

X Michael Smith: The Moral Problem

1 The Moral Problem

As Smith sees it, we are strongly pre-theoretically committed to the following three (by now familiar) claims:

- I. Moral Objectivity: moral judgements are beliefs about matters of fact;
- II. Motivational internalism: moral judgements, by themselves, motivate those who make them;
- III. The Humean Theory of Motivation: beliefs and desires are distinct states; beliefs on their own cannot motivate.

The three claims all look plausible, yet they seem to be in conflict. How should we respond? One response is to give up on morality altogether; to abandon it as incoherent. This is to adopt an Error Theory. Alternatively we could abandon one of the three principles. Expressivists and certain types of subjectivists abandon the first; externalists abandon the second; and various theorists (for whom there is no well established name) abandon the third. Finally we could try to show that the three principles are not really in conflict. This is what Smith tries to do.

His approach is two-fold: first provide a theory of what it is to value something that sees valuing as believing; then, characterising ethical beliefs as certain types of value beliefs, show how, so understood, they do give rise to an appropriate motivation.

2 Valuing as believing

Smith argues as follows: suppose you value a certain outcome. Perhaps you don't in fact desire to perform it now. But insofar as you don't, you think that there is some rational failing in you. You think that if only you were fully rational, you would desire to perform it. But then that is a belief: a belief about what you would desire to do if fully rational. And then you might think that if you were indeed fully rational, you would desire to do it. So that gives us a form of rationally conditional motivational internalism: if you value something you will be motivated to do it (i.e. to desire it) insofar as you are fully rational. By taking the content of the belief as concerning your own desires if fully rational, Smith has connected up valuing (understood in this way as a kind of believing) with desiring.

Put more precisely, Smith's account of value is as follows:

An individual X values her potential action Φ iff X believes that were she fully rational, she would desire that she perform Φ if she were situated as she actually is.

Why the reference to the actual situation of the agent?. It is needed to deal with cases in which agents know that they have a tendency to irrationality. Ulysses valued having himself tied to the mast, since he valued hearing the Sirens sing, and knew that unless he were tied to the mast he would be unable to resist their call. Yet he also knew that were he fully rational, he would be able to resist their call, and so would have no desire to be tied to the mast. Thus if the account is to work for such a case, what Ulysses valued must be identified with what he believed his rational self would desire for his actual irrational self. In short, the idea is that the rational self gives advice, rather than providing a model to be emulated.

What is meant by a fully rational agent? Following Bernard Williams, Smith tells us that a fully rational agent is one who (i) has no false beliefs; (ii) has all relevant true beliefs; and (iii) deliberates correctly, where this includes making all the normal inferences, exercising one's imagination, and bringing all of one's beliefs and desires into a coherent set. This is perhaps an unusual notion of rationality—we normally think that we can rationally arrive at false beliefs—but can just accept that the term is meant stipulatively; nothing hangs on this.

3. Solving the Moral Problem

Apply this now to the Moral Problem. Moral judgements are held to be a subset of values, those concerning other regarding action and the like (Smith doesn't think the distinction between moral judgments and other sorts of value judgments is very important). They are beliefs about what we would desire if fully rational. Then, Smith thinks, we can accept objectivity, motivational internalism, and the Humean Theory of Motivation:

Objectivity, since moral judgements really are judgements: they are beliefs. But note that they are not beliefs about a reality totally independent of us: they are beliefs about which desires we would have if we were rational. So in some sense they are still just beliefs about us. This makes the epistemology much more straight-forward than on many objectivist accounts of morality. But at the same time it might seem that it comes too close to subjectivism.

Motivational Internalism, since Smith thinks that if we believe we would desire something if rational, then, in so far as we are rational, we will desire it. (Is this true?)

The Humean Theory of Motivation, since Smith holds that we still need a desire to motivate us; the moral belief won't do it on its own. It is just that, if we are rational, we will get that desire.

4. Concerns

There are a huge number of 'responses' to Smith. I've mentioned that, like subjectivism, it does leave ethics dependent on our desires, even if on those we believe would have if rational (perhaps we'd be horrible if rational!). Here though I'll focus on two others (I'm not impartial with respect to the first):

Valuing

The Muggletonians were a protestant sect in mid-seventeenth century England. They held that each person contained a mixture of two seeds in various proportions. One seed, the seed of faith, came from God; those in whom it predominated were destined for salvation. The other seed, that of reason, had entered Eve at the time of the fall. As a result reason was held to be 'the right devil'; those in whom the seed of reason predominated were damned.

Isn't it clear that the Muggletonians valued faith and rejected the unconstrained use of reason? What would they have made of the desires that they would have had were they fully rational? They would surely have thought them to be the desires of the devil. So we have an apparent counter-example to Smith's analysis. The Muggletonians believed that their fully rational selves—rational in just Smith's sense—would have blasphemed against God; and that their rational selves would have wanted their actual selves to do likewise. But blaspheming against God was not what they valued.

Motivational Internalism

Smith adopts the principle:

- D If an agent believes that she has a normative reason to Φ (i.e. believes that she would desire to Φ if fully rational), then she rationally should desire to Φ .

He thinks that this is parallel to:

- B If an agent believes that she has most reason to believe that p (i.e. believes that she would believe p if fully rational), then she rationally should believe that p.

Let's look at this latter case first. Suppose someone were hopelessly wrong about what they would believe if fully rational. Would they be more rational if they came to believe it? Mightn't we think that they would be more rational to stick with the beliefs they have? For instance: suppose someone became convinced of some wacky metaphysical belief—that all physical objects are really ideas. She finds that she just cannot in fact believe, of each physical object, that it is made of ideas. But she takes this to be an irrational failing in herself: she thinks that if she were only fully rational she would believe it. But would she indeed be more rational (rather than merely more consistent) if she believed this crazy thing?

Mightn't we want to say the same about D?