

The Right and Wrong Kinds of Motivations: An Argument against the Humean Theory of Motivation

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Abstract: The Humean theory of motivation maintains that cognitive states like beliefs lack motivating force. If an agent were to be motivated to perform an action, s/he would necessarily have a preceding desire Φ and a means-end belief that by Ψ -ing she would be able to satisfy Φ . Although different accounts of this theory have been provided so far, in this paper we will examine the account according to which satisfying the preceding desire is the only basis for motivating someone to choose actions. This paper attempts to show that although the Humean theory of motivation as described above is considered a standard view in explaining intentional actions, it may encounter considerable difficulties to make plausible distinctions between the right and wrong kinds of motivations. In order to demonstrate that, we will first explain Bernard Williams' Humean view and then discuss that ordinary people not only draw distinctions between de re and de dicto motivations, and between self-regarding and other-regarding motivations, but also think that moral agents normally have reasons to be motivated according to the right kind of these motivations in the relevant circumstances. Finally, we shall design a thought experiment to illustrate the point more strikingly. It seems that a plausible theory of motivation in meta-ethics should accommodate these intuitive and common-sensical sorts of distinctions, while the Humean theory of motivation lacks this feature.

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Introduction:

In his paper, “Internal and External Reasons”, Bernard Williams argues for a Humean model of practical reasons. He distinguishes between two sentences: “there is a reason for A to Φ ” and “A has a reason to Φ ”. The former implies that the agent has a desire which will be satisfied by doing ϕ . If the agent does not have a desire to Φ , it would be false to claim that there is a reason for her to Φ ; hence she has no reason to Φ . The latter implies that if the agent did not have the mentioned desire, it would not be false to claim that there is a reason for her to Φ or that she has a reason to Φ . Williams calls the first the internal interpretation and the second the external interpretation, and intends to argue that practical reasons are only of the type of internal reasons and there are no external reasons (Williams: 1979).

In this article, we will critique Williams’ sub-Humean model for practical reasons. We argue that the Humean model of motivation advocated by

Williams does not have sufficient explanatory power in certain respects and cannot plausibly explain many intuitive real-life cases of motivation. Let us first explain Williams’ argument in favour of the Humean model of motivation.

Williams believes that a consideration can be a reason for action for an agent only if it is possible for the agent to be motivated to act for that reason. According to a common interpretation of Williams’ view, if the agent acts for that reason, then that reason will explain her action. If the agent has a practical reason for doing something, then she should be motivated to do it, and if it is possible for the agent to be motivated to do something, she must have a desire to do that. Therefore, if the agent has a practical reason to do something, she must have a desire.

Williams’ account of internal reasons follows from the Humean model of motivation according to which beliefs alone are inert. Beliefs are not enough to motivate people to do actions; rather, if one has a reason for

doing an action, one must also have a desire to be motivated to do that act. However, Williams' Humean theory of motivation has some implausible implications. The following argument shows one of the implications of Williams' account of internal reasons:

1. Every action, including moral actions, is performed only if there is a pre-existing desire that performing that action will satisfy.
2. If all moral actions are performed merely because the desires associated with them are satisfied, then those actions are not performed merely because they are morally right.
3. No moral action can be done merely because it is morally right.

However, Williams' account of a Humean theory of motivation faces serious challenges. One can argue that if the basis for choosing and performing actions in all cases is the satisfaction of desire, then it is difficult to explain plausibly why someone is motivated in considerable cases

of intentional actions. Also, the individuals' judgments in everyday life for performing certain actions cannot be blamed or praised. This, however, is counter-intuitive.

In the following, we distinguish between different kinds of motivations by discussing several examples. These distinctions matter because they show that one may consider people worthy of blame or praise based on their forming motivation for their actions. Therefore, intuitively speaking, people can be blamed or praised based on their motivation to act. If it is rationally plausible to blame or praise someone for their actions, then it is plausible to assume that there is a reason for it. And if there is a reason for doing certain actions with certain motivations, then one can conclude that, at least, there is a normative type of motivation. If we can have a normative sense of motivation, we can have the right and wrong kinds of motivation.

Findings: In this article, we have argued for the inefficiency of the

Humean theory of motivation by discussing several examples. Williams' model of practical reasons that advocates a Humean theory of motivation does not seem to be able to distinguish between different types of motivations and explain why a certain kind of motivation is the right kind, and a certain kind of motivation is the wrong kind of motivation.

Williams' sub-Humean model of practical reasons cannot explain the difference between sincere (de re) and insincere (de dicto) kinds of motivations where our common moral intuitions use this distinction to evaluate people's actions. His account also cannot explain the difference between self-regarding (egoistic) and other-regarding (altruistic) kinds of motivations. The Humean theory of motivation accepts that we do not have purely altruistic motivations for our desires. And every desire ultimately has an egoistic element. But this seems counterintuitive because people tend to believe that there are

purely altruistic motivations, at least in some cases. If the Humean theory of motivation wants to tackle this problem, it must accept that certain desires do not necessarily motivate us. This, however, violates one of the main presuppositions of this theory.

If our argument against the Humean theory of motivation is on the right track, then a proponent of a Humean theory of motivation must accept that since this theory does not distinguish between the right and wrong kinds of motivations, it does not provide the best possible explanation of what we intuitively think of motivations.

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