RIVISTA INTERNAZIONALE DI FILOSOFIA E PSICOLOGIA
DOI: 10.4453/rifp.2018.0006
ISSN 2039-4667; E-ISSN 2239-2629
Vol. 9 (2018), n. 1, pp. 67-72

SYMPOSIUM

Reflective Efficacy

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Ricevuto: 22 ottobre 2017; accettato 23 marzo 2018

Abstract The purpose of this paper is to highlight some difficulties with Neil Sinhababu's Humean theory of agency, which stem from his radically reductivist approach, rather than his Humean sympathies. The argument is that Sinhababu's theory builds on a critique of reflective agency which is based on several misunderstandings of the Kantian approach. Ultimately, the objection is that his reductivist view is unequipped to address the classical problems of rational deliberation and agential authority.
KEYWORDS: Humean Theory; Rational Deliberation; Agency; Authority; Christine Korsgaard

Riassunto *Efficacia riflessiva* – Questo articolo mette in luce alcune difficoltà della teoria proposta da Neil Sinhababu, che dipendono da un approccio radicalmente riduttivista. Si argomenta che la teoria di Sinhababu è basata su alcuni fraintendimenti a proposito dell'approccio kantiano alla teoria dell'azione. L'obiezione fondamentale è che questa posizione riduttivista non riesce a rendere conto adeguatamente della deliberazione razionale e dell'autorità dell'agente.
PAROLE CHIAVE: Teoria humeana; Deliberazione razionale; Agentività; Autorità; Christine Korsgaard

IN *HUMEAN NATURE*, NEIL SINHABABU engages in a fierce defense of the Humean account of nature, agency and reason. His lively and accessible language makes for an entertaining entry in a thorny debate. While the matter is complex, Sinhababu shows little doubt that the truth lies with Hume. Alternative approaches are judged simply wrong, false or, perhaps even worse, betrayals of David Hume's true account.

This critical commentary will focus on Chapter 10, which addresses a cluster of problems organized under the title *Agency and the Self*. Sinhababu's basic claim is that all the workings of agency can be fully explained in terms of desires. This is because selves/agents are constituted by desires. More precisely, agents consist of, at least in part, all of their desires; and, second, desires are the only motivational states. These claims represent the Humean self-constitution thesis. The second claim is particularly reductive in that it says that desires are the only motivational states that can help explain human motivation; there are no other motivational aspects of agency or selfhood apart from desires. Sinhababu takes

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agents and selves to be interchangeable concepts. These strongly reductive claims are not just mere stipulations. In a nutshell, the argument in their support is that an exploration of the reasons why people do what they do, think what they think, and feel what they feel, ultimately shows that it is because of their desires. Desires play a decisive explanatory role in all phenomena pertaining to agency. Their explanatory power is not restricted to the domain of deliberative agency, but also includes thought and feeling. Furthermore, according to Sinhababu's argument in Chapter 9, desires play a crucial normative role in that they transform considerations into reasons, make us recognize such reasons and act on them. Once this claim has been established, there is no incentive to introduce any other element into the machinery: all is operated by desires, including particular reasons to act, feel and believe.

This is a particularly strong formulation of the Humean claim regarding the nature of agency. In comparison to other recent defenses of Hume's ethics, such as Jaqueline Taylor's *Reflecting Subjects: Passion, Sympathy and Society in Hume's Philosophy*,[1] Sinhababu's theory radicalizes the reductivist aspects of Hume's approach to ethics. This is not the place to adequately compare various legacies of Hume's philosophy. The purpose of this commentary is to highlight some difficulties with Sinhababu's theory, which I attribute to his radically reductivist approach, rather than to his Humean sympathies. I shall focus on a standard objection, which has been voiced by several philosophers in the Kantian tradition, according to which the reductivist view is ill equipped to deal with the classical problems of rational deliberation.

The deliberative standpoint

The problem that philosophers such as Christine Korsgaard or Jay R. Wallace identify with the reductivist understanding of Hume's ethics is that it makes "the agent" ultimately disposable: If all the motivational and normative work underlying agency is accomplished by desires, what is the role of the self in the production of action? According to Sinhababu, this is no objection at all and can be defused in one strike. The self is also partially constituted by desires, so to explain agency by desires alone does not rule out the self. What is interesting in the stuff of the self is, again, the desires that constitute it. Practical agency is constituted by the motivational effects of desires.

Sinhababu recognizes that the phenomenology of deliberate choice, seems to require something more substantial and structurally organized than the stuff of desires. This is especially apparent in the case of temptation, as Sinhababu recognizes, but it is not limited to this special phenomenon of deliberation. In fact, the problem is pervasive, and its pervasiveness shows that the reductivist Humean account cannot make sense of rational deliberation, even though it might be *a* description of how some motives trump others in ordinary deliberation. Whether this is a perspicuous description is doubtful, but it is even more doubtful that this is a credible account of what happens when someone acts upon rational deliberation. The simpler case is temptation. In such a case, the agent feels and acknowledges that she has a strong and persistent desire, and feels and acknowledges that it is a motivational state but she also denies that such a motivational state should take priority. The latter item in the agent's mind is an evaluation. At this point, the reductivist argument embraced in the previous chapters comes to the rescue and explains that the evaluation is nothing but a desire, perhaps a second-order desire about the sort of desires that one should have. For instance, Al is tempted by his desire to consume all the energy of a spaceship but he is constrained by the desire to behave according to the rule that all resources available on the spaceship be shared equally. Al is conflicted, and this is something that the Humean account can describe, but how can it make sense of the constraint? If the theory explains all conflicts of the mental life in terms of desires, there is no

other element to decide the matter but the strength of desires. This means that the reductivist Humean theory does not distinguish between the intensity and the rational authority of desires. In the case of temptation, such a theory fails to explain why the desire to abide by the rule bears any authority for Al, since it is not stronger than the craving for energy. As it appears, the problem is not only phenomenological, even though the fact that a theory under-describes a phenomenon in the life of the mind might be considered a serious failure. Another, perhaps more significant, failure is that it cannot explain how one is motivated by a desire that one regards as more important, even though less intense. It is this eventuality that gives rise to the phenomenon of temptation. To see how pervasive this problem is, let us consider other deliberative scenarios.

Consider the case in which Al has a strong desire to consume all the energy of a spaceship at once, but he also knows that some energy must be kept for the days to come, because there are no sources for generating new energy. In this case, Al experiences conflicting desires, and the correct way to solve the problem is to recognize that there is a reason to postpone the craving, independently of its strength. To reason with himself toward this conclusion, Al must find that there is something more authoritative than the force of desires. If Al could count only on his desires, the decision would be taken only according to their strength. However, there is no guarantee that the strongest desire is also the correct one. From the reductivist Humean theory that Sinhababu defends there is no standpoint from which the agent can even raise this question. The standpoint of agency is the standpoint of desires, which determine actions by exerting causal influence.

In commenting on Jay R. Wallace's formulation of this objection,[2] Sinhababu notices that Kantians are worried about the passivity displayed in action. This is true, but it may be regarded as a secondary point in the present discussion. The main point is that there seems to be no standpoint for deliberation, if all that counts is desires, hence no way to account for the distinction between correct and incorrect deliberation in addition to the criterion of the strength of desires. Thus, the objection is not that agency driven by desires is not "real agency". In a way, agency driven by desires qualifies as real agency insofar as desires identify an agency and explain efficacy. But the efficacy that pertains to this form of agency has little to do with rational deliberation. There is no standpoint at which competing desires are assessed and measured. In fact, there is no need to introduce such a theoretical apparatus. «Desire constitutes agents and its effects constitute their choosing»,[3] as we are told. We are also told that «Desire constituting an intention is the agent choosing to act».[4] The implication of these claims is that there is no need for a deliberative standpoint from which the competing motivational items are assessed and authorized because all deliberative problems are solved by referring to the strength of desires. Sinhababu presents this claim as an accomplishment of his Humean theory, but there are reasons to doubt that this is the case.

The false problem of externality

In his response to the Kantian objection, Sinhababu insists that there is no reason to look and judge our desires as if from outside, from an external perspective. But this reply seems to me to be based on a mischaracterization of the whole controversy. He attacks the approach advocated by Wallace and Holton[5] as unduly representing the theoretical need of a standpoint *external* to deliberation:

> If you're resisting the temptation to eat something, either because you're on a diet or so someone will reward you with two of them later, the desire to eat can seem like a force external to your agency. It appears as something that might make you do what you really don't want to do, unless you fight it. It's still part of you, so it isn't a force to-

> tally alien to the self in the way that an opponent's arm in an arm-wrestling match is alien. But we look upon such desires warily, from a position outside of them that makes them not seem like parts of the self. Desire isn't usually like this. In simple enjoyment of food, the desire to eat doesn't seem like something external. One sees food from within the standpoint of desire, absorbed in attention to its delicious features.[6]

I agree that to explain the dynamics of rational deliberation it is neither necessary nor appropriate to think of the self as an external perspective on one's mind. The risk of this strategy is that it loses track of the distinction between authorization and alienation. However, it is quite doubtful that this distinction can be preserved and explained by invoking the claim that the self just is its content, i.e. the desires that it contains. This claim cannot explain by itself how the content of the self is authorized. Sinhababu does not seem to appreciate in full the objection put forward by the Kantian quarter. They are not worried about construing an external perspective from which to judge the content of the self. Rather, they are worried about vindicating the distinction between items of the self that are authorized so as to pertain to one's own self, and items that belong in the self but remain unauthorized. To be sure, this distinction does not amount to postulating a perspective external to the self. The objection is that a plausible theory of agency cannot do without such a distinction. To this objection, it is not enough to reply that there can be no perspective external to the self. There are other ways to ground the distinction that assume no such objectionable externality.

A similar equivocation occurs in the brief passage where the author disposes of Kant's theory by commenting on a famous passage of the *Groundwork*.[7] Against the Kantian view as he reconstructs it, Sinhababu objects:

> If we saw reason as driven by forces outside of it, we'd see it as being determined by alien influences, and therefore as unfree. And we can only see ourselves as agents under the idea of freedom. So the price of regarding reason as the slave of the passions is failing to see ourselves as agents at all.[8]

Sinhababu insists that one's desires aren't alien influences that would take away one's freedom. This is what we are made of. The activity of desires just *is* our activity, which includes practical reasoning, is agency. Kant is talking of impulses, which are not straightforwardly "desires", since the latter term is broader. This detail is relevant to the present discussion because at least according to some prominent interpretations, reason is supposed to be "desiderative" in its practical function; this is exactly what explains its productive and motivating powers. Secondly, in the passage quoted, Kant is not talking about what belongs or does not belong in the self without qualification. Likewise, he may find nothing wrong in saying that impulses, desires, and feelings are "ours", in the sense that they are subjective and rooted in our animality. In Kantian jargon, they are recognizable as elements of a phenomenal character. Does it make them alien items? The question is that this level of explanation does not make sense of agential authority, which is the problem that the Kantian theory of rational agency is designed to address. Any fruitful discussion of Kantian theory should engage with this level of discussion of agency. But this is a level of discussion that the reductivist agenda does not contemplate. Do Kantians reject the claims that "the activity of desires" includes "practical reasoning" or is equivalent to agency? Well, again, it all depends on the meaning of these words. To be sure, the claim that the activity of desires is what we call reasoning and amounts to agency requires some unpacking. Kant distinguishes between the activity of pure reason and the activity of empirical practical reason, thus his theory of rational authority offers the theoretical resources for differentiating different though related activities that might

or might not involve desires. Their main point is that desires as well as any other unreflective elements in our mind do not exercise their authority *directly*: they do so under the guise of incentives that have to be assessed by reasoning.

One legitimate concern is that reflective agency is just one very small portion of human agency, probably smaller than we are ready to acknowledge. But this is a different concern and it is not an objection to the Kantian approach. Kantians are well aware that reflective agency is a rare accomplishment; their efforts are directed to establish that there is a distinction to be made between unreflective efficacy and reflective agency. For the Kantians the reductivist model owes us an explanation of the second kind of agency, which it is unequipped to offer; the reductivists do not see the problem. Ultimately, their differences concern the normative powers they attribute to reason.

This disagreement is apparent in Sinhababu's discussion of Christine Korsgaard's theory of deliberation. He thinks that the emphasis on reflective agency makes her account incapable of recognizing serious forms of divisive conflicts. Indeed, even when the agent comes to a decision, he is still torn and divided between the defeating and the defeated desires, hence remains in an unhappy condition. By comparison, the purported advantage of the Humean model is that it appears to accord with our ordinary experience of hard choices. And it's telling that Sinhababu takes these disagreements to be descriptive, because they are philosophical hypotheses about the form and powers of reasoning.

At the descriptive level, however, it is hard to see why a Kantian theory could not make sense of the phenomenology of hard choices, e.g. admitting the reasonableness of regret. Korsgaard's treatment of the conflicts of practical identities in her *The Sources of Normativity* centers exactly on this issue.[9] Precisely because of the importance of conflictual desires and plans, the unity of the self is not a stipulation but a deliberative task. In her view, rational deliberation shapes agency but this is not to deny that reasoning may be inefficacious and that there may be many defeating conditions that interfere with the causal powers of reasons. The case in which reasons are not efficacious calls for an explanation, but it is not an argument in support of the so called *Immutability Under Reasoning* claim, according to which reasoning cannot change our intrinsic desires.[10] Trivially, Kantians agree that there are some conative states that cannot be changed by reasoning. Indeed, this is an important claim about what Kant calls "radical evil" and about the recalcitrance of "inclinations", a category that is often taken to be equivalent to desires. In the Kantian theory, these radical and recalcitrant elements do not undermine the possibility of reflective agency because they do not exercise a direct influence on the mind, and their efficacy can be judged and assessed even when it cannot be resisted. This is a position that can be shared independently of special commitments to Kantian ethics. For instance, Harry Frankfurt draws an analogous distinction without any allegiance to the Kantian tradition.[11] He argues that there are psychological forces that we cannot resist because they overcome us, as in the case of terror and compulsion; and there are psychological forces that we cannot resist because we do not want to resist them in that they represent our volitional constraints. No doubt there are other fruitful approaches closer to Hume's tradition, such as Jacqueline Taylor's account of reflective subjects. My point has been that the reductivist view owes us an explanation of a phenomenon that it is not equipped to describe correctly.

The costs of reductivism

One might accept or even welcome the radical reductivist approach as a strategy to simplify the philosophical account of agency, doing without items perhaps more mysterious than desires, e.g. intentions, agents, and the "rational will". Whether the very notion of

"desire" is really less mysterious, theoretically innocent and as such does not stand in need of a philosophical defense, is something to be seen. As Thomas Scanlon has pointed out in his *What We Owe to Each Other*,[12] the explanatory power of desires ultimately depends on the fact that they work as normative items whose normativity is taken for granted. If so, then they can explain normative phenomena such as those arising in deliberation but to see why and how, we need to verify how they have acquired their normative status. Without any such defense, we are left with no philosophical account of authority, *including* the authority that desires have in deliberation, and even in the case that they are all the stuff of agency. The cost of this philosophical strategy is that it loses sight of phenomena that pertains to the individual life of the mind, and it renounces to explain macrophenomena such as the possibility of communities governed by norms, where norms constrict and bind independently of the strength of desires. It seems to me that this is too heavy a cost for any plausible philosophical theory to knowingly incur.

The author resumes his *modus operandi* in Chapter 11, which builds upon the defense of the Humean Theory and considers the metaethical significance of its alleged truth. As we all recognize, Humean theory is often chosen for its simplicity and parsimonious ontology. Whether these features warrant any explanatory power is an open question. Sinhababu's defense of the Humean Theory begins with describing moral phenomenology in terms of desires and beliefs and, not surprisingly, ends with a declaration of triumph. For those describing phenomenology differently, his defense remains unconvincing.

Notes

[1] See J. TAYLOR, *Reflecting Subjects: Passion, Sympathy and Society in Hume's Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015.

[2] See J.R. WALLACE, *How to Argue about Practical Reasoning*, in: «Mind», vol. XCIX, n. 395, 1990, pp. 355-385; J.R. WALLACE, *Addiction as Defect of the Will: Some Philosophical Reflections*, in: «Law and Philosophy», vol. XVIII, n. 6, 1999, pp. 621-654.

[3] N. SINHABABU, *Humean Nature. How Desire Explains Action, Thought, and Feeling*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 2017, p. 170

[44] *Ibidem*.

[5] See J.R. WALLACE, *How to Argue about Practical Reasoning*, cit.; J.R. WALLACE, *Addiction as Defect of the Will*, cit.; R. HOLTON, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 2009.

[6] N. SINHABABU, *Humean Nature*, cit., p. 170.

[7] See I. KANT, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of the Morals* (1785), edited by M. GREGOR, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York 1998, p. 448.

[8] N. SINHABABU, *Humean Nature*, cit., p. 187.

[9] See C. KORSGAARD, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, pp. 100ff.

[10] N. SINHABABU, *Humean Nature*, cit., p. 176.

[11] See H. FRANKFURT, *The Importance of What we Care About*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988.

[12] See T.M. SCANLON, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1998.