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Smith on moral fetishism

HALLVARD LILLEHAMMER

1. Introduction

According to internalism about moral judgements there is an interesting conceptual connection between an agent's making a moral judgement and that agent's motivation. The externalist denies this and claims that any interesting connection between moral judgements and motivation is contingent.¹ The resolution of this dispute has important consequences. For whereas the internalist can construe moral judgements either as non-cognitive states like desire or as cognitive states like belief, the externalist is committed to construe moral judgements as cognitive states like belief.² A vindication of externalism would therefore lend support to those who believe in the possibility of some kind of moral reality.

In his book *The Moral Problem* and in a recent issue of this journal, Michael Smith claims to refute any theory which construes the relationship between moral judgements and motivation as contingent and rationally optional. He claims that no such theory is able to account for the platitude that a good and strong-willed person is reliably motivated in accordance with her moral judgements.³ More specifically, the claim is that although the externalist may provide a reliable link between the moral judgements and motivations of some individual, the only link at his disposal is a basic moral motive to do what is right, where this is read *de dicto*. But, so Smith argues, we can read off from the platitudes that are definitional of moral discourse that this self-consciously moral motive makes for moral fetishism and not for moral goodness.⁴ Good people care about what is right, where this is read *de re*, not *de dicto*. He calls this a *reductio* of externalism.

¹ An uninteresting conceptual connection between judgement and motivation which the externalist accepts: if an agent judges that it is right for her to *f* in circumstances *c*, then she is motivated to *f* in *c* unless she isn't.

² For an externalist theory, see Brink 1989. For internalist cognitivism, see Dancy 1993. For internalist noncognitivism, see Blackburn 1993.

³ (Smith 1994: 60–91) and (1996b). The latter discussion is part of a defence against Miller 1996, in which it is claimed, unsuccessfully to my mind, that Smith's argument is question-begging. Miller 'happily concedes' that externalism fails to account for the platitude (1996: 171). I refuse to make this concession.

⁴ (Smith 1994: 76). Smith (1996b) makes no mention of the *de dicto/de re* distinction. There he applies a distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental desires in order to make what is essentially the same point. The two distinctions are related as follows. Someone whose motivation is explained by a desire to do what is right *de*

Smith's argument fails. In showing how it fails, I shall make three claims. First, a concern for what is right, where this is read *de dicto*, does not amount to moral fetishism. Second, it is not always morally preferable to care about what is right, where this is read *de re*. Third, the externalist can account for why a good and strong-willed person is reliably motivated in accordance with her moral judgements without appealing to a basic moral motive to do what is right, where this is read *de dicto*.

2. *Smith's argument*

Smith's argument has the form of a dilemma which arises when we ask in virtue of what a good and strong-willed person is reliably motivated in accordance with her judgements about what is right. The externalist says the connection between moral judgements and motivation is contingent, so he cannot say that it obtains in virtue of the contents of the moral judgements themselves. What accounts for an agent's moral motivation must then be that agent's motivational dispositions, more specifically the contents of her desires.⁵

What do the contents of an agent's desires have to be like in order for that agent to be reliably motivated in accordance with her judgements about what is right? One answer is this: an agent who thinks it is right to *f* in circumstances *c*, and who desires to do what is right, will be motivated to *f* in circumstances *c*, all other things being equal. The externalist might therefore claim that what accounts for the reliability of moral motivation in the good and strong-willed person is a desire to do what is right.

Smith's dilemma then arises from the fact that a sentence of the form 'x has a desire to do what is right' may be read either *de dicto* or *de re*. The difference between the two readings is a difference in logical scope. Consider the sentence: 'I want a sloop'.⁶ On a *de dicto* reading the meaning of this sentence is 'I want that: I have a sloop', where the sentence following the colon gives the content of the want. On a *de re* reading the meaning is 'There is a sloop of which I want that: I have it'. There are interesting differences between the two readings. First, the difference in meaning mirrors a difference in the intentionality of the mental states. In the case of

dicto has a non-instrumental moral desire to do whatever is right, to which his desires to perform particular right actions are merely instrumental. A person who desires what is right *de re* desires to perform particular right actions for their intrinsic right-making features.

⁵ Smith (1994: Chapter 4) endorses a Humean belief/desire account of action-explanations, according to which the term 'desire' is used to cover all motivating states. I follow this usage.

⁶ The example is Quine's (1971: 101).

the *de dicto* want, but not the *de re* want, I have an attitude which includes the concept 'sloop' as part of its content. Arguably, I need to possess the concept of a sloop in order to have a want with this content. Second, the *de re* reading, but not the *de dicto* reading, entails the existence of the object referred to by 'sloop'. Arguably, the *de re* reading attributes a desire to me which is in part individuated with reference to an externally existing object which must exist in order for my desire to have it to exist.⁷

Now for the claim that good people desire to do what is right, where this is read *de re* and not *de dicto*. This claim requires clarification. There are at least two attribution-sentences between which Smith's argument equivocates. The first says that 'x has a desire to do what is right' (1994: 74, 75, 76). Call this sentence P. The second sentence says that 'x has a desire to do what he believes is right'.⁸ Call this sentence Q. P and Q have different implications for what the good person is like.

First, a *de re* reading of P entails the existence of right actions, whereas a *de re* reading of Q only entails the existence of actions believed to be right. It follows that in the case of P but not Q there is a constitutive link between goodness and right actions. Second, in the case of Q but not P we can say that a person who changes his fundamental values desires to do what is right at both ends of the transition. For all we mean by this is that he is motivated in accordance with his judgement. In the case of P, on the other hand, at most the desire at one end of the transition is a desire for what is, in fact, right.

Smith must think it is a *de re* reading of Q which characterises the good and strong-willed person. For his dilemma is formulated for the case of a good and strong-willed person who changes her most fundamental values. This person is nevertheless supposed to be good partly in virtue of her concern for what is right, where this is read *de re*. This claim only makes sense if we take Smith to mean that she desires to do what she believes is right. Otherwise, she would not be able to change her fundamental values consistently with remaining good in virtue of her *de re* concern for what is right.

Smith's dilemma is as follows. Suppose you are a libertarian and have always voted for the libertarian party. During the course of a discussion a friend convinces you that you are wrong, whereupon you judge that it is right to vote for the social democrats and become motivated to do so. How can the externalist account for the fact that you change your motivation to

⁷ It has been argued that no such mental states exist (Fodor 1980). If they do not, then the very idea of a *de re* desire is problematic. Fortunately, we can ignore this question for the sake of argument.

⁸ Or, what for Smith amounts to the same thing: 'X has a desire to do what he judges right' (1994: 73, 75).

accord with your judgement?

On the first horn of the dilemma, Smith correctly claims that the externalist cannot appeal to an antecedent desire to do what is right, where this is read *de re*. Read *de re*, Q says: 'There is an action which x believes is right, and x has a desire to perform that action'.⁹ Now prior to your conversion you desired to vote for the libertarians and judged that it was right to do so. For the externalist, a mere change in judgement has no implications for subsequent motivation. So you might equally well continue desiring to vote for the libertarians rather than the social democrats while judging this is wrong, rather than change your motivation to accord with your judgement. An appeal to your antecedent desire to do what is right, where this is read *de re*, goes no way toward explaining your subsequent change in motivation.

On the second horn of the dilemma, Smith claims that a desire to do what is right, where this is read *de dicto*, may account for why your motivation changes with your judgement, but only at the cost of moral fetishism. Now this is plausible only if the *de dicto* desire has universal rather than existential scope. To see this, consider the *de dicto* reading of P. The truth of a sentence of the form: ' x has a desire that: there is some action which is right and which x performs' would not suffice to account for a reliable connection between moral judgements and motivation. Nor would it justify any charge of moral fetishism. Nevertheless, it is still a desire to do what is right, where this is read *de dicto*. The character who Smith thinks is a moral fetishist must be someone all of whose desires to perform particular right actions are derived from a general desire to do what is right. This desire is best attributed by a sentence of the form ' x has a desire that: if some action is right, then x performs that action'. In other words, Smith's moral fetishist is someone who desires to do what is right in the sense of P. He is a person whose only non-instrumental moral desire is a desire to do whatever is right. All his desires to perform particular actions believed to be right are merely instrumental to the satisfaction of this desire to do whatever is right. He desires to perform no action on the basis of its right-making features alone (1996b: 180ff.).

If you have such a standing desire to do what is right you may stop desiring to vote for the libertarians and start desiring to vote for the social

⁹ The same conclusion can be drawn for a *de re* reading of P. Notice that it does not follow that x is barred from desiring to perform the action believed to be right under some description. What is crucial is that his desire is not merely instrumental in the pursuit of a desire to perform actions under the description of rightness. Smith can therefore claim that the person who desires to do what is right *de re* desires to perform right actions for their right-making features, and thus for a reason (1996b: 182).

democrats, given that you now think it is right to vote for the social democrats. There is a rational explanation for this change in motivation, since you have all along desired to perform right actions. The problem is that good people apparently do not have their moral motivation explained by a *de dicto* desire to do what is right. To show this, Smith gives examples, such as that of the man who desires to do what is right, who believes it is right to save his wife rather than a complete stranger, and who only therefore desires to save his wife (1994: 75–76). Smith thinks this person is a moral fetishist, because his desire to save his wife is derived from a basic moral desire which is directed towards rightness qua rightness, and in the pursuit of which his wife plays only an incidental role.

According to Smith, the way out of this dilemma is to endorse the following internalist principle:

(PR) If an agent judges that it is right to *f* in circumstances *c*, then she is motivated to *f* in *c* unless she is practically irrational.

According to (PR) moral judgements issue in desires to act as they specify on pains of practical irrationality.¹⁰ The kinds of irrationality in question are psychological disturbances such as weakness of will and the like. There is then a rational explanation for why a good and strong-willed person is reliably motivated by his moral judgements. For a good and strong-willed person who judges that it is right to *f* in *c* will know that it is rational for him to be motivated to *f* in *c*. And because he does not suffer from any irrational disturbance such as weakness of will, he will be motivated to *f* in *c*.

3. *Moral attitudes: de dicto*

The claim that it is a fetish to care about what is right, where this is read *de dicto*, is false. It is false even for Smith's basic case, where an agent changes his most fundamental values. Consider the case of someone who has always believed that morality is not very demanding in terms of individual sacrifice. Suppose he comes to believe that he is morally required to sacrifice everything he has, perhaps even his life. Suppose further that he does not directly acquire a *de re* desire to do what he now thinks is right, but that a standing desire to do what is right *de dicto* provides the causal link which motivates him to sacrifice everything he has. It is not a platitude that this person is a moral fetishist. Maybe it would be admirable if he eventually came to care about what is right in an underived way. But given

¹⁰ Smith calls the principle the practicality requirement (1994: 61). Apparently, he takes the principle of Weak Internalism in (1996b: 177) to capture the same claim, in spite of its making no reference to the concept of rationality.

what he now considers morality to demand, he might be forgiven if his immediate concern for what is right is not direct.

Smith is strangely silent about the person who comes to reassess what morality requires. For although his dilemma is formulated with reference to a fundamental change in values, his argument that a *de dicto* concern for what is right is a fetish is not. This argument is supported by an appeal to cases like that of the man who faced with the choice of saving his wife or a stranger is motivated to save his wife, but only conditionally on a *de dicto* desire to do what is right (1994: 75–76). Smith thinks this person fails to be good because he fails to care non-derivatively about his spouse. But nothing follows from this example about what explains the motivation of a good and strong-willed person when she changes her most fundamental values, since this example does not mention a change in values, never mind a fundamental change.

A concern for what is right, where this is read *de dicto*, has a role to play in the psychology of good people beyond this special case. To take one example, many people go through phases when they temporarily lose affection for people to whom they are close. Consider someone who goes to a party during a phase when she is tired of her husband. At the party she meets a very charming person and is tempted to have an affair. She judges that it would be wrong to have an affair on account of her husband's feelings. But she is temporarily indifferent to her husband's feelings. However, she has a standing *de dicto* desire to do what is right which, together with her moral judgement, causes her to do the right thing, in spite of the absence of a *de re* desire to do the right thing and the presence of a *de re* desire to do the wrong thing. If there is anything in this case which prevents this person from being good it is not her standing desire to do what is right, where this is read *de dicto*. For this desire is playing the role of an internalised norm that prevents her from being tempted to do wrong. Such norms are not in contradiction with the platitudes that are definitional of moral discourse. Their benefits are all too obvious.

Consider next the case of the father who discovers that his son is a murderer, and who knows that if he does not go to the police the boy will get away with it, whereas if he does go to the police the boy will go to the gas-chamber. The father judges that it is right to go to the police, and does so. In this case it is not a platitude that a desire to do what is right, where this is read *de re*, is the mark of moral goodness. If what moves the father to inform on his son is a standing desire to do what is right, where this is read *de dicto*, then this could be as much of a saving grace as a moral failing. Why should it be an a priori demand that someone should have an underived desire to send his son to death?

4. *Moral attitudes: de re*

Smith is wrong if he thinks the externalist is barred from attributing to good people desires to do what is right, where this is read *de re*. Suppose it is right to care for one's family. Many people do, and they do so without having derived this concern from a concern for what is right, where this is read *de dicto*. The same goes for a host of other concerns, from a desire for self-preservation to desires for the well-being of living creatures of all sorts. Externalism is consistent with the claim that these concerns are partially constitutive of moral goodness.

Externalism is also consistent with the fact that *de re* concerns for what is right can be acquired by experience, education and reflection. I might change my previously mercenary attitude towards human life after experiencing the horrors of war and thus come to care in an underived way about other people's suffering. I might be brought to love my country after having its values inculcated in me at school. Or I may undergo a process of reflection and acquire a belief that it is right of me to perform a certain action, whereupon that belief causes a desire in me to do what I now think is right, where this is read *de re*, not *de dicto*.¹¹ The externalist does not deny that moral beliefs directly cause desires to act in accordance with those beliefs. Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. The crucial point is that it is not necessarily a mark of irrationality when they don't.

Smith can press his point once more at this stage. For in virtue of what is it that moral beliefs cause desires to do what is right in those in whom such desires are reliably produced? What is the externalist account of moral goodness which guarantees such motivation in the good and strong-willed person?

One does well to remember that the externalist does not have to answer this question. For he may accept the platitude about the reliability of motivation in the good and strong-willed person without accepting that this platitude is in need of some further platitudinous a priori principle like (PR) to account for it. He may regard the platitude as primitive. If he does, then he will say that it is a fact that we call people good and strong-willed only if they are reliably motivated in accordance with their moral judgements. If someone fails to be so motivated, then they do not qualify as good and strong-willed. What makes some people motivated in one way rather than another is a matter of their psychological make-up, something about which we are mainly ignorant a priori. After all, (PR) does not tell us very much about the psychology of good people either. All it tells us is that if

¹¹ The thesis that moral judgements are beliefs which may cause desires to act on them is neutral between Smith's internalism and the externalism he wishes to refute. To employ it here is therefore not question-begging.

they are not directly motivated in accordance with their moral judgements, in some way or other, then they are practically irrational.

5. *The Practicality Option*

The externalist can do better. Consider the following platitude about moral judgements and motivation, neutral between externalism and internalism:

(PO) If an agent judges that it is right for her to f in circumstances c , then if she has a normative reason to f in c she will be motivated to f in c unless she is practically irrational.¹²

(PO) differs from (PR) in that (PR) does, whereas (PO) does not, entail that it is always irrational not to be motivated in accordance with one's moral judgement. (PO) only entails that it is irrational not to be so motivated when one has a reason to be so motivated. The externalist can appeal to (PO) to account for why a morally good and strong-willed person is reliably motivated in accordance with her moral judgements on Smith's own terms, yet without endorsing (PR). Furthermore, the externalist can do this while avoiding an awkward implication of (PR), namely that it is always irrational not to be motivated in accordance with one's moral judgement, no matter how poor that judgement is.¹³

On the externalist account which I am proposing, a good person is someone for whom it is rational to act in accordance with his moral judgements, and who acts on those judgements because he knows what morality requires. For such a person there is exactly the same rational explanation for why he is reliably motivated in accordance with his moral judgements as the one Smith proposes for all agents on (PR). An agent who has a normative reason to be motivated in accordance with his moral judgements will be motivated in accordance with those judgements on pains of irrationality.

But not all agents may be such that they have a normative reason to be motivated in accordance with their moral judgements. First, an agent whose moral judgements are radically defective or corrupted may be rationally required not to be motivated in accordance with them. Second, an agent might come to think that morality requires something which it cannot be rationally demanded that he do. You might, for example, come

¹² I call this the practicality option to distinguish it from the practicality requirement.

¹³ Smith retracts his claim that agents necessarily have a normative reason to act in accordance with their judgements about what is rational in (1996a: 162, footnote 1). This retraction can be extended to the case of moral judgements, since Smith thinks moral judgements reduce to judgements of what is rational (1994: 62ff.). He goes on to say that agents nevertheless 'rationally should' act in accordance with their judgements about what is rational. The force of this 'should' eludes me.

to think that it is morally required to drown all handicapped people at birth or that mothers should be prevented from having an abortion even when the alternative is that both mother and child will die. It is not a platitude that you would be irrational not to be motivated in accordance with those judgements. On the contrary, someone who was motivated in accordance with his moral judgements no matter what they were, could be accused of a different kind of moral fetishism. It follows that Smith himself, in virtue of his commitment to (PR), is committed to a kind of moral fetishism.¹⁴

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¹⁴ Parts of this paper have been presented at the universities of St. Andrews, Cambridge and Reading. I am grateful to the audiences there, as well as to David Copp, Jonathan Dancy, Brad Hooker, Chris Penston, Michael Smith, Peter Smith, an anonymous referee, and especially Alex Oliver for their generous help and comments. Work for this paper has been supported by a Peterhouse Research Studentship.