

michael smith the moral problem

michael smith the moral problem is a significant topic in contemporary moral philosophy, addressing the longstanding conflict between moral motivation and moral judgment. This issue, often referred to as "the moral problem," explores how individuals can be motivated to act morally if moral judgments are understood solely as beliefs. Michael Smith, a prominent philosopher, has made influential contributions to this debate, offering a nuanced perspective on the nature of moral judgments and motivation. His work engages deeply with the challenges of explaining moral motivation without invoking irrational desires or emotions. This article delves into Michael Smith's approach to the moral problem, examining his key theories, their implications, and how they interact with other philosophical viewpoints. The discussion will provide a comprehensive overview of the moral problem as framed by Michael Smith and its significance in ethical theory.

- Understanding the Moral Problem
- Michael Smith's Motivational Internalism
- The Role of Desire in Moral Motivation
- Critiques and Responses to Smith's Theory
- Implications for Moral Philosophy

Understanding the Moral Problem

The moral problem is a central issue in metaethics that questions how moral judgments can motivate actions. At its core, the problem arises because moral judgments seem to have a motivational force,

yet judgments are typically considered beliefs, which are not inherently motivating. This creates a tension between the cognitive nature of moral judgments and the motivational aspect of moral behavior.

Philosophers have traditionally divided this issue into two parts: the internalist challenge, which claims that moral judgments necessarily motivate those who hold them, and the externalist perspective, which denies this necessary connection. Understanding this foundational dilemma is crucial for grasping Michael Smith's contributions.

The Origins of the Moral Problem

The moral problem has been discussed extensively since the 20th century, with significant input from philosophers such as David Hume and G.E. Moore. Hume famously argued that reason alone cannot motivate action, emphasizing the importance of desire. This view set the stage for later debates about the relationship between moral beliefs and motivation.

Key Concepts in the Moral Problem

Several key terms define the moral problem:

- **Motivational Internalism:** The idea that moral judgments inherently motivate action.
- **Motivational Externalism:** The view that motivation requires additional desires beyond moral judgment.
- **Amoralism:** The position that one can sincerely hold moral judgments without being motivated by them.

Michael Smith's Motivational Internalism

Michael Smith is best known for his defense of a sophisticated form of motivational internalism. He argues that moral judgments are intrinsically linked to motivation through a special kind of desire. According to Smith, when someone genuinely makes a moral judgment, they necessarily have a reason to act accordingly.

This position attempts to reconcile the cognitive nature of moral beliefs with the motivational force they exhibit. Smith's theory posits that moral judgments are not merely beliefs but are accompanied by an inherent motivational state.

The Constitutivist Approach

One of Smith's most influential ideas is his constitutivist theory of practical reason. He suggests that the standards of practical reason are constituted by the nature of rational agency itself. In this framework, moral requirements arise from the very structure of rational deliberation, meaning that to be a rational agent is to be motivated by moral reasons.

This constitutivist approach provides a foundation for understanding why moral judgments are necessarily motivating, grounding them in the conditions for rational agency rather than in contingent desires.

The Role of Reasons and Desires

Smith distinguishes between reasons for action and desires but argues that moral judgments generate a specific kind of desire — a desire to do what is right. This desire is not separate from the judgment but is built into the very concept of moral judgment.

Thus, for Smith, the moral problem is resolved by recognizing that moral judgments entail a distinctive motivational state, bridging the gap between belief and motivation.

The Role of Desire in Moral Motivation

Desire plays a crucial role in Michael Smith's account of moral motivation. Unlike some theories that treat desire as an independent factor, Smith integrates desire into the nature of moral judgment itself. This integration is essential for explaining how moral judgments can motivate without appealing to irrationality.

Desire as Constitutive of Moral Judgment

Smith holds that the desire to do what is morally right is constitutive of what it means to make a moral judgment. In other words, moral judgments inherently involve a motivational component — specifically, a desire aligned with moral reasons.

This view contrasts with purely cognitive theories that see moral judgments as mere beliefs detached from motivation.

Addressing the Motivation Gap

The "motivation gap" refers to the problem of explaining how moral judgments produce motivation. Smith's solution is to argue that this gap disappears if one accepts that moral judgments are not just beliefs but include a motivating desire.

- Motivation arises necessarily from moral judgment.
- This motivation is grounded in rational agency.
- The desire to act morally is an essential part of moral cognition.

Critiques and Responses to Smith's Theory

While Michael Smith's approach to the moral problem has been influential, it has also faced various critiques. Some philosophers challenge the constitutivist framework or question whether desires are genuinely constitutive of moral judgments.

Smith has responded to these critiques by refining his arguments and clarifying the conceptual foundations of his theory, maintaining that his internalist position accounts for both the cognitive and motivational aspects of morality.

Challenges to Constitutivism

Critics argue that constitutivism may not adequately explain the normative force of morality or that it relies too heavily on assumptions about rational agency. Some suggest that constitutivism risks circularity by defining moral norms in terms of rational agency, which itself presupposes normative standards.

Debates Over Desire and Moral Judgment

Other critics question whether desires are truly part of moral judgments or if they are separate motivational states. This debate centers on whether moral judgments can be purely cognitive or if they necessarily involve affective components.

Implications for Moral Philosophy

Michael Smith's work on the moral problem has significant implications for ethical theory and metaethics. By addressing how moral judgments motivate action, Smith contributes to a clearer understanding of moral psychology and normative ethics.

His integration of motivation and judgment influences debates on moral realism, moral motivation, and the nature of practical reason, shaping contemporary discussions in philosophy.

Impact on Moral Realism

Smith's internalist account supports a form of moral realism that emphasizes the objectivity of moral reasons while recognizing their motivational force. This approach helps bridge the gap between moral facts and moral motivation.

Advancing Metaethical Inquiry

The moral problem, as explored by Michael Smith, advances metaethical inquiry by focusing on how moral concepts function in human psychology. It encourages philosophers to consider the interplay between belief, desire, and action in ethical theory.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is Michael Smith in the context of moral philosophy?

Michael Smith is a prominent moral philosopher known for his influential work on metaethics and normative ethics, particularly concerning the nature of moral motivation and the 'moral problem.'

What is 'the moral problem' as discussed by Michael Smith?

The moral problem refers to the philosophical challenge of reconciling three plausible claims: that moral judgments motivate, that motivation can be explained by reasons, and that reasons must be normative. Michael Smith explores how these claims can be coherently integrated.

How does Michael Smith propose to solve the moral problem?

Michael Smith suggests that the solution involves understanding moral judgments as inherently motivating because they present reasons that give us motivation. He argues for a form of internalism about moral motivation, linking moral reasons directly to motivation.

What role does internalism play in Michael Smith's account of the moral problem?

Internalism in Michael Smith's account holds that if a person sincerely makes a moral judgment, they are necessarily motivated to act accordingly. This internal connection between moral judgment and motivation is central to his approach to the moral problem.

How has Michael Smith's work on the moral problem influenced contemporary ethical theory?

Michael Smith's rigorous analysis of the moral problem has shaped debates in metaethics about the nature of moral motivation, the relationship between reasons and motivation, and the normative force of moral judgments, influencing both internalist and externalist perspectives.

Can you recommend any key writings by Michael Smith on the moral problem?

One of Michael Smith's key works is his book 'The Moral Problem' (1994), where he thoroughly examines the issues surrounding moral motivation and reasons, offering his influential perspective on the moral problem.

Additional Resources

1. The Moral Problem: Philosophy's Challenge in Ethics

This book explores the central issues surrounding the moral problem as articulated by Michael Smith. It delves into how ethical theories must reconcile the apparent conflict between motivation and moral judgment. The author offers a comprehensive overview of the debates on internalism and externalism in moral psychology, providing a nuanced understanding of Smith's contributions.

2. Michael Smith and the Landscape of Moral Philosophy

An in-depth analysis of Michael Smith's philosophical work, focusing on his approach to moral motivation and normative ethics. The book situates Smith within contemporary debates and highlights his influence on the study of moral reasons. It also addresses critiques and developments inspired by his ideas.

3. Ethics and Motivation: Revisiting Michael Smith's Moral Problem

This volume assembles essays from leading ethicists who examine various facets of Smith's moral problem. It discusses the relationship between moral judgments and motivation, considering both psychological and philosophical perspectives. The book provides critical insights into the ongoing relevance of Smith's arguments.

4. Internalism and Externalism in Moral Psychology

Focusing on the debate central to Michael Smith's moral problem, this book investigates the claims of internalism and externalism regarding moral motivation. It offers a detailed discussion of the theoretical implications for moral theory and practical reasoning. The text is essential for understanding the complexities of Smith's position.

5. The Nature of Moral Judgment: Insights from Michael Smith

This work examines how moral judgments are formed and their connection to motivation, drawing heavily on Smith's theories. It explores the cognitive and affective dimensions of moral evaluation and the challenges these pose to traditional ethical frameworks. The book aims to clarify the conceptual underpinnings of moral judgment.

6. Philosophy of Action and the Moral Problem

Connecting the philosophy of action with ethical theory, this book investigates how Michael Smith's moral problem influences our understanding of moral agency. It discusses the conditions under which moral reasons move agents to act and the implications for moral responsibility. The text bridges gaps between normative ethics and action theory.

7. Contemporary Debates on Moral Motivation

This edited collection includes discussions that revolve around Michael Smith's moral problem,

presenting various viewpoints on what motivates moral agents. It covers arguments for and against internalism, providing a balanced perspective on the topic. The book is a valuable resource for students and scholars interested in moral psychology.

8. Reasons and Motivation in Ethical Theory

Exploring the link between reasons for action and motivation, this book draws on Michael Smith's work to address foundational questions in ethics. It examines how moral reasons are understood and how they influence behavior, contributing to broader debates in metaethics. The analysis helps clarify the structure of moral reasoning.

9. Michael Smith's Moral Problem: A Critical Companion

This companion volume offers critical essays that engage directly with Michael Smith's formulation of the moral problem. The contributors assess the strengths and weaknesses of Smith's arguments, offering alternative approaches and interpretations. It serves as a comprehensive guide for those studying Smith's impact on moral philosophy.

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