

Anthony Trollope on Akrasia, Self-Deception, and Ethical Confusion

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Anthony Trollope tended to reuse a particular version of the marriage plot.¹ What Victoria Glendinning calls his “Ur-story” (135) is a version of the romantic triangle in which protagonists, usually male, commit to marrying one character but then find themselves drawn to a second. The specific plot dynamics vary. Sometimes the protagonist returns to the first character, sometimes he abandons his previous commitment; often, complications produce other outcomes. This aesthetic fact leads to a recurring consideration of a particular issue in philosophical psychology: moral philosophers have long been interested in situations where moral agents know what they ought to do, but do not do it.²

At the most general level, the theoretical problem evoked by such states, which philosophers describe as instances of “weakness of the will” or “akrasia,” is a question in the logic of moral psychology: how can agents will something and not will it at the same time?³ On what one might call the “simple philosophical model,” ordinary action proceeds by an agent judging that a given action is worth performing; this decision constitutes an intention and produces an action. Hence it is not immediately clear how akratic action—which occurs somehow *against* an agent’s judgment—is possible. Since agents frequently do seem to act against their better judgments, the simple model of

ABSTRACT: This essay takes as its point of departure Anthony Trollope’s tendency to reuse a version of the romantic triangle, one where a protagonist is committed to one character, becomes attracted to another, and hence delays fulfillment of the first relationship. This formal feature makes the philosophical problem of akrasia central, as the novels return repeatedly to agents who act against their own best judgment. Trollope’s novels reveal a complex array of irrationality, considering how our desires can lead to self-deception and how even judgment unbiased by desire may fail to move an agent. Perhaps most interestingly, Trollope challenges standard assumptions about rational behavior in depicting states of “ethical confusion,” where characters act irrationally precisely by acting on their best judgment.

intentional action must be inadequate in some way. Yet this model is so intuitive that philosophers have often thought that akrasia proper never occurs. The first account of the problem, Plato's discussion in the *Protagoras*, claims axiomatically that "to make for what one believes to be evil" is not in "human nature" (358d). When agents appear to do so, they are really confused about what course of action is best. As Amelie Rorty explains, Plato's "account of akrasia explains away counterexamples by re-describing them as cases of deception of some sort" (54). In depicting characters who cannot bring their romantic actions into accord with their own best judgments about how to act, Trollope reflects insightfully on this issue.

Frank Greystock, in *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871-73), offers a typical example. There is no doubt in Frank's mind that he loves Lucy Morris more than his cousin Lizzie Eustace. Early in the novel, he proposes to Lucy, refusing to give up the engagement even though it is against his material interests. But despite this commitment, he continually finds himself violating his own judgment, in full awareness of what he is doing. After he flirts with and kisses Lizzie, the narrator notes that "what [Frank] was doing was not only imprudent—but wrong also. He knew that it was so" (256). Similarly, Frank fails to defend Lucy in conversation, knowing that "such silence was in truth treachery" (311). More dramatically, after Lucy makes their engagement public, Frank is at first irritated, but then admits that "the truth is, we are, all of us, treating Lucy very badly" (361). Alongside Frank's own reflections on his nature, Trollope's narrator considers his irrationality at some length:

There are human beings who, though of necessity single in body, are dual in character;—in whose breasts not only is evil always fighting against good,—but to whom evil is sometimes horribly, hideously evil, but is sometimes also not hideous at all. . . . Self-indulgence, pride, and covetousness will get a hold of them, and in various moods will be to them virtues in lieu of vices. (199)

Passages like this one move from a depiction of akrasia to an analysis of it. Here, Trollope conceives of weakness of will as the product of psychological oscillation: akratic moral agents contain opposing impulses toward good and evil, which alternate in causing the agent's actions. This causation happens not through compulsion, in such a way that the agent recognizes the evil but is powerless to overcome it, but rather through a change in beliefs akin to the one Plato had in mind. Frank's judgments about what is good temporarily change: evil

changes to “not hideous at all”; ambition, luxury, and pride become “virtues in lieu of vices.”

This is to say that Frank is susceptible to a particular type of self-deception: he is not a “rogue,” but his moral judgment is not immune to immoral influences. Significantly, both narrator and novel are deeply interested in the process by which the vices “get a hold” of men like Frank Greystock. Sexual desire in particular, the narrator explains, can temporarily lead such men astray: Frank “was fool enough to be flattered by [Lizzie’s] caresses” (627–28). Trollope thus suggests a particular way of thinking about how actions against best judgments are possible: desire can temporarily alter such judgments.

The point here is not merely to offer a reading of *The Eustace Diamonds*, but to demonstrate the interpretive usefulness of a concept from moral philosophy. Because of his distinctive versions of the marriage plot, Trollope returns frequently to weak-willed agents like Frank. Recognizing this fact has two key benefits. First, the attention to moral psychology can clarify an interpretative debate about the tension in Trollope’s fiction between ethics and psychology; Trollope is interested in precisely the areas where the two discourses intertwine. Second and more substantively, the recognition of the role of akrasia in the main romantic plots allows a new dimension of Trollope’s art to emerge: his novels contain dozens of depictions of irrational action and self-deception, and these depictions (and his narratorial explanations of them) complement each other in philosophically revealing ways. In particular, Trollope’s works combine to offer a series of arguments against models of rationality that depend on reflective judgment and conscious decision-making. The critical tradition has long recognized that Trollope’s novels see ideal ethical deliberation as an instinctive process, suggesting that any substantive ethical principle is incapable of acknowledging the particularities of a given situation. What an attention to irrationality suggests is that Trollope does not hold this view merely because of the inability of such judgments to achieve sufficient nuance; the defense of instinct stems also from a deep worry about the psychology of rational judgment.⁴

I. Trollope, Morality, and Psychology

The contemporary critical debate about Trollope’s ethics remains indebted to Ruth apRoberts’s 1971 book *The Moral Trollope*, which contends that Trollope accepted a “situation ethics,” a sense of

moral evaluation that emphasized sensitivity to situational particulars. As she explains, "Trollope's interest in complex cases is thoroughly and frankly and insistently ethical. His tender casuistry demands the most careful, detailed consideration of the circumstances, even those of a crime" (42). Put another way, Trollope's novels depict the inadequacy of the application of general ethical principles to specific situations. By portraying moral problems with the full richness of accumulated detail, Trollope reveals the insensitivity of simple rules to the complexity of human ethical life. Trollope famously refused to define his key moral concept, the "gentleman," suggesting that those who use the term know what it means without being able to articulate it propositionally. This refusal to elaborate straightforward moral claims is related to what apRoberts tracks, in that Trollope's casuistry involves reflecting on the sub-principles and provisos that enable moral agents to attend to situational specificity. Significantly, his refusal of moral generalization makes apRoberts's Trollope almost an ethical skeptic, and certainly a relativist: "Trollope's own position consists in 'antisystematism'" (65), she writes, later claiming that "his distinguishing consistency . . . can best be thought of as a relativism" (125).

Yet, as James Kincaid has pointed out, for all his ethical sensitivity there is nevertheless a discernible moral code in Trollope's works:

It is true that [Trollope's] novels consistently attack all forms of purism and absolutism, but not generally to establish simple relativism in their place. The standards are all there; they are made more difficult to apply and far more difficult to define; most of all, there is less communal agreement on what they are. But they are dependent on codes which are not to be defined by situations. (12)

Kincaid is thus prepared to grant the claim about casuistry, agreeing that Trollope emphasizes the adjustments moral agents must make to apply general ethical rules to particular situations. However, it does not follow from this emphasis that everything is relative to the situation; the principle being applied necessarily depends on "extra-situational" criteria. To offer an example Kincaid mentions later, the question of how to act honestly in a given situation is only meaningful if the word "honesty" has a meaning independent of the description of the situation. For Kincaid, Trollope's moral philosophy is concerned with how best to live out a moral code. Rather than relying on the careful deductive application of a general rule, Kincaid's Trollope

advocates a moral model—the gentleman—who instinctively senses how to behave.

Amanda Anderson has criticized this interpretive strain by pointing out that many of Trollope's most memorable characters become so by virtue of the conflict between their own psychological features and the moral code by which they are attempting to live. As she puts it,

They manifest not exactly integrity but rather a kind of stubbornness or obsession that often shades into perversity. The tense imbrication of morality and psychology, the irreversible mediation of morality by psychology, thus becomes a fundamental narrative interest, and problem, for Trollope. Any account of ethics in Trollope that does not appreciate this fact . . . fails to acknowledge the prominent issue of recalcitrant psychologies even, or especially, among the morally favored characters. (511)

Anderson's point is that both apRoberts and Kincaid fail to acknowledge that Trollope's depiction of the difficulties of ethical life is in some significant sense the result of his interest in characters whose psychological makeup inevitably frustrates their moral agency. Thus the problem Trollope identifies pertains not so much to the difficulty of applying moral rules to specific situations—which is in some sense a problem outside the moral agent—but rather to the difficulty of living according to a moral rule given the stubborn, intractable, and possibly perverse thing that one is.

Anderson suggests that the focus on psychology supplants a focus on morality: "Trollope is always putting into question the limits of morality by focusing on recalcitrant psychological impulses and on the transformations that psychological habit effects on affirmed principle" (515). As the interpretive use of *akrasia* suggests, however, it is possible to see Trollope's investment in such psychological issues as reflecting the importance of a particular kind of moral problem rather than a belief about the limited scope of the moral realm. Ethical criticism can acknowledge the problem of recalcitrant psychologies by enriching the meaning of the term "ethics." That is, it is possible to follow apRoberts and Kincaid in seeing Trollope as invested in the nuances of ethical life, but follow Anderson in thinking of the problems that ensue as the result of internal, psychological difficulties.

In considering these moral-psychological problems, Trollope's work complements and is complemented by an important minor strain

in Victorian moral thought. For the most part, the dominant utilitarian thinkers failed to recognize *akrasia* as a problem. Relying on the simple model of philosophical agency, they believed that agents would necessarily pursue whatever end they judged would maximize their own pleasure: as Jeremy Bentham put it, “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone . . . to determine what we shall do” (65). The idea that an agent might judge that an action maximized her happiness and then not behave accordingly—that is, that she might act *akratically*—is essentially inconceivable.

But as Jerome Schneewind has noted, the intuitionist moral philosophers—unlike the utilitarians—took as emblematic of morality in general those problems “in which the agent knows what to do but finds it difficult to bring himself to do it” (33). Many of the less-remembered writers Stefan Collini has called the Victorian “public moralists” were also aware of the problem; in his description, “the fear was not relativism but weakness of will” (100). Finally, and like Trollope, the pre-Freudian psychologists who theorized the “morally insane” took as central the issue of self-control, offering sophisticated accounts of moral rationality and the ways in which it can fail.⁵

For much of the twentieth century, Anglo-American moral philosophers—still largely working within the utilitarian tradition—generally defended the simple model of agency. In the last quarter of the century, however, they began to recognize the importance of *akrasia* and irrationality more generally for a full account of moral agency. A seminal 1970 paper by Donald Davidson reignited this philosophical conversation by spelling out the intuitions behind the simple model of agency and acknowledging the problem *akrasia* presents to it. The response to Davidson has been rich and varied and, when combined with elements of minor strains of Victorian morality, it allows an underlying coherence in Trollope’s depictions of irrationality to emerge. The type of *akratic* protagonist Trollope most often depicts—which includes Frank Greystock, but also characters such as the Duke of Omnium and Phineas Finn—manifests a kind of self-deception importantly different from that implied by Davidson’s view. Rather than holding that such irrationality is a *state*, in which an agent both believes and doesn’t believe something at the same time, Trollope shows it to be a *process*, whereby the ordinary means by which agents decide on actions and beliefs are misled by desires. When he depicts

situations in which agents are not self-deceived and act freely against a better judgment of which they are aware, Trollope demonstrates skepticism about the assumption, central to Davidson's view, that judgments carry motivational power. Trollope's depiction of "conscious akrasia" in George Vavasor and Glencora Palliser suggests that the reasonableness of a judgment may have little impact on an agent's actions. Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, Trollope questions models of rationality that define reasonable behavior as that which accords with one's judgment. Through "ethically confused" characters like Alice Vavasor, Trollope shows how agents can act irrationally precisely by acting in accordance with their best judgment; correspondingly, he indicates that such agents would have been better off acting akratically, trusting recalcitrant impulses. Trollope's fiction accordingly contributes to the debates around akrasia in three ways: he shows how self-deception can easily mislead judgment; how judgment can fail to motivate even when it is not self-deceived; and, finally, how even unbiased deliberation can still be mistaken. Taken together, Trollope's depictions of the psychology of irrationality thus concord with his emphasis on casuistry, in order both to criticize the assumption that reflective judgment is the primary capacity for moral life, and to support the sophisticated but instinctive moral agency of the gentleman.

II. Self-Deception

Davidson argued for the possibility of akrasia by distinguishing between three kinds of judgments: "prima facie" judgments, which judge a given action preferable over another in some respect; "all things considered" judgments, which determine a given action preferable in all respects; and "all out" judgments, which essentially decide to perform a given action. Akrasia is possible, Davidson claims, because of the gap between "all things considered" and "all out" judgments. An agent can conclude that, all things considered, it would be best to turn off the television and go to sleep, but then fail to form the all-out judgment that leads to turning the television off. In such situations, on Davidson's model, the agent falls back on some prima facie judgment—perhaps that watching television is better than sleeping with respect to the desire to know what happens on *Mad Men*. What Davidson calls "the principle of continence" ("How is Weakness" 41), the philosophical core of his account of self-control, depends on connecting "all out" judgments

(“Intending” 98) to “all things considered” judgments, avoiding the akratic break (“How is Weakness” 40).

Explaining akrasia by appealing to a gap between judgments allows Davidson to preserve the basic theory of agency that the simple philosophical model affords: judgments still produce intentions, which in turn cause actions. If these are not exactly separable as mental phenomena, they are nevertheless distinguishable as components of the process of action. The psychological notion at work here is one Davidson calls a “mild form of ‘internalism’” (26). The term refers to the view that an agent’s judgments about what is worth pursuing have motivational, and thus causal, force; the opposite pole, “externalism,” holds that our judgments and beliefs about what is worth doing have little or no effect on our motivations and desires. The internalist contends that the causes of an action are internal to the deliberative process that produces the belief that the action is worth doing; colloquially, what happens in my consciousness leads to what my body does. This internalist commitment explains why Davidson emphasizes *prima facie* judgments. Even in cases of akratic action, a judgment produces the movement of the agent’s body; it’s just that the judgment isn’t of the “all things considered” type.

This solution comes, however, at a philosophical cost. In claiming that actions can sometimes stem from a partial judgment not representative of the full deliberative process, Davidson imagines the self as divisible, so that there are moments when part of a moral agent acts rather than the whole. This “partitioning of the mind” is implausible, Davidson’s critics have argued, for it posits the existence of “semi-autonomous structures” within the mind that can serve as “mental causes for other mental states” without being “reasons.” They can somehow cause action without being constitutive of full judgment (Mele, *Irrationality* 75–76).

It is possible to see the problem more clearly by considering the issue of self-deception, about which Davidson defended a similar strategy.⁶ One way to make sense of the peculiar state wherein an agent appears both to know and not know a given thing—say, that his spouse is faithful—is to claim that a part of the agent knows the spouse is faithful, while the rest believes that the spouse is not. This is to see self-deception as structurally analogous to interpersonal deception: the deceiver and the deceived are separate agents. But surely, the critique goes, this is implausible. As with the approach to akrasia, this way of

addressing the problem posits a number of dubious mental phenomena, sites of knowledge that exist within a person without being constitutive of that person.

Alfred Mele, among others, has suggested an alternate approach, arguing that self-deception and akrasia do not describe states of conflict within an agent's mind, but rather indicate failures in the ways agents arrive at action and form beliefs. Self-deception, from this perspective, is not a split between two contradictory beliefs but one belief arrived at in an irrational—because motivationally influenced—way. In similar fashion, akrasia is not a state in which a tension between a judgment and an action splits an agent, but rather one in which the operation of practical reason has been misled.

It is this alternative view that Trollope's representation of self-deception supports, and this particular kind of irrationality—that is, self-deception, as opposed to what this essay terms “conscious akrasia” or “ethical confusion”—forms perhaps the most prevalent form of weakness of will in his fiction. Even Plantagenet Palliser, whom Trollope terms “a perfect gentleman” in his *Autobiography* (361), eventually succumbs to it. *The Duke's Children* (1879) opens typically with a marriage crisis, with Palliser's daughter in love with a man whom he does not approve of. His beloved and now-deceased wife, however, encouraged the relationship behind his back, and thus Palliser (now the Duke of Omnium) irrationally redirects his anger against his wife's best friend, Mrs. Finn, who has advised the young couple. As the narrator explains, Palliser is “driven by the desire of his heart to acquit the wife he had lost of the terrible imprudence . . . of which she was now accused” (38). The Duke's desire to “acquit” Lady Glencora of manipulating him affects the way he assesses the situation and drives him into self-deception.

Palliser's mode of irrationality does not result from his holding contradictory beliefs (as in the Davidsonian account); rather, it stems from motivationally influenced belief formation. Put another way, what Palliser wishes to be true affects how he sees the evidence for and against his beliefs. Trollope's narrator represents the process with some subtlety:

He struggled gallantly to acquit the memory of his wife. He could best do that by leaning with the full weight of his mind on the presumed iniquity of Mrs. Finn. Had he not known from the first that the woman was an adventuress? And had he not declared to himself over and over again that between such a one and himself there should be no intercourse, no common feeling? He had allowed himself to be

talked into an intimacy, to be talked almost into an affection. And this was the result! (49-50)

As the analysis offered by the narrator in the first two sentences fades into a passage of free indirect discourse representing Palliser's increasingly self-deceived thoughts, the way in which motivation affects the understanding of evidence becomes clear. Rather than remembering his wife's willingness to manipulate love affairs, his thoughts are redirected into the irrelevant beginnings of his relationship with Mrs. Finn, to whom the old Duke, Plantagenet's father, had proposed marriage at the end of his life. The fact that then-Madame Goesler had declined the proposal is dismissed; for Palliser at this moment, Mrs. Finn is an "adventuress."

In thus attending to irrelevant evidence, the Duke exemplifies self-deception through what Mele calls "error costs," which involve the pain an agent will suffer if a belief turns out to be false (*Self-Deception* 42). If the Duke believes wrongly that his wife is innocent, the mistake is largely harmless, but if he wrongly believes that she is guilty, he will have unfairly condemned the woman he loved. As such, he unreflectively sets the standard of evidence for proof of his wife's guilt extremely high, and the standard for proving Mrs. Finn's guilt much lower:

He had come to entertain an idea that Mrs. Finn had been the great promoter of the sin, and he thought that Tregear [his daughter's lover] had told him that that lady had been concerned with the matter from the beginning. In all this there was a craving in his heart to lessen the amount of culpable responsibility which might seem to attach itself to the wife he had lost. (55)

The narrator makes clear that the hope of "lessening" his wife's fault affects Palliser's belief formation. Since he would suffer in believing that his wife manipulated him behind his back, the mere assertions from Tregear and Mrs. Finn of his wife's involvement in the affair do not constitute sufficient evidence of guilt. Conversely, Palliser's desires make it quite easy to convict Mrs. Finn of "iniquity." She has briefly interceded with Tregear as a mentor, and while her primary advice was for Tregear to confess everything to Palliser, the mere fact of the intercession, along with her past flirtation with the old Duke, becomes sufficient evidence to demonstrate that she is the "great promoter of the sin."

Even after it becomes clear that Mrs. Finn's behavior has been praiseworthy, the Duke somewhat willfully continues to condemn her.

As Trollope depicts it, this is again a result of error cost: it would cost the Duke a great deal to believe that he had treated her unfairly. After receiving a letter from Mrs. Finn accusing him of injustice, Palliser reflects on his behavior:

He tried to set himself to the task in perfect honesty. He certainly had condemned her. . . . And when he considered it all, he had to own that her intimacy with his uncle and his wife had not been so much of her seeking as of theirs. . . . And after all this,—after the affectionate surrender of herself to his wife's caprices which the woman had made,—he had turned upon her and driven her away with ignominy. That was all true. As he thought of it he became hot, and was conscious of a quivering feeling round his heart. . . . If he could make it good to himself that in a matter of such magnitude as the charge of his daughter she had been untrue to him. . . . Then would it have been impossible that he should have done aught else than cast her out! As he thought of this he felt sure that she had betrayed him! (100–01)

Palliser consciously tries to avoid deceiving himself, aspiring to “perfect honesty” in evaluating his conduct. And he starts well, first recognizing that Mrs. Finn was not really an “adventuress” in becoming acquainted with the Palliser family, and then admitting the deep friendship between her and his wife. And yet a “feeling round his heart rises” when he considers how inappropriate his own conduct has been; “driving” Mrs. Finn ignominiously away will be justified only if he can “make it good to himself” that she was in fact “untrue.” Thus he misleads himself into believing that she was unfaithful: “As he thought of this, he felt sure she had betrayed him,” a certainty that relies not on evidence but on how heavily his own need for self-approval depends on Mrs. Finn’s betrayal.

In keeping with the gentlemanly ideal he exemplifies, however, Palliser eventually overcomes his self-deception and apologizes to Mrs. Finn. The perception involved in such self-mastery is central to Trollope’s conception of honesty. In his book on Cicero, Trollope remarks:

To be believed because of your truth, and yet to lie; to be trusted for your honesty, and yet to cheat; to have credit for patriotism, and yet to sell your country! The temptations to do this are rarely put before a man plainly, in all their naked ugliness. They certainly were not so presented to Cicero by Caesar and his associates. The bait was held out to him, as it is daily to others, in a form not repellent, with words fitted to deceive and powerful almost to persuade. . . . But at last [Cicero] saw his way clear to honesty. (*Life* 194)

Cicero refuses to let his actions be guided by “temptations,” masters his motivations, and acts on his own best judgment; in this way, he avoids weakness of will. But the more specific problem Cicero confronts is self-deception. The “bait” does not appear in its “naked ugliness” and is “not repellent,” but instead appears in a form “fitted to deceive and powerful almost to persuade”; this is to see it as an influence relying on a disguised appeal to desire, in the same way that the Duke’s desire to believe his wife was innocent led him to believe Mrs. Finn was guilty of manipulating the romantic affairs of his children. To Trollope, it is not so significant that Cicero is open with others; rather, he is admirable because he is finally honest with himself.

The strains of Victorian moral philosophy that dealt with *akrasia* cohere closely with Trollope’s depictions of self-deception. Somewhat ironically, one finds a particularly clear expression of this view in the utilitarian thought of Henry Sidgwick.⁷ Arguing that the philosophical tradition had refused to recognize “unreasonable action,” Sidgwick suggests that weakness of the will most commonly arises from fallacious chains of practical reasoning that the agent momentarily fails to recognize as fallacious:

When a general resolution is remembered, while yet the particular conclusion which ought to be drawn is not drawn, the cause of the phenomenon is a temporary perversion of judgment by some seductive feeling. . . . [Given] a hard and distasteful task which he regards it as his duty to do, [a man] then rapidly but sincerely persuades himself that in the present state of his brain some lighter work is just at present more suited to his powers. (255–56)

Further, when a “seductive feeling” prevents an agent from drawing a particular conclusion that he or she rationally should, the feeling “operates not by producing positively fallacious reasoning, but by directing attention to certain aspects of the subject, and from certain others” (258).

Thus, an akratic agent often senses “that he might come to a different view of his position if he resolutely faced certain aspects of it tending to reduce his personal claims; but he consciously refrains from directing attention to them” (259). As in Trollope’s account, there is no sense that the man somehow knows and does not know a given belief. Rather, a “seductive” feeling has “perverted” his judgment, self-deceptively convincing him that “some lighter work” is more suitable than the difficult task initially undertaken. Moreover, the man’s irrationality

arises in a manner similar to Palliser's, in that his motivations determine the "aspects of the subject" to which he directs "attention," and—as with Palliser's desire to believe well of himself—his "personal claims" lead him astray.⁸

If *The Duke's Children* essentially corroborates the account of self-deception as motivated reasoning in Mele and Sidgwick, *Phineas Finn* (1867–68) considers but ultimately rejects Davidson's account of self-deception as a contradiction between internal states. Phineas Finn tries to convince himself that he is, in some sense, two agents; crucially, however, Trollope presents Phineas's belief not as a lucid account of his actual internal division, but as a product of motivated self-deception. In the first novel that bears his name, Phineas finds himself after election to Parliament in a series of romantic entanglements, first with Lady Laura Standish, then with Violet Effingham, and finally with Madame Max Goesler. All the while, however, he is in an implicit way engaged to a woman back home, Mary Flood Jones, with whom Phineas grew up in Ireland.

Phineas deals with this romantic tension by imagining that he is two different people:

He felt that he had two identities,—that he was, as it were, two separate persons,—and that he could, without any real faithlessness, be very much in love with Violet Effingham in his position of man of fashion and member of Parliament in England, and also warmly attached to dear little Mary Flood Jones as an Irishman of Killaloe. He was aware, however, that there was a prejudice against such fullness of heart, and, therefore, resolved sternly that it was his duty to be constant to Miss Effingham. (263)

And similarly, after giving up his pursuit of Violet Effingham, the reader hears:

His Irish life, he would tell himself, was a thing quite apart and separate from his life in England. He said not a word about Mary Flood Jones to any of those with whom he lived in London. Why should he, feeling as he did that it would so soon be necessary that he should disappear from among them? (500)

As these passages reveal, Phineas makes sense of himself by partitioning his agency: he has "two separate identities," is "two separate persons," with an "Irish life" quite different from his "life in England." But Trollope's narration clarifies the extent to which Phineas is mistaken: his mental division represents only what Phineas "would tell

himself," what he "feels," and what allows him to think that he is not guilty of "faithlessness." Phineas thus evades what Richard Moran has called the responsibility of the authority that arises from bearing a first-personal relation to one's actions (81). By pretending that the person in Ireland is different from and not in control of the person in England, Phineas avoids having to deal with his own duplicity. And his inchoate recognition of this fact appears in his awareness of the "prejudice against such fullness of heart." The ironic contrast between the romantic phrase representing Phineas's consciousness and the reader's awareness that Phineas is essentially trying to justify infidelity reveals the extent to which Phineas is fooling himself.

As with Palliser, the primary cause of Phineas's self-deception is his desire: he convinces himself of the possibility of a dual life because this allows him to achieve the multiple sexual relationships for which he yearns. At the point when Phineas has convinced himself that he loves Violet and cannot marry Mary, he nevertheless goes out with Mary during a visit back to Ireland. The narrator explains:

Perhaps there is no position more perilous to a man's honesty than that in which Phineas now found himself . . . knowing himself to be quite loved by a girl whom he almost loves himself. . . . Phineas was not in love with Mary Flood Jones; but he would have liked to take her in his arms and kiss her . . . and did, at the moment, think that it might be possible to have one life in London and another life altogether different at Killaloe. (369)

The narrator makes explicit the threat to Phineas's "honesty," as his desire to flirt with Mary leads him to "think it might be possible" to have a relationship with her and maintain his affection for Violet. Importantly, he is not consciously duplicitous; the text makes it clear he does not intend to hurt Mary. But he does in fact behave badly toward her, and does so by convincing himself it is possible for part of him to act without all of him acting.

What Frank Greystock, Palliser, and Phineas Finn together reveal is the extent to which self-deceived irrationality is a structuring element of Trollope's fiction. Indeed, Phineas's subsequent narrative makes this particularly clear: Mary Flood Jones dies before the beginning of *Phineas Redux*. The woman to whom Phineas has committed himself, and marries at the end of *Phineas Finn*, representing the triumph of his self-control, disappears from the rest of his story. Insofar as it reopens the possibility of weakness of will within Phineas's romantic

life, Mary's death is necessary for Trollope's narrative logic: a Phineas with fully integrated motivations would not allow for a vivid depiction of the distortions of practical reasoning. Early in *Phineas Redux*, the narrator criticizes Phineas, remarking that "in his character there was much of weakness, much of vacillation" (79). It is precisely because of the philosophical complexities of these failings, however, that the character is of such interest to Trollope.

III. Conscious Akrasia

Alongside these portrayals of self-deception, Trollope occasionally depicts conscious akrasia, wherein an agent recognizes that a given action is mistaken but performs it anyway. Although the bulk of the novel is concerned with self-deception, the resolution of Phineas's akrasia at the climax of *Phineas Finn* exemplifies this more conscious kind of irrationality. Phineas visits Madame Max Goesler, believing she will propose marriage to him and intending to decline it in order to marry Mary. No longer self-deceived, complete self-mastery still eludes him; he must deliberately remind himself of his commitment to Mary in order to prevent irrational flirtation:

There was a care about his person which he would have hardly taken had he been quite assured that he simply intended to say good-bye to the lady whom he was about to visit. But if there were any such conscious feeling, he administered to himself an antidote before he left the house. On returning to the sitting-room he went to a little desk from which he took out the letter from Mary which the reader has seen, and carefully perused every word of it. "She is the best of them all," he said to himself, as he refolded the letter. (533)

The passage emphasizes, first of all, the recalcitrance of desire. Despite his overt intentions, Phineas unreflectively dresses attractively for the meeting—in Sidgwick's terms, the desire draws his attention to certain kinds of clothing in a way that warps his original deliberation. Second, and crucially, Phineas here demonstrates what Mele calls self-control as an "ability," after demonstrating over the course of the novel that he lacks it as a "trait" (*Irrationality* 58). Mele intends for the distinction to capture the difference between self-control through reflective techniques and self-control as a property of character. One might think here of the difference between agents who get themselves out of bed through a complex series of alarm clocks and agents who get out of

bed simply as a result of deciding to wake up at a certain time. The latter are “exceptionally resolute” agents, who have “no need to make an effort of self-control even when faced with strong competing desires” (59). It is because Phineas lacks this kind of resolve that he must consciously work to control himself. Since he knows his judgment may fail to motivate him when the chips are down, in an encounter fraught with temptation he bolsters the motivational strength of his judgment by rereading a letter from Mary.

This weakness arises from a somewhat startling evaluative instability. Trollope’s narrator criticizes Phineas’s attempt to bolster himself by judging that Mary is the “best” of the women he might marry, explaining:

I am not sure that it is well that a man should have any large number from whom to select a best; as, in such circumstances, he is so very apt to change his judgment from hour to hour. The qualities which are the most attractive before dinner sometimes become the least so in the evening. (533)

In the offhand remark that a man is “so very apt to change his judgment,” this passage expresses a striking skepticism about the stability of character. Phineas’s weakness is not merely a result of his lack of resolve, but results more substantively from the weak nature of human judgment: his judgments fail to motivate him, the passage implies, because they are so changeable.

These passages suggest Trollope’s skepticism regarding what Davidson called internalism, the position that judgments are intrinsically motivational. On the opposing externalist view, akrasia results from the difference between an “agent’s assessments or rankings of the objects of his wants and the motivational force of those wants” (Mele, *Irrationality* 11). This is to say that self-control is difficult and akrasia common because the connections between judgments and motivations are so tenuous: merely judging that an action is worthwhile may have little effect on what an agent actually does. To put the objection in Davidson’s terms, akrasia happens not because an agent falls back on a *prima facie* judgment, but because the motivational power of some other option outweighs the motivational power of an “all things considered” judgment. I do not keep watching *Mad Men* because I fall back on the judgment that it is the better option than sleep with respect to some desire, but because that desire is motivationally stronger than my reasons.⁹ The point is not precisely that the

desire overwhelms such agents in a way that compels them; rather, the claim is that when they do decide to act, their reasons play a lesser role in the decision than the motivations created by their desires.

This rejection of internalism appears in a number of different ways in Trollope's works, but *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864–65) is particularly suited to an exploration of the issue. It brings together a number of conscious akratics, each of whom demonstrates an important difference from the sort of self-deceived irrationality exemplified by Palliser. George Vavasor, for instance, approaches self-conscious villainy. Upon Alice Vavasor's refusal to embrace him after their engagement, he recognizes that she does not love him but concludes that he will take her money anyway. The narrator explains: "When Alice contrived as she had done to escape the embrace he was so well justified in asking, he knew the whole truth. He was sore at heart, and very angry withal. He could have readily spurned her from him . . . [and] would have done so had not his need for her money restrained him. He knew that this was so, and he told himself that he was a rascal" (406). Here, George differs from self-deceived characters in openly recognizing the wrongness of his actions, yet performing them anyway; his judgment that they are wrong simply fails to motivate him.

Trollope is at pains to explain how George can simultaneously recognize himself as a rascal and yet treat Alice in such a fashion. The narrator remarks:

Vavasor had educated himself to badness with his eyes open. He had known what was wrong, and had done it, having taught himself to think that bad things were best . . . [yet he] would sometimes feel tempted to cut his throat and put an end to himself, because he knew that he had taught himself amiss. Again, he would sadly ask himself whether it was yet too late; always, however, answering himself that it was too late. . . . He believed in his own ability, he believed thoroughly in his own courage; but he did not believe in his own conduct. (481–82)

In George, a true separation between evaluations and intentions emerges: for him, the internalist notion that evaluations have motivational power has become entirely untrue. The fact that he knows himself to be a rascal is not sufficient to lead him to change; it is "too late" to do so.

One might think that George is self-deceived in the same way Phineas is; the line indicating that George "had taught himself to believe that bad things were best" could suggest that George has fooled

himself into thinking that immoral actions are in fact praiseworthy. The emphasis, however, falls on George's awareness of what he has been doing: he "educated himself to badness with open eyes," and does "not believe in his own conduct." Then, too, the context is revealing, in that the narrator compares George to Mr. Bott, a fellow new member of Parliament, who—though he "meant to do well"—was "born small" (480). The narrator explains that Mr. Bott "did not know that he was doing amiss in seeking to rise by tuft-hunting and toadying. He was both mean and vain . . . [but] was troubled by no idea that he did wrong" (480–81). Mr. Bott suffers from a garden-variety form of self-deception: he acts immorally but has no awareness of the fact. Given that the passage draws a contrast between the two, one must understand George as caught in a much darker state of agency in which he is helpless to act from what Trollope calls the "better part of his nature."

If George knows what he does is wrong while Mr. Bott does not, Lady Glencora Palliser knows that what she *would* do is wrong. Although situational constraints do not allow Glencora to act on her desires, her impulse to act against her own judgment parallels George Vavasor's. She is drawn to Burgo Fitzgerald and away from her husband in a way that she recognizes as wrong but is powerless to stop: "I know what I am, and what I am like to become. I loathe myself, and I loathe the thing that I am thinking of" (306). Much like George, Glencora is a conscious akratic: she would have run away with Burgo, but exterior forces—her husband and her family—have prevented her from acting at all.

The distinction between Lady Glencora and George emerges when she deploys self-control as an ability. She alters her circumstances to prevent an elopement by avoiding Burgo socially and enlisting Alice in the service of preventing any sort of meeting between her and her ex-lover. As the narrator describes Glencora, "She was as one who, in madness, was resolute to throw herself from a precipice, but to whom some remnant of sanity remained which forced her to seek those who would save her from herself" (453). This scene is akin to Phineas's decision to fortify his resolution through the "antidote" of rereading Mary's letter: Glencora's decision to draw on forces outside herself represents an awareness of the gap between her reasons and her actual motivations. Believing that she will elope if she is left to her own devices, she does not—as George does—let the chips fall where they may, but instead adds additional motivational strength to her reasons.¹⁰ In this

way, Glencora and George offer a philosophically significant juxtaposition: if George represents Trollope's awareness of the motivational gap, Glencora represents his suggestion for how moral agents ought to address such a condition.

IV. Ethical Confusion

The instances of irrationality presented thus far do not yet question the role of deliberative judgment within an account of rational behavior. If self-deceived characters demonstrate Trollope's recognition of the ways judgment can be misled, and conscious akratics demonstrate his recognition of the ways judgment can fail to motivate, both sorts of moral problem still reinforce the importance of judgment. In other words, failures of corrupted judgment and insufficient motivation both imply that moral action requires freeing one's judgment from bias and bringing one's behavior into accord with one's judgment. But the depth of Trollope's reflection on the issue appears in the fact that he also considers what is in some sense the opposite problem. Challenging the assumption that correct judgment is essential to rational behavior, Trollope depicts extended states of ethical confusion, in which a character's sincere, honest, and careful deliberative judgment is nevertheless deeply mistaken. In such moments, he represents emotions not as biases that produce irrationality, but instead as sub-reflective guides that point to a moral agent's real reasons. In such situations a character's rationality does not lie in finding ways to overcome those feelings and act in accord with her best judgment, but rather in trusting her feelings and acting against that judgment.

The suggestion that weakness of will might be rational represents a powerful challenge to the Davidsonian view. Nomy Arpaly points out that one's "all things considered" judgment is, after all, just another belief and thus certainly susceptible to error (512). Arpaly argues that there is no guarantee that reflection, even under ideal circumstances, will prevent mistakes. Even if one limits the conception of rationality to what Arpaly calls the "coherence of the agent's mental states" (496), the possibility of reflective error remains; even when the only question is which action best serves an agent's interests, the agent can still err through subjective irrationality or confusion about what her interests actually are. When caught up in such confusion, Arpaly argues, akrasia is not necessarily irrational. Given two irrational

actions, where one is against an agent's real interests and desires but in accord with her judgment, and the other is against an agent's best judgment but in accord with her real interests and desires, the fact that the latter is akratic is inconsequential. In a state of ethical confusion, an agent's recalcitrant emotions and instincts— affective states that resist the control of rational judgment— can be guides to her genuine interests.¹¹ Thus akrasia matters less than one might think: agents who act on the basis of recalcitrant emotions might be procedurally irrational, but they are better off than they would be if they insisted on following their judgment.¹²

In *Can You Forgive Her?* Alice Vavasor's extensive reflection on whom to marry exemplifies the kind of irrationality Arpaly describes. As Trollope's representation indicates, ethically confused deliberations can be quite sophisticated; indeed, the implication is that their extent and depth are part of the problem. Alice's deliberation has led her to vacillate between her choices: she has been engaged to George Vavasor, is engaged to John Grey at the novel's beginning, returns to George, and then marries John. The narrator criticizes Alice's deliberations:

That Alice Vavasor had thought too much about it, I feel quite sure. . . . She had gone on thinking of the matter till her mind had become filled with some undefined idea of the importance to her of her own life. . . . If [a woman] shall have recognized the necessity of truth and honesty for the purposes of her life, I do not know that she need ask herself many questions as to what she will do with it. Alice Vavasor was ever asking herself that question, and had by degrees filled herself with a vague idea that there was a something to be done; a something over and beyond, or perhaps altogether beside that marrying and having two children;—if she only knew what it was. (140–41)

Alice's extensive reflections on what to do with her life have come to mislead her; she has developed a "vague idea" that a life spent in married domesticity is somehow inadequate. Trollope's alternative is revealing, since he suggests not that Alice ought to have deliberated differently but rather that she should not have deliberated to such an extent at all. Once they have recognized the importance of "truth and honesty," agents need not think very much about what to do with their lives more generally.

As Kate Flint has noted, Trollope's portrayal of Alice undoubtedly reflects Victorian sexual politics. Certainly, Trollope reveals a version

of separate-spheres ideology in the suggestion that Alice's confusion arises from her belief that she should do something with her life besides "marrying and having two children." The anti-feminist impulses inherent in this view become more obvious in the narrator's explanation that Alice has become confused after listening to a "flock of learned ladies" (140). As such, it is difficult not to see ideological content in Trollope's suggestion that Alice should not reflectively deliberate, but instead just feel and act. Nevertheless, the destabilization of rational judgment here is philosophically insightful.

For instance, the narrator returns to the relationship between rationality and coherence in a series of counterfactuals:

When she told herself that she would have no scope for action in that life in Cambridgeshire which Mr. Grey was preparing for her, she did not herself know what she meant by action. Had any one accused her of being afraid to separate herself from London society, she would have declared that she went very little into society and disliked that little. Had it been whispered to her that she loved the neighbourhood of the shops, she would have scorned the whisperer. Had it been suggested that the continued rattle of the big city was necessary to her happiness, she would have declared that she and her father had picked out for their residence the quietest street in London because she could not bear noise;—and yet she told herself that she feared to be taken into the desolate calmness of Cambridgeshire. (141)

The passage points to a tension between Alice's real reasons and the conclusions to which she has come. Alice does not like London society, London shops, or London noise, and each of these facts about her desires represents a reason to marry John Grey. But her desires are opaque to her in this matter: without being self-deceived, she has concluded that the "desolate calmness" of John Grey's estate in Cambridgeshire represents a reason not to marry him. This sort of disjunction between desires and agents' conclusions about them is what rational incoherence involves, and it is significant that the problem is Alice's having thought too much about her desires. In thinking about herself, she has distanced herself from the sort of immediate reactions feelings involve. As the narrator indicates, if one asks her directly whether she likes London, she says no; but she loses the clear connection to her desires when she moves to the larger question of marriage.

Correspondingly, John persuades Alice to marry him by critiquing her reasoning: "I think you have been foolish, misguided,—led away by a vain ambition, and that in the difficulty to which these

things brought you, you endeavored to constrain yourself to do an act, which, when it came near to you . . . you found to be contrary to your nature." Alice's response is revealing: "Now, as he spoke thus, she turned her eyes upon him, and looked at him, wondering that he should have had power to read her heart so accurately" (769). This diagnosis is consistent with what John thinks throughout the novel; elsewhere he thinks of Alice as "one wounded, and wanting a cure" (138), brought to "a sad pass" by "her ill judgment" (395). He thus portrays Alice's conscious beliefs as a medical condition, a "vain ambition" having so misdirected her assessment of what she should do that it nearly resembles insanity. Moreover, John points suggestively to a theory of rationality in discerning a part of Alice that resists this condition: he appeals to her "nature," suggesting that it was ultimately in some sense smarter than she was. When, to paraphrase his point, push came to shove and it was time to marry George Vavasor, Alice's unreflective nature found the action "contrary" and acted against her judgment. Alice confirms this diagnosis in her reaction, as does the plot. Even after saying she will marry George, Alice involuntarily resists his embrace.

The appeal to Alice's "nature" as an entity that opposes her judgment has two important implications. First, it helps to explain the tension between Alice's actions and her advice to Lady Glencora. As Juliet McMaster has observed, Alice "can be astonishingly sententious in her judgments on Glencora's behavior, and in the very matters in which she is herself most at fault" (612). She insists that Glencora maintain her marriage vow, for instance, when Alice has broken her own promises a number of times. This sort of hypocrisy is, of course, common; as McMaster writes, "Most of us have at some time irritably responded to cavillers: 'Don't do what I do, do what I say!'" (613). Ordinarily such statements denote the duplicity of a moral agent not living up to her ideals. But Trollope suggests that they can also be indicative of ethical confusion. In commonplace hypocrisy the problem is that agents need to bring what they do in line with what they say; in ethical confusion, conversely, agents need to bring what they say in line with what they do.

Edward Hinchman calls this "upstream reasoning": in moments of "rational akrasia," when an agent behaves rationally in acting against her best judgment, he or she should manifest what Hinchman calls "reasonable self-mistrust" (2). Maintaining a healthy skepticism about the capacity of one's rational abilities, such agents take their inability to perform the action they have judged they should

do to be indicative of a reason that has been overlooked. As opposed to reasoning “downstream,” by which an agent forms a judgment and then acts, such agents reason “upstream”: having found that they cannot act, they reform their judgment.

Second, the fact that Alice’s “nature” responds to her real reasons through her emotions suggests that agents’ non-deliberative feelings can be better guides to their actual reasons than their deliberations. In this light, it is significant that Alice’s ethical confusion arises in part from a dismissal of her emotions: “It was not her love for [George] that prompted her to run so terrible a risk. Had it been so, I think that it would be easier to forgive her. She was beginning to think that love . . . did not matter” (342). This dismissal of the importance of love is necessary, since even with “all her doubts,” Alice “never doubted her love for John Grey” (140). In concluding that it does “not matter” whether she loves George, Alice dismisses the reasons to which her love for John attends. Rather than trusting that her affection attends to genuinely valuable properties that she cannot consciously articulate, she distrusts her own emotions.

In suggesting that emotional reactions can be rational, and that Alice acts irrationally in dismissing them, Trollope speaks to an important trend in recent moral philosophy. As Karen Jones has described it, such feelings can be “reason-trackers”: “When an agent’s emotional responses are shaped, fine-tuned, and sometimes even radically transformed through the process of character formation,” they can become “reliable at latching on to the reasons that obtain for her” (196). Explanations of rationality need to account for those moments when an agent acts rationally without recognizing that she is doing so. When well-developed emotions respond to a fact and subsequently move an agent to act in the same way she would have done had she recognized the fact and deliberated about it, the insistence that such deliberation is necessary for rational action seems implausible. The Duke of St. Bungay distills this view concisely when he remarks, “I would a deal sooner trust to instinct than to calculation” (*Can You Forgive Her?* 619).

V. Conclusion: The Instinctive Rationality of a Gentleman

In concluding that Trollope criticizes the view that moral deliberation should involve a process of reflective judgment and advocates an instinctive version of moral agency, my argument aligns with

the critical consensus about Trollope's moral philosophy. James Kincaid points out that "the most common standard for moral behavior in Trollope is the code centered on the word 'gentleman'" (12). Critics disagree about just how substantive this code is, but most concede that it cannot be identified with a particular principle for action: one cannot be a gentleman by following a rule.¹³ A degree of situational sensitivity is required, which can be modeled if not articulated. To such arguments I hope to have contributed a sense of Trollope's coherence. Rather than demonstrating his rejection of principle-based judgment by revealing its insufficiency in evaluating specific situations, this essay shows Trollope questioning the psychology of judgment itself. Through diverse representations of irrationality, Trollope contends that the deliberative judgment of practical reasoning is easily misled into self-deception; that it can fail to motivate even when it is not biased by desire; and, finally, that even unbiased judgment can still be profoundly mistaken. Thus, Trollope offers a moral psychology that complements his view of moral deliberation: the gentleman represents an ideal for moral agency not only because he will be appropriately sensitive to situational particularities, but also because, in minimizing the ethical role of judgment, he will avoid irrationality.

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NOTES

¹As Sharon Marcus puts it, "A typical Trollope novel charts the dilemmas of a heroine who must choose between two or more suitors" (233).

²This in some ways extends an observation by Andrew H. Miller, who notes in passing that Trollope's *The Prime Minister* (1876) is "a novel much concerned with the weakness of will" (77). Though Miller approaches the problem differently, we share a sense of Trollope's interest in akrasia. Miller's *The Burdens of Perfection* also directed me to a number of sources, including Collini and Sidgwick.

³On this issue, see Stroud. For my understanding of the current philosophical debate about akrasia, I am indebted to her explanation.

⁴In reading so directly for the moral-philosophical content of a work of fiction, and in seeing discursive passages from the narrator as a guide to that content, this essay practices what I elsewhere call "content formalism." See my "In Defense of Paraphrase."

⁵*Embodied Selves*, the anthology of Victorian psychology compiled by Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth, brings together several examples of this tradition.

⁶See Deweese-Boyd for a discussion of Davidson in this light, as well as examples of other thinkers defending a "partitioning" view.

⁷See Sidgwick, who writes of the philosophical tradition, "I find that such writers are apt to give an account of voluntary action which—without expressly denying the existence of what I call subjective irrationality—appears to leave no room for it" (246).

⁸Sidgwick's essay, along with Trollope's remarks in his nonfiction, matter further insofar as they show that an invocation of akrasia is not especially anachronistic.

⁹See Mele, *Irrationality* 54.

¹⁰This account of Glencora elides some of the complexity of this subplot's ending. It turns out that she is wrong about herself: Glencora meets privately with Burgo, but successfully rejects him (697-700). Yet Glencora doesn't understand herself as having acted in a self-controlled fashion, but instead as having failed to control herself in a moment of cowardice: "As for running away with him, I have not courage to do it" (701).

¹¹There is of course a lengthy theoretical tradition diagnosing states like Alice's: she is repressed. While I lack the space to offer it here, a longer treatment would certainly need to engage the psychoanalytic account of irrationality.

¹²Arpaly is not quite prepared to concede that agents would be more procedurally rational if they changed their judgment, since this is in some sense a way of re-instantiating the importance of reflective judgment.

¹³As Shirley Robin Letwin puts it, "The manners of a gentleman are not a set of choreographed movements and they cannot be found in a code or a manual" (115).

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