

## **A Case for Besires**

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### **Abstract**

One Humean view holds that motivation requires beliefs and desires, which are separate and distinct mental states. Beliefs are disposed to fit the world, and desires are disposed to make the world fit them. This view is thought to eliminate besire theory, according to which moral judgments have both a world-mind direction of fit by representing the ethical facts of the matter, and a mind-world direction of fit by motivating action accordingly. Here I argue that besires are fully consistent with the Humean view. The Humean view should be cast at the level of types, while besire theory is supported by introspection on psychological tokens. Existent Humean arguments against besires do not go through, and besire theory remains a viable option—indeed, the option best supported by the evidence—without rejecting the Humean view.

## **A Case for Besires**

According to the Humean view of motivation, beliefs alone cannot motivate. According to besire theory,<sup>1</sup> some first person moral judgments (judgments of the form ‘I morally ought to  $\Phi$ ’) are both belief-like and desire-like in that they represent things as they morally are, and motivate appropriate actions. For example, on besire theory my judgment ‘I ought to visit my grandmother in the hospital’ can both represent a factual moral obligation and motivate me to visit my grandmother without the help of some separate desire-type psychological state.

Can besire theory be right? Not under the Humean view, for on that view besire theory mistakenly attributes motivationally hot, desire-like properties to a certain class of beliefs. It would seem that our options are highly constrained: either we embrace the Humean view, and characterize first person moral judgments as beliefs or desires (but not both), or we reject the Humean view to free up conceptual space for besire theory. Here I want to revive besires and reconcile the antagonism between besire theory and the Humean view. To do so I clarify the Humean view and its rivals, offer a *prima facie* case for besire theory, and then rebut arguments from the Humean view to the denial of besire theory.

### **The Humean View of Motivation and Its Rivals**

The provisional slogan ‘beliefs alone cannot motivate’ requires interpretation, for it leaves open exactly what is required for motivation. The fleshed out core of the Humean view is that beliefs and desires are *distinct existences*, and that motivation requires suitable belief-desire complexes. This Humean core has stronger and weaker versions. On the strong interpretation of the view, beliefs and desires are not only distinct existences, but beliefs alone are not sufficient to generate the desires needed for motivation. This rules out the possibility that beliefs casually produce separate and distinct desires. Until fairly recently, this interpretation has been taken for

granted, and it compels adherents to adopt one of two positions: either moral judgments are 1) standard non-cognitive, desire-like states in need of means-related beliefs to generate motivation, or 2) standard cognitive, belief-like states in need of *antecedently existent* desires to generate motivation.

On a weaker interpretation of the Humean view, beliefs and desires are distinct existences, but beliefs alone are able to causally produce the desires needed for motivation.<sup>2</sup> On this view, it is possible for particular belief-like moral judgments to causally produce the relevant desire-type states, and the two can then conspire to motivate action. The weak view opens up a third option for Humeans: moral judgments are 3) special cognitive, belief-like states that can produce the desires required by Humean motivation *ex nihilo*. Various philosophers, including Ross (1930, 157 ff), Nagel (1970, 29), and Smith (1994, 197), argue that this occurs for moral judgments.

Henceforth, let me just consider the weaker Humean view unless explicitly stated otherwise, for it would seem that desire theorists must reject even that weaker view. After all, desires offer us a fourth option, according to which first person moral judgments are 4) unitary, psychological states with both belief-like and desire-like features, capable of motivating action by themselves. Some philosophers are comfortable rejecting the Humean view, including McDowell (1978), Platts (1979), and Dancy (1993, 20). Though I will argue that desire theory (4) is indeed best supported by the evidence, I want to preserve what is right about the Humean view. So I defend option (4) as a theory about psychological state *tokens*, and argue that it is consistent with the Humean view as a theory of psychological state *types*. If so, the Humean view does not compel one to abandon (4) in favor of one of the options (1)-(3).

### **Moral Judgments as Bires: the Prima Facie Case**

The following *prima facie* case for bires theory shows that moral judgment tokens feature cognitive, belief-like attitudes toward moral contents, and it also shows that those tokened states are capable of motivating all by themselves without the aid of some separate and distinct desire-type psychological state.

The best case for the belief-like character of moral judgments lies in various critical practices within moral discourse. Consider that in moral discourse we often argue with one another about what one should do, morally speaking, as though there is some fact of the matter that settles our disputes. In addition, moral judgments are truth-apt, and it is always appropriate to evaluate the truth of any particular moral judgment. And lastly, for any given moral judgment there is a real possibility of error, i.e., we acknowledge that, while we have confidence in our moral views, it is possible that we are wrong. These kind of critical practices only show up when agents adopt cognitive, belief-like attitudes, for it would be inappropriate to evaluate the truth of the propositional contents of non-cognitive attitudes in sincere disagreement. To take a non-moral case that makes this clear, contrast one's belief that the President is in the White House with one's desire that the president be in the White House. Only the first is subject to genuine disagreement about the fact of the matter, and it would be inappropriate to evaluate the content of the desire as false, seeing as how one is not holding oneself out as committed to its truth. Because the critical practices surrounding moral judgments are more like the standard belief scenario, the discourse itself provides good evidence that moral judgments feature cognitive and belief-like attitudes toward moral contents.

Concerning the desire-like, motivational properties of moral judgments, consider particular moral judgment tokens and what it is like to be motivated by them. Suppose you have

been invited to a party, and you are not at all inclined to attend. But then you recall promising a friend that you would be at that party, and so you judge that you are morally obligated to attend. Or imagine what it is like to judge that you ought to donate money to Oxfam because you realize how your money could meet the basic needs of others. Upon introspection, it seems like these kinds of judgments are capable of motivating all by themselves, and sometimes they succeed. Contrast judgments with purely descriptive contents. When you judge that the Nile is the longest river in the world, or that Mount Everest is the tallest mountain, for instance, introspection reveals that these judgments cannot motivate all by themselves. They require some additional psychological state to generate motivational force.<sup>3</sup> Judgments with moral contents seem qualitatively different in that they can motivate all by themselves.<sup>4</sup>

The claim here is not the motivational internalism thesis that moral judgment tokens always or necessarily motivate, which is worthy of debate in its own right. Nor is the claim here that motivational sources are always introspectively accessible. The modest claim supported by the available evidence is that there are some clear cases where it is introspectable that moral judgment tokens alone carry motivational force. If moral judgment tokens also represent the moral facts of the matter, as our critical practices suggest, it looks like they are *besires*.<sup>5</sup> Can this be right, or is there something about moral discourse or ethical experience that is systematically misleading?

### **Humean Challenges**

The best defense of the Humean view comes from analytical functionalism, according to which beliefs and desires can be established as distinct existences because they have different and separable dispositional or functional roles (see, e.g. Anscombe 1957, §2, Jackson and Pettit 1988, Smith 1994, 111-116). The functional role of a belief is to take information as input,

represent that information, and supply that information to other psychological states. For beliefs, the functional role is popularly summarized by saying that beliefs have a world-mind direction of fit – the contents of one’s beliefs change depending on how one takes the world to be. By contrast, desires have a mind-world direction of fit – the content of one’s desires affect behaviors to make the world conform to them. Their dispositional or functional role is to take information from beliefs and output behaviors.

This bit of Humean theory is thought to supply a defeater for besire theory, leaving us the standard cognitivist, non-cognitivist and production views (options (1), (2), and (3)) despite the fact that none of them fit the introspective evidence well. However, we must hold in mind a crucial distinction between the levels at which the Humean claim can be cast. As an analytic claim, the Humean view is most plausibly about beliefs and desires as *types* of mental states, where types are individuated by their differing dispositional-functional *roles*. As the case for besire theory makes clear, however, evidence for besires comes from introspection on mental state *tokens* or *realizer states*. If we attend to this distinction, we can be more precise about the nature of the besire view, and we can see that the Humean-based arguments against besire theory do not go through.

To clarify besire theory, let us work with an example that shows its directions of fit. Say that I have the means related belief that I can visit my grandmother in the hospital by  $\Phi$ ing. The Humean view requires some additional desire-type state, say, the desire to visit my grandmother in the hospital, to generate motivation. Based on introspective evidence, the besire view says that one way to realize that desire-type state is by tokening a belief-like attitude toward the moral content <I ought to visit my grandmother in the hospital> (i.e., a besire). To be sure, another way to realize that desire-type state is to token a desire-like attitude toward the descriptive

content <I visit my grandmother in the hospital>. The key claim for besire theory is that both tokens—the besire and the standard desire—would have the same dispositional-functional profile vis-à-vis  $\Phi$ ing, and if so, both tokenings meet the Humean’s conceptual desideratum. Both play the same mind-world dispositional-functional role toward the proposition <I visit my grandmother in the hospital>. In addition, the besire token also plays a belief-like role toward the moral content, i.e., it tends to fit what I take to be the normative truth of the matter. It has a world-mind direction of fit with respect to the moral facts.

Admittedly, the belief-plus-normative-content token (the besire) does not token an attitude-content pair that is isomorphic to the way in which we have represented it type-wise as a desire (that is, as a desire-plus-non-normative-content). Is this a problem if we want to say that the besire tokens a desire-type attitude? No. Though it might seem odd to say that a belief-plus-normative-content token is at the same time a tokening of a desire, if the besire token disposes me to  $\Phi$  in the right contexts, then it is entirely appropriate to make psychological ascriptions in terms of desire types regardless of how my psychological tokens are actually getting the dispositional-functional jobs done. Again, with respect to the mind-world direction of fit, the besire token is functionally equivalent to a more standard desire token, and since desire types are individuated by their dispositional-functional role, the besire qualifies as a desire qua type. Crucially, the Humean view remains at the level of types.

Thus, the Humean view only defeats besire theory if there is some argument from the dispositional-functional type claim to the conclusion that realizer token states must be separate and distinct. Below I rebut such arguments.

### **First Argument: Motivation Implies Desire**

It is often thought that motivational states entail the presence of desires. This appears to be Frank Jackson's view: "Hume did enough, it seems to me, to show that the very fact that a belief motivates to some extent entails facts about accompanying desires."<sup>6</sup> Michael Smith and Donald Davidson seem to agree, as this quote from Davidson, favorably discussed by Smith, indicates: "R at t constitutes a motivating reason of agent A to  $\Phi$  iff there is some  $\Psi$  such that R at t consists of an appropriately related desire of A to  $\Psi$  and a belief that were she to  $\Phi$  she would  $\Psi$ ."<sup>7</sup>

Based on this entailment claim an argument against besire theory could proceed as follows:

1. Motivational states are partly constituted by desires such that it is impossible for one to be motivated to  $\Phi$  without an appropriate desire.
2. If there were besires, one could be motivated to  $\Phi$  without having an appropriate desire.
3. Therefore, there are no besires.

Unfortunately, the argument relies on an equivocal use of 'desire' and so it is either invalid or unsound. In the first premise 'desire' refers to a desire type of state with its characteristic dispositional-functional role. Indeed, if the presence of a desire is *analytic* given that one is motivated, one must have a very thin notion of desire in mind, one that encompasses all states with a mind-world direction of fit so that instinctive reactions, prejudices, addictions, hopes and wishes all count as desires.

If 'desire' is not to change meaning in second premise, then here again it refers to a type of state. The second premise then claims that one can be motivated by a besire without the presence of an appropriate desire-type dispositional-functional role. But if desires qua state types are individuated as dispositional-functional roles—and analytic functionalists say this is

what it means to have a desire—then that functional role will be realized by a besire. In other words, one way to have a desire is to have a besire, and having a besire entails that you have a desire. Under a functional analysis of desires, the second premise is false.

Clearly this is not what Humeans have in mind. In the second premise desires are supposed to be realizer states or tokens that fulfill the desire role *and fulfill no other role*. But this stronger claim is far from analytic, and this notion of a desire as a distinct mental token does not show up in the first premise. From the fact that one is motivated we *can* conclude that one has some state that fulfills the desire-type functional role. But we *cannot* conclude how that functional role is realized – that is the work of introspection and empirical psychology, and so far introspection evidences besires.

### **Second Argument: Modal Separateness**

Notice that the functional roles of belief and desire qua type are separate and distinct, and it is always *possible* for these roles to be realized separately. Michael Smith appears to turn this into an argument against besires.

[W]hat Humeans must deny and do deny is simply that agents who are in belief-like states and desire-like states are ever in a *single, unitary, kind of state*. . . . And their argument for this claim is really quite simple. It is that it is always at least possible for agents who are in some particular belief-like state not to be in some particular desire-like state; that the two can always be pulled apart, at least modally. This according to Humeans, is *why* they are distinct existences.<sup>8</sup>

The claim appears to be that there is no such realizer state as a besire doing two things at once because it is always possible to do those things with two separate, specialized mental states instead of one.

The move from separate functional roles to separate realizers is too quick. Here is a parallel case that makes it clear. I have some article of clothing X that has the functional role of keeping me warm. I also have some article of clothing Y that has the functional role of making

me stylish. Because there are two functional roles here, *must* I conclude that I have two articles of clothing? No. My jacket fulfills both roles.  $X=Y$ .

Smith makes the same mistake about besires. His claim appears to be that it is always possible for the belief-like state to pull apart from the desire-like state is a claim about what is epistemically possible given the concepts of belief and desire. Because these concepts are individuated via a functional role analysis, prior to any empirical work it is at least possible for moral motivation to proceed through a combination of separate and distinct belief tokens and desire tokens, and it is always possible to build a psychology that gets the jobs done with separate tokens. It does not follow that moral motivation must proceed, or actually proceeds, through separate and distinct belief tokens and desire tokens. Indeed, after an examination of our critical practices and introspection on moral judgments we have evidence that these roles are actually realized in human psychology by single moral judgment tokens.

Perhaps this is not fair to Smith, for he denies the existence of a single, unitary, *kind* of state that is belief-like and desire-like. Perhaps his reference to *kinds* indicates that he would only deny besires as a type of state, not that he would deny besires as tokened states. This would have the happy result of leaving besire theory intact. The claim that besires are types of states that combine a world-mind direction of fit with respect to  $p$  and a mind-world direction of fit with respect to  $q$  is not central to the besire view. Having said that, it is hard to see why one would deny besires qua types given the seeming ubiquitous psychological tokenings of such states in the form of moral judgments. We need not recognize conjunctive kinds or types generally, if that is a problem, and we need not deny that the dispositional-functional roles of beliefs and desires are separate and distinct, to recognize besires qua types.

Smith's view, however, indicates his rejection of besires as tokens and not just types. In the end he holds that token moral judgments are belief tokens, though special in that they can produce separate desire tokens that did not exist antecedent to the moral judgment (1994, 179).<sup>9</sup> This production view is one he appears to share with Nagel (1970) and Ross (1930), and the view seems to garner its appeal, at least in part, from the Humean theory of motivation. It should now be clear that the suitably humble Humean view concerning distinct dispositional-functional role types provides no argument against besire theory, which primarily concerns how those roles are realized in moral judgments. Because the introspective evidence supports the besire view we now lack any reason to shift to the production view, or more standard cognitive and non-cognitive options.

### **Third Argument: The Falsity of Motivational Internalisms**

The Humean view aside, Smith offers a further argument that we have indirect reason to reject besire theory. The worry is that besires would entail a modally strong internalism thesis, according to which moral judgments necessarily motivate moral action. Because Smith thinks that the modally strong internalism thesis is false we can apply modus tollens to reject besires. Here is what he says:

Is the idea that someone who judges it right to act in a certain way is motivated to act accordingly *simpliciter*? Or is the idea rather that someone who judges it right to act in a certain way is motivated to act accordingly, *ceteris paribus*? The anti-Humean needs moral judgment to be practical in the first sense. But moral judgment is quite evidently practical only in the second.<sup>10</sup>

The simpliciter internalism that Smith rejects comes in different strengths, each of which remains controversial. Let us work with a weak thesis according to which moral judgments about what one ought to do necessarily motivate one's compliance, at least a little bit, but they do not guarantee compliance. While the weaker thesis allows for non-dispositive motivational

influence, Smith rightly points out that it does not accommodate cases where moral judgments fail to have any motivational influence whatever, due to depression, listlessness, or what have you. That is why he rejects even weak forms of simpliciter internalism.

If we agree with Smith and think simpliciter internalism false, this problem spreads to besire theory only if besire theory entails simpliciter internalism. It does not.<sup>11</sup> If moral judgments are besires—that is, if they motivate all by themselves without the aid of separate desire state tokens—it does not follow that they necessarily motivate. The locution ‘motivate all by themselves’ might be a bit misleading in this respect. Besire theorists are not committed to the thesis that besires are intrinsically motivating, at least if that means that they can motivate whatever other features of mind there might be.<sup>12</sup> Any psychological state depends for its existence and efficacy on a favorable psychological context, such as the presence of other mental states and “wiring” between them. Thus, only in a suitable psychological environment can besires motivate without the aid of some separate and distinct motivational state token with a separate and distinct mind-world direction of fit. If that is the besire view, then the motivational power of besires can fail on some occasions, or it can be defective on some occasions, without eviscerating the judgment’s status as a moral judgment and a besire.<sup>13</sup>

The upshot is that besire theory does not entail even weak simpliciter internalism. The major difference between standard cognitivism, standard non-cognitivism, the production view and besire theory, then, does not concern the strength of the modal claim about moral motivation, but how mind-world functional roles are realized by mental states and what goes wrong when they fail to translate into motivation. In all cases, whatever it is that fulfills the desire-type functional role is capable of failing on any particular occasion due to apathy, depression, listlessness, akrasia, misfiring, failure of rationality or will power, or what have you.<sup>14</sup>

## **Conclusion**

We are left with a qualified defense of besire theory based on ethical discourse and introspection on first person moral judgments. Of course, this is a defeasible case, and further empirical research or philosophical argument might prove it wrong as a matter of fact. But contrary to commonly accepted views, the Humean view itself provides no defeaters. This is a substantial result because it opens up options for those, like myself, who are attracted to the Humean view as a non-negotiable psychological platitude. No longer must one choose between the Humean view and besire theory. So long as we carefully attend to the sources of the arguments for besires, and so long as we clearly and consistently distinguish desires qua mental state type or functional role, on the one hand, and desires qua mental state token or realizer, on the other, we see that besire theory is consistent with the suitably humble analytical functionalism of the Humean view.

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<sup>1</sup>Altham (1986) coined the term 'besire.'

<sup>2</sup> For a similar distinction, see Shafer-Landau 2003, 121.

<sup>3</sup> Even in cases where there seems to be a phenomenologically manifest motivational tug to purely descriptive judgments—like your judgment that dinner is ready—upon introspection, one realizes that that judgment requires an additional state—like hunger—to generate motivational force, and it is easy to see that the descriptive judgment by itself is insufficient for motivation.

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<sup>4</sup> Here is how Shafer-Landau puts the point: “before theorizing about motivation, most of us would find it plausible to suppose that some evaluative beliefs—‘that simply must be done’; ‘that is the right thing to do’—can motivate all by themselves. . . . Sometimes a desire simply does not appear on the scene—‘I saw that it needed to be done, and did it. I don’t recall wanting anything at the moment.’” Shafer-Landau 2004, 123.

<sup>5</sup> Note that besires are thought of as states that have belief-like dispositions toward content p, and desire-like dispositions toward content q. For example, I besire that <I ought to save the baby on the tracks> (belief-like toward content p), and that <I save the baby on the tracks> (desire-like toward content q). See Smith 1994, 118.

<sup>6</sup> Jackson 1998, 155.

<sup>7</sup> Davidson 1963; Smith 1994, 92.

<sup>8</sup> Smith 1994, 119.

<sup>9</sup> If true, would not the production view also introduce a conjunctive type of its own: a type of state that is belief-like concerning moral facts, and that is disposed to produce separate desire-like states.

<sup>10</sup> Smith 1994, 120.

<sup>11</sup> The reverse entailment might go through: simpliciter internalism might entail besire theory. To see why consider the following proof. Assume besire theory is false. In that case it is possible for one to sincerely judge that she ought to  $\Phi$  yet have no motivation to  $\Phi$  just in case there is no separate and distinct mental state token supplying the motivation. But then it would not be true that moral judgments necessarily motivate, so simpliciter internalism would be false. Now assume that moral judgments do necessarily motivate. Then they must motivate in all possible worlds where they appear. Barring any necessary connections between distinct mental

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state tokens, we must conclude that the moral judgment mental state is the motivating mental state, that is, moral judgments are besires. Therefore, with the plausible assumption that there are no necessary connections between distinct mental state tokens, simpliciter internalism entails besire theory.

<sup>12</sup> Shafer-Landau argues for a similar position, though he calls some beliefs “intrinsically” motivating. Shafer-Landau 2004, 147-48.

<sup>13</sup> Only when we combine besire theory with an essentialist claim, for example, that no state counts as a besire unless it actually motivates, do we get the result that moral judgments necessarily motivate. This essentialist claim is too strong for any desire-type state, for even occurrent, normal desires combined with relevant means-related beliefs can fail to realize their functional role.

<sup>14</sup> One might think that the standard cognitive view of moral judgments evades the burden of showing how moral motivation fails, but thereby gains the burden of explaining the reliable connection between moral judgments and motivation.