

## Moral obligations and rational desires

In a recent article Michael Smith argues ingeniously that his dispositional theory of value and reasons has a rather definite normative upshot. From it we can derive two obligations: a negative obligation not to interfere with people's exercise of rational capacities, and a positive obligation to do what we can to make sure that people possess rational capacities. The dispositional analysis of value holds that the desirability of some state of affairs, relative to some agent, consists in that state of affairs' being the object of a desire that that agent would have if he were fully rational. Given the link between normative reasons to act and value, if we have a reason to act in a certain way, it follows that we would desire that we act in that way if we were fully rational, or, as Bernard Williams' internalism has it, if we were to deliberate correctly, where the notions of rationality and correct deliberation are taken in a procedural, non-substantive sense.

Smith's strategy is to show that it follows from the very functioning of a fully rational subject (a subject who is theoretically and instrumentally rational) that she will have at least two intrinsic (basic) "moral" desires: that she doesn't interfere with other rational agents' exercise of their rational capacities, and that she does what she can to make sure that others possess rational capacities. In turn these desires ground two reasons to act accordingly, and two obligations. One crucial part of Smith's argument is that "to suppose that rational agents do not extend their concern for non-interference to other rational agents...is to imagine that they make an arbitrary distinction between certain of those on whom they must rely – that they make a distinction between their reliance on themselves and their reliance on others" (Smith 2011: 357).

Smith's hope is to generate a plausible set of moral obligations out of the non-moral materials of the dispositional view. E.g. the nasty husband who treats his wife bad may not actually desire to treat her any better, but still has a reason and an obligation to do so insofar as his rational counterpart, simply *qua* rational, has an intrinsic desire not to interfere with others' exercise of rational capacities (including the man's wife's), and such a desire presumably trumps any conflicting desire the husband might have. But if this is how moral obligations are generated on a dispositional view, then Smith's hope is likely to be frustrated.

First, suppose we want to say that the nasty husband has an obligation to treat his wife better than *he can desire* to do. Smith might think he has an easy answer here: maybe the husband just can't be brought to desire to treat her better, but his rational counterpart has the relevant desire to treat her better than the less than rational man can desire (derived from the general desire not to interfere with people's rational capacities). This answer, however, is problematic, as it posits a mismatch between our motivational abilities and those of our rational counterparts. Thus it removes some of the attraction for an analysis of reasons in terms of rational motivation (reasons must be capable of motivating *us*, not just our rational counterparts), or in terms of ideal advisors rather than ideal exemplars (the ideal advisor must be able to move *us*).

Second, even if Smith can somehow explain the previous obligation, he still is committed to saying that this does not make sense: the nasty husband has the obligation to treat his wife better *than his rational counterpart would desire*. For Smith, this is an impossible obligation to have, since obligations entail reasons, and reasons stem from what our rational counterpart would desire to do. However, it seems like a perfectly conceivable obligation and moral reason, provided that in some sense the agent is able to do such actions as are required.

Third, one mark of the rational counterpart is that he is perfectly internally coherent. He is unfailingly motivated to act according to his best judgment. Insofar as he is only theoretically and instrumentally rational, his best judgments in moral matters are unconstrained by substantive moral truths. If he came to believe that men have the right to treat their wives as they please, he would be motivated to act accordingly. Such motivation would conflict in many instances with a desire not to interfere with peoples' rational capacities. Regardless of how the rational counterpart solves the conflict – it is not clear why he should abandon the immoral motivation – it will be true that the nasty husband, who also has such a morally misguided belief, has at least *some* reason to treat his wife as he pleases. So it is not obvious how a rational counterpart *qua* rational can guarantee against aberrant pro tanto moral reasons.

Fourth, and finally, it is not clear anyway how reasons generated by the intrinsic desires implied by the concept of a rational agent obtain the status of *moral* reasons. For the rational agent himself, such other-regarding desires are simply an expression of his rationality: if he desires that others don't interfere with his rational capacities, he cannot but desire that he doesn't interfere with theirs, on pain of making an arbitrary self/other distinction. But, simply *qua* rational, he doesn't value people's rational capacities for their own sake: he only values them on pain of being irrational. So there is a sense in which his concern with others' rational capacities is purely formal, or morally anodyne. Insofar as our rational counterpart's concerns ground our moral reasons, then our moral reasons will likewise have a purely formal character. It will be up to our contingent evaluative and motivational sets to invest such reasons with moral significance.

M. Smith, 2011, Deontological Moral Obligations and Non-welfarist Agent-relative Values, *Ratio*, 24, 4, 351-63.