

Moral Psychology // Spring 2021

Handout 9

Rationalism and moral motivation: Smith, Nichols

INTERNALISM AND EXTERNALISM. Internalism and externalism are views about the sources of moral motivation. Smith invests most of his effort in characterising internalism. He characterises it with two features:

Practicality requirement: $[A \text{ judges } \phi\text{-ing right in the situation } C] \Rightarrow [\text{either } A \text{ is motivated to } \phi, \text{ or he is practically irrational}]$. 61

Rationalism: $[\phi\text{-ing is right for } A \text{ in } C] \Rightarrow [A \text{ has a reason to } \phi \text{ in } C]$. 62

Example 1. Suppose I think (strongly believe? am totally convinced?) it's my duty to donate funds to a dog shelter. Then, unless I am irrational, I am motivated to donate funds (PrReq). Also, I have a reason to donate (Rat).

What of externalism? As Smith presents it, externalism interprets morality as motivationally idle. Just because you have judged ϕ -ing 'right' you aren't motivated to act one way or another. (This is a view familiar to Hume's readers.) 63

TWO VERSIONS OF RATIONALISM. Let's register Mackie's (and Smith's) two interpretations of rationalism:

Conceptual: The concept of a moral requirement is the concept of a reason for action. Rationalism provides an analysis of moral terms. 64

Substantive: There actually are reasons for action that correspond to objective, realistic moral facts. 64–65

Smith claims that Rationalism above is a conceptual claim about the content of moral judgement. It doesn't follow that these judgements are true. What follows, rather, is the Practicality Requirement.

Remark 2. Nichols calls substantive rationalism 'empirical rationalism'.

BRINK'S AMORALIST. It is possible that a person understands all the moral arguments, all the moral philosophy, yet fails to act morally. Notorious examples include Thrasymachus in *Republic* I and the Fool in *Leviathan* XV (I am not sure why Uriah Heep is brought up here). This possibility, if a possibility it is, may be used to shew that the Practicality Requirement is false (and that externalism is true).

Smith's response in short: The amoralist has no mastery of moral terms. Thus he fails to make moral judgements altogether. This is precisely because the amoralist is not motivated to act on that judgement. Instead, the amoralist merely parrots what *other* people say about morality. 70 69

But this response depends on the prior rejection of an alternative account, according to which the mastery of moral terms is exhibited by their fluent use.

SMITH'S RESPONSE AT LENGTH Smith proposes to imagine a debate in the course of which you 'convince' me that ϕ -ing is wrong: at the outset I held that ϕ -ing is right, now I am convinced by you that it is wrong. You convinced me to 'change my most fundamental values'. 71

Before going any further I (YSB) wish to protest about the setup. Yes, at the end of some conversation it may *very rarely* happen that your views change. Perhaps even your fundamental views. I'm not sure about the 'values'. But in any event, how plausible is to say that you 'convinced' me? that you gave me arguments, I examined them, and changed my views? It is worth looking deeper into the phenomenology of these (arguably rare) exchanges.

Notice also other assumptions. Smith asks: how to explain that a 'good and strong-willed person's' motivation is correlated with his judgement? Well, we saw earlier that this assumption may well be vacuous. There may be no such people in the first place, if their motives are different in public and in private (Batson, DeScioli and Kurzban). 72

Let's carry on. Smith envisages two alternatives: either the motivation follows directly from the judgement (internalism), or it follows from some other dispositions of the said good person (externalism). In symbols:

(9-1) Judgement \Rightarrow Motivation \Rightarrow Action. [Internalism]

(9-2) Judgement And (Motivation \Rightarrow Action). [Externalism]

In fact, we can think of two *further* alternatives:

(9-3) Motivation \Rightarrow (Action + Judgement). [Haidt and Greene]

(9-4) Motivation-private \Rightarrow (Action-private + Judgement-private); Motivation-public \Rightarrow (Action-public + Judgement-public) [DeScioli and Kurzban]

But let's stick with internalism and externalism. Smith argues for an inference to the best explanation: Internalism can explain why motivation-change follows judgement-change. Externalism can't (plausibly) explain it. In detail:

Internalism The moral judgement 'Voting Labour is wrong' causes the 'non-derivative' desire to vote Tories (or: it is an expression of just such a desire).

Externalism Strictly, it is true that the moral judgement of a good person causes (for example) the desire to vote Tories. But the stress is on the 'good': The active causal factor is not the judgement itself, but rather the special disposition (virtue, character) of the good person.

Externalism is at a disadvantage. For what exactly is the motivational structure there? What does the structure amount to? It cannot be a non-derivative 'concern' or desire to do the right thing. At the beginning I have: I am motivated to vote Labour. How? According to the externalist, it can't be that the non-derivative desire to vote Labour was my motive qua the good person. For: (i) the ensuing discussion made me change my judgement. (ii) My motivation changed too (we assume). (iii) My initial motivation was not rationally (from my point of view, anyway) determined by my judgement and is, therefore, not tracked by my judgement. According to externalism, when I find a reason to do one thing, I may still desire to do the opposite—which, from my point of view, is wrong.

What motivational element, therefore, is able to track the judgement-change, also characterise the good person? It is the desire 'to do the right thing'. Smith puts the contrast between externalism and internalism in terms of the de dicto/de re distinction. This is familiar to Kant readers. On some interpretations of Kant, the unique characteristic of moral motive is to follow a moral principle. I may help you because I see you suffering. That is, your suffering causes me to help you. That's not a moral motive. Instead, there must be an intermediate motive to, say, 'alleviate suffering in general.' A moral person is ultimately concerned with principles, not people, animals, cabbages, or the universe.

If this is the externalist account, then we may accuse the externalist of having one idea too many. We may further disparage him as fetishising morality.