

# Externalism and the Content of Moral Motivation

Caj Strandberg

Received: 29 January 2007 / Revised version received: 24 March 2007 / Accepted: 4 April 2007 /  
Published online: 9 June 2007  
© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2007

**Abstract** In his fetishist argument, Michael Smith raises an important question: What is the content of the motivational states that constitute moral motivation? Although the argument has been widely discussed, this question has not received the attention it deserves. In the present paper, I use Smith's argument as a point of departure for a discussion of how advocates of externalism as regards moral judgements can account for moral motivation. More precisely, I explore various explanations of moral motivation that externalists can employ to answer the question Smith poses.

**Keywords** Externalism · Internalism · Desire *de dicto* · Desire *de re* · Moral judgement · Michael Smith · Fetishist argument

## Introduction

A perennial debate in meta-ethics concerns how the relation between moral judgements and motivation should be understood. Advocates of internalism as regards moral judgements maintain that the relation is analytically necessary, whereas advocates of the opposite view – externalism as regards moral judgements – deny this claim. Internalism might be characterised in the following way:

*Internalism* It is analytically necessary that if a person judges that it is morally right that she performs an action, then she is motivated to perform that action (at least to some extent).

---

C. Strandberg (✉)  
Department of Philosophy, Lund University, Kungshuset, Lund 222 22, Sweden  
e-mail: caj.strandberg@fil.lu.se

Thus stated, internalism means that a person's judgement to the effect that it is morally right for her to perform a certain action is sufficient by itself for her to be motivated to perform that action.<sup>1</sup> As I understand externalism, it is simply the denial of internalism. Whether internalism or externalism is correct is considered as one of the main issues in meta-ethics since internalism in conjunction with the so-called Humean theory of motivation is thought to entail that cognitivism as regards moral judgements is false.

In his fetishist argument, Michael Smith raises an important question: What is the content of the motivational states that constitute moral motivation? Although Smith's argument has been widely discussed, I do not think this particular question has received the attention it deserves. In the present paper I am not particularly concerned with the fetishist argument as such, but use it rather as a point of departure for a discussion of how externalists can account for moral motivation. More precisely, I explore different explanations of moral motivation that externalists might employ in answering the question Smith poses.<sup>2</sup>

### The Fetishist Argument

Smith opens the fetishist argument by claiming that it is a "striking fact about moral motivation that a *change in motivation* follows reliably in the wake of a *change in moral judgement*, at least in the good and strong-willed person."<sup>3</sup> Thus, if a good and strong-willed person changes her judgement as to whether a certain action is right or not, her motivation to perform the action changes accordingly. Smith then asks how this *reliable connection* between changes in moral judgement and motivation is best explained.

In Smith's view, the kind of state that accounts for a person's motivation to do what she judges to be right consists in a desire.<sup>4</sup> He sees two ways of understanding such a desire:

<sup>1</sup>Henceforth, when referring to rightness I intend *moral* rightness and when referring to moral judgements I intend self-addressed moral judgements of the kind just mentioned.

<sup>2</sup>It should be mentioned that Smith advocates a weaker version of internalism than the one I am concerned with here: "If an agent judges that it is right for her to  $\phi$  in circumstances C, then either she is motivated to  $\phi$  in C or she is practically irrational" (Smith, M. (1994). *The moral problem*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 61). However, he believes that the fetishist argument provides support to both versions of internalism. (See e.g. Smith, op. cit., p. 72.)

<sup>3</sup>Smith, op. cit., p. 71. Smith has presented somewhat different versions of the argument. Here I follow mainly Smith's original formulation of it (Smith, op. cit., pp. 71–76), but see also Smith, M. (1996). The argument for internalism: Reply to Miller. *Analysis*, 56, 175–184, and Smith, M. (1997), In defence of *The moral problem*: A reply to Brink, Copp and Sayre-McCord. *Ethics*, 108, 111–117. My understanding of the argument has gained from some of the comments it has given rise to: Brink, D. (1997). Moral motivation, *Ethics*, 108, 26–29; Copp, D. (1997). Belief, reason, and motivation: Michael Smith's *The moral problem*. *Ethics*, 108, 49–50; Cuneo, T. (1999). An externalist solution to the 'moral problem.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 59, 359–380; Dreier, J. (2000). Dispositions and fetishes: Externalist models of moral motivation. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 61, 619–638; Lillehammer, H. (1997). Smith on moral fetishism. *Analysis*, 57, 187–195; Miller, A. (1996). An objection to Smith's argument for internalism. *Analysis*, 56, 169–174; Miller, A. (2003). *An introduction to contemporary metaethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 225–227; Olson, J. (2002). Are desires *de dicto* fetishistic? *Inquiry*, 45, 89–96; Sadler, B. (2003). The possibility of amorism: A defence against internalism. *Philosophy*, 78, 63–78; Shafer-Landau, R. (1998). Moral judgment and moral motivation. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 48, 353–358; Svavarsdóttir, S. (1999). Moral cognitivism and motivation. *The Philosophical Review*, 108, 194–215; Toppinen, T. (2004). Moral fetishism revisited. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 94, 305–313, and Zangwill, N. (2003). Externalist moral motivation. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 40, 146–148.

<sup>4</sup>The reference to desires here should not be taken to imply that internalists or externalists are committed to the Humean theory of motivation. The relevant motivational states might consist in beliefs or in desires that are generated by beliefs. However, here I will adhere to Smith's terminology.

either as a desire *de dicto* or as a desire *de re*. If a person is motivated by a desire *de dicto* to do what she judges to be right, her desire has a content that involves the concept of rightness; the concept of rightness figures as a part of the intentional content of her desire. If a person is motivated by a desire *de re* to do what she judges to be right, her desire does not have a content that involves the concept of rightness. In having such a desire, she is motivated to do what she judges to be right, but the concept of rightness is not part of the content of her desire. Put metaphorically: according to the first alternative, the person desires to perform actions because they are right; in the second case she does not. A desire *de re* to do what is judged to be right might consist in a desire to perform actions with certain morally relevant features that right actions are thought to have, e.g. helping people in need.

According to internalism, a person's judgement to the effect that an action is right is sufficient for her to be motivated to perform the action. On this view, there is in other words no need to refer to anything but a person's moral judgement to explain her moral motivation. This also provides internalists with a straightforward explanation of the reliable connection. Before a change in moral judgement, a good and strong-willed person's judgement to the effect that a certain action is right entails that she is motivated to perform the action. After the change, her moral judgement to the effect that the action is not right does not entail that she is motivated to perform the action and, consequently, she might have no motivation to perform the action in question.<sup>5</sup> An analogous account holds for cases where the change goes in the other direction. Hence, internalism is able to explain the reliable connection at issue without referring to anything except a change in moral judgements. Smith also believes that internalists are free to insist that good and strong-willed persons are motivated by a desire *de re* to do what they judge to be right.<sup>6</sup>

According to externalism, a person's judgement to the effect that an action is right is not sufficient for her to be motivated to perform the action. In order for a person to be motivated to do what she judges to be right, she has to have a separate motivational state that is external to her moral judgement. As a consequence, for externalists it is not enough to refer to a change in moral judgements to explain the reliable connection; they have to refer to an external motivational state to provide such an explanation.<sup>7</sup> In Smith's view, the only kind of motivational state that can fulfil this function is a desire *de dicto* to do what is judged to be right.

<sup>5</sup>Of course, she might still be motivated to perform the action but in that case this is due to a motivational state that is not related to her moral judgement.

<sup>6</sup>To see an example of how this might be possible, consider a version of non-cognitivism. According to this view, a person's moral judgement to the effect that an action is right consists in her having a non-cognitive state in the form of a certain kind of desire to perform the action in question. She has this desire, we might assume, because she has a desire of that kind to perform actions which have certain features, and she believes that the action in question has these features. Such a moral judgement is sufficient for her to be accordingly motivated. On this view, her moral judgement does not need to involve the concept of rightness for her to be morally motivated. In other words, she does not have to be motivated by a desire *de dicto*, but might be motivated by a desire *de re*, to do what she judges to be right. For Smith's cognitivist account of how a good and strong-willed person can be motivated by a desire *de re*, see e.g. "In defense of *The Moral Problem*," p. 114. Alexander Miller argues that this account fails, in which case Smith's own view does not escape the fetishist argument. (See Miller, *An introduction to contemporary metaethics*, pp. 225–227.)

<sup>7</sup>According to externalism as I understand it, a moral judgement is never sufficient for moral motivation; an external motivational state is always required in order for a person to be motivated to do what she judges to be right. Since it is the need for an external motivational state that is thought to be problematic for externalism, I do not beg any questions by understanding the view in this way.

However, Smith argues that this explanation is implausible on the ground that good and strong-willed persons cannot plausibly be considered to be motivated by such a desire:

Good people care non-derivatively about honesty, the weal and woe of their children and friends, the well-being of their fellows, people getting what they deserve, justice, equality and the like, not just one thing: doing what they believe to be right, where this is read *de dicto* and not *de re*. Indeed, commonsense tells us that being so motivated is a fetish or moral vice, not the one and only moral virtue.<sup>8</sup>

Smith concludes that since internalists are able to give an explanation of the reliable connection in terms of a desire *de re*, whereas externalists are committed to an explanation in terms of a desire *de dicto*, internalism is preferable to externalism.

### **An Externalist Explanation of Moral Motivation and the Reliable Connection**

I think it is possible to argue that externalists can offer a plausible explanation of moral motivation in terms of a desire *de re* to do what is judged to be right. This explanation is also able to account for central cases of the reliable connection.

We might start by seeing how externalists can explain the fact that a person who holds a judgement to the effect that an action is right is motivated to perform the action in question. Externalist can explain this by assuming that the person has: (1) A normative view according to which certain features make actions right; (2) A desire to perform actions that have these features, and (3) A belief to the effect that the action in question has (some of) these features. A person who judges that an action is right is consequently motivated to perform this action because she believes that certain features make actions right, has a desire to perform actions that have the features in question and believes that the action has (some of) these features.

As indicated, the features referred to in this kind of explanation might be such that the person in question believes that they make actions right.<sup>9</sup> However, they may also consist in other morally relevant features that she believes belong to actions that are right. In what follows I will for the sake of simplicity adhere to the previous formulation. It should also be

<sup>8</sup>Smith, *The moral problem*, p. 75.

<sup>9</sup>I use the phrase ‘make actions right’ in the established but vague sense that is common in meta-ethics. How the right-making relation is to be understood exactly is presumably determined by the meta-ethical theory at issue. Suppose a meta-ethical view claims that rightness supervenes on, but is not identical to, a certain set of features. On this view, what makes actions right might consist in (some of) these features. This is perhaps the most straightforward sense in which it might be thought that features make actions right. However, there are perhaps other ways in which this relation might hold. To illustrate, we might take the following examples. Consider a version of analytical reductionism which states that an action being right consists in an ideal observer wanting to see it performed. On this view, what makes actions right might consist in the features that the ideal observer wants actions to have. (The fact that she wants actions to have these features explains, in combination with her belief that a certain action has these features, why she wants to see this action performed.) Consider next a version of synthetic reductionism which states that an action being right consists in it having a certain natural property, such as maximising happiness. On this view, what makes actions right might consist in this property or certain features that instate it in particular situations. It should be observed, however, that even if it is a meta-ethical theory which determines what the right-making relation consists in, it is presumably a normative theory which determines what the features are that make actions right. These features might in turn consist in non-moral features or thick moral features. When discussing examples of such features, I do not want to commit myself to any particular meta-ethical or normative view.

noted that people need not have any coherent or detailed normative theory of what these features are; however, it seems plausible to suppose that they may consist in non-moral features such as promoting other people's welfare, not causing harm to people, helping people in need, not lying, keeping promises, etc. Needless to say, people disagree as to what these features are and many of them might be mistaken.

It is important to observe that the desire referred to in this kind of explanation is a desire *de re*, not a desire *de dicto*, to do what is judged to be right. The features that the person in question believes make actions right consist in features she thinks are had by actions that are right. Her desire to perform actions that have these features is consequently a desire to perform actions she judges to be right. However, it is a desire *de re*, not a desire *de dicto*. It is a desire to perform actions that have certain features, such as helping people in need. Although she believes that these actions are right, her desire to perform them does not involve the concept of rightness as a part of its content; she is not motivated to perform them because they are right.

We can now continue by seeing how externalists can use this kind of explanation to account for the reliable connection. To illustrate, consider the following example of the reliable connection. Suppose a good and strong-willed person initially judges that it is not right to give money to the beggars in the town centre, but changes her view and comes to judge that it *is* right to give money to them, and that she changes motivation accordingly: before the change she is not motivated to give any money to the beggars, but after the change she is motivated to do so, and her former resistance has vanished.

Externalism can explain this example of the reliable connection in the following way. Assume first that the person in question believes that certain features make actions right. We may for the sake of simplicity call these features *F*. To illustrate, we may suppose that *F* consist, among other things, in helping people in need. Next we may assume she has a desire to perform actions that have these features, *F*. Externalists can now account for the reliable connection at issue by assuming that the person in question alters her beliefs as regards *what actions* have *F*. Before the change in moral judgement, she does not believe that giving money to the beggars has *F* and does consequently judge that it is not right to give them any money. However, for some reason she comes to believe that giving money to the beggars has *F*.<sup>10</sup> (She may for example come to believe that they will not buy drugs for her money, something she thought before.) As a result, after the change in moral judgement she believes that giving money to the beggars has *F* and judges consequently that it is right to give money to them. Now, since she has a desire to perform actions that have *F*, her motivation changes accordingly. That is, before the change in moral judgement she is not motivated to give any money to the beggars, whereas she is motivated to do so after the change, and her former resistance has disappeared.<sup>11</sup>

As just observed, the desire figuring in this kind of explanation is a desire *de re* to do what is judged to be right. In the example above it is a desire to perform actions that have certain features *F* which consists, among other things, in helping people in need. According to this kind of explanation, there is thus no need to assume that good and strong-willed persons are motivated by a desire *de dicto* in order to explain the reliable connection.

<sup>10</sup>As I indicated when I introduced this kind of explanation, it might be the case that a person believes that the action at issue merely has *some* of the features that, according to her view, make actions right. For the sake of simplicity I will take this qualification as implied in what follows.

<sup>11</sup>This holds only *ceteris paribus* since there might be motivational states that are not related to her moral judgements but which are such that she is motivated to perform the action in question already before the change in moral judgement. In what follows, I will take the *ceteris paribus* clause to be implied.

### A Special Case of the Reliable Connection

To my mind, the externalist explanation of moral motivation and the reliable connection suggested above seems quite natural. Why, then, does Smith believe that externalists have to appeal to a desire *de dicto* to explain the reliable connection? The answer is not entirely clear from what he says. However, one reason why it might be thought that externalists have to appeal to such a desire is that they need to do so in order to explain instances of the reliable connection which, unlike the kind of cases just considered, involve changes in a person's view about what makes actions right.<sup>12</sup>

Consider again an example of the reliable connection: a good and strong-willed person who changes judgement as to whether it is right to give money to the beggars and whose motivation changes accordingly. However, assume now that the person in this case simultaneously changes her view of what features make actions right. Suppose that she before the change believes that what makes actions right is *G*. To illustrate, we may assume that *G* consist, among other things, in contributing to people's ability of taking care of themselves. Suppose that she after the change believes that what makes actions right instead is *F*. As before, we might assume that *F* consist, among other things, in helping people in need.

The kind of explanation of the reliable connection I employed in the last section appeals, as we have seen, to a person's view that certain features *F* make actions right, her desire to perform actions that have *F* and her beliefs as regards what actions have *F*. It then accounts for the reliable connection by assuming that the person in question alters her beliefs as regards what actions have *F*. Before the change, she believes that giving money to the beggars does not have *F* and judges consequently that it is not right to give them any money. After the change, she believes that giving money to the beggars has *F* and judges consequently that it is right to do so. Because she has a desire to perform actions that have *F*, her motivation changes as well: before the change she is not motivated to give any money to the beggars while she is thus motivated after the change. What is important to observe is that in this kind of explanation the person's view about what features make actions right remains the same before and after the change; she has merely changed her beliefs as regards *what actions* have these features.

However, the instances of the reliable connection we now are considering involve a change in a person's view of *what the features are* that make actions right, not, or not merely, a change in her beliefs as regards *what actions* have these features. Now, that a person alters her view of what features make actions right does not guarantee that her *desire* as to what actions to perform is adjusted accordingly. That is, although a person has adopted a new view to the effect that certain features make actions right, it does not follow that she has a desire to perform actions that have these features. If that is the case, the kind of externalist explanation suggested earlier is unable to account for the reliable connection at issue. The reason is that the explanation in such a case would not refer to a desire to perform actions which have features that the person after the change believes make actions right. Consider the example above. Before the change in moral judgements the person believes that what make actions right is *G* whereas she after the change believes that what make actions right instead is *F*. However, after the change she need not have any desire to perform actions that are *F*; she might still have a desire to perform actions that are *G*. As a

<sup>12</sup>Smith alludes to such cases at certain points in his argument: *The moral problem*, pp. 71–72; “The argument for internalism,” pp. 180–181, and “In defence of *The moral problem*,” p. 114.

result, the kind of explanation suggested above would be unable to account for the fact that she after the change in moral judgement, when she judges that it is right to give money to the beggars, is motivated to act in accordance with her judgement. It might therefore be thought that externalists cannot provide an explanation of such instances of the reliable connection in terms of a desire *de re*.

Now, externalists can provide explanations of the instances of the reliable connection at issue in terms of a change in moral judgement together with a desire *de dicto* to do what is judged to be right. Return to the example above. Before the change in moral judgement, when the person judges that it is not right to give money to the beggars, she is not, due to her desire *de dicto*, motivated to give any money to them. After the change, when she judges that it is right to give money to the beggars, she is, due to her desire *de dicto*, motivated to do so.

As we have seen, Smith argues that this kind of explanation is implausible with regard to good and strong-willed persons. However, if what I have argued is correct, externalists might need to make use of it only in a limited type of cases. We will find further reasons for this view below.

### An Externalist Explanation of the Special Case of the Reliable Connection

Next it should be observed that externalists actually are able to provide explanations of the reliable connections which involve changes in a person's view about what make actions right in terms of a desire *de re*. Externalists can do so on the assumption that a person who has changed her view of what features make actions right and adopted a new view about which these features are has a pre-existing desire to perform actions which have these features.

Let us consider a simple illustration of how such an explanation might work. Recall again the example of the last section: a person who changes her judgement as to whether giving money to the beggars is right and who modifies her motivation accordingly, while she simultaneously alters her view of what features make actions right. To explain this, externalists may assume the following. Before the change in moral judgement the person in question believes that certain features make actions right. As before, let us call these features *G*. Again, we may assume that *G* consist, among other things, in contributing to people's ability of taking care of themselves. She has a desire to perform actions which have *G*. However, she does not believe that giving money to the beggars has *G* and judges accordingly that it is not right to give any money to them. And since she does not believe that giving money to the beggars has *G*, she is not motivating to do so. We now add the assumption that the person in question has a pre-existing desire to perform actions that have certain other features, *F*. Once more we may assume that *F* consist, among other things, in helping people in need. Now the following happens. As she contemplates her normative view, she comes to doubt whether *G* really make actions right. A result of this process is that she becomes convinced that *F*, not *G*, make actions right. As we saw, she has a desire to perform actions which have *F*. The change in her view as regards what features make actions right has her reflecting over what actions have *F*. When she considers whether giving money to the beggars has *F*, she realises that this action actually has these features. She judges consequently that it is right to give money to the beggars. And since she desires to perform actions which have *F*, she becomes accordingly motivated to give money to them. This kind of explanation of the reliable connection appeals to a desire *de re*, not a desire *de dicto*. Before the change in moral judgement, she



was motivated by a desire *de re* to do what she judges to be right in the form of a desire to perform actions that have features *G*, and after the change she is motivated by a desire *de re* to do what she judges to be right in the form of a desire to perform actions that have features *F*.

This kind of explanation rests on a crucial assumption: that a person who has adopted a new view of what features make actions right has a pre-existing desire to perform actions that have these features. I think it is reasonable to assume that this assumption is correct in many instances of the reliable connection that concern us here. When we after a change in view about what makes actions right are motivated to act in accordance with our new conviction, this is typically because it connects to certain dispositions to act that we already possess. For example, suppose a person who has rejected egoism and adopted a more altruist view becomes motivated to act in accordance with her new conviction. It seems plausible to assume that part of the explanation is that she already has certain dispositions to act unselfishly: to help people in need, etc. However, we can presumably not make this presumption about all relevant instances of the reliable connection.

### Substantially and Non-substantially Good People

Above I have argued that externalism is able to explain central cases of moral motivation and the reliable connection in terms of a desire *de re*. Now I turn to a consideration which provides further support to this view.

As we have seen, Smith believes that the reliable connection holds primarily for good and strong-willed persons. In Smith's view, such a person is characterised by being motivated to do what she judges to be right. What is involved in being a good person is of course a complicated issue, and my remarks are bound to be simplified. However, I think there is an essential distinction between two forms such persons might take. A *substantially* good and strong-willed person is motivated to do what *in fact* is right, not merely what she judges to be right. A *non-substantially* good and strong-willed person is motivated to do what she *judges* to be right, not necessarily what in fact is right. Now, on the assumption that a good and strong-willed person belongs to the first kind, Smith's argument against externalism is mistaken. Since a substantially good and strong-willed person is motivated to do what in fact is right, there can be no question of her *changing* motivation in the significant respect. In that case there is no relevant instance of the reliable connection that is in need of explanation, and Smith's argument does not get off the ground. Accordingly, in a subsequent comment on his argument, Smith makes clear that he has non-substantial good and strong-willed persons in mind.<sup>13</sup>

This contention may need some clarification. In order for a person to be a good and strong-willed in any substantial sense, it is presumably not enough that she does what, on the whole, is right; she has also to perform these actions for the right reasons. That is, that she performs these actions has to be explainable in a way that provides moral justification to them. It seems therefore reasonable to understand a *substantially* good and strong-willed person as someone who is a reliable detector of what makes actions right and who forms her moral judgements and motivation in accordance with her findings. Thus, such a person is able to detect what features make actions right, judges that actions which have these

<sup>13</sup>Smith, "The argument for internalism", pp. 176–177. In order to avoid misunderstanding, Smith has abandoned the expression 'good and strong-willed person' and prefers instead 'moralist.'



features are right and is motivated to perform such actions.<sup>14</sup> For example, if helping people in need makes actions right, she appreciates this, judges that actions with that feature are right and is motivated to perform these actions. In accordance with this conception, Smith claims that “morally perfect people are moved by right-making features.”<sup>15</sup> Now, there is a sense in which a substantially good and strong-willed person may not be motivated to perform actions that actually *are* right. The reason is that she may be mistaken about *what actions* have the features that make actions right. For example, she might mistakenly believe that a particular action helps a person in need and as a consequence be motivated to do something that, as a matter of fact, is not right. However, this clarification does not affect the main point of my argument above. A substantially good and strong-willed person is able to detect what features make actions right and accordingly does not change her appreciation of what these features *are*. Hence, she does not change in a way that externalists have to explain by referring to a desire *de dicto* to do what is judged to be right. A *non-substantially* good and strong-willed person is, like her substantial counterpart, motivated to perform the actions she judges to be right. However, such a person is not a reliable detector of what actually makes actions right and her moral judgements and motivation need accordingly not be consequences of such findings. That is, she is not necessarily such that she detects what features make actions right, judges that actions that have these features are right and is motivated to perform them. She may on the contrary be quite mistaken about what makes actions right and as a result her moral judgements and motivation can be fundamentally erroneous. Moreover, like her substantially good counterpart she may in addition be mistaken about what actions have the features she believes make actions right.

Thus, externalists are not committed to explaining the reliable connection in substantially good and strong-willed persons in terms of a desire *de dicto*; in so far as they have to appeal to such a desire, it is only to explain the reliable connection in non-substantially good and strong-willed persons. However, this does not seem to be any difficulty for externalism. It might perhaps be argued that it would be mistaken to believe that a *substantially* good and strong-willed person is motivated by a desire *de dicto*. The basic reason would presumably be that a person with her character is appropriately morally motivated and consequently not motivated by a desire with that content. In particular, it might be thought that she is motivated to perform actions that have certain features where these features are such that they actually make actions right. For example, if helping people in need makes actions right, she is motivated to perform actions that have that feature. It might consequently be thought that she is motivated by a desire *de re* to do what she judges to be right. This is also the idea suggested by much of what Smith says about good and strong-willed persons. Consider for example the quotation above where he claims that such

<sup>14</sup>It should be stressed that a substantially good and strong-willed person does not have to be consciously aware of the correct normative theory of what makes actions right. The reason why she is able to detect what features make actions right does consequently not have to be that she has theoretical knowledge of the matter, but might instead be that she possesses practical or “silent” knowledge of the appropriate kind. In relation to this, it should also be observed that normative theories might converge in a wide range of cases as to what is right. It is therefore reasonable to assume that substantially good and strong-willed persons can detect the features that make actions right even if they accept different normative theories. Moreover, this suggests that such a person might change her intellectual understanding as to what the correct normative view is, provided she is sensible to these features in the way stated above. Consequently, as long as she is a reliable detector of what these features are, there is no need to explain her moral motivation in terms of a desire *de dicto* to do what she judges to be right, even if she changes her intellectual understanding of what constitutes the correct normative view. Furthermore, it might be argued that people can be more or less good and strong-willed in virtue of being more or less able to detect what features make actions right and more or less motivated to perform actions that have these features.

<sup>15</sup>Smith, “The argument for internalism,” p. 182. See also “In defence of *The moral problem*,” pp. 112–115.

persons are motivated by “honesty, the weal and woe of their children and friends, the well-being of their fellows, people getting what they deserve, justice, equality and the like,” but not by a desire *de dicto*, because the latter would be a “fetish or moral vice.”<sup>16</sup> When Smith appeals to the content of a good and strong-willed person’s desire in this way, he seems to have substantially good and strong-willed persons in mind. However, it does not seem to be any difficulty to claim that a *non-substantially* good and strong-willed person is motivated by a desire *de dicto*. The basic reason is that there does not seem to be anything in her character which suggests that she has to be appropriately motivated. In particular, as she does not have to be such that she detects what features make actions right, there is no reason to presume that she is motivated by a desire to perform actions that have these features. Thus, there is no reason to presume that she is motivated by a desire *de re*; she might just as well be motivated by a desire *de dicto*.

### Being Motivated by a Desire *de Dicto*

If what I have argued is correct, externalists are able to explain the central cases of moral motivation and the reliable connection in terms of a desire *de re* to do what is judged to be right. The only instances of moral motivation that externalists might have to explain in terms of a desire *de dicto* to do what is judged to be right are the following: cases where a person changes her view as regards what features make actions right and does not have any pre-existing desire to perform actions that have these features. Moreover, we have seen that a substantially good and strong-willed person does not change her view of what makes actions right in a way that externalists have to explain in terms of a desire *de dicto*. A non-substantially good and strong-willed person may change her view in that regard. However, it does not seem to be any difficulty for externalists to claim that such a person is motivated by a desire of that nature. Hence, there is only a very limited subclass of moral motivation that externalists may have to explain by referring to desire *de dicto* and these cases are quite readily explainable in that way. As a consequence, externalism is not committed to explaining moral motivation in a way that is vulnerable to the fetishist argument.

One important question I have left uncommented so far is whether there would be any difficulty for externalists to maintain that people quite commonly are motivated by a desire *de dicto* to do what is judged to be right. I will end this paper by briefly arguing that Smith has not provided any convincing argument to this effect.<sup>17</sup> If these arguments are correct, there is reason to doubt that the only cases of moral motivation that are explainable in terms of a desire *de dicto* are those I demarcated above. On the contrary, many, perhaps the majority, of cases where people are morally motivated might be thus explainable. However, as Smith’s discussion bears witness, some people seem to have the strong intuition that certain individuals – especially substantially good and strong-willed persons – cannot plausibly be motivated by a desire *de dicto*. Hence, it might be difficult to provide convincing arguments for the view that moral motivation always is explainable in terms of such a desire. However, as we have seen, externalists need not do so in order to explain this phenomenon.

Above I alluded to one reason why it may be thought that people are not commonly motivated by a desire *de dicto* to do what is judged to be right, namely that good and strong-willed persons are not motivated by such a desire. This reason is however due to a

<sup>16</sup>Smith, *The moral problem*, p. 75.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Copp, “Belief, reason, and motivation,” pp. 49–50; Sadler, “The possibility of amorism,” pp. 69–71; Svavarsdóttir, “Moral cognitivism and motivation,” pp. 202–203, and Zangwill, “Externalist moral motivation,” pp. 146–148.

failure to distinguish between two forms such persons might take. There might be reason to believe that substantially good and strong-willed persons are not motivated by a desire *de dicto*. However, there is no reason to believe that their non-substantially good counterparts are not thus motivated. Many people belong presumably to the latter type, and they might consequently be motivated by such a desire.

Another reason why it may be thought that people are not commonly motivated by a desire *de dicto* is that they have to be consciously aware that they are motivated by such a desire. This would presumably be awkward because we do not experience ourselves as being motivated by a desire to do what is right, where this is understood as a desire *de dicto*. Smith indicates that he believes that externalists are committed to this conception when he says that, according to this view, a person is motivated by a “self-consciously moral motive.”<sup>18</sup> However, it is difficult to see why externalists should be thus committed. Externalists may – and presumably should – claim that we are not consciously aware that we are motivated by a desire *de dicto*. They may in other words claim that such a desire stays in the background of our moral deliberation.<sup>19</sup>

There is a further reason why it may be thought that people are not commonly motivated by a desire *de dicto* to do what is judged to be right. Some of the things Smith says suggest that he believes that when a person is motivated by such a desire, she is motivated to perform these actions without any consideration of their properties except that they are right. He writes in other words as if the person on this alternative would be motivated to perform these actions irrespective of what other properties she believes they have.<sup>20</sup>

However, there seems to be no reason to assume that this is the case. On any reasonable view of rightness, if a person judges that an action is right, she believes that the action has this property in virtue of having certain non-moral or natural properties. This means that when she is motivated by a desire *de dicto* to do what she judges to be right, she is not motivated to perform these actions irrespective of what other features she believes they have. One way to see this is the following. Suppose a person is motivated to perform an action by a desire *de dicto* to do what she judges to be right. She then believes that the action is right in virtue of having certain non-moral properties. If she comes to believe that the action does not have the non-moral properties she first thought it had, she might come to believe that the action is not right after all. Given her desire *de dicto*, her motivation to perform the action will then vanish.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

Let me end this paper by summarising how externalists can explain the fact that a person who judges that an action is right is motivated to perform that action.

Externalists might explain this fact by assuming that the person has a normative view according to which certain features make actions right, a desire to perform actions that have these features and a belief to the effect that the action in question has (some of) these features. The mentioned desire is a desire *de re* to do what she judges to be right. We have seen that this kind of explanation is available also in cases where the person in question has

<sup>18</sup>Smith, op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Shafer-Landau, “Moral judgment and moral motivation,” pp. 158–159, and Svavarsdóttir, “Moral cognitivism and motivation,” p. 202. For the distinction between backgrounding and foregrounding desires, see Pettit, P. & Smith, M. (1990). Backgrounding desire. *The Philosophical Review*, 99, 565–592.

<sup>20</sup>See e.g. Smith, “In defence of *The moral problem*,” pp. 114–115.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Zangwill, op. cit., pp. 148–149.

changed her view of what makes actions right. However, since the explanation in these cases rests on the assumption that the person who has adopted a new view of what features make actions right has a pre-existing desire to perform actions that have these features, it might not be available in all such cases. Furthermore, it might be argued that this kind of explanation is required when the person is substantially good and strong-willed since such a person is motivated by a desire *de re* rather than a desire *de dicto*.

Moreover, externalists might explain this fact by assuming that the person has a desire *de dicto* to perform actions she judges to be right. This kind of explanation is open to externalists in all cases, with the possible exception for those where the person is substantially good and strong-willed since it might be argued that such a person is not motivated by a desire *de dicto* but rather by a desire *de re*. We have also seen that externalists might need to make use of this kind of explanation in some cases where the person has changed her view of what makes actions right. Moreover, there is reason to believe that at least non-substantially good and strong-willed persons might be motivated by a desire *de dicto*.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup>I would like to thank the participants of various philosophical events in Lund, Linköping and Helsinki for valuable discussions of this material. I am also indebted to a number of anonymous referees (*Philosophia*) for valuable comments. One version of the paper appeared in Rønnow-Rasmussen, T., Petersson, B., Josefsson, J., & Egonsson, D. (2007) (Eds.) *Hommage à Wlodek. Philosophical papers dedicated to Wlodek Rabinowicz*, <http://www.fil.lu.se/hommageawlodek>. A substantial part of my work with the paper was supported by a research grant from The Bank of Sweden's Tercentenary Foundation.