

What Reason Can't Do<sup>1</sup>

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Michael Lacewing

given the extent to which Freudian ideas have by now permeated our ways of thinking about human conduct, there is surely something remarkable about the almost wholesale disregard of those ideas by contemporary practitioners of philosophical ethics... so many contemporary moral philosophers... [are] still writing... as if humans were transparently self-aware creatures, and the task of ethics were simply that of intellectually analysing the structure of our goals, and rationally working out the best way to implement them. (Cottingham 1998: 130)

The aim of this paper to analyse the central argument of Cottingham's (1998) *Philosophy and the Good Life*, and to strengthen and develop it against misinterpretation and objection. Cottingham's argument is an objection to 'ratiocentrism', the view that the good life can be understood in terms of and attained by reason and strength of will. The objection begins from a proper understanding of akrasia, or weakness of will, but its focus, and the focus of this paper, is the relation between reason and the passions in the good life. Akrasia serves to illustrate ratiocentrism's misunderstanding of this relation and of the nature of the passions themselves.

In § I, I outline and clarify the objection. In § II, I present and provisionally elaborate on Cottingham's diagnosis of what a corrected understanding of the passions makes necessary for the good life, viz. the rediscovery and reclamation of the source of our passions, our childhood past. In § III, I discuss whether ratiocentrism could accept and absorb the critique as developed so far. Cottingham (1998: 162)<sup>2</sup> is aware that his claim, with its emphasis on self-*knowledge*, could be reinterpreted by ratiocentrism as no more than the need for reason to work with a different source of information regarding the passions in order to master them. I briefly present three further objections to show why this is a mistake. In § IV, I argue that Cottingham's diagnosis is not quite right, and I seek to emphasise aspects of self-discovery that I believe Cottingham overlooks or underplays. What is needed is a set of interrelated dispositions, viz. acceptance, vulnerability, courage, and compassion; these can be inculcated and sustained by the journey Cottingham defends, but it is the dispositions, rather than the journey, that are properly considered a necessary part of the good life.

Some readers may wonder whether the view I defend is an alternative to or a form of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics has tended to prioritise the passions more than other normative theories, and all the more so in recent years, and this paper supports that trend. However, I would question the extent to which virtue ethicists have taken on board the argument against reason that follows, as sympathetic as they may be to the theory of the passions it defends. For example, one question raised by the critique concerns the internal structure of a virtue and its relation to rational insight. The argument suggests traits other than reason play an equally important role here. Insofar as virtue ethics retains the goal of a life planned and unified by reason, the argument forms an objection: the foundation must be broader. This said, my main concern is with what is necessary for ethical practice. I do not have space to discuss the

implications for how philosophical theory should change or proceed in order to take account of what follows.

### I. 'A rationally articulated plan'

In this section, I aim to clarify what it is that ratiocentric ethics claims which Cottingham rejects. I first introduce ratiocentrism and the objection from *akrasia*. In the next sub-section, I look at the models of ratiocentrism from the ancient Greeks and discuss Cottingham's claim that the passions are 'opaque' to reason. In the third, we look at developments from Descartes, and in the last, restate the objection.

The central claim of ratiocentrism is that the good life can be understood in terms of and attained by reason and strength of will. As a product of reason, philosophy has its role to play in developing an understanding of being human, one that can serve in attaining the good life. The aim, as Cottingham quotes from John Kekes (1995: 209), is 'increasing our control by developing a reasonable conception of a good life, and bringing our actions in conformity with it'. The ancient Greek ideal, that '[s]trengthened by the instilling of the right habits, and guided by a rational vision of the good life' (24), we shall secure the good life, is still with us.

It is not my concern to run through the (important) differences between the classical Greek, Medieval, early modern, and contemporary accounts of how the rational plan for a good life is to be formed, what it recommends, and how it is to guide us, as the heart of Cottingham's critique targets a claim much deeper than the level at which these models disagree. Indeed, it takes in any ethical theory, whether consequentialist, deontological, or virtue-based, that has as its foundation the possibility of reason discovering what the good life might consist in, and then securing such a life for us. No matter whether such theories are taken with a cognitivist metaethics, in which reason discovers what is objectively good, or a non-cognitivist metaethics, in which the good is a projection of our desires and attitudes, and reason merely discovers and organizes these responses into a life that can be lived. The problem with ratiocentric ethics is that, in the light of findings by psychoanalysis, 'the very idea of a rationally planned structure for the good life begins to look like a piece of naïve self-deception' (27).

There are three fundamental obstacles to the rational plan for the good life: a lack of knowledge, a lack of control, and fortune. The third is not my concern here, for it is on the questions of knowledge and control that Cottingham focuses (see Ch. 2, § 3). And he illuminates the commitments of ratiocentric theories in the end by the way they diagnose and respond to *akrasia* (44). *Akrasia*, of course, is doing what you believe is not what is best. In all cases of *akrasia*, arguably, there is an equivalent structure at the level of motivation: feeling or desiring what you believe it is not best (e.g. not appropriate) to feel or desire. This extension is important, as the ratiocentric models Cottingham discusses all understand the good life not just in terms of what one does, but what one feels as well. To certain deontological or consequentialist models, this may only be of instrumental concern, i.e. it is only actions that matter ethically, and so desires and emotions are important only as motivation to actions. But whether one is concerned with emotions and desires (henceforth 'passions') intrinsically or only instrumentally, the question still arises of how to deal with akratic motivation, if not to correct or prevent it entirely, then at least to prevent it from giving rise to akratic action. Furthermore, *akrasia* cannot be dismissed as a peripheral issue in ethics: it is central to an understanding of the good life, for 'as long as there is a psychic split between what I feel like doing and what I am morally called to do...

then there will be an unresolved tension at the heart of my moral nature' (Cottingham 2005: 75).

Ratiocentric ethics mistakenly claims that akrasia can be both understood and corrected by reason, and not just in theory, but in the actual, particular case. Understanding why this is a mistake leads to the objection that reason cannot have the knowledge and control necessary for forming and implementing a plan of the good life.

What 'reason' is I shall leave implicit. It is clear enough that 'reason' as understood by the philosophers Cottingham discusses – Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Descartes – is attributed a knowledge and control he argues it cannot have. Whether such knowledge and control could be gained by reason understood differently, I discuss in § III.

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Socrates famously claims that 'No one willingly pursues the bad, or what he thinks bad' (*Protagoras*, 358c). If I appear to act against what is best, this is a result of ignorance – in fact, I have done what I thought best in some sense. I may not have considered carefully what is best, and this may be a result of my passions in some way. But while passions may influence my beliefs about what is best, the force of reason, in the form of these beliefs, is so strong that I cannot act against it. Aristotle, eventually, similarly concludes that full and active knowledge of what is best is not present. If it were, he agrees with Socrates that it could not be 'dragged around' by the passions. We always do as reason indicates; but in coming to its conclusion, reason can be lead astray or 'clouded' by the passions.

What is to be done? A first solution is that if the balance of forces could be brought to favour reason, the good life could be secured. But the ability of passions to 'cloud' reason is not, or not just, about force, argues Cottingham; rather, reason, in its deliberations about the good, does not fully understand the passions and the vision of the good they present. As a result, it does not understand the *source* of their motivating force. Without knowing where the passions get their strength from, reason will struggle to best them.

If force won't work, a second solution, then, is for reason to understand the passions: If akrasia is a *cognitive* defect, it can be corrected by reason. In commenting on the Epicurean version of *therapeia*, Cottingham notes that 'the kind of 'confrontation' [of the passions by reason] envisaged is taken to operate largely at the level of relatively transparent cognitive and emotional self-awareness... [and] aimed...at exposing them to the intellect as inherently confused and confusing' (59). This comment indicates that ratiocentrism's commitment to the transparency of the passions to reason is not a commitment that reason can *make sense* of them, but rather it can *either* do this, laying out the vision of the good they present for rational evaluation *or* it can expose them as essentially confused, and so to be rejected.

But the passions are *opaque* to reason, Cottingham argues, in a way that falsifies both options. What is this 'opacity'? When we respond emotionally, we seek to understand ourselves; above all, to understand the vision of the world the emotion presents. To what are we responding, and how is that object presented? What are the reasons for the response? What explains the emotion's intensity, or its being precipitated now rather than on another, similar occasion? And so on. We look for a 'sufficient explanation', either showing how our response and the way in which it represents the world is appropriate, timely, proportionate, and so on; or explaining

why it was inappropriate or disproportionate, e.g. as a result of a particular bad mood, or a sequence of events that finally proved too much to bear. With our desires, we seek to identify the good they seek and the reasons for thinking it is good. We may seek to explain an inappropriate desire on the basis of confused thinking about what satisfaction its fulfilment would actually bring us. Now if we were able, simply upon self-reflection, to provide such a sufficient explanation that correctly identified the meaning of the passion the passions would be transparent. The claim that they are opaque is the claim that what explains a passion – its object, content, intensity, cause, timing, or vision of the good – is not always available in this way.

Furthermore, we believe, often rightly, that if we understand why we react as we do, this gives us some control over the passion. Our passions clearly respond to reasons; a reasoned account of the object and reasons for the passion should therefore alter it if necessary. But because passions are opaque, there are also recalcitrant. Ratiocentrism misunderstands and misdiagnoses the opacity and recalcitrance of passions, and this misunderstanding leads ratiocentrism to falsely maintain that the passions can be brought into line, by reason, with a plan for the good life that reason has devised or discovered.

As yet, we have had no argument to support the claim that passions are opaque. Cottingham will argue that the opacity stems from *unconscious influence*, deriving from the past, on our passions. To deny that there is such unconscious influence is now, I believe, to fly in the face of huge amount of evidence, and Cottingham's claim is equally defended by many other philosophers of emotion.<sup>3</sup> So I shall not seek to defend the claim at any length, though I expand on it at the beginning of § II.

Cottingham takes *akrasia* to illustrate the opacity and recalcitrance of the passions starkly. But there is no reason, I believe, to think that passions are easily divided into the 'akratic' and the 'non-akratic' in nature.<sup>4</sup> All passions are open to unconscious influence. The passions that motivate akratic action do not derive their content or motivation from a unique source, untapped by other passions. And the same passion can lead to akratic action or not in different circumstances. What makes the difference is the modulation of passion in relation to the agent's conception of the good. So if the passions are opaque to reason in cases of *akrasia*, this tells us something about the nature of the passions *per se*. Opacity is always a potential threat to rational control: 'if our very grasp of what we truly want can be subject to a pervasive and potentially crippling opacity, then we need to rethink the optimistic vision of a rationally planned and organized life' (28).

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The possibility that ratiocentrism may yet accommodate the opacity of the passions arises in Cottingham's discussion of Descartes. Descartes recognises the opacity of the passions, and accounts for it in terms of their physiological nature and in terms of our past psychological history, including the pre-rational experiences of early childhood (here treading the stumping-ground of psychoanalysis). This understanding enables a more subtle and ameliorative approach to recalcitrant passions, viz. 'to use the resources of science and experience to understand what has caused things to go awry, and then to attempt to reprogram our responses so that the direction in which we are led by the passions corresponds to what our reason perceives as the best option' (96). But whether this is really possible (through the activities of reason alone) seems to be a matter on which Descartes equivocated. At times, he is

optimistic, and rejects the Stoic recommendation of *apatheia*, arguing that ‘persons whom the passions can move most deeply are capable of enjoying the sweetest pleasure of this life’ (1650: Article 212). At other times, the opacity of the passions leads him to emphasise their *alteration* less and the *purity and strength of the will* more: ‘Nothing truly belongs to us but the freedom to dispose our volitions’, and praise and blame should rest only on using this freedom well, i.e. the resolution ‘never to lack the will to undertake and carry out what we judge to be best’ (1650: Article 153). From this, a person ‘will receive...a satisfaction that has such power to make him happy that the most violent assaults of the passions will never have sufficient power to disturb the tranquillity of his soul’ (1650: Article 148).

Perhaps the most charitable way of reading these apparent equivocations is as a ‘belt-and-braces’ approach: using reason, change what you can; but what you can’t change, protect yourself from by cultivating purity and strength of will. Descartes holds fast to the idea that the conscientious exercise of the will, guided by reason, is all that is needed to secure the good life. But, Cottingham argues, this glosses over those very insights into the opacity of the passions that Descartes disclosed. First, and perhaps most importantly, the unconscious influences at work in recalcitrant passion, influences that may lead to ‘violent assaults of the passions’, work equally effectively by distorting ‘the calm deliberations of reason about how best we should live’ (103) (this is further discussed in § II). Second, such attempts to control, rather than resolve, one’s passions create psychic pressures that can lead to catastrophic results. Cottingham notes that Aristotle’s prescriptions for the good life strikingly contrast with the Greek tragedians’, and of course Freud’s, recognition of the force passions retain, even (or perhaps especially) when repressed (48, 51). Third, even supposing such control were possible, in light of Descartes’ comment that the passions can yield ‘the sweetest pleasure of this life’, we should doubt whether it would result in the good life after all.

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Let us take stock. First, Cottingham claims that the opacity of the passions to reason, and not just in the case of *akrasia*, means that reason lacks the knowledge that is needed for a rationally ordered and planned life. This ignorance is compounded by the fact that reason has historically misunderstood the passions, focusing on the issue of their force, rather than their source and meaning. Second, just as passions are opaque, so they are also recalcitrant. Attempts to control them by force, without understanding, either do not succeed – witness *akratic* passions and actions – or insofar as they do, they create a psychic pressure that is not properly considered part of the good life.

What is missing is knowledge of the true meaning or content of our passions. Ratiocentrism always presupposes ‘that the end is clearly in sight, and that what has to be done is to arrange the pieces in the appropriate way... what the psychoanalytic approach implies... is that our innermost nature, and hence the structure of any possible recipe for its fulfilment, is *not* clearly in sight’ (140). Hence we face an overarching practical problem, that ‘Unless and until the past is reclaimed, unless we can come to appreciate the significance of our past, and the role it plays in shaping our emotional lives, then the very idea of an ordered plan for the good life will have to be put on hold’ (135).

Cottingham does not reject outright the claim that some form of cognitive defect *is* involved in *akrasia* (47); there is something unknown, viz. the unconscious

influence that is present and how it informs the conception of the options between which the agent is deliberating. But, finally, this is *not* knowledge reason gains later by the methods of confronting the passions discussed above. To gain this knowledge requires a different approach from any countenanced in ratiocentrism (59).

It is worth noting that Cottingham does not seek to dismiss or replace reason (111). Furthermore, he argues that psychoanalysis holds out ‘the possibility that after acknowledging its lack of total mastery, our conscious power of understanding can eventually get to grips with those buried images, drives and fears’ (131). We may therefore ask, Is Cottingham’s objection to ratiocentrism an objection to the *project* of bringing one’s passions under the control of reason or just to how the project has been *conceived*? If we accept the criticisms he has made, and understand that we must reconsider the relationship between reason and the passions, must we ‘merely’ widen our view of how the good life is to be achieved; or are there further implications of his critique?

The remainder of the paper will be concerned with these questions. In § III I discuss whether ratiocentrism can be updated to accommodate the fact of unconscious influence. In § IV I shall conclude by arguing that Cottingham has *not gone far enough* in displacing reason in his model of self-understanding. To begin with, though, in the next section, I lay out the basics of a psychoanalytic approach to the question of the passions.

## II. Psychoanalytic ethics

We should begin by refocusing our target. For many philosophers may object that ethics is not predominantly concerned with the niceties of our emotions, but with our public actions. Cottingham grants that both the plan and execution of our lives in this sphere can be brought under reason,<sup>5</sup> but argues that the ‘intensely private sphere of close personal relations..., for most of us, forms the very core of a worthwhile life’ (143). And so it is with this arena that he is concerned. Even here, what is good – in general – is clear; we may relate personal goods to a good life. But ‘These are relations involving uncertainty, vulnerability, deep physical and psychological needs... [And so] what is not similarly accessible [to reason] is... the power and resonance which informs each of the relevant relationships is a uniquely particular way, at the deepest level of our pre-rational drives and feelings’ (143).

As I noted in § I, I believe there is overwhelming evidence that our passions are subject to unconscious influence, deriving from our past. Because the influence is unconscious, the passions are opaque to conscious reflection, and because it derives from the past, we need to engage with our past in order to discover their meaning and significance. As Cottingham notes, despite philosophical reservations regarding psychoanalysis, this claim should not be controversial after reflection on the nature of our emotions. Ratiocentrism has had a tendency to understand emotions as easily identifiable elements within a static time-frame; we feel them, and can identify just what they are from that. But this view, challenged by a number of recent philosophers of emotion, fails to integrate the long psychic history which our emotions have, and which gives them their meaning, their power, and their resonance:

Bringing to the surface the precise nature of our feelings, is not a matter of identifying simple items... swimming around the transparent tank of consciousness... our awareness of our emotional states, and of the nature of the

objects to which they are directed, can frequently be distorted by all kinds of dark projections and shadows from the past... (Cottingham 2005: 63)

With its focus on the theory of reasons, and the equation of the right to that which we have conclusive reason to do, contemporary ethical theory does not address either the extensive influence our passions have on our judgments of what the best reasons are nor the inability of such judgments to integrate with our motivations. The psychology is complex: pride, vanity, self-importance, fear, embarrassment, self-defensiveness, envy, greed, self-absorption, and fantasies of power all play a role (Cottingham 2005: 142). I would argue, without seeking to reduce these different motivations, that at the heart of the matter lies psychic pain. Psychoanalysis argues that we have a constant tendency in the face of painful emotions and experiences to unconsciously pervert our experience of reality by imagining it to be different.

There are many reasons why our passions can be painful. They can cause us anxiety, horror, guilt, shame, even terror. We can feel this way just about having them; or about not being able to control them; or about the prospect, or its absence, of what would satisfy our desires or arouse our emotions occurring in reality. I can be ashamed of my envy; I can be anxious that I can't control feelings of anger; I can be terrified that my love will make me dependent. Psychoanalysis argues that our minds have an in-built tendency to keep such painful mental states and what becomes associated with them out of consciousness. We turn them away. The many ways in which we do this are 'defence mechanisms'.<sup>6</sup>

Defence mechanisms utilize mental processes that, using the imagination, operate 'on mental content that represents the cause of anxiety in such a way as to reduce or eliminate anxiety' (Gardner 1993: 145) or the other painful feelings just mentioned.<sup>7</sup> This barring of certain states from consciousness affects what we understand of ourselves, of others, of the situations in which we find ourselves, in other words, the world as we experience it (Lear 2003: 205), and therefore, of course, of our reasons.<sup>8</sup>

As our emotions are not isolated events, these distortions are not 'one-offs', but, as Jonathan Lear argues, form an entire world-view:

A patient of mine inhabited a disappointing world. Although she was quite successful at work, had friends, and so on, there was no success in the social world that would not be interpreted by her under an aura of disappointment. If she got a raise at work, it was because the boss was shamed into it – he really wanted to give someone else in the office a raise, but he felt he had to give her one to appear fair. If she was invited out for a date, the person had already tried to go out with others and had failed. If someone congratulated her on some accomplishment, they were just being polite. And so on. From a distance it is clear to us, as it was not clear to her, how active she was in understanding her world in ways that were bound to disappoint. And, of course, much of the analysis was spent working through these repetitive attempts at disappointment. (Lear 2003: 48-9)

In the light of all this, we see that neither the resolve to weigh up reasons better nor to act more consistently on the reasons we perceive is sufficient to overcome the difficulty the opacity of our passions presents to a ratiocentric vision of living the good life. We must engage with the influences of the past that has formed our passions and continues to inform their meaning.

This, Cottingham argues, is the project of psychoanalysis. But the point of the appeal to psychoanalysis is not to argue that everyone should enter analysis if they wish to attain a good life; the point is to uncover the nature of the psyche, i.e. what is involved in being human. And the psyche is such that self-knowledge, knowledge of the meaning of one's passions, involves the recovery the roots of our passions in childhood phantasies and a recognition of our emotional vulnerability (152).

### III. Reason's return?

I asked, at the end of § I, whether Cottingham's objection to ratiocentrism an objection to the project of bringing one's passions under the control of reason or just to how the project has been conceived. Must we abandon ratiocentrism? Is what is needed for the recovery of the past, for us to come to know the meaning and significance of our passions and their roots in our childhood experiences, outside the power of reason? And in any case, once the knowledge has been gained, however it is to be gained, can't reason then form and enact a plan for the good life? In other words, could not the process of self-discovery, and the use of the knowledge it delivers, be interpreted rationalistically: 'This is perhaps how Freud, in many ways, after all, still the rationalist, sometimes saw it: "where Id was, there shall Ego be"' (162).<sup>9</sup>

This line of thought does indeed receive some support from Freud's understanding of the psychoanalytic aim, in which rational control is repeatedly mentioned. For example, 'We try to restore the ego, to free it from its restrictions, and to give it back the command over the id which it has lost' (Freud 1926: 205); 'The method by which we strengthen the weakened ego has as a starting-point an extending of its self-knowledge... The loss of such knowledge signifies for the ego a surrender of power and influence' (Freud 1940: 177); 'whether [this] results in the ego accepting, after a fresh examination, an instinctual demand hitherto rejected, or whether it dismisses it once more, this time for good [is indifferent]. In either case... the compass of the ego has been extended' (Freud 1940: 179).

Furthermore, as Martha Nussbaum argues, the emphasis on the *meaning* of our passions provides grounds for thinking that they are amenable to reason – which would not be true if, as some ratiocentric theories had it, they were meaningless and so needed to be controlled by force. If we can make the cognitive content of the emotion available to the subject, then because reason extends 'all the way down into the personality', this offers the hope of a transformation in thought and feeling (Nussbaum 2001: 232). In Richard Sorabji's (2000) book-length treatment on the nature and possibility of a *cognitive* therapy of the emotions, he notes that modern cognitive therapy has had much more success with certain conditions than others. He records that rather than abandon the cognitive approach, David Clark, one of the leading researchers into cognitive therapy in the UK, suggested in discussion that the judgments involved are numerous and unconscious, and so difficult to identify. 'In time, however, all emotions will turn out to consist of judgements and all will be amenable to cognitive therapy.' (Sorabji 2000: 155) Clark's model here is to identify the 'cognitive abnormality' in the disorder, explain what keeps it from 'self-correcting', and develop 'specialized cognitive treatments' to 'reverse... the maintaining factors' (Clark 1986: 461).

From the very first, however, psychoanalysts have been at pains to emphasise that whatever occurs in psychoanalysis, it is *not* a matter of the patient grasping *intellectually* the 'missing knowledge'. An intellectual approach, if this suggests

detached self-scrutiny, is mistaken; what needs to be known – *how* it needs to be known – cannot be known this way. The passions are better understood by ‘listening to the signals from within’ (12). Lear relays

the old joke about the analyst who at the end of the first hour says, “Your case is easy: you want to kill your mother and have your father to yourself. That will be \$50,000, and we don’t need to meet again.” The joke works because intuitively we assume what the analyst says may be true, but precisely because it is true the form of the utterance is utterly inappropriate... the mere assertion of content could never convey the truth of what is being asserted. (Lear 2003: 11, 13)

Even were the patient to become convinced, by sound reasoning, of the truth of the claim, it would not be what she needed to know. Coming to understand the meaning of one’s passions through an understanding of past unconscious influences, then, is not a matter of forming a *belief* on good grounds. The model of uncovering the mistaken judgment that underpins the akratic or recalcitrant passion is too simplistic, even when it is allowed that the mistaken judgment derives from childhood. As Freud (1913: 142) notes, the ‘knowledge’ lacks any connection with the unconscious passions involved and how they have affected her adult thoughts and feelings. It has as much effect on the person ‘as a distribution of menus in a time of famine has upon hunger’ (Freud 1910: 225). So it would be a mistake to use such a model to support reason’s claim to uncover the meanings of our passions.

A second reason for caution stems from the nature of the content of emotions, perhaps especially in the context of tracing this content to one’s childhood. In standard cognitive therapeutic models, the emotion is grounded on (or is, in some versions) a judgment. But the nature of thought in emotion may not be so easily assimilated to propositional judgment. (Nussbaum is sensitive to this, Clark less so.) As Lear argues, passions – or at least those passions sufficiently deep to disturb our view of the world – are better understood as an orientation towards the whole world, rather than a ‘mistaken judgment’ occurring within it.<sup>10</sup> The disappointment (or what lay under the disappointment) of his patient gives a certain *structure* to her view of the world, rather than appearing as something *within* the world (as she experienced it). The disappointment governs the *possibilities* available to her, possibilities of interpretation, feeling, and response. When she comes to understand her activity in making the world disappointing, ‘This is a moment in which the world itself shifts: there is, as it were, a possibility for new possibilities’ (Lear 2003: 204). Analysis consisted in changing her view of the world (Lear 2003: 49).

There are models of emotion that attempt to capture this understanding of the nature of the intentional content of emotion in terms of ‘construal’ or ‘seeing-as’, constructing an analogy between the intentional content of emotion and that of perceptual states. The best developed of these models (e.g. Roberts 2003; Nussbaum 2001) steer away from reducing such content to that which could be captured by a judgment. The recovery of past meaning, then, involves a transformation in the subject’s view of the world. While in *some* ways this is similar to correcting a mistaken judgment, neither the process nor the result is truly akin to it.<sup>11</sup>

A third reason for caution stems from the process of making sense of the past, of discovering and reclaiming the childhood sources of emotion. For it is unclear to what extent the intentional content, the meaning, of such emotions (or judgments) is ‘given’, as if waiting, fully-formed in the unconscious, to come to light. Again, from

the beginning, psychoanalysts have argued that a somewhat complex process of meaning-making regarding the past occurs throughout life, and throughout the process of recovering meaning. Past events are constantly reinterpreted and re-evaluated, both consciously and unconsciously, in the light of present experience.<sup>12</sup> An important part of this process is the clarification of what was *not* understood at the time – whether an event, a relationship, or a wish – although it was experienced as obscurely significant. The model of an unconscious *judgment* to be ‘reversed’ fits ill here. The unconscious meaning or source of the passion must first *become* something with which thought can work, something that can be articulated and evaluated.

The process by which the meaning of past influences on present passions and choices is recovered must be sensitive to this process of reconstruction. The meaning we presently make of the past is not isolated from the meaning we make of the present. However, the meaning we make of the present is under the influence of the past. Lear argues that we constantly give meaning to ‘our world’. Unless I am psychotic, then ‘my world’ is pretty much ‘the world’, but I interpret and experience it (particularly the social world) idiosyncratically, consciously and unconsciously forming associations to and finding significance in a unique slice of the quotidian – a cup, a book, a glance, a pang of hunger; all this gives life so much of its flavour. And so we repeat the point made above, that ‘rediscovery’ of the past involves a transformation of the subject’s view of the world. Psychoanalysis undertakes an investigation into the past *through* the meanings a subject makes of the present (as in the case of the woman’s world of disappointment). The process seeks to transform the activity of making meaning from one of distortion, of present and past, into one of insight (Lear 2003: 47, 201).

#### IV. Beyond reason

In § II, I argued for an understanding of the passions that made clear our need to engage with unconscious influences deriving from the past. In § III I argued that an updated form of ratiocentrism cannot do this adequately; its models of knowledge and discovery are not appropriate to the project. What is it, then, that is needed?

Cottingham puts the point like this:

Full self-awareness must involve more than widening the scope of deliberative reason; it requires a new kind of understanding, one mediated not by the grasp of the controlling intellect, but by a responsiveness to the rhythms of the whole self... Unless we regain some sense of attunement with that totality, of which our intellectualizing is only the thinnest of surfaces, we will be clinging to the most pitiful illusion...’ (163, 165)

The ideas of ‘responsiveness’ and ‘attunement’ need to be unpacked, and my aim in what follows is to make clear how the transformation of which Cottingham talks should be understood. One concern I have is that Cottingham can sometimes emphasise the acquisition of knowledge at the expense of the other elements I suggest are needed; so I intend to explain the transformation in terms that make transparent the inability of reason to enact it.

The case against ratiocentrism can be stated thus: Gaining knowledge of the meanings of one’s passions and choices is not knowledge one can acquire *without changing as a person*. The change that is required cannot be performed by either

intellectual insight or strength of will, traditionally the two powers at reason's disposal. Instead, the transformation requires

- a) recovering and accepting, as parts of oneself, those parts of oneself that have been rejected;
- b) accepting one's vulnerability – both one's vulnerability in childhood and one's vulnerability now to the effects of childhood; this involves a form of relinquishing control, not just initially, but permanently, to achieve the 'responsiveness' Cottingham mentions. Because vulnerability is always potentially painful, and the parts of the self that were rejected were so because of the pain they cause or threaten to cause, accepting one's vulnerability involves the courage to endure psychic pain;
- c) compassion for oneself, which enables the above.

'Recovery', 'vulnerability', and 'acceptance' are all, to some extent, terms of art. The ideas of recovery and vulnerability are Cottingham's; the elaboration on these, and the ideas of acceptance, courage, and compassion are mine.

I find that I cannot fully separate these three conditions in discussion; an analysis of each involves the others. Precisely what is meant by recovery, vulnerability, and acceptance will therefore perhaps not become clear until the end of the discussion of compassion. But let us start with recovery.

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*Recovery: vulnerability*

Recovery is not discovery. Certainly, discovery is part of the process, but it is only a beginning. When Cottingham talks of the need to return to the past in response to the opacity of our passions, he repeatedly speaks of the need to 'recover', 'rehabilitate', and 'reclaim' it, and he notes this is not 'bland acceptance', i.e. the type of acceptance involved in believing a fact, nor, as we have seen, a matter of information (144).

The image suggested by a ratiocentric interpretation of the process of clarifying the opacity of the passions is that of the self identified with that which comes to know, and which essentially remains unchanged by the knowledge until it decides what to do with it. This is fundamentally mistaken. For until the past is reclaimed, the 'self' is incomplete. What represents itself as the self – in Freudian terms, the ego – cannot be taken as *the* voice of the person. The occurrence of 'akratic' passions is demonstration of this. As Lear puts it,

his psyche is split into parts that are themselves at war with each other... from an ego position, he may tell us who he thinks he really is; from a superego position, he may tell us what he'd like to be; and when he acts out he may express all sorts of id-like wishes that come from deep within him. (Lear 2003: 117-8)

Ratiocentrism's identification of the self with reason in the conflict with akratic passions leaves the passions 'alien' to the self, a sense reinforced by their opacity to reason. This only exacerbates the division.

The idea of recovery involves a different model of the self, of its relationship to itself and its 'parts', what it claims as its own. In recovery, parts of the self that have been disowned come to be integrated into the self. But putting the matter thus – in terms of a reflexive relationship – is perhaps misleading, for it suggests, as it has

been suggested by, a self alienated from itself, and so needing some kind of relationship to itself. What is at issue is how the self *is*, whether it is able to be itself fully, through the full extent of its emotional experience.<sup>13</sup> My aim is to describe the traits of a self that enable it to achieve this. Recovery, then, is a process of self-transformation.

A first step in the process of reclaiming parts of oneself, which Cottingham takes from Jung (1933), 'is an acknowledgement of precisely the fallibility, vulnerability and dependence that is an integral part of the strange openness we experience in our emotional lives... It is only by giving up, in the first instance, our pretensions to rational control that we open the way for deeper, transformed, self-understanding' (147). If this were the first step on the path back towards control, ratiocentrism could countenance it. But the sense of vulnerability deepens in the realization that it is inescapable, a realization that comes with the understanding of the passions, and their roots in one's childhood past, that Cottingham has been arguing for throughout. This realization comes together with, and is a product of, the experience of how one's past continues to influence one's present understanding of oneself, one's passions, and the outlook on the world they embody.

I use the word 'experience' here for two reasons. First, Freud (1914: 155) remarks that in the absence of actually *experiencing* this influence, it is extremely difficult to believe its extent and force. Believing the psychoanalytic model of the mind to be true is an entirely different matter from experiencing oneself as an example of it. (Again, this is not to say that such experience is only possible in psychoanalysis, though of course, that curious human relationship is set up as it is precisely to enable such an experience to take place.) However, second, the analogy of § III between the passions and perception suggests and supports the claim that the model for knowledge of one's passions should be perceptual experience rather than judgment. And perceptual experience has two key features of relevance to understanding 'vulnerability': first, it is 'passive' (in contrast to 'active' judgment) and 'open' (to the world); second, the knowledge gained is knowledge by acquaintance, not by description. These analogies should not be taken too far (e.g. that introspection is an 'inner eye'), but both may illuminate the way in which a purely cognitive model of self-knowledge is inadequate to the process of understanding one's passions. To judge that one has such-and-such an emotion is not yet to experience that emotion. We can still make any number of accurate judgments about the world around ourselves with our eyes closed, or indeed, from books; but they are no substitute for experience. It is in the experience of the emotion – for unconscious emotions, very often, at first through an experience of its effects on other emotions, thoughts, understandings one has – that its content, its significance, its place in one's psychic life, is appreciated. Furthermore, the influence of the past never ceases, even when it has been reclaimed, after which one is able to appreciate and moderate it, not eradicate it. And so openness to one's emotional life, a willingness to at least tolerate and admit into thought whatever it is one feels, is necessary for self-knowledge to continue.

It is more enlightening to talk of recovering parts of oneself than of recovering passions, for it is rarely, if ever, that the influence of the past is transmitted through one desire or emotion. It is, rather, a (sub-) structure of passions, a way of seeing the world, with which we lose touch. For example, a fear of failure can lead to a refusal to take responsibility, which can lead to anger at others for not picking up responsibility. Behind the fear of failure, and equally responsible for the anger, could be anger at one's parents for repeatedly pushing one to the point of failure in the quest for

‘achievement’. And so on. This part of ourselves, Freud (1914: 152) says, ‘must no longer seem contemptible, but must become... a piece of his personality, which has solid ground for its existence’.

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*Recovery: acceptance, courage, and compassion*

The process by which the self recovery occurs, and the dispositional state that results, I call ‘acceptance’. This is not, of course, what Cottingham terms ‘bland acceptance’, the formation of a belief about a passion on the model of information. Nor is it a matter of taking an approving moral stance towards oneself. At its core is the willingness to tolerate, in experience, whatever one feels, without attempting to control or deny one’s feelings.

Defence mechanisms are means by which we control passions or parts of ourselves that threaten psychological pain. This exercise of control – through repression, projection, or other means – creates a distance between the self as it understands and presents itself and those passions. One way of understanding the work of acceptance is in terms of taking ‘ownership’ of disowned parts of the self. That such psychological states and structures are genuinely part of one’s psychology can be difficult to see or accept; the case of the disappointed woman exemplifies how we may seek to find in the world the sources of an emotion that in fact arises within us. Part of owning disowned parts of oneself, then, is a matter of withdrawing such projections. Developing acceptance involves undoing defence mechanisms.

This is not, however, a simple task. Defence mechanisms are maintained by the pain threatened by the disowned part of the self, were it to be incorporated into the self. If we return for a moment to akrasia, akratic passions are not ones we are comfortable with, and the parts of the self they express are ones we find most difficult to contemplate. We may, for instance, find it quite inconceivable that we could ever want *this* or feel *this* way; it seems so childish or unreasonable. This pain is unavoidable in the process of acceptance, although the setting of psychoanalysis attempts to mitigate it and make it bearable. Acceptance involves vulnerability and the willingness to tolerate pain.

Acknowledging the existence of a passion one feels is a first step (‘discovery’), but still perfectly compatible with refusing to grant it, as Freud says, ‘a solid ground for its existence’. What is missing in such acknowledgement is the sense that the passion is an aspect of *oneself*. Defence mechanisms are usually reinforced by a false and idealized sense of oneself; the parts of oneself defended against, even after their existence is acknowledged, are not yet one’s own in the same way in which one identifies with other traits with which one is content. The pain caused lies not, or not only, in the disowned part of the self; it lies also in the gap between that part and one’s self-image. Lear (2003: 117-9) speaks of the gap between ‘aspiration’ and ‘pretence’. On the one hand, our passions aspire to expression and fulfilment; on the other hand, we can aspire to virtuous ideals beyond our present means, or even beyond human means. When these conflict, we pretend, on the one hand, that our passions do not exist, or that they are adequately fulfilled, or that they are no part of our ‘true self’; on the other hand, we pretend that we meet the ideals we hold for ourselves, or that we can, that they are reasonable. But these ideals can themselves be defensive reactions to our passions (Lear 2003: 118). Accepting our passions means bridging the gap between aspiration and pretence, not only between ego and id but also between ego and superego. It may not be just that which maintains the ‘akratic’

passion that needs recovering, but that which maintains the (false) ideal against which it offends; passions play their part on both sides of the akratic conflict. The sense of the self, i.e. the sense of what is the self, has been limited by their defensive rejection. So a further aspect of owning the full extent of oneself is the move from a narcissistic relationship to oneself to a deeper understanding of what it means to be merely human. Once again, this is not a mere intellectual acknowledgement, but a structural change in the self.<sup>14</sup>

One could speak here of a ‘change in attitude’ of the self towards those parts that have been disowned. And I think this is right, except for the reservation I mentioned above: that the attitude of acceptance that replaces that of alienation and rejection returns the self to itself. The result of acceptance, then, is perhaps better described as the self *being* itself fully.

This model is, of course, not the way it seems when one is confronted with a passion that seems dubious when judged in terms of one’s ideals for oneself. It is easy to feel that the passion – merely as a passion, quite independent of the acts it seeks to motivate – is to be morally disapproved of. How, then, can it be ‘accepted’? This suggests moral complacency.

The objection is severally confused. First, it confuses acceptance with a kind of moral approval. But acceptance is, indeed must be, morally neutral, and moral judgments have no place in acceptance. This may only inflame the charge: acceptance refuses to condemn what should be condemned. But second, it is arguable that the mere occurrence of passions, in absence from any action upon them, is not a matter of moral judgment;<sup>15</sup> accepting a passion is not equivalent to refusing to condemn acting upon it. Third, we must, in any case, understand the passion before we rightly judge its moral credentials; and the argument is that acceptance is necessary for understanding, and so unavoidable. Fourth, and most importantly, the objection substitutes for self-understanding the attempt at self-improvement: ‘The passion is not worthy; therefore I must not feel it’. Richard Wollheim notes:

[the terminology of transparency] suggests that the process whereby I try to find out what I have desired, or what I have felt, *up until the present moment*, should, even as it starts up, substitute for itself the inquiry about which are the desires, which the emotions, with which I can live. That is premature. We cannot dispose of ourselves so speedily.

...The moral is this: if we try to change ourselves before we have come to recognize ourselves, learned to know ourselves, there is a clear danger. It is that we shall put one form of self-ignorance behind us only to embrace another. (Wollheim 2003: xxx)

Acceptance does involve self-change; but this does not occur through the will to change in particular directions, according to pre-held ideals.

It is worth discussing further the role of the will in acceptance, not least because it contrasts strongly with the role of the will envisioned by ratiocentrism. Freud (1926: 224) argued that the work of uncovering the sources of our passions was relatively easy compared to the work of overcoming our resistance to accepting them, resistance premised on the avoidance of psychic pain. Facing up to pain calls for courage, which is often understood as steeling one’s will. But it is paradoxical to think of someone ‘steeling’ themselves to be vulnerable, to tolerate whatever emotional experience arises. There is a *relinquishing* of the will here; and the will demonstrates itself (for the project of self-knowledge is still willed) by not asserting

itself. The courage of vulnerability is the courage of letting go, of allowing oneself to feel that which is painful. This contrasts with courage in the face of physical pain, which does involve steeling oneself; what the two forms have in common is that both enable one to continue functioning despite the pain, to not give up on one's end. In the case of deepening self-knowledge, this is to not give up on letting go of attempts to control one's experience of one's emotion.

This process does not leave the self unchanged, but 'enlarged', where that enlargement is not first of all to be understood in terms of reason's control, but in the sense of that with which the self is prepared to fully identify. This willingness must come prior to any attempts to exercise control over the reclaimed parts of the self for them to be recovered at all. But there is a second transformation that this first enacts: the passions that seemed so intolerable themselves change, becoming less threatening, more amenable to influence and compromise, as they become integrated.

There are two further difficulties in attempting to involve the will further in the development of acceptance. First, Freud (1926: 205) speaks of re-educating the ego 'to overcome its inclination towards attempts at flight and to tolerate an approach to what is repressed'. Our will, then, is predisposed from familiarity to move in a certain way when painful emotions threaten to arise. Hence its active involvement, beyond the commitment to 'letting go', may undermine the project of self-knowledge. Second, most psychoanalysts understand defence mechanisms as not within the remit of the will, and so an act of will is not enough to undo them. Defence mechanisms are *purposeful* in aiming to reduce psychic pain, but do not involve *choices*. They are part of the nature of the mind, and they interact with the will, but they are not within or directly under the control of the will. Rather, they may be described as the psychic equivalent to the reflex mechanism of withdrawing one's body from a painful stimulus. The psychic pain, or threat of pain, is sufficient to redirect the attention away from the passion without the intervention of the will.<sup>16</sup>

What, then, supports the development of acceptance and vulnerability? The ability to tolerate and work through the pain the process of recovery involves, I want to argue, is essentially born of and sustained by compassion for oneself. The ability to tolerate, to bear, suffering – anxiety, guilt, shame, anguish – without denying the reality of that which causes it is usually identified as part of compassion. Of course, we normally think of compassion as directed towards others; here I argue we need compassion for ourselves. If our response to our fallibility, vulnerability, and dependency is disgust or contempt, we cannot move towards acceptance. Again, compassion is frequently associated with tolerating that which can strike us as disgusting or contemptible. Acceptance is the perspective of compassion.

A second point secures the role of compassion further: the passions with which we feel ourselves in conflict, as in *akrasia*, often seem intolerable because they threaten our sense of ourselves as acceptable, as *lovable*. Acceptance involves compassion because it precisely countermands this sense – it is possible for me to tolerate the emotion and the pain it brings, and hence to come to know and understand it, because the fact that I feel this emotion does not mean I am unlovable. Compassion for oneself and one's passions is an attitude towards one's passions that allows them to exist, to be felt, because it pulls the sting that leads us to distort our experience of ourselves, to deny or misunderstand the passions we have.<sup>17</sup>

Within the last fifty years, many psychoanalysts have come to understand a form of compassion, some would say love, as essential to the therapeutic process. But the analyst Hans Loewald, whose work was influential in this respect, argues that 'in our best moments of dispassionate and objective analyzing we love our object, the

patient, more than at any other time and are compassionate with his whole being. In our field scientific spirit and care for the object...flow from the same source' (Loewald 2000: 297; see also Loewald 1960: 229).<sup>18</sup>

The point of referring to analysis is this: that the analyst demonstrates the nature of acceptance. As the patient interacts with the analyst, and repeatedly experiences their acceptance, they slowly develop the ability to adopt this compassionate understanding themselves. This is, of course, not the only way we can become compassionate towards ourselves, particularly those parts we wish to disown. But it supports the claim that it is needed for acceptance.

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What I take myself to have argued for, and here I may disagree with Cottingham, is not, in fact, a journey of self-discovery. What I have described in this section is a set of capacities, dispositions, and attitudes of a person who is able, insofar as anyone of us are, to have the 'sense of attunement with that totality' of the self Cottingham rightly places as an essential condition on the good life. The journey is only necessary for those who lack such attunement, but there could be some happy souls who have not lost touch with parts of themselves, who managed to stay attuned, more or less, throughout the process of growing up. What I hope to have shown is that this structure of mental states, of acceptance, vulnerability, courage, and compassion, is beyond the powers of reason alone to bring about; it is what reason can't do.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the editors, Louise Braddock, Richard Gipps, and members of the St John's Research Seminar group in psychoanalysis for helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> All page references in the text are to Cottingham (1998), unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Rorty (1980), Roberts (2003: Ch. 4), Nussbaum (2001: Ch. 4), Taylor (1985), and Gardner (1992). Goldie (2000: 76) also defends the opacity ('cognitive impenetrability') of emotions, though does not discuss whether this is a consequence of unconscious influence.

<sup>4</sup> Cottingham does talk specifically of the 'non-rational elements of our makeup' (143), and goes on to discuss a case of sexual akrasia. But it would be a mistake to think that psychoanalysis – or even Freud – emphasises sexual motivation above all. There is nothing in psychoanalysis that would suggest some passions and not others have an unconscious source that makes them prone to motivate akrasia. We can be

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akratic with respect to love, lust, anger, fear, greed, and so on, and all may receive a psychoanalytic account.

<sup>5</sup> I am not persuaded of this. The unconscious influences on our passions can extend throughout our lives, and can upset the public life of reason, even if this influence is stronger and more apparent in our private lives.

<sup>6</sup> See Freud (1894), Freud (1968); Bateman & Holmes (1995).

<sup>7</sup> The mechanisms operate by *phantasy*; see Isaacs (1948); Gardner (1993: Ch. 6); Wollheim (1984: Chh. IV, V).

<sup>8</sup> See Lacewing (2005) for further discussion.

<sup>9</sup> The quote is from Freud (1933: 80).

<sup>10</sup> Variations on this view of emotions as orientations to the world can be found in Sartre (1962) and Wollheim (1999).

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed presentation of this argument, see Lacewing (2004).

<sup>12</sup> I am talking here of what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit*.

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Dawn Phillips for this.

<sup>14</sup> To distinguish possible forms, and the structural relations of the self involved in the different forms of 'ownership', would make more precise the line of argument I present here. However, this is not something I am able to do at present, in part for reasons of space. But see, for example, Frankfurt (1988).

<sup>15</sup> See Wollheim (1984, Ch. VII).

<sup>16</sup> See Wollheim (1984: Ch. II), Gardner (1993: Ch. 6), Gardner (1991), Hopkins (1991). For critical discussions, see Pataki (2000) and Marshall (2000).

<sup>17</sup> I am not claiming that compassion is in any way sufficient for knowledge of one's emotions. There are many other factors that may interfere.

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<sup>18</sup> It was no part of Freud's understanding of psychoanalysis that the analyst displayed a form of love for his or her patients. While he thought love played a crucial role, so as to write to Jung, 'Psychoanalysis is in essence a cure by love' (6 Dec, 1906), he was speaking of the love the patient developed for the analyst. Without 'the aim of pleasing the analyst and of winning his applause and love', the patient would be unable to overcome his resistance to the painful discoveries that emerge.

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