

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar
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2/7/07
Smith, “The Humean Theory of Motivation”

- See the 2 principles, P1 and P2, that state stronger and weaker formulations of the Humean theory. P1 holds that the *source* of motivation always lies with a belief-desire pair. P2 is a bit weaker, stating that motivation always requires the *presence* of a belief-desire pair. But according to either, desire is always required for motivation.

Smith will present an argument for the Humean Theory of Motivation (HTM). (It might help to re-consider Hume’s original arguments for HTM.)

- The HTM is a thesis about motivating reasons. So, we should carefully distinguish *motivating* and *normative reasons*. Smith’s 3 examples from pp. 37–38 are supposed to help illustrate the distinction: buying a Picasso, standing on someone’s foot, and drinking petrol.

Motivating reasons can potentially explain an agent’s behavior, whereas a mere normative reason cannot so explain. Motivating reasons must be *psychologically real*, but not so for normative reasons. Motivating and normative reasons can coincide or come apart.

- Ignore Nagel’s objection, from section 3, for today.
- McDowell charges that the HTM rests on a mistaken, “quasi-hydraulic” conception of reasons explanations. Smith seems to think that the quasi-hydraulic conception is simply the view that reasons are causes. But, it should be obvious that merely accepting that reasons are causes does not rationally commit one to the HTM. There is nothing in the causal theory that rules out beliefs alone being causally sufficient for action.
- Smith now proceeds to develop an account of desires, which will drive his argument for the HTM. His main point is that only desire-like states provide goals, and goals are necessary for reasons explanations.

◦ The *strong phenomenological conception of desire*: this is the view that desires essentially have (distinctive) phenomenological content.

Smith grants that such phenomenology is not always present when we have a reasons explanation. But, he denies that any such phenomenology is required of desire. I will pass over his objections, which are basically appeals to common sense and ordinary cases.

◦ Smith distinguishes beliefs and desires based on their contrary *directions of fit*. Beliefs have mind-to-world direction of fit, whereas desires have world-to-mind direction of fit.

Smith suggests that we make sense of this metaphorical characterization by looking to the *functional role* of desire.

That is, according to this conception, we should think of the desire to ϕ as that state of a subject that grounds all sorts of his dispositions: like the disposition to ϕ in conditions C, the disposition to ϕ in conditions C', and so on (where, in order for conditions C and C' to obtain, the subject must have, *inter alia*, certain beliefs). (52)

The propositional content of a desire is then be provided by its functional role. It is also possible that a desire be partially characterized by a disposition towards producing certain phenomenology.

Let us then contrast desire with belief, in terms of directions of fit:

... roughly, a belief that p is a state that tends to go out of existence in the presence of a perception that *not* p , whereas a desire that p is a state that tends to endure, disposing the subject in that state to bring it about that p . (54)

• So, here is his very simple argument for the HTM:

- (1) Having a motivating reason *is, inter alia*, having a goal
 - (2) Having a goal *is* being in a state with which the world must fit
- and
- (3) Being in a state with which the world must fit *is* desiring.
- (55)

Smith thinks this argument is solid, though he states that (3) is likely the most controversial premise.

◦ A critical question is whether there are mental states with both directions of fit. But, Smith's account of direction of fit in terms of the agent's reaction to the perception that *not p* rules out this possibility. Also see the discussion of "quasi-beliefs", on pp. 56–57. Smith attempts to account for such apparent states using only a standard belief-desire psychology. His key insight is that there might be some beliefs that we will have only if we have certain desires. And it might appear that these beliefs are motivational, when in fact the requisite desires provide the motivation.

The HTM would also be refuted by an example in which a desire is motivated by a belief (or other cognitive state). This is one of Nagel's objections (it grants P2, but denies P1). But, Smith argues against it on p. 59.