

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar
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Pettit, “Humeans, Anti-Humeans, and Motivation”

- Pettit argues that Smith both mischaracterizes the debate between Humeans and Anti-Humeans, and fails to make a convincing case for the Humean position.
- The real debate between Humeans and Anti-Humeans concerns the power of reasoning to produce motivation.

The issue between them is not whether motivating reasons always involve desires but whether they always involve the presence of non-cognitive states, states which reason on its own is incapable of producing. If the thesis about desires is relevant to that issue, that is only because it is assumed that desires are non-cognitive states of this kind. (531)

◦ There are two ways to deny that desires must be non-cognitive in this way. First, one could hold that desires are an agent’s estimate of objective goodness. This is not popular route, however. Second, some desires might inherit cognitive status in virtue of being entailed by certain beliefs — e.g., the desire that p might be entailed by the belief that p is good. The desire would be sensitive to the perception of the truth or falsity of the goodness of p. The Humean must deny that there are such desires.

◦ How does Smith argue against the possibility of such desires?

His idea is that for any example of a desiderative belief that the anti-Humean mentions — say, the belief that it is *prima facie* desirable that p — the Humean can construe it as a belief on the agent’s part about his own desires: say, as the belief that he desires that p, ‘since “is *prima facie* desirable” = “is desired by me”. (532)

Though this move might be a theoretical option, why think that it is always true, or even likely to be true most of the time?

- Pettit concludes by presenting three ways in which the Humean could advance his case.

1. Deny that there are desiderative beliefs.
2. Deny that there are desiderative facts.
3. Argue that the only beliefs that could entail desires are those beliefs that presuppose the existence of such desires.