

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar

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Smith, "On Humeans, Anti-Humeans, and Motivation: A Reply to Pettit"

- Pettit argued that non-Humeans can accept Smith's P1, so P1 does not adequately capture the Humean's position. Remember, Pettit claimed that the real debate is whether desires must be non-cognitive (i.e., states that reason alone cannot produce). Call desires that are entailed by beliefs 'desires=beliefs'. According to Pettit, Humeans hold that motivation always requires the presence of a desire that is not a desire=belief. This is the claim that Smith calls 'P-Pettit'.

- But Smith argues that P-Pettit *just is* P1.

P1 and P-Pettit are the same principle just in case 'desire' in P1 means the same as 'desire≠belief' in P-Pettit. (590)

And Smith thinks that all desires are such that they are desire≠belief.

- A desire=belief is also what Smith called a 'quasi-belief'. Quasi-beliefs have one direction fit with respect to one content (e.g., that x is good) and another direction of fit with respect to another content (e.g., I promote x).

Pettit and I therefore agree about the issue dividing Humean from non-Humean theorists of motivation. Pettit chooses to describe final resistance to the Humean's view in terms of a commitment to the existence of desires=beliefs, I choose to describe such resistance in terms of a commitment to the existence of quasi-beliefs. (591)

- Think about what the Rationalist about practical reasoning believes:

But rationalists think, in addition, that there are norms of practical reason, in particular, that there are norms telling us that if an agent has certain beliefs — for example, the belief that someone is in pain and the he (the believer) can relieve his pain by  $\phi$ -ing — then he (the believer) *prima facie* ought to have certain motives — for example, the motive to  $\phi$ . (592)

But, Smith claims that the Rationalists need not think that such beliefs *entail* these desires. Rather, these desires follow only if the agent is rational.

Q: But, doesn't this very same point also hold for theoretical reasoning?

If the Rationalist is correct, there still are reasons for desires. It then seems that desires can be more or less reasonable. Doesn't this go against at least one aspect of the HTM (namely, that motives cannot be contrary to reason)?

Also, what should we make of this passage?

Moreover, and more importantly, it should also be evident that even if reason does produce a motive in this sense, that will be neither here nor there as regards the debate in the theory of motivation. For to say that beliefs may produce motivating reasons in this sense is not to tell us about the nature of motives, it is rather to tell us about their rational genesis. (592)

- Pettit and Smith differ over whether the direction of fit argument establishes that there aren't desires=beliefs (or quasi-beliefs). Smith supports his case by citing Stocker's (1979) examples of situations in which a belief that x is good fails to provide the agent with any motivation to x. So, here is Smith's position regarding such beliefs:

For, I argued, if we think of values as (roughly) properties that elicit certain desires in us under certain conditions, then we can explain both why agents do have beliefs about what is of value, and why agents tend to desire to promote what they believe to be valuable, without supposing that their having beliefs about what is of value entails their having desires to promote what they believe valuable; that is, without postulating desires=beliefs. (593)