

PHIL 260; Spring 2007

The Normativity of Ethics

David O. Brink

Handout #2: Moral Motivation and Rationalism

We have looked at worries about expressivism and other forms of noncognitivism. The externalist solution may also seem to be a solution of last resort, because it may seem to deny the platitude that moral judgments are motivationally efficacious. For this reason, we might look seriously at rationalist theories of moral motivation, because they promise to represent moral judgments as intrinsically motivational without giving up cognitivism.

A PURELY COGNITIVE CONCEPTION OF MORAL MOTIVATION

Some philosophers, such as Nagel and McDowell, maintain cognitivism and internalism about motivation by rejecting the assumption that motivation requires a desire or pro-attitude; they insist that purely cognitive states -- beliefs -- can motivate.

- The analogy between prudential and moral motivation: seeing what's in one's interest or what morality requires is often all that's needed to motivate and explain action. In such cases, ascription of the desire to perform the act in question is "merely consequential".
- Even if ascription of proximate desires is consequential, motivation seems to depend on more ultimate desires. Proximate or foreground belief can be sufficient for motivation only when more ultimate desires are part of the background. If we count appeal to my belief that it is raining as explaining my action, this is only because we take my desires to go out and to stay dry for granted as part of my psychological background. Likewise, we can agree that moral beliefs are sufficient to motivate the virtuous person, but this is only because a virtuous person is someone with a certain well developed psychological profile that is structured by various cognitive and conative states.
 - This picture is supported by the fact that acquiring the same belief about what morality requires can produce different behavior and motivation in the virtuous and the non-virtuous. Same input, different output.
 - By itself, this just means that there must be some difference in internal psychological architecture between the virtuous and the non-virtuous. The differences might be cognitive, not conative.
 - But we can presumably find cases of differential output (motivation) with common input (moral beliefs), despite common beliefs. Compare the virtuous person, who tracks the morally good, with the vicious person, who tracks the morally bad. Same input, same cognitive architecture, different output. If so, then there must be a difference in conative architecture.
- The implausibility of the purely cognitive picture of moral motivation is a consequence of the plausibility of belief-desire psychology. Proponents of belief-desire psychology often characterize the difference between beliefs and desires in terms of their different **directions of fit** with the world (e.g. Aristotle, Green, Anscombe, Stampe, Humberstone, Velleman). The difference between beliefs and desires is a special case of a more general difference between representations and pro-attitudes. On this view, representations, such as beliefs, are states of the agent whose content she adjusts to conform to information she receives about the state of the world. By contrast, pro-

attitudes, such as desires, are states of the agent on the basis of which she acts to make the world conform to them. We can think of the difference in terms of the response to a perceived mismatch between the content of the intentional state and information about the way the world is. If the state is a belief, the agent tends to respond to such a mismatch by modifying the content of the intentional state to match the way the world is or appears. If the state is a desire, the agent tends to respond to such a mismatch by acting so as to modify the world to conform to the content of the state. On this sort of belief-desire psychology, agents act in order to satisfy their desires based on their beliefs about the world, in particular, their beliefs about the causal means to and necessary conditions of satisfying their desires.

MORAL MOTIVATION BY RATIONALIZED DESIRE

A different form of rationalism denies that motivation is possible without a prior pro-attitude but insists that certain beliefs, in particular, normative beliefs entail pro-attitudes. On this view, the belief that I have a moral reason generates a desire to perform the action in question. This solution to the puzzle has two component parts.

- **Normative Internalism:** beliefs about one's practical reason entail (pro tanto) desire.
- **Conceptual Rationalism:** belief that an action is morally required entails belief that it is rationally authoritative.

Nagel and Smith both seem to endorse this sort of moral motivation by rational desire. Smith's version:

- Normative Internalism: To judge that I have reason to ϕ is to judge that I would desire to ϕ if I was fully rational, that is, deliberating correctly (e.g. with full information, coherently, and employing means-ends reasoning) (155-61). (This is, I think, a conceptual claim about normative judgment, not just a claim about the truth-conditions of normative judgment.)
- Conceptual Rationalism: To judge that I am morally required to ϕ is to judge that I would desire to ϕ if I was fully rational and that ϕ -ing "is an act of the appropriate substantive kind" (184). (This is also a conceptual claim.)

However, I'm not sure the details of Smith's version of motivation by rationalized desire need concern us. Though there is an important grain of truth in normative internalism, both theses are open to question.

Normative internalism implies that there is an important connection between judgments of practical reason and the will. This idea might be defended by appeal to belief-desire psychology. On this view, as we have seen, intentional action is viewed as the product of representational states, such as belief, and pro-attitudes, such as desire, which display different directions of fit with the world. On this sort of belief-desire psychology, agents act in order to satisfy their desires based on their beliefs about the world, in particular, their beliefs about the causal means to and necessary conditions of satisfying their desires. But on this sort of psychology, we can also understand how normative beliefs would tend to influence desire. For normative beliefs are beliefs about how the world should be. But if desires are precisely states that tend to make agents modify the world in accordance with their content, then we should expect normative

beliefs normally to affect desires. If we accept belief-desire psychology, because of their different directions of fit, we can claim that desire can be responsive to ought judgments. This shows how one can accept the Humean dictum that action depends on desire without accepting the Humean dictum that reason can only be the slave of the passions.

However, to say that normative beliefs can and normally do influence desire is not to say that normative beliefs have such influence necessarily. Other things being equal, normative beliefs have conative influence. But other things need not be equal if there is some relevant form of psychological interference. In some cases of weakness of will, normative beliefs apparently motivate but provide insufficient motivation. In other cases of weakness of will, normative beliefs may not motivate at all. This second sort of weakness of will is selective if the interference is intermittent; it is global if the interference is systematic. Depression might produce selective weakness of will (cf. Stocker, Mele), but damage to the prefrontal lobe of the cerebral cortex (as in the famous case of Phineas Gage) might produce systematic weakness of will.

This is already to recognize one kind of **amoralism** -- someone who recognizes moral requirements yet remains indifferent. The kind of amoralism whose possibility Smith concedes is a kind of **unprincipled** amoralism. It is unprincipled, not in the sense that it is random or lacks a psychological explanation, but in the sense that it is due to psychological interference with the normal process by which results of practical deliberation affect an agent's motivational set; indifference does not reflect principles the agent accepts.

The possibility of this sort of amoralism undermines the strong internalist assumption about moral motivation. If, as I believe, the puzzle about moral motivation is best construed as resting on this strong internalist assumption, then recognition of the possibility of this sort of amoralism is sufficient to vindicate the externalist solution.

But there is another problem for this form of rationalism about moral motivation, even if we accepted normative internalism. Conceptual rationalism seems problematic. Doubts about conceptual rationalism reflect the possibility of **principled** amoralism in which one is indifferent to moral requirements, either globally or selectively, because one has doubts about the rational authority of moral requirements. In this way doubts about conceptual rationalism actually presuppose (weak) normative internalism. It is possible to remain unmoved by what one judges morally required as long as one can hold conceptions of morality and practical reason according to which moral requirements, globally or selectively, lack rational authority.

There are many conceptions of morality and practical reason according to which their coincidence is at best imperfect. One familiar set of conceptions involves recognizing impartial or other-regarding duties and an instrumental or prudential conception of practical reason. For even if it is often true that fulfilling other-regarding duties would satisfy one's desires or promote one's interests, this coincidence need not always take place. Fulfilling one's other-regarding duties need not always satisfy one's desires or promote one's interests.

Notice that principled amoralism does not require the truth of anti-rationalism. It requires only that one be able to form conceptions of morality and practical reason according to which their demands can diverge.