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## Which Passions Rule?

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Non-cognitivists hold that when we make claims about what it is desirable or undesirable to do (or good or bad, or right or wrong, or sensible or stupid—from here-on I will omit these) we thereby express desires and aversions, in some suitably broad sense, rather than beliefs. But which desires and aversions? This question is far more difficult for non-cognitivists to answer than they typically admit.

On the one hand, non-cognitivists must agree that that not just any old desire or aversion is such that, when we express it, we make a normative claim. For example, they must agree that an unwilling addict could rightly claim that it is in no respect desirable for him to take the drugs he takes, notwithstanding the fact that he desires to take them. Whatever form of words he uses to express his addictive desires, then, that form of words must not be interpreted as the making of a normative claim.

On the other hand, however, non-cognitivists must also insist that whenever someone makes a normative claim there are desires or aversions which they express. Thus, for example, the non-cognitivist must suppose that the unwilling addict who claims that it is undesirable to take drugs does indeed have aversions that he thereby expresses. But what aversions, and what special feature do they possess that makes them especially suitable for expression in a normative claim? How do they differ from mere desires and aversions that aren't suitable for such expression?

Simon Blackburn attempts to answer these questions in the early part of his wonderful new book *Ruling Passions* (Blackburn 1998). Unsurprisingly, despite my admiration for his book, I think he fails to identify a special feature of desires and aversions that makes them especially suitable for expression in normative claims. For all that he says the desires and aversions he picks out are much like the addict's desire to take drugs. There are revisions Blackburn could make which would make his account more plausible. However, if he were to make these revisions, then he might just as well abandon his non-cognitivism in favor of a version of non-cognitivism's close cognitivist cousin: subjectivism.

It is important to note from the outset the difficulty involved in supposing that normative claims express desires or aversions, rather than beliefs. I assume it can be agreed on all sides that the psychological state we express when we make a normative claim has many of the functional features of belief. I will mention some of these presently. The difficulty, to anticipate, is to conceive of desires or aversions that have exactly these features, given that the main difference between beliefs, on the one hand, and desires and aversions, on the other, is that they differ in just these functional respects.

The function of a belief is to represent things as being a certain way. Beliefs manage to do this, in part, by coming prepackaged with links to other beliefs and perceptions that serve as sources of epistemic support. In the absence of these sources of epistemic support it is the role of beliefs simply to disappear. To believe something at all is thus to believe a whole host of things which, together, are supposed to provide some sort of justification for what is believed. Desires, by contrast, are the exact opposite of beliefs in this respect. The function of a desire is not to represent things as being a certain way, but rather (very roughly) to represent things as being the way they are to be. Desires thus do not come prepackaged with links to other desires which provide them with some analogue of epistemic support. Instead they come prepackaged with links to beliefs about means with which they can combine to produce action, and in the absence of which they remain (more or less) dormant.

Now consider the psychological states that we express when we make normative claims. On the face of it these psychological states would seem to be functionally like both desires and beliefs (Smith 1994, Ch.1). They are like desires in that those who are in the psychological state that they would express in the claim that (say) it is desirable to act in a certain way are thereby disposed to so to act, at least absent practical irrationality. This function has traditionally provided non-cognitivists with their main reason for being non-cognitivists (Hare 1952, p. 1). (I will have something to say about how we might better explain this function towards the end.) But these psychological states are also functionally like beliefs in that they come prepackaged with links to other psychological states that provide them with (some analogue of) epistemic support. This function provides cognitivists with their main reason for being cognitivists (Brink 1989, pp. 6-7).

Thus, for example, to accept the desirability of keeping promises is to be disposed to accept a whole host of claims which, as it seems to us, together provide this claim with some sort of justification, and in the absence of which acceptance of the desirability of keeping promises would simply disappear. Indeed, this is the reason that the procedure of reflective equilibrium Rawls describes sounds so platitudinous (Rawls 1951). For the reflective equilibrium procedure simply takes to the limit the commonplace procedure

whereby we test the various particular normative claims we accept against the host of other normative (and non-normative) claims we thereby accept and from which the various particular normative claims we accept gain their (analogue of) epistemic support.

It should now be plain why there is a special difficulty involved in finding desires or aversions that share the functional features of the psychological states that we express when we make normative claims. The difference between beliefs and desires and aversions is, *inter alia*, that desires and aversions do not come prepackaged with links to other desires and aversions which provide them with some analogue of epistemic support. This is why the unwilling addict can rightly claim that it is in no respect desirable for him to take drugs, notwithstanding the fact that he desires to take them. The unwilling addict's desire for drugs exists entirely independently of any links to desires or aversions that provide it with some analogue of epistemic support. It is simply a brute drive caused in him by his consumption of drugs. When a non-cognitivist tries to spell out the nature of the special desires and aversions that we express when we make normative claims, then, he must take care to stipulate the presence of such links.

Notwithstanding the fact that desires and aversions do not come prepackaged with links to other desires and aversions that provide them with some analogue of epistemic support, it is thus crucial to the truth of non-cognitivism that such links do exist. But nor should we be skeptical about this. Many links among desires and aversions are ordinarily agreed to provide them with an analogue of epistemic support (Williams 1980; Smith 1994, pp. 155-61). For example, desires and aversions, like beliefs, are sensitive to information. The fact that a particular desire or aversion is uninformed and would disappear upon the impact of information—imagine someone who has a preference for drinking red wine over white, but who is ignorant of the taste of both, and yet would hate red wine if he tasted it and enjoy white—is ordinarily taken to be grounds for criticism. Desires and aversions, like beliefs, also fit together in more and less coherent ways. The fact that a particular desire or aversion contributes incoherence to the overall set of desires and aversions of which it is a member is thus also ordinarily taken to be grounds for criticism. Finally, desires and aversions fit together with other desires and aversions in more or less unified ways, much as beliefs fit together with other beliefs in more or less unified ways. The fact that a desire or aversion contributes disunity to the overall set of desires and aversions of which it is a member is thus also ordinarily taken to be grounds for criticism.

What a non-cognitivist must stipulate, then, when he tries to spell out the special nature of the desires and aversions that we express when we make normative claims, is that these desires and aversions are parts of sets of such special desires and aversions that are, in turn, sufficiently informed and coher-

ent and unified (where to say that a set of desires and aversions is 'sufficiently' informed and coherent and unified is simply to say that the links among the desires and aversions in that set are similar in number and quality to the minimum number and quality of epistemic links among beliefs that we are prepared to tolerate for the ascription of a belief). To repeat, he must stipulate such links on pain of failing to capture the functional role of the psychological states that we express when we make normative claims.

With this in mind let's now consider Simon Blackburn's official story about the nature of the special desires and aversions we express when we make normative claims.

We should think in terms of a staircase of practical and emotional ascent. At the bottom are simple preferences, likes, and dislikes. More insistent is a basic hostility to some kind of action or character or situation: a primitive aversion to it, or a disposition to be disgusted by it, or to hold it in contempt, or to be angered by it, or to avoid it. We can then ascend to reactions to such reactions. Suppose you become angry at someone's behavior. I may become angry at you for being angry, and I may express this by saying it is none of your business. Perhaps it was a private matter. At any rate, it is not a moral issue. Suppose, on the other hand, I share your anger or feel 'at one' with you for so reacting. It may stop there, but I may also feel strongly disposed to encourage others to share the same anger. By then I am clearly treating the matter as one of public concern, something like a moral issue. I have come to regard the sentiment as legitimate. (Blackburn 1998, p. 9)

As I read this passage, the last sentence is supposed to be the conclusion of an argument whose premises are spelled out earlier on in the passage. Blackburn continues:

Going up another step, the sentiment may even become compulsory in my eyes, meaning that I become prepared to express hostility to those who do not themselves share it. Going up another level, I may also think that this hostility is compulsory, and be prepared to come into conflict with those who, while themselves concerned at what was done, tolerate those who do not care about it. I shall be regarding dissent as beyond the pale, unthinkable. This should all be seen as an ascending staircase, a spiral of emotional identifications and demands. The staircase gives us a scale between pure preference, on the one hand, and attitudes with all the flavor of ethical commitment, on the other. (Blackburn 1998, p. 9)

And again, as he puts it later:

To sum up, then: to hold a value is to have a relatively fixed attitude to some aspect of things, an attitude with which one identifies in the sense of being set to resist change, or set to feel pain when concerns are not met. That fixed attitude typically issues in many dispositions, at various places on the staircase of emotional ascent I described. (Blackburn 1998, p. 68)

Blackburn thus clearly thinks that he has made a case for the idea that someone who has the higher order attitudes and dispositions he describes is in a state of mind that is best described as a normative commitment: having the higher-order attitudes entails having the normative commitment. These are

therefore the special attitudes he thinks get expressed when we make normative claims.

As is perhaps already clear, however, Blackburn's official story is unconvincing. We can readily imagine someone who (say) has a desire that people keep their promises, and who shares many other people's anger at those who fail to keep their promises, and who feels disposed to encourage others to share that same anger too, and who feels disposed to be angry at those who don't share that anger, and yet who doesn't regard any of these sentiments as being in the least legitimate. We need simply to imagine someone who, in addition, regards all of his various attitudes towards promising in much the same way as the unwilling addict regards his addiction. He might think, for example, that these attitudes were all simply caused in him by social forces, in much the same way as the ingestion of drugs caused the unwilling addict's desire to take drugs in him, and that no reasons can therefore be given in support of acting on the basis of these attitudes, much as the addict thinks that no reasons can be given for his acting on his desire to take drugs.

In short, nothing about the mere location of attitudes on the staircase of emotional and practical ascent Blackburn describes suggests that they are parts of sets of desires and aversions that are sufficiently informed and coherent and unified. Blackburn's account thus fails to capture the functional role of the psychological states we express when we make normative claims.

Blackburn has an obvious reply to this objection. He could simply stipulate that the syndrome of attitudes that he says get expressed in normative claims are parts of such sets. I will consider this reply below. But, even conceding for a moment that this reply succeeds (which I doubt), the very fact that he needs to make the reply must surely be an embarrassment. For it amounts to an admission that what makes a desire justified, and hence immune to criticism, is its being part of a set of desires that is informed and coherent and unified, and this is tantamount to admitting that at least one normative claim—the claim that a desire is justified, or immune from criticism—is the expression of a belief, rather than a desire. This is cognitivism, not non-cognitivism.

Let's now consider the view about the nature of the special desires and aversions we express when we make normative claims to which Blackburn would be committed if he were to make the obvious reply to the objection just stated. When we make such claims Blackburn would have to say that we thereby express certain desires or aversions that are located in his preferred place on the staircase of emotional and practical ascent, but he would then have to add that these desires and aversions exist alongside other similarly located desires and aversions which are such that, together, they make up a sufficiently informed and coherent and unified set. Would this solve the problem? I do not think so.

The reason is that we could evidently believe that we have such desires and aversions, and hence believe that they are justified or immune to criticism relative to the sufficiently informed and coherent and unified set of which they are members, and yet also believe that we would not have such desires and aversions if we had a set of desires and aversions that was *maximally* informed and coherent and unified. (A coherent sub-set of desires and aversions might fail to cohere with the larger set of which it is a sub-set.) In that case I take it that we would not believe that the original desires and aversions were justified or immune from criticism. We would rather believe the opposite.

The upshot would therefore seem to be that since, when we claim that it is desirable or undesirable to act in a certain way, we must suppose that we have a justification for making this claim, and since, by the non-cognitivist's own lights, we could not suppose that we have such a justification if we believed that the desires or aversions that we thereby express would be no part of a maximally informed and coherent and unified set of desires and aversions, so, when we make such a claim, we must at least implicitly believe that the desires or aversions we thereby express would be part of a maximally informed and coherent and unified set of desires and aversions. Only so does it appear that we could take ourselves to have the sort of justification we require.

However, if this is right, then it follows that Blackburn must further revise his account of the nature of the special desires and aversions that we express when we make normative claims. He must suppose not just that we express certain desires or aversions that are located in his preferred place on the staircase of emotional and practical ascent he describes, and not just that these desires and aversions exist alongside other similarly located desires and aversions which, together, make up a sufficiently informed and coherent and unified set. He must suppose that, in addition, these desires and aversions are possessed in the presence of at least an implicit belief that such desires and aversions would be possessed if we had a set of desires and aversions that was maximally informed and coherent and unified.

However, if Blackburn were to revise his account of what makes desires and aversions special in this way then he would all but have abandoned his non-cognitivism. For only a very tiny step is required to move from something that would then be agreed by both Blackburn and his close cognitivist cousin, a certain sort of subjectivist, alike—that when we claim that it is desirable or undesirable to act in a certain way *we must believe* that we would have corresponding desires or aversions if we had a set of desires and aversions that was maximally informed and coherent and unified—to a version of subjectivism pure and simple: that is, to the view that when we make that

claim *we thereby express that belief*. Nor is it difficult to see what would motivate someone to take that step.

After all, as we have seen, even by Blackburn's own lights, the actual presence of the desires and aversions plays no essential role in the explanation of the belief-like functions of the psychological state that we express when we make a normative claim. These functions could all be explained by the presence of the belief whose presence must now be posited. And nor, as I have argued elsewhere, does the actual presence of desires and aversions play any role in the explanation of the desire-like functions of the psychological state that we express when we make a normative claim either (Smith 1997, pp. 99-106). That is best explained by the belief as well, together with the fact that agents have a general capacity to acquire the beliefs and desires that are mandated of them by considerations of coherence. For when someone believes that he would want that he acts in a certain way if he had a set of desires that was maximally informed and coherent and unified, coherence itself tells in favor of his actually desiring accordingly. Those whose psychologies tend towards coherence will therefore tend to desire when they have the belief, rather than being indifferent or averse.

But if the actual presence of desires and aversions plays no role in the explanation of either the belief-like or the desire-like functions of the psychological state we express when we make a normative claim, then the postulation of their presence is idle. It would therefore be far better to take that tiny step and say not just that when we make a normative claim we must have the belief that we would have corresponding desires or aversions if we had a set of desires and aversions that was maximally informed and coherent and unified, but also that when we make that claim we thereby express that belief. This means abandoning non-cognitivism altogether in favor of a version of non-cognitivism's close cognitivist cousin: subjectivism.

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