

COGNITIVISM AND INTERNALISM

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Abstract

One of the arguments put forward against cognitivism goes along these lines. Cognitivism, motivational internalism and the belief-desire model are jointly inconsistent. A strong case can be made for motivational internalism and for the belief-desire model. So cognitivism has to go.

Firstly, I will argue that these three theses aren't inconsistent. The inconsistency is generated only if we add the *further* claim that beliefs can't cause desires. Second, I will argue that that's false – I will argue that beliefs can cause desires. I will do so by analysing two quite different examples of religious conversion, St. Augustine's and St. Paul's, and arguing that, if we believed that beliefs couldn't cause desires, we might be able to explain the former conversion, but certainly not the latter.

So, despite appearances, cognitivism, motivational internalism and the belief-desire model aren't jointly inconsistent.

Keywords

cognitivism, motivational internalism, belief-desire model, conversion

1. The argument for inconsistency

The three theses may be summed up in the following way.

COGNITIVISM

– Moral judgments are beliefs.

MOTIVATIONAL INTERNALISM

– Moral judgments are always followed up by a desire (or an intention) to act accordingly.

BELIEF-DESIRE MODEL

– We always need to ascribe to an agent a belief-desire pair in order to explain his actions.

– Beliefs have mind-to-world direction of fit; desires have world-to-mind direction of fit.

– There are no mental states with both directions of fit (“besires”).

People who think cognitivism, motivational internalism and the BD model are jointly inconsistent usually argue along these lines:

“According to the BD model, the practical role of beliefs is to tell us how best to fulfil our desires, not to motivate us. Therefore, if moral judgments were beliefs, then motivational internalism would be false because there would be no connection between believing that X-ing was right and feeling motivated to do X. Desires, on the other hand, have a much closer relation to motivation. To feel that X-ing is right is, among other things, to be motivated to do X. Therefore, if moral judgments were desires, then internalism would be true because it would be impossible to feel that X-ing was right and yet feel no motivation to do X.”

So the general structure of the argument is the following. Motivational internalism can't be true unless either moral judgments express desires (in which case cognitivism is false) or beliefs can motivate (in which case the BD model is false). Beliefs can't motivate. Therefore, moral judgments express desires and, consequently, cognitivism is false.

2. A reply

What's wrong with the argument is that it is a false dilemma to say that either moral judgments must express desires, or beliefs must be able to motivate, if internalism is to come out true. The third option is to agree that it is not the role of beliefs to motivate, whilst supporting the claim that entertaining a moral judgment causes an agent to have a desire or an intention to comply with it.

So my claim is that the inconsistency is generated only if we add

CAUSAL INERTIA OF BELIEFS

– Beliefs can't cause desires.

Now the key question is: is it inconsistent for a supporter of the BD model to accept this picture of how people get motivated to act morally? Not if the BD model is defined as I defined it. Nobody said that sometimes we didn't need to ascribe to the agent a belief-desire pair in order to explain his action. Nor that beliefs and desires weren't distinct existences, or that beliefs didn't have mind-to-world direction of fit. Consider an everyday example. My moral judgment to the effect that X-ing is right caused a desire to X, and this desire, coupled with some instrumental beliefs, lead me to act. My moral judgment didn't “jump the queue”, so to speak: my being motivated to act morally *consisted* in my having a desire to act morally, not in my assenting to a moral judgment to the effect that X-ing was right.

A question that often pops up in ethics textbooks is, “Do we need to ascribe to the agent an independently intelligible desire in order to explain his moral actions?” The question is misleading. The moral desire isn't independently intelligible from the moral belief in the sense that we have the desire because we have the belief. But it is independently intelligible in the sense that the belief and the desire aren't being conflated: they're distinct existences.

Before I move on, there is an important clarification to be made: what is the relation (if any) between accepting expressivism (i. e. the view that moral judgments are desires) and accepting the view that beliefs are causally inert? I'm not sure whether there's a *conceptual* connection here, but, as a matter of fact, they usually go hand in hand. There is good reason for that. If you're an expressivist to start with, then you'd better come up with some story as to why beliefs wouldn't fit the job just as well, and accepting the view that beliefs are causally inert does the trick. If you hold the view that beliefs are causally inert to start with, then you need to come up with a story to explain how we get motivated to act morally, and expressivism does the trick.

So by rejecting the view that beliefs are causally inert we are undercutting the motivation for expressivism – and thereby enhancing the prospects for cognitivism.

3. Two cases of conversion

Apparently, it's tacitly assumed that the burden of proof falls upon those who believe, like I do, that beliefs can cause desires, not upon those who think the opposite. I will try to shift the burden

of proof onto my opponents by arguing that there are (at least) two reasons for us to think they can't make much sense of radical changes in personality.

Let's adopt the following terminology: to say of a desire that it is primitive is to say that it is identical to some innate disposition of ours. A non-primitive desire is simply a desire that isn't primitive. The big question is: are there non-primitive desires that didn't originate from primitive desires? I say there are. My opponents say there aren't. The case of St Augustine's conversion seems to show them right. Even while he was a sinner, he had the disposition not to be a sinner. He felt guilty about his sinful life. His conversion is therefore easily explained without appealing to non-primitive desires that didn't originate from primitive desires. But now take a very different sort of conversion: St Paul's. He used to persecute Christians without feeling any remorse. But he eventually "saw the light" and became a Christian himself. The most natural way to describe his conversion would be to say that a radical change in his belief-system caused a radical change in his whole set of motivations. My opponents are barred from saying such a thing. For them, everyone who ever underwent a process of conversion – however radical – had in them from the start the seed of their change.

So there are two reasons why people who hold that beliefs are causally inert are unable to make much sense of radical changes in personality. First, according to their view, those changes aren't *that* radical after all. When St. Paul became a Christian, what happened was merely that his primitive desires (through more or less intricate ways) caused him to refrain from persecuting Christians. Such a transition doesn't even seem to merit being termed "conversion". Second, still according to their view, the beliefs he acquired as a result of his conversion may have provided a convenient way for him to rationalise his actions, but had no causal influence towards his decision to refrain from persecuting Christians. His newly found religious beliefs were epiphenomenal.

Summing up: if we accepted the view that beliefs are causally inert, we would be unable to explain at least some cases of radical changes in personality. That's not so good. Therefore, the burden of proof falls upon whoever says that beliefs are causally inert, not upon those who (like me) say they aren't.