

6.1 and 6.2 The Answer to the Moral Problem

To say that we have a normative reason to ϕ in certain circumstances C is to say that, if we were fully rational, we would want to ϕ in C.

“A rational-ideal agent is an agent who is fully rational, where “to be fully rational an agent must not be suffering from the effects of any physical or emotional disturbance, she must have no false beliefs, she must have all relevant true beliefs, and she must have a systematically justifiable set of desires, that is, a set of desires that is maximally unified and coherent.” (Smith 1997, 89)

How do we find out what our fully rational self would want? We use a decision making process known as *reflective equilibrium*. (pg 159) Reflective equilibrium, in part, helps us justify and systematize our desires. When we reflect on all of our non-derived desires (be they specific or general), we can always ask whether there is a way to add an even more general desire that - if it were added - would unite our desires more than if we do not include it. If it does help to unite, then this new set of desires is better justified, and, so, rationally preferable. We may also use reflective equilibrium to abandon certain desires. Desires which do not contribute to systemization, lead us to question their appropriateness. This leads to a loss of justification, and can, therefore, be discarded.

This account of moral motivation and rightness is not inconsistent with naturalism. This is an important aspect of the theory which will be relevant in Smith's response to a Mackie-styled objection. All that his theory requires is that we are psychologically capable of engaging in reflective equilibrium to a sufficient degree. Our 'fully rational self' is, of course, not an actually existing thing. But there is nothing about the laws of nature that make such theorizing as being outside of the naturalistic worldview. We are just talking about psychological possibilities, and psychology is a kind of science.

6.3 Moral Disagreement

When we look at the world, don't we just see deep and unresolvable moral disagreement? Such deep disagreements seem to undermine the idea that fully rational agents will *converge* on what desires we should have. Smith has three things to say in response to this worry.

1. Despite there being much moral disagreement in the world, there is also much moral agreement. Many of us share 'thick' moral concepts such as honesty and treachery.
2. Current entrenched moral disagreements may be solved in the future, just as past entrenched moral disagreements were eventually solved.
3. Much of why current moral disagreement is entrenched is because one or more of the participants in the debate are acting irrationally. You can't convince the irrational person of something because they are immune to good reasoning.

6.4 Four Objections

Standard Objection 1: Hume's 'is-ought' problem

Hume ponders, as do those who endorse this problem, how any discussion of how things actually are in the world could ever entail a claim about how the world should be. We don't, after all, learn ethics in a physics or chemistry class. Again, Smith finds that a parallel kind of problem in the philosophy of color literature will assist the rationalist.

Object x has surface reflectance property α	An agent gives to famine relief in circumstances C
Surface reflectance property α is the property that actually causes objects to look red to normal perceivers under standard conditions	Giving to famine relief in circumstances C is the feature that we would want acts to have in C if we were fully rational, where such a want is of the appropriate substantive kind
Object x is red	Giving to famine relief in circumstances C is the right thing to do in C

Smith states that the second premise in each argument is a necessary truth, and so can be omitted from the argument without changing its validity. Hence, the first premise of both arguments entails their respective conclusions.

Standard Objection 2: Foot and Harman¹

Foot: Immorality and irrationality are not connected.

Harman: Reasoning well and being concerned for others are not connected.

In short, Smith replies by claiming just that the criminal is *intellectually arrogant*. This criminal simply disregards the views of others on the issue of whether or not robbing is acceptable. He doesn't appreciate 'certain arguments' and is, therefore, practically irrational.

Standard Objection 3: Gauthier's Objection

Gauthier thinks that anti-rationalism is uncontroversial and accepted by both sides (i.e. that we have most reason to do what we have the strongest desire to do). Smith denies this. Instead, Smith claims that both sides agree that reflective equilibrium is what is accepted by both sides. Where the disagreement between the two is to be found is in which direction the reflection goes.

¹ There is an epistemic objection that Smith doesn't fully appreciate. He states 'perhaps we are all mistaken about what fully rational creatures would want. But the mere fact that it is *logically possible* that we are wrong, gives us no more reason to endorse the opinions of the successful criminal...' (pg 195) This is not the only sense in which we could be wrong about what fully rational creatures would want. In some sense, you might think that what a fully rational creature would want us to do in C is either impossible for us to know, or that there is no good reason to think that such a creature's desires could map on ours.

The relativist restricts which reasons can be generated by focusing on the agent's present desires. The rationalist, instead, looks not to the agent's present desires but to the fully rational agent's desires. Then, and only then, the rationalist uses those fully rational desires as a basis for what reasons the actual agent should have.

Standard Objection 4: Mackie

Mackie's queerness objection (both ontological and epistemic) rely on objective values being different than Smith has described them. Smith's account is not Rossian; it is passionately naturalistic. According to Smith's version, then, there is nothing queer about moral objectivity properly understood.

As regards the relativity argument, Mackie's position is that there is no rational procedure for resolving moral disagreement. Smith, however, claims that the very construction of moral theories, many as there are, teach us something that Mackie overlooked. The construction of moral theories are attempts to find out what we have normative reasons to do. These just are what fully rational agents would want and we discover this through reflective equilibrium. Hence, there is a rational procedure, and it is reflective equilibrium.

If Mackie, however, is simply denying that fully rational agents will converge, then Smith is fine as labeling this a logical possibility, but one that we shouldn't worry too much about. We shouldn't deny a plausible moral system (Smith's) merely because of a single logical possibility. As it stands now, Smith sees no reason to think that after free and full debate over moral issues there will be no agreement by those who participate.