically now and in this specific way? The answer is going to be rather long. He is having lunch at 12 perhaps because he has teaching commitments at 11 and at 1 on which he does not want to default. And he is having lunch at Sheiks because they do good veggie food and Jane is a veggie and he is having lunch with Jane because he likes Jane and would like to get to know her better. (He had another offer of company from Samantha but he turned that down because he doesn't much enjoy Samantha's company). And he is going to Sheiks which is in Sheffield where he lives rather than some restaurant in New York because that would be silly. Why would it be silly? Well because of what it would cost him in time, money and hassle to get to New York which doesn't seem worthwhile to him just for some lunch and besides Jane would never agree to meet him in New York and (did I mention?) he likes Jane. And he ordered the salad because he is getting rather health conscious even though he'd really rather enjoy a nice steak. And so on and so on.

Notice how the story goes. The explication of Ernest's action doesn't seem here to consist, as Korsgaard rightly observes, simply of specifying *the* purpose that it serves. But that's not because some *non-purposive* ingredient is missing. For the explication of his action consists rather in specifying *loads and loads* of purposes that it serves.[34] Once all these purposes are on the table it isn't clear that there's any work left for, say, the categorical imperative to do to make sense of the action. Thus we can readily enough explain why Arthur is silly if he goes to New York for paper clips not by turning from the specification of his *purpose* to considering the *reason* where that is some categorically different kind of beast but just by saying *more* about his numerous purposes (his reluctance to incur the cost of travelling to New York, the rather modest urgency of his need for paper clips, his complete satisfaction with the quality of the numerous paperclips readily availability closer to hand, etc.) Purposes operate *holistically and together* both in motivating our actions and in making them intelligible. The full explanation of even a simple action like having lunch involves not a *single* purpose but a *vast number* of purposes, a vast number of purposes moreover that broadly cohere together and that Ernest is broadly disposed to endorse on reflection. Indeed, as we have begin to see, and could see more clearly if I had the time

and energy to elaborate such examples further, for me to paint you a picture of what Ernest is playing at when I go for lunch is for me to paint you a rather substantial picture of *Ernest*. Once you have all the information you will know him rather well as the locus of a huge array of purposes, projects and policies contributing *together* to motivate this simple action. And as we have seen, once Ernest finds within himself this sort of stably structured and coherent complex set of purposes then he is already in the reason business; for a space of reasons is just what a suitably stable and structured space of purposes becomes when viewed from within, from the first person standpoint as we might say.

Once all this information is on the table, we don't seem to need the categorical imperative to make sense of the action and to make sense of it, moreover, as an action *of Ernest's*, not merely of some force that works inside him. For the picture of his purposes that emerges is not a picture of what Korsgaard thinks only the categorical imperative can rescue us from being, 'a heap of unrelated impulses', not a picture of a set of isolated forces operating in me or on me.[35] Rather it is starting to turn into a picture of a rational, autonomous person. If Ernest tells you how he'd far rather be here in Sheiks having lunch with Jane than with Samantha and tells you he's far too sensible about time and money to contemplate travelling from Sheffield to New York just for some lunch but add that he's happily travel to *Chicago* for lunch so long as *Samantha* was there, intelligibility would start to fade. If he told you the story I just did about the motives that take him to lunch and you then find him, a few hours later, tucking into a steak in New York with Samantha, simply shrugging off any suggestion that there is anything odd about this and telling some story about his purposes that simply isn't recognizable from the picture of him you formed from the story he told you at lunchtime, then again you will start to lose your grip on who he is, the more so if like he made a habit of this sort of thing. In the light of such considerations, I fear, Korsgaard's proposed distinction between actions and acts starts to look like an inadequately motivated philosophical contrivance that will not bear the weight her argument requires it to support. The categorical imperative plays no indispensable role in the constitution of the self.

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- [2] Lewis, 1946, p. 480.
- [3] Lewis, 1946, p. 480-481.
- [4] I don't mean my use of this phrase to carry a heavy load of metaphysical baggage. (Cf. Brink, 2003, p. 242, note 14.)
- [5] Parfit, 1984, p. 327.
- [6] Chesterton, 1909, pp. 193-4.
- [7] Lewis himself would dispute this as he wants to urge that logical norms applying to thought are derived from rational norms applying to action. This is not a claim I have any present agenda either to contest or to defend. It leads to deep waters way beyond the scope of the present paper.
- [8] See Tiberius, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, Bratman, 2006 and the papers in Bratman, 2007, Finlay, forthcoming.
- [9] Book VIII, 558c – 562a.
- [10] Korsgaard, 2002, 5.4.6.
- [11] Blackburn, 2006, pp. 136-7.
- [12] Hume, 1740, book III, part III, section 6, paragraph 6. See also Tiberius, 1997, 2002c, 2008. An closely related emphasis on 'reflective endorsement' is central to the argument of Korsgaard, 1996 though she pushes this in a Kantian direction in ways I find unpersuasive. Korsgaard's more recent writings are critically discussed below in section 6. For a lively Humean critique of *Sources*, one I would broadly endorse, see Tiberius, 2000.
- [13] Scanlon, 1998, chapter 3.
- [14] Hume, 1740, loc. cit.
- [15] I call him Derek as he is a bit like the hero of the film *American History X*.
- [16] Neurath, 1981, p. 162: 'We are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-dock and to reconstruct it there out of the best materials.' Cf. Williams, 1985, chapter 6, Blackburn, 1998, chapter 8, Tiberius, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, Bratman 2006, Street, 2008, Lenman, 2007.
- [17] Cf. Lenman, 1999, section 6.
- [18] 1997, p. 334.
- [19] Sharon Street in her 2008 defends a position broadly similar to mine under the label *formal constructivism*.
- [20] Cf. Korsgaard's discussion of the 'Combat Model' of the soul in her 2002, 5.1.2 and Hampton's discussion of the 'curmudgeon' in her 1998, pp. 142-151.
- [21] Anscombe, 2000.
- [22] The distinction is taken from a draft of Parfit, forthcoming.
- [23] In saying this I closely echo Tiberius, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, Bratman, 2006.
- [24] Tiberius, 2000, p. 431.

[25] See Watson, 1975.

[26] See in particular chapter 10 of Bratman, 2007.

[27] 1998, pp. 8-14.

[28] Talk of the unity of agency in contemporary philosophy is most associated with Korsgaard (1996, 2002). But it plays a role in the work of other highly influential writers.. See e.g. Elijah Millgram, *Practical Induction*, esp. chapter 3, Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason*, esp. chapter 9.

[29] In thinking in this way about the constitution of human practical reason, it's worth being clear that *homo economicus* is something of a red herring. I'm thinking here of the standard economist's picture of rationality as maximizing utility where utility is defined formally in terms of a relation of weak preference supposed to be reflexive, transitive and complete. Where these formal conditions are not satisfied, then the agent's doesn't have a coherent utility function and we left with no clear sense of what we are supposed to be maximizing. If they are satisfied, then we don't have that problem. But it's important to stress what a fantastically tall order the antecedent of that condition gives us. There is a word that perfectly describes the reflection and deliberation of someone who satisfies these axioms and that is *finished* – finished in a way real human deliberation never is. What this economist's picture tells us is, in effect, the somewhat innocuous contention that it is a hallmark of a practically rational agent that, when she has made up her mind what to choose, she then goes ahead and chooses it. That's not a threatening picture, or an amoral one, or one that fails to do justice to the richness of the normative landscape. It's just not very informative in telling us nothing about how we do or should get to the enviably decided conditions its assumptions characterize.

[30] 2002, 3.1.4.

[31] 2002, 1.2.4.

[32] 2002, 1.2.6.

[33] 2002, 3.1.5.

[34] A similar point is made by Alfred R. Mele criticizing R. Jay Wallace. See his 2003, p. 43.

[35] 2002, 2.5.2.