

A State of Besire

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It is common to distinguish between a desire's and a belief's "direction of fit" with the world: beliefs, it is said, aim to fit the world, while desires aim for the world to fit them.¹ How exactly the notion of a direction of fit is to be understood is a matter of some dispute. Michael Smith proposes to construe the notion in causal-dispositional terms: while beliefs that p tend to go out of existence in the face of a perception that $\sim p$, desires that p tend to persist.² Others opt for a normative construal. Tenenbaum, for instance, suggests a view on which theoretical and practical reasoning have different appropriate aims: when we reason theoretically, we ought to be guided by the evidence. When we reason practically, we ought to be guided by a vision of the good.³ Thus, a belief is defective, on this view, if it is not properly responsive to the evidence, and a desire is defective if it does not guide us to the good. I will set the issue of these different interpretations aside for now.⁴ As we shall see shortly, which interpretation one adopts does not much matter for my purposes.

It has been claimed that there are no states with both directions of fit, that is, that there are no besires.⁵ Humeans make this claim in an attempt to argue for the Humean theory of motivation: according to anti-Humeans, moral beliefs are – or could be – besires, because they are beliefs that tend to motivate,

¹ This idea goes back to Anscombe's *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957).

² Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1994) and "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* 96 (1987): 36-61.

³ See Sergio Tenenbaum, "Direction of Fit and Motivational Cognitivism," in Russ Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 235-64. Other proponents of the normative view include Searle, Platts, Humberstone, and Gregory. See John Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and *Rationality in Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001); Mark Platts, *Ways of Meaning* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); Lloyd Humberstone, "Direction of Fit," *Mind* 101 (1992): 59–84; and Alex Gregory, "Changing Direction on Direction of Fit," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 15 (2012): 603-14.

⁴ There is conceptual space for adopting a normative account of belief's direction of fit, and a descriptive account of desire's direction of fit: we can say that beliefs *ought* to aim at the truth, while desires *aim* at their own fulfillment (else they are not desires). Such asymmetry, however, may seem problematic for all talk of directions of fit. See also footnote 13 below.

⁵ The term "besire" is attributed to J. E. J. Altham. See his "The Legacy of Emotivism," in G. Macdonald and C. Wright (eds.), *Fact, Science and Morality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 275-88.

that is, just like desires, they aim at their own realization in addition to aiming at the truth. But if there are no states that are both belief-like and desire-like in the relevant sense, then moral judgments cannot be such states.⁶

While the implications of the existence or non-existence of besires for the Humean theory of motivation are interesting and important, my main interest here is in the picture of moral psychology we get if we deny the existence of besires. Michael Smith has called it an “austere psychological theory.”⁷ This view is “austere” because it posits two and only two kinds of mental states: states with a mind-to-world direction of fit, such as beliefs; and states with a world-to-mind direction of fit, such as desires.

I wish to suggest that this picture is mistaken. There are besires. Consider hope. Hope has both directions of fit. When hope does not aim to fit the world at all, for instance, when an author of a self-published novel that has sold 20 copies hopes to win the Nobel prize in literature, the hope is groundless (a mere desire to get the prize would not be similarly groundless). Groundless hope, just like groundless belief, is epistemically flawed. But hope also aims for the world to fit *it*: this is why hope can be fulfilled or not fulfilled. Hope is a besire.

There are two main objections one can raise to this proposal. The first is that hope has one direction of fit only: that of desires. Michael Smith assumes as much in a response to Platts. Platts’s critical point is that, *pace* Smith, not all states with a world-to-mind direction of fit are desires, because “there are other states that have this direction of fit as well: hopes, wishes, and the like.”⁸ Smith responds by saying that this is a minor quibble because the Humean can easily expand the category of motivational states, that is, states with a world-to-mind direction of fit – or “pro-attitudes” as Smith calls them – to include such

⁶ Smith puts the point forcefully in *The Moral Problem*, p. 118.

⁷ Smith, “Humean Theory,” 56.

⁸ Smith, “Humean Theory,” 55.

things as hopes and wishes, without sacrificing the spirit of the Humean view. Smith thus grants Platts's point that hopes (among other states) have a world-to-mind direction of fit.

Hope certainly seems like a desiderative state. This is why it is frequently lumped together with such states as "wishes" and "dreams". Not surprisingly, it *does* have a world-to-mind direction of fit; but not *only*. There are epistemic constraints on hope. Our novelist with the 20 copies has a groundless, epistemically defective hope.

But this only shows that hope has a belief's direction of fit on a normative view. And what about a causal-dispositional view? We must note here that on Smith's own way of cashing out the "direction of fit" idea, hope actually has *thetic*, mind-to-world, rather than *telic*, world-to-mind, direction of fit, because hope tends to desist in the face of evidence that it is not fulfilled.⁹ While our novelist may hope (against hope) he will win the Nobel before the results are announced, once they are announced, he will tend to find himself unable to continue hoping. The hope will vanish.¹⁰ Thus, the point about hope's mind-to-world direction of fit applies regardless of whether we construe the *thetic* direction of fit in causal-dispositional terms, as Smith does, or normatively.

Perhaps one can argue that Smith is right that hope has one direction of fit but wrong about what direction of fit it has. Maybe hope just has a *thetic* direction of fit (as his account implies rather than as he explicitly says). This seems implausible. Indeed, one could say that only hope's *thetic* credentials need be established, and that hope is so obviously a desiderative state that any account of a *telic* direction of fit on which hope lacks that direction of fit is thereby flawed. Hope, much like desire, aims at its own fulfillment. We need to grant that in order to make sense of both the phenomenology of hoping and all

⁹ The "thetic" versus "telic" terminology in this context is due to Kim Frost. See his "On the Very Idea of a Direction of Fit," *Philosophical Review* 123 (2014): 429-84.

¹⁰ This may seem like a second way in which hope aims to fit the world. The first I mentioned was this: hope must not be groundless. But hope tends to vanish in the face of evidence it has not been fulfilled because if it persists in the face of such evidence, it will be *completely* groundless.

of our ordinary talk about fulfilled or dashed hopes. This observation in conjunction with the argument for a *thetic* direction of fit will give us what we need.

Intuitive, though, as this reply may be, it may not seem entirely satisfying since Smith's claim that besires are incoherent appears to be a logical implication of the way he construes directions of fit, so that if we adopt his view of directions of fit, it will logically follow that there are no besires. It can be argued that a mental state with the content that p can either persist or desist in the face of $\sim p$; it cannot do both.¹¹ If it tends to persist, it is a desire (or some other suitable "pro-attitude"). If it tends to desist, it is a belief. Smith's analysis of directions of fit has been criticized,¹² but I wish to note that my view is friendly to a version of the causal-dispositional account; not exactly Smith's version, but arguably, a better one than his. We already saw why hope has a *thetic* direction of fit on Smith's view: it tends to vanish when the evidence that it will not be fulfilled becomes conclusive. What of a *telic* direction of fit?

Note that while hope that p tends to desist in the face of conclusive evidence against p , it tends to persist in the face of strong but less-than-conclusive evidence. This is like desire and unlike belief: belief tends to vanish in the face of very strong evidence that $\sim p$. It does not have to be that the evidence is absolutely conclusive. (For instance, Brown's belief that he will get a salary raise will tend to vanish if his boss tells him he won't get a raise. Brown need not see his next salary check in order for the belief to vanish. But before he has seen his next check, Brown may still hold out the hope that his boss will change her mind and give him a raise. In this way, Brown's hope will behave like a desire rather than like a belief.) An improved version of the causal-dispositional view would say, roughly, the following:

(a) Mental state M is belieflike iff it tends to desist in the face of evidence that $\sim p$.

¹¹ Smith, "Humean Theory," 56.

¹² See, for instance, Tenenbaum's "Direction of Fit."

(b) Mental state M is desirelike iff it tends to persist in the face of evidence that $\sim p$.

Arguably, this version of the account captures our dispositions to believe or not to believe things better than Smith's own version. But it is logically possible for a mental state to have both tendencies (a) and (b). For instance, a mental state may, just like belief, tend to desist in the face of conclusive evidence against p (which is one way of meeting the constraint in (a)) and tend to persist in the face of strong but inconclusive evidence against p (one way of meeting the constraint in (b)). This is just how things stand with hope.

Thus, on a (suitably revised) causal-dispositional view, hope has a *telic* direction of fit as well. Of course, a desire that p can persist even in the face of conclusive evidence that p is impossible, but this is because desire has only *one* of hope's directions of fit. In addition, hope has a *telic* direction of fit on a normative view also: hope will be practically defective if it is not hope for the good.

We saw earlier that hope has a *thetic* direction of fit on both the causal-dispositional and on a normative view: hope is epistemically defective if it is groundless (as per the normative view), and it tends to vanish in the face of conclusive evidence against its own fulfillment (as per the causal-dispositional view). We can now say that hope has a *telic* direction of fit regardless of whether we adopt a normative or a causal-dispositional view also. On a normative view, it is defective when it does not aim at the good. On a causal-dispositional view, it will tend to persist in the face of strong evidence against its own fulfillment. Hope, therefore, has a dual direction of fit regardless of how we construe the notion of a "direction of fit."¹³

¹³ Frost, in "On the Very Idea," argues that no interpretation of the direction of fit idea succeeds, and that we ought to abandon all talk of directions of fit. I mention, in this regard, that hope has elements of both practical and theoretical reason, regardless of what account of the difference between the two we adopt and whether or not we cash out the difference in terms of "directions of fit." But for present purposes, I am happy to make my claim conditional: *if* there are two directions of fit, hope has *both*.

There is, however, a second objection we need to consider, also derived from Smith. It goes like this: while there may seem to be besires, every candidate besire is analyzable into a belief and a desire. Apparent besires are cobbled-together attitudes whose belief and desire components can, in principle, be pulled apart. Hence, we need not introduce a third kind of attitude in our psychological picture. The austere psychological theory can explain all the evidence.¹⁴

But hope is not reducible to a belief component and a desire component.¹⁵ It entails believing something and desiring something, but it is more than the conjunction of a belief and a desire. Consider two people, Vera and Alex, who receive lottery tickets on their respective birthdays. Both believe that they may win, though they believe too that such an outcome is unlikely. Both desire to win. Alex, however, hopes to win. He keeps thinking how nice it would be and what he would buy with the money. He looks forward to the day the results of the lottery will be announced. Vera, by contrast, does not hope to win. She thinks the probability is too low for her to hope for this, only to have her hopes dashed. Alex and Vera, thus, share the same belief with regard to winning (“I may win, but winning is unlikely”), and the same desire, (“I would like to win”), but one of them hopes to win while the other does not. Hope is, therefore, a distinct state, not reducible to a belief and a desire.

I conclude that the austere psychological view is false. Hope has both a belief’s and a desire’s direction of fit, but it is not conjunction of a belief and a desire. It is a besire.

¹⁴ See Smith, *The Moral Problem*, p. 119.

¹⁵ There is a further question of what exactly the belief component is. Hope requires, at minimum, a belief in the possibility of its own fulfillment. In most cases, something stronger will be required. In addition, hope resembles epistemic attitudes such as credence in coming in degrees. A person who believes that the hoped for outcome is at least somewhat likely will tend to hope more strongly for that outcome, while one who believes the outcome is extremely unlikely may hold out a small hope. Of course, desire also comes in degrees, and the degree of someone’s desire for an outcome may affect the degree of his or her hope for that outcome. A person who wishes for something more strongly may tend to hope for it more. So both the degree of one’s credence and the strength of one’s desire will tend to affect the strength of one’s hope. But we need not pursue these issues here.