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Moral Motivation, Directions of Fit, and Some of Their Implications for Philosophy of Religion

Mohammad Ali Abbasian Chaleshtori ³

Abstract

“Moral motivation” is one of the most important and widely used concepts in moral philosophy. Moral motivation is in close relation with two key terms in moral philosophy, i.e. “reasons for action” and “moral judgment”. People often do their actions with reasons, and motivational reasons are one of those reasons. People also make moral judgments, and “motivation” is what links judgments to actions. Philosophers of action agree that the agent must be motivated to do the action. A dominant theory among philosopher, known as “Humean theory”, considers two psychological states of “desire” and “belief” to be effective in motivating an agent to act. According to the “Humean theory” of motivation, “desire” is an intrinsically motivational state, with a world- to- mind direction of fit, and “belief” is an intrinsically cognitive state, with a mind- to- world direction of fit. Some moral philosophers deny the generality of Humean theory and consider at least some of our moral beliefs to be cognitive-motivational, with both two directions of fit. The view of the recent philosophers, in my mind, has the merit of being applied to religious beliefs as well. In this case, at least some of our religious beliefs and the statements expressing them should have both two directions of fit. Accepting this view, accordingly, will help us lead to new and two-faceted approaches to religious epistemology and religious language.

Keywords: Moral Motivation, Reasons for action, Belief/Desire, Directions of fit, Religious Epistemology, Religious Language.

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³. **Corresponding Author:** Associate Professor, Department of Islamic Philosophy and Theology, Payam Noor University, Tehran, Iran. Email: abbasian@pnu.ac.ir

Introduction

We have moral knowledge. We usually refer to our knowledge of what is moral and how to do it and make judgments about what is right or wrong, good or bad. We usually do our moral actions with reasons, after which we can explain or justify our actions. However, we are not acting always in accordance with our moral knowledge and judgements. Why people don't act morally? One of the things that can help us understand and explain these inconsistencies is the concept of "moral motivation". In this article, we will discuss the ideas of "moral motivation" and "directions of fit", and the Humean and anti-Humeian theories. At the end, we will propose and defend two ideas: 1) some religious beliefs can have two directions of fit, and 2) accepting that idea will lead us to a new two-faceted approach to religious epistemology and religious language.

Moral Motivation and Reasons for Action

"Moral motivation" is a wide-ranging term in the philosophy of action, philosophy of mind and meta-ethics. It is in close relation with two other important terms in action theory and meta-ethics: "reasons for action" and "moral judgment". People often do their actions for reasons, and motivational reasons are one of those reasons.

They think about what and how to do their action. They often do their actions for reasons, then they explain or even justify their actions with reasons. There are three types of reasons: "normative", "explanatory", and "motivational". "Normative" reasons are, roughly, reasons that support or justify an action from the standpoint of an external well-informed and impartial observer. "Motivational" reasons are, roughly, reasons that the agents consider as supporting and justifying their action, and they perform the action in light of them. There are also "explanatory reasons", which explain an action without necessarily justifying it. The reasons for doing the action become important for us, as well, because they make the action understandable and comprehensible for us.

Almost all normal and mature people are motivated by reasons to perform their act. However, it does not mean that all the reasons are normative. There may be no normative reason at all for the act performed. If the normative reason is the reason that motivated the agent, the normative reason is also a motivational one. We are rational and justified in our actions when we do our actions according to normative reasons. People do their actions, necessarily, for motivational reasons, but these reasons do not always conform to normative reasons, and this is when they commit immoral actions.

The prevailing theory among the philosophers of actions about the nature of the motivational and explanatory reasons goes back to Davidson (1963, p. 685). Davidson has defended the "desire-belief" model of action explanation or motivation, according to which the reasons are combinations of two Psychological states: 1) desire as a practical attitude towards

the act, and 2) belief as a cognitive state that doing the act accomplishes the thing to which the practical attitude belongs.

Moral Motivation and Moral Judgments

We make moral judgments, such as, it is right to give money to the charity, or wrong to kill human beings. Can these judgments motivate us to act in accordance with them? In response to this question, philosophers are divided into two main groups: internalists and externalists. Internalists believe that it is conceptually impossible for someone to make a moral judgment out sincerely but not be motivated to act. Externalists consider motivation as something external to moral judgment, so that depending on whether an agent may or may not have a desire, moral judgment may or may not motivate to act.

The most common and probably the strongest support for externalism comes from Humean account of motivation. According to the Humean theory, the combination of two things motivate someone to act: desire and belief. Desire is an intrinsically motivational mental state, and belief is a cognitive state, and even if it does not have a motivational force on its own, it indirectly contributes to the agent's motivation by providing the necessary information. Desires without beliefs are blind, and beliefs without desires are neutral and inactive.

Directions of fit: Humean/Anti-Humean Accounts

The most sophisticated argument in favor of the Humean account of motivation appeals to the idea of "directions of fit". The idea of "directions of fit" refers to the ways in which beliefs and desires can relate to the world. According to this idea, beliefs are cognitive mental states with a direction of fit of mind- to-world, and desires are pragmatic mental states with a direction of fit of world-to- mind. According to the same idea, the words expressing the beliefs have a word-to-world direction of fit, and the words expressing desires have a world-to-word direction of fit. Beliefs are motivationally inert; they are merely passive responses to the way the world is. In contrast to beliefs, desires are active and wanting the world to conform to them. Beliefs aim at the truth, desires aim at realization. Beliefs and the statements expressing them are true if they fit the world, desires and the sentences expressing them are realized if the world is changed and fits to them.

Humean theory of motivation and the idea of directions of fit has been attacked from at least three fronts. First, from a group of philosophers of action, like Bratman (1987, Ch. 8), who does not consider beliefs and desires as the mere effective factors in motivation, and believes in a third type of psychological states that is distinct and effective in motivating to act. These are "intentions". Bratman believes that the intentions are psychologically real and cannot be reduced to the desire-belief combination. Intentions are motivationally distinctive, and subject to their own unique criteria of rational assessment.

The second front of anti-Humeans includes non-descriptive cognitivists, such as Horgan and Timmons (2000; 2006). Horgan and Timmons consider moral judgments as expressions of beliefs, but in their view, moral beliefs do not describe moral facts or the things in the outside world. Moral beliefs are psychological commitments of agents towards what reality should be, and they should motivate an agent independently of any desire.

The third anti-Humean front includes philosophers such as John McDowell (1979), Mark Platts (1980), David McNaughton (1988), Russ Shafer Landau (2003) and others. These philosophers are generally cognitivists who consider some moral beliefs to be motivational. According to this group of anti-Humean philosophers, moral motivation does not necessarily depend on the presence of desire as a separate and distinct state from belief, because moral belief can itself give rise to motivation in some cases.

Directions of Fit and the Philosophy of Religion

Most of the philosophers of religion have considered the opposite dual divisions of belief/desire, and mind (word)-to-world/world-to-mind (word) directions of fit, as correct. The adherence of those philosophers to the dual divisions has moved them to choose one-sided approaches to religious epistemology and to religious language: purely cognitive or purely pragmatic.

Contrary to the considerations of most philosophers of religion, and in line with anti-Humean moral philosophers, this article will try to propose and defend the view that at least some religious beliefs have two directions of fit. A religious belief state needs to be true, and to make some changes in a religious believer, as well. A religious belief needs to fit the world, if it is a true one, and it must change the attitudes and actions of the religious believer, if it needs to be a satisfied one. The situation is the same with respect to sentences expressing those religious beliefs, so they need to have two directions of fit. Accepting this view, accordingly, will help us to lead to new and two-faceted approaches to religious epistemology and religious language; approaches which are both cognitive and at the same time pragmatic.

Conclusion

Why do people not always act morally, despite having moral knowledge and making moral judgments? One of the reasons for this phenomenon, according to the philosophers, is the lack of motivation. “Motivation” is a key word in philosophers’ discussions of “reasons for action”, and of “judgment”. There are two competing theories of moral motivation: Humean and anti-Humean. According to the “Humean theory”, “desire” is an intrinsically motivational state, with a world-to-mind direction of fit, and “belief” is an intrinsically cognitive state, with a mind-to-world direction of the fit. Some anti-Humean moral philosophers deny the Humean theory and consider at least some of our moral beliefs to be both cognitive and motivational, with both two directions of fit. The view of the recent philosophers, in my mind, has the merit of

being applied to religious beliefs as well. In this case, at least some of our religious beliefs and the statements expressing them should have both directions of fit. Accepting this view, accordingly, will help us lead to new and two-faceted approaches to religious epistemology and religious language.

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