A NEW WORRY FOR THE HUMEAN INTERNALIST

ABSTRACT. The Humean internalist finds Humean motivational theses and reasons internalism to be independently attractive. She therefore combines them, in the hope of creating a theory of reasons that is attractive for all of the reasons that each thesis is attractive. On this score, she succeeds. However, there is a drawback. Those who build a theory of reasons by combining Humean motivational theses and reasons internalism face a dilemma. If you combine these views, either you are committed to a theory of reasons that allows all of a person’s reasons to simultaneously change, erratically and randomly, or you are committed to a theory of reasons that fixes a person’s reasons at birth, in which case they remain stable and unchanging over a lifetime. Neither alternative is attractive. Humean internalism cannot navigate a path between these two extremes, and this should worry the Humean internalist.

Internalism about reasons is the view that there is a necessary connection between an agent’s reasons and her motives.¹ Humean internalism about reasons combines this thesis with Humean motivational theses, while rationalist internalism about reasons combines this thesis with rationalist motivational theses.² The most prominent Humean internalist is Bernard Williams,³ while prominent rationalist internalists include Christine Korsgaard⁴ and Michael Smith.⁵

Humean internalism has been criticized on a variety of fronts. Those who think that beliefs can motivate reject the Humean component, as do those who think that practical reasoning can originate motivation, independently of antecedent motivation.⁶ Those who think that a person’s reasons have nothing do with her psychology reject the internalist component,⁷ as do those who think that internalism falls prey to the conditional fallacy.⁸ Still others bring moral concerns to the table, claiming that a theory of reasons that commits us to the
view that a person can have reason to further vile, wicked or abhorrent desires must be mistaken.

I want to put these old worries aside, and raise a new worry for the Humean internalist. The Humean internalist finds Humean motivational theses and reasons internalism to be independently attractive. She therefore combines them, in the hope of creating a theory of reasons that is attractive for all of the reasons that each thesis is attractive. On this score, she succeeds. However, there is a drawback. Those who build a theory of reasons by combining Humean motivational theses and reasons internalism face a dilemma. As we will see, if you combine these views, either you are committed to a theory of reasons that allows all of a person’s reasons to simultaneously change, erratically and randomly, or you are committed to a theory of reasons that fixes a person’s reasons at birth, in which case they remain stable and unchanging over a lifetime. Neither alternative is attractive. Humean internalism cannot navigate a path between these two extremes, and this should worry the Humean internalist.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, I say a bit about Humeanism as a motivational thesis and internalism about reasons. I then argue that the Humean internalist faces a dilemma, and I close by suggesting a way out of it.

1. Humeanism as a motivational thesis

I begin by articulating two purely motivational theses, which will help us distinguish Humeanism about motivation from rationalism about motivation. The two motivational theses are

1. Only desires and proattitudes can motivate.

The first thesis tells us that desires and proattitudes are the only kinds of state that can motivate. This is a Humean position. To deny this thesis is to claim that some cognitive states, in addition to desires and proattitudes, can motivate. This is a rationalist position. The second thesis tells us something about practical reason’s ability to produce motivation. Motivation-in,