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Mind, New Series, Vol. 96, No. 384. (Oct., 1987), pp. 530-533.

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Humeans, Anti-Humeans, and Motivation

PHILIP PETTIT

In 'The Humean Theory of Motivation' Michael Smith attempts two tasks: he offers an account of the debate about motivation between Humeans and anti-Humeans and he provides arguments that are designed to show that the Humeans win.¹ While the paper is of great virtue in clarifying the debate, I believe that it falls short of both its goals. It does not highlight the really central issue between Humeans and anti-Humeans and it does not provide arguments which would settle that issue in favour of the Humean side.

Smith makes three points in setting up the debate between Humeans and anti-Humeans.

1. The primary issue has to do with whether the constituent elements of a motivating reason always include a desire.

2. A motivating reason to ϕ is one such that in virtue of having a reason of that kind an agent is not only justified to some extent in ϕ -ing: he 'is in a state that is potentially explanatory of his ϕ -ing' (p. 38). A motivating reason contrasts with a merely normative reason to ϕ : that is, a reason the having of which may justify ϕ -ing but can hardly serve, because of the agent's acknowledged lack of awareness or sensitivity, to explain it.

3. Desires, like beliefs, are dispositions to enact or undergo certain changes in appropriate circumstances. Thus the desire that p certainly involves the disposition to bring it about that p and may or may not involve the disposition to have certain feelings (p. 53). The desire that p differs from the belief that p by being generally insensitive to the perception that not-p: 'a belief that p is a state that tends to go [out] of existence in the presence of a perception that not p, whereas a desire that p is a state that tends to endure, disposing the subject in that state to bring it about that p' (p. 54).

I believe that these points define a more or less unambiguous debate. The only extra qualification that needs to be entered is probably this. The fact that a desire is held to go into the constitution of a motivating reason does not mean that the existence of the desire is one of the considerations which the agent explicitly takes into account. It may only mean that he would not take account of certain of those considerations unless he was moved by corresponding desires.² Unless this point is made, it will seem immediately obvious that desires are unnecessary for motivation.

Once the debate is defined in this way then I agree with Michael Smith that a very simple argument establishes the necessity of desires. The argument, with some paraphrase and schematic illustration, is that having a motivating reason to ϕ is having a goal: say, the goal that p; that having such a goal is being disposed to bring

¹ *Mind*, 1987, pp. 36-61.

² See my 'Universalizability without Utilitarianism', *Mind*, 1987, on the difference between reason-supposed and reason-supplying considerations. In particular, see n. 9, p. 79.

it about that *p*, where that disposition is naturally capable of surviving the perception that not *p*; and that being so disposed is desiring that *p* (p. 55).

But although I think that victory in this debate goes the Humean way, I do not believe that the debate focuses on the core issue between the two sides. What divides Humeans and anti-Humeans, by all accounts, is a difference of view about the potency of reason in motivating behaviour. The issue between them is not whether motivating reasons always involve desires but whether they always involve the presence of non-cognitive states, states which reason on its own is incapable of producing. If the thesis about desires is relevant to that issue, that is only because it is assumed that desires are non-cognitive states of this kind.

This cannot be assumed, however, since there are two extant ways of denying it. The first, a minority preference, is to hold that desires or, more precisely degrees of desire, are an agent's estimates of objective goodness or utility.³ This line is not generally favoured, because it runs against the common assumption that it is only beliefs which are capable of having cognitive status. That assumption probably comes of the thought that if propositional attitudes are cognitive, that must mean that they are discursive: that they lend themselves to the argumentative resolution of differences. Beliefs are more obviously amenable to discursive process than desires and so it is natural to think that only beliefs can have cognitive status.⁴

I intend to go along with this assumption and so I come to the second way in which desires may be vested with cognitive status. Suppose that some of the desires which figure in motivating reasons are such that their presence is entailed by the presence of certain beliefs.⁵ In particular, suppose that an agent's desire that *p* is entailed in this way by a belief—a desiderative belief, we might call it—that it is good or appropriate or useful that *p*. We must regard the desire in that case as inheriting the cognitive or discursive status of the desiderative belief. The desire that *p* may be insensitive to the perception that not *p* but it will be sensitive to the perception that it is not good or not appropriate or not useful that *p*. It will be a state, or so it appears, which reason alone is capable of producing in the agent.

In order for the Humean to establish his point of view he needs to be able to resist at least the possibility that desires can inherit cognitive status in this way. Smith implicitly recognizes the fact when he poses an objection which maintains precisely that desires enjoy such an inheritance (pp. 56–8, 60–1). But what he says in response to the objection does not display an appreciation of the depth of the challenge which the Humean faces.⁶

³ See D. H. Mellor 'Objective Decision-Making', *Social Theory and Practice*, 1983.

⁴ This assumption is not so natural if beliefs are thought of as subjective probabilities and that is probably why Mellor rejects it.

⁵ In such a case it would seem to be natural to say that the desires are constituted by the beliefs, that the beliefs are themselves desires. Smith would seem to have reason for going along with this, for he says at one point that desires are states that 'ground' the dispositions by which they are distinguished (p. 52). But elsewhere he takes a different line, requiring that desires are insensitive to all perceptions: as he puts it, 'desires and pro-attitudes have only one direction of fit' (p. 56).

⁶ Sometimes it seems that Smith fails to see how significant the possibility of inheritance is. He suggests that the possibility is not contrary to the Humean spirit when he considers the claim that clear moral perception, or the perception of the virtuous agent, may be sufficient to provide a motivating reason (pp. 60–1). He quotes the fact that an agent has such a perception 'only if he has certain desires' and he says that this observation is enough to establish the Humean point of view: 'though a subject who has such a clear perception will be disposed to act in certain ways, the state that grounds this disposition

Smith argues that the Humean need not be concerned about the objection, because he is in a position to accommodate any evidence which may be produced in support of it. His idea is that for any example of a desiderative belief that the anti-Humean mentions—say, the belief that it is *prima facie* desirable that p —the Humean can construe it as a belief on the agent's part about his own desires: say, as the belief that he desires that p , 'since "is *prima facie* desirable" = "is desired by me"' (p. 57). He goes on: 'We can thus explain why one who believes that ϕ -ing is *prima facie* desirable is generally disposed to ϕ by noting that the normal condition for having such a belief is desiring to ϕ , and desiring to ϕ is, *inter alia*, a disposition to ϕ ' (p. 57). Although the line is illustrated with a desiderative belief involving *prima facie* desirability, he thinks that it can be extended to cover even desiderative beliefs of a moral kind (p. 58).

But it is not enough for Smith to show that this accommodation is possible. What he has to demonstrate is, not that it is an available account, but that it is the best account on offer: in particular, that it is a better account of desiderative beliefs than that which the anti-Humean provides.

Smith may think he has ground for ignoring this demonstrative task. He casts the Humean theory as 'an "austere" psychological theory' and he may think that its austerity makes it preferable to any anti-Humean story, just so long as it can account, however awkwardly, for the data cited by the anti-Humean (pp. 56–7). This thought ought not to move him, however, for he acknowledges elsewhere that the enterprise about which Humean and anti-Humean quarrel is one of 'formulating a philosophical conception of folk psychological states' (p. 48); it is not one of constructing a psychological theory from scratch but of analysing the theory with which we all already operate.

The debate between Humeans and anti-Humeans remains open. Smith has made a considerable advance in enabling us to focus the issue between them but he has not established that the issue ought to be resolved in the Humeans' favour. In conclusion, I would like to identify three ways in which a Humean might reasonably seek to press his case. They turn around three claims which would individually undermine the possibility of desiderative beliefs to which the anti-Humean clings.

The first claim that the Humean might try to defend is a psychological one: the proposition that there are no such states as desiderative beliefs.⁷ The argument, familiar from subjective theories of decision, will be that the only evidence for the existence of desiderative beliefs is the occurrence of desiderative assertions and that the occurrence of such assertions is better explained as the expression of desires.

The second claim that the Humean might seek to support is a metaphysical one: the thesis that even if there are belief-like states of a desiderative kind, there are no desiderative facts, and therefore no desiderative perceptions, for them to be sensitive to. That will mean that contrary to appearances the desiderative beliefs, and the desires associated with them, will not be cognitive or discursive.

Finally, the Humean might try to defend a common analytical thesis to the effect that whatever of the psychological and metaphysical matters involved, the only sort will be a desire' (p. 60). In making these remarks, however, he may only be meaning to recall the response described in the text.

⁷ It will be sufficient for the Humean to defend this only if he makes the assumption, which we noted earlier, that desires are not directly cognitive states.

of belief which could get close to entailing the presence of desires is a belief which bears on the existence of precisely those appetitive states. The accommodation of desiderative beliefs for which Smith looks would be supported on the grounds of being the only satisfactory account available.

We may look forward, I believe, to a continuing debate between Humeans and anti-Humeans. There will be plenty of material for the two sides to contest, for there is no shortage of arguments for and against the three propositions mentioned. Let battle be rejoined.

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