

Besires and the Motivation Debate

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Abstract: This article addresses a number of difficulties and complications in the standard formulations of motivational internalism, and considers what besires might be in the light of those difficulties and complications. Two notions of besire are then distinguished, before considering how different kinds of motivational internalism and different conceptions of besire fare against the significant argument that we may be indifferent to the demands of morality without irrationality.

Keywords: morality, motivation, indifference, besires.

1. Formulating Motivational Internalism

1.1

HOW SHOULD WE characterize the debate over moral motivation? The standard way to set up this debate is to say that what is in question is whether moral judgements necessarily motivate us to act. The “motivational internalist” is said to affirm this thesis, whereas the “motivational externalist” is said to deny it and to say that the motivation for acting on a moral judgement derives from a desire that is independent of it (and thus not necessarily connected with it). On its usual weak interpretation, this motivational internalist doctrine allows that our moral judgements do not necessarily lead us to action, and moral motivations may not even be our strongest motivations, since we may have other desires that motivate us more than moral motivations; and even if there are no stronger rival desires, we may still fail to act on our moral desires due to irrationality. Nevertheless, the motivational internalist believes that in the absence of other rival desires, and in the absence of irrationality, moral judgements *can* by themselves provide sufficient motivational force to lead us to act on them. Motivational internalists divide into cognitivist internalists, who think that moral judgements are *beliefs* that represent moral states of affairs and are sometimes true in virtue of them, and non-cognitivist internalists who deny that thesis. In this paper, I focus only on cognitivist forms of internalism, according to which there are moral beliefs that are necessarily motivating.

1.2

This characterization is framed in terms of beliefs and desires. Let us accept the assumption of those who engage in this debate that beliefs and desires have *natures*: there is something that it is to be a belief or a desire. In saying this, we do not

thereby assume that these natures are distinct. It is common to explain these natures in terms of the metaphor of “direction of fit”. To pick up on one way of doing so, it is said that we change our beliefs to fit the world, while we change the world to fit our desires. As a way of cashing out the content of these unsatisfactorily vague formulations, some philosophers have given accounts of direction of fit in causal-functional terms (e.g., Smith, 1994). Others cash it out in normative terms (Anscombe, 1957; Zangwill, 1998, 2005). In whichever way we spell out what it is to be a belief or a desire, we need a characterization that leaves open the substantive question of whether there are, or can be, states that have *both* directions of fit, since that is a disputed matter. Someone who embraces motivational internalism is someone who questions the belief/desire distinction. On that view, a moral judgement is both – a kind of hermaphrodite state (see McDowell, 1978, p. 19; 1979, p. 346; and 1983, p. 304). Moral judgements have *both* the direction of fit characteristic of belief *and* that of desires. These states are sometimes called “besires”. Besires are not supposed to be gerrymandered mereological sums of two states – a belief plus a desire – each of which could occur without the other. Besires are conceived of as unitary states that have both the representational characteristics of beliefs and the motivational characteristics of desires (Smith, 1994, p. 119). If we accept motivational internalism, then we believe that moral judgements are besires.¹

1.3

The Standard Formulation of such a weak version of motivational internalism, and the commitment to besires, is this:

SF It is necessary that if we have a self-directed moral belief that we ought to do something, then we are motivated to act in accordance with that belief (even if we also have other motivations).

1 Michael Smith has two short arguments against the existence and possibility of besires (Smith, 1994, pp. 118–125). The first alleges that there is an inconsistency between the causal roles that allegedly define beliefs and desires. According to Smith, the perception that not-p tends to cause a belief that p to expire, whereas the perception that not-p tends to cause a desire that p to persist. But, argues Smith, the perception that p cannot tend to do both those things at once (p. 118). (Following Fred Schueler’s (1991) critique, let us charitably read “the perception that not-p” as “the perceptual experience as if not-p”.) But Smith’s claims about beliefs and desires beg the question against besire theorists, for they will just deny that the perception that p tends to cause the besire that p both to continue and to cease. The besirist will deny that the causal roles that are distinctive of besires are the same as the causal roles that are definitive of beliefs that are not desires and of desires that are not beliefs. Besires will share some but not all of the causal roles that are distinctive of beliefs, and some but not all of the causal roles distinctive of desires. Smith’s second argument is that moral judgements cannot be besires because of cases of lack of motivation: the possibility of belief without motivation shows that they are distinct. But why should we infer that some particular besire state is not a unitary state from the fact that there are some *other* states of beliefs without desires? If besires are to be ruled out, it will have to be by means of other arguments.

However, SF is seriously flawed as a way of characterizing the debate over motivational internalism. Irrespective of the view we take of the nature of beliefs and desires, this standard characterization falls short in at least two important ways. First, the issue is formulated in modal terms rather than in terms of essences or natures – that is, it is cast in terms of what is necessary and what is possible, rather than in terms of the essence or nature (or being or identity) of the states in question. And second, it fails to recognize the degrees in which we can believe something or the strength with which we can desire something. In both respects, it is essential to refine and alter the terms of this debate. We must re-characterize motivational internalism, and when we do so in such a way as to take account of these two points, we will see that the dialectical situation alters significantly.

1.4

The first formulational issue concerns the modal character of formulations of motivational internalism. Quite generally, it is unsatisfactory to appeal to a modal relation as a terminus of philosophical explanation. We can usually explain modal relations in terms of the essences or natures of things. Essences or natures do not reduce to necessities, as Kit Fine (1994) has emphasized; but essences or natures do usually explain necessities. On the standard characterization, motivational internalism is the view that moral judgements are *necessarily* motivating. But if moral beliefs are necessarily motivating, in the way that the motivational internalist has in mind, it is surely *because* they are *essentially* motivating, just as water is necessarily H₂O because it is essentially H₂O. It could be that every person necessarily has the distinct desires that externalists postulate to explain moral motivation. In that case, moral beliefs would be necessarily motivating without being essentially motivating. If it were necessarily the case that everyone has a general desire to obey the demands of morality, then moral judgements would be necessarily motivating, but not because motivation is part of what it is to be a moral judgement. So externalists could embrace the doctrine that moral beliefs are necessarily motivating, even though motivation is not internal or essential to moral beliefs.

1.5

Thus we might modify SF and cast the issue in terms of essence.

ESF It is essential to our self-directed moral beliefs that we ought to do something that we are motivated to act in accordance with those beliefs (even if we also have other motivations).

This formulation evades the problem of moral judgements that are necessarily motivating despite not being essentially motivating. Unfortunately it is not at all clear that this formulation is what motivational internalists have in mind. ESF fails to factor the degrees of belief and strength of desire into the motivational internalist

thesis. Beliefs and desires are not black and white; like most things (though perhaps not all), they come in degrees and strengths. We need a doctrine about motivation that respects those degrees and strengths, and in particular respects them by giving them a role according to which those degrees and strengths make a difference; they are not epiphenomenal.² ESF is too weak; it tacitly countenances what I shall call “variable besires”, and it is compatible with the following view:

VB It is essential to our self-directed moral beliefs that we ought to do something that we have a desire to act in accordance with those beliefs of some non-zero strength, but what non-zero strength is not essential.

But this, surely, is not what motivational internalists really have in mind, deep down. Presumably motivational internalists intend to deny that there could be similar moral beliefs with different motivational profiles. But both ESF and VB fall considerably short of that idea. The motivation debate is about whether belief *determines* or *fixes* desire, and this is not true for ESF and VB.

1.6

Perhaps the most natural way to reformulate motivational internalism to take account of both essences and degrees is this:

PB It is essential to our self-directed moral beliefs that we ought to do something that we have a desire to act in accordance with those beliefs of a certain strength; in particular, the strength of that desire is proportional to the degree of the moral belief.

PB is not just the thesis that *some* motivation is essential to a moral belief, but that the *strength* of motivation varies with *degree* of moral belief. That is, either to have a certain degree of belief *is* to have a certain strength of motivation or else a certain strength of motivation is *essential* to a degree of belief. This doctrine gives us something worthy of discussion in the motivation debate. PB is distinct from VB, and this distinction has not been made in the literature, so far as I know. But it is important because, as we shall see, it makes a difference to

2 If one desire is stronger than a second, then, given that we believe that there is an equal chance of satisfying each, one would either choose the first rather than the second (if one had to choose), or else it would be rational for one to choose the first rather than the second (if one had to choose). And if one holds one belief to a higher degree than a second, then either one would act on the first rather than the second (if one had to choose), or else it would be rational for one to act on the first rather than the second (if one had to choose). Degree of belief is not a matter of the *content* of a belief – for example, a matter of how good one thinks a thing is – but of one’s *attitude* to that content.

the kind of arguments that are effective against motivational internalism. The two views fare differently in important ways. The difference between VB and PB is dialectically significant.³

1.7

The standard characterization of motivational internalism does *not* imply PB. It seems that someone could hold that moral judgements are besires even though PB fails. Non-proportional or variable besires seem to be possible. It is a weakness of the standard way of setting up the motivation debate that both variable and proportional besire theorists count as motivational internalists in the way the idea is usually introduced. The modal thesis that there could not be similar moral beliefs with different motivational profiles flows from the essentialist claim of PB. But it seems that there *could* be motivational internalists who only had in mind the weaker idea that when moral beliefs motivate us, they do so by themselves, which is compatible with the possibility of variable besires. Perhaps there are theorists who are happy to embrace just such a doctrine for moral besires according to which their strength of desire can vary independently of their degree of belief. Such a weak doctrine might be attractive for reasons that we have not yet explored.⁴

2. Dialectical Consequences

2.1

What difference do these reformulations and distinctions make to the dialectic over motivational internalism? Those who argue against motivational internalism often appeal to the figure of the amoralist. The amoralist is someone who is *completely*

3 Although it is not of much dialectical significance, we might note that variable besirists can cast their doctrine by appealing to the idea of constitution: they might say that the internalist doctrine should be that moral beliefs are *constituted* by motivation, rather than saying that they are *necessarily* or *essentially* motivating. For the constitution relation allows contingency in the relation between constitutee and constituted. One moral belief might be constituted by one strength of desire, while another similar moral belief can be constituted by a very different strength of desire. The idea would be that the strength of moral desire is not *essential* to degree of moral belief; but it does *constitute* it.

4 Jonathan Dancy (1993) holds a position that is difficult to map on to the options I have delineated. His idea seems to be that some belief states are “intrinsicly” motivating; that is, motivation is “built into” them. Nevertheless, they do not *always* or *necessarily* motivate (pp. 23–24). I do not understand the metaphysics of this. Motivational internalism is the view that each token moral judgement is essentially motivating. And this has strong modal *and* generalist consequences. If water is *essentially* H₂O, then water is *necessarily* H₂O and *all* water is H₂O, and similarly if moral beliefs are essentially motivating, then they are *necessarily* motivating and they are *all* motivating, whether or not they lead to action. What is metaphysically odd is the idea that moral judgements have essences or natures which are the same in all instances of such states, even though some instances of that state do not always, or necessarily, have that property.

indifferent to moral requirements. Complete amorality is inconsistent with both PB and VB. But whether complete indifference is possible is not obvious. Thought experiments hardly help establish the possibility, for familiar reasons. (Either imagination does not entail possibility, or whether we can really imagine something is not obvious.) However, while it is not obvious whether the amoralist is possible, it *is* obvious that our motivations vary while beliefs remain constant. Arguments from accidie, depression and listlessness appeal to phenomena that uncontroversially exist (Stocker, 1979; Mele, 1996). Such phenomena threaten PB. But they do not threaten VB. This is because the possibility of moral motivation varying while moral belief stays constant is part of the variable besire account. So the variable besirist can easily take on board the way moral motivation varies despite constancy of moral belief in cases of accidie, depression and listlessness. The appeal to amorality is dialectically indecisive because it is controversial whether complete indifference is possible. But it is obvious that people become depressed and lose motivation while retaining moral beliefs. Thus the distinction between PB and VB is dialectically significant since an argument from relatively uncontroversial premises threatens one view but not the other.

2.2

Some motivational internalists will want to add a rationality condition, so that we have:

RVB It is essential to our self-directed moral beliefs that we ought to do something that it would be *rational* for us to have a desire to act in accordance with it of some non-zero strength, but what non-zero strength is not essential.

RPB It is essential to our self-directed moral beliefs that we ought to do something that it would be *rational* for us to have a desire of a certain strength to act in accordance with those beliefs; in particular, the strength of that desire should be proportional to the degree of the moral belief.

On both of these views, moral beliefs move us only if we are rational. PB is vulnerable to the accidie, depression and listlessness argument. But RPB can escape that argument by conceding motivational variation between similar beliefs, but explaining it as stemming from irrationality. Rationality is thought of as a second variable, one that also comes in degrees: the more rationality, the more desire varies in proportion to moral belief.

2.3

However, there is an argument that militates against VB, PB, RVB and RPB, which is therefore more dialectically potent than the appeal to accidie, depression and listlessness. It is the appeal to the possibility and actuality of *instrumentally*

rational indifference. A simple example would be of two people who both believe that they should not take a bribe but the first resists while the second does not. The second person takes the bribe, not because he irrationally succumbs to temptation, but because he cares less about morality than the first person, who refused the bribe. The one who takes the bribe exhibits instrumentally rational indifference in that he takes it because he has only a weak concern with what morality demands. The first person, by contrast, might resist the bribe due to having a stronger desire to adhere to what morality demands. Instrumental rationality here is construed in a broad and relatively weak sense, in which having a desire to X is *necessary* if it is instrumentally rational to intend to X (Williams, 1995, p. 35). Or perhaps it is necessary that one have a desire to Y and believe that X is a means to Y. In either case, the rationality of intending something depends on one's desires. Unlike cases of accidie, depression or listlessness, cases of instrumentally rational indifference admit of a distinctive explanation: there is a difference in motivation between people with moral beliefs of the same degree that *is* best explained by a difference between them in their desires. That is what makes it instrumentally rational. (I pursue this argument in Zangwill, 2008.)

2.4

The phenomenon of instrumentally rational indifference looks like it poses a serious difficulty for motivational internalism and offers powerful support for motivational externalism. The motivational internalist can appeal to variable desires in order to account for variations in moral motivation that are due to accidie, depression and listlessness. But cases of instrumentally rational indifference cannot be so explained. For in these cases, both the person who is motivated by the moral belief and the person who is not are rational – instrumentally rational, that is – in virtue of a difference in desires that one has and the other lacks. Therefore there is every reason to believe that the variation does *not* stem from *within* the moral belief itself. It *is* to be explained *externally*, not internally, as it would be on the variable desire mode, or by appeal to non-instrumental rationality, as on the RPB model. The best explanation of such instrumentally rational variation is the externalist one that postulates a desire that is distinct from moral judgement.⁵

2.5

An additional advantage of this kind of argument is that we need not go down the path of debating the question of whether indifference is irrational in some *non-instrumental* sense, perhaps given some Kantian conception of non-instrumental rationality. Nothing under discussion *here* turns on that. Irrespective of whether

⁵ For an articulation and defence of motivational externalism, see Zangwill (2003).

there are Kantian non-instrumentalist rational norms, in the cases of variation that we have been focusing on there seems to be a difference in motivation that *is* traceable to a difference in desire, in which case it is traceable neither to the instrumental irrationality of one of the two cases, nor to a difference in non-instrumental rationality. In these cases, there *is* an explanation by way of a difference in the presence or absence of an extra mental state: there is a difference in how much people care about morality. And that makes it straightforwardly instrumentally irrational. So VB and RVB are vulnerable to such an argument.

2.6

Proportional besirists might deny the possibility and actuality of motivational variation, but that is very implausible given the existence of accidie, depression and listlessness. Or else, they might admit the variation but put it down to a failure of rationality of some Kantian non-instrumental kind. Variable besirists also try to accommodate the variation. But both explanations of the variation are implausible explanations of many kinds of cases, where the more plausible explanation is the distinct desire explanation, which postulates a difference in mental states. Given a moral belief of a given degree that is conjoined with desires of a certain strength, there are also, or can also be, moral beliefs of that same degree that are conjoined with desires of different strengths. The crucial issue is whether this difference in strength of desire, between similar beliefs, is due to some *other* mental difference apart from the moral belief. For besirists of all sorts, this variation is not due to some other desire or emotion of the person. But that is exactly what *is* plausible in the cases of instrumentally rational indifference. It is true that *many* cases of desire variation (given equivalent moral beliefs) can be explained by accidie, depression, listlessness or other such phenomena. But in many *other* cases, there are distinct desires that explain the desire variation. The variation stems from a difference in some *distinct mental state*. (I do not say “by some mental factor”, since *being rational* might be a condition of a person’s mind but not a *mental state* that he has.)

2.7

In any case of motivational variation, we face the question: *why* the variation? I presume that it is unacceptable to say that there is no explanation at all of the difference (see Lycan, 1981, chapter 4 on the general point). That would be obscurantist. The variable besirist story would have to be that the explanation of the difference does not surface at the mentalistic level: the waxing and waning of desire while belief stays constant has no explanation in terms of mental states. But if moral motivation can and does vary such that the variation is instrumentally rational, then moral beliefs are not besires of *any* sort. For there *are* extraneous explanations, and indeed instrumental rationalizations, for the lack of motivation by moral judgements. Of course, many facts about strength of desire are basic, and are

not explained in other mental terms. The only explanation is a brain explanation. But many other facts about desire are explained and rationalized by other mental states. Someone might argue that the variation in strength of motivation from besire to besire is just a basic mental fact that is not explained or rationalized by other mental facts. But the reply would be that the variation in strength of motivation by moral beliefs of the person who is instrumentally rationally indifferent *is* plausibly explained and rationalized by their other mental states.

2.8

I have not here argued conclusively for the possibility and actuality of rational moral indifference, although it is surely *prima facie* very plausible that it is both possible and actual (see further Zangwill, 2008). The main point is that this kind of argument is a more powerful kind of argument against moral besires of any sort than the more usual appeal to amoralists or depressives. Given the possibility and actuality of rational indifference, we would have a good reason not to believe in besires, whether proportional or variable. Explanations that appeal to besires conflict with the most natural explanation in terms of instrumentally rational moral indifference. What the variable besirist is ultimately saying is that there is no explanation of variations in desire that invokes the presence and absence of mental states. But in cases of instrumentally rational moral indifference, *there is*. There may be *some* cases of motivational variation that are explained by variable besires. But motivational internalism is a general thesis. It says that *all* moral motivations are internalist. And it seems that in many cases, the best explanation of the difference between similar moral judgements that motivate to a different extent is the externalist's distinct desire explanation. Even if the idea of a variable besire were respectable, we would lack reason to believe that moral judgements are variable besires, and we would have positive reason to believe that moral judgements are not variable besires.⁶

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⁶ I am grateful for helpful comments from anonymous referees.

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