ABSTRACT. Cognitive internalism is the view that moral judgments are both cognitive and motivating. Philosophers have found cognitive internalism to be attractive in part because it seems to offer support for the idea that moral reasons are categorical, that is, independent of agents’ desires. In this paper, I argue that it offers no such support.

1. INTRODUCTION

Call judgments about what one should do and about what is good or of value practical judgments; moral judgments are a subset of these. There are two claims about practical judgments that philosophers often try to accommodate. The first is the cognitivist claim that they are capable of being true or false, and the second is the internalist claim that they are practical, or capable of motivating action. Philosophers have also often wished to accommodate a third claim, namely, that no mental state is both cognitive and motivating. According to this claim, which traces its origins back to Hume, beliefs, while cognitive, cannot by themselves motivate action, and desires, while motivating, are not cognitive. The problem, which Michael Smith has dubbed “the moral problem,” is that these three claims seem incompatible. If one accepts the Humean view of motivation, it seems that only two alternatives are available. First, one can claim that practical judgments are desires, and thereby save internalism at the expense of cognitivism. Second, one can claim that they are beliefs, and save cognitivism at the expense of internalism.

However, a number of philosophers have tried to resist these alternatives by rejecting the Humean view of motivation.
particular, they claim that some mental states are cognitive like beliefs yet motivating like desires; since they have features of both, we may follow J.E.J. Altham in calling them besires (1986, p. 284). Since besires are capable both of being true or false and of motivating action, one can preserve both cognitivism and internalism by arguing that practical judgments are besires; call this view *cognitive internalism*.

Cognitive internalism not only promises to solve Smith’s moral problem, but to make sense of the idea that the moral reasons are categorical, that is, that moral considerations provide reasons that are independent of agents’ desires. The Humean view, in contrast, precludes categorical reasons. It holds instead that only a desire, or a set of considerations in conjunction with one or more desires, can serve as a practical reason: only desires can motivate action, and so only desires can serve as practical reasons. But by rejecting the Humean view of motivation and admitting besires, cognitive internalism can say that practical reasons may motivate action independently of desires, and that our cognitive apprehension of the world can by itself motivate our responses to it.

Smith claims that the cognitive internalist solution to the moral problem is unsuccessful, arguing that it is implausible that there are such mental states as besires (1994, pp. 116–125). However, I will argue that, even if we grant that there are such mental states as besires and that appealing to them can solve Smith’s moral problem, the notion of a desire provides no defense for the thought that moral reasons are categorical. Any defense of the categorical nature of morality would presumably wish to say that recognizing its reasons can not only motivate action, but can justify it as well. The trouble is that although the appeal to besires allows us to say that cognitive states can motivate action, it does not by itself allow us to say that they can justify action; even if a cognitive state is rational or justified, the action it motivates may not be. Cognitive internalism’s appeal to besires, then, cannot adequately defend the categorical nature of moral reasons.

The claim that morality is categorical is a claim about the nature of moral reasons, and a moral reason is a certain type of