

Reason, Value, and the Muggletonians

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In a series of papers, and now a book, Michael Smith has developed an account of value—more precisely, of what it is to value one’s own potential actions.¹ To value such an action is, he claims, to believe that it would be valuable; and to believe it would be valuable is to believe that one has a normative reason to perform it. To believe that one has a normative reason to perform an action is, roughly, to believe that one would desire to do it if one were fully rational. Putting these things together, and adding a little precision, we get:

An individual X values her potential action iff X believes that were she fully rational, she would desire that she perform if she were situated as she actually is.

The reference to the actual situation of the agent will be important later, so let us get clear on it now. It is needed to deal with cases in which agents know that they have a tendency to irrationality. Ulysses valued having himself tied to the mast, since he valued hearing the Sirens sing, and knew that unless he were tied to the mast he would be unable to resist their call. Yet he also knew that were he fully rational, he would be able to resist their call, and so would have no desire to be tied to the mast. Thus if the account is to work for such a case, what Ulysses valued must be identified with what he believed his rational self would desire for his actual irrational self. In short, the idea is that the rational self gives advice, rather than providing a model to be emulated.

To complete Smith’s account we need to know what is meant by a fully rational agent. Following Bernard Williams, Smith tells us that a fully rational agent is one who (i) has no false beliefs; (ii) has all relevant true beliefs; and (iii) deliberates correctly, where this includes making all the normal inferences, exercising one’s imagination, and bringing all of one’s beliefs and desires into a coherent set. This is perhaps an unusual notion of rationality—we normally think that we can rationally arrive at false beliefs—but we need not squabble over the word.

Smith’s account is attractive, since it offers to give us an explanation both of how we can deliberate over our values (we deliberate over what we would desire if fully rational), and of how the upshot of such deliberation is practical (believing that our fully rational self would desire something might bring us to desire it now). However, it strikes me that it cannot be the correct account of value. Consider the following opinions about reason:

It was the Spirit of Reason in Man that always blasphemed and fought against God, and persecuted and killed the Just and the Righteous.

Rational Truth is not the Truth of Christ but of Pilate. It is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The spirit of reason in all magistrates is that Beast that doth arise out of the bottomless pit of their imagination, all the world over.

¹See especially Smith [2] and [3, Ch 5].

The Beast of Revelation XI. 7 is the spirit or seed of reason in man; and the bottomless pit is the imagination which the spirit of reason liveth in, or that floweth from the seed.²

The quotes are from Ludowick Muggleton, who, with his cousin John Reeve, founded the Muggletonian sect in mid-seventeenth century England. The sentiments made good sense in the framework of their other beliefs. The Muggletonians held that each person contained a mixture of two seeds in various proportions. One seed, the seed of faith, came from God; those in whom it predominated were destined for salvation. The other seed, that of reason, had entered Eve at the time of the fall. As a result reason was held to be 'the right devil'; those in whom the seed of reason predominated were damned.

I think it is clear that the Muggletonians valued faith and rejected the unconstrained use of reason. What would they have made of the desires that they would have had were they fully rational? They would surely have thought them to be the desires of the devil—quite literally so, since they thought that all there was to the devil was the activity of the seed of reason: 'There is no other Satan to tempt God or man but the motions and words that proceed from the seed of reason in man and woman' 'That devil ... that tempts men and women to all unrighteousness, it is man's spirit of unclean reason and cursed imagination.'³ The claim was not that the exercise of reason would lead one astray epistemically; it was rather that reason was apt to corrupt one's desires. The complaint was with the tree of knowledge, not the tree of false beliefs. The fully rational would blaspheme against God from a lack of respect, rather than from ignorance.⁴

Thus we have a counter-example to Smith's analysis. The Muggletonians believed that their fully rational selves—rational in just Smith's sense— would have blasphemed against God; and that their rational selves would have wanted their actual selves to do likewise. But blaspheming against God was not what they valued.

What responses are open to a defender of the analysis? I see three. The first is to try to apply to the Muggletonians a response parallel to that made in the Ulysses case. There we exploited a distinction between the rational self as adviser and as model. Perhaps we could say the Muggletonians had a rational reason for being irrational; and so perhaps we could say that their rational selves would have advised a course of irrationality, even though they would not model it. Certainly

²The first two quotes are taken from Thompson [4, pp. 94, 95]; the other two are from Hill et al. [1, p. 81].

³Hill et al. [1, p. 80], Thompson [4, p. 94].

⁴Did the Muggletonians believe that reason would corrupt their values too? The question is moot. Intuitively I would say that they did. But on Smith's analysis they presumably didn't, since they believed that their rational selves would have the same beliefs about their rational selves' desires as they did; hence they would have had the same values. They might have said that they believed their values would change; but if Smith's analysis is right, this would just show that they had misunderstood what is meant by 'value', and so their claims should not be taken as expressive of their real beliefs.

Could Smith hold that the Muggletonians believed that rationality would change not just their desires, but also their values? No. In that case they would have concluded that their fully rational selves would have had false beliefs about what was valuable; but then they would not have thought them fully rational after all. So the Muggletonians would have thought it impossible to be fully rational, on the grounds that increased knowledge in one dimension would destroy knowledge in another. But then they would have had no beliefs about what they would desire if fully rational, and so, on Smith's analysis, they would have had no values.

there are cases of people who value irrationality which seem to be amenable to this treatment. Thus it was a central tenet of dadaism that creativity could only be released through spontaneity, and that this in turn required irrationality. So we can make the example conform to the analysis by imagining the dadaists' rational selves giving advice to their actual selves to behave irrationally.⁵ Can we tell a similar story for the Muggletonians? If they had believed that their fully rational selves would remain virtuous (although damned), then we could: their rational selves would have advised their actual selves to take a path of irrationality and hence of salvation. But that is not what the Muggletonians believed. They did not think simply that God punished the rational; they thought that he punished them because they were corrupt. And since they were corrupt, they would give corrupt advice. What their rational selves would want for their actual selves would be bad. Distinguishing the role of adviser from that of model is of no help to Smith's analysis.

The second possible response is to deny that the Muggletonians really possessed the propositional attitudes we have ascribed to them. Either they did not really value faith over reason; or they did not really believe that their rational selves would give corrupt advice. Responses like this come in two versions, a more and a less radical. The more radical version sees the Muggletonians as so confused as to fail to have any values, or else to fail to have any beliefs concerning rationality at all. The less radical accepts that the Muggletonians did have values, and that they did have beliefs about rationality, but denies that these were what the Muggletonians said they were. According to this version of the response, when we consider the Muggletonians' actions, and their other attitudes towards rationality, we will find that they did not really value faith over rationality, or did not really believe that rationality would bring corruption, in spite of what they said.

I don't think that either version of this response will work. We can accept that the Muggletonians had *false* beliefs: the doctrine of the two seeds was false, and this means that they didn't have a sound argument for rejecting rationality. However, the Muggletonians' beliefs were not *incoherent*. They were not in the incoherent state of believing that all knowledge is bad. On the contrary, they thought that it was good to have some knowledge: the everyday knowledge that was necessary for ordinary life, and the theological knowledge that was given by the Bible, and by the writings of the Muggletonian prophets. But they thought that more knowledge than this was corrupting; and hence that reason, the method by which one expanded one's knowledge beyond its proper bound, could be corrupting. This is not to say that reason is always corrupting: it has a quite legitimate role within the proper sphere of knowledge.⁶ But it corrupts when, as in the fully rational person, it is employed too widely. It strikes me that this is a perfectly coherent attitude, and one which we have every reason for ascribing to

⁵I say that we can make the example conform to the analysis, but I don't think that the result is very natural. Doubtless most dadaists would have loathed the idea of taking advice from their rational selves.

⁶Reeve wrote: 'I am so far from denying a sober use of reason in its proper place that I acknowledge it an admirable instrument for illuminating the things of God to rational man' Hill et al. [1, p.81].

the Muggletonians. They professed it, and they lived their lives in accordance with it, avoiding reasoned debate with those outside the sect.⁷

These considerations suggest a third response, which is to amend Smith's gloss on rationality. Suppose we said that a rational person is not someone who has *all* the relevant true beliefs, but rather the right ones. Couldn't we then fit the Muggletonians to the analysis? Perhaps we could. The trouble now is to say, in a non-question begging way, what 'the right beliefs' consist in. For the obvious way to understand them is as the class of beliefs that someone who has the right values would have. But then we have said that to value an action is to believe that someone who had the right values would advise doing it. The attempt to analyse value in terms of rationality has been abandoned.

There may be other ways of amending the gloss on rationality. But I doubt that such a strategy would work without effectively emptying the notion of its content, since I suspect that it is exactly the rationalistic aspect of the account that is causing the problem. I suspect that the account gains its plausibility from the fact that most of us (at least, most of those of us who read philosophy journals) do value rationality. So it is unsurprising that we typically value the things that we would desire if rational. But not everyone thinks that way. The Muggletonians did not; and there are surely others who, whilst rejecting their peculiar theological premises, share with them the belief that too much reasoning can corrupt. Valuing rationality is no essential part of what it is to value.⁸

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3. M. Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
4. E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁷This was obviously not true of the Muggletonian prophets, especially not of Muggleton himself, who was an inveterate polemicist. But it does seem to have been true of the majority of the sect, who kept very much to themselves. In particular, they were radically anti-evangelical: one explanation of the small size of the sect. See Hill et al. [1, pp. 1-2 and p. 5 n.2].

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