



**Volatile Reasons**

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**Volatile Reasons**

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3 **Abstract:**  
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6 I argue for the existence of a category of practical reasons which I call “Deliberation-Volatile  
7 Reasons” or “DVRs”. DVRs have the distinguishing feature that their status as reasons for  
8 action is diminished when they are weighed in deliberation by the agent. I argue that DVRs  
9 are evidence of “deliberative blindspots”. I submit that an agent manifests a peculiar kind of  
10 practical *irrationality* insofar as she endeavors to find a deliberative path to what she has  
11 reason to do, when the discovery of such a path renders the destination inaccessible.  
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14 **Key Words:**

15 practical reason rationality deliberation spontaneity  
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### Volatile Reasons<sup>1</sup>

*I have grown much too used to an outside view of myself, to being both painter and model, so no wonder my style is denied the blessed grace of spontaneity. Try as I may I do not succeed in getting back into my original envelope, let alone making myself comfortable in my old self.*

- V. Nabokov<sup>2</sup>

One's reasons for action can be "volatile" in a number of ways. For instance, one's tastes may change. While one previously had a reason to choose chocolate ice-cream, one now has a reason to choose mocha. The way that an agent's reason to choose chocolate ice-cream "decays" as a reason for action with his changing inclinations is neither troubling nor mysterious.

However, there is a class of practical reasons that have a curious feature in common: namely, merely in virtue of being considered in deliberation, their status as reasons for action weakens. I will call these Deliberation-Volatile Reasons, or DVRs for short. In this paper I will argue that DVRs exist, and that they share three interesting properties:

- (1) The status of DVRs as reasons for action generally degrades progressively the more they are deliberated upon.
- (2) DVRs are only volatile when they are considered from a first-person perspective.
- (3) Not weighing a relevant DVR does not imply faulty or imperfect deliberation.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper benefited greatly from audiences at the University of XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXX University as well as comments from XXXXXX, XXXXXX, XXXXXXX, XXXXXX, and XXXXXXX.

<sup>2</sup> from Nabokov, V. *Despair Perigree*, 1979, p. 29.

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3 I will further argue that consideration of the existence and nature of DVRs illuminates two  
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5 important features of practical reason:  
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8 (1) Deliberation-volatile reasons exist in “deliberative blindspots”. They are reasons for  
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10 action that are “cognitively closed” to deliberation.  
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12 (2) Because of (1), practical imperatives that issue from deliberation, even *perfect* deliberation,  
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14 may not be in conformity with the norms of rationality.  
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20 There is a venerable philosophical tradition of identifying what is good for a person with the  
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22 deliverance of that person’s suitably idealized deliberation. In *The Methods of Ethics* Henry  
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24 Sidgwick argues that “a man’s future good on the whole” can be discovered by considering  
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26 “what he would now desire and seek on the whole if all the consequences of all the different  
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28 lines of conduct open to him were accurately foreseen and adequately realized in imagination  
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30 at the present point of time” (111-112). Contemporary philosophers such as David Sobel  
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32 (1994) and Connie Rosati (1995) take their cue from Sidgwick in formulating “full  
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34 informational” accounts of the good<sup>3</sup>.  
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41 Parallel with the identification of a person’s non-moral good with the deliverance of  
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43 idealized deliberation in some strains of metaethics, there is a also a tradition of identifying a  
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45 person’s *reasons for action* with the deliverance of idealized deliberation. In accounting for  
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47 how a reason to  $\phi$  can have normative force, Bernard Williams maintains that “an important  
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49 part of the internalist account lies in the idea of there being a ‘sound deliberative route’ from  
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51 the agent’s existing  $S$  [subjective motivational set] to his  $\phi$ -ing” (Williams 1995, 36). In a  
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57 <sup>3</sup> There is some controversy over whether contemporary “full information” accounts of the  
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59 good are truly in the spirit of Sidgwick’s views. For a dissenting view see Shaver 1997.  
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3 similar vein, Robert Johnson writes of a “justificatory desideratum” for reasons: “[R]easons  
4 must be capable of justifying actions. But something could be a justification for a person’s  
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being only if he could connect it, through practical deliberation, to what he wills under conditions in which he is rational – to a motivation he would have under rational conditions.” (59) If what I am arguing is correct, then these kinds of accounts have to be revised. If there are such things as “deliberation volatile reasons” then there are some occasions where there is no “sound deliberative route” to what one has most reason to do, and what one has reason to do will diverge from the deliverance of (even flawless) deliberation.

Consider *Moritz*:

Moritz is taking a weekend trip from Berlin to Dresden. Sitting on the train, he peruses the schedule in the seat pocket in front of him. He notices that the train continues on after Dresden to a city bearing the curious name of Zittau. For a moment, he deliberates on whether to pass up Dresden, and stay on the train until Zittau. It occurs to him that if indeed Zittau is in Germany, it is the one of the few German cities that begins with a “Z”. Moreover, Moritz had previously visited Zweicken, Zweibrücken, and Zeitz, and the idea of visiting all the German cities that begin with “Z” strikes his fancy. However, he remembers that he is supposed to be meeting some friends in Dresden, and that they’re preparing dinner. What’s more, he has concert tickets for the Frauenkirche in Dresden. Finally, his high school geography is failing him, and he’s not completely sure whether Zittau is in Germany, or in Poland or the Czech Republic. If it is in Czech or Poland, he might need his passport, which he hasn’t brought with him. All things considered, he thinks, the best course of action is to get off the train in Dresden.

The train grinds to a halt at the Dresden Hauptbahnhof, but Moritz stays put in his seat. He doesn’t know precisely why. As the doors close and the train lumbers forward, he feels an overwhelming euphoria come over him, a powerful sensation of freedom that, in retrospect, easily outweighs his other reasons for going to Dresden (his friends won’t be upset if he calls to cancel; the money spent on the concert tickets is not significant; if he has trouble at the border, they’ll simply send him back).

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3 I take it that euphoria and excitement can often be a good (although of course not an  
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5 indefeasible) reason for action. I stipulate that it is a good reason for Moritz, assuming that  
6  
7 amongst Moritz's deepest desires is a desire to be happy and a desire to live an interesting  
8  
9 life, and that euphoria and excitement contribute to these goals. It can be difficult to  
10  
11 characterize precisely why such actions bring joy. Perhaps it is the break from routine, or  
12  
13 the recognition that one has some leeway to occasionally flout everyday obligation.  
14  
15 Whatever it is, the experience is neither unfamiliar or exotic for many. However, consider  
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17 what would have happened had Moritz deliberated on this possible outcome:  
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(DVR1) If I continue on to Zittau, I will feel an overwhelming sense of  
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26 euphoria and freedom.  
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31 I think a little reflection on DVR1 will show that when the conditional is considered  
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33 carefully in deliberation, it is rendered false<sup>4</sup>. Part of what made possible the euphoria that  
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35 Moritz feels upon leaving the Dresden Hauptbahnhof is the *spontaneity* of his decision. The  
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37 greater the degree of sober and careful deliberation Moritz directs toward DVR1, the less  
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39 likely he will feel elated upon acting on it. In this way, the very act of deliberating on DVR1  
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41 degrades the extent to which it represents a reason for action. The consequence of intense  
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43 happiness and euphoria is in this sense unforeseeable, since when it is foreseen, it can no  
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45 longer obtain<sup>5</sup>.  
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53 <sup>4</sup> Readers might notice a parallel with the paradoxical Moorean sentence, "It is raining outside but I don't  
54 believe it."

55 <sup>5</sup> I do not deny that there are *some* cases where foreseeing an elating event does nothing to diminish the elation.  
56 In fact, I am sure that such cases exist (indeed, sometimes anticipation can heighten the intensity of an  
57 experience). However, all that is necessary for my argument is that there also exist *some* cases where the insight  
58 that deliberation proffers undermines the value of the action. These are the cases that interest me.  
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3 It is important to stipulate that when Moritz decides not to get off the train at Dresden, he  
4 does not do so randomly. Rather, he acts on a *hunch* that this possible course of action might  
5 provide him some benefit. It is a low-level cognitive awareness of the desirability of staying  
6 on the train that leads him to do so, a “feeling in the bones”. Full awareness of the  
7 desirability of this course of action, however, would undermine it as a reason for action.  
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11 I think that this case illuminates well some of the common features of deliberation-volatile  
12 reasons. DVRI *degrades progressively* as a reason for action the more it is deliberated upon.  
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14 The more that Moritz deliberates on the possibility of going to Zittau and the happiness that  
15 might bring, the less likely that he will experience the excitement that attends spontaneous  
16 action, and the less this serves as a reason for action for him. Deliberation gives his action  
17 an *air of instrumentality*. The more enveloping and pervasive this air, the weaker his reason to  
18 act becomes.  
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36 A second feature of DVRs is that they *only occur in deliberation about one's own action*. When I  
37 deliberate on the possibility that Moritz not get off the train in Dresden and continue on to  
38 Zittau, it makes perfect sense for me to reflect, “If Moritz were only to ditch his plans and  
39 go to Zittau, he'd escape his oppressive routine and have an exciting time.” Moreover, I can  
40 reflect on this reason for Moritz to stay on the train as much as I like, and it won't in the  
41 least degrade the degree to which it is a reason for action for Moritz.<sup>6</sup>  
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53 <sup>6</sup> Jamie Drier has suggested the following example to me as a candidate “third-person DVR”: “My wife is  
54 thinking about getting me a surprise gift. The gift is something I would buy for myself, if I thought of it, but I  
55 have not thought of it. It will be a nice surprise. But now, I think carefully about what my wife might be up to  
56 in the store, and I work out that she is probably thinking about getting me the gift. Now she has no reason to  
57 get the gift. (She still thinks she does, of course, but that's accidental – I could run into the store and tell her  
58 that I figured out her plan.)”  
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6 A third feature of DVRs is that failure to consider them does not indicate faulty deliberation  
7 or irrationality. One might worry that Moritz's failure to realize clearly and distinctly that an  
8 excursion to Zittau would make him happy is an indication of sub-par rationality on his part,  
9 attesting to a troubling lack of the kind of self-understanding required for practical  
10 rationality<sup>7</sup>. But this would be to apply too high a standard of rationality for ordinary human  
11 beings. We are not transparent to ourselves, nor do we possess the algorithm for our own  
12 happiness. Sometimes following gutting feeling or intuition is the best we can do. In the  
13 case of DVRs, this is necessarily the case.  
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26 Previous discussions in epistemology and moral psychology have focused on cases where  
27 deliberation is faulty, or deliberation undermines action by distracting the agent from  
28 achieving her goal. It's not hard to think of occasions when, instead of acting on a sharp  
29 intuition, you "out-think" yourself and tie yourself up knots as a result. One's ability to act  
30 can be undermined by incertitude, doubt, or dyspepsia (think: Hamlet). Indeed, depth of  
31 analysis that outruns one's ability to make cogent inferences is a prescription for confusion  
32 and neurosis (think: Alvy Singer of Woody Allen's "Annie Hall"). Recent work in  
33 epistemology has focused on scenarios where excessive reflection is pathological and not  
34 truth conducive (Dawes 1994, Goldstein and Gigerenzer 1999, Bishop 2002). These authors  
35 focus on empirical studies that suggest that using a "quick and dirty" heuristic or mental  
36 shortcut is often more likely to lead to the truth than applying reflective strategies.  
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55 Drier's example, though ingenious, does not quite capture the phenomenon I am trying to characterize. It is  
56 only because Drier now *knows* about the surprise gift that his wife no longer has reason to buy it for him. The  
57 fact that Dreier arrived at this knowledge through deliberation is not relevant to its "reason-destroying" nature.

58 <sup>7</sup> This worry was also raised by Jamie Dreier.  
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3 Analogous to this critical examination of reflection in epistemology, there has been some re-  
4 evaluation of deliberation in recent moral psychology. In *Unprincipled Virtue* Nomy Arpaly  
5 describes cases where the agent is more likely to act in his best interest by flouting the  
6 deliverance of deliberation (39). Arpaly's case-study, Sam, is a college student who, anxious  
7 about his imminent final exams, decides that he should "become a hermit" and avoid all  
8 socializing. However, it is a psychological fact about Sam that whenever he deprives himself  
9 of social interaction he becomes depressed and unproductive. Sam does not include this  
10 consideration in his deliberation. Accordingly, his faulty deliberation recommends the  
11 wrong course of action. Fortunately, Arpaly's Sam ignores the "all things considered"  
12 judgement that he has arrived at via deliberation and spends some time with friends, much  
13 to his benefit. The moral that Arpaly draws is that "sometimes an agent is more rational for  
14 acting against her best judgement than she would be if she acted in accordance with her best  
15 judgement." (36) By ignoring the deliverance of his (faulty) deliberation, Arpaly's Sam is  
16 better able to act in accordance with the norms of practical rationality. In the sorts of cases  
17 Arpaly discusses, the agent has failed to appraise a relevant consideration, and hence has  
18 deliberated faultily.  
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43 Cases involving DVRs are importantly different from the cases discussed in the  
44 epistemology and moral psychology literature. Unlike the cases that Arpaly discusses, with  
45 DVRs there is no reason that the agent *should have* considered that she *did not* in fact consider;  
46 moreover, she makes no error in assigning reasons their proper weight. When Moritz was  
47 sitting on the train considering whether to get off at Dresden or go on to Zittau, it would  
48 not make sense for us to say of him that he should have considered DVR1 more closely. In  
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3 fact, there is a good reason for Moritz *not* to weigh this reason (namely, that if he does, he  
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5 will have precluded the possibility of something very good for himself).<sup>8</sup>  
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10 Causing a DVR to decay by weighing it in deliberation is markedly different from other types  
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12 of pathological reflection. Consider the (non-DVR) case of Jimmy, an overly analytical  
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14 tennis player who, just as the ball comes whizzing towards him, deliberates on whether he  
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16 should hit a lob or a passing shot. He considers the fact that his opponent is bad at hitting  
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18 volleys. On the other hand, he remembers that his opponent has a great record of hitting  
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20 overhand smashes. Accordingly, Jimmy decides to go for the passing shot. Unfortunately,  
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22 by the time Jimmy has decided what to do, the ball is firmly lodged in the fence behind him.  
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24 In Jimmy's case, excessive deliberation impedes him from acting in the way he has reason to  
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26 act.  
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33 However, this is only because of limitations on Jimmy's brain, i.e. limitations on the speed at  
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35 which he can deliberate. Imagine Super-Jimmy, who is able to think many thousands of  
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37 times faster than Jimmy can. If Super-Jimmy were to deliberate on whether to hit a lob or a  
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39 passing shot, not only would he not miss the ball because of the time it takes him to  
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41 deliberate, he would also make a good decision about what sort of shot to hit. The same is  
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43 not true of Moritz. No matter how greatly we increased his deliberative capacities, he would  
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45 still have less reason to go to Zittau had he weighed in deliberation all of the potential costs  
46  
47 and benefits of this action. In Jimmy's case, or that of Alvy Singer and Hamlet, deliberating  
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49 at the wrong time makes it more difficult to do what you have reason to do. With DVRs, on  
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57 <sup>8</sup> He should not consider this reason either, since it would lead him to deliberate on DVR1, and this would in  
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59 turn preclude the possibility of something very good for himself.  
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3 the other hand, deliberating at the wrong time makes it the case that what you once had  
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5 reason to do, you no longer have reason to do.  
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10 A natural question arises: why does it matter that you don't do something that you no longer  
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12 have reason to do? How does this make you any less rational? What is wrong with  
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14 "destroying reasons"? The problem is that in undermining a DVR you have made it less  
15  
16 likely that you will fulfill long-term goals and fundamental desires, because you have  
17  
18 deprived yourself of the means. Consider someone who is building a house. If he breaks his  
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20 hammer, he no longer has reason to use it. Still, it is odd to ask, "But why fret about a  
21  
22 broken hammer if you no longer has reason to use it?" The rational injunction not to allow  
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24 DVRs to lose their status as reasons is grounded in the rational injunction to desire the  
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26 means if you desire the ends.  
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33 I suspect that the presence of DVRs is more widespread that one might initially imagine.  
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35 DVRs lurk in any situation where spontaneity has a distinctive value. But what, then, is the  
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37 distinctive value of spontaneous action? With a few notable exceptions, the value of  
38  
39 spontaneous action has received scant attention in contemporary philosophical literature.  
40  
41 Nagel takes the position that while spontaneity is valuable, we must not let it gain the upper  
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43 hand over prudence: "If spontaneity is a good, then one has reason to ensure that there will  
44  
45 be spontaneity in one's future, not only in the present. Even the most extreme devotee of  
46  
47 carefree decisions should be susceptible to the prudential argument that a spontaneous  
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49 present act which may be very tempting (shooting a policeman, joining the Marines) can  
50  
51 seriously diminish his capacity for spontaneous action later on" (73). In a paper on the  
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53 moral psychology of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, Felicia Nimue Ackerman suggests  
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3 that philosophers tend to underestimate the value of spontaneity, and that this philosophical  
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5 blind-spot may be due to the reflective predispositions of philosophers themselves: “The  
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7 impetuous and nonreflective nature of some people in Malory’s world often gets them into  
8  
9 trouble, but it also gives their lives an emotional richness, immediacy, and excitement that it  
10  
11 is very hard (especially for people with the conventional philosophical bias in favor of  
12  
13 reflectiveness) to appreciate fully.” (Ackerman 202) Jon Elster is one of the few  
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15 philosophers who acknowledges explicitly the distinctive value of spontaneity apart from the  
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17 cost-saving of time and energy used by calculation and deliberation: “[E]ven if the  
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19 deliberations do succeed in modifying the behaviour or the character in the desired way, *the*  
20  
21 *very activity of deliberating* can modify the character for the worse, and in ways judged even  
22  
23 more important, through the stultifying effects on spontaneity.” (40)  
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31 Perhaps one reason why spontaneous action is so often rewarding is that it induces the  
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33 intensification of pleasure that accompanies a good thing that comes *unbidden*. It is a  
34  
35 contingent but pervasive feature of human psychology that when good things come by  
36  
37 surprise, the pleasure that they bring is amplified<sup>9</sup>. It’s lovely to receive a letter from an old  
38  
39 friend in the mail. It’s even lovelier to receive a letter from an old friend when one hasn’t  
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41 been expecting anything. It’s a relief to pass one’s exams. It’s even more a relief when one  
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43 suspects that one hasn’t done at all well. When someone exclaims, “What a pleasant  
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45 surprise!” it is implied not only that what has happened is pleasurable, but also that it is all  
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47 the more pleasurable for arrived unbidden. When one acts spontaneously, one makes  
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49 possible this sense of surprise. One is surprised by the consequences of one’s own action.  
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57 <sup>9</sup> I do not deny that there can also be an amplification of pleasure associated with the arrival of something that  
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59 has been much anticipated.  
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Another reason why eschewing deliberation and acting with abandon brings its own peculiar joy is that it engenders in one a feeling of freedom. It is possible to feel “hemmed in” by one’s own rational calculation, and sometimes acting on a whim provides the antidote. While Nagel is right that “throwing caution to the wind” is not a policy that should be generalized to all action, neither is “measuring life with coffee-spoons”. Consider the following dialogue:

Alfred: What shall we have for supper tonight, dear?

Belinda: I have an idea: let’s forget about cooking supper and just eat ice cream!

Alfred: But we have plenty of groceries in the fridge that we should use before they spoil.

Belinda: They won’t spoil in one day. We can cook with them tomorrow.

Alfred: I guess you’re right. But surely eating ice cream for supper isn’t good for our cholesterol levels?

Belinda: But Alfred, we so rarely do such a thing. Skipping supper *just once* isn’t going to kill us.

Alfred: I guess you’re right. But what if the kids come home and there’s no ice cream left? They might be cross.

Belinda: Alfred, they’ll understand when we tell them that their parents have decided to go on a little binge. They’ll probably find it quite funny.

Alfred: I guess you’re right again, Belinda, all things considered. Our diet won’t be seriously compromised, the groceries won’t be wasted, and the children won’t be cross. Yes, you’re quite right. Ice cream for dinner it is!

Belinda: Oh, Alfred, forget about it. We’ll just put in a roast and boil up some cabbage.

In this scenario, Belinda clearly has better “instincts” about when to act on whimsy, and when to weigh matters carefully in deliberation. Alfred, on the other hand, behaves like a Prufrock. The careful consideration that Alfred brings to bear on the question of whether to have ice cream for supper proves fatal to Belinda’s plans. The charm of eating ice cream for supper gradually evaporates as all of its implications are calculated and foreseen. Belinda and Alfred have the following reason to eat ice-cream for supper:

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(DVR<sub>II</sub>): Eating ice-cream for supper will be silly, fun, and provide relief from unrelenting routine.

However, the more Alfred forces the weighing of reasons, the more the status of DVR<sub>II</sub> as a reason for action is degraded. Once the calculation is undertaken, there is no longer reason to embark on eating ice-cream for supper, even if, before the calculation was undertaken, Belinda and Alfred had reason to eat ice-cream for supper. The reason that Alfred and Belinda had to eat ice-cream for dinner is deliberation-volatile.

An inability to act on deliberation-volatile reasons can seriously undermine an agent's pursuit of her interests. For example, an authentic display of friendship or love may require one to act in a relatively spontaneous manner. Sometimes gains in calculation represent losses in sincerity. While a willingness to sacrifice one's own interest for the interests of another is an important aspect of friendship or love, a willingness to act sometimes *without any regard* to one's own interest in the interest of another has its own distinctive value. It is not so much the shortness of time between consideration and action that marks spontaneous action, but rather the absence of weighing<sup>10</sup>. An excess of conscious, rational calculation precludes this possibility.<sup>11</sup>

Given that the ability to act on DVRs is important both to being an effective practical agent and to being a loving and moral human being, it seems salient to ask *how* one is to learn to

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<sup>10</sup> This was pointed out to me in conversation with Lilian O'Brien.

<sup>11</sup> This idea resonates well with Bernard Williams' famous observation that "one thought too many" is incompatible with moral virtue. Williams' famous example of the man who deliberates about whether to jump into a river to save his wife is as relevant to practical reason as it is to ethics.

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2  
3 act on DVRs. How should one act more like Belinda and less like Alfred? It is interesting to  
4  
5 note that while one can *decide* to be more spontaneous, and *try* to be more spontaneous, one  
6  
7 cannot *decide to do x* or *try to do x* in the service of spontaneity. Doing so just wouldn't be  
8  
9 spontaneous. Analogously, one can counsel someone to be less careful and calculating in  
10  
11 particular areas of her life, but one cannot counsel a specific action to achieve that goal<sup>12</sup>.  
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14

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16  
17 Consideration of DVRs should alert us to the dangers of conflating the quintessential  
18  
19 rational faculty – deliberation – with rationality itself. Rationality itself is a set of norms;  
20  
21 deliberation is a process that often helps one to act in accordance with these norms, but  
22  
23 sometimes does not. In the case of deliberation-volatile reason, the separation of rationality  
24  
25 from deliberation is marked: with respect to DVRs, deliberation *cannot* lead us to act in  
26  
27 accord with rationality.  
28  
29  
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34 In distinguishing internal from external reasons, Bernard Williams claims, “Internal reason  
35  
36 statements can be discovered in deliberative reasoning.” (1985, 365) If what I have argued  
37  
38 above about the nature of DVRs is right, this claim is problematized. On one hand, DVRs  
39  
40 are clearly “internal” in Williams’ sense; that is, they are reasons that are generated by the  
41  
42 agent’s “subjective motivational set”. On the other hand, the “deliberative path” that leads  
43  
44 to the discovery of these reasons also leads to the impoverishment and eventual destruction  
45  
46 of their status as reasons for action. I submit that an agent manifests a peculiar kind of  
47  
48 practical *irrationality* insofar as she endeavors to find a deliberative path to what she has  
49  
50 reason to do, when discovering such a path destroys the destination.  
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57  
58 <sup>12</sup> This was pointed out to me in conversation with Nick Treanor.  
59  
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