

Imps of the Perverse

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In *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason*, Kant insists that human evil could never be motivated by clear-eyed opposition to the moral law. He admits that the non-rational aspects of our sensibility cannot by themselves account for our wrongdoing.

Yet Kant also asserts that

an *evil reason* as it were (an absolutely evil will), would on the contrary contain too much [to explain human immorality] because resistance to the law would itself be thereby elevated to incentive... and so the subject would be made a *diabolical* being. Neither of these two [purely sensuous or purely diabolical motivation] is however applicable to the human being.ⁱ

Kant never explains why such diabolical motivation is unavailable to human beings. He may simply have thought that no such explanation is needed, confident that the idea of doing evil for its own sake is manifestly incoherent. After all, Kant considers the moral law to be a basic principle of practical reason, so that truly diabolical motivation would be an instance of doing something simply because there is a particularly strong if not conclusive reason against doing it. Acting diabolically would be analogous to believing some claim just because it was self-contradictory, decisively refuted, or patently absurd.

Not everyone has been as confident as Kant that we are incapable of such perverse or anti-rational behavior. In his *Confessions*, Augustine recounts an episode from his youth that continues to haunt him:

There was a pear tree near our vineyard, heavy with fruit, but fruit that was not particularly tempting either to look at or to taste. A group of young blackguards, and I among them, went out to knock down the pears and carry them off late one night... We carried off an immense load of

pears, not to eat—for we barely tasted them before throwing them to the hogs. Our only pleasure in doing it was that it was forbidden....

...I was thus evil for no object, having no cause for wrongdoing save my wrongness. The malice of the act was base and I loved it—that is to say I loved my own undoing, I loved the evil in me—not the thing for which I did the evil, simply the evil...seeking no profit from wickedness but only to be wicked.ⁱⁱ

Kant and Augustine share the common-sense view that to act from a reason involves seeing one's act *sub specie bonum*; i.e., in light of some idea of how the action might be good or worthwhile in some respect. Such goodness can take a variety of forms, but in every instance it must at least involve some sort of consideration that could count toward the justification of that act, in a way that could answer some real challenge or query.ⁱⁱⁱ

Following Joseph Raz, I will call the position that to act intentionally is to act with an eye to some good the “classical view.” Ambitious versions of this view sometimes insist that an agent has to not merely *see* her act as good, but must *believe* it to be so, or that an agent must judge that her action is not only good but her best option, all things considered. Such strong versions of the classical view are essentially rationalist in spirit, in that they try in various ways to understand choice and action according to the model of theoretical inference and cognition. These approaches have been the targets of a good deal of recent criticism that has been largely successful in showing just how quickly the analogy between action and belief runs out.^{iv}

Yet shorn of these rationalist excrescences, the classical approach has great intuitive appeal and interpretative flexibility. On a suitably modest version of the view, acting for the sake of some good need not involve acting for the sake of what is thought best, or even for the sake of what is thought to be justifiable, all things considered. Nor does

the view need to insist that we actually believe our acts to be good in any way. On plausibly modest versions of the classical view, we act *sub specie bonum* so long as we act from some sense of how what we are doing is worthwhile, even in those cases in which we fully understand that this appearance is illusory. In its more modest form, the classical view can readily accommodate *akrasia*, unreflective behavior, and acting out of emotions such as fear and anger even in those cases where the agent recognizes these attitudes to be ungrounded or irrational. Of course, there must be a limit to such flexibility if the position is to avoid vacuity. If the classical view is to have any interesting content, it seems that it must at least preclude the possibility of acting for the sake of the bad *simpliciter*: the sort of action that I will call “perverse action”, where the bad in question may but need not be moral in character.

2. Augustine insists that he saw nothing in the pears he stole that even seemed to speak in favor of taking them. He claims that the pears “had not even that false show or shadow of beauty by which sin tempts us”(p.28), and that his thievery failed to suggest any “gain to oneself or vengeance to be satisfied” (p.31). Although Augustine believes that he would not have stolen had he been alone, he still denies that he was motivated by friendship or solidarity with his companions, or from a desire to stay in their favor.

He reflects:

Perhaps then what I really loved was the companionship of those with whom I did it. If so, can I still say that I loved nothing over and above the thievery? Surely I can; that companionship was nothing over and above, because it was nothing (p. 30).

If we are to trust Augustine, the only bond he felt with the young blackguards was as a partner-in-crime. His attachment to blackguards then presupposes, rather than explains, his motivation to steal.

Such perverse motivation is familiar even to those of us without Augustine's broader theological commitments. Human life appears to be rife with acts done for the sake of some bad, or to avoid realizing some good. In discussing perversity, philosophers have tended to focus on its moral forms, such as spite, malice and *Schadenfreude*, which I will group under the sub-category of the "diabolical" or morally perverse. Yet perversity is not confined to the ethical. Kitsch is appealing because of its conspicuous aesthetic flaws, and movies such as "Showgirls" and "The Wicker Man" (the remake with Nicholas Cage) have become minor classics by dint of their exquisite and unrelenting awfulness. In winter, it is hard to see a beautiful array of icicles or delicately frozen surface of a puddle without having some urge to smash it. We sometimes smell or taste spoiled food just because we expect it to be disgusting, or find ourselves attracted by someone's ugliness (the "*jolie-laid*"). We are often fascinated precisely by what we ourselves consider to be the repellent aspects of corpses, deformities, and grisly accidents. In like fashion, perfectly sane and happy people sometimes have inexplicable but very real urges "to throw themselves from high places or under approaching tube-trains."^v We may even court physical pain out of a vivid and immediate appreciation of its unpleasantness. Even apart from the complex dynamics of sexual masochism, most of us know what it is like to pick at a scab or worry a loose tooth simply because of the peculiar way in which doing so hurts.^{vi}

The fundamental paradox of perverse action is that while such behavior does not make much sense, neither does it seem to be completely insane. Acting for the sake of some apparent bad comes across as less brutally unintelligible or alien than acting for the sake of something that is simply irrelevant to the justification of the act in question. It makes more sense for Augustine to steal the pears because doing so is morally wrong than because they were owned by a tall man, or because there was an odd number of them.^{vii} Strange as it is, perversity is not nearly as weird as the behavior of extreme obsessive-compulsives, who appear to act sincerely for the most arbitrary and pointless concerns. We readily accept such obsessives to be afflicted with some sort of debility that at least mitigates their responsibility for their actions. We are not nearly so sure about the perverse: they may be sick, but they may be just plain rotten, and all the more blameworthy for it. In short, if the classical approach is correct, then the idea of perverse action should be manifestly incoherent. If the classical approach is wrong, it is not clear why perversity should be any more mysterious than any other highly eccentric tastes we might have. Either way, our dominant philosophical approaches to intention would lead us to expect perverse action to seem either more or less intelligible than it in fact does to us.

3. On a familiar Davidsonian picture of action, acts differ from other bodily movements in that acts not only are caused by the agents' beliefs and desires, but there is also some meaningful relationship between the contents of these beliefs and desires that shows how the action constitutes a rational response to having such a desire in light of that

belief. Yet as Davidson notes, something important still seems to be missing. An agent's beliefs and desires might jointly both cause and rationalize some behavior (and even cause it because they rationalize it) without this behavior being a real action.

Davidson offers the example of one mountaineer holding another by a rope. The first mountaineer may desire to be free of the weight of his companion, believe that letting go of the rope will achieve this, and suddenly realize that he has a reason to do just this. This realization may then unnerve him to such an extent that he does in fact release the rope. What seems to be missing here is any way in which the agent's action might be seen as being actively and continuously guided by her reasons and rational judgment, rather than just being triggered by them in some complex way.^{viii} Being guided by a concern is more than just having it affect one's behavior in certain predictable or beneficial ways. When we are guided, we act from a particular practical outlook on the world, with a sensitivity to how what we are doing might be done better or worse as the sort of thing we are trying to bring off. Guidance comprises more than just an understanding of the difference between what would count as complete success and utter failure in our efforts. Guidance also involves an active appreciation of how to discriminate between and evaluate intermediate possibilities, whereby we anticipate some range of ways in which our action might be improved or frustrated.

This is what I take to be the central insight of the classical view. The distinctively intentional character of an action depends on the way its performance expresses a sensitivity to the world portrayed in terms of some characteristic array of resources and dangers. The richer this sort of anticipation, the more clearly or fully intentional the act is. Marginally intentional acts, such as my touching my nose on a whim, or drumming

my fingers in impatience, are marginal just because there is not very much room for guidance and recalibration in these contexts. In both instances I know and am in control of what I am doing, and I act with an awareness of the difference between success and failure. Nevertheless, not much sense can be given to the idea of doing these things in a better or worse way. I drum my fingers or I do not, I manage to touch my nose or not, but there hardly anything to be said about the relative merits of the various ways in which this may be approached.

On the other end of this continuum, when we act in light of some good, a conception of value provides us the interpretative axes according to which we can distinguish a merely adequate way of doing what we are trying to accomplish from a way that is truly excellent, or discriminate between simple failure, inept bungling and utter travesty. Most such notions of the good are sufficiently rich and complex to allow for very fine discriminations that bear on the manner and not just the result of the activity. If I act with an eye to beauty, or honor, or morality, then I see my execution not just as a matter of ultimate success or failure, but in terms of elegance, nobility, tact, or respectfulness.

Such substantial values support the richest and most thorough sort of guidance and anticipation, and it is not surprising that acts done for such goods serve as central examples of intentional action. The narrower or more limited the scope of these concerns, the more the behavior shades from fully intentional action into something like emotional expression, approaching at the limit something more like an involuntary reflexes (such as crying out in pain). Yet while this might rule out the possibility of completely pointless acts, it does not preclude truly perverse ones. A perverse response

is isomorphic to a good-oriented one: the same evaluative sensibility and powers of self-direction would be in play in both, even if exercised in the opposite directions.

However, this does not mean that the perverse stands “on all fours” with reasonable behavior. Although it is possible to act perversely on occasion, such action can never be the expression of the agent’s general attitude or outlook on life. The problem is that as our perverse responses spread, they tend to undermine their own perversity. I have argued that for our acts to be intentional, they must have an overall point that, in a broad way, allows us to rationally readjust our performance to a broad range of changes in our environment. Since perverse reasoning is isomorphic to good-directed reasoning, it should be capable of determining an equally rich practical stance toward the world.

4. However, the question then arises whether such putatively perverse action really qualifies as being done for the sake of the bad at all, instead of just an aberrant understanding of the good? Perhaps what the seemingly perverse agent means by the word ‘bad’ is just what we mean by the word ‘good.’ If so, then we differ from the perverse agent not with respect to seeking the good, but only with regard to our beliefs about what is in fact good, and with the way we use our normative vocabulary.

Normally people take pain, ugliness and cruelty to be bad. For some reason, the perverse agent has come see such things as good, but has also come to use the word ‘bad’ to mean what we intend by the word ‘good.’ Given how different his values are from ours, this confusion is not surprising. His avowals that he is acting for the sake of the bad need not be insincere, just misleading. While this person certainly has bizarre beliefs and strange tastes, his most formal commitments are really the same as our own.

To avoid this consequence, a perverse response can only involve a partial inversion of the overall attitude of a reasonable agent. Why should we accept that Augustine really considered theft to be bad, given his willingness to steal for this supposed reason? Most likely, we assume that the young Augustine would still not have advised others to steal in such circumstances, nor would he have criticized or been puzzled by their failure to do so. Augustine does not seem to feel any gratitude toward the young blackguards for enlightening him about the value of evil, nor does it seem that he would have experienced any sort of regret or self-recrimination for passing up a prime opportunity to steal just because he was feeling lazy. While Augustine did seem to adopt a perverse posture toward the pears, he seemed generally to retain his normal reasonable stance with respect to his relations to others and to himself. Because Augustine was not ready to advise, commend, or criticize others in a perverse way, there can still be grounds for saying that he truly thought theft was bad (in our ordinary sense of bad), despite the strange way that this consideration guided his action in this particular instance. On the other hand, if Augustine were ready to address other people in the same way he approached the pears, then his action would indeed cease to be perverse, becoming instead the expression of a strange view about what is in fact good.

I have argued that what is distinctive about intentional action is the way in which it is performed with a sense of how we might adjust our behavior so as to keep doing what would count as the same thing despite changes in circumstances. In the most basic cases of action, we act with some attentiveness to the opportunities and threats to success that might emerge in our environment, with an appreciation of how our performance might thereby be improved or go awry. This attentiveness does not have

to be limited to the various ways in which our act might be performed in our physical world. We can also anticipate how our act might fit into our social world, with a sense of how others might challenge, criticize, resent or thank us for what we do. At their fullest, our intentions incorporate a sense not just of how to adjust our behavior in response to our physical environment, but also sense of how to reply to the possible responses of other agents to our actions.

Our acts are most fully intentional when we proceed in a way that anticipates challenges from the world, in terms of resources and impediments, and challenges from other people, in terms of questions, criticism, and advice. When we act for the sake of some good, our actions have a point that orients us toward both of these contexts simultaneously. In acting *sub specie bonum*, the point of our act directs us toward the potential demands and suggestions of others just as much as it allows us to anticipate physical impediments. We may not actually be able to satisfy anybody, but at least we will have something to say, some sense of how to “go on” in such dialectical contexts.

In contrast, perverse action anticipates only physical challenges, those that might be presented by the causal powers of the world. Here, our behavior has a point that directs us toward our physical environment, but which gives us no determinate orientation to other people. We have a sense of how to repair or improve our performance, but we have no idea of how to defend, explain, or discuss it. In this perverse action is essentially the complement of some emotionally expressive action. When I slam a door in anger, I do so with little or no sense of how to adjust my doing to changing circumstances; such actions are normally thought to involve some loss of control. However, when I slam the door I do so with an immediate sense of how others might

react to it, and how I might respond to their questions, reprimands, or suggestions. We naturally say that such acts are protests, “cries for help,” invitations to talk, etc. Our attentiveness here is addressed purely toward our social relations, rather than toward our causal ones.

When we act *sub specie bonum* our behavior manages to be intentional along two dimensions, having a point that orients us toward both potential challenges from other people as well as possible obstacles in the world. Perverse action, like purely expressive behavior, is intentional along only one of these two dimensions. Expressive activity involves only a readiness to reply to other people; perversity is prepared to adjust only to causal impediments and opportunities. Both kinds of behavior are only imperfect approximations of full-blooded intentional action, in which the agent is poised to respond to both types of challenge from the same point of view.

What the one-dimensional character of perversity entails is that although possible, perverse behavior cannot really be the expression of any substantial resolve or commitment. Perverse action lacks any determinate orientation toward other people. I act without any sense of how to anticipate their challenges or suggestions, or how to engage in anything like shared conversation, argument, or joint action. If I do something because it is bad, how do I expect or suppose others to respond when I tell them this? Do I expect them to join in my attitude, protest it, blankly reject me, or start to advise me on the nuances of badness? No response here seems any more appropriate than another, every way of “going on” with others from this point seems to be equally available. Perverse motives lack any way of directing us toward any kind of on-going

address and exchange that could develop anything like a shared viewpoint or a common project. As such, these concerns must remain fundamentally private.

Such privacy bears not only on the perverse agent's relations to others, but also his relations to himself in different states of mind. If I am unable to anticipate or orient myself toward the responses of other people, I also cannot know how to address myself, should my perverse motives come into competition with other concerns, or should I experience doubts or worries about what I am doing.^{ix} There is nothing more the perverse agent can hope to say to herself as a way of steadying or reaffirming her current attitude should it start to fade. For creatures who need to maintain their resolve in the face of temptation and distraction, perverse motives, while possible, must always be sharply limited in their scope and importance to the agent. They can be little more than a kind of mood that is largely disconnected from the rest of her psychic life, rather than any sort of fundamental diabolical commitment.

ⁱ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason* George di Giovanni, trans. In *Religion and Rational Theology*, Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 6:35.

ⁱⁱ Augustine, *Confessions*, F.J. Sheed, trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), p. 27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Plato, Aristotle and Kant all hold some version of this claim. More recent examples include G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957); Anthony Kenny *Action, Emotion and Will*, (Bristol, Thoemmes Press, 1994); Ronald de Sousa, "The Good and the True," *Mind* 83 (1974), pp.534-51 Dennis Stampe, "The Authority of Desire," *Philosophical Review* 96, n.3, pp.335-81; Warren Quinn, "Putting Rationality in its Place" in *Morality and Action* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.228-255 and Joseph Raz, "Agency Reason, and the Good" in *Engaging Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 22-45.

^{iv} See for example Michael Stocker: “Desiring the Bad: An Exercise in Moral Psychology,” *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979), pp.738-53; Rosalind Hursthouse: “Arational Actions,” *Journal of Philosophy* 88 (1991), pp.57-68; J. David Velleman, “The Guise of the Good,” in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.99-122 and Joseph Raz, “Agency, Reason, and the Good” and “Incommensurability and Agency” both in *Engaging Reason*.

^v Kenny, p. 95. For similar examples, see Edgar Allan Poe, “The Imp of the Perverse” in *Thirty-Two Stories* (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing, 2000), p. 326.

^{vi} Joel Feinberg recounts how at an APA reception, he approached a good longtime friend in public “and in all seriousness proceeded to insult him in a gross and vulgar way (‘Hal, you are a stupid son of a bitch.’)” Feinberg claims that there was “nothing jocular at all in my manner,” and remains as perplexed by his behavior as Augustine was by his. See Joel Feinberg, “Evil” in *Problems and the Roots of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) pp. 162-163.

^{vii} Here I am indebted to Raz’s discussion of “anomic reasons” in “Agency, Reason, and the Good,” pp. 31-34.

^{viii} See Velleman, pp.100-109.

^{ix} For a similar suggestion about whims, see Christine Korsgaard, “The Normativity of Instrumental Reason” in *Ethics and Practical Reason* ed. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).