

Draft of March 1, 2005

**Moral Reasons and Moral Fetishes: Rationalists and Anti-rationalists
on Moral Motivation**

by R. Jay Wallace

University of California, Berkeley

Ethical rationalism, to a first approximation, is the thesis that moral requirements are requirements of practical reason. This thesis has a long tradition in moral philosophy, but it also has long met with philosophical resistance. A particular crux for thinking about ethical rationalism is the phenomenon of moral motivation. It has been argued, in particular, that rationalism alone can provide a plausible interpretation of the motivations characteristic of the virtuous agent, and that those who reject rationalism treat the concern to act morally as a kind of fetish. My aim in this paper is to consider and assess this charge.

The essay is written in the spirit of sympathetic reconstruction. The larger aim is to explain the strength and appeal of rationalism as a framework for thinking about moral motivation. I begin (sec. 1) by considering the rationalist approach to motivation of this kind. Central to this approach is the idea that moral motivation is potentially grounded in the agent's own deliberative reflection about morality and its normative significance. This idea needs to be developed, however, in a way that leaves room for a variety of possible divergences between motivation and the agent's deliberative point of view. In sections 2 and 3 I take up the charge that anti-rationalists are saddled with a fetishistic account of moral motivation. I argue that the charge of fetishism turns on the basic idea that the anti-rationalist position lacks the resources for

understanding moral motivation as a response that is warranted by its objects. If this is correct, then the question of fetishism is connected to more basic issues about the alleged normative significance of various kinds of moral consideration, in ways that I try to spell out. In section 4 I consider some moves that are open to the anti-rationalist in response to the objection from fetishism. To meet the objection, it is necessary for the anti-rationalist either to defend a kind of global nihilism about reasons for action—something, I suggest, that may be difficult to pull off—or to abandon the distinctively anti-rationalist conception of moral motivation. To see why this is the case should help us to appreciate the force and interest of the complaint that the anti-rationalist account of moral motivation is fetishistic.

1. Reasons and Motivation.

Let us begin by considering the rationalist interpretation of moral motivation. The central rationalist tenet is the claim that morality is a normative domain, providing reasons for action to all agents, regardless of their contingent desires, dispositions, and concerns. The reasons in question are normative reasons, of the sort that count for or against prospective actions in contexts of deliberation and advice.¹ It is the proper function of such reasons, we might say, to figure in contexts of deliberation and advice, as the considerations that agents reflect on in order to arrive at sound conclusions about what they ought to do. Acknowledging this fact, the rationalist will suggest that moral motivation can be grounded in deliberative reflection that is couched in moral terms, and that we respond

¹ On reasons in this basic normative sense, see T. M. Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), chap. 1.

correctly to the moral considerations we take to obtain only to the extent we are motivated accordingly.²

This is a rough formulation, which leaves room for a variety of ways in which normative reflection and moral motivation might come apart. There are three possibilities of this kind that should be kept in mind. First, even if moral considerations are suited to figure explicitly in the deliberation of the agents to whom they apply, such agents in practice often comply unreflectively with the moral requirements that govern their actions. Well-habituated agents will typically have internalized a policy of treating people fairly and with respect, so that they do not need to reflect anew on the normative significance of such considerations in deliberating about what to do. For such agents, morality may function to filter out prospective options for action before they even enter the deliberative field, in a way that obviates conscious attention to moral reasons within practical reflection itself.

Nothing in the rationalist picture is at odds with these possibilities. The rationalist insists that moral considerations are suited to appear in the practical deliberation of the agents to whom they apply, insofar as they constitute genuine reasons for action. But considerations can satisfy this condition without figuring continuously in the foreground of the agent's deliberative consciousness. Even when moral motivation does not result immediately from an episode of moral reasoning, however, the rationalist can still say that it is grounded in the agent's deliberative point of view. This will be true in a weak sense if it is counterfactually the case that the agent would affirm the role of moral considerations as internalized filters for deliberation, if they were to reflect

² This is, for instance, a common commitment in the rationalist positions of Christine Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Michael Smith, The Moral Problem (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994).

explicitly on the question of how their practical thinking should be structured. And it will be true in a more robust sense if the agent actually does engage, on other occasions, in episodes of reflection through which the general structuring role of moral considerations is explicitly affirmed.

Even when moral considerations are directly acknowledged in this kind of deliberation, however, they do not always succeed in engaging the will of the agent who reflects on them. There are in fact two possibilities that need to be left open here. To see this, it will be helpful to introduce a distinction between moral judgments on the one hand, and normative judgments on the other. A moral judgment is a judgment that is couched in moral terms, to the effect (for instance) that doing X would be morally right, or thoughtful or considerate or helpful or just. A normative judgment, by contrast, expresses the generic acknowledgment that a consideration of some other, substantive kind constitutes a reason for action, counting in favor of or against a prospective policy or course of action. Now it seems to be a general truth about normativity that at least some of the considerations that are normative for human thought and action can be acknowledged to obtain, without acknowledging that those considerations are normative. Many of the things that count as normative reasons in ordinary discourse and practice, for instance, include what Hume might have called matters of fact and existence. That a contribution to my pension fund would enhance my financial security in old age is, in itself, merely an interesting empirical truth about that course of action. It is perfectly possible for a cogent, clear-eyed, and otherwise rational agent to concede that this fact obtains, yet deny that the consideration in question counts in favor of making a contribution to the pension fund. Furthermore, this remains the case even if we grant what anyway seems very plausible,

namely that enhancement of financial security in one's old age really is a reason for making contributions to one's pension fund.

With moral considerations, things may appear otherwise. Some metaethical positions, in particular, seem to blur the distinction between moral judgments and what I have called normative judgments, holding that one sincerely endorses a moral judgment only if one also acknowledges the normative significance of the moral considerations that are judged to obtain.³ For the record, these positions seem to me to go too far in the direction of building normativity into the meaning of the moral predicates. It is perhaps plausible to say that morality aspires to normative significance, insofar as moral considerations are widely taken to count as reasons in contexts of deliberation and advice. Many people suppose that morality collects considerations that have direct relevance for the practical question of what they are to do, and these considerations are routinely cited when we criticize the actions of others, and attempt to engage with them in collective deliberation. The rationalist will suppose that these activities are basically in good order, insofar as they reflect the fact that moral considerations really do have normative significance for practical reflection. Even if it is not the case that morality is normative in this way, however, it is generally taken to have this status, and this has no doubt left some residue in moral language. Consider someone who denies that the moral wrongness of X-ing—or its cruelty or injustice or humiliating effects on others—are considerations that count against doing X. If such a person did not have some sense, in drawing this conclusion, that they were going against the grain of moral discourse, and using moral language in ways that are at odds with widespread social practices, then they would probably not have a firm grasp on the meaning of the

³ See, for example, Michael Smith, The Moral Problem. I say more about Smith's metaethical views in sec. 3 below.

predicates that they were deploying. To the extent this is the case, we can say that morality intrinsically aspires to normative significance.

As I suggested above, however, some will want to go further than this, holding that the acknowledgment of normative significance is built into the meaning of the moral predicates. On a view of this kind, it will not strictly be possible to arrive at the sincere conclusion that X-ing would be morally wrong, but to deny that its wrongness counts against doing X. Discourse about morality would then differ in this respect from discourse about some other normative domains (such as the reasons involved in the case of the pension contribution mentioned above). For present purposes, nothing of substance hangs on this metaethical question. Even if rationalism is correct, I want to say that it is possible to acknowledge that moral considerations obtain, but to fail to be motivated accordingly, because one denies their standing as genuine reasons for action. This is the position occupied by the conventional skeptic about morality, someone who understands moral discourse, and is prepared to grant that doing X would be (say) morally wrong—or unjust or unkind or cruel—but wonders why they should care.⁴ It seems perfectly intelligible that someone might take up a stance of this kind; the question that the skeptic is posing locates a genuine issue, one of the defining questions for the traditional subject of moral philosophy. Of course, if a firm commitment to normativity is built into the meaning of the moral predicates, then the question will have to be reformulated slightly. It will not be the question whether moral considerations constitute normative reasons, but instead the

⁴ On skepticism in this form, see David Brink, Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chap. 3. I differ from Brink in thinking that the possibility of skepticism in this form does not rule "internalist" metaethical views.

question whether what are ordinarily called moral considerations constitute normative reasons. But nothing of real substance seems to me to hang on whether we choose to formulate the question in one or the other of these ways.

Moral skepticism thus represents one scenario in which an agent who acknowledges moral considerations in reflection might fail to be motivated accordingly. This scenario involves a gap between putatively moral judgments and normative judgments; the skeptic grants, in effect, that moral considerations apply (that, say, X-ing would be morally wrong, or unjust or cruel etc.⁵), but denies, or at least does not yet concede, that these considerations are genuine reasons. Furthermore, because skeptics challenge the normative significance of morality in this way, they will typically fail to be motivated accordingly. Of course, if rationalism is true, then the person who occupies this position will be making a substantive mistake.⁶ Rationalism is the view that moral considerations are normative reasons, so the person who denies that this is the case, or who questions its truth, will be missing something, and thereby going astray in their deliberative reflection about the landscape of reasons. But substantive error is rampant in human intellectual life, and there is no reason to think it less likely in relation to practical questions than in relation to theoretical issues of various kinds (on the contrary). The rationalist should therefore leave room for the stance of the moral skeptic, noting that it represents one

⁵ Or, at least, that X-ing would ordinarily be considered morally wrong etc.

⁶ Substantive error of this kind might be epistemically blameless. Someone who for whatever reason is not in a position to see that X is wrong, or that X's wrongness is a reason, may not be deliberating incorrectly in failing to accept either of these judgments.

way of acknowledging (putatively) moral considerations without being motivated to act on them.⁷

Let us now contrast moral skepticism with a third kind of case in which moral judgment and motivation come apart. This is the case that we might call moral weakness, in which agents concede the normative significance of the moral considerations that apply to their situation, but still fail to act on them. Weakness of this kind is of course a special instance of a more general phenomenon, whose distinguishing feature is that an agent freely and intentionally acts contrary to their own best judgment about what they have reason to do. If rationalism is correct, then the moral version of this general phenomenon will include cases in which agents are not making any substantive mistakes in their deliberative reflection. If moral considerations really do apply in the way the agent takes them to—if, for instance, X-ing really would be wrong, or unjust or inconsiderate or cruel—then the agent will be correct to conclude that they have reason to avoid doing X. And yet, despite arriving at the correct conclusion about the bearing of morality on their deliberative situation, agents who are morally weak fail to act in accordance with their normative judgments. They go astray by their own lights, as it were, and to the extent this is the case they seem to be peculiarly irrational, in a way that potentially contrasts with the outlook of the moral skeptic.⁸ (The skeptic may be mistaken to judge that moral considerations are without normative significance, but there is no obvious irrationality in making a substantive mistake of this kind.)

⁷ A different possibility that is opened up by the potential divergence between moral and normative judgment is a scenario in which an agent is motivated in accordance with moral considerations that they recognize to obtain, despite believing that those considerations are without normative significance. Possibilities of this kind are interestingly explored by Nomy Arpaly in Unprincipled Virtue (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁸ Here I follow Scanlon's suggestion about irrationality; see What We Owe to Each Other, chap. 1, sec. 4.

Taking these various possibilities into account, how should we characterize the rationalist approach to moral motivation? The basic rationalist thesis is that morality is a normative domain. Insofar as moral considerations constitute reasons for all agents, they will be capable of figuring in practical deliberation, as considerations that count for and against prospective actions that it is open to agents to perform. Those agents who deliberate correctly, and who are not otherwise irrational, will acknowledge the normative significance of morality, and be motivated in accordance with their moral and normative conclusions. Rationalism thus suggests a conception of moral motivation as potentially grounded in the agent's own deliberative reflection.

This general conception allows, however, for various kinds of divergence between practical deliberation and moral motivation. We have considered three forms that this divergence can take:

[a] Habituated or automatic responsiveness to moral reasons, where the agent is motivated to act in accordance with moral reasons without reflecting on them. The rationalist should allow that morally admirable agents internalize their commitment to moral ends, in ways that often obviate explicit moral reflection. Motivational structures of this kind may still be grounded in the agent's deliberative point of view, however, insofar as the agent does or would affirm their role through reflection.

[b] Moral skepticism, in which a lack of moral motivation can be traced to the agent's denial of the normative significance of morality. On the rationalist view, this position, though possible, involves a substantive mistake about the landscape of reasons.

[c] Moral weakness, involving the failure to act on moral considerations whose normative significance one explicitly affirms. The rationalist will say that this kind of case represents a paradigm of practical irrationality.

2. Rightness and the Fetishism Objection.

It is a consequence of the rationalist approach that motivation will tend to track moral judgment. People can by and large be expected to be moved to do what they believe it would be morally right to do, and changes in a given person's moral beliefs will be correlated reliably with corresponding changes in their motivations. Thus someone who comes to the view that it would be wrong to support a politics of tax cuts for the affluent will typically be moved to adjust their political activities and preferences accordingly. Of course, a typical relation of this kind is not an infallible relation, and we must leave room for the kind of backsliding that can inhibit the reliable connection between moral judgment and motivation, and also for the moral skepticism that denies the normative significance of morality. But rationalism allows for these sorts of phenomena. The relation that it postulates between moral judgment and motivation "typically" holds, just insofar as agents are typically not subject to the kinds of substantive errors and defects of reasoning that are present when the link between moral judgment and moral motivation is severed, or when the reason-giving force of moral considerations is called into question.

If we reject the rationalist account of the demands made by morality on motivation, how might we account for the reliable connection between moral judgment and motivating attitudes? One possibility would be to opt for an expressivist treatment of moral judgment, holding that judgments of this kind are necessarily motivating, insofar as they function to give expression to motivating

non-cognitive attitudes. This kind of metaethical position is compatible with the view that moral considerations do not constitute independent reasons for action, and so it represents one route the anti-rationalist could take for making sense of the reliable connection between moral judgment and moral motivation. But for reasons already adverted to this approach does not strike me as very promising. In effect, it makes the connection between moral judgment and moral motivation too reliable, ruling out from the start the kinds of moral weakness and moral skepticism that can occur in agents who are capable of making sincere judgments about morality. A plausible account of the connection between moral judgment and moral motivation must leave room for these possibilities, in ways that noncognitivist accounts notoriously fail to do.

The natural alternative strategy that is open to the anti-rationalist would be to concede that moral judgments do not function essentially to express motivating attitudes, but to contend that such attitudes are nevertheless present whenever agents are in fact motivated to act in accordance with their moral beliefs. Thus we might postulate a contingent concern to do the right thing on the part of agents who take morality seriously, whose motivations would adjust in virtue of this concern to changes in their judgments about what it would be morally right to do. We might then say that having a concern of this kind to do the right thing is partly constitutive of being a morally good or admirable person. It is a contingent concern, because having it is not itself a requirement of reason. In particular, the nonderivative concern to do what is right will not be present in those agents who are (for instance) skeptical or cynical about moral discourse, agents who will not in fact tend to be motivated to do what they understand to be morally right. But in the morally virtuous agents whose motivations do track their moral judgments, we might explain this psychological fact by appeal to a

concern for morality that precisely distinguishes the morally admirable from the cynics, skeptics, and rogues of this world.⁹

This explanation has a certain surface plausibility. There is little doubt that morally admirable agents differ from other people in part in having a special concern to do what is morally right, and it would be possible to account in terms of such a concern for the reliable connection between moral judgment and moral motivation in such agents. Furthermore, precisely insofar as this concern for rightness is contingent, the approach leaves room for the kind of divergences between moral judgment and moral motivation canvassed in the preceding section. Michael Smith has argued, however, that this way of accounting for moral motivation is deeply flawed.¹⁰ He points out that the concern to do what is right will produce motivations that track an agent's changing beliefs about what it is right to do only if it is interpreted in a distinctive way: as a concern for rightness in itself, where this is understood de dicto and not de re. But, Smith argues, this kind of concern is hardly characteristic of morally admirable agents. They are moved by non-derivative concerns for the variety of concrete ends that morality prescribes, such as justice, honesty, the flourishing of their friends, and so on. Pursuit of such ends may in fact be morally right, but if so the virtuous agent's interest in them is not derivative from that fact; in this way, their concern to do what is right can be interpreted de re. By contrast, a person whose concern for moral rightness were properly understood as de dicto would exhibit a kind of moral fetishism, a preoccupation with rightness of the sort that would alienate them from the myriad concrete ends that are morally important. The anti-rationalist approach to moral motivation should

⁹ For an example of this strategy, see David Brink, Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics, chap. 3.

¹⁰ See his The Moral Problem, sec. 3.5.

therefore be rejected, Smith suggests, as incompatible with our understanding of the structures of care and concern that genuinely distinguish those agents who are morally admirable.

Two different strategies initially suggest themselves for responding to this argument. The first is to point out that there is nothing in their account that would preclude morally virtuous agents from developing the kinds of non-derivative concern for concrete moral ends that Smith takes to be exemplary of a non-fetishistic outlook.¹¹ It is true that morally virtuous agents have a concern to do what is right, where this is properly understood de dicto and not de re, and that it is this concern that accounts for their tendency to be motivated in accordance with their moral judgments. But it is also true that a direct concern for rightness of this kind can coexist with a nonderivative concern for the variety of first-order ends that morality approves of. Thus someone who has long been indifferent to considerations of social equality might change their view about the moral permissibility of inegalitarian arrangements, and thereby acquire a new concern about the lack of equality in their society. This new concern would initially be derivative from the agent's general desire to do what is right. But over time it could develop into a self-standing or nonderivative motivational structure, of the sort that Smith takes to be characteristic of those agents whose characters we admire.

The basic point upon which this argument insists is surely correct: there is no reason why a general concern for rightness of the de dicto kind could not coexist with a variety of nonderivative concerns for the different ends whose pursuit the virtuous agent

¹¹ See, for example, Sigrun Svavarsdóttir, "Moral Cognitivism and Motivation", The Philosophical Review 108 (1999), pp. 161-219, at 215-218.

believes to be right.¹² But this point is not by itself an adequate response to Smith's basic objection. The objection turns on the idea that it would be fetishistic to exhibit a concern for rightness as such (as contrasted with an interest in such concrete substantive values as justice, equality, honesty, and loyalty to one's friends). But if this is correct, then the anti-rationalist account will be defective in appealing to such a concern to explain the virtuous agent's initial motivation to pursue the ends that they believe to be morally right. Nor is the objection undermined by the observation that such agents could come to develop over time nonderivative interests in the first-order moral ends that they believe to be morally right. If a de dicto concern for rightness is fetishistic, then the anti-rationalist's reliance on such a concern at any point in their account of moral motivation would seem problematic, for the basic reason that we should not ascribe to the morally admirable agent a form of motivation that is distinctively fetishistic.

A second line of argument addresses this worry head-on. The gist of it is to deny that a de dicto concern for moral rightness would be a fetishistic form of motivation. Thus it might be observed that a general concern to do the right thing has a venerable history in moral philosophy. A version of this form of motivation seems to lie at the heart of Kant's ethical theory, for example, in the guise of the motive of duty that distinguishes the good will. The Kantian

¹² In a later development of his fetishism objection Smith contends that the anti-rationalist should not in fact approve of the cultivation of such nonderivative concerns, since they would potentially inhibit right action in the case of revised beliefs about what it would be right to do; see Smith, "In Defense of The Moral Problem. A Reply to Brink, Copp, and Sayre-McCord", Ethics 108 (1997), pp. 84-119, at p. 113. But this point does not strike me as very powerful. Someone who believes that it is right to keep agreements, or to support one's friends, might reasonably be confident enough in these convictions to make it reasonable for them to cultivate supporting nonderivative dispositions to act in these ways—even granting the slight risk that might be involved in so doing.

motive of duty is a nonderivative concern to act rightly, and Kant holds that one achieves a good will only when this concern is operative in leading one to do what duty prescribes. But if a Kantian conception of the good will represents a plausible ideal of moral motivation, it can hardly be objected that the anti-rationalist's appeal to the general desire to act rightly is incompatible with our conception of moral virtue. The morally admirable agent is someone who is moved by a general concern to do what is right, and this is precisely in line with the anti-rationalist's account.

Of course, there are many philosophers who do not find the Kantian conception of the good will attractive as an ideal of character or action. It is thought to leave too little room for the sorts of emotional satisfactions that may be experienced by the virtuous person in acting well, enjoining a dour moralism that precludes direct concern for the ends that morality promotes (such as the welfare of other persons). Perhaps, then, Smith's objection to the anti-rationalist approach would apply equally to the Kantian conception of the good will. That is, he might reject Kant's account of the value of acting from the motive of duty for the same reasons that he rejects the anti-rationalist's suggestion that moral motivation derives from a general concern for moral rightness. The basic complaint in both cases would be that the accounts on offer ascribe to the morally admirable agent a fetishistic concern with rightness for its own sake, a concern whose operation would alienate the agent from the several valuable ends that the virtuous characteristically pursue.

There is an important difference between the Kantian and anti-rationalist approaches that this line of argument overlooks, however. For the anti-rationalist, the basic concern to do what is right that explains moral motivation is rationally contingent. After all, it is distinctive of the anti-rationalist position that it denies that

moral considerations constitute reasons or rational requirements; the whole point of postulating a general concern to do what is right is to make sense of the reliable connection between moral judgment and moral motivation without assuming that moral rightness (say) is something we all have reason to care about. But Kant's ethical theory is different in precisely this respect. He is perhaps the paradigmatic rationalist in the tradition of moral philosophy, insofar as he believes that moral requirements are rational requirements on action. The categorical imperative, which articulates the normative structure of morality, is on Kant's view itself a principle of practical reason. To the extent this is the case, it can be said that moral rightness has independent normative significance; it is a reason for action, a consideration that will be attended to by any agent who is deliberating correctly about action.

This difference between the Kantian and the anti-rationalist positions, however, would seem to determine a corresponding difference in their vulnerability to the charge of fetishism. On the anti-rationalist picture, moral motivation gets traced to a general concern to do what is right that is arbitrary from the point of view of reason. Rightness does not itself count in favor of actions that have that property, so someone who is moved by the concern to do what is right is attaching significance to a consideration that is, by hypothesis, of no independent normative importance. To the extent this is the case, the charge of fetishism would seem to be justified, for one way to think of fetishism is as the investment of attention and interest in objects that do not intrinsically merit such responses. The general concern to do what is right is not something that is called for by the nature of rightness; rather it is an optional psychological extra that some agents just happen to have, on the order of a taste for clams or the color azure.

For Kantians, by contrast, the concern to do what is right is precisely a subjective response to a consideration that is independently understood as a reason or a normative requirement. According to this way of seeing things, those who have a concern to act rightly are not investing attention and interest in objects that do not merit such responses. Insofar as rightness is an independent reason for action, the concern to do what is right is a form of motivation that is called for by its proper object, and we would be open to rational criticism if we were to lack that distinctive concern. This is a crucial difference between the anti-rationalist and the Kantian approaches, despite the superficial similarities in their accounts of moral motivation, and it suggests that the former could be vulnerable to the fetishism objection in a way the Kantian account would not be.

3. Digression: Smith on "Right"

Now a Kantian position of this kind will be successful only if it is correct to maintain that moral rightness is itself a reason-giving consideration. It appears, however, that Michael Smith is committed to denying precisely this claim. On his metaethical account, judgments about moral rightness are not to be understood as identifying a consideration that itself constitutes a reason for action. Rather they amount to claims to the effect that there is reason of some other kind to perform the action that is said to be right.¹³ (To adopt Smith's preferred terminology, their content is given by the claim that one would desire to perform the right action in the agent's situation, if one were fully rational, where claims of this kind are claims about one's normative reasons for action.) We might think of this as a summary or "buck-passing" account of

¹³ See Smith, The Moral Problem, chap. 6.

rightness, insofar as it construes rightness not as a normatively significant kind or property in its own right, but as the property of being an action of a certain substantive kind that the agent has other, independent reasons for performing. To say that X would be right is to say that X-ing is something one has good reason to do, not to identify the reason why one ought to do it. Insofar as reasons to do X are in the picture, they are provided not by the consideration that X-ing would be right, but by the features that make X-ing the right thing to do under the agent's circumstances: for instance, that it would maximize impartial utility, or be the honest or just or considerate course of action.¹⁴ Rightness will accordingly be transparent in the deliberations of the person who is reasoning correctly about action, which will be focused instead on concrete right-making features of this kind.

As a characterization of Smith's position this is correct as far as it goes. But within the framework of his metaethical theory it would in fact be possible to articulate and defend a position of the broadly Kantian kind. To see this, we need only note that Smith's account of the concept of rightness leaves completely open the question of what the substantive right-making features are. Here it may be useful to distinguish between two different kinds of position. There are, first, pluralist accounts of the structure of the normative domain, which hold that there are no interesting unities to be found at the level of the right-making features of peoples' actions and circumstances. In particular, there is no independent property that is held in common by a subset of the right-making features, by reference to which we can identify those features as distinctively moral, and which set them apart from other, non-moral reasons for action. A second kind of position, by contrast, maintains

¹⁴ Compare Smith, "In Defense of The Moral Problem", pp. 116-117.

that there is a unity of this kind at the level of the right-making features of actions. According to these positions, we can isolate an interesting substantive property that is held in common by a subset of the right-making features, a property that is normatively significant in its own right, and that also sets the reasons in the unified class apart, as specially moral in character. Thus a utilitarian might hold that moral reasons have in common the property of maximizing impartial utility, while a contractualist would characterize the unifying property in terms of principles that it would be unreasonable for people to reject. In the same spirit, a Kantian might characterize the distinctively moral reasons by reference to the categorical imperative, identifying a certain sort of universalizability as the normatively-significant property that is held in common by all and only the specifically moral reasons for action. We see, then, that Smith's metaethical theory does not after all commit him to the view that Kantians have a fetishistic conception of moral motivation. His summary account of the concept of rightness leaves open the possibility that there is a substantive unity at the level of the right-making features of precisely the sort the Kantian would need there to be to avoid the charge of fetishism.

The most basic point to have emerged from this discussion is that the charge of fetishism is in place when a source of moral motivation is posited that cannot be understood as a proper response to its object, a response that is rendered appropriate by independent facts about what one has reason to do. The anti-rationalist account in terms of a general concern to do what is right seems fetishistic in this sense, insofar as the account starts from the assumption that rightness is not itself a reason-giving consideration. This assumption is a defining commitment of the anti-rationalist's own position, and so its avowed source of moral motivation is fetishistic on grounds that would be accepted by anti-rationalists themselves.

Beyond this, we have seen that concerns about fetishism will go hand-in-hand with differing substantive views about normative reasons for action. Thus anti-rationalists and Kantians may appear to have similar accounts of the basic structure of moral motivation, postulating a class of desires or concerns whose content is characterized in terms of an abstract moral concept, such as that of duty or of the moral law. The accounts strikingly differ, however, on precisely the issue that is paramount for the issue of fetishism. Kantians affirm that the general properties to which morally admirable agents are responsive are normatively significant; they constitute reasons for anyone to act accordingly, and to the extent this is the case the Kantian can avoid the charge of fetishism to which the anti-rationalist's superficially similar account seems vulnerable.

One way to put this point is to recall that, on the rationalist position as I have presented it, there are two distinct judgments that will be involved in moral motivation, when its reflective structure is made fully explicit. To see this, let us take as an example a contractualist account of the unity of the moral domain, which characterizes moral reasons in terms of the idea of principles for the general regulation of behavior that no one could reasonably reject. Deliberated moral motivation, given the contractualist picture, will involve the belief that this property obtains—that, for instance, X-ing would be required by principles for the general regulation of behavior that no one could reasonably reject. If we are anti-rationalists, this judgment must exhaust the cognitive content of the motivation to act morally, which will involve a brute desire to perform actions that have the property in question. For the rationalist, by contrast, there is a further and distinct judgment that is at issue, the normative judgment, namely, that the fact that X-ing is required by contractualist principles is a reason. The truth

of this second judgment is what makes it the case that moral motivation, on the rationalist account, is not a merely fetishistic fixation, but rather a response that is warranted by its proper object. Moreover, as I have developed the rationalist position moral motivation at least potentially involves the acknowledgment, on the part of the agent, that this distinctively normative truth obtains. It is the endorsement of the normative judgment, for example, that distinguishes morally admirable agents from the moral skeptics that the rationalist should acknowledge to be possible.

If this is on the right lines, however, it raises a question about Smith's presentation of the fetishism objection. He puts the objection by charging that we should not think of moral motivation as a desire to do what is right, where this is construed as de dicto rather than de re. But now it looks as if the rationalist too will think of moral motivation in a way that involves a de dicto belief on the agent's part about the rightness of what they do, and a responsiveness to this consideration. Reflective moral agents judge that a property obtains that makes X-ing, morally speaking, the thing to do; but—to express the point in Smith's terms—they also judge that it is right to do X because it has that property, and their motivation to do X is in some way responsive to their acknowledgment that X-ing would be right. If it is fetishistic to have a de dicto concern to do what is right, why doesn't this render the rationalist's account of moral motivation vulnerable to the fetishism objection?

There are a couple of points to be made about Smith's own position that might help to answer this question. One is that he does not himself posit a desire to act rightly of the de dicto kind in his story about how reflective agency gives rise to moral action. Fully reflective agents will grasp that X-ing would be right, in a way that gives rise to the motivation to do X. What produces this motivation,

however, is not a de dicto desire to do what is right, but rather a disposition to coherence, of the same general kind that is operative whenever we revise our attitudes in compliance with requirements of rationality.¹⁵ So it is misleading to suggest that rationalism, at least as Smith construes it, requires a de dicto desire to do what is right. (The point generalizes, I believe, to other ways of developing a rationalist position.) Second, it should be noted that Smith and the anti-rationalist give different accounts of the content of the de dicto judgments of rightness that they each take to be involved somehow in moral motivation. For the anti-rationalist, these judgments are what we might call substantive judgments about the morally right, to the effect (for instance) that some general property is instantiated, such as the maximizing of impartial utility, that holds the moral considerations together as a class. For Smith, by contrast, the rightness that figures in the rational agent's judgments is the summary concept we encountered earlier; the de dicto judgment that X-ing would be right plays the role that other rationalists might take to be played by the unanalyzed normative judgment that there is conclusive reason to do X. There is no inconsistency involved in saying that a de dicto judgment of rightness of one of these kinds would be a problematic component in the thoughts that give rise to moral motivation, while affirming a role for de dicto judgments of rightness of the other kind.

This is still not quite right, however. For on Smith's view, too, it looks as if de dicto judgments about rightness of both kinds will have a role to play in moral motivation. That is, if—as Smith himself seems to leave open—the anti-pluralists about morality are correct, so that there are general properties held in common by all of the distinctively moral reasons, then the de dicto judgment that

¹⁵ See Smith, "In Defense of The Moral Problem".

those properties obtain will have a perfectly respectable role to play in the reflections of morally admirable agents. Their motivations, in other words, will be focused not just on the fact that X-ing would be kind or just or helpful, but also on the fact that X-ing would maximize impartial utility, or be required by principles for the general regulation of behavior that no one could reasonably reject. What is crucial, for the fetishism objection, is not merely whether general de dicto judgments of substantive moral rightness of this kind figure in moral deliberation, but whether such judgments can be combined with further, normative judgments (whose content will also be de dicto) about the reason-giving force of the substantive moral considerations in question.

I conclude that the question of whether de dicto thoughts about rightness figure in moral motivation is a red herring. Smith is correct to suggest that anti-rationalists interpret moral motivation as a kind of fetish. What makes this the case, however, is not the fact that accounts of this kind trace moral motivation to de dicto judgments of rightness. It is the different and more basic fact that anti-rationalists deny the independent normative significance of such moral properties as they are willing to countenance.

4. Three Anti-Rationalist Responses.

To this point I have mainly been concerned to get clear about what the fetishism objection comes to. In the present section I would like to test the strength of the objection, by considering three lines of response that it is open to the anti-rationalist to pursue. My hope is that these considerations will help us to understand the deep attractions of the rationalist approach as a way of thinking about the motivations of moral agents.

The fetishism objection turns on the idea that moral motivation is not a response that is merited by its object, if we think of it in

anti-rationalist terms. But anti-rationalists might reply that on their account no less than that of the rationalist, moral motivation can be considered a response that is merited by its object. Agents who lack the desire to do what is right open themselves to certain distinctive forms of criticism; they are (for instance) cads, or bastards, or selfish and insensitive louts. Insofar as criticism of these kinds is warranted when agents lack the desire to do what is right, that response does not seem to be on all fours with purely subjective tastes and preferences, such as those of a culinary or aesthetic variety. It is a proper way of responding to the morally right, precisely in the sense that those who lack the response render themselves vulnerable to moral censure.

It is not obvious, however, that moral motivation, on the anti-rationalist account of it, really does differ in this respect from preferences regarding foods and colors. Those who do not appreciate certain foods and wines may be said to have an unsophisticated palette, and there are preferences in the domain of color that are clear expressions of bad taste. This is not, to be sure, moral censure, but the anti-rationalist argument turns on the vulnerability to criticism of those who lack moral motivations, not on the nature of the criticism that is called for in these cases. The more fundamental point, however, is that our ability to criticize those who lack moral motivations does not alone suffice to render those motivations proper responses to their characteristic objects. The central anti-rationalist thesis is that there is no independent reason for people to care about moral ends. If this thesis is true, then those who lack the desire to do what is right cannot be said to be deliberating incorrectly. They may be nasty and unjust, but we cannot say that they are mistaken in their reasoning about what to do—not even if they are epistemically well-positioned to see that their actions are wrong, and to grasp what makes them morally

objectionable. The moral criticism that the anti-rationalist may direct at those who lack moral motivations is in this way superficial. It does not vindicate the basic suggestion that the desire to do what is right is a response that is called for by the intrinsic nature of its object.

On the rationalist picture, our most basic point of view as agents is that of practical deliberation, a perspective from which we attempt to make out what we have reason to do in ways that lead to justified modifications of our intentions. It follows from this picture that criticism in terms of reasons is inescapable, in a way that merely moral censure (considered simply as such) need not be; to be mistaken in one's judgments about one's reasons, or to fail to be motivated in accordance with those judgments, is to fail at what one is most fundamentally endeavoring to do (insofar as one is engaged in practical reflection). Here a comparison with fetishism in the sexual domain may be instructive. A fetish of this kind involves the investment of sexual interest and energy in objects that are not intrinsically erotic, such as socks or elbows. We have here a kind of subjective response—sexual arousal—that is by its nature aimed at objects of a certain category, together with an independent way of ascertaining whether objects really do fall into that category or not. Analogously, the rationalist understands intentions as responses that—by our nature as practical reasoners—are out to track our reasons for action. Against this background, an account that does not anchor moral motivation in independent normative considerations may quite rightly be considered fetishistic.

A second and more radical response on behalf of anti-rationalism would be to question a basic feature of the rationalist position that gives the fetishism objection purchase. This is the assumption that there are reasons for action, in the normative sense that I have been appealing to throughout this paper. Thus if we deny

this assumption, then the distinction between fetishistic and non-fetishistic forms of motivation would seem to lack application. There will be no motivations that can be said to be presumptively warranted or fitting responses to their objects, because at the end of the day there are no facts of the matter about what anyone has reason to do. The desire to do what is right is not a response to something that we have independent reason to care about, but in this respect it is no different from any other motivation. All motivations would appear to be equally fetishistic, which is to say that the charge of fetishism is without any critical bite. The analogy, in the sexual case, would be the position that there is no property of being erotic that we have a handle on, independently of considering the responses of particular agents. On this view, neither reproductive organs nor breasts (say) can be considered intrinsically erotic zones of the body. These zones may be ones that people, as a matter of fact, often take a sexual interest in, but if so that is a fact of merely statistical significance. There is no interesting contrast to be drawn between objects in respect of their being intrinsically erotic or not, and to the extent this is the case there will be no critical bite to the characterization of a particular sexual preference as fetishistic.

Now as it happens I believe that a view along these general lines has some plausibility in the case of sexual arousal. That is, I concede the attractions of the position that holds that no conceivable objects of sexual desire can truly be said to be intrinsically erotic, in a way that sets them interestingly apart from other such objects. (Of course, some parts of the body have starring roles to play, as it were, in connection with the processes of reproduction, but it is not clear that this functional fact about them vindicates the claim that the bodily parts in question are intrinsically erotic.) If this is right, then fetishism in the domain

of sexual response will be at best a statistical concept, one whose application is utterly devoid of critical animus or force. In a similar vein, anti-rationalists might contend that there are no facts of the matter about normative reasons for action, of the sort that might make some motivations rather than others presumptively warranted responses to their proper objects. And indeed there are at least hints of such a view that can be discerned in the work of some anti-rationalists, who write about moral and other kinds of motivation as if there are merely objective facts of a quotidian or non-normative kind on the one hand, and the subjective desires of various agents on the other hand.¹⁶ A view of this kind might be developed by maintaining that distinctively normative judgments are, as a class, somehow conceptually confused, such that we do not even know what is being asserted when it is claimed that a given agent has a normative reason to do X. Or it might be contended that judgments of this class, though not meaningless in this fashion, are all of them false, right across the board. This would effectively defuse the fetishism objection in a way precisely analogous to the denial of intrinsically erotic facts or properties in the sexual case.

This seems to me to be a coherent position, one that, if correct, would in fact rebut the charge of fetishism as an objection to the anti-rationalist account of moral motivation. But the rebuttal turns on an extreme and wide-ranging view about normative reasons for action, something tantamount to a kind of nihilism about the whole normative domain. Certainly, it would be surprising if anti-rationalism turned out to involve an extreme commitment of this kind. The central anti-rationalist thesis concerns the normative

¹⁶ See, e.g., Nick Zangwill, "Externalist Moral Motivation", American Philosophical Quarterly 40 (2003), pp. 143-154, secs. 5-6. Zangwill's view appears to shift between skepticism about "normativity" (when this is construed as something that goes beyond the applicability of moral predicates), and a kind of instrumentalism or "internalism" about reasons for action.

significance of distinctively moral considerations, and on the surface a view of this sort would seem to leave room for the acknowledgement that there are normative reasons of other, non-moral kinds (reasons for agents to avoid actions that would cause them extreme pain, for example). So if anti-rationalism is committed to what I have called normative nihilism, this is not something about it that has been very clearly expressed by anti-rationalists themselves. Moreover, the further commitment that is in question here is one that seems highly problematic, considered just on its own terms. It is at odds, for instance, with the whole of our deliberative experience, which seems fundamentally structured around the assumption that there are reasons that speak for and against the various actions that are open to us; the very point of deliberation would seem to be to get clear about what these reasons are in the case at hand, and to arrive at some kind of assessment of their overall balance and direction. If normative nihilism is correct, however, then all of this is an illusion, something that must be explained away in psychological terms. Given the centrality of the deliberative point of view to our sense of ourselves as agents and persons, I find myself very skeptical that something like global normative nihilism could be true. For the present, however, my point is merely that the anti-rationalist takes on a surprising and very heavy burden of argument in appealing to normative nihilism to defuse the objection from fetishism.

A third and less extreme response to the fetishism charge would concede that there are normative reasons for action, but offer a more refined interpretation of the reasons that are involved in the moral case. In particular, it would be open to anti-rationalists to make the following modification in their account of moral motivation. The concern to do what is right is indeed arbitrary from the point of view of reason, insofar as rightness is not a consideration that

provides all agents with reasons for action and attention. But those agents in whom this concern is present, it might be said, do have reason to strive to act in accordance with moral requirements. For them, the fact that X-ing would be right, together with the subjective fact that they are concerned to act rightly, combine to speak in favor of doing X. The motivation to do what is right, on this account, need not be fetishistic in the way the original anti-rationalist position seemed to represent moral motivation as being, since that motivation can be understood as an appropriate response to normative reasons—albeit reasons that apply only to those agents in whom the contingent concern to act rightly is present. The resulting position concedes that the distinction between fetishistic and non-fetishistic forms of motivation has critical animus, but attempts to show that moral motivations fall on the right side of that distinction after all.

This revised position seems to avoid the objection of fetishism. But does it retain the defining claim of anti-rationalism, which is the denial that moral considerations represent requirements of reason? I believe it does. The revised position holds that virtuous agents have reason to do what morality requires. But the reasons in question are not constituted by moral considerations alone. On this view, it is not simply the fact that X-ing would be wrong that gives me reason to refrain from X-ing, but that fact together with the fact that I have a concern to avoid acting wrongly. To the extent this is the case, the revised position remains committed to the idea that moral considerations are not independent requirements of reason. In the idiom introduced by Bernard Williams, they supply internal rather than external reasons, counting in favor of acting rightly only for those whose subjective motivational sets

are appropriately aligned.¹⁷ A view of this kind can still be counted a form of anti-rationalism, even if it is not quite as radically anti-rationalist as the position considered earlier.

The Kantian and contractualist approaches sketched earlier, by contrast, are strongly rationalist views. They hold that moral considerations are reasons for anybody, regardless of the constitution of their subjective motivational set. The fact that an action would be uniquely universalizable, or required by principles that no one could reasonably reject, is itself a consideration that speaks strongly in favor of doing it, and it has this normative standing regardless of whether the agent in question happens to care about doing the right thing. To the extent this is the case, the general moral properties have what I have earlier referred to as independent normative significance, and it is this fact about them that immunizes the Kantian and contractualist approaches from the potential charge that they are fetishistic in their conceptions of moral motivation.

The revised position I have sketched thus differs from the paradigm rationalist accounts, in a way that renders the anti-rationalist label appropriate. It also provides a way of answering the charge of fetishism, showing that moral motivation, on a suitably anti-rationalist account of it, can after all be understood as a response that is in the relevant way warranted by the normative character of its proper objects. This non-fetishistic interpretation can be sustained, however, only at the cost of abandoning the anti-rationalist's original and distinctive account of moral motivation. According to that account, it is the concern to do what is morally right, interpreted in a de dicto way, that is the virtuous agent's

¹⁷ Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons", as reprinted in his Moral Luck (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101-113.

fundamental motivation to do what morality requires. In the revised, internal reasons theory, by contrast, that concern comes to play a very different kind of role; it figures not as the source of moral motivation, but as a condition for having reason to act rightly. If the account is to avoid the charge of fetishism, then it must represent morally admirable agents as responding to reasons that they can acknowledge to obtain, and this acknowledgement would appear to go by way of second-order reflection on the subjective concern to act rightly that is a condition or constituent in their reason for action.

What moves fully reflective moral agents to action, then, is not the general concern to do what is right. It is rather the acknowledgement, arrived at through reflexive thought about their own possession of such a general concern, that they have reason to act rightly. This account of moral motivation is in its essentials the rationalist account. Agents who act morally have reasons for so acting, and their motivations implicate their general rational capacities for grasping and responding to the facts about what they have reason to do. The disagreement between rationalists and anti-rationalists, on this way of developing the anti-rationalist view, is not about the general psychic structures that make moral motivation possible, but about the content and truth conditions of the normative judgments on which moral agents distinctively act. Rationalists, for their part, should be very happy with this outcome, since it concedes their basic point that moral motivation is grounded in the deliberative reflections of the agent.

But the situation is still worse for the anti-rationalist position than this might suggest. If we follow the route just sketched, then anti-rationalism, in taking on board the rationalist account of motivation, threatens to become an internally unstable collection of views. Proponents of the internal-reasons model have

typically defended the idea that reasons depend on our desires by saying that those desires are what make it possible for us to act on our reasons. Normative reasons are grounded in desires that are rationally contingent, the thought goes, because such desires are the ultimate source of our motivations to action; they account for the capacity of normative considerations to engage the will of rational agents. On the position just sketched, however, it turns out that this claim is false. Motivation has its source not in our contingent desires and dispositions, but in independent capacities for deliberative reflection about the normative. By conceding the rationalist account of motivation, anti-rationalists thus undermine the line of thought that purportedly gave support to the internal-reasons view in the first place.¹⁸

There are, to be sure, other ways in which an internal-reasons approach to moral normativity might be developed. The anti-rationalist might insist that the concern to do what is right functions not merely as a condition of the virtuous agent's reason to act morally, but also as the psychic structure that directly enables moral motivation. On this kind of position, agents in whom the concern to act rightly is present will indeed have reason to act as morality prescribes. But when they do the right thing, their actions will be motivated not by their acknowledgement that these reasons obtain, but rather by the basic concern to act rightly that conditions their moral reasons in the first place. This kind of position restores the anti-rationalist's distinctive account of moral motivation, tracing it to a concern for moral rightness that is arbitrary from the point of view of reason. Precisely insofar as it interprets moral motivation in this way, however, the revised position abandons its claim to have overcome the fetishism objection.

¹⁸ Compare my "Three Conceptions of Rational Agency", Ethical Theory and Moral Practice 2 (1999), pp. 217-242, sec. 1.

Moral motivation is once again understood as a response that is not merited by its proper objects, insofar as it is constituted by a brute and unmotivated desire to act in ways that are morally right, rather than by the agent's reflexive acknowledgement of reasons to act morally that are constituted or conditioned by such brute desires.

The anti-rationalist might respond that even if moral motivation remains in this way fetishistic, the actions it gives rise to are not. Agents who are moved by the brute concern for moral rightness will end up doing what they have reason to do, and to the extent this is the case we can say that their actions are merited responses to normative facts about their situation. It is just that these responses are produced by psychic structures that are not themselves sensitive to the normative fact that the actions they motivate are merited in this way. The anti-rationalist might maintain that this much fetishism is unavoidable for any position that wishes to reject the distinctively rationalist picture of moral motivation as potentially grounded in normative reflection.

Once anti-rationalists have maneuvered themselves into the position of conceding that there are reasons for the actions that moral agents perform, however, it seems highly artificial to insist that those reasons should not register in the deliberation of the agents to whom they apply. As I suggested in section 1, reasons are precisely considerations that are suited to figure in contexts of deliberative reflection and advice, counting for and against options for action that it is open to the agent to perform. A position that makes room for such reasons, and appeals to them to explain why the actions of moral agents are not merely arbitrary responses, should leave room for the possibility of motivation that is based on reflection about these normative considerations. There is thus a kind

of natural dynamic that pushes the internal reasons theorist back to the rationalist account of moral motivation.

I do not suppose that these considerations alone decide the issue between rationalists and their opponents. But I believe they locate a real challenge for the anti-rationalist approach. If we reject the idea that morality constitutes an independent normative domain, then it will be much harder than theorists may have supposed to come up with an account of moral motivation that is both attractive and independently stable.¹⁹

¹⁹ I have received very helpful feedback on distant predecessors of this paper from audiences in Berkeley (BAFFLE), Minnesota (Conference on Moral Psychology), Chicago (Central Division Meetings of the APA), Oxford (Moral Philosophy Seminar), Adelaide (departmental colloquium), Canberra (Conference on Reasons and Rationality), Aarhus (departmental colloquium), and Rotterdam (public lecture).