

## A Problem With Michael Smith's Moral Problem

Michael Smith holds an internalist position in his *The Moral Problem*. I intend to argue that, based on considering what else he says in *The Moral Problem*, his arguments for internalism must fail because his position is incoherent.

Smith gives us his statement of internalism as:

There is a conceptual link between making a moral judgment and being motivated of the form:

(1) 'If an agent judges it right to  $\phi$  in certain circumstances C, then she is motivated to  $\phi$  in C, at least absent weakness of will and the like.'

The internalist and externalist differ in their characterization of the link between making a moral judgment and motivation. The internalist claims that (1) is a conceptual truth; the externalist that it is an empirical claim – The externalist is prepared to say that it can be false, the internalist is not. The internalist holds that judging  $\phi$  to be right is sufficient for the agent to be motivated to  $\phi$ ; the externalist holds that it is not sufficient, and so supplements the antecedent with a psychological fact to the effect that: 'and the agent has the disposition to be motivated to do what she judges is right'. So the externalist thinks that it is conceptually possible for an agent to be psychologically healthy, judge that it is right to  $\phi$  in C and yet not be motivated to  $\phi$  in C – call an agent like this an 'amoralist'.

One dead-end and question-begging way to argue for internalism would be to say the following: amoralists are conceptually impossible; this is because any candidate for being an amoralist can be rejected. Here is why: if the agent in question lacks motivation to  $\phi$  in C while judging it right to  $\phi$  in C, then they simply haven't understood what is meant by judging it right to  $\phi$  in C. That is, if an agent hasn't been motivated to  $\phi$  in C, then they haven't *really* judged it right to  $\phi$  in C. Without further discussion I take it this argument get us nowhere.

The internalist however should, rightly, make the following point about his position: Namely that (1) is a defeasible principle. The idea behind making

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<sup>1</sup> M. Smith (1996) 'The argument for internalism: reply to Miller', *Analysis*, Vol. 56, No. 3, p. 175

this point is to show that seeming amoral behaviour is compatible with internalism. That is, the statement of internalism in (1) does not entail that being motivated to  $\phi$  in C should always move us to action. Which is to say that simply pointing to examples of agents who appear to be amoralists is in no way decisive against the internalist. The internalist is right to say that his conceptual claim is independent of any empirical facts about seeming amoralists. Pointing that out is not question begging.

Smith offers two related arguments for favouring the internalism of (1) against the externalism. I think that these arguments fail.

They are as follows<sup>2</sup>:

(A) Redescription argument:

- This argument is that if we accept externalism, then we have to redescribe our ordinary moral psychology in an unintuitive way.

(B) Moral Perfection Argument:

- This argument is that if we accept externalism, then we must accept a particularly unintuitive account of moral perfection that follows from the externalist redescription of our moral psychology.

It is not obvious that these two arguments are substantially different, rather it simply seems to me that (B) is a more poignant way of bringing out the unintuitiveness of the redescription noted in (A). (B) merely shows that the externalist has a larger bullet to bite if he wants to accept the redescription that (A) claims he must. Consequently any argument the externalist offers against (A), if valid, will be just as salient against (B).

The argument of (A) is this<sup>3</sup>: We know that the externalist must describe an agent's motivation to  $\phi$  in C as being due to both the judgment that it is right to  $\phi$  in C and, if that agent is not an amoralist, due to the possession of a disposition to be motivated to  $\phi$  in C after judging it right to  $\phi$  in C. So If we ask the externalist why some agent is  $\phi$ -ing in C after judging that it is right to  $\phi$  in C, then he will say that the agent's motivation comes from the disposition they

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<sup>2</sup> Both are present in Smith (1994) and Smith (1996). The latter makes them most clearly separate, but the treatment of them is, I think, better in the former.

<sup>3</sup> See M. Smith (1994) *The Moral Problem*, Blackwell, Oxford. p. 75 and Smith (1996: 181)

possess and not from the moral judgment. So according to this view we must say that the agent's motivation to  $\phi$  in  $C$  are derived from the disposition they possess in virtue of not being amoralists. This is therefore to make all the agent's motivations to  $\phi$  in  $C$  instrumental on their disposition. But Smith claims this just seems a false way to describe people's motivations – when asked, “Why were you motivated to  $\phi$  in  $C$ ?” we should take at face value answers of the form “because I should  $\phi$  in  $C$ .”, rather than reinterpret these as “because I am motivated to do what's right and I judged that  $\phi$ -ing in  $C$  was right.” or perhaps “because I should  $\phi$  in  $C$  and because I'm not amoral.”. Smith's idea here is that the externalist's description of what's going on just involves too much thinking on the part of the agent – the phenomenology just doesn't match the externalist's description.

To illustrate Smith's argument with an example: When our heroine comes across a drowning man and is able to save him, she is motivated to do so by her judgment that it is right to save him because of; his peril, his distress, her abilities etc. Her motivation to do so does not derive directly from the thought that she should do what is right; even if we agree that it is uncontroversially right, it is not *that* fact that we think ought to motivate her. Smith is arguing that the externalist must instead hold the view that the motivation to save the drowning man is instrumental on our heroine's disposition to be motivated to do what it right. Under the externalist's description she is saving the man because that is how, in the circumstances, she can do the right thing. She is not, as we would more naturally think heroines are, motivated to save the man because, in the circumstances, she judges that that is what she should do<sup>4</sup>.

I find this argument unpersuasive. There are a two of reasons why: Firstly the externalist could just bite the bullet here, and the argument would loose a lot of its force against him and would obviously fail to be decisive. Secondly the externalist could claim that argument relies on ascribing to him a certain phenomenology of desires that he can simply deny. Both these points need unpacking.

The first point grants everything to Smith and then claims there is still room for the externalist to remain externalist. By granting Smith so much the externalist accepts a tension between his position and Smiths account of our

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<sup>4</sup> If this is unclear without the 'de dicto' or 'de re' terminology, then substitute the phrases in appropriately.

intuitions concerning moral psychology. Since the tension is not decisive however, the externalist is merely in a sticky, rather than disastrous position. Perhaps someone might argue that holding this position amounts to externalism for the sake of it. But consider that if we have a strong intuition that an amoral agent is a conceptual possibility then the internalist owes us a convincing explanation of why an amoralist is actually impossible before we give up externalism. Smith's argument does not do this.

More interesting is the second point. This expresses the idea that that Smith misconstrues externalism. Consider that the argument of (A) relies upon the notion of the derived or instrumental desires to  $\phi$  in C being at odds with the way we would explain the motivation to  $\phi$  in C. Put another way, Smith's point is that the phenomenology of our desires to  $\phi$  in C – manifested, as mentioned above, by taking the answers to questions like 'Why were you motivated to  $\phi$  in C?' at face value – does not match the externalist's explanation of motivation. I think that the externalist can rightly argue here that he never committed himself to holding that his explanation was meant to serve as a phenomenological explanation.

The externalist could argue in the following way (embarrassing for Smith, is the fact that this is his argument<sup>5</sup>): First note that Smith is criticizing externalism because the externalist explanation of motivation fails to be tracked by the intuitive phenomenology of desires. This is because, remember, Smith's argument against externalism is that good and strong willed agents just don't possess any 'desire to do what's right' from which further desires to  $\phi$  in C are derived – as evidenced by the phenomenological descriptions of motivation we would want to give for good and strong willed agents. Now the commitment to an explanation whereby the phenomenological characteristics of motivation track what is going on when the agent is motivated to  $\phi$  in C implies that the agent is infallible as regards their knowledge of their motivations. That is, it involves holding some principle of the form<sup>6</sup>:

(2) An agent 'desires to  $\phi$  if and only if she believes that she desires to  $\phi$ '<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Smith (1994: 104-7).

<sup>6</sup> Why? – Because Smith is saying that if desires don't feel instrumental to the agent, then they are not; hence the externalist explanation is either false or highly unintuitive.

<sup>7</sup> Smith (1994: 105)

Now the externalist can argue that (2) is false. In the style of Smith, two counter-examples illustrate this: Consider first a person, K., who always walks from the library to the pub on the side of the road such that he has the best view of the lake. Now make two assumptions: 1. that if asked, K. would deny that he did this because he desired to view the lake; 2. that if there was in fact no lake, then K. would lose his preference for that side of the road. Since these two assumptions involve no obvious problems, then the externalist can legitimately say that 'believing you desire to  $\phi$ ' is not necessary for actually desiring to  $\phi$ . This is because the above example, given our plausible assumptions, provides a situation where it is true that K. desires to  $\phi$ , but doesn't believe he desires to  $\phi$ .

Consider second a person, Émile, who has been covertly taught by his tutor that he must always eat his evening meal at 19:30<sup>8</sup>. Since Émile has learnt this without his tutor overtly imposing his will on him, he believes that he desires to eat at 19:30 without feeling coerced. Which is to say, he believes that he desires to eat at 19:30 and so quite genuinely would not admit that he ate at that time because of his tutor. Now make the assumption that without the tutor's presence Émile would lose the desire to eat at 19:30. Again this assumption involves no obvious problem, so the externalist can claim that 'desiring to  $\phi$ ' is not necessary for believing you desire to  $\phi$ , since this situation is just such an example.

This therefore establishes that the biconditional (2) is false. Now the argument just given is Smith's own argument; his view is that in giving an account of motivation we need not necessarily track the phenomenology of what's going on. I simply want to conclude with the following point. If this is Smith's view, then it undermines his argument for internalism. The reason is that that argument against externalism tacitly rests on a principle like (2) which Smith goes on to argue is false.

## References:

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<sup>8</sup> It's worth noting that this isn't to be confused with hunger. It's not clear that hunger can be called a desire, whereas it is clear that 'eating at 19:30' can properly be called a desire (though a bit of an odd one).

M. Smith (1994) *The Moral Problem*, Blackwell, Oxford.

M. Smith (1996) 'The argument for internalism: reply to Miller', *Analysis*, Vol. 56, No. 3, pp 175-184.