Temptation and the Manipulation of Desire

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1. The Concept of Temptation

The term "temptation" admits of two normative senses, a primary meaning which is essentially moral, and a secondary meaning which is non-moral though nevertheless evaluative. The *Oxford American Dictionary* lists "to arouse a desire in" and "to attract" as the second meaning of the term.[1] This common meaning is invoked in such colloquialisms as "I was tempted to have another cup of coffee," or "I was tempted to stay up late and watch a movie." These examples suggest that we often use "temptation" to mean nothing more than desire, and thus that "temptation" is sometimes used in a non-moral way. Though non-moral, this sense of "temptation" is nevertheless normative, since to desire something involves possessing a pro-attitude toward the object.

But the central meaning of "temptation," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "the action of tempting or fact of being tempted, especially to evil."[2] There are active and passive dimensions to this. On the one hand, "temptation" involves something that tempts: an agent or object of temptation. On the other hand, temptation connotes the state of being tempted: a subjective state. The standard definition also makes clear that the active and passive aspects of temptation have a special relation to evil. Although this may be compatible with being tempted to do good, it seems exceedingly odd to suppose, for instance, that we might be tempted to tell the truth, or care lovingly for our child, or obey the law. We need to know more about the relationship between temptation and evil, if only to determine whether it is possible to be tempted to do good. One recent author goes so far as to assert that both tempting and being tempted are necessarily immoral, implying that the link between temptation and evil is conceptual.[3] If so, then it is not merely odd but absurd to suppose that we might be tempted to do good.

The passive dimension of the standard definition, the state of being tempted, raises the issue of what such a condition involves, and whether it is itself active or passive. If being tempted is a psychological condition in which we are disposed toward that which we believe is wrong or bad, then it is important to identify the specific beliefs and desires, intentions and motives, and knowledge

and emotions requisite for being tempted. The extent to which such states are under our control bears on whether we are passive victims of temptation, or active participants, sometimes even co-conspirators, in our own temptations. A partial explication of the nature of this main moral sense of temptation may be ascertained by critically reviewing J.P. Day's recent analysis of the verb "to tempt."

2. A Contemporary Account of Temptation

Day's account is a good starting place for reflection on the nature and moral significance of temptation because it is one of the few recent philosophical efforts to make sense of temptation. Moreover, as Day rightly notes, temptation is an important but neglected phenomenon in Christianity and Anglo-American criminal law, the two domains with which he is mainly concerned.[4]

Day's conception of temptation implies that to tempt involves intentionally engaging a person's desire for that which is in some sense wrong. Though he concedes that tempting may be unintentional, and gives an example of a beautiful woman unconsciously and unintentionally tempting her husband's best friend to commit adultery with her, Day insists that temptations are usually conscious and intended. In keeping with his focus on the active dimension of the core moral meaning of the term, Day thus defines "temptation" from the standpoint of one person tempting another: "a tempter (TR) tempts a temptee (TE) by offering (TE) something which (TR believes) will please (TE)."[5] Furthermore, temptation requires that the subject desire that which he thinks is in some sense wrong. Temptation thus occurs when a tempter engages a temptee's wrongful desire in circumstances in which the temptee's resistance is weakened. Moreover,

> Tempting is morally wrong because it is morally wrong to try to cause TE [the person tempted] to do what is morally, or prudentially, or aesthetically, or legally, wrong.[6]

Thus, tempting and being tempted are always immoral, since trying to cause someone else to do that which is in some way wrong is immoral, as is desiring to do it. Day claims, too, that "tempt," like "provoke," is a success-verb, implying that the subject did that which he was tempted to do. As he puts it: "All degrees of provocation *cause* PE [the person provoked] to do X, just as all degrees of temptation *cause* TE [the person tempted] to do X."[7] Finally, Day claims that because all temptations are immoral, they must be disguised as offers.[8] On this view tempting involves deliberately exploiting the wrongful desires of a person in a weakened state to resist them; tempting and being tempted are always immoral; "tempt" is a success-verb, implying that the

subject did that which he was tempted to do; and temptations are disguised offers. The following is a paradigm of temptation on this view.

Frank is a recovering alcoholic actively involved in a rehabilitation program. He has gone without a drink for five months and is gaining confidence in his ability to control his desire for alcohol. Frank is nevertheless aware of his vulnerability and generally avoids situations in which alcohol is present. At an office party for a retiring colleague and close friend, a co-worker who knows of Frank's condition encourages him to have a drink in honor of his departing friend, suggesting that "One drink for your friend's sake isn't going to hurt," and "Just have one to celebrate." Frank thinks his co-worker's proposal is reasonable and is tempted to have a drink.

This example illustrates Day's conception of temptation, as Frank's imprudent desire for alcohol is deliberately exploited by his co-worker in circumstances where Frank's resistance might reasonably be expected to be weaker than usual. Such manipulation is certainly morally dubious, and the co-worker's use of language to minimize the danger inherent in the situation effectively masks the temptation as an innocuous offer to have a drink. Furthermore, Frank is morally at fault for being tempted, which on Day's view means he is morally blameworthy for yielding to the temptation to have a drink. Because of its emphasis on the intentional, conscious activity of a tempter in interpersonal temptation, we may refer to Day's conception as the manipulation theory of temptation.

3. Inadequacies of the Manipulation Theory

Though the manipulation theory of temptation is in some respects plausible, it is largely a description of one side of a relational phenomenon. Put simply, there can be no tempting if there are no temptees, and there can be no temptees if people have no wrongful or unruly desires. Of course, someone's wrongful desires may be created, in part or perhaps even fully, by someone else, but this does not obviate the need for a subject of temptation without which temptation cannot occur. Consequently, temptation depends essentially on the subjectivity of the person tempted. What tempters do when they deliberately tempt is an important factor in interpersonal temptation, but the role of the person tempted is theoretically richer than the manipulation theory reveals. The manipulation theory is needlessly tied to the activity and behavioral consequences of tempting instead of the experience of being tempted and the internal struggle this frequently involves. Consider the claim that all temptations are disguised offers. The reason given for this is that "all temptations are immoral and so need to be made to look like plain offers."[9] Whether or not all intentional interpersonal temptations are immoral, it is a familiar experience to be tempted by that which we believe to be morally

wrong. Evil has its own appeal, and people sometimes violate moral rules and other conventions of civilized society for no other reason than to flout them or to serve their own immediate or long-term interests. A would-be thief in league with an employee of the bank he wishes to rob need not have the activity of stealing represented to him as somehow legitimate in order to be tempted and need not worry whether the wrong he conspires to commit can be dressed up to appear socially acceptable. His primary concern may just be whether or not he can get away with committing the theft, where that need not be regarded as somehow making the act right, good, or even prudent in his own eyes. It is therefore false to suppose that temptations must be disguised as ordinary offers.

Moreover, the manipulation view equivocates about the sense in which "tempt" is a success-verb. That view suggests that temptations are not the same as offers, for they differ in their manner and occasion. Whereas an offer is a simple presentation that implies neither acceptance nor rejection, temptation involves making an offer to someone in a way that deliberately preys upon his pre-existing desire or disposition for something he thinks he should not have or do. Since desiring that which we should not have or do is a weakness, tempting is a kind of testing of a person's strength of will or other character traits. Summing up the essential differences between offering and tempting, Day explains that

> TR [a tempter] makes his offer in such a way and in such circumstances that TE's [a person tempted] lowered resistance precludes deliberation and choice, so that he *reacts automatically* (*instinctively*) *to* the temptation.[10]

Here, "tempt" is represented as a success-verb in the sense that for the proposition "Smith tempted Jones to rob the bank" to be true, it must be the case that Jones was instinctively drawn to the offer to rob the bank. To say that instinctive attraction to something precludes deliberation and choice evidently means that the desire of the person tempted is not the product of reflection or choice at the moment. But this is not the same as whether a person tempted automatically or instinctively yields to temptation. In fact, two different senses of the success of the verb "tempt" cloud the manipulation theory on this point. While "tempt" may mean that someone has caused someone else to be tempted, it may also mean that someone has caused someone else to yield to temptation. The sense that requires yielding derives from comparing "tempting" and "provoking" as success-verbs. But this view is implausible.

If to tempt is to cause someone to yield to his desire for that which he believes is wrong, then all interpersonal temptations will turn out to be irresistible. Since it is clear that people sometimes resist temptation, tempting cannot be merely a matter of causing someone to yield to a wrongful desire. As well, if the propositions "Smith tempted Jones to rob the bank" and "Smith

provoked Jones to shoot Adams" entail, respectively, "Jones robbed the bank" and "Jones shot Adams" then, strictly speaking, such statements as "Smith tempted Jones to rob the bank, but Jones resisted" are either incoherent or code for something like "Smith attempted to tempt Jones to rob the bank, but failed." But these alternatives also violate the commonsense intuition that we may resist temptation, an intuition that renders such statements as "Smith tempted Jones to rob the bank but Jones resisted" perfectly coherent and not shorthand for some more circuitous locution about attempting to tempt. The manipulation theory runs afoul of this intuition because it fails to consider an important disanalogy between tempting and provoking. Consider the following propositions with grammatically analogous verb structure:

(1) Smith tempted Jones to rob the bank.
(2) Smith dared Jones to leap off the cliff without a parachute.
(3) Smith provoked Jones to shoot Adams.
(4) Smith lured Jones into the dark closet.

Proposition (2)," Smith dared Jones to leap off the cliff without a parachute," does not entail "Jones leapt off the cliff without a parachute," for being dared does not imply that a person has accepted the dare. "Smith dared Jones to leap off the cliff without a parachute, but Jones refused the dare" involves no absurdity, and neither, it seems, does the proposition "Smith tempted Jones to rob the bank, but Jones took a nap instead." Moreover, it would be linguistically odd and morally counterintuitive to insist that such locutions mean merely that "Smith tried to dare Jones to leap off the cliff without a parachute, but failed," and "Smith tried without success to tempt Jones to rob the bank." Assertions (3) and (4), by contrast, do not admit of a comparable analysis. The claims "Smith provoked Jones to leap off the cliff without a parachute, but Jones resisted," and "Smith lured Jones into the dark closet, but Jones took a nap instead," are self-contradictory. To provoke or to lure entail not merely that the subject reacted, but that he acted. Put differently, to be provoked or lured means in part to respond psychologically to that which provokes or lures, and to act from that psychological state. Tempting and daring carry no such implication. As a success-verb, "tempt" is more akin to "dare" than it is to "provoke." Having been tempted, like having been dared, does not entail that anyone acted. If this is right, then "tempt," as a success-verb, entails not that the subject actually did that which he was tempted to do, but merely that he was tempted. Statements like "Smith tempted Jones to rob the bank" entail only that "Jones was tempted to rob the bank," not that "Jones robbed the bank." Precisely what being tempted involves is another question; here it is enough to emphasize that the success implied by the verb "to tempt" is not yielding to temptation, but simply the state of being tempted. Over this we have no control, whether or not we yield to it is a different matter.

4. Temptation and Evil: A Contingent Connection

Is temptation necessarily immoral? Day's manipulation theory asserts that "both tempting and being tempted are always *morally* wrong," and thus that when a tempter tempts someone he acts immorally, since he manipulates another person's desire for that which is wrong.[11] This is plausible in standard cases of deliberate interpersonal tempting, but the notion that a tempter deliberately tempting someone to commit non-moral wrongs is immoral and the idea that the person tempted is immoral for desiring that which is non-morally wrong are dubious propositions.

On the manipulation theory, the immorality of tempting and being tempted should be clearly distinguished from the wrongness of the object of temptation, for the object may be merely legally, prudentially, or aesthetically wrong. As Day says:

> One must distinguish yielding to temptation, which is always morally wrong, from the wrongness of that which TE [the person tempted] is tempted to do, which must be wrong in *some* way (e.g. prudentially, or legally, or aesthetically), but need not be wrong morally.[12]

The supporting example has us imagine someone yielding to a temptation to exceed the posted speed limit in exchange for money offered by a tempter. Yielding to the temptation is morally wrong, though the wrong committed is only legally wrong. But this distinction leaves the moral status of the person tempted ambiguous. Is he immoral for possessing wrongful desires, or for yielding to them? If he is immoral for possessing wrongful desires, then what is added to the analysis by distinguishing yielding to temptation from the object of temptation? Though common sense supports the notion that yielding to temptation is morally worse than resisting it, and resisting temptation is worse than not being tempted at all, distinguishing the wrongness of the object of temptation from the wrongness of being tempted does not clarify the moral status of either a tempter or someone tempted. Furthermore, if yielding to temptation is morally wrong, being tempted in the first place must be morally wrong, since the same wrongful desire is present whether we yield to it or not. If so, then the distinction between the wrongness of yielding to temptation and the wrongness of that which we are tempted to do is in this context a distinction without a difference. The moral status of the person tempted has nothing to do with the object of temptation, for whether someone is tempted to break the law, lie, act foolishly, or violate an aesthetic norm, the fact that he desires to do any of these things ensures his immorality. The distinction between being tempted and yielding to temptation is morally important, but the distinction between being tempted and the wrongness of the object of temptation is not useful in determining

whether temptation is, as advocates of the manipulation theory insist, necessarily immoral.

Moreover, the idea that whenever we tempt someone to imprudence, illegality, or aesthetic wrongs, we behave immorally, though resting on a strong intuition, is puzzling. If it is not morally wrong to commit a non-moral wrong, how can it be immoral to tempt someone else to do so? Suppose that while in a hurry to get home, my companion tempts me to run a red light in broad daylight by proposing to pay any fines that I might incur if I am caught violating the law. In encouraging me to run a higher risk than usual of being ticketed for a traffic violation, my companion would be urging that I engage in imprudent behavior. But there is nothing necessarily immoral about it, and to insist otherwise would be to ignore the point that traffic violations, marriage and divorce laws, tax law, and government mandated military conscription have nothing necessarily to do with morality. If these sorts of non-moral wrongs have nothing necessarily to do with morality, it remains a mystery, at least, how tempting someone to commit them renders us immoral. The mere fact that we take advantage of someone's wrongful desires in circumstances of weakness is not, without further argument, sufficient to explain the immorality of tempting someone to commit a non-moral wrong, though perhaps Kantian notions of dignity and respect for persons as ends-in-themselves come into play to render such immorality intelligible. Without some such rationale, however, Day's assertion that tempting "is morally wrong because it is morally wrong to try to cause TE to do what is morally, or prudentially, or aesthetically, or legally, wrong." simply begs the question why it is immoral to try to cause others to violate the law, to act contrary to their interests, or to commit aesthetic misdeeds.[13] The manipulation theory offers no reason for why this is so and sheds no light on why it is immoral to tempt others to behave immorally.

With the manipulation theory, however, we may acknowledge that there is a strong intuition that tempting others to engage in behavior that is inconsistent with their non-moral interests is at least morally questionable, and so perhaps a tempter who intentionally tempts someone else to commit egregious non-moral wrongs acts immorally. Tempting others to commit less serious improprieties is perhaps more a matter of bad taste than a matter of morality.

The implications of the manipulation theory for non-standard cases of interpersonal temptation, and for entirely self-referential or intrapersonal temptation, are equally untenable. For instance, the view that all tempting is immoral implies that self-temptation must be immoral as well, and that if it is possible to tempt someone to do that which is morally good, it must also be immoral to do so. These are unacceptable implications. Consider self-tempting. We may immorally exploit our own wrongful desires. For example, I may deliberately put myself in circumstances where I know I am likely to act immorally and steal, lie, or cheat. It seems reasonable to suppose that I act

immorally in deliberately subjecting myself to temptation. Yet on the manipulation theory, tempting ourselves to perform non-moral wrongs is also supposed to be immoral. But again, since not all imprudent or illegal acts are immoral, being tempted by ourselves to commit such acts cannot be immoral, except perhaps if the non-moral wrong is egregious.

Against this, it might be urged that giving in to our non-moral weaknesses is immoral in at least a broad sense. If human flourishing consists in part in the cultivation of habits of mind and traits of character conducive to self-control, and self-control is a moral excellence, then resisting even non-moral temptations will be virtuous and yielding to them will not be virtuous, at least generally. Routinely yielding to non-moral temptations may not be virtuous, perhaps in part because of the erosion of self-control that presumably accompanies such behavior and subsequently influences our ability to resist immorality. Still, it hardly seems reasonable to suppose that yielding to all non-moral temptations is immoral. Giving in to some non-moral temptations is trivial and harmless.

As for tempting someone to do that which is morally right or good, the manipulation theory suggests that this is either a conceptual impossibility or immoral. That it is immoral seems absurd, since it is self-contradictory to assert that it is immoral to desire that which is moral. The key question, of course, is whether it is possible to be tempted to do good. Advocates of the manipulation theory claim that it is not possible, since there is a conceptual link between temptation and evil. But is there a logically necessary connection between temptation and moral evil, or is the connection contingent and merely typical?

The more casual sense of the term "temptation," where to be tempted means simply to desire, allows that we may be tempted to do good. Thus, for instance, during the holidays I may become overly sentimental and as a result pay greater attention to the needs of the destitute, yielding to the temptation to give more than usual to the beggars who accost me for spare change. But this would not be the main moral sense of temptation, for there is nothing wrong with a stronger than usual desire to be charitable, and the main moral sense of temptation involves a special link with evil. So the question of whether or not it is possible to be tempted to do good in the main moral sense persists.

It should be clear that for a person to be tempted she must believe that what she desires is in some way wrong. But since a person's beliefs about what is immoral, inappropriate, shameful, or ignoble may be mistaken, it follows that we might desire that which is morally right or good despite our belief that it is not right or good. This means that we may be tempted to do that which is in fact morally right or good, since temptation only requires us to desire that which we regard as somehow wrong. Thus, contrary to the manipulation theory, the link between temptation and evil is contingent, though the connection between temptation and perceived evil is logically necessary. Perhaps temptation typically involves desiring that which is in fact somehow

wrong, but the logical possibility that we may be tempted to do that which is morally right or good is not merely a theoretical possibility. Examples of people being tempted to do the right thing abound. Oskar Schindler bribing German soldiers to spare the lives of Jews otherwise destined for extermination camps is only one notorious case.[14]

Notes

1. The *Oxford American Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 948.
2. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Vol. XVII, p. 759.
3. J.P. Day, "Temptation," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 30.2, (April, 1993), pp. 175–183.
4. Day's essay is among a handful of articles by philosophers on temptation in the past quarter century. For other recent discussions see Joseph S. Fulda, "The Mathematical Pull of Temptation," (*Mind*, Vol.101.402, April, 1992); and John Bigelow, Susan M. Dodds, and Robert Pargetter, "Temptation and the Will," (*American Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, 1990). On the related phenomenon of weakness of will, see Gary Watson, "Skepticism about weakness of will," (*The Philosophical Review*, Vol.86, 1977), Frank Jackson, "Weakness of Will," (*Mind* XCIII, 1984), Donald Davidson, "How is weakness of the will possible?", in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford University Press, 1980), and Gerasimos Santas, "Plato's *Protagoras* and explanations of Weakness," (*The Philosophical Review*, 1966).
5. Day, op. cit., pp. 175–176.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 178.
8. Ibid., p. 176.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 177.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. I thank Robert Holland and the editor of this journal for helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.