V. Smith’s Solution

Finally, then, Smith’s solution to the Moral Problem. Moral judgements are held to be a subset of values, i.e. beliefs about what we would desire if fully rational. Then, Smith thinks, we can accept objectivity, internalism, and the Humean Theory of Motivation:

Objectivity, since moral judgements really are judgements: they are beliefs. But note that they are not beliefs about a reality totally independent of us: they are beliefs about which desires we would have. So in some sense they are still just beliefs about us. This makes the epistemology much more straightforward that on many objectivist accounts of morality. But at the same time it might seem that it comes too close to subjectivism. As we saw in the second lecture, subjectivism escapes the moral problem; it is just not a plausible account of moral judgements. The way that Smith’s account escapes the moral problem is rather similar to subjectivism.

Internalism, since Smith thinks that if we believe we would desire something if rational, then, in so far as we are rational, we will desire it. Is this true?

The Humean Theory of Motivation, since his rejection of Hume’s position comes only with his account of normative reasons. He holds that we still need a desire to motivate us.

Are Normative Reasons Relative or Non-Relative on Smith’s Conception?

Smith argues that our concept of a normative reason requires a non-relative conception: that all agents have the same normative reasons in the same circumstances. Moreover he thinks that his analysis delivers this result: that two rational people in the same circumstances would have the same desires. But is that right? Why is Smith so confident of it? (There is a fallacy in Smith’s argument at one point: he says that either our moral concepts presuppose converge, or they presuppose that we will not converge. But they might presuppose neither of those things. In short, Smith presents us with a false dichotomy. Does this hurt his argument?)

In saying this Smith distinguishes the conceptual question of what our concept requires, from the substantial question of whether there is something that meets that concept. When it comes to the substantial question he is fairly confident that we will indeed converge. He thinks that the successful criminal is probably simply wrong in thinking that he would desire to go on robbing if he were fully rational. Is this plausible? Would the same apply to Satan? Smith’s account seems to presuppose the answer to the conceptual point. He assumes that the criminal will think that everyone will come to the same conclusion about what he has reason to do. This is a case of Smith substituting what he takes to be analytic truths in the beliefs of agents.

Does It Follow That a Rational Agent Desires What She Believes She Would Desire If Fully Rational?

Smith adopts the principle

\[ C_2 \text{ If an agent believes that she has a normative reason to } \phi \text{ (i.e. believes that she would desire to } \phi \text{ if fully rational), then she rationally should desire to } \phi. \]

He thinks that this is parallel to:

\[ C_3 \text{ If an agent believes that she has most reason to believe that } p \text{ (i.e. believes that she would believe } p \text{ if fully rational), then she rationally should believe that } p. \]

Let’s look at this latter case first. Suppose someone were hopelessly wrong about what they would believe if fully rational. Would they be more rational if they came to believe it? Mightn’t we think that they would be more rational to stick with the beliefs they have? For instance: suppose someone became convinced of some wacky metaphysical belief—that all physical objects are really ideas. She finds that she just cannot in fact believe, of each physical object, that it is made of ideas. But she takes this to be an irrational failing in herself: she thinks that if she were only fully rational she would believe it. But would she indeed be more rational (rather than merely more consistent) if she believed this crazy thing? And mightn’t we want to say the same about C2?