

# A Defence of Smith's Solution to The Moral Problem

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## Abstract

Michael Smith's internalist resolution to 'The Moral Problem' serves to establish a *necessary* connection between moral judgement and moral motivation in the rational agent. Externalists, like Brink, counter Smith's claim with the figure of the amoralist, whose moral motivation, they argue, is only *contingent* on antecedently-held desires. In this paper, I draw a distinction between 'moral motivation' – if an agent judges it right to  $\phi$ , she is, *ceteris paribus*, motivated to  $\phi$  – and 'acting on moral motivation' – if an agent judges it right to  $\phi$ , she actually  $\phi$ s. I show how the amoralist explanation might account for the latter notion, but not the former, which ultimately leaves Smith's argument for motivational internalism intact.

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## Introduction

The central organising question in the field of Metaethics, as contended by Michael Smith, pertains to the apparent incompatibility between the oft-presupposed objectivity and practicality platitudes of moral judgements. In his book, *The*

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*Moral Problem*, Smith aims to overcome the incompatibility by arguing that moral judgements entail normative reasons for action, which are, by their very nature, both objective and motivating.<sup>1</sup> His solution has since been challenged by many Externalists including David Brink; Brink posits the figure of the amoralist, a rational being who makes moral judgements, but fails to be motivated by them. In this paper, I aim to show that Brink's account of moral motivation does not ultimately challenge the validity of Michael Smith's solution to the Moral Problem.

The paper proceeds as follows: In the first section, I give a brief overview of Smith's formulation of the Moral Problem, and follow that with an overview of his proposed solution in the second section. In the third section, I recapitulate Brink's challenge to Smith's solution. In the fourth section, I show how Brink's argument does not invalidate Smith's solution. I reformulate the conclusion of Smith's argument in such a way as to make its salience against Brink's criticism apparent. The fifth section concludes.

## **I. The Moral Problem: An Introduction**

The moral problem is constituted by three propositions about morality that are individually plausible, but jointly inconsistent. The problem, as formulated by Smith, is as follows:

- (1) Moral judgements of the type, 'It is right that I  $\phi$ ' express a subject's beliefs about an objective matter of fact, a fact about what is right for her to do.
- (2) If one judges it right that she  $\phi$ s, then *ceteris paribus*, she is motivated to  $\phi$ .
- (3) An agent is motivated to act in a certain way just in case she has an appropriate desire and a means-end belief, where belief and desire are,

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<sup>1</sup> Belief about the rightness of  $\phi$  entails a normative reason to  $\phi$ , which causes the desire to  $\phi$ , which in turn, motivates the agent to act in accordance with the belief.

in Hume's terms, distinct existences.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth explicating exactly wherein the inconsistency arises. In general, traditional views of moral judgements presuppose both objectivity and practicality – what Smith has referred to as ‘moral platitudes.’ The first proposition is Smith’s ‘objectivity thesis.’ Were this true, moral judgements would have to be beliefs, since only beliefs are truth-apt and representational of moral facts. Beliefs, however, are not unto themselves practically motivating. The second proposition is Smith’s ‘practicality requirement.’ If this were true, moral judgements would have to be expressions of desire, since only desires are motivating. The downside is that desires are neither objective and truth-apt, nor rationally criticisable. So far, we can see that if moral judgements are to be both objective and practical, they must be both beliefs and desires. However, the long-standing Humean view of moral motivation states that beliefs and desires are distinct entities and additionally that a moral judgement is sufficient to explain action only if it is supplemented with a relevant desire to realize that judgement. Our traditional view of moral judgements is, thus, inconsistent.

### **a. Strategies for Overcoming the Inconsistency**

If we espouse the Humean view of belief-desire psychology, then moral judgements cannot be objective and practical simultaneously. A natural strategy to overcome the inconsistency lies in rejecting one of the three propositions. If we reject the objectivity thesis, we adopt the non-cognitivist perspective, under which, we can neither account for the seemingly descriptive nature of moral discourse, nor allow for the platitude of moral disagreement. By denying that moral judgements are beliefs, we concede that morality is entirely contingent on the agent’s desires and thereby, reduce moral discourse to the goal of convincing others to adopt our desires. If we reject the practicality requirement, we are unable to explain how and why moral motivation

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, ‘The Moral Problem’, 12.

‘tracks’ the agent’s beliefs about what is right; beliefs, given their mind-to-world direction of fit, are not action-guiding. And yet, when we change our beliefs about what is morally permitted or prohibited, we find ourselves eager to comply with these new beliefs. How, then, can we account for this? Lastly, if we reject the Humean picture, we can neither ‘account for our actions as goal-directed, nor explain our actions as fundamentally teleological.’

<sup>3</sup> We lose much of morality’s substantive characteristics by rejecting one of the three conflicting propositions. Therefore, Smith concludes, we should overcome the inconsistency while retaining all three propositions.

## **II. Normative Reasons: Smith’s Solution to The Moral Problem**

Smith’s solution to the problem is a form of moral rationalism wherein the right thing for an agent to do is the thing she would do were she fully rational. Smith sides with cognitivists in accepting the objectivity thesis presented above. That is to say that when an agent makes a moral judgement of the kind, ‘It is right to  $\phi$  in C,’ she indeed expresses truth-apt beliefs about objective moral facts. Smith also accepts the practicality requirement, but makes a distinction between explanatory and normative reasons for action. Explanatory reasons are psychological states that link beliefs to action *only* when paired with a pre-existing desire to act. Normative reasons, on the other hand, apply to all moral judgements and are such that the belief itself *entails* a desire to act (note that beliefs and desires are distinct entities here). When an agent says, ‘It is right to  $\phi$  in C,’ she has a normative reason to  $\phi$  in C.

Smith defends the claim that these normative reasons are both objective and practical. They are objective in that, when arrived at through a process of rational reflection and argument, they prescribe a common course of action for all people in the same moral situation. Here, the process of ‘rational reflection’ consists of considering what the agent’s fully rational counterpart would want her to do in situation C. Said another way, then, the agent’s belief that ‘It is right to  $\phi$  in C,’ is tantamount to saying the agent’s fully ideal

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<sup>3</sup> Copp, ‘Belief, Reason and Motivation in the Moral Problem’, 35.

counterpart would want her to  $\phi$  in C. This connection to the agent's fully rational self explains the practicality of normative reasons. Smith argues that if an agent's fully rational counterpart wants her to  $\phi$  in C, the agent is then motivated to  $\phi$  in C. In short, if an agent judges it right to  $\phi$  in C – i.e. possesses a normative reason to  $\phi$  in C because her fully rational self wants her to  $\phi$  in C – then she is motivated to  $\phi$  in C. The upshot of this argument, and the conclusion at which Brink's criticism is directed, is that if an agent judges it right to  $\phi$  in C, and fails to be motivated to  $\phi$  in C, her belief-desire set is incoherent and she is practically irrational 'by her own lights.'<sup>4</sup>

In essence, Smith's argument commits him to the internalist camp, which holds that there is a *necessary* connection between moral judgement and moral motivation in the 'good and strong-willed person.'<sup>5</sup> The motivation to act in accordance with one's moral beliefs is internal or *intrinsic* to the belief itself. It is not contingent upon further considerations like the agent's fundamental proclivity to be moral or wish to be rational. Of course, to remain compatible with Humean psychology, Smith does allow that a person who judges it right to  $\phi$  in C, may fail to actually  $\phi$  in C. Nevertheless, the connection between judgement and motivation is mandatory in the rational person – i.e. it is impossible for a fully rational person to make a genuine moral judgement without being moved to motivation by it. For if this is not so, the agent fails to have a desire that she herself believes is rational to have, which by Smith's view, is practically irrational.

### **III. The Amoralist: An Externalist Challenge to Smith's Solution**

Smith's conception of rationality has drawn much criticism from Externalists like David Brink, who counter with the archetype of the amoralist, 'the rational, strong willed individual who seemingly makes moral judgments, while remaining utterly indifferent.'<sup>6</sup> Brink argues that there is no obvious irra-

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, 'The Moral Problem', 177.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Rosati, 'Moral Motivation'.

tionality in failing to be motivated by the moral judgements one makes, because in many cases, moral reasons bear no rational authority.

By ‘moral reasons,’ Brink means, ‘impartial other-regarding obligations that do not apply to agents in virtue of their aims or interests.’<sup>7</sup> ‘Rational authority’ refers to the prescriptions of an ‘agent-centered conception of practical reason that rests on instrumental or prudential’ concerns.<sup>8</sup> Put differently, in many cases, the dictates of an impartial morality diverge from the ends of individual interest and make it so that fulfilling one’s moral requirements does not advance one’s interests. If we accept that rational action is action that advances the agent’s interests, as Brink believes we should, in such cases at least, moral judgements have no rational authority. Relaying Brink’s argument in Smith’s terms, we see that in such cases, it would not be irrational to judge it right to  $\phi$  in C and fail to be motivated to  $\phi$  in C.<sup>9</sup> This is especially true, Brink posits, because Smith provides no reason to favour moral or normative reasons over instrumental or prudential reasons in one’s judgement-making and decision-making processes.

Brink’s argument, if viable, challenges Smith’s idea of normative reasons and the necessary and intrinsic connection between moral judgement and moral motivation they stipulate (externalism, by definition). It shows, instead, that any moral motivation is *contingently* derived from an antecedently-held deeper desire of the agent’s.

#### IV. Defeasibility of Moral Motivation: A Defence of Smith’s Solution

The upshot of Brink’s challenge is that we must deny the original practicality platitude from our explanation of moral judgements. As discussed previously, however, rejecting this proposition is troublesome; it leaves us unable to explain how and why moral motivation so reliably ‘tracks’ the agent’s beliefs

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<sup>7</sup> Brink, ‘Moral Motivation’, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Brink, ‘Moral Motivation’, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Rightness of  $\phi$  in C  $\leftrightarrow$  Normative reason to  $\phi$  in C  $\rightarrow$  Instrumental reasons  $>$   
Normative reason  $\rightarrow$  Agent not motivated to  $\phi$  in C.

about what is right.<sup>10</sup> Fortunately, we need not reject the practicality requirement, since Smith's argument stands salient against Brink's criticism. In this section, I will defend Smith's solution against the amoralist argument by citing the defeasibility of moral action. I will also introduce the notion of 'moral irrationality' to bridge the gap, as identified by Brink, between instrumental and moral reasons.

Recall that the crux of Brink's argument lay in the claim that in cases where moral and practical reasons for action conflict, it might be rational to judge it right to  $\phi$  and fail to be motivated to  $\phi$ . Brink claims that this explains why moral judgement cannot be intrinsically motivating. I challenge this claim by making a distinction between 'moral motivation' and 'acting upon moral motivation.' In Brink's case, when he says that moral motivation is contingent upon antecedently-held instrumental desires, I contest that what he actually means is that the agent's *acting on* moral motivation is contingent upon antecedently-held instrumental desires.

Per my view, moral motivation is not contingent – i.e. it occurs intrinsically once an agent judges it right to  $\phi$  and discovers a normative reason to  $\phi$ . The *action* (derived from the motivation), however, *is* contingent upon the agent's goals and interests – and it is this contingency to which Brink's challenge refers.<sup>11</sup> Understood in this sense, we see how Brink's argument might account for why the agent refrains from ultimately *acting* upon her moral judgement (cases in which other-regarding moral requirements do not advance the agent's interests), but does not disprove Smith's claim that the moral judgement *is* necessarily motivating. I argue that all moral agents will be *pro tanto* motivated to  $\phi$ , at least marginally, after forming a belief about the rightness of  $\phi$ . However, not all moral agents – chief amongst them,

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<sup>10</sup> In *Moral Judgement and Moral Motivation* (1998), Shafer-Landau makes an Externalist argument for how an underlying desire to be moral, *de dicto*, can still account for this 'tracking,' but Smith considers and rejects it as a form of moral fetishism. The scope of this paper prevents me from covering that vein of argument here.

<sup>11</sup> Rightness of  $\phi$  in C  $\leftrightarrow$  Normative reason to  $\phi$  in C  $\rightarrow$  Agent motivated to  $\phi$  in C  
 $\rightarrow$  Instrumental reasons  $>$  Normative reason  $\rightarrow$  Agent does not  $\phi$  in C.

amoralists – will act upon that motivation; only those agents whose instrumental reasons do not override their moral reasons will be moved to action.<sup>12</sup>

**Strong Moral Motivation:** Brink attacks Strong Moral Motivation, which mandates a necessary connection between moral judgement and action: Agent judges it right to  $\phi \rightarrow$  Agent necessarily  $\phi$ s.

**Weak Moral Motivation:** Smith, however, defends only a weakened form of moral motivation, which mandates a necessary connection between moral judgement and moral motivation: Agent judges it right to  $\phi \rightarrow$  Agent is necessarily motivated to  $\phi \rightarrow$  Agent may or may not  $\phi$ .

Brink's connection between moral judgement and moral action, is stronger than Smith's original proposition. Smith defends the connection between moral judgement and moral motivation, but allows for defeasibility between moral motivation and moral action. Per Smith, if someone judges it right that she  $\phi$ s, then *ceteris paribus*, she is motivated to  $\phi$ . This formulation necessitates an all-things-equal connection between judgement and motivation, but allows that an agent may fail to act on her motivation due to 'weakness of will [and] other such psychological failures.'<sup>13</sup> Brink attacks a stronger version of Internalism, claiming that 'only [such a restatement] makes the puzzle genuinely inconsistent.'<sup>14</sup> Thus, the simplest way to overcome Brink's challenge is to consider the difference between being motivated to  $\phi$  (moral motivation) and acting upon one's motivation to  $\phi$  (moral action). Smith, himself, allows for this consideration via the inclusion of the *ceteris paribus* clause in his practicality requirement.

However, I do believe that Brink makes a valid objection to Smith's conception of irrationality. Recall that for Smith, if an agent judges it right to  $\phi$  in C, and fails to be motivated to  $\phi$  in C, her belief-desire set is incoherent

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<sup>12</sup> Rightness of  $\phi$  in C  $\leftrightarrow$  Normative reason to  $\phi$  in C  $\rightarrow$  Agent motivated to  $\phi$  in C  
 $\rightarrow$  Instrumental reasons  $<$  Normative reason  $\rightarrow$  Agent  $\phi$ s in C.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, 'The Moral Problem', 119.

<sup>14</sup> Brink, 'Moral Motivation', 8.

and she is practically irrational 'by her own lights.'<sup>15</sup> Given that there is a substantive difference between being motivated to  $\phi$  and actually  $\phi$ ing, Externalists, like Brink, urge a redefinition of Smith's conception of irrationality. They argue that when moral and instrumental reasons for action conflict, Smith provides no reason to favour moral reasons over instrumental reasons. He, instead, presupposes that we should prefer moral reasons, lest we become irrational. At this juncture, Externalists assert a distinction between weak and strong irrationality, where weak irrationality entails acting contradictory to a reason for action and strong irrationality entails acting contradictory to the *best* reason for action.<sup>16</sup> Brink's claim follows: since the instrumental reason for action is often the *best* reason, it should not be 'strong irrational' to favour it over the moral reason. I believe that Smith would concede that point (as he has already allowed for defeasibility of moral action). I argue, however, that moral considerations should not be relegated to the realm of 'weak irrationality,' since morality is an important common concern. Therefore, we should introduce the notion of 'moral irrationality,' which entails acting against one's most compelling moral reason, but in compliance with one's most compelling practical reason. In this way, if an agent judges it right to  $\phi$ , but fails to actually  $\phi$ , she might be rational in a strong Fsense, but will be irrational in a moral sense.

### Smith's Original Irrationality Proposition

Agent judges it right to $\phi$ , but fails to actually $\phi$ (assuming the instrumental reason overrides the moral reason)		Agent's action complies with best practical reason	Agent's action goes against best practical reason
	Agent's action complies with best moral reason	Rationality	Rationality
	Agent's action goes against best moral reason	Irrationality (Brink's challenge)	Irrationality

<sup>15</sup> Smith, 'The Moral Problem', 177.

<sup>16</sup> Shafer-Landau, 'Moral Judgement and Normative Reasons', 36.

**Amended Irrationality Proposition**

Agent judges it right to $\phi$ , but fails to actually $\phi$ (assuming the instrumental reason overrides the moral reason)		Agent's action complies with best practical reason	Agent's action goes against best practical reason
	Agent's action complies with best moral reason	Moral Rationality (Strong Rationality)	Moral Rationality (Strong Irrationality)
	Agent's action goes against best moral reason	Moral Irrationality (Strong Rationality)	Moral Irrationality (Strong Irrationality)

The notion would alter Smith's conclusion so as to have it read: if an agent judges it right to  $\phi$  in C, and fails to actually  $\phi$  in C, her belief-desire set is incoherent and she is *morally* irrational.<sup>17</sup> This restatement trumps the Amoralist challenge by allowing for cases in which practical reasons can override moral reasons (defeasibility of moral action), but retains Smith's Internalist assertion that moral judgements are necessarily motivating.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have showed that Brink's Externalist attack against Smith's solution to the Moral Problem is invalid. Brink attacks a stronger version of Smith's solution than Smith himself advocates. We can overcome Brink's challenge by acknowledging that Smith allows for defeasibility between moral judgement and action, but not between moral judgement and motivation. Having conceded that point, we can bolster Smith's position by introducing the notion of 'moral irrationality,' which is the state of acting against one's best moral reason for action. This restatement of Smith's conclusion accommodates the amoralist challenge while retaining the intrinsic nature of moral motivation.

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<sup>17</sup> Originally: if an agent judges it right to  $\phi$  in C, and fails to actually  $\phi$  in C, her belief-desire set is incoherent and she is practically irrational.

## References

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