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24.120 Moral Psychology  
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### III Belief/Desire Psychology & The Humean Theory of Motivation

#### Belief/Desire Psychology

Belief/Desire psychology was for a long time the dominant approach in psychology and philosophy, and is still very important; it remains dominant in economics. The origins go back at least to Hume, and to the idea that a belief on its own will not move an agent. (In contrast Kant thought that one could be motivated to act morally just by the judgment that the action was morally right; indeed, on his account, if one has a desire to act morally, that corrupts the moral motivation.) But the claim has developed from the thought that beliefs are insufficient to move an agent, to the claim that desires are necessary to move an agent. In psychology this was given impetus by the (broadly behavioristic) drive to operationalize mental notions: desires earn their scientific keep if they are manifested in action. In economics this becomes the idea behind revealed preference theory: an agent's preferences are revealed by their actions; a similar idea is present in most decision theory. There is something attractively hard-headed about the idea: actions speak louder than words. (Though don't words have some role? *Beowulf* talks of 'words *and* deeds' ('worda ond worca' Ch IV l. 289) as having a role.)

#### Smith's account: two sorts of reasons, and a third

*Normative reason:* you have reason to get off the person's foot;

*Motivating reason:* your desire to hurt the person (and your belief that this hurts) is the reason you keep standing on their foot;

*Psychological but non-intentional reason:* your drunkenness is the reason that you think that standing on their foot is the best way to hurt them.

The Humean theory of motivation is a theory about the second of these: that all motivating reasons consist of a belief/desire pair. There is a substantial philosophical thesis that all normative reasons must be grounded in desires (sometimes called internalism about reason, though that term has another use); but that is somewhat independent of our primary focus here. You could think that all normative reasons must be grounded in desire, and still think that somebody had a normative reason to do something without having a motivating reason; perhaps they hadn't realized that this act would satisfy their desire.

#### Causal explanations

There is a long-standing debate about whether motivating reasons are causes. Many philosophers used to deny that they were. Donald Davidson pointed out that even if we have a desire for something, and a belief that a certain action will bring that thing about, we don't get an explanation of the corresponding action unless we think that the belief and desire caused that action (and caused it, moreover, in the right way).

## Phenomenology of Desire

Smith argues that it is not a necessary feature of desires that they have a certain phenomenology (i.e. a certain feel) attached. Perhaps certain desires must (hunger for instance); but this is not generally so. And even with hunger, one can be distracted (in which case, does the phenomenology of hunger go away, or do we simply not notice it; compare wounds on the battlefield). Smith only considers certain sorts of phenomenology though. There is a worry for Smith's approach from the fact that when the phenomenology is *completely* lacking (or perhaps where there is an inappropriate phenomenology) we are reluctant to ascribe desires. Consider compulsion. Philip Quinn gives the example of a compulsive radio-switcher-on-er: he switches on every radio he can find, entirely without any pleasure or satisfaction. Would we say that he wanted to switch the radios on? (Similarly, Anscombe has the example of someone who says, inexplicably, 'I want a pin'; and then, when you give it to them, says simply 'Thank you, my wish is gratified', and puts the pin down.) Could it be that desires have to involve pleasure in the satisfaction; or, more plausibly, pleasure in the anticipation of satisfaction? There is now a considerable psychological literature showing that wanting and liking can come apart. See for instance Kent Berridge's work, which we shall look at in detail when we come to study addiction.

## Desires as Functional Roles and Dispositions

For Smith here, a functional role just is a bunch of dispositions: dispositions to act in certain ways given certain beliefs. Dispositions are clearly related to counterfactuals (statements about what I would do if ...) but probably shouldn't be identified with them. The dispositions all have a distinctive, mind-world direction of fit.

## Pro-Attitudes

Smith is explicit (p.55) that distinguishing other states with a mind-world direction of fit from desires is not a deep objection (he considers hopes and wishes). His response is just to introduce the term 'pro-attitude' (from Davidson) and rephrase the Humean theory in terms of that. But he needs to be careful here. For if the claim is just that anything that gets one to act counts as a desire, then of course whenever we act there will be a desire. In fact Smith is surely not saying that. (Witness his response to the claim that there might be states with both directions of fit: he doesn't just conclude that such states would be desires. So he must think that desires have features that distinguish them from such states.) So we are left with the thought that desires have certain features (that makes the Humean theory non-trivial); and then we can ask whether every action is motivated by states that have those features. Smith assumes that they are, but that is far from obvious. One putative class of counter-examples that we have already mentioned is addictive and compulsive behavior. Perhaps Smith will say that this is not intentional behavior (that is controversial). Another class of putative counterexamples that we shall go on to consider at length is the class of intentions. Intentions have features that plausibly distinguish them from desires (for instance they are under our control in a way that desires are not, they have a different phenomenology); and yet they are plausibly motivating.

## Attitudes with Both Directions of Fit

Some philosophers want to acknowledge the possibility of states that are both belief like and desire like; ‘besires’ as they are sometimes called. It is sometimes thought that moral judgments are like this: moral judgments are truly judgments, and hence are a kind of belief; but at the same time they involve a disposition to change the world in a certain way (moral internalism). Smith’s argument is that these states are incoherent, since no state can simultaneously have both directions of fit. But that seems to muddle up the content of the states which are supposed to have the different directions of fit. A belief that, say, racism is wrong, doesn’t bring with it a desire to change the world so that it was no longer the case that racism is wrong. Rather it brings a desire to change the world so that there is less racism in it. So the argument that is left for Smith is that admitting such states brings us no explanatory advantage, and so we shouldn’t admit them; an application of *Ockham’s razor*.

## Smith’s later work

In a subsequent book (*The Moral Problem*) Smith tried to reconcile the Humean theory of motivation with moral internalism (i.e. the thesis that moral beliefs are essentially motivating). Very briefly, his line is that to make a moral judgment that an action is good is to judge that one would desire to perform that action if one were fully rational; and then to argue that rational agents will desire what they judge they will desire if rational. So beliefs and desires are still quite distinct, though rational agents will come to desire what they judge good.