An Argument Formalization of "Realism," by Michael Smith

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[Note: '<P$_n$>' means that premise P$_n$ is implicit. 'SP$_n$' means Sub-premise$_n$, and 'SC$_n$' means Sub-conclusion$_n$.]

I. Intro

    A. Thesis: Moral Realism is true.

    B. Smith sets the stage for his arguments: Most people want to have the right beliefs about what's moral and what's not. Philosophers want that as well, but they are also concerned about whether two features of our conception of morality are consistent:

        1. People ordinarily treat moral judgments as being objective; we think we might be wrong about moral matters and debate with each other about who's right.

        2. People's moral judgments motivate them to act in certain ways.

    C. Smith introduces the Standard Picture of Human Psychology (SPHP), which also has two features:

        1. There are two different types of mental states:

            a. Beliefs, which represent something as *being* the case.

            b. Desires, which represent that something *is to be* the case.

        2. Desires cannot be rationally criticized unless they are based on beliefs that were established irrationally.

    D. Smith continues to set the stage: Given the SPHP, beliefs cannot rationally *influence* our desires unless our desires are founded on irrational beliefs.

E. Smith outlines the implications for morality: Because of point (D), if our moral judgments express beliefs they cannot motivate us to act. If they express desires, it is odd that we would think of them as being objective. Thus the two features of our conception of morality seem not to sit well with each other.

II. Main Arguments:

    A. An argument that the SPHP implies moral judgments don't express facts about reasons

        P_1. Moral judgments concern one's reasons for acting

            Sub-argument:

            <SP_1.> On the SPHP, only desires can motivate one to act.

            SP_2. One's judgments concerning one's reasons can motivate one to act.

            _____

            SC_1. On the SPHP, one's judgments concerning one's reasons for acting must express desires.

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        C_1. From (P_1) and (SC_1) it follows that, *on the SPHP,* it's not true that one's moral judgments concern *facts* about one's reasons for acting as one does.

    B. An argument for the distinction between motives and reasons

        P_1. According to common sense, one can be motivated to act by a desire that's not worth satisfying.

        P_2. According to common sense, desires that aren't worth satisfying don't give one a reason to act.

        _____

        C_1. According to common sense, one can be *motivated* to act but not have a *reason* to act.

C. An argument for the incorrectness of the SPHP

P_1. On the SPHP, desires which are not based on false beliefs cannot be rationally criticized.

P_2. It's not true that desires which are not worth satisfying cannot be rationally criticized.

Sub-argument:

SP_1. Some desires which are not worth satisfying are not based on false beliefs.

_____

SC_1. From (P_1) and (SP_1), *on the SPHP*, some desires which are not worth satisfying cannot be rationally criticized.

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C_1. Since (SC_1) contradicts P_2, the SPHP is incorrect.

D. Smith brings out the implications of these arguments: The SPHP is inadequate because it fails to distinguish reasons and motives. Smith thinks that to be ideally rational one must be cool, calm, and collected (CCC). Our *reasons* for acting don't derive from what we *do* desire but from what we *would* desire if we were ideally rational. This gives Smith a way to argue that desires which are not based on false beliefs can still be rationally criticized.

E. An argument that one can be rationally criticized for desires *not* based on false beliefs

P_1. Someone could *actually* believe that they *would* desire to give to famine relief if they were CCC, but not be CCC and hence not desire to give to famine relief.

P_2. It is an ideal of rationality to actually have the desires one would have if one were CCC.

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C_1. From (P_1) and (P_2), someone who believed that they would desire to give to famine relief if they were CCC but didn't actually desire to do so could be rationally criticized for violating an ideal of rationality.

F. Smith concludes that the SPHP has a false consequence, which is that moral judgments express desires.

G. However, Smith thinks that for moral realism to really be out of harm's way, people's reasons for acting must be the same in identical circumstances. Even if we were ideally rational and hence CCC, some would suggest that we might not converge on a common set of moral judgments. If that were possible, Smith thinks moral realism would be false. He grants that we have not yet reached a convergence, but he ends his piece with the optimistic thought that under better conditions we may eventually reach one.

References

Smith, Michael. "Realism." *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007