

Besires and the weakness of will argument

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1 Introduction

Can there be a state which is *both* a belief *and* a desire? More exactly, a state which is a belief that p and a desire that q, where p and q may be the same proposition or a different one? Such a state would be a ‘besire’ (following Altham 1986). So a first question is the general question whether besires are possible.

Normative attitudes would be good candidates for besires. For example, if Sandra has the normative attitude that it would be best for her to leave the country, this seems to be a propositional state of hers which may be both a belief and a desire. Or, for another example, suppose that Michael has the normative attitude that one should not lie without good reason. Then he seems to hold a belief about lying, namely, that lying without good reason is normatively forbidden, and, at the same time, he also seems to have a desire with respect to lying, namely, the desire not to lie without good reason. A second question is whether normative attitudes are besires.¹

There are other good candidates for besires. A ‘simple’ state like the state of the young chicken expressed by its cry may be a case in point. Even though the chicken’s state is probably not a full-blooded propositional state, it seems to be ‘Janus-faced’ as well. Does it descriptively represent the chicken’s hunger? Or is it a desire for food? Maybe both – and then it could be a besire, or something like that.² Ruth Garrett Millikan mentions another candidate, namely, intentions. Intentions clearly have a desire-like nature. And arguably, they

¹ Instead of ‘normative attitudes’ one could call these states ‘practical attitudes’. Note, however, that to call these states or attitudes ‘beliefs’ (‘practical beliefs’ or ‘normative beliefs’) would be somewhat misleading, since it would suggest that they are beliefs *and not besires*.

² Millikan (1995) calls representations that have both directions of fit – that are both ‘descriptive’ and ‘directive’, as she puts it – ‘pushmi-pullyu representations’.

also do involve some belief-like aspect, some belief to the effect that one will do what one intends to do.³

In order to assess the possibility of besires one would have to investigate into the individuation conditions of states. Modal questions will come up. And it would be advisable to consider the idea of representations in general (and not just propositional attitudes) which are ‘Janus-faced’. A complete investigation would probably turn out to be very demanding and long. But we can make a start by considering an interesting argument given by Michael Smith – the weakness of will argument – which addresses the topic of besires on a more limited scale.

2 The weakness of will argument

First, let us start with some preliminaries and stage setting.

The weakness of will argument is supposed to show that motivating reasons are not constituted by besires. It does not attempt to show that there are no besires. But at least, motivating reasons are not besires, so the argument goes. Thus, the argument addresses a third question: Are motivating reasons besires?

Michael Smith presents the weakness of will argument in the context of his so-called ‘*teleological argument*’. The teleological argument is supposed to show that motivating reasons are constituted by desires and means-end beliefs, and not by beliefs alone, and not by besires either. The last part of this, however, is not established by the teleological argument alone. The teleological argument establishes, at best, that any motivating reason is constituted, at least in part, by a desire. But this leaves open the possibility that motivating reasons are besires. So the teleological argument contains a hole, and a separate argument is needed. The weakness of will argument is supposed to be this separate argument and, thus, to supplement the teleological argument in order to close the hole. Together, the two arguments are meant to show that the Humean theory of motivation is correct.⁴

For the sake of exposing the weakness of will argument, let us treat desire, belief, and besire as kinds or types of states. So, for example, the belief that p is a kind, or type, to which a token state can belong. And belief in general (no matter what propositional content) is a –

³ Cf. Millikan (1995), p. 176.

⁴ I am not sure why the view that motivating reasons are besires would not count as a ‘Humean theory of motivation’. As we will see, the mere fact that belief and desire are always modally separable does not quite have the force that Michael Smith takes it to have.

broader – kind, or type. (Analogously, for desire.) And equally, a besire with the belief-like component that p and the desire-like component that q – the besire (p, q), or Bes (p, q), for short – is also a kind of state. Also, besire in general (no matter what propositional contents) is a – broader – kind, or type. Unless said otherwise, ‘belief’, ‘desire’, and ‘besire’ will stand for kinds or types of states in what follows.

The question then is what relations hold between these kinds of states. It is clear that, by definition, any state which is a besire is also a belief. So there is an implication from besire to belief (and from besire to desire, too). In other words, a besire is also a belief (and a desire). That’s what is meant by speaking of the ‘belief-like component’ of the besire (or the ‘desire-like component’). But the kinds, of course, are not identical. (Granting, for the moment, that there are any besires at all.) There could be (and probably is) a state which is a belief but not a besire (and a desire which is not a besire). So belief, as a kind, is not identical with besire (and neither is desire). (This holds whether we quantify over the propositional contents or whether we keep the propositional contents fixed. In the following, I will ignore the distinction between these two versions.) So besire is not the same as belief, even though a besire is a belief.

Now, let us take a look at Michael Smith’s weakness of will argument. Even though Smith does not present the argument in a premises-conclusion fashion, the following way of formulating the argument may be a fair and helpful presentation. The first premise of Smith’s argument can be taken to consist in the thesis

(1) Modal separability of belief and desire:

For any propositions p, q:

it is possible that some state s is a belief that p but not a desire that q.

(1) is backed up by intuition about cases of weakness of will, and it is supported by, or corresponds to, a Humean view of the attitudes. The second premise we get by the definition, or constitution, of a besire:

(2) Constitution of besires:

For any propositions p, q:

it is not possible that some state is a besire (p, q) but not a desire that q.

It follows that

(3) Besire (as a kind) is not identical with belief (as a kind).

For, if it is possible that some state s is a belief that p but no besire (p, q) , for any q , then the two kinds, or types, besire and belief cannot be identical.

Now, suppose that

(4) Motivating reasons (MRs) are besires.

More exactly, any MR (as a kind) is identical with a besire (as a kind).

(A MR is a besire (p, q) (for some p, q .)

Then, by (1) – (4), we get

(5) A MR (as a kind) is not identical with a belief (as a kind).

But this is entirely unsurprising, and no problem for thesis (4), that motivating reasons are besires, arises. In particular, we do not arrive at any *reductio* of thesis (4). So (1) and (2) are entirely compatible with the view that motivating reasons are besires. (Note that (5) is entirely compatible with the fact that, necessarily, any token state which is a besire is a belief, too.)

To conclude. If we take Michael Smith's weakness of will argument to consist in the argument from (1) to (5), we do not get the conclusion that Smith wants to derive. And there is no obvious argument in the vicinity which could establish the thesis that motivating reasons are not besires.

The same is true, it seems, of *normative attitudes*. For, if we add the premise that

(4') Normative attitudes are besires.

then, by (1) – (3) and (4'), we get

(5') A normative attitude (as a kind) is not identical with a belief (as a kind).

But this, again, is unsurprising and does not do any harm to (4'). The view that normative attitudes are besires is no more called into doubt by (1) and (2) than the view that motivating reasons are besires.⁵

What moral can we draw? – When reading Michael Smith's presentation of the argument, one could get the impression that modal separability was the source of the trouble with besires. But it seems that the mere fact of modal separability, the Humean view that belief and desire can always be pulled apart – which we have taken for granted here –, does not pose any problem for the view that motivating reasons are besires. Humean modal separability cannot be the source of the trouble. If there is any trouble, it must derive from something else.

3 A puzzling situation?

What is going on?, one might wonder.

Someone who is in a state which is a belief that *p* and a desire that *q* and, thus, is in a besire state *Bes* (*p*, *q*), might lose the desire that *q* while keeping the belief that *p*. Then, of course, the person loses the besire, too. But what does not follow is that the original state was not a besire (*p*, *q*). So if the original state was a motivating reason, the person has simply lost the motivating reason. It does not follow that the motivating reason was not a besire. And there does not seem to be any other route from plausible premises to this conclusion in the vicinity.

What is puzzling about Michael Smith's argument is that, according to his own position, a motivating reason is constituted by a belief and a desire. Now, if a besire is just this, namely, a hybrid or complex state constituted by a belief and a desire, then one wonders why Smith cannot and does not simply claim that MRs are besires. Nothing seems to stand in the way of holding this view. – One feels inclined to conclude that there must be some hidden assumption in the background. But what is it?

Perhaps, there is an issue about the 'unity' or 'unitariness' of besires. But what exactly is the issue? Michael Smith does not tell us. He simply speaks of 'unitary psychological

⁵ It is interesting to observe that Michael Smith, in the relevant chapter 4.7 of Smith (1994), at some point switches from talk about motivating reasons to talk about moral beliefs and judgments (around p. 120). Officially, his view is that moral beliefs and judgments are not motivating reasons, exactly because one could keep the moral belief or judgment and lose the desire to act correspondingly – weakness of will, again.

states', but he does not tell us what makes a state a 'unitary psychological state'. Hybrid states and complex states do not seem to be problematic in general. Plausibly, some emotions are hybrid states, or complex states. Grief or mourning, for example, require both a certain belief (about the loss of someone or something) and a feeling (of sadness), and so do proud, guilt, shame, etc. Perhaps, being 'unitary' hints at some further condition. But unless we have an explicit statement of this condition on the table, it is hard to see what the issue might be.

Already in Altham (1986), where the term 'besire' is introduced, the topic of 'unitariness' shows up.

“A better idea is that awareness of a moral property [a moral conviction or normative attitude, F.H.] is a unitary mental state which has properties both of belief and desire. It would not be two mental states, one a belief and the other a desire, for then the question would again arise about how they were connected [...].” (Altham 1986, p. 284)

But this is all we are told about the supposed 'unitariness' or 'unity' of besires. What makes a mental state 'unitary'? Is an emotion like proud or grief a 'unitary' mental state? (Note that, in the last sentence quoted, Altham hints at the issue of modal separability, too – without explaining any further why this should be a problem.) Unless we are given some clear ideas about what makes for 'unitariness' or 'unity', we do not know what to make of the suggestion that besires are supposed to be 'unitary mental states'. It is unclear what the requirement is and on what justification it could rest.

4 Besires in general

Let us come back to the first, general question of whether besires are possible. According to a common conception of representation (to be found, for example, in the works of Fred Dretske and Ruth Millikan), besires seem to be a possibility. (And Ruth Millikan endorses the existence of Janus-faced representations which are both indicative and directive.)⁶ Suppose that physical types realize semantic properties. So a token state *s* has a semantic property *M* in virtue of being of a certain physical type *P* which realizes the semantic property *M* (for

⁶ Cf. Millikan (1995), p. 166.

example, some representational content with a certain attitude type). (The types must be relativized to individual representational systems. P might realize M in system a, but not in system b.)⁷

According to such a conception of representation, it seems possible that a state has two different semantic properties at the same time (or even more than two). Or, more exactly, it seems possible that a physical type P realizes two different semantic properties M1 and M2 and that, therefore, a state of type P has two different semantic properties, M1 and M2. And what seems possible is not just the having of multiple semantic properties belonging to the same attitude kind, say, the belief-like attitude type. It also seems possible that these semantic properties belong to different attitude kinds, such as belief on the one hand and desire on the other hand. For, the physical type P might be a realizer for two different semantic properties belonging to different kinds of attitude. There does not seem to be any reason in principle why this should be precluded.

Suppose, schematically, that s is a state of physical type P, and that P realizes the semantic property of being a belief that p. Then, P might realize the semantic property of being a desire that q, too (where p and q might be different or not).

A first example here might be the state of a young chicken which is expressed by its cry. This state could be a state carrying multiple semantic properties. It might be both a ‘belief’ (or indicative representation) that the chicken is hungry and a ‘desire’ (or directive representation) that some food be given to the chicken. Emotions might be another case in point. For, an emotion might be a state which belongs to two different semantic kinds: it represents some physical changes in one’s body, in the indicative or belief-like mode (it is a bodily perception of some sort), and it represents some expressive behavior, say, some facial expression, in the directive or desire-like mode (it has a function of activating a certain evaluative facial behavior, for example). It is both a belief-like representation and a desire-like representation (where the contents are different).⁸

A third example could be the following. Consider a simple representational system, Z, which has a detector for the instantiation of feature F in its environment and is capable of producing movements of kind B. If internal state s (of physical type P) is activated, by the receptor’s stimulation, system Z is in a belief-like representational state with the (*de-re*) content that its environment instantiates F. But in addition, the internal state s might also have

⁷ Here I am describing this conception of representation by using the notion of realization. I am confident that one could describe it equally well without relying on ‘realization’.

⁸ In the literature on emotions, it is common to go either for the ‘input side’ (perceptual theories) or for the ‘output side’ (expressive-evaluative theories). The besires account just sketched can preserve intuitions of both views. I would like to work out this account in the close future.

a behavior-guiding function, as it were. It might have a desire-like semantic property, e.g., the property of representing bodily movement B under the desire-like attitude kind. The very same physical type P might realize both semantic properties, a belief-like semantic property and a desire-like semantic property. In a way, this would be a very efficient and elegant way of getting two representational jobs done at once, so to speak. In principle, a representational system like Z seems to be a (not too unlikely) possibility.

Taking all of this together, it seems that the following conclusion is vindicated. In general, besires are a possibility. There could be representations which are both descriptive and directive. And there does not seem to be any reason of principle which precludes the possibility of such a Janus-faced kind of state on the level of propositional attitudes – of besires – either.⁹

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⁹ Millikan holds that propositional attitudes are ‘more sophisticated’ in a certain sense, and that only on the level of propositional attitudes we can have states which are purely descriptive or purely directive (and whose interaction then requires some practical inference). But this does not mean that there are no propositional attitudes which are ‘Janus-faced’. Quite the contrary, Millikan herself suggests that intentions are good candidates for besires. Compare Millikan (1995), pp. 166-7; 176-8.

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