

IV Belief/Desire Psychology, The Humean Theory of Motivation & Emotion

Belief/Desire Psychology

Belief/Desire psychology was for a long time the dominant approach in psychology and philosophy, and is still very important; it remains dominant in economics. The origins go back at least to Hume, and to the idea that a belief on its own will not move an agent. Hume: "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions." (In contrast Kant thought that one could be motivated to act morally just by the judgment that the action was morally right; indeed, on his account, if one has a desire to act morally, that corrupts the moral motivation.) But the claim has developed from the thought that beliefs are insufficient to move an agent, to the claim that desires are necessary. Hence the 'Humean Theory of Motivation': intentional actions are always caused by a complex of beliefs and desires. In psychology this was given impetus by the (broadly behavioristic) drive to operationalize mental notions: desires earn their scientific keep if they are manifested in action. In economics this becomes the idea behind revealed preference theory: an agent's preferences are revealed by their actions; a similar idea is present in most decision theory. There is something attractively hard-headed about the idea: actions speak louder than words. (Though don't words have some role? *Beowulf* talks of 'words *and* deeds' ('worda ond worca' Ch IV l. 289) as having a role.)

Another way of phrasing the theory: reasons

Normative reason: you have reason to get off the person's foot;

Motivating reason: your desire to hurt the person (and your belief that this hurts) is the reason you keep standing on their foot;

Psychological but non-intentional reason: your drunkenness is the reason that you think that standing on their foot is the best way to hurt them.

The Humean theory of motivation is then a theory about the second of these: that all motivating reasons consist of a belief/desire pair. There is a substantial philosophical thesis that all normative reasons must be grounded in desires (sometimes called internalism about reason, though that term has another use); but that is somewhat independent of our primary focus here. You could think that all normative reasons must be grounded in desire, and still think that somebody had a normative reason to do something without having a motivating reason; perhaps they hadn't realized that this act would satisfy their desire.

Causal explanations

There is a long-standing debate about whether motivating reasons are causes. Many philosophers used to deny that they were. Donald Davidson pointed out that even if we have a desire for something, and a belief that a certain action will bring that thing about, we don't get an

explanation of the corresponding action unless we think that the belief and desire caused that action (and caused it, moreover, in the right way).

Phenomenology of Desire

Is it a necessary feature of desires that they have a certain phenomenology (i.e. a certain feel) attached? Perhaps certain desires must (hunger for instance); but this is this generally so? Even with hunger, one can be distracted (in which case, does the phenomenology of hunger go away, or do we simply not notice it; compare wounds on the battlefield). When the phenomenology is *completely* lacking (or perhaps where there is an inappropriate phenomenology) we are reluctant to ascribe desires. Consider compulsion. Philip Quinn gives the example of a compulsive radio-switcher-on-er: he switches on every radio he can find, entirely without any pleasure or satisfaction. Would we say that he wanted to switch the radios on? Could it be that desires have to involve pleasure in the satisfaction; or, more plausibly, pleasure in the anticipation of satisfaction? There is now a considerable psychological literature showing that wanting and liking can come apart. See for instance Kent Berridge's work, which we shall look at in detail when we come to study addiction.

Desires as Functional Roles and Dispositions

A functional role just is a bunch of dispositions: dispositions to act in certain ways given certain beliefs. Dispositions are clearly related to counterfactuals (statements about what I would do if ...) but probably shouldn't be identified with them. The dispositions all have a distinctive, mind-world *direction of fit*.

Attitudes with Both Directions of Fit

Some philosophers want to acknowledge the possibility of states that are both belief like and desire like; 'besires' as they are sometimes called. It is sometimes thought that moral judgments are like this: moral judgments are truly judgments, and hence are a kind of belief; but at the same time they involve a disposition to change the world in a certain way (moral internalism). Some philosophers (e.g. Michael Smith) argue that such states are incoherent, since no state can simultaneously have both directions of fit. But that seems to muddle up the content of the states that are supposed to have the different directions of fit. A belief that, say, racism is wrong, doesn't bring with it a desire to change the world so that it was no longer the case that racism is wrong. Rather it brings a desire to change the world so that there is less racism in it. So the argument that is left is that admitting such states brings us no explanatory advantage, and so we shouldn't admit them; an application of *Ockham's razor*.

In general that is the main motivation for the Humean Theory understood as a substantial; though sometimes it is treated like a truism (whenever one acts we know a priori that it is correct to attribute a belief and a desires).

A First Challenge: Emotion

How to characterize emotions? Four broad approaches: beliefs; desires; tendencies to act; feelings. James-Lange theory: emotion as *feeling* of bodily change. Prinz: emotion as *perception* of bodily change. It's not that you feel afraid and as a result your heart starts to beat faster, your hairs stand on end, etc.; it's rather that you undergo these bodily reactions and as a result of perceiving them you come to feel afraid.

Arguments for: (i) bodily changes accompany emotions; (ii) bodily changes are sufficient for emotions (they induce them); (iii) bodily changes are necessary for emotions (nothing left over once we subtract the bodily changes). There is good empirical evidence for something like (i) and (ii); (iii) seems like a conceptual claim, but there is some evidence from those with decreased bodily perception.

Prinz wants to reject all of these claims though: they hold when emotions aren't malfunctioning, but emotions can misrepresent. The 'as-if' loop. In general do perceptions have to be accurate? Compare other perceptual verbs: 'saw that' etc. These do seem to be factive; indeed, they seem to entail that one knows the complement. Prinz wants a non-factive reading of 'perceive'. Would that entail a belief?

How does this challenge the belief-desire model? Claim would have to be that intentional actions can result from emotions without the need for mediating beliefs and desires.

Think of this for perception in general. Can a perception (of a snake, say) get me to intentionally act (to move away from the snake) without my needing to form a belief that there is a snake there?

Are these just unconscious beliefs? We might have the explicit belief that there is no snake there. Compare: feelings of fear on the Grand Canyon walkway; kitty-litter cake (what Tamar Gendler calls 'aliefs'). Note that these typically involve an emotional reaction.