

Why Cannot My Beliefs Fit?

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THOMAS Nagel, in his book *The Possibility of Altruism*, argues that desires are not the basis for all motivation. Nagel distinguishes between motivated and unmotivated desires and argues that some reasons can be traced to unmotivated desires (emotions, urges, etc.), but he argues that it has yet to be shown that all reasons for action must be traced back in this way. Nagel concludes that motivated desires, motivated by practical judgments, are a possible cause of motivation. Peter Ross, in his article “Explaining Motivated Desires,” compares two approaches to the motivational question: what he calls Nagel’s “rationalist” view and the “Humean” view. At the end of his article, Ross argues that the rationalist and Humean views turn out to be so similar that the problem must be resolved by claims about moral judgment. In this article, I argue that Ross seriously misconstrues the rationalist view, in particular Nagel’s view, and thus his misrepresentation undermines his conclusion that the rationalist and Humean views are so similar. To do this I will summarize both Nagel’s and Ross’s arguments, review their terminology, and then show that Ross’s argument (that the “directedness” of beliefs and of “states” needs goals) shows a misunderstanding of Nagel’s argument.

I will begin with how Ross presents the dispute. Ross defines two camps: the rationalists and the Humeans. Both of these camps are internalists; they believe that we are always motivated when we act, or that we act because we are motivated internally. The alternative view is externalism, which says we can act from external constraints. The dispute between

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the rationalist and Humean camps is about how to explain motivation for action. Ross explains that the Humeans believe desires to be the cause of motivation and that the rationalists believe motivation can be explained in terms of reason and belief. Ross uses Nagel's rationalist argument from *The Possibility of Altruism* where Nagel makes a key distinction between motivated and unmotivated desires. Ross describes unmotivated reasons (by quoting Nagel): "[Unmotivated reasons] . . . 'simply come to us' independently of having (conscious or unconscious) reasons for them" (199). Nagel describes unmotivated desires as being like "appetites," "emotions," and as states that although they can "assail" us, can be explained (29). Unmotivated desires are thus desires such as hunger or urges such as seeing a candy bar you like and immediately wanting one. Unmotivated desires are contrasted by motivated desires, which Ross describes as desires had for reasons (199). An example of a motivated reason may be deciding after deliberation that it would be better to stay up and work on a paper than to go to sleep early. (I will discuss the nature of motivated desires below.) Beliefs and reasons do not explain unmotivated reasons at all; thus, unmotivated reasons are not of interest to us and will not be analyzed henceforth.

Ross presents Michael Smith's argument in favor of the Humean view that all motivation stems from desire. Ross defines two types of reasons, motivating and normative, and two types of explanations, teleological and justificatory. Motivating reasons are "constituted by goal-directed intentional states" (200). Ross never explicitly explains what exactly Smith means by a "state," but I will assume he means a mental or psychological state, as in a disposition of some sort. The goal of these goal-directed intentional states is served by these intentional states—in other words there is a goal, and the point of these intentional states is to reach that goal. Thus, motivating reasons motivate because we have some intentional states or dispositions, etc., that aim at some goal, and acting would satisfy them. Teleological explanations explain motivating reasons. A teleological explanation explains a motivating reason in terms of goal-directed intentional states. What Smith seems to be saying is that we have many of these intentional states, and some of them point to the same goal; that is why we have that goal. A normative explanation is a "propositional content on the basis of which the contents of these [mental] states can be justified from the standpoint of some system of normative rules" (Ross 200). Justificatory

explanations explain normative reasons in terms of some system of normative rules. I assume this refers to something such as not jaywalking because it is against the law (the law being the system of normative rules) or not lying because it violates Kant's categorical imperative.

One last definition brings in the conclusion of Smith's argument, that of "direction of fit." There are two kinds of fit, also called directions of fit: mind-to-world and world-to-mind. The mind-to-world fit is when our minds fit the way the world actually is. World-to-mind fit is when we want the world to fit how our mind is. Another way to describe it is that the mind-to-world fit represents the world as it is, and the world-to-mind fit represents the world as it is to be (Smith, *The Moral Problem* 7). Smith argues for the Humean view using motivating reasons in the following manner:

- (1) I have a motivating reason.
 - (2) Teleological explanations explain motivating reasons.
 - (3) Teleological explanations explain motivating reasons in terms of goal-directed states.
 - (4) Goal directed states are a world-to-mind fit.
 - (5) Desires are world-to-mind fit states.
 - (6) Beliefs are mind-to-world fit states.
- (C) Therefore, motivating reasons, and thus motivated desires, are explained in terms of desires, not beliefs.

Smith sums it this way, "The motive that motivates the desire must therefore embody some goal of the agent. But no belief could do that, for beliefs are not the right kind of state to embody the having of goals" ("Reason and Desire" 251-52).

I will start with motivating reasons and goal-directed intentional states. Motivating reasons are defined in terms of goal-directed intentional states, and this definition or explanation of motivating reasons is teleological. If we have a motivating reason, we have it because we have goal-directed intentional states, but what exactly is a goal-directed intentional state? Ross, via Smith, defines a goal-directed intentional state as

a state that has a world-to-mind fit; in other words, he defines it as a desire. But what is a desire? And how do we find or gain a new one? Ross seems content to say that a motivating reason is explained by a desire, and that is why motivation is always caused by a desire. But a goal-directed state is not a sufficient explanation of what a desire is. A state can be some state of being or disposition, so does this include things like appetites or emotions? I will assume this is what is intended and appeal to Nagel's example of a soda pop and dime. (33–34). The example is that of getting thirsty and putting a dime in a soda pop machine in order to get a drink. It is clear that in this example an unmotivated desire is present: thirst, which, although it can be explained, simply assails me. However, I may be able to reason myself into being thirsty; for example, I prepare to do an athletic activity and need to stay hydrated. But let us say in our (Nagel's) example that I am thirsty simply because my body is running out of water and is telling me to seek water. At this point it can be said that I have a goal-directed intentional state. My state is thirst, and my goal is to drink something refreshing.

So far, Smith's definitions can explain the situation, but here the problems start. This is because simply having this unmotivated desire is not sufficient to be motivated to put a dime in a slot: it "seem[s] mysterious that thirst should be capable of motivating someone not just to drink, but to put a dime in a slot" (Nagel 33). I have the desire to quench my thirst, but not to put a coin into a slot—the urge to put a coin into a slot has never occurred to me. Something more is needed, and that is reason or deliberation. I reason (from prior experience, observing others, etc.) that in order to obtain a can of pop, I will need to insert a coin into the slot. After reasoning that putting a coin in the slot a can of pop will come out, I am motivated to do it, and only then do I have a desire to put a coin in the slot. This is a clear case of having an unmotivated desire (thirst) and in order to fulfill that unmotivated desire, I reason to some further action. I derive motivation to do that further action not from my unmotivated desire, but from reason. After deriving a motive to do this further action, I desire to act.

Let us see how this example fits into Ross and Smith's terms. We can distinguish two motivations (although there may be more) that need explaining. They are to quench my thirst and to insert a coin into the slot. In the first case the motivating reason is thirst. The teleological explanation, in terms of a goal-directed intentional state, is that my body

seeks to stay hydrated. The fit of this state is world-to-mind because the mind is looking for the world to satisfy its needs. The motivation to quench my thirst has thus simply assailed me and fits Nagel's description of unmotivated desires. Thus, the first motivating reason is caused by a desire, as Smith contends.

The second motivation is to insert a dime into the slot. The motivating reason is to obtain a can of pop (to quench my thirst). The teleological explanation of this motivating reason, in terms of goal-directed intentional states, is that I have reasoned that inserting a dime in the slot will produce a soda pop with which I may quench my thirst. By that reasoning I have a desire to put the coin in the slot. But this is not a unique goal-directed intentional state—this desire to put the coin in the slot is not an additional desire, and this is the difference between Ross and Smith's view and Nagel's view. I derive the desire to put the coin in the slot by the nature of reason. As Nagel describes: "[The desire to insert the coin in the slot] is a desire *motivated* by thirst plus certain information" (34). There need not be mention of any other desire, or directional state, in order to explain my motivation to insert the coin into the slot. There is no need because of the nature of reason: by having a desire, we automatically desire the means to the end. "Reasons are transmitted across the relation between ends and means, and that is also the commonest and simplest way that motivational influence is transmitted. No further desires are needed to explain this phenomenon" (Nagel 33). On this account there is no need for an additional desire.

As cited above, Smith says, "The motive that motivates the desire must therefore embody some goal of the agent. But no belief could do that, for beliefs are not the right kind of state to embody the having of goals" (*The Moral Problem* 251–52). Above I have effectively shown that beliefs may embody goals. Let us say I am motivated to act on some means. I am motivated to act because I have reasoned that through these means I may achieve a desired end. In this case my desired end is to satisfy an unmotivated desire. My reasoning is therefore based on the belief that the means will bring about the end. Thus, my motivation, which comes from a reason based on beliefs, may embody my goal because "reasons are transmitted across the relation between ends and means" (Nagel 33). Because I have a reason to believe that a certain act will satisfy a desire of mine, I am automatically motivated to do that act and no further desire is necessary.

Smith seems to be saying in this quotation, “One cannot have a desire without having a desire.” Smith’s use of the phrase “the motive that motivates” must mean the reason that motivates the desire.

Why is it not the case that I can be motivated from practical judgment? Why do all desires have to be motivated by further desires? Smith says that if I have a goal (a desire, whether motivated or not) then that goal must be explained by some state that is goal-directed. But by “goal-directed state” Smith means another desire. Where do the desires end? If all desires have to be explained in terms of other desires, then all motivation would come from unmotivated desires, and the only reasons we would ever do anything would be because we have some type of urge or appetite to act. It is absurd to say that my motivation to get out of bed this morning was because of some urge or appetite (or some other unmotivated desire), especially because all the messages my body sent me this morning indicated that I should stay in the warm, restful environment; nevertheless, I got up. I have described a situation, my thirst and the soda pop, in which I derive motivation not from a desire, but through reasoning. I reasoned that I could obtain a soda pop by inserting a dime into the slot. Through this realization I was motivated to do so; there is no need for talk of a desire.

In the introduction of his article, Ross states that Nagel tries to prove that we can “explain motivation for action in terms of reason and belief alone” (199). I agree with this statement, although it may be a little deceptive. It may be better to say that Nagel sets out to prove that it is possible to explain motivation for action in terms of reason and belief alone; however, Nagel never explicitly states this. At the beginning of his chapter entitled “Desires,” in which he makes his important distinction between unmotivated and motivated desires, Nagel states his goal for the chapter is to “argue that . . . accounting for all motivations in terms of the agent’s desires will not work, and that the truth is considerably less obvious and more significant” (27). Nagel goes on to explain that “other motivating factors besides desire may be present among the conditions for the existence of those reasons [for motivation]” (32). Nagel gives an argument that has been hinted at in this paper by my argument that if all motivation must stem from further desires, then we are all acting from unmotivated desires. If a practical judgment is not motivational, and practical reasoning is possible, then some further argument with a motivational conclusion is needed;

however, one can always ask, “Why should I do that?” of all arguments. Thus, either practical judgments are motivational, or practical reasoning is not possible. Practical reasoning is possible; therefore, practical judgments are motivational.

Nagel shows that explaining motivation through desires alone does not work and that it is possible to be motivated by practical judgments. Ross, via Smith, attempts to give an argument that motivation must be explained in terms of desires, using terms that imply that motivation only comes from desire. We have seen that this is not the case, because motivation may be explained in terms of belief and reasoning. However, why cannot I be motivated by other things as well? My point is that Ross and Smith try to show that we can only be motivated by a narrow explanation of desires, but if we think about our everyday experience, it seems that our motivations can come from many different sources, including practical judgment, belief, and reasoning. Why cannot a person help another because they think it the right thing to do, and that is the end of the explanation? Or what would stop me from saying, “My shoe is untied, so I want to eat a candy bar”? Even though the idea may seem strange, and the two things totally unrelated, it seems that different people may have many different reasons and motivations for action. Restricting motivation to explanations in terms of unmotivated desires, urges, hungers, etc., seems strangely restrictive and not indicative of everyday experience. We are filled with more than just goal-directed intentional states, and these other things may also motivate us.

Works Cited

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