The Humean Theory of Motivation

PHIL2315 Value Theory
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Admin

Required reading for this seminar: Smith, Ch 4, Sections 4.1-4.6

Tutorial on 27 March cancelled. Tutorial 3 will be on April 10 instead

Required reading for next seminar: Smith, Ch 4, Sections 4.7
Smith’s view (so far defended)

Cognitivism: moral judgements express beliefs (objectivity of moral practice, failure of the open question argument)

Conceptual practical internalism: It is conceptually necessary that if x judges that it right to φ in c, and x is rational, then x is motivated to φ in c

(Practicality of moral practice, Smith’s argument Sec 3.5, slides 15-19 seminar 5)
Smith also endorses conceptual rationalism

(Conceptual rationalism) It is conceptually necessary that, if it is right for \( x \) to \( \phi \) in \( c \) then there is a reason for \( x \) to \( \phi \) in \( c \)

Smith’s argument for conceptual rationalism (Sec 3.9), as I see it, relies on conceptual practical internalism, Korsgaard’s principle (p62) and the objectivity of moral practice

(Korsgaard’s Principle) It is conceptually necessary that \( x \) has a reason to do \( \phi \) in \( c \) iff it is conceptually necessary that (if \( x \) was rational \( x \) would be motivated to do \( \phi \))
The Objectivity of Moral Practice

Moral judgements express beliefs whose truth or falsity can be established through reasoning (see p6 Smith)

Note: It follows from the objectivity of moral practice that, if x is (ideally) rational, and it is right for x to φ, the x believes that it is right for her to φ
Smith’s argument for conceptual rationalism (Smith sec 3.9, my interpretation)

Suppose

(A) It is right for x to φ in c

Then

(B) If x is rational then x judges it right for her to φ in c [By (A) and the objectivity of moral judgement]
Smith’s argument for conceptual rationalism (cont)

(C) It is conceptually necessary that it is right for x to φ in c [By (A) and the objectivity of moral judgement]

(D) It is conceptually necessary that if x is rational then x judges it right for her to φ in c [By (C) and the fact that (A) conceptually entails (B)]
Smith’s argument for conceptual rationalism (cont)

(E) It is conceptually necessary that (if x is rational then x is motivated to φ in c [By (D) and conceptual practical internalism]

(F) There is a reason for x to do φ in c [By (E) and Korsgaard’s Principle]
Smith’s argument for conceptual rationalism (cont)

Hence, by argument (A-F): If it is right to $\phi$ in $c$ then $x$ has a reason to $\phi$ in $c$.

Since the argument (A-F) is conceptually valid, and its premises are conceptually necessary, we get:

(Conceptual rationalism) It is conceptually necessary that, if it is right for $x$ to $\phi$ in $c$ then there is a reason for $x$ to $\phi$ in $c$. 
The moral problem (modified)

(MP1) Moral judgements of the form ‘It is right to φ’ express a subject’s beliefs about an objective matter of fact, a fact about what it is right for her to do [from the objectivity of moral judgement]

(MP2) If someone judges that it is right that she φs then, given she is rational, she is motivated to φ [from the practicality of moral judgement]

(MP3) An agent is motivated to act in a certain way just in case she has an appropriate desire and a means-end belief, where belief and desire are distinct existences [from the Humean theory of psychology]

(MP4) For any rational person x, provided x’s beliefs stay the same, x’s basic desires can be replaced by any other set of basic desires, and x will remain rational [from the Humean theory of psychology]
The Humean Theory of Psychology

(MP3) follows from the Humean theory of motivation

(MP4) follows from the Humean theory of normativity

Anti-Humeans about motivation reject (MP3). Smith thinks that (MP3) is true, and instead wants to reject (MP4).
Features of motivation

• The objects of motivation are actions, whereas the objects of desire are propositions (One is motivated to perform certain actions)

• Whenever one intentionally performs an action, one is motivated to do that action

• One might be motivated to do A, but fail because one is prevented from doing it (e.g. by being tied up) or one can’t do it (e.g. because of being parallysed)

• ‘Motivation’ mean here ‘Overall motivation’

• Motivation + ability to do Action = Action
The Humean theory of motivation

- A motivational state is the product of two distinct existences: a desire representing the way the world is to be, and a means-end belief telling us how the world has to be changes as to make it that way
- A motivational state will result in an action (unless the action is prevented or not possible)
- Desires and beliefs are distinct existences in the sense that you can have one particular set of desires without any particular set of beliefs (and vice versa)
Motivational vs. Normative Reasons

An important ingredient in Smith’s defence of (MP3) and his argument against (MP4) is his distinction between motivational reasons and normative reasons.

(NR) x has a normative reason to φ iff there is a normative requirement that she φ’s (that is, φ-ing is required from the perspective of the normative system that generated the requirement)

Examples of different normative systems:
Examples of normative reasons

i) I have a reason to give to charity (moral)

ii) I have a reason for believing that $p$ and $q$ given I believe $p$ and I believe $q$ (rationality)

iii) I have a reason for eating regularly (prudence)
Motivational vs. Normative Reasons (cont)

(MR) x has a motivating reason to φ iff x is in a state that is explanatory of her φ-ing

Motivational reasons are psychological states (motivational states) that play a certain explanatory role in producing action

Example:
Q: For what reason did I go to the icecream van (what explains why I went to the icecream van)
A: The reason was that I wanted some icecream and thought I would get some if I went to the icecream van
The Humean theory of motivational reasons

Motivational reasons are motivational states, and motivational states consist of appropriately related desires and beliefs. Or more precisely:

P1) R at t constitutes a motivating reason of an agent A to φ iff there is some ψ such that R at t consists of an appropriately related desire of A to ψ and a belief that were she to φ she would ψ

(P1) plausibly entails (MP3). Hence anti-Humeans about motivation want to reject (P1).

Smith, on the other hand, wants to defend (P1).
Putative counterexample 1 to P1

Suppose I now desire to purchase an original Picasso, but I do not now believe that were I to purchase the painting before me I would do so – suppose I don’t believe that it is a Picasso. If the painting performing is indeed a Picasso, then surely it would be appropriate for an outside to say I have a reason to purchase the painting before me. But I lack the relevant belief.
Smith’s response

• I have a normative reason to buy the Picasso (since there is a requirement of rationality that I buy the painting). For I think that buying a Picasso is desirable in the painting is a Picasso.

• But I am not in a state that is potentially explanatory of me buying the painting, since I do not believe that the painting is a Picasso. I therefore do not have a motivational reason to buy it.
Putative counterexample 2 to P1

Suppose I knowingly stand on someone’s foot so causing that person pain. Surely we can imagine it’s being appropriate for an outside to say I have a reason to get off the person’s foot even though I lack the relevant desire, and, indeed, even if I decide to cause that person pain.
Smith’s response

• I have a normative reason to get off the person’s foot (since it is a moral requirement that I do not cause him pain).

• But I do not have a motivational reason to get off his foot
Putative counterexample 3 to P1

Suppose I now desire to drink a gin and tonic and believe I can do so by mixing the stuff before me with tonic and drinking it. Suppose further that this belief is false; that the stuff before me is petrol rather than gin. Surely it would be appropriate for an outsider to say I have no reason to mix this stuff with tonic and drink it. Yet I have both the relevant desire and belief.
Smith’s response

• I have a motivational reason to mix the stuff and drink it
• But I do not have a normative reason to mix the stuff and drink it (indeed I have a normative reason not to mix the stuff and drink it, since it is a prudential requirement that I don’t mix it and drink it)
The phenomenal theory of desire

- Desires are like sensations like pain in being conscious states having a certain “feel” or “phenomenology”.
- There is something there is like to have a desire, just as there is something it is like to feel pain.
An argument for the phenomenological theory of desire

• If desires are feelings (=conscious states), we can know that we have them in the same way we know that we have pains
• The phenomenological theory of desire can therefore explain how we can know we have desires
• If desires are feelings, however, how can we know that we have them?
The argument against P1 from the phenomenological theory of desire (p109-110)

• Given the phenomenological theory of desire, it follows from (P1) that when ever we perform an intentional action, we should have a certain type of conscious feeling that is the relevant desire.

• However, it is a painful feature of moral life that in many cases we perform actions without such a feeling – we simply do something because we believe we should.

• Therefore P1 is false.

Smith’s response: The phenomenological theory of desire is false!
Smith’s first argument against the phenomenological theory

Given the phenomenological theory, it should be the case that (1) is true just as (2) is true.

(1) $x$ desires that $\phi$ iff $x$ believes that she desires that $\phi$
(2) $x$ is in pain iff $x$ believes she is in pain

But (1) is false. Hence the phenomenological theory is false.
The Newspaper Case

• Each day on his way to work John buys a newspaper at a certain newspaper stand
• He has to go out of his way to do so, and for no apparently good reason
• The only difference between this newspaper stand and the newspaper stands on his way home is that behind the counter of the stand where John buys his newspaper, there are mirrors so placed that anyone who buys a newspaper cannot help but look at himself
The Newspaper Case (cont)

• But if it was suggested to John that the reason he buys his newspaper at that stand is that he wants to look at his own reflection, he would vehemently deny it
• And it wouldn’t seem to John as if he was concealing anything in doing so
• However, finally, let’s suppose that if the mirrors were removed from the stand, his preference for that stand would disappear
Smith’s diagnosis

In this case:

i) John in fact desires to buy a newspaper at a stand where he can look at himself in a mirror

ii) But John doesn’t believe this
The musician case

- John professes that one of his fundamental desires is to be a great musician.
- However, his mother has always drummed into him the value of music.
- She is a fanatic with great hopes for her son’s career as a musician, hopes so great that she would be extremely disappointed if he were even less than excellent musician, let alone if he were to give up music altogether.
- Moreover, John admits that he has a very great desire not to upset her, though he would, if asked, denied that this in any way explains his efforts at pursuing excellence in music.
- However, one day John’s mother dies and, upon her death, he finds all of his interest in music vanishes.
- He gives up his career as a musician and pursues some other quite different career.
Smith’s diagnosis

i) John believed that he desired to be a great musician

ii) But he didn’t have this desire
A response

We aren’t infallible about our conscious experiences. Hence there is no reason to think that (1) must be true for the phenomenological theory to be true.

Example: Because shadows on white surfaces are normally grey, most people think that shadows on snow are grey. But a discovery made fairly early by every landscape painter is that they are actually blue! (Cruz & Pollock)
Smith’s second argument against the phenomenological theory (p. 107)

- Conscious experience such as pain do not have content
- Desires do have content (e.g. the content of x’s desire to have icecream is that x had icecream)
- Therefore desires aren’t conscious states

A response: Some conscious states do have content
Example: The visual experience of it seeming as if there is a red square before me
Smith’s third argument (p. 109)

A father can have a long term desire that his children do well
The father may occasionally feel the prick of his desire from time to time, in moments of reflection on their vulnerability
But such occasions aren’t the norm
Yet we certainly wouldn’t ordinarily think that he loses this desire during those periods when he lacks such feelings
An alternative theory of desires

Desires are dispositions!
To desire that $p$ is to have the disposition to do certain actions on the condition that you have certain beliefs

Next week
i) The dispositional theory of desire
ii) Smith’s argument that the dispositional theory is true
iii) Smith’s argument that, given the dispositional theory, $P_1$ (and hence $MP3$) is true