Against a Besire Theory of Moral Judgment

Abstract
A besire theory of moral judgment holds that a moral judgment is a besire. A besire that p is a unitary mental state that comprises a belief that p and a desire to act as if the belief that p is true. I argue that the belief endures while the desire expires with the introduction of a new bodily condition, and hence that they are distinct mental states. The besire theory of moral judgment is undermined by my strategy, but not by Smith's strategy (1994), by Zangwill's strategy (2008) or by a teleological strategy. Besires cannot be conjured up as a pathway to the moral objectivist view that there are moral facts, truths, and knowledge.

Keywords: Belief, Besire, Desire, Motivation, Satisfaction, Truth

Park, Seungbae (2013). "Against the Besire Theory of Moral Judgment", *Organon F* 20 (1): 5-17.

Seungbae Park
Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology
Republic of Korea
nature@unist.ac.kr

1. Introduction

What is the psychological structure of moral judgment? Some meta-ethicists advocate a besire theory of moral judgment which asserts that a moral judgment is a besire. A besire is alleged to be a unitary mental state that is composed of a belief and a desire. It is similar to a belief in that it represents a state of affairs, and to a desire in that it motivates an action. But it differs from a belief in that it is motivationally efficacious, and from a desire in that it purports to depict a fact in the world. In any event, the defining characteristic of a besire is that it performs both the function of representing a moral fact and the function of motivating an action.

A simple version of the besire theory holds that a besire that p consists of a belief that p and a desire that p. Note that the belief and the desire have the same content, p. On this version, for example, the besire that it is moral to save a drowning child is made up of the belief that it is moral to save a drowning child and the desire that it is moral to save a drowning child. Thus, anyone besiring that it is moral to save a drowning child wishes to generate the moral fact that it is moral to save a drowning child. Perhaps, he abhors the absence of the moral fact in the world, so he is motivated to create it. Creating the moral fact would mean that the truth-value of the belief changes from falsehood to truth. It is not clear that we can create such a fact, and that a sensible besirist would claim so. A better version of the besire theory is called for.

A sophisticated form of the besire theory states that a besire that p consists of the belief that p and a desire to act as if the belief that p is true. Note that the belief and the desire have different contents, p and q. Margaret Little and Sergio Tenenbaum have this version of the besire theory in their minds when they write as follows:

> ..it is a believing-attitude directed toward one proposition, and it is a desiring attitude directed toward another. (Little, 1997: 64)

> Besires are supposed to be complex mental states that have the direction of fit of belief towards

> one content (say *p*) and the direction of fit of desire towards another content (say *q*). (Tenenbaum, 2006: 237)

For example, to make the moral judgment that it is moral to save a drowning child is to besire that it is moral to save a drowning child. The besire represents the moral fact that it is moral to save a drowning child, and it motivates an agent to act as if it is true that it is moral to save a drowning child. The besire does not motivate an agent to bring it about that it is moral to save a drowning child. It rather motivates the agent to save a drowning child, to commend a person saving the child, to condemn an able swimmer looking on idly as the child drowns, etc.

I will argue that the belief that p and the desire to act in accordance with the belief that p are distinct mental states because when the bodily condition that caused the desire is eliminated, the desire expires while the belief remains intact. It will be shown that different physiological processes are responsible for beliefs and desires. I will explicate how the besire theory is refuted by my strategy, but not by Michael Smith's strategy (1994), by Nick Zangwill's strategy (2008), or by a teleological strategy to be expounded below. The debate over the ontological status of besires sheds light on the psychological nature of moral judgments, but it also has ramifications on the debate over the ontological status of moral facts, truths, and knowledge. If some besires are true, there would be moral facts in the world that render them true. Furthermore, if we have enough evidence for the besires, we would have some moral knowledge. Such moral knowledge would necessarily motivate agents to act morally. If the main thesis of this paper is true, however, besires do not exist, and hence they cannot serve as a means to establish moral facts, truths, and knowledge.

2. My Strategy

Imagine that your body is in need of water. You believe that there is water in the refrigerator, you desire to act in agreement with the belief, and hence you are motivated to open the refrigerator. Before you open the refrigerator, however, you spot a bottle of water on a table, and you drink from it. As a result, your body no longer lacks water. A new bodily condition has arisen. Nonetheless, even in this new situation, you would continue to believe that there is water in the refrigerator. After all, you remember that you put a bottle of water in the refrigerator a few hours ago. In short, your preexisting belief is not affected by the change of the bodily condition.

How about the desire to act in accordance with the belief that there is water in the refrigerator? Unlike the belief, the desire ceases to exist. After drinking water in the bottle from the table, you no longer feel thirsty, so you lose the desire to open the refrigerator. Your desire to act in accordance with the belief that there is water in the refrigerator disappeared. Of course, you still have the desire to act in conformity with the belief in the sense that if someone asks you whether there is water in the refrigerator, you would answer affirmatively. But the desire you have after drinking water is different from the desire you had before drinking water. After all, the motivation to open the refrigerator is embedded in the old desire, but not in the new desire. Since the old desire and the new desire have different contents, it still stands that the new bodily condition dispelled the old desire.

Based on the foregoing example of water in the refrigerator, we can make a general claim about the relationship among a bodily condition, a belief that p, and the desire to act as if the belief is true. Upon the elimination of the old bodily condition that caused a desire to act in accordance with a belief that p, the desire expires, whereas the belief persists. Put differently, a new bodily condition does not annihilate the belief that p, whereas it exterminates a desire to act in accordance with a belief that p. It is incoherent for a mental

state to persist and expire at the same time. Therefore, the belief that p and the desire to act in accordance with the belief that p cannot constitute a unified mental state, i.e., a besire that p.

There is further reason for thinking that a belief that p and a desire to act as if the content of the belief is the case are independent of each other. The strength of a desire varies together with the potency of its cause, not with the potency of the cause of the belief. For example, the strength of a desire to act in accordance with the belief that there is water in the refrigerator varies in accordance with the amount of water in your body. If your body is in severe need of water, the desire will be strong enough to impel you to open the refrigerator. If the lack of water is moderate, the desire may not be strong enough to induce you to open the refrigerator. In contrast, the degree of a belief covaries with the power of its cause, not with the potency of the cause of the desire. For example, the degree of the belief that there is water in the refrigerator is correlated with the vivacity of the perception that there is water in the refrigerator. If the perception is vivid, the degree of the belief will be high. If the perception is dull, the degree of the belief will be low.

Moreover, the degree of a belief that p may be inversely proportional to the strength of a desire to act in accordance with the belief that p. For example, you may be confident that there is water in the refrigerator, but you may not desire at all to open the refrigerator. This happens when you have a vivacious perception of water in the refrigerator, but there is enough water in your body. In contrast, you may be unsure that there is water in the refrigerator, but you may strongly desire to open the refrigerator. This happens when you have an obscure perception of water in the refrigerator due to an eye disease, but there is a severe shortage of water in your body. It follows that the degree of belief that p and the strength of a desire to act in accordance with the belief that p are under the control of different physical factors, and the belief and the desire are independent of each other. To summarize, different factors exert different influences on the belief that p and the desire to act in accordance with the belief that p. This phenomenon reinforces the view that the belief that p and the desire to act in accordance with the belief that p are distinct mental states.

Why does a belief that p endure whereas a desire to act in accordance with the belief that p expires, given some appropriate change of bodily conditions? The answer lies in the fact that the belief and the desire are under the influence of different physical factors. The amount of water in the body determines whether a subject feels the desire to drink water or not. It is not surprising that a subject loses the desire after the intake of water above the needed threshold. The transmission of signals along the optic nerves determines whether a subject believes that there is water in the refrigerator or not. It is natural that a subject maintains his perceptual belief even after the amount of water in the body increases. Since the belief and the desire are under the control of different factors, the elimination of the bodily condition that caused the desire puts an end to the desire but not to the belief.

Different physical factors are responsible for different beliefs and for different desires. A visual belief is generated by the physical processes in our eyes, while an auditory belief is generated by the physical processes in our ears. A desire for water is created by the lack of water in our body, while a desire for food is generated by the release of the hormone called ghrelin. It is up to scientific inquiry, not to conceptual analysis, to reveal the one-to-one correlations between beliefs and physical factors, and between desires and physical factors. What is important for my purpose here is that beliefs and desires are causally related to different physical factors, so they are independent of each other, and hence besires do not exist.

A recent finding in neuroscience also speaks in favor of my argument that a besire that p does not exist because a belief that p and a desire to act in accordance with the belief are

independent mental states. Some neuroscientists discovered that a region of a rat's brain called the rostral AGM activates when the rat chooses an action among multiple alternatives which lead to different rewards:

> Our results indicate the involvement of the rostral AGm not only in action selection but also in valuation, which is consistent with the finding that AGm activity is modulated by expected reward. (Jung Hoon Sul et al., 2011: 6)

This neurological finding points to a possible difference between neural substrates underlying our decisions about what to do and those underlying our deliberations about what to believe. It may be discovered in the future that a certain region in our brain activates when we are motivated to save a drowning child, but not when we merely believe that it is moral to save a drowning child. Also, the region may turn out to be inactive in the brains of dejected agents suffering from volitional debilities, such as *accidie* and *akrasia*, even when they claim to believe that it is moral to save a drowning child. Such neural discovery would amount to empirical evidence disconfirming the besire theory of moral judgment.

Tenenbaum, however, would not be swayed by the aforementioned neural discovery. Suppose that agents suffering from *accidie* and *akrasia* claim to believe that it is moral to save a drowning child, and yet they are not motivated to save a drowning child. On Tenenbaum's account, it is wrong to attribute moral beliefs to them because they have not fully grasped the content of the moral beliefs:

> So the motivational cognitivist is committed to seeing those motivational failures as in themselves failures to fully grasp the content of one's moral beliefs, or somehow failing to have the same kind of moral beliefs as the moral agent. (Tenenbaum, 2006: 257)

For Tenenbaum, appropriate motivation is constitutive of a moral belief. The lethargic agents do not have moral beliefs, although they claim that they do, because they are not motivated to act appropriately. Their failure to be motivated to act as if their moral beliefs are true proves, by Tenenbaum's stipulated definition of 'moral belief,' that they do not have the moral beliefs.

A puzzle arises, however. What is it, if not a moral belief, that the listless agents have when they sincerely claim to believe that it is moral to save a drowning child? Obviously, they take it to be a belief, although they are aware that they are not motivated to act in accordance with it. Tenenbaum, on the other hand, refuses to call it belief on the grounds that it does not motivate them to save a drowning child. The dejected agents would reply to Tenenbaum that what they have in their minds is a moral belief, pointing out that they have better access to, and hence know better about, their own mental states than Tenenbaum does. Furthermore, the fact that they are not motivated to perform certain actions cannot be the grounds for not attributing a moral belief to them any more than it can be the grounds for not attributing a non-moral belief to them, such as the belief that snow is white. The non-moral belief is motivationally inert. It does not follow that it is not a belief. Similarly, the moral belief that it is moral to save a drowning child is devoid of motivation. It does not follow that it is not a belief. In any event, it is not clear why motivation is constitutive of a moral belief, but not of a non-moral belief.

3. Smith's Strategy

Smith's critique of the besire theory of moral judgment can be illustrated with the above example of water in the refrigerator. Suppose that you believe that there is water in the refrigerator, and desire for the state of affairs that there is water in the refrigerator. You open

the refrigerator only to find that there is no water in it. In such a situation, you would tend to stop believing that there is water in the refrigerator, but you would tend to continue to desire for the fact that there is water in it. After all, your thirst has not yet been quenched. Thus, a belief that p tends to expire whereas a desire that p tends to persist on a perception that not p:

> ..a belief that *p* tends to go out of existence in the presence of a perception with the content that not *p*, whereas a desire that *p* tends to endure, disposing the subject to bring it about that *p*. (Smith, 1994: 115)

It would be incoherent for a mental state to tend to expire and persist at the same time. Therefore, the belief that p and the desire that p cannot constitute the besire that p.

Smith's strategy may refute the simple version of the besire theory that a besire that p is composed of a belief that p and a desire that p. But it does not confute the sophisticated version of the besire theory that a besire that p is composed of a belief that p and a desire to act in accordance with the belief that p, for the perception that not p tends to destroy not only the belief that p but also the desire to act in accordance with the belief that p. For example, the perception that there is no water in the refrigerator drives out not only the belief that there is water in the refrigerator but also the desire to act as if it is true that there is water in the refrigerator. If the belief that p is destroyed, so is the desire to act as if the belief that p is true. After all, if an agent stops believing that p, he will lose the desire to act as if the belief that p is true. Consequently, it is wrong to say that the belief tends to expire while the desire tends to endure on the perception that not p. Smith's strategy fails to explicate how the belief and the desire come apart.

How does Smith's strategy differ from my strategy? Smith invites you to imagine a situation in which the perception that not p is introduced. He claims that the perception tends to oust the belief that p, but not the desire that p. In contrast, I invite you to imagine a situation in which the old bodily condition that caused a desire to act in accordance with a belief that p is replaced with a new bodily condition. I claim that the new bodily condition extinguish the desire, but not the belief. Thus, in Smith's strategy what is newly introduced is the perception that not p, whereas in my strategy what is newly introduced is a new bodily condition. Also, in Smith's strategy the target of the newly introduced condition is the belief that p, whereas in my strategy the target of the newly introduced condition is the desire to act in accordance with the belief. In a nutshell, the two strategies produce variations in different effects by introducing variations in different causes.

4. Zangwill's Strategy

Zangwill (2008) observes that motivation may vary while the degree of belief remains constant. Consider two agents who believe that it is wrong to take a bribe. They are both rational agents in that none of them suffers from mental debilities, such as depression and listlessness. The degrees of their moral beliefs are the same in that they both believe with equal level of confidence that it is immoral to take a bribe. Suppose, however, that the first agent is more concerned with the demands of morality than the second agent, so that the first agent refuses the bribe whereas the second agent takes it. From the point of view of the besire theory, it is mysterious why the first agent rejects the bribe and the second agent accepts it. After all, they both besire that it is wrong to take a bribe, so they must be equally motivated not to take a bribe and they should both turn down the bribe.

The besirist might say that the first agent declines the bribe while the second agent receives it because the first agent is rational while the second agent is irrational. This answer,

however, is not adequate because both agents are, by hypothesis, rational. In response, the besirist might now say that the first agent rejects the bribe because he believes with a high degree of confidence that it is immoral to take the bribe, and that the second agent accepts the bribe because he believes with a low degree of confidence that it is immoral to take the bribe. This move, however, is not available to the besirist either because, by hypothesis, both agents believe with the equal degree of confidence that it is immoral to take a bribe. Zangwill seems to be right that a besirist cannot account for the variation in the motivations and the resulting difference in the behaviors of the two agents.

In contrast, Zangwill, a motivational externalist, has an adequate explanation: the first agent rejects while the second agent accepts the bribe because they have desires of different strengths not to take the bribe:

> ..there is a difference in motivation between people with moral beliefs of the same degree that *is* best explained by a difference between them in their desires. (Zangwill, 2008: 56)

Thus, the variation in the motivations stems not from the variation in the degrees of the besires but from the variation in the strengths of the moral desires. What is crucial on Zangwill's account is that the desires are extraneous to the moral judgments. Thus, the variation in the desires can be explained by motivational externalism, but not by the besire theory.

In my view, however, the besirist would retort that a moral judgment is a combination of a belief and a desire. A belief comes in degrees, and a desire comes in strengths, so a besire comes in both degrees and strengths. The aforementioned first agent resists the bribe because he besires strongly that it is wrong to take a bribe, and the second agent takes the bribe because he besires weakly that it is wrong to take a bribe. Their besires involve desires of different strengths and hence exhibit different levels of motivation. Thus, the variation in the motivations and different behaviors of the two agents originate not from the different degrees but from the different strengths of their besires. In short, Zangwill overlooked the possibility that the variation in motivations and different behaviors can be explained by the different strengths of besires.

Zangwill may ask why the second agent acts contrary to his motivation. After all, he is motivated, although weakly, to act in accordance with his besire. The besirist's answer is that the second agent's motivation is defeated by another motivation, the motivation for monetary gain. The motivation to act morally recurs in his mind when his mind attends to the moral judgment that it is wrong to take a bribe. But it is subdued by his desire for money. The latter desire arises when his mind attends to the pleasure which he could derive from the money. Thus, his failure to act in accordance with his besire can be explained not only by the externalist hypothesis that his moral judgment lacks the desire to act as if the content of the moral judgment is the case but also by the internalist hypothesis that the desire to act in accordance with his moral belief is embedded in his moral judgment and it is obstructed by another desire separate from the moral judgment. The mere fact that rational agents have different levels of motivations despite having the same degree of confidence in their moral judgments does not confirm motivational externalism and disconfirm the besire theory of moral judgment, contrary to what Zangwill thinks.

5. Teleological Strategy

Both my strategy and Smith's strategy involve what Aristotle calls 'efficient cause.' They attempt to show that the variation in efficient causes has differential impact on beliefs and

desires. In contrast, one may make use of what Aristotle calls 'final cause' to argue that beliefs and desires are distinct mental states. Specifically, beliefs aim at truths whereas desires aim at satisfactions. Belief does not pursue satisfaction, and desire does not seek a truth. Since beliefs and desires pursue mutually exclusive ends, they cannot constitute a unified mental state, a besire. This strategy to refute the besire theory might be called the teleological strategy, since it employs the notion of goal.

In my view, the teleological strategy is a nonstarter as a competitor to my strategy because it faces a conceptual problem, viz., it anthropomorphizes mental states. Ordinarily, we ascribe a goal to an agent, not to an individual mental state, and having a goal is cashed out in terms of various mental states. For example, when we say that John has the goal of becoming a professional philosopher, we mean that he decides to major in philosophy over other fields in graduate school, that he believes that it is meaningful to become a philosopher, that he desires to read philosophy books as opposed to other books, that he sinks into despair when he fails to become a philosopher, and so forth. To sum up, to have a goal is to have certain mental states. Thus, it is a category mistake to attribute a goal to a mental state.

A teleological strategist may argue that the goal of a mental state can be fleshed out in terms of an agent's behavior. When an agent has a belief, he makes efforts to gather evidence for the belief. He ceases to make such efforts once his belief turns out to be true. Analogously, when an agent has a desire, he makes efforts to satisfy it. He stops making such efforts once it is satisfied. Thus, to say that a mental state has a goal is to say that an agent makes certain efforts in relation to the mental state. This proposal sounds plausible.

But the proposal has two problems. The first problem is that we also make efforts to gather evidence for a belief when the belief is in fact false, and we no longer make such efforts when the belief turns out to be false. For example, we may believe that the Earth is at rest at the center of the universe, and make efforts to collect evidence for the belief. We would stop making such efforts once the belief turns out to be false. Therefore, we might as well say that the goal of a belief is a falsity, not a truth. The second problem with the foregoing suggestion is that it is saddled with the burden of proving that the efforts to arrive at truth and the efforts to arrive at satisfaction are mutually exclusive. If the efforts are not mutually exclusive, the suggestion does not help to drive a wedge between the belief-component and the desire-component. After all, a besirist could contend that we make efforts to arrive at truth and efforts to arrive at satisfaction simply because we have a certain besire.

A teleological strategist may now propose that to say that a belief aims at truth means that an agent as opposed to a mental state has the goal of arriving at truth when he has a belief, and that to say that a desire aims at satisfaction means that an agent has the goal of arriving at satisfaction when he has a desire. On this new account, what bears the goal is not a mental state but an agent. Thus, this new form of the teleological strategy avoids the charge of personifying a mental state. It sounds agreeable that an agent seeks different goals with a belief and a desire.

However, a problem with the new proposal is that an agent could also aim at satisfaction with his belief. In many cases, an agent forms a belief with the purpose of satisfaction. For example, many believe that God exists in order to be happy with the thought that they will go to heaven after they die. To take another example, people tend to believe that they look better and drive better than average. The epistemic reasons for such beliefs are flimsy. But such beliefs serve the practical purpose of preserving self-esteem, thereby helping people to live normal lives. These examples reinforce the position that we often form beliefs not to arrive at truths but to arrive at satisfactions.

A teleological strategist may admit that it is an incorrect description that we aim at

truths when we form beliefs. But he may now assert that we ought to achieve the goal of truths when we form beliefs, and that we ought to achieve the goal of satisfactions when we have desires. Note that this proposal is not descriptive but prescriptive, and hence it is compatible with the fact that we often form beliefs with the goal of satisfying our desires. This normative proposal sounds more convincing than the descriptive proposal.

The normative proposal, however, has two problems. The first problem is that it is hard to justify it. As pointed out earlier, in some cases, a false belief helps us to live a mentally healthy life. A true belief can be painful and disconcerting. Once you encounter the truth that you look worse and drive worse than average, you may suffer from psychological distress or a nervous breakdown. Such examples make it unconvincing that we ought to achieve the goal of truths when form beliefs. The second problem is that a teleologist will be doomed in a debate with a besirist if he employs a normative judgment to argue against the besire theory, the reason being that the besirist will take the normative judgment as a besire. Consider the following imaginary dialogue between a besirist and a teleologist:

> Besirist: To judge that we ought to save a drowning child is to besire that we save a drowning child. The besire consists of the belief that we ought to save a drowning child and the desire to act in accordance with the belief.
>
> Teleologist: Besire is an incoherent notion because we ought to pursue different goals with the belief and the desire. Specifically, we ought to aim at truth with the belief and at satisfaction with the desire.
>
> Besirist: When you say that we ought to aim at truth with the belief and satisfaction with the desire, you are besiring that we aim at truth with the belief and satisfaction with the desire.

Note that the teleologist originally used the concept of besire to analyze a moral statement, a kind of normative statement, and then he used a normative statement to analyze the concept of besire. It is circular for the teleologist to appeal to a normative judgment to argue that a besire does not exist. For this reason, it is not helpful for the teleologist to rely on a normative judgment in the course of a debate over whether a besire exists or not.

6. Conclusion

Beliefs and desires are caused by different bodily conditions. A new bodily condition that does not annihilate a belief that p can terminate a desire to act as if the content of the belief that p is true. It is incoherent for a mental state to both endure and expire at the same time. It follows that the belief and the desire cannot constitute the unified mental state, a besire that p. The besire theory of moral judgment is undercut by my strategy, but not by Smith's strategies or by Zangwill's strategy. It is an open question whether moral knowledge exists or not.[1] What this paper is intended to establish is the thesis that if moral knowledge exists at all, it involves purely cognitive states, and hence it does not motivate an agent to act morally.

References

[1] See Park (June, 2012) for a recent attempt to argue against the existence moral truths and knowledge.

Jung Hoon Sul, Suhyun Jo, Daeyeol Lee, and Min Whan Jung (2011). "Role of Rodent Secondary Motor Cortex in Value-Based Action Selection", *Nature Neuroscience*, 14, 1-7. DOI: 10.1038/nn.2881

Little, Margaret (1997). "Virtue as Knowledge: Objections from the Philosophy of Mind" *Nous* 31, no. 1: 59-79.

Park, Seungbae (June, 2012). "Against Moral Truths", *Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*.

Smith, Michael (1994). *The Moral Problem*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Tenenbaum, Sergio (2006). "Direction of Fit and Motivational Cognitivism", in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, Russ Shafer-Landau (ed.), Oxford University Press.

Zangwill, Nick (2008). "Besires and the Motivation Debate", *Theoria*. 74: 50-59.