IV VALUING

For Smith the crucial link between moral judgements and motivation comes from the notion of valuing. Smith thinks that moral judgements are values (in the sense that to make a moral judgement is to find a certain action valuable), although he doesn’t explicitly address this issue until the beginning of Chapter 6 (pp. 183‒4). Smith holds that there is a *loose* connection between valuing and desiring. There is some connection, in that someone who values a certain action will typically be motivated to perform it. But the connection is not watertight, in that it is possible, indeed common, to value an action and yet not perform it; or conversely, to perform an action without valuing it. A example standardly discussed here (following Frankfurt) is the heroin addict. The unwilling addict will desire to take heroin without valuing it; he will despise himself for the very desires that he has. Smith explains valuing in terms of normative reasons: to value an action is to think that there is normative reason to perform it. So the interesting question is to understand what is happening when someone (i) thinks that they have a normative reason to perform a certain action, and yet (ii) they do not desire to perform it, and hence have no motivating reason. (Note this isn’t just the issue of how normative and motivating reasons can come apart; that can happen if you make a mistake about what you have normative reason to do, a possibility that even Hume could accept. We are faced rather with the question of how your motivating reasons can come apart from what you believe to be your normative reasons.) Understanding this requires giving an account of valuing. Smith considers, and rejects, several accounts before giving his own. I am going to discuss just one of the options that he discusses: that proposed by Frankfurt and Lewis

VALUING AS SECOND ORDER DESIRING

We have desires; we also desires about those desires. Thus: I might want to go to the cinema; but might wish that I didn’t want to go to the cinema, because I know I have an essay to write. Call simple desires, that make no reference to other desires, *first-order desires*. Call a desires about first-order desires, *second-order desires*. The Frankfurt-Lewis proposal is that values are second-order desires. Consider the heroin addict. he desires heroin; but he doesn’t value it. That is because, say Frankfurt and Lewis, he doesn’t desire to have that desire. (Some of you might remember from first year that Frankfurt tries to understand free will in terms of the ability to get one’s first-order desires into line with one’s second-order desires.) The account seems to explain a lot. It explains why we do not always act on our values, since sometimes we desire to have desires that we don’t have. But it also explains why we have a tendency to desire what we value: insofar as our second-order desires are strong, we will bring our first-order desires onto line with them.

So why does Smith reject the account? He claims that it is arbitrary; why identify values with second-order desires? Why not third- or fourth-order? This is a rather odd response. Insofar as Lewis and Frankfurt are trying to give an *analysis* of our ordinary concept, then talk of arbitrariness seems out of place. Either the account is a good one or it isn’t. (Imagine someone complaining about an analysis of bachelor as never married male of marriageable age on the grounds that it was arbitrary: ‘why male’? they ask; what’s special about that? The answer is that there is nothing special about that; that’s just what our concept of bachelor is.) Perhaps then the point is that the analysis is arbitrary in a way that the concept of value isn’t. But then it seems that there is a natural way to fix it up: values are the highest order desires that we have, or more precisely: a desire is a value just in case there is no higher order desire concerning that desire (perhaps they have to be at least second order.)

But there is another problem which is perhaps in the back of Smith’s mind. We seem to have second-order desires that we don’t think are values. Jeanette Kennett mentions the idea of wanting to want strawberries (one happens not to like them; but wishes that one did because it would be so much more sociable). Such a desire doesn’t seem to have any claim to being a value.
SMITH’S ACCOUNT: VALUING AS BELIEVING

How else might we understand valuing? One possibility is to understand it as a type of believing. People like Lewis rejected that idea because they thought that there could be no essential connection between one’s beliefs and one’s motivation; that is, he thought it would involve giving up internalism. But Smith argues as follows: suppose you think that a certain outcome is valuable. Perhaps you don’t in fact desire to perform it now. But insofar as you don’t, you think that there is some rational failing in you. You think that if only you were fully rational, you would desire to perform it. But then that is a belief: a belief about what you would desire to do if fully rational. And then if you were indeed fully rational, you would desire to do it. So that gives us a form of internalism; indeed, it gives us the practicality requirement, here formulated as connecting values and desires: if you value something you will be motivated to do it (i.e. desire it) insofar as you are fully rational. By taking the content of the belief as concerning your own desires if fully rational, Smith has connected up valuing (understood as a kind of believing) with desiring. Put more precisely, Smith’s account of value is as follows:

An individual X values her potential action $\phi$ iff X believes that were she fully rational, she would desire that she perform $\phi$ if she were situated as she actually is.

Why the reference to the actual situation of the agent? It is needed to deal with cases in which agents know that they have a tendency to irrationality. Ulysses valued having himself tied to the mast, since he valued hearing the Sirens sing, and knew that unless he were tied to the mast he would be unable to resist their call. Yet he also knew that were he fully rational, he would be able to resist their call, and so would have no desire to be tied to the mast. Thus if the account is to work for such a case, what Ulysses valued must be identified with what he believed his rational self would desire for his actual irrational self. In short, the idea is that the rational self gives advice, rather than providing a model to be emulated.

What is meant by a fully rational agent? Following Bernard Williams, Smith tells us that a fully rational agent is one who (i) has no false beliefs; (ii) has all relevant true beliefs; and (iii) deliberates correctly, where this includes making all the normal inferences, exercising one’s imagination, and bringing all of one’s beliefs and desires into a coherent set. This is perhaps an unusual notion of rationality—we normally think that we can rationally arrive at false beliefs—but can just accept that the term is meant stipulatively; nothing hangs on this.

AN APPARENT COUNTER-EXAMPLE: THE MUGGLETIONIANS

The Muggletonians were a protestant sect in mid-seventeenth century England. They held that each person contained a mixture of two seeds in various proportions. One seed, the seed of faith, came from God; those in whom it predominated were destined for salvation. The other seed, that of reason, had entered Eve at the time of the fall. As a result reason was held to be ‘the right devil’; those in whom the seed of reason predominated were damned.

Isn’t it clear that the Muggletonians valued faith and rejected the unconstrained use of reason? What would they have made of the desires that they would have had were they fully rational? They would surely have thought them to be the desires of the devil. So we have an apparent counter-example to Smith’s analysis. The Muggletonians believed that their fully rational selves—rational in just Smith’s sense—would have blasphemed against God; and that their rational selves would have wanted their actual selves to do likewise. But blaspheming against God was not what they valued.

READINGS

Smith, The Moral Problem, Chapter 5
Holton, ‘Smith, Value and the Muggletonians’ Australasian Journal of Philosophy 74, pp. 484–7 I mention this just in case anyone wants to see the Muggletonian objection developed at greater length. Since I have copyright for this, I’ll put a version on the web page. There is a lengthy reply from Smith and Bigelow in the ensuing volume of the journal.