

Virtue and Rationality

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In chapter 3 of *the Moral Problem* Michael Smith argues for the following claim:

Internalism: If an agent judges that it is right to x, then either the agent is motivated to x or he is practically irrational.

He argues that those who deny internalism, externalists, cannot adequately explain why virtuous people are reliably motivated to do what they judge to be right. Specifically, externalists cannot explain why a virtuous agent's motivations reliably change in light of changes in his judgments about what is right. Smith claims that in order to explain this reliable change in motivation, the externalist will be forced to portray the virtuous agent as alienated from the right-making features of acts. This is because in order to explain the reliable change in motivation that ensues in light of a change in moral judgment, the externalist will be forced to claim that the virtuous agent has a *de dicto* desire to do what is right, which combined with his belief that it is right to x, will lead him to care about x in a derivative, indirect way. For example, according to the externalist, if a virtuous agent becomes convinced that it is right to be honest, his *de dicto* desire to do what is right will combine with this judgment to cause him to care about honesty. His valuing of honesty thus derives from his distinct *de dicto* desire to do what is right. But, Smith argues, virtuous agents care directly and non-derivatively about right-making features. Virtuous

agents who come to believe that it is right to be honest, for example, thereby come to care about honesty in a non-derivative way. Thus, in order to explain why the virtuous agent reliably does what he judges to be right the externalist is forced to portray the virtuous agent as having the wrong kind of concern for the right-making features of acts.

For the sake of argument, grant Smith his claim that if the virtuous agent is motivated by a *de dicto* desire to do what is right, then he will be alienated from the right-making features of actions. I will attempt to show that by making use of materials that Smith himself has provided in later chapters of *The Moral Problem*, an externalist can explain why the virtuous agent is reliably motivated to do what he judges to be right without portraying the virtuous agent as having a *de dicto* desire to do what is right.

In chapter 6, Smith argues that to believe that it would be right for one to x involves believing that one has a normative reason to x. In chapter 5, he argues that to believe that one has a normative reason to x is to believe that one would want one to x were one fully rational. Smith further claims that one is fully rational only if one is fully informed and one's desires are unified and coherent. I will assume that these constitute all the conditions of full rationality, although Smith certainly doesn't commit himself to this list being complete. So, according to Smith, to believe that it would be right for one to x involves believing that one would want one to x were one fully informed and were one's desires unified and coherent. I'll call this the belief that the desire to x is ideal from now on.

Smith goes on to claim that if one believes that one has a normative reason to x but one does not desire to x, one is practically irrational. One is in a situation in which one believes that one would intrinsically desire to x were one fully rational, and yet one does not intrinsically desire to x. Smith claims that this sort of internal dissonance constitutes a type of irrationality. Therefore, if an agent does not suffer from irrationality, once he comes to believe that he has a normative reason to x, if he doesn't already intrinsically desire to x, this belief will itself, without the aid of any further mental state such as a desire to do what one has normative reason to do, lead him to come to intrinsically desire to x. If a moral belief is itself a belief about one's normative reasons, it follows that if one does not suffer from practical irrationality, one's moral beliefs will directly lead one to intrinsically desire to do what one judges to be right.

The crucial point to notice is that on Smith's account there is a direct connection between the virtuous agent's belief that the desire to x is ideal and his desire to x. It is because the virtuous agent has a reliable disposition to have those desires that he believes are ideal that the virtuous agent is reliably motivated to do what he judges to be right.

But why can't the externalist also posit such an unmediated connection between a virtuous agent's moral beliefs and the relevant desires? That is, why can't the externalist accept the analysis of rightness that Smith gives, which is that to believe that it would be right for one to x involves believing that desiring x is ideal, and then claim that a virtuous agent is someone who has a reliable disposition to intrinsically desire just those things that he believes it is ideal to desire?

I take it that Smith would claim that were the externalist to give this explanation of a virtuous agent's motivations, he would cease to be an externalist, since the connection between the belief that desiring x is ideal and the desire to x that the externalist seeks to exploit is a rational one. Were the externalist to posit such a connection to explain the virtuous agent's motivations, he would be committed to the claim that an agent who is not motivated to do what he believes he would desire to do were he fully informed and had unified and coherent desires is irrational. But this means that the externalist is committed to internalism, the claim that either one is motivated to do what one judges to be right—like the virtuous agent— or one suffers from practical irrationality.

Smith thus would argue that the externalist cannot exploit his account of the disposition that reliably connects the virtuous agent's moral beliefs and motives. Whether the externalist can exploit Smith's account thus depends upon whether such a connection is a rational one. Smith thinks that it is, but surely this is not compulsory.

Before I explain the grounds upon which an externalist might deny Smith's conception of practical rationality, I want to point out that if Smith were to grant that whether the externalist can adequately explain the motivations of the virtuous agent depends upon whether his conception of practical rationality is correct, he would have to concede that his argument against externalism in chapter 3 is a failure. Recall that Smith claims to have successfully argued against externalism by the end of chapter 3, at which point he has yet to introduce or defend his conception of practical rationality. At a minimum, then,

I hope that I have shown that he is wrong about this; his argument against externalism depends upon his conception of practical rationality; thus his argument in chapter 3 does not by itself defeat externalism.

Smith might concede this point though. After all, this concession would only postpone the inevitable defeat of externalism if Smith's conception of practical rationality is correct. And if the only reason that the externalist can give for rejecting Smith's conception of practical rationality is that doing so allows him to explain the motivations of the virtuous agent, this strikes me as tantamount to an admission of defeat. In order to gain the right to exploit elements of Smith's own account of virtuous motivation, the externalist needs to explain why we should detach those elements from Smith's claims about practical rationality. This means that the externalist needs to provide an independent conception of practical rationality that entails that the connection between the belief that desiring to x is ideal and one's desire to x is not a rational one.

Here is a conception of rationality that has just such an implication. To give a reason for something is to show that it is correct. Thus, only things that are subject to a standard of correctness are capable of being rational or irrational. For example, the categories of inanimate objects, such as rocks, do not have standards of correctness, and thus cannot be assessed as rational or irrational. In fact, it seems that only states or activities can be assessed for correctness. But not all states and activities are subject to a standard of correctness. Beliefs are states of mind that are capable of being rational or irrational because they are capable of being correct or incorrect in virtue of being true or false. Norms of rational belief are rules the following of which tends to lead to correct beliefs.

Incoherence and inconsistency are rational vices in belief because inconsistency and incoherence in one's beliefs are indications that some of one's beliefs are incorrect. But desires do not have a standard of correctness. They are incapable of being true or false, nor is there any other standard of correctness that applies to desires as such. Therefore desires are incapable of assessment in terms of rationality.

While we might speak loosely of desires as being coherent or consistent, these are not the same features that beliefs are capable of instantiating. For example, if an inconsistent set of beliefs is a set of beliefs that cannot all be true, then it doesn't make sense to speak of inconsistency in desire. Furthermore, that one's desires are (quasi-) coherent is not a rational virtue, since (quasi-) coherence goes no way towards indicating that one's desires are correct.

Thus, according to this conception of rationality, while we might admire those people whose desires are (quasi-) coherent and (quasi-) unified, and admire those people whose desires match their beliefs about which desires are ideal (and who are disposed to have those desires that they believe are ideal), this admiration is not correctly expressed in the judgment that such people are rational. We can assess our beliefs about which desires are ideal as rational or irrational (e.g. which desires we would have under conditions), since these beliefs are capable of being correct or incorrect, but we cannot assess either our desires themselves or the connection between our beliefs and desires in terms of rationality.

I have not attempted to defend this conception of rationality here; rather, I have tried to make clear that there is a conception of rationality that supports the externalist denial of Smith's claim that it is rational to have those desires that one believes one would have if one's desires were ideal. The externalist, armed with this conception of rationality, is now free to exploit the disposition to have those desires that one believes are ideal in his explanation of why a virtuous agent is reliably motivated to do what he judges to be right. While such a disposition is not a disposition constitutive of rationality, it is a disposition constitutive of virtue. Smith hasn't considered or argued against the externalist's conception of rationality. Until he does he will not have shown that the externalist cannot adequately explain the motivational structure of morally virtuous agents.