

# Against the Besire Theory of Moral Judgment<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper critically examines two objections and raises a new objection against the besire theory of moral judgment. Firstly, Smith (1994) observes that a belief that *p* tends to expire whereas a desire that *p* tends to endure on the perception that not *p*. His observation does not refute the sophisticated version of the besire theory that to besire that *p* is to believe that *p* and to desire to act in accordance with the belief that *p*. Secondly, Zangwill (2008) claims that the strength of motivation may vary while the degree of belief remains constant. Besirists would reply that a besire admits of both degree and strength. Finally, I argue that the belief that *p* endures while the desire to act on the belief that *p* expires with the introduction of a new bodily condition, and hence that the belief and the desire are distinct mental states.

**KEYWORDS:** Belief – besire – desire – motivation – perception.

## 1. Introduction

What is the psychological structure of moral judgment? Some meta-ethicists advocate a besire theory of moral judgment which asserts that a moral judgment is a besire. A besire is alleged to be a unitary mental state. It is similar to a belief in that it represents a state of affairs, and to

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a desire in that it motivates an action. But it differs from a belief in that it is motivationally efficacious, and from a desire in that it purports to depict a fact in the world. Thus, the defining characteristic of a besire is that it performs both the function of representing a purported fact and the function of motivating an action:

Besires are not supposed to be gerrymandered mereological sums of two states – a belief plus a desire – each of which could occur without the other. Besires are conceived of as unitary states that have both the representational characteristics of beliefs and the motivational characteristics of desires (Smith 1994, 119). (Zangwill 2008, 51)

Note that the besire theory is refuted, if we can imagine a situation where the belief and the desire come apart. So far as I can tell, there can be a simple version and a sophisticated version of the besire theory, depending on what the content of the desire is. I will explicate them below and then argue that none of them is tenable.

The debate over the ontological status of besires sheds light on the psychological nature of moral judgments. It also has ramifications on the debate over the ontological status of moral facts, truths, and knowledge. If moral besires are true, there should be moral facts in the world that render them true.<sup>2</sup> The besires would be true in virtue of moral states of affairs. Furthermore, if the true besires are backed up by good evidence, they could count as moral knowledge. Moral knowledge alone would essentially motivate agents to act morally. If the main thesis of this paper is true, however, besires do not exist, and hence they cannot serve as a means to establish the existence of moral facts, truths, and knowledge.

My discussion below proceeds under the assumption that a belief is motivationally inert. Bromwich (2010) argues, however, that a belief that *p*, whether moral or non-moral, is motivationally efficacious in the sense that it disposes an agent to answer in the affirmative to the question: is it true that *p*? Many eminent philosophers are on her side. Nevertheless, I criticize her arguments in Park (forthcoming) and defend the Humean view that a belief is devoid of dispositional content. My main idea therein is that we answer affirmatively to the question not because a belief disposes us to do so but because we have a standing and default disposition to do so, and this dis-

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<sup>2</sup> I agree with Goldman (1999) that the correspondence theory of truth is the best theory of truth, and that it is committed to worldly truth-makers.

position is external to the belief that  $p$ . Rather than expound the idea here and go off on a tangent, I refer the interested reader to the aforesaid article.

## 2. Smith's strategy

The simple version of the besire theory claims that to besire that  $p$  is to believe that  $p$  and to desire that  $p$ . Note that the belief and the desire have the same propositional content,  $p$ . On this version, to besire that we ought to save a drowning child, for example, is to believe that we ought to save a drowning child and to desire that we ought to save a drowning child. What does it mean for an agent to desire that we ought to save a drowning child? Perhaps, the agent abhors the absence of the moral fact in the world that we ought to save a drowning child, so he wishes to make it the case. Making it the case that we ought to save a drowning child would mean that the truth-value of the moral belief in question changes from falsehood to truth. It sounds, however, implausible that we can create such a fact. It is not even clear how we can bring about the existence of such a fact. Therefore, no sensible besirist would advance the simple version.

Smith's critique of the simple version can be illustrated with the example of water in the refrigerator. Suppose that you believe that there is water in the refrigerator. You feel thirsty, so you desire for the state of affairs in which there is water in the refrigerator. You open the refrigerator only to find that there is no water in it. In such a situation, you would tend to stop believing that there is water in the refrigerator, but you would tend to continue to desire for the state of affairs in which there is water in the refrigerator. After all, your thirst has not yet been quenched. Thus, a belief that  $p$  tends to expire whereas a desire that  $p$  tends to persist on a perception that not  $p$ :

... a belief that  $p$  tends to go out of existence in the presence of a perception with the content that not  $p$ , whereas a desire that  $p$  tends to endure, disposing the subject to bring it about that  $p$ . (Smith 1994, 115)

It would be incoherent for a mental state to tend to expire and persist at the same time. Therefore, Smith concludes, a besire that  $p$  does not exist. A shortcoming of Smith's critique is that it may undermine the simple version, but not the sophisticated version of the besire theory.

The sophisticated version asserts that to besire that  $p$  is to believe that  $p$  and to desire to act in accordance with the belief that  $p$ . Let me provide

two examples. To besire that we ought to save a drowning child is to believe that we ought to save a drowning child, and to desire to act in accordance with the belief, e.g., to desire to save a drowning child. To besire that there is water in the refrigerator is to believe that there is water in the refrigerator, and to desire to act on the belief, e.g., to desire to open the refrigerator. Unlike the simple version, the sophisticated version takes into account what Little, Tenenbaum, and Bromwich observe about besires when they write as follows:

... it is a believing-attitude directed toward one proposition, and it is a desiring attitude directed toward another. (Little 1997, 64)

Besires are supposed to be complex mental states that have the direction of fit of belief towards one content (say  $p$ ) and the direction of fit of desire towards another content (say  $q$ ). (Tenenbaum 2006, 237)

... a belief disposes a subject to act as if the content of her belief is the case; a belief does not dispose a subject to bring about the content of her belief. (Bromwich 2010, 346, footnote)

Thus, on the sophisticated version, although the cognitive content of one's besire is that  $p$ , the motivational content of the besire is not to bring about the state of affairs that  $p$ , but to bring about the state of affairs that one acts in accordance with the belief that  $p$ . The besire that we ought to save a drowning child represents the moral fact that we ought to save a drowning child, and it motivates an agent to save a drowning child. The besire does not motivate the agent to bring about the moral fact that we ought to save a drowning child. Also, the besire that there is water in the refrigerator represents the fact that there is water in the refrigerator, and it motivates an agent to open the refrigerator. It does not motivate the agent to bring about the fact that there is water in the refrigerator. Therefore, the sophisticated version is not committed to the implausible view that we can generate a moral fact.

In order to refute the sophisticated version, Smith would have to present a perception that tends to expel the belief that  $p$ , but not the desire to act in accordance with the belief that  $p$ . Does such a perception exist? What perception would tend to oust the belief that we ought to save a drowning child, but not the desire to save a drowning child? As far as I can tell, no such perception exists. After all, you can maintain your belief that we ought to save a drowning child, whether or not you perceive a per-

son saving the child. No matter what you observe, you can stick to the moral belief. Suppose, however, that you gave up the moral belief after repeatedly seeing people ignore drowning children. A problem is that you would, then, tend to lose the desire to act on the belief, and tend to form a new desire, viz., the desire to act on the new belief that we ought not to save a drowning child. Consequently, no perception can drive a wedge between the belief that *p* and the desire to act on the belief that *p*.

Also, what perception would tend to dispel the belief that there is water in the refrigerator, but not the desire to act in accordance with the belief? The perception that there is no water in the refrigerator may tend to drive out the belief that there is water in the refrigerator, but it is not clear that it tends to leave intact the desire to act on the belief. Suppose, for example, that your wife opens the refrigerator, and that you see no water in the refrigerator. You would, then, tend to lose the desire to act on the belief and tend to form a new desire, the desire to act on the new belief that there is no water in the refrigerator. Thus, on the perception that not *p*, the desire to act on the belief that *p* tends to go out of existence along with the belief that *p*. Therefore, Smith's observation that on the perception that not *p*, the belief that *p* tends to expire whereas the desire that *p* tends to endure does not undermine the sophisticated version of the besire theory, which proposes that to besire that *p* is to believe that *p* and to desire to act on the belief that *p*.

### 3. Zangwill's strategy

Zangwill (2008) observes that the strength of motivation may vary while the degree of belief remains constant. Consider two agents who believe that it is wrong to take a bribe. They are both rational agents in that neither of them suffers from mental debilities, such as depression and listlessness. The degrees of their moral beliefs are the same in that they both believe with equal level of confidence that it is immoral to take a bribe. Suppose, however, that the first agent cares more about the demands of morality than the second agent, so that the first agent refuses the bribe whereas the second agent takes it. From the point of view of the sophisticated version of the besire theory, it is mysterious why the first agent rejects the bribe and the second agent accepts it. After all, they both believe with equal degree of confidence that it is wrong to take a bribe, so they must be equally motivated not to take a bribe and they should both turn down the bribe.

Besirists might say that the first agent declines the bribe while the second agent receives it because the first agent is rational while the second agent is irrational. This answer, however, is not adequate because both agents are, by hypothesis, rational. In response, the besirists might now say that the first agent rejects the bribe because he believes with a high degree of confidence that it is immoral to take the bribe, and that the second agent accepts the bribe because he believes with a low degree of confidence that it is immoral to take the bribe. This move, however, is not available to the besirists either because, by hypothesis, both agents believe with the equal degree of confidence that it is immoral to take a bribe. Besirists cannot, Zangwill concludes, account for the variation in the degree of motivation and the resulting difference in the behaviors of the two agents.

In contrast, Zangwill, a motivational externalist, has an adequate explanation: the first agent rejects the bribe, while the second agent accepts it because they have desires of different strengths not to take the bribe:

... there is a difference in motivation between people with moral beliefs of the same degree that *is* best explained by a difference between them in their desires. (Zangwill 2008, 56)

Thus, the variation in the motivations stems not from any variation in the degrees of besires but from a variation in the strengths of desires. What is crucial on Zangwill's account is that the desires are extraneous to the beliefs. Thus, the variation in the desires can be explained by motivational externalism, but not by the besire theory.

In my view, however, besirists would retort that a besire admits of both degree of confidence and strength of motivation. The aforementioned two agents hold the besire with equal degree of confidence, but they besire with different strengths of motivation that we ought not to take a bribe. The first agent besires strongly that it is wrong to take a bribe, whereas the second agent besires weakly that it is wrong to take a bribe. Their besires are of different strengths, and hence they lead to different levels of motivation and resultant behaviors. Thus, the variation in the motivations and resultant behaviors of the two agents originates not from their besires' degrees of confidence (which are assumed to be the same), but from their different strengths of motivation. In short, Zangwill overlooked the possibility that the variation in the motivations and behaviors of the two agents can be explained by the besires' having different strengths of motivation.

#### 4. My strategy

Let me sketch my strategy for rebutting the sophisticated version of the besire theory. Imagine that while patrolling the beach, a lifeguard sees a child drowning in the sea. He believes that we ought to save drowning children, and he desires to save the drowning child. As a result, he jumps into the water. Unfortunately, a venomous sea snake bites him on his leg. The excruciating pain eliminates his desire to save the child. Not at all motivated to save the child, he simply flounders in the water. Just then, a fisherman comes along on a boat and asks, "Do you believe we ought to save the drowning child?" The lifeguard says, "Yes." The fisherman rows his boat to the child and pulls him out of the water. He comes back to the lifeguard only to learn that he has died. This tragic example illustrates how a new bodily condition puts an end to the desire to act in accordance with the belief that *p*, but does not put an end to the belief that *p*. After the poison got into his body, the lifeguard lost the desire to save the drowning child, but he continued to believe that we ought to save the drowning child. Thus, a belief that *p* can occur without a desire to act on the belief that *p*, contrary to what the sophisticated version claims.

Let me take another example. Imagine that your body is in need of water, so you feel thirsty. You believe that there is water in the refrigerator. You have the desire to act on the belief that there is water in the refrigerator, and hence you are motivated to open the refrigerator. In such a situation, besirists would say that you besire that there is water in the refrigerator. Suppose, however, that while walking to the refrigerator, you spot a bottle of water on a table, and you drink from it. As a result, your body no longer lacks water. Due to the new bodily condition, you no longer desire to open the refrigerator, but you continue to believe that there is water in the refrigerator. Thus, your belief endured while your desire to act on the belief expired with the introduction of the new bodily condition. Therefore, the belief and the desire cannot form a unitary mental state, viz., the besire that there is water in the refrigerator.

Besirists would retort that after drinking the water, you still have the desire to act on the belief that there is water in the refrigerator, in the sense that if someone asks you whether or not there is water in the refrigerator, you would respond in the affirmative. You had that desire even before drinking water. It appears that this desire to act on the belief persisted along with the belief, and hence the besire that there is water in the refri-

generator continued to exist in your mind. So does the lifeguard's desire to act in accordance with the belief that we ought to save drowning children. He did not lose the desire, given that he answered in the affirmative to the fisherman's question. Therefore, it still stands that the belief that  $p$  cannot occur without the desire to act on the belief that  $p$ .

My response to the preceding observation is to point out the differences between the desire to act on the belief before you drink water and the desire to act on the belief after you drink water. Let's call them 'D<sub>1</sub>' and 'D<sub>2</sub>' respectively. It is granted that D<sub>1</sub> and D<sub>2</sub> share the dispositional content to answer affirmatively to the question of whether or not there is water in the refrigerator. Recall, however, that D<sub>1</sub> motivated you to open the refrigerator whereas D<sub>2</sub> did not, and hence they have different motivational contents. They have different phenomenological contents too. D<sub>1</sub> has an unpleasant phenomenological content, viz., the thirsty sensation, which you wanted to get rid of, whereas D<sub>2</sub> does not have the unpleasant phenomenological content. Since D<sub>1</sub> and D<sub>2</sub> have different motivational contents and different phenomenological contents, they are different desires, although the umbrella expression 'the desire to act on the belief' is used to refer to either of them.

The same is true of the example of the lifeguard above. Let's use 'D<sub>1</sub>' and 'D<sub>2</sub>' respectively to refer to the desire the lifeguard had before he was bitten by the snake and the desire he had after he was bitten by the snake. It is granted that D<sub>1</sub> and D<sub>2</sub> share the dispositional content to answer affirmatively to the question of whether or not we ought to save a drowning child. But there is an important difference between them. D<sub>1</sub> motivated the lifeguard to save the child whereas D<sub>2</sub> did not. Recall that he lost the desire to save the child after being bitten by the snake. Since they have different motivational contents, they are different desires, although the umbrella phrase 'the desire to act on the belief' is used to refer to either of them.

Besirists would insist that D<sub>1</sub> and D<sub>2</sub> are the same mental state. Consider that a person can persist as the same person over time, even if he loses his mental features and physical features. Analogously, a mental state can persist over time, even if it loses its contents. D<sub>1</sub> lost the motivational content and the qualitative content, but it is the same mental state as D<sub>2</sub>. After all, D<sub>1</sub> and D<sub>2</sub> are conjoined by the dispositional content to answer affirmatively to the question: is it true that  $p$ ? Besides, when you say yes to the question, you are acting in accordance with your belief that  $p$ . It is not the



case that you are no longer acting on the belief. Therefore, besirists maintain, either desire merits the appellation 'the desire to act on the belief'.

As I mentioned earlier, I argued in Park (forthcoming) that a belief that *p* does not embed the disposition to answer affirmatively to the question: is it true that *p*? However, let me assume here for the sake of argument that the disposition is internal to the belief, and that they jointly form the besire that *p*. What I want to point out here is that the existence of such a besire does not have any interesting ethical implication. After all, the scope of its motivational force is limited to answering a question honestly. It does not motivate us to act morally. The besire, for example, that we ought to save a drowning child does not motivate us to save a drowning child. It only motivates us to say yes to the question: is it true that we ought to save a drowning child? It is not clear that such besires are worth fighting for from the besirists' perspective. Such besires, even if true and justified, would not be the kind of moral knowledge that motivates us to act morally.

Let me distinguish between what I call moral besires and conversational besires. A moral besire motivates an agent to act morally. For example, the lifeguard above had a moral besire when he jumped into the water to save the drowning child. An agent whose mind is filled with moral besires tends to perform moral acts, and hence he is a virtuous person. In contrast, a conversational besire only motivates an agent to answer a question as he believes. In this sense, the lifeguard above only had a conversational besire when he responded to the fisherman affirmatively. An agent whose mind is full of conversational besires might be a cooperative conversational partner, but he might not be a virtuous person. He might be the kind of person who habitually commits immoral acts, such as murder, theft, and adultery. Honesty might be his sole admirable moral quality.

In any event, based on the two examples discussed earlier in this section, let me make a general claim about the relationship among a bodily condition, a belief that *p*, and a desire to act on the belief that *p*. Upon the introduction of a new bodily condition in certain circumstances, the belief that *p* endures whereas the desire to act on the belief that *p* expires. Put differently, a new bodily condition may not annihilate the belief that *p*, whereas it may exterminate the desire to act in accordance with the belief that *p*. Thus, the belief that *p* can exist without the desire to act on the belief that *p*. It is impossible that a mental state exists and does not exist at the same time. Therefore, the belief that *p* and the desire to act on the be-

belief that  $p$  cannot form a single mental state, i.e., a desire that  $p$ . The putative unitary mental state does not exist.

My strategy differs from Smith's strategy in the following respects. Smith invites you to imagine situations in which the perception that not  $p$  is introduced. He claims that the perception that not  $p$  tends to oust the belief that  $p$ , but not the desire that  $p$ . In contrast, I invite you to imagine situations in which a new bodily condition arises. I claim that there are some situations where the new bodily condition extinguishes the desire, but not the belief. Thus, in Smith's strategy what is newly introduced is the perception that not  $p$ , whereas in my strategy it is a new bodily condition. Also, in Smith's strategy the target that is extinguished by the newly introduced condition is the belief that  $p$ , whereas in my strategy it is the desire to act on the belief. In a nutshell, the two strategies produce variations in different effects by introducing variations in different causes. Finally, my strategy is successful whereas Smith's strategy is not in confuting the sophisticated version.

There is a further reason for thinking that a belief that  $p$  and a desire to act on the belief that  $p$  are distinct mental states. The strength of a desire to act on a belief that  $p$  varies together with the potency of its cause, not with the potency of the cause of the belief that  $p$ . For example, the strength of the desire to act on the belief that there is water in the refrigerator varies in accordance with the amount of water in your body. If your body is in severe need of water, the desire will be strong enough to impel you to open the refrigerator. If the lack of water is moderate, the desire may not be strong enough to induce you to open the refrigerator. In contrast, the degree of a belief covaries with the power of its cause, not with the potency of the cause of a desire. For example, the degree of the belief that there is water in the refrigerator is correlated with the vivacity of the perception that there is water in the refrigerator. If the perception is vivid, the degree of the belief will be high. If the perception is dull, the degree of the belief will be low.

Moreover, the degree of a belief that  $p$  may be inversely proportional to the strength of a desire to act on the belief that  $p$ . For example, you may be confident that there is water in the refrigerator, but you may not desire at all to open the refrigerator. This happens when you have a vivacious perception of water in the refrigerator, but there is enough water in your body. In contrast, you may be unsure that there is water in the refrigerator, but you may strongly desire to open the refrigerator. This happens when you

have an obscure perception of water in the refrigerator due to an eye disease, but there is a severe shortage of water in your body. In short, different factors exert different influences on the belief that *p* and the desire to act on the belief that *p*. This phenomenon reinforces the view that the belief that *p* and the desire to act on the belief that *p* are separate mental states.

Why does a belief that *p* endure whereas a desire to act on the belief that *p* expires, given some appropriate change of bodily conditions? The answer lies in the fact that the belief and the desire are under the influence of different physical factors. The amount of water in the body determines whether a subject feels the desire to drink water or not. It is not surprising that a subject loses the desire after the intake of water rises above the needed threshold. In contrast, the transmission of signals along the optic nerves determines whether a subject believes that there is water in the refrigerator or not. It is natural that a subject maintains his perceptual belief even after the amount of water in the body increases. Since the belief and the desire are under the control of different factors, the elimination of the bodily condition that caused the desire puts an end to the desire but not to the belief.

In general, different physical factors are responsible for different beliefs and for different desires. A visual belief is generated by the physical processes in our eyes, while an auditory belief is generated by the physical processes in our ears. A desire for water is created by the lack of water in our body, while a desire for food is generated by the release of a hormone called ghrelin. It is up to scientific inquiry, not to conceptual analysis, to reveal the one-to-one correlations between beliefs and physical factors, and between desires and physical factors. What is important for my purpose here is that beliefs and desires are causally related to different physical factors, so they are separate mental states, and besires do not exist.

A recent finding in neuroscience speaks in favor of the view that in general a belief and a desire are distinct mental states. Some neuroscientists have discovered that a region of a rat's brain called the rostral AGM activates when the rat chooses an action among multiple alternatives which lead to different rewards:

Our results indicate the involvement of the rostral AGM not only in action selection but also in valuation, which is consistent with the finding that AGM activity is modulated by expected reward. (Jung Hoon Sul et al. 2011, 6)

This neurological finding indicates a possible difference between neural substrates underlying our decisions about what to do and those underlying our deliberations about what to believe. It may be discovered in the future that a certain region in our brain activates when we are motivated to save a drowning child, but not when we merely believe that we ought to save a drowning child. Also, the region may turn out to be inactive in the brains of dejected agents suffering from volitional debilities, such as *accidie* and *akrasia*, even when they claim to believe that we ought to save a drowning child. Such neural discovery would amount to empirical evidence disconfirming the desire theory of moral judgment.

Tenenbaum, however, would not be swayed by the aforementioned neural discovery. Suppose that agents suffering from *accidie* and *akrasia* claim to believe that we ought to save a drowning child, and yet are not motivated to save a drowning child. On Tenenbaum's account, it is wrong to attribute moral beliefs to them because they have not fully grasped the content of the moral beliefs:

So the motivational cognitivist is committed to seeing those motivational failures as in themselves failures to fully grasp the content of one's moral beliefs, or somehow failing to have the same kind of moral beliefs as the moral agent. (Tenenbaum 2006, 257)

For Tenenbaum, appropriate motivation is constitutive of a moral belief. Lethargic agents do not have moral beliefs, although they claim that they do, because they are not motivated to act appropriately. Their failure to be motivated to act morally proves, by Tenenbaum's stipulated definition of 'moral belief', that they do not have moral beliefs.

In my view, however, a puzzle arises. What is it, if not a moral belief, that the listless agents have when they sincerely claim to believe that we ought to save a drowning child? Obviously, they take it to be a belief, although they are aware that they are not motivated to act morally. Tenenbaum, on the other hand, refuses to call it 'belief' on the grounds that it does not motivate them to save a drowning child. The dejected agents would insist that what they have in their minds is a moral belief, pointing out that they have better epistemic access to their own mental states than Tenenbaum does, and that Tenenbaum's definition of 'moral belief' is no more correct than their definition of 'moral belief'. Of course, these arguments are not decisive, but Tenenbaum has the burden to account for their mental states.

## 5. Conclusion

The sophisticated version of the besire theory asserts that to besire that *p* is to believe that *p* and to desire to act in accordance with the belief that *p*. I have argued that in some cases, a new bodily condition that does not obliterate a belief that *p* terminates a desire to act on the belief that *p*. It is impossible for a mental state both to endure and to expire at the same time. Therefore, the besire that *p*, as posited by the sophisticated version, does not exist. It is an open question whether moral knowledge exists or not. What this paper is intended to establish is the claim that if moral knowledge exists at all, it is purely a cognitive state,<sup>3</sup> and hence it does not motivate an agent to act morally. What motivates an agent to act morally is not a moral belief but a mental state extraneous to it.

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<sup>3</sup> By the way, I have constructed what I call the dilemma of moral perception in Park (2012) against the view that a moral judgment has cognitive content. In this paper, however, I set aside the debate between cognitivists and noncognitivists.