

Smith and Bigelow on the Muggletonians

RICHARD HOLTON

In (Holton 1996) I argued that the account of value that Michael Smith has offered was vulnerable to a counter-example in the person of the Muggletonians. Smith argued, roughly, that what one values is what one would desire if one were fully rational. I objected that the Muggletonians held the path of Reason to be the path to evil. According to them, a fully rational person would have their desires so corrupted that they would become, quite literally, Satan. Thus they believed that their fully rational selves would have blasphemed against God; but blaspheming against God was not what they valued

Smith and Bigelow have responded to my alleged counter-example (Bigelow and Smith 1997). They object that my understanding of Smith's position is itself over rationalistic. We shouldn't think of the fully rational person as someone who follows the path of Reason wherever it might lead. Rather we should think that the fully rational person is someone who does what they have *reason* to do. The Muggletonians thought that following the path of Reason would lead them to do things that they have no reason to do; so they believed it would not be rational, in the sense relevant to Smith's analysis, to follow that path. Hence they provide no counterexample to the analysis.

Now talk of 'what we have reason to do' is vague. In ordinary unphilosophical English someone might well say that they believe they have a reason to perform a certain action *because* they value it. But if we then embrace both

- (i) A values F = A believes she has a reason to F; and
- (ii) A believes she has a reason to F because she values F

we will have argued ourselves into a very tight circle indeed.¹ If we are to get any purchase on the matter we need to explain what is to have a reason to perform an action, where this isn't seen as something that can *follow* from valuing that action. Smith and Bigelow don't shirk this need. They do give a gloss on what it is to have a reason, and hence on what it is to be fully rational in the sense relevant to their account; the gloss is in terms of having a *fully justified set of desires*. As I see it then, the crux of their response is this:

¹At best; if we think that the 'because' in (ii) is anti-symmetric, then this pair is not simply circular but inconsistent.

- (P1) a fully rational person is someone who has a systematically justifiable set of desires, that is, one rendered maximally coherent and unified after exposure to all of the relevant facts;
- (P2) the Muggletonians believed that God had a systematically justifiable set of desires in just this sense;
- (C) the Muggletonians believed that they would be fully rational if they had desires just like God's; or, if it is impossible to be in that state, to approximate it in the closest possible way by following God's commands.

As a preliminary, we might wonder whether P2 is true. I think it is plausible that the Muggletonians had no beliefs about whether God had a systematically justifiable set of beliefs; it is plausible that they thought that the question of whether or not He did is exactly the sort of question that we should not ask. (Indeed, at one point Smith and Bigelow seem to agree that this is possible; this seems to be what they have in mind when they speak of 'the tiny corner of logical space which might be occupied by some careful Muggletonians'). But I shan't contest that point here; let me concede P2. Instead the worry I want to raise is this: the argument works just as well if we substitute Satan's name for God's. The Muggletonians believed that Satan's desires (that is, the set of desires of a human agent who followed the path of reason wherever it takes him) would also be systematically justifiable. Satan would take account of all the relevant facts, and his desires would be maximally coherent and unified. But that means that, given Smith's account, the Muggletonians valued following Satan. And that, it seems to me, is palpably false.

This point is somewhat obscured in Smith and Bigelow's paper, because they speak as though the Muggletonians thought that the power of human reason was deficient. (They speak of the Muggletonians' distrust of 'what *seems to their poor intellects* to be good logical reasoning' and of their resolve to ignore 'the *superficially persuasive* arguments of others' (my italics).) But that is to miss the point. The Muggletonians did not think that the path of reason would lead them to falsehood. As I said in my original paper, they feared the fruits of the tree of *knowledge*, not the fruits the tree of *false belief*. Their contention was that the path of reason would corrupt their desires. They thought that both God and Satan have sets of desires that are systematically justifiable in Smith and Bigelow's sense; it is just that God's desires are good, whereas Satan's are evil.

This takes us into a familiar area. It has been a theme in much of Bernard Williams' work that reason alone will not take us to virtue. The Muggletonians shared this belief. We do not need to ask whether it is true; it is enough that they believed it. They thought that they should follow God's commands, not because he had the unique systematically justifiable set of beliefs, but because he was

uniquely good; and that they held to be self-evident. Equally, they thought the reason that one should not follow Satan was not because he was irrational but because he was evil. What was extraordinary about their position was that they thought that the path of Reason would lead them to evil. But we do not need to invoke that feature here. It is enough that they did not think that being fully rational in Smith and Bigelow's sense would lead them uniquely to the good.

It is important to remind ourselves at this point of the comments made at the outset. Of course there is a sense of 'reason' in which the Muggletonians thought that they had a reason to follow God rather than Satan. God's path was the path of virtue; they thought it self evident that that was the path they ought to follow. But in that sense they thought that they had a reason to follow God because His was the valuable path. So invoking that sense of 'reason' gives us no explanatory mileage. In the sense of 'reason' that does give us some explanatory mileage, the sense that is tied to full justification as glossed by Smith and Bigelow, they thought that there was no reason to follow God rather than Satan.

Now Smith thinks that it is a conceptual truth that if anything is valuable, rational agents will converge on it; let us call this 'the conceptual convergence thesis', to distinguish it from the empirical claim that agents will in fact converge. The Smith and Bigelow reply to me was supposed to be independent of the conceptual convergence thesis. But perhaps it will be thought that the right reply to my argument here is to withdraw the claim of independence. Could it be that if the Muggletonians thought that both God and Satan were equally rational, then they didn't really value anything, and so present no counter-example to the account of value? Perhaps this follows from the conceptual convergence thesis: it requires us to understand it in such a way that people cannot have values without fully understanding what values are like. But if do we understand the thesis in this way, then to my mind cases like that of the Muggletonians show just how implausible it is.²

Bigelow, J. and M. Smith (1997). "How Not to be Muddled by a Meddlesome Muggletonian." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 75.

Holton, R. (1996). "Reason, Value and the Muggletonians." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74: 484-7.

² Thanks to Michael Smith and John Bigelow for comments, and for many hours of fruitful discussion.