The Humean Theory of Motivation 2

PHIL2315 Value Theory
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Seminar 7
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Required reading for this seminar: Smith, Ch 4, Tutorial on 27 March cancelled. Tutorial 3 will be on April 10 instead

Required reading for next seminar: Smith, Ch 5, Sections 5.1-5.8

Optional reading: McDowell, ‘Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives?’
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).
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)
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 $\phi$ iff there is some $\psi$ such that $R$ at $t$ consists of an appropriately related desire of $A$ to $\psi$ and a belief that were she to $\phi$ she would $\psi$

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

Smith, on the other hand, wants to defend (P1).
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.
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 professors 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 prck 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.
A response

We need to distinguish between two types of desires:

i) Occurent (or conscious) desires; and

ii) Standing (or non-conscious) desires.

The following dispositional account gives the correct account of standing desires, but not occurent desires.
The dispositional theory of desire

• “[W]e should think of desiring to \( \phi \) as having a certain set of dispositions, the disposition to \( \psi \) in conditions \( C \), the disposition to \( \chi \) in conditions \( C' \), and so on, where, in order for conditions \( C \) and \( C' \) to obtain, the subject must have, [amongst other things], certain other desires, and also certain means-ends beliefs” (Smith p. 113)

• “To desire that \([\phi]\) is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to bring it about that \( \phi \) in a world in which one’s beliefs, whatever they are, were true” (Stalnaker, *Inquiry*, p. 15)
In favour of the dispositional theory 1: it avoids the problems faced by the phenomenal theory

i) It doesn’t have the consequence that we are infallible with respect to what desires we have

ii) It can explain how desires have content (See Stalnaker’s characterisation for example)

iii) It allows for long term non-conscious desires
In favour of the dispositional theory 2: It can explain direction of fit

“Beliefs aim at the true, and their being true is their fitting the world; falsity is a decisive failing in a belief, and false beliefs should be discarded; beliefs should be changed to fit with the world, not *vice versa*. Desires aim at realisation, and their realisation is the world fitting with them; the fact the indicative content of a desire is not realised in the world is not yet a failing in the desire, and not yet any reason to discard the desire; the world, crudely, should be changed to fit with our desires, not *vice versa*.” (Platts, *Ways of Meaning* pp. 256-7)
In favour of the dispositional theory 2: It can explain direction of fit (cont)

Or more briefly:

i) Belief fits the world

ii) The world fits desire
In favour of the dispositional theory 2: It can explain direction of fit (cont)

“[T]he difference between beliefs and desires in terms of direction of fit can be seen to amount to a difference in the functional roles of belief and desire. Very roughly, and simplifying somewhat, it amounts ... to a difference in the counterfactual dependence of a belief that \( p \), and a desire that \( p \) on a perception with the content that not \( p \): a belief that \( p \) tends to go out of existence in the presence of a perception with the content that not \( p \); whereas a desire that \( p \) tends to endure, disposing the subject in that state to bring it about that \( p \)” Smith p. 115
How can the dispositional theory explain our knowledge that we have desires?

A dispositionalist can claim that we know that we have desires in the same way we know things have other dispositional properties, such as the property of being fragile.
Smith’s argument for the Humean theory of motivation (based on p. 116)

S1) Having a motivational reason is having a goal and a conception of the means of attaining that goal
S2) Having a goal is being in a state the world must fit
S3) Being in a state the world must fit is desiring
S4) Having a conception of of the means of attaining that goal is having certain means-ends beliefs

Conclusion: Having a motivational reason is having appropriate desire and means-ends beliefs
Smith’s argument for the Humean theory of motivation

The conclusion of this argument is approximately P1, and entails MP3)

Does Smith’s argument work?
The premise S1

A teleological explanation of human behaviour explains behaviour by citing a goal toward which it is directed.

Example: ‘Jane went to the kitchen in order to get coffee’

The behaviour: ‘went to the kitchen’
The teleological connection: ‘in order’
The goal: ‘to get coffee’
The premise S1 (cont)

Q: What was Jane’s (motivational) reason for going to the kitchen?
A: Her reason was to get coffee (since she thought that she would get some by going to the kitchen)

Hence Jane’s motivational reason is her goal (combined with her conception of the means of attaining that goal)

This suggests S1 is true
The premises S2 and S4

“[S2] is likewise unassailable. For becoming apprised of the fact that the world is not as the content of your goal specifies suffices not for giving up that goal, it suffices rather for changing the world” (p. 116-117)

S4 is also clearly true.
Objection 1 to S3

There are mental states other than desire the world must fit, such as hopes, wishes, and intentions

Response 1: These can all be analysed in terms of beliefs and desires, and hence are no threat to the Humean theory of motivation

Example: To wish that φ is to both desire that φ and believe that φ is unlikely
Response 2

If these states can’t be analysed in terms of belief and desire, we can simply modify the Humean theory by replacing ‘desire’ with ‘pro-attitude’,

where ‘pro-attitude’ means ‘psychological state with which the world must fit’

The modified theory differs from the letter of Hume’s theory, but retains its spirit.
Objection 2 to S3

There are propositions, \( p \), such that to believe \( p \) one must be in a mental state (called a desire) which requires one to desire some related proposition \( q \)

Example: In order to believe that it is right to \( \phi \) one must be in a mental state (called a desire) which requires that one desires to do \( \phi \)

Call this the desire theory
Problem with the desire theory:

- The best case of desires are moral judgements.
- But weakness of will and the like can break the connection between moral judgement and desires.
“Through spiritual or physical tiredness, through accidie, through weakness of body, through inability to concentrate, through a feeling of uselessness or futility, and so on, one may feel less and less motivated to seek what is good. One’s lessened desire need not signal, much less be the product of, the fact that, or one’s belief that, there is less good to be obtained or produced”
The case of pain

• A person might know that it is right for her to $\phi$, but because doing $\phi$ would involve an amount of pain, she doesn’t do it
• Indeed, perhaps, there is a level of such high pain that everybody who knows that it is right for them to do $\phi$ will fail to do $\phi$
• The desire theory seems to be in conflict with this
McDowell disagrees with this.

He holds that the virtuous person conceives of the world different from the non-virtuous person, and given one conceives of the world in this way, one necessarily has the appropriate motivations. (See McDowell’s ‘Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives?’)
What can McDowell say in response to Stocker and the pain case?

When the pain involved in doing $\phi$ is so high we no longer desire to do $\phi$, we still assert ‘It is right for us to $\phi$’ but our understanding/appreciation of it being right for us to $\phi$ decreases.

Note: This diagnosis of what happens has some plausibility in Stocker’s ‘inability to concentrate’ example.