

DISCUSIONES

CRÍTICA, *Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía*
Vol. XXVIII, No. 84 (diciembre 1996): 41–62

HOW CAN REASON BE PRACTICAL?

G.F. SCHUELER
Philosophy Department
University of New Mexico

“[O]rdinary moral practice”, according to Michael Smith, “suggests that moral judgments have two features that pull in quite opposite directions from each other”. (p. 11)¹ On the one hand, they seem to be, like factual beliefs, capable of being true or false, that is they seem to be about objective matters of (moral) fact and hence justified or not, rationally supported or not, and the like. On the other hand, they seem uniquely practical in at least something like the way desires are. Someone’s moral beliefs are in some sense automatically things she acts on, at least normally. These two features of morality by themselves are difficult enough to make sense of but for someone such as Smith, who also wants to hold a desire-belief (or “Humean”) account of action explanation, they seem very close to being inconsistent. For a Humean, beliefs, though they can be rationally supported, and of course true or false, are by themselves powerless to motivate actions. And desires, which provide the essential motivating force behind actions, are neither

¹ All page references are to Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994, unless otherwise noted.

true nor false and cannot be ‘rational’ in any significant way. So for a Humean “[t]he idea of morality [...] looks like it may well be incoherent [...]” (p. 11) In fact, as Smith notes (p. 137), the problem here is not specifically about morality. The problem is about practical rationality generally. How is it possible for beliefs about what one has reason to do (which, on Smith’s view, include moral beliefs) also to be practical in the sense of issuing in actions, at least sometimes? Or to put it more generally, how is it possible for (some) actions to be both justified by reasons and explained by the reasons that justify them? The central chapters of this book (which I will discuss below) are in fact about this broader question.

Smith devotes the first three chapters (roughly the first half) of this book to examining the two main ways philosophers sympathetic to the Humean view of action explanation have tried to deal with this problem in ethics (though these solutions, if they worked, would equally apply to the broader issue), namely by denying either the objectivity of morality (e.g. the various ‘non-cognitivist’ views) or the practicality of morality (various ‘externalist’ views). Neither of these sorts of moves, he argues, survive detailed examination. So the puzzle remains. His own proposed solution involves distinguishing two different sorts of reasons, “motivating” and “normative”, and then arguing for a Humean account of motivating reasons but an anti-Humean account of normative reasons. This distinction, he argues, when combined with these different sorts of account, lets us preserve the Humean view of action explanation while accepting the objectivity of moral judgments. So in order to evaluate this solution we need first to get clear about how he understands these two sorts of reasons.

It is a commonplace in moral philosophy to distinguish agents’ reasons (explaining reasons) from good reasons (justifying reasons). If I say that Ralph’s reason for going to the

bank was to buy some coffee, I may speak the literal truth. It may be that Ralph's whole purpose in going to the bank was to buy some coffee. That explains why he is going to the bank. So my statement uses the explaining sense of "reason". In another sense, however, Ralph may have had no reason to go to the bank (that is, no good reason), if coffee is not for sale there and never has been. (Maybe Ralph got confused. Since you can now bank at the supermarket, he unthinkingly assumed you could also get groceries at the bank.)

This distinction between (what I will call) explaining reasons and justifying reasons comes straight out of ordinary language and applies to virtually any topic where human rationality is possible. So we can speak of Ralph's reason for *believing* that he could buy coffee at the bank (He assumed that since one can now bank at the supermarket, etc.) as well as asking whether his reason is a good reason for this belief (probably not very). Likewise, if we change the example slightly, we can speak of Ralph's reason for hoping that one can now buy coffee at the bank (He has heard about lots of strange corporate mergers and noticed that you can now bank at the supermarket.) as well as asking whether this is a good reason to hope that coffee might now be for sale at the bank, if one hasn't checked recently (well maybe). And so on.

When he first states the distinction between motivating and normative reasons, early in Chapter Four ("The Humean Theory of Motivation") Smith seems to indicate that it is just this ordinary distinction that he has in mind. "To say that someone has a normative reason to phi", he writes, "is to say that there is some normative requirement that she phi's, and is thus to say that her phi-ing is justified from the perspective of the normative system that generates that requirement". (p. 95) He also says, "The distinctive feature of a motivating reason to phi is that, in

virtue of having such a reason, an agent is in a state that is explanatory of her phi-ing, at least other things being equal [...]” (p. 96) These two sentences are, so far as I can find, the closest Smith gets to explicitly defining these two notions and they seem intended to capture the ordinary distinction.

But as the argument moves along many of the other things Smith says about his motivating-normative distinction make this way of understanding it at least very problematic. For one thing, according to Smith, “The claim ‘*A* has a reason to phi’ is [...] ambiguous [between motivating and normative reasons]”. (p. 95) But this sort of claim is not at all ambiguous between the ordinary sorts of explaining and justifying reasons, to my ear at least. If, thinking of Ralph possibly heading off to the bank to buy coffee, I say “Ralph has a reason to go to the bank”, I would seem to be either endorsing the view that there is coffee to be had at the bank or perhaps claiming that there is something *else* to be said for his going to the bank. But in both cases these are justifying claims. In fact, “*A* has a reason to phi” could be true even if *A* never phi’s at all and it is hard to see how that could be the case if there is an explanatory reading of this sort of claim.

Smith also says, “Motivating and normative reasons do have something in common in virtue of which they both count as reasons. For citing either would allow us to render an agent’s action intelligible”. (p. 95) This is at best quite misleading if by “normative reasons” Smith means justifying reasons of the ordinary sort (as he would seem to, given his initial explanation of “normative reason” quoted above). Ralph might have good (justifying) reason for doing something that he never in fact does (e.g. his desire for coffee might give him good reason to go to the supermarket even if he never goes to the supermarket) and the good reason he has for going to the bank (he needs new

checks) might not be what explains his going to the bank (he is going in order to buy coffee). In neither of these cases does the fact that Ralph has a good reason to do something make his doing of that something ‘intelligible’. In the first case, he doesn’t in fact do the something in question and in the second case, though he does it, it is something else that explains his doing it.

Since Smith seems to want to say that reasons, whether motivating or normative, always in some way explain actions (or ‘render them intelligible’ if that is different), that makes it hard to see how what he calls ‘normative reasons’ are what in ordinary language would be called good reasons. One could have good reasons for doing something one never does and the good reasons one has for doing something may not be what explains one’s doing it.

In any case, by the time we get to Chapter Five (“An Anti-Humean Theory of Normative Reasons”), Smith clearly does *not* mean by ‘motivating reasons’ what in ordinary language would be referred to as the agent’s reasons for doing whatever she does (explaining reasons). When explaining the difference between what he calls “the intentional and the deliberative” perspectives on explanation of intentional action, Smith says, “From the intentional perspective, we explain an intentional action by fitting it into a pattern of teleological, and perhaps causal, explanation: in other words, we explain by citing the complex of psychological states that produce the action. [...] In terms of our distinction between two kinds of reasons, we explain by citing my *motivating reasons*.” (p. 131, emphasis in the original) The example he gives to illustrate this is his own typing of words on a page. This is explained from the intentional perspective, he says, by citing “my desire to write a book and my belief that I can do so by typing these words [...]” (p. 131)

But it is implausible, or at least very contentious, to say that an agent's reasons for doing something must *always* involve some of her own psychological states. Someone who does something she doesn't want to do, say attends a boring meeting because her contract requires her to do so, might resist vigorously the claim that she did so because she *wanted* to (or wanted to do what her contract required or the like). *Her* reason for going to the meeting, she might say, was not her *desire* to do her duty (the way a desire to see a particular actor might be her reason for going to a certain movie) or even her *belief* that she should do her duty, but the *fact* that it was her duty; her contract required it.

Further evidence for this same point, i.e. that Smith doesn't mean by "motivating reason" what in ordinary language would be called the agent's reason, is that in discussing what he calls the "deliberative perspective" he explicitly identifies the agent's reasons with the considerations the agent had in mind that led her to do what she did. In terms of his example of typing words on a page, he says that the considerations he takes into account, "that it would be desirable to write a book and that I can do so by typing these words [. . .] give *my reasons*" for doing so (my emphasis). "In terms of our distinction between two kinds of reasons", he writes, "these considerations constitute my *normative reasons* for doing what I do, at least as those reasons appear to me" (p. 131, his emphasis) So Smith seems here to endorse the ordinary use of "my reasons" as referring to what I had in mind in doing what I did and to explicitly *contrast* that to what he calls "motivating reasons".

So at this point in the discussion then Smith is really dealing with *three* sorts of reasons, though only two have been explicitly named and discussed. First, what he calls motivating reasons are (according to his earlier definition)

“the complex of psychological states that produce the action” and are cited in ‘intentional explanations’. Second, the agent’s reasons (my reasons if I am the agent) are, as we might say, whatever the agent had in mind in doing what she did. (Typically, as in Smith’s typing case just cited, these will be considerations the agent thinks constitute good reason for doing what she did. But that is not always so. I might realize that my reasons for doing something are not really very good reasons for doing it, but still do it and for those reasons.) These will be what figure into what Smith calls “deliberative” explanations of actions. In the quotation in the above paragraph, they are what he calls “my normative reasons”. Third, and finally, there are what he calls normative reasons. To say that someone has a normative reason, according to Smith’s Chapter Four explanation, is to say that her action “is justified from the perspective of the normative system that generates” the reason in question (p. 95).

All this leaves us with a bit of an interpretative puzzle. If we take Smith’s distinction between motivating and normative reasons as intended simply to be the ordinary distinction between the agent’s reasons (explaining reasons) and good reasons (justifying reasons) then, as we have just seen, many of the things he says seem either problematic or simply false. Worse still, on this reading his discussion of the difference between intentional and deliberative explanations of actions becomes virtually unintelligible since it refers to three, not just two, sorts of reason. We could of course just take everything Smith says about motivating and normative reasons as true by stipulation, that is take the terms “motivating reasons” and “normative reasons” as technical terms, ‘defined’ in context by what Smith says about them in this book, leaving open the question of what if any connection these concepts have with the ordinary concepts of the agent’s reasons and good reasons. Presum-

ably this reading would not be acceptable to Smith himself though since he clearly takes himself to be *arguing* for, e.g., a Humean account of motivating reasons, not just stipulating the meaning of a technical sense of “reason” on which such an account would be true by definition.

My own suspicion is that Smith started, in Chapter Four, with the intention that the motivating-normative reason distinction would be, or be an account of, the ordinary distinction between the agent’s reasons and good reasons, and so would at the very least fully overlap this distinction. This is why his explanation of his distinction early in Chapter Four sounds very close to the ordinary distinction. After giving his version of the desire-belief (or “Humean”) account of motivating reasons, however, he realized that in addition to the form of action explanation for which such a desire-belief account might seem adequate (what he calls intentional explanations of action), there is a form of action explanation in terms of what the agent had in mind (what he calls deliberative explanations of action) for which the desire-belief account doesn’t look very plausible. So given that he only has two sorts of reason on the table, this new sort of explanation, deliberative explanation, must involve the only other sort of reason Smith has distinguished, normative reasons, in spite of the fact that normative reasons were originally explained as requirements or standards, i.e. not at all the right sorts of things for explaining actions. This difficulty is obscured by the use of the word “my” in front of the phrase “normative reasons”. (As pointed out above, when he discusses this at the beginning of Chapter Five, he says a deliberative explanation of his own action will cite “my *normative reasons* for doing what I do”. (p. 131, his emphasis)) But this just makes hash of the original explanation of normative reasons in terms justification as well as ignoring the fact that people don’t always think that *their* reasons are good reasons. And of course, it runs

together the questions of what my reasons actually are and the question of whether these reasons are any good.

I have argued elsewhere² that the desire-belief account of action explanation is deeply problematic. So there is no point in repeating those arguments here. Before considering Smith's discussion of what he calls his "anti-Humean account of normative reason", however, it is worth considering briefly the distinction between intentional and deliberative explanations of action. Though this is an important distinction to notice, it is one which (I want to say) defenders of desire-belief accounts of action explanation should find deeply problematic. If that is right then it may be that the terminological muddle that I have been trying to sort out here covers up a much bigger problem for someone who, like Smith, wants to hold a desire-belief account of action explanation.

"From the deliberative perspective", Smith writes, "we explain an intentional action in terms of the pattern of rational deliberation that either did, or could have, produced it". (p. 131) "[F]rom the deliberative perspective we are interested in which propositions, from the agent's point of view, justify her actions." (p. 132) The clearest sort of case of this, presumably, is when someone deliberates about what to do and then *acts on the basis of that deliberation*. And it is this "on the basis of" that the deliberative perspective is intended to cover. If that is right then there are two points to notice here. The first, rather small one, is that we are not really asking here what, "from the agent's point of view, justified her action" but rather what, from her point of view, *explains* her action, i.e. what *really* led her to do it. Think of the sort of case where the agent knows there

² G.F. Schueler, *Desire: Its Role in Practical Reason and the Explanation of Action*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1995, esp. Chapters 4 and 5.

are several perfectly good reasons for doing something but where only one of these reasons (or indeed something else altogether) actually decided her to act.

The second point though is much more serious. It is this. Once we allow such deliberative explanations, it becomes very difficult to see that there is any real explanatory work left to do for what Smith calls explanations from the intentional perspective, that is, desire-belief explanations of the sort he favors. It is easy to get confused here because the usual case used as an example is one where an agent has some desire and it is that desire which, in her eyes, provides her with a reason to do something (e.g. where she wants to buy some coffee and believes this desire for coffee provides her with reason to go to where it is available).

To see how the confusion arises, think again about Ralph's trip to the bank. Suppose the situation is this. Ralph wants to buy some coffee, realizes he has this desire, believes this gives him a good reason to buy some coffee, thinks coffee is for sale at the bank, reasons that this gives him good reason to head for the bank and, as a result, does so head. If we ask what Ralph's reason for going to the bank was, the correct answer will be "He wanted to buy some coffee, and thought coffee was for sale at the bank". Putting the answer this way might lead us to think that Ralph's desire to buy some coffee is somehow part of the explanation of why Ralph set out for the bank. But if this is a *deliberative* explanation of Ralph's action, that is not so. Ralph's actual desire to buy coffee plays no part *at all* in a deliberative explanation of his action. What gets cited in the deliberative explanation of his action is only his realization (i.e. belief) *that* he has a desire to buy some coffee. The desire by itself, if he were unaware of it (i.e. if he did not believe he had it), could play no role in his deliberation, and hence no role in a deliberative explana-

tion. The belief that he has this desire, even if false, is all that is required.

Explanations of actions by means of the agent's deliberation work in terms of the agent's beliefs, not her desires. Though of course the relevant beliefs are often *about* her own desires, beliefs about desires are still beliefs. So what Smith calls deliberative explanations of actions simply make no use at all of the agent's desires. And the problem here is that once one notices this point about deliberative explanations it is hard to see how what Smith calls intentional explanations should be any different.

Confusion can arise here because of course one is typically well aware of one's own desires, especially desires with a distinct phenomenological feel, such as a craving for coffee. But it is far from obvious that all desires are like this (think of the desire that if the Republicans have the Presidency, the Democrats control Congress). It seems possible to believe one has a desire one doesn't really have and, alternatively, it seems equally possible to have a desire of which one is not aware. But even if these things are not possible, intentional explanations (desire-belief explanations) as Smith explains them are supposed to work via the *actual* desire one has, not via one's *belief* about that desire. That, one's belief about the desire, is what is involved in a *deliberative* explanation.

So what Smith calls an intentional explanation of an action is a desire-belief explanation that (supposedly) makes no use of the agent's deliberation. But then how is it supposed to work? It is no good saying that intentional explanations work by asking how someone with this desire and this belief *would* deliberate, or how it *would be rational* for someone with this desire and belief to reason (as Daniel Dennett puts it when explaining "intentional stance expla-

nations”).³ Not only does this simply repeat the confusion between the desire and the agent’s belief about her desire, it rather obviously makes intentional explanations completely parasitic on deliberative ones. In fact, given Smith’s way of explaining deliberative explanations (quoted above) as working by citing deliberations that “either did, or could have, produced” the action, it seems to make intentional explanations a *form* of deliberative explanation. Though there may be nothing wrong with this view per se, it is hardly one that someone like Smith, who wants to defend a “Humean” account of action explanations, can be happy to accept.

Let us turn now to Smith’s account of what he calls normative reasons. His idea is to give an account of what it is to have a good reason to do something which is both consistent with our ordinary understanding of such reasons (what he calls the ‘platitudes’ we all accept about them) and at the same time fits with his Humean account of motivating reasons. According to Smith, the conceptual connection between believing that one has a good reason to do something, that is believing that doing it is valuable in some way, and desiring, is expressed in the following principle: “C2 If an agent believes that she has a normative reason to phi, then she rationally should desire to phi”. (p. 148) That is, it is a platitude “that what we have normative reason to do is what we would do if we were fully rational”. (p. 150) So we can understand the facts about what we have reason to do, what it would be desirable for us to do, as being *constituted* by facts about the desires we would have were we fully rational. In short, “the belief that we have a normative reason to phi, or that it is desirable that we phi, can

³ Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1987, p. 49.

be represented as the belief that we would desire to phi if we were fully rational". (p. 117)

This is an "anti-Humean" view because it analyzes good or justifying reasons not in terms of actual desires of any sort but in terms of what it would be rational to desire. Before examining this view itself, though, a misleading feature of Smith's way of stating it needs to be set aside. Smith sees himself as reconciling a Humean (desire-belief) account of what he calls motivating reasons with an anti-Humean account of normative reasons. But in fact his account of normative reasons is perfectly consistent with a Humean account of normative reasons. That is because Smith is giving what used to be called a conceptual analysis of the notion of "a normative reason", that is an account of the meaning of "a good reason". An analysis of this sort will, if successful, be virtually empty. It is, as Smith emphasizes, based on and constructed from 'platitudes'. (p. 151) But this means that such an analysis leaves it completely open what, if anything, actually provides one with a good reason to act. As Smith himself puts it, "In defending [this] non-relative *conception* of normative reasons we have therefore said nothing to suggest that, *substantively*, there are any such reasons". (p. 173, his emphasis)

Assuming though that people sometimes do have good reasons to do things, the analysis Smith suggests says nothing at all about what those reasons actually are. So one could, for instance, perfectly well agree with Smith that to say that someone "has a good reason to phi" *means* she "would be rational to desire to phi" and at the same time claim that no one ever has good reason to do anything that doesn't further one of her unmotivated desires (or her own interests, etc.). This would be a 'substantive', and of course 'Humean', claim about justifying reasons, but it is perfectly consistent with the conceptual analysis of "a good reason" that Smith proposes.

How plausible is Smith's analysis of having a good (or "normative") reason to phi? Here is at least one difficulty with the analysis Smith suggests. There is a difference between what one has a reason to do (that is, some reason to do) and what, as we might say, the balance of reasons recommends doing. I might have a perfectly good reason to go to the grocery and yet the balance of reasons still might argue against going, if along with my reason to go, there are also lots of weighty reasons not to go. And of course a similar point applies to reasons to believe, to fear, to hope and so on. In each case we need to distinguish the thought that there is something to be said for 'phi-ing', from the thought that, all things considered (i.e. taking into account everything relevant), one has most reason to phi.

Through most of his discussion of normative reasons Smith speaks (as in the quotations above) of what one has "a reason" to do. And in several of his arguments that is clearly how he wants us to understand it. In denying Williams' claim that the truth of "*A* has a reason to phi" implies that *A* has some motive which would be furthered by *A*'s phi-ing, Smith says that "what it implies is rather that he *would* have some such desire if he were fully rational". (p. 165)

At some crucial places in his discussion, however, Smith's point turns on reading his central claim the other way, that is, not as the claim that "*A* has a (or some) reason to phi" should be understood as "It would be rational for *A* to have a (or some) desire to phi" but as the claim that it should be read as "It would be rational for *A* to want to phi, all things considered". In one of the summaries of his argument, for instance, he says that if we believe we have a reason to phi then we believe we rationally should desire to phi, even if we in fact desire not to phi. And this latter desire gives us no reason to change our belief (that we have a reason to phi). "Believing what we believe", he says, "it

therefore follows that we rationally should get rid of the desire not to phi and acquire the desire to phi instead". (p. 178) But this will only be the case if the "desire to phi" and the "desire not to phi" are all-things-considered desires. No matter how rational it is for me to have some desire to phi, it might still be equally, or even more, rational for me to have a desire not to phi. (I want to take the bus home. So it is rational for me to want to walk to the bus stop. But I also want to stay warm and it is very cold outside. So it is rational for me to want not to walk to the bus stop.)

In spite of some of the things he says, however, and in spite of the way he usually states his principle (though not always, see p. 153), the analysis of justifying reasons that Smith proposes seems much more plausible when understood as referring to what one has most reason to do, all things considered. Consider again the central claim: "the belief that we have a normative reason to phi, or that it is desirable that we phi, can be represented as the belief that we would desire to phi if we were fully rational". (p. 177) If we take this to mean that if an agent has *a* reason to phi then she would have *a* desire to phi if she were fully rational, it seems pretty clearly false. Suppose Ralph has a reason to go to the grocery and knows he does. He is out of coffee, say. But suppose as well that Ralph also realizes he has several very good reasons not to go to the grocery: there is a terrible storm raging outside, his wife is ill and needs his care, the car is not working so he would have to walk the two miles to the grocery in the storm, etc.

In these circumstances do we really want to say that Ralph would not be "fully rational" if he didn't (still) have some desire to go to the grocery, that is that the person whose desire to go to the grocery (for coffee) simply vanishes in the face of the overwhelming reasons not to go is not "fully rational"? If not then we will have to read Smith's

analysis as speaking of all-things-considered reasons and desires, i.e. as saying that the belief that we have the best reason all things considered for phi-ing can be represented as the belief that we would have an all things considered desire to phi if we were fully rational. This seems more plausible but put this way though the analysis raises another question, which I will mention but not pursue, namely why a desire comes into it at all. Why not just say, for instance, that the person who has the best reason all things considered for phi-ing is someone who, if she were fully rational, *would* phi, or intend (or try?) to phi?

From what has been said so far it may not be clear how Smith thinks his two accounts, of motivating reasons and normative reasons, provide a solution to what he calls the moral problem, that is (really), to the problem of how reason can be practical. So we need to look at how Smith thinks his two accounts fit together so as to solve this problem. According to his account of motivating reasons (and setting aside the problems about deliberative explanations already discussed), actions are explained by reference to the agent's desire to perform an action of a certain kind plus her belief that the action in question is of that kind. According to his account of what he calls normative reasons, an agent has a good reason to phi when it would be rational for that agent to have a desire to phi. Of course an agent may or may not actually be rational but if she is she either already has the desire to do what she has reason to do or else her realization that she has reason to do it produces in her a desire to do it. As Smith puts it, “[W]hen we deliberate, we try to decide what we have reason to do, and to the extent that we are rational we will either already have corresponding desires or our beliefs about what we have reason to do will cause us to have corresponding desires [...]” (p. 180)

Smith argues that this allows him to hold onto the Humean thought that “[a]ll actions are indeed produced by desires” (p. 179) while still giving an account of normative reasons that does not refer to actual desires, only hypothetical ones. Since he admits though that “some of these desires [that is, actual desires, that explain actions] are themselves produced by the agent’s beliefs about the reasons she has, beliefs she acquires through rational deliberation” (p. 179), it is not clear just how ‘Humean’ this account really is. It was part of the Humean picture that desires are not subject, in the way beliefs are, to rational evaluation. This is a feature that Smith gives up when he holds that some of the desires that explain actions are themselves produced by rational deliberation. (In terms of Thomas Nagel’s distinction between motivated and unmotivated desires,⁴ Smith is able to maintain the claim that a desire is involved in the explanation of every action only by appeal to motivated desires.)

This is not merely a terminological point. In fact it is the same problem about deliberative explanation alluded to above. The status of the (motivated) desires produced by deliberation is deeply problematic.⁵ If nothing else it is a bit difficult to see much substantive difference between a view that says deliberation (sometimes) produces action and one such as Smith’s that says deliberation (sometimes) produces a motivated desire that produces action. It seems reasonably clear that if the desire supposed to be produced by deliberation exists *only* so to speak by courtesy of the fact that once the agent performs the act in question it will be *correct to say* of her that she wanted to do it,

⁴ See Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1970, p. 29.

⁵ As I have recently argued and Nagel pointed out long ago (see Schueler, 1995, and Nagel, 1970).

then Smith's deliberation-produces-desire-produces-action account will only be a terminological variant of the idea that deliberation produces action directly. So let's consider, briefly and in closing, the idea that presumably Smith wants, i.e. that in a rational person deliberation at least sometimes causally produces a new, proper, desire to perform the act supported (as being the most rational thing to do) by the deliberation.

There is still a question whether such a view solves the problem of practical rationality or merely relocates it slightly. The problem of practical rationality is (roughly, and partly) the problem of how to make sense of the fact that people who come to believe they have sufficient reason to perform some action (sometimes) do perform that action (and sometimes don't, of course). Smith's answer is that the rational ones (or maybe the ones we call 'rational') are those whose belief that they have sufficient reason to perform the action causes them to want to perform that action (which then causes them to act). The problem of how evaluative beliefs lead to action (and sometimes don't) is replaced with the problem of how evaluative beliefs lead to the desire to act (and sometimes don't).

It is hard to see that, even if correct, this view with a new desire inserted, so to speak, between deliberation and action, constitutes any progress on figuring out how reason can be practical. The question just becomes why *this particular* desire rather than some other (or none at all) gets caused by *this particular* deliberation.⁶ If this isn't just (this part of) the problem of how reason can be practical all over again, it is very close.

Setting aside the question of whether Smith's view solves the problem of how reason can be practical, however, we

⁶ Again, see Nagel, 1970, especially chapters five and six, for the clearest statement of this problem.

can ask directly whether this view is plausible as an account of the way deliberation leads to action. Consider the following case. I am at my desk, working away, with a mug of coffee within easy reach. At some point I am struck by a desire to have another swig. There was no deliberation, the desire just hit me, perhaps because the aroma of coffee wafted my way just at that moment. But I don't just have another swig, I deliberate about it. I weigh the fact that I do indeed want another swig against the fact that I have already had several cups of coffee today, the fact that I know more coffee would make me jittery, and so forth. In the end I decide that my original (unmotivated) desire for another swig is quite good enough reason to have another swig. So I do.

How exactly does Smith want us to understand this process? In particular, how are we to understand the "so" here? Smith's view would seem to be that the belief that results from my deliberation, the belief that I have good enough reason to have another swig, causes me to want to have another swig (which then causes me to have another swig). But of course, I *already* want to have another swig, that was what my deliberation led me to think and gave me enough reason to have another swig. So Smith's view seems to give us one desire too many here.

What Smith actually says (for instance in the quotation from p. 180 above) is that if I am rational I will *either* already have the appropriate desire *or* my belief about what I have reason to do will cause me to have such a desire. So perhaps what he wants to say is that in a case of this sort my original desire for another swig takes over, so to speak, and no second desire gets generated. But this can't be right since, as was argued above, what is required for deliberation here is not an actual desire for another swig but merely my belief that I have such a desire. My deliberation should go the same way, and have the same

result, whether or not that belief is correct (difficult as it might be to imagine it being false). And in any case, there is nothing ‘rational’ about my original (unmotivated) desire for another swig of coffee, even if I am right in deciding that, once I have it, it gives me a reason to have another swig.

What seems needed here is Nagel’s distinction between an unmotivated desire (here, my original desire for another swig of coffee, caused perhaps by the aroma of coffee from the mug) and a motivated desire (here, the desire supposed to result from my deliberation). But it is far from clear that Smith can allow this distinction. The problem is that once one allows that deliberation can ‘generate’ only *motivated* desires, that is desires which are explained and seem only to make sense by reference to the reasoning that produces them (and which are thus quite unlike the unmotivated cravings, yens, urges and the like that seem sometimes to move us unthinkingly to act), it is difficult to see that there is any real substance left to the claim that a desire is involved in the explanation of every action.⁷

Recibido: 22 de abril de 1997

⁷ I am grateful to Sergio Tenenbaum for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

RESUMEN

En *The Moral Problem*, Michael Smith ofrece una solución al enigma de cómo puede la razón ser práctica. Éste es un enigma espinoso para un humeano como Smith, quien cree que toda acción tiene que estar motivada por un deseo, pues, desde el punto de vista humeano, los deseos escapan en gran parte a la crítica racional. La solución de Smith supone distinguir entre razones para la acción “motivantes” y “normativas” y luego argüir que si bien una interpretación humeana (o deseo-creencia) funciona para las razones motivantes, se tiene que ofrecer una interpretación “antihumeana” diferente para las razones normativas. De modo que hay por lo menos cuatro cuestiones por examinar: si la distinción entre motivante y normativo es convincente; si la explicación humeana que da Smith de las razones motivantes funciona; si su explicación antihumeana de las razones normativas tiene éxito; y si estos puntos de vista juntos realmente resuelven “el problema moral”, esto es, si explican cómo la razón puede ser práctica. Este artículo insiste en que la respuesta de cada una de estas preguntas es negativa.

Aunque pretende trazar el mapa de la distinción ordinaria entre razones del agente y razones que justifican, la distinción entre motivante y normativo choca con la interpretación que el propio Smith ofrece de las explicaciones “deliberativas” de las acciones —una interpretación convincente que, sin embargo, no puede hacer uso ni de las razones “motivantes” ni de las “normativas”, tal como Smith las explica. La interpretación humeana que da Smith de las razones motivantes tropieza con el mismo problema. Bien considerado, su explicación antihumeana de las razones normativas adolece, en puntos cruciales, de una incapacidad para distinguir “una razón” de lo que es razonable. Finalmente, aun si dejásemos todo esto de lado, ya que Smith piensa que la creencia que alguien tiene acerca de lo que tiene mejor razón para hacer provoca que lo quiera hacer (si ese alguien es racional), la solución que propone para el problema de cómo la razón puede ser práctica da “un deseo de más” justo en el tipo de ca-

so que debería ser el más sencillo para un humeano: el tipo de caso en el que uno cree que es el deseo inmotivado que uno tiene de hacer algo lo que le da una razón para hacerlo.

[Traducción: Laura Manríquez]