

Moral motivation

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August 2006

Three accounts of motivation. The main question which I will be concerned with is whether it is feasible to defend a naturalistic and internalist account of moral motivation, and if so, which. I thereby take it (in agreement with Scheffler) that such an account is naturalistic just in case it explains our motivation to act in accordance with moral reasons in terms of certain features or states of our empirical psychology; and that it is internalist just in case it respects the idea that something is a practical reason for or against an action only if it is capable to motivating us to act accordingly.

More specifically, I will look at three specific and initially plausible accounts of this type and investigate their various prospects of meeting certain additional challenges to, or constraints on, any theory of moral motivation.

The three accounts I have in mind are: (i) the Humean account according to which practical and moral motivation is ultimately a matter of our desires or sentiments (cf. Hume, or Williams); (ii) the Freudian account according to which such motivation is primarily a matter of the super-ego or a similar internalized authority or standard; and (iii) a more rationalist account according to which practical and moral motivation work pretty much in the same way as epistemic motivation does.

With respect to the first two accounts, the reason for introducing desires or an internalized authority as the sources of motivation seems to be motivated by the idea that moral rationality cannot be reduced to instrumental rationality. Given that we are already motivated to do something, instrumental reasoning may bring us to become motivated to do something else as a means to the first thing. But we seem to need some initial motivation to get started in the first place - whether this is supplied by desires, or by an internalized moral authority which enables moral judgements to become motivationally effective (cf. Scheffler: 139).

In contrast, the third account does not see the need to introduce such an additional source of motivation: normative judgements motivate us by themselves. In discussions about how conclusive epistemic reasons compel us to endorse certain propositions, there is usually no appeal to, and no question about, some further source of motivation (such as a desire to care about conclusiveness, or some internalized authority or standard) over and above the recognition of the epistemic reasons itself. The idea of account (iii) is that the same may be true of practical motivation.

My hope is to be able to illustrate that account (iii) is a viable alternative to accounts (i) and (ii) and perhaps to be preferred over them. More generally, I also hope to make plausible how rationalism and naturalism are compatible, when moral motivation is concerned. But now to the various challenges:

The normative challenge. The first constraint to be met by the accounts under consideration is the normative constraint. For a practical reason to be genuinely normative, it seems to be required, not only that we can be motivated to act in accordance with the reason, but also that we can fail to be motivated by it despite recognizing it as the best, or only available, reason for action. In other words, weakness of will must be possible (cf. Korsgaard).

Reference to the super-ego does not help account (ii) to meet this constraint. The function of the super-ego seems to be merely to recognize certain reasons as moral, and to enable this

recognition of such reasons as moral to exert some motivational force on us. But whichever specific super-egos we have, it seems always possible that we act against what we take to be our best moral reasons. However, account (ii) seems to be able to account for such cases in terms of the distinction between desire-based and authoritative motivation: cases of weakness of will are such that the former wins against the latter.

The explanation of account (iii) seems superficially very similar. For again, desires, emotions and similar states may disturb or undercut the motivational impact of the moral judgements. But weakness of will may also be due to some other malfunction of our rational system, as in the case of weakness of belief. Moreover, desires are not treated this time as independent and competing sources of motivation. They may influence or disturb the motivational force of normative judgements (e.g., our recognition that we desire something may provide us with a reason to do it; and desires may also cause some rational malfunction). But they do not themselves figure as motives. Motivation is purely a matter of rationality, and not of some kind of striving, pushing, and so on.

The challenge seems to be most problematic for Humean accounts, given that they originally tend to treat motivation as a mechanistic relation between our actual desires and the resulting actions. According to this simple picture, if a desire fails to produce a certain action, this is not due to the fact that the desire in question was the best or strongest and failed to move us, but rather to the fact that there was another and better or stronger desire. Thus, weakness of will seems never to occur; there is always (the possibility of postulating) another desire (cf. Korsgaard). In response to this, more sophisticated Humean accounts have been developed, according to which our reasons for action do not straightforwardly depend on our actual desires, but instead on the desires which a fully rational and informed alter ego would develop on the basis of our actual desires. Weakness of will seems then to be a matter of our actual desires rebelling against our (recognition of our) ideal desires.

But there are still a couple of problems with accounts (i) and (ii). First, it is unclear how the recognition of what our alter ego would desire - or, alternatively, the fact that our internalized authority tells us to act in a certain way - can actually move us to act (assuming that we do not already desire to do whatever our alter ego would desire or do); and why it does so, in contrast to other desires or other 'internal voices'. And second, weakness of will seems to be possible already on the level of non-moral practical and instrumental rationality. But in such cases, there is neither a conflict between actual and ideal desires, nor a conflict between desire- and authority-based motivation.

The Kantian challenge. As Scheffler (rather indirectly) claims, it seems that accounts of motivation should also be able to explain why we may be morally motivated to act against all our actual desires, sentiments or interests; and why acting solely out of our desires or sentiments does not appear to involve moral motivation.

The obvious solution of account (ii) is that there are two kinds of motivation, moral motivation out of authority and desire-based motivation. While desires and sentiments may play a role in moral considerations, they cannot move us to act with moral authority.

Again, the solution of account (iii) seems similar - with the difference that it denies that there is any desire-based motivation.

And again, the Humeans endorsing (i) seem to have to struggle the most. The best solution seems to be either to deny that Kant is right about the two intuitions about the gap between moral motivation and desires (e.g., because it does not capture our common-sense, or because a theory of motivation need not necessarily be concerned with what we commonly think), or to defend the broad interpretation of the notion of a desire, according to which they are to be defined, say, in terms of motivation or direction of fit.

The Smithian challenge. Smith has presented a convincing argument to the effect that (moral) motivation presupposes or implies desiring (as defined in terms of direction of fit). This raises the challenge of how to account for this link between the two phenomena.

This time, the Humean seems to be best positioned to meet this task, given that it is essential to his theory that motivation stems from desires or sentiments.

But accounts (ii) and (iii) can accommodate the conclusion of Smith's argument as well. Their idea should be that, although desires do not (morally) move us to act, they play some other role in motivation and action, for instance in our teleological explanation of these phenomena.

The Schefflerian challenge. There seems to be the phenomenon of resonance: certain social relationships seem to require certain emotions and attitudes, which again seem to require moral beliefs and concerns. Hence, we cannot avoid having such beliefs and concerns, and being motivated by them (Scheffler assumes that failure to be ever motivated by moral considerations indicates the absence of moral beliefs or concerns; 138). The challenge is to explain this in terms of a realistic psychological theory.

One of my points will be to argue that this challenge should be addressed primarily, not by a theory of motivation, but instead by a theory of the relationships, emotions and attitudes concerned. The phenomenon of resonance raises two important questions: why we have, and cannot avoid having, the respective relationships, emotions and attitudes; and why they require moral beliefs or concerns (which we thus also cannot avoid having). The first question can presumably be answered in terms of certain values attached to the having of those relationships, emotions and attitudes (and perhaps also in terms of certain values recognized by them: 95); while the second requires an account of the role of the emotions or attitudes in moral epistemology and deliberation. Neither has much to do with motivation. (Note that a Freudian theory, for instance, may explain why we feel guilty; but it does not seem to be able to explain why guilt should count as a moral emotion.)

Scheffler seems to think that resonance shows also that we cannot help but being morally motivated, even if we did not want to be so motivated (95 and 138; cf. above). But first, this is perhaps in tension with the normative constraint. And second, there is no reason to assume that account (ii) is better placed to account for this alleged aspect of resonance than (i) or (iii), given that it is assumed that we also cannot avoid having moral sentiments and beliefs, and given that one or the other of these are taken to be the relevant sources of moral motivation by the latter two accounts.

Besides, there is always the problem that understanding resonance in this way may have the consequence that our moral values turn out to be instrumental on the values which we attach to our relationships. If we cannot help but having moral beliefs, emotions and motivations because of the specific social lives we (like to) lead, our moral values seem to become dependent on our reasons for living these lives, as well as relativistic, assuming that our reasons for living may vary. (I am not sure whether Scheffler actually argues for something similar in the last chapter of his book.)

The naturalist's challenge. The main difference between accounts (i) and (ii), on the one hand, and account (iii), on the other, seems to be that the former begin with a psychological theory of motivation and then move on to investigate how it can accommodate reasons and normativity, while the latter begins with a rational theory of motivation and then moves on to investigate how it may fit with our psychology. Accordingly, the first two accounts struggle with the normative character of motivating reasons; while the second faces the naturalist challenge of showing how it is compatible with mental causation and, in particular, the impact of desires on motivation and action. However, I don't see any principle reason why this should not be done, and why thus account (iii) should be worse off in this respect than the other two accounts.