Emotions and Practical Reason: 
Rethinking Evaluation and Motivation

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1. The Motivational Problem

A central problem—perhaps the central problem—in understanding human action is that of how we can have and exercise rational control over what we do. On the face of it, we exercise this control by deliberating about what to do, evaluating some option as best, and then as a result simply going ahead and doing it. Thus, there seems to be a conceptual connection between deliberatively judging something as the thing to do in the circumstances and actually doing it, between evaluation and motivation, a conceptual connection that seems fundamental to our being in control over what we do.

The problem with this easy account is that it cannot handle phenomena like that of weakness of the will. To give a standard example, one can look at the chocolate cake, decide that, all things considered, it’s best not to have a second piece right now, but nonetheless take and eat it, even while saying to oneself, “I shouldn’t be doing this.” Here one evaluates more cake as bad but is motivated to eat some anyway. In extreme cases, one can make this evaluation but not feel at all motivated to act in accordance with it and so not struggle at all to overcome one’s akratic appetite. The possibility of this extreme form of weakness of the will, which has also been called accidie or listlessness, is philosophically troubling insofar as it seems to sever entirely any necessary connection between evaluation and rational motivation, between practical reason and action. This apparently makes such a connection (when it is in place) contingent and fortuitous and so undermines the thought that we ever have control over what we do. This problem of understanding how it is possible, in the face of the possibility of phenomena like weakness of the will, to have rational control over what we do is what I shall call the motivational problem. My aim in this

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paper will be to solve the motivational problem in a way that preserves a conceptual connection between evaluation and motivation.

In response to the motivational problem, a common strategy is simply to accept this division between evaluation and motivation by conceiving them as distinct states or processes for which there are distinct kinds of reasons. In effect, this is the tack taken by Michael Smith.\(^1\) According to Smith, in arriving at an evaluative judgment, we consider *normative reasons*—reasons that rationally justify a particular course of action, that show why I ought to act in this way. Normative reasons thus underwrite our beliefs about what we should do, and they are what we consider in deliberation—from what Smith calls the *deliberative perspective*. On the other hand, from the *intentional perspective*, from which we explain our actions, what are in view are the causes of our actions. Such causes are psychological states, prototypically desires, and Smith calls these causes “*motivating reasons.*” Largely in order to make sense of the phenomenon of weakness of the will, insofar as it seems to require a division between evaluation and motivation, Smith claims that we must understand normative and motivating reasons as being of fundamentally different kinds, with the underlying mental states of beliefs and desires therefore being “distinct existences” (p. 119; cf. Smith’s explicit inference to this effect on p. 120). For Smith, to believe that you ought to do something is not in itself to desire to do it, for we can always “leave someone’s evaluative outlook intact while removing their motivations altogether” (pp. 120–21). There is, consequently, an inevitable motivational gap between evaluative beliefs and the corresponding desires, and the motivational problem is thereby conceived as the problem of understanding how it’s possible to bridge this inevitable motivational gap and so make sense of cases in which the agent is not weak-willed. Conceived this way, the general outline of a solution can seem obvious: the only way to connect such distinct existences must be by some causal mechanism disposing us to have the desire when we reach the evaluative decision.\(^2\)

This proposed solution to the motivational problem is untenable, I shall argue, because it distorts the problem itself. To posit such an inevitable motivational gap between evaluation and motivation, a gap that places normative reasons on one side and motivating causes on the other and that requires some extra ingredient to mediate between them, is already to have begun to undermine the idea that we have rational control over what we do. For this extra ingredient can only play its role after we have done all we can do in practical reason and so cannot itself be under our rational control. The best we can do, it seems, is to deliberate and then hope that the gap will be bridged for us: practical reason by itself is completely motivationally impotent.\(^3\) This is not so much a solution as a capitulation in the face of the problem.\(^4\)

As I hope to show, the difficulty here is not so much with a particular solution to the motivational problem as it is the way of conceiving the problem itself. Once we allow an inevitable gap to open up between evaluation and motivation, no proposal for how to bridge that gap can provide a proper under-
standing of how we can in general control what we do through practical reason. Rather, as I shall argue, a better solution involves rejecting the problem thus conceived and so rethinking our understanding of the connection between evaluation and motivation. As I indicated above, what motivates this common conception of the motivational problem as involving an inevitable motivational gap is the idea that we can remove someone’s motivation altogether and leave their evaluative outlook intact. I shall argue that this is false: a complete failure of motivation is a defect in the evaluation itself, a defect that brings into question its normative status. This is because a proper understanding of the relation between evaluation and motivation requires understanding evaluation itself as more complicated than simply evaluative judgment, in a way that refuses to acknowledge normative reasons and motivating reasons as two separate kinds of reasons inevitably requiring mediation. In particular, I shall argue, we should reconceive evaluation as normally involving judgments and emotions, and it is only by doing so that we can arrive at a fuller account of the nature of evaluation and its connection to motivation. This, in effect, will amount to an expansion of our understanding of what practical reason consists in.

2. Emotional Commitments

One way to begin rethinking the connection between evaluation and motivation is with the emotions, for emotions both evaluate their objects as somehow good or bad and simultaneously motivate one to act accordingly. It might therefore seem that any account of evaluation and its relation to motivation must have a place for the emotions.

As I have argued elsewhere, emotions should be understood as intentional feelings of import. That emotions are intentional feelings means in part that they are responses to one’s situation as being of a certain kind, and that they are rationally appropriate or not depending on whether the situation is or justifiably seems to be that way. Moreover, emotions are intentional feelings of import, which is to say that the appropriate kind of situation is a kind that includes things being important or significant in some way to the subject. After all, my fear for the Ming vase as you hurl a baseball in its direction (or my anger at you for doing so) presupposes that the Ming vase has import for me, and if it does not—if I don’t care about it—my emotion is inappropriate.

Emotions, however, are not simply cognitive responses to import, as when one merely comes to believe that something has import. For to feel an emotion is in part to be moved by that import—moved to behave in some way. Such behavior can be unintentional movements that do not qualify as actions, as when one trembles from fear, for in such a case there is no point to be served by behaving in this way. Yet emotions can also move one to intentional action in a way rationally motivated by the import to which they are responsive. Thus, to be afraid is to feel something to be a danger worth avoiding, and fear thus motivates such avoidance—by, e.g., hiding or running away as appropriate to the
situation; likewise, to be angry is to feel something to be an offense worth punishing, and anger thus motivates such punishment. So it seems that we can make the following identification: to have an emotion is to evaluate something as having import of some sort, and this just is, at least in many cases, to be moved to action by that import. Hence, at least for emotions, evaluation is motivation, and we therefore have a conception of their relationship without positing a motivational gap.

Of course, this is too easy. It remains to be seen how this putative discovery bears on the issue at hand in the motivational problem, namely that of how to understand the connection between properly judgmental evaluation, arising as the outcome of rational deliberation, and motivation. For this understanding of emotions to help solve the motivational problem, therefore, we need to consider the rational interconnections between emotions and judgments. This will require first (in the remainder of this section) understanding the rational interconnections among emotions themselves and then (in §3) understanding how in virtue of these interconnections emotions make a distinctive contribution to evaluation—to import—and so to our understanding of the connection between evaluation and motivation.

Two ways in which emotions are rationally interconnected is by virtue of transitional and tonal commitments. Consider first transitional commitments. One way of dividing emotions into kinds is in terms of whether they are forward-looking or backward-looking. *Forward-looking emotions*, such as hope and fear, anticipate good or bad things that are currently happening or might well happen, whereas *backward-looking emotions*, such as relief and disappointment, are responses to something good or bad that has already happened. Consequently, as the relevant things happen in the world, forward-looking emotions rationally ought to become the corresponding backward-looking emotions: there is something rationally inappropriate, other things being equal, about feeling fear that one’s prize Ming vase is about to be destroyed, but feeling neither relief when it miraculously escapes unscathed nor sadness or anger when one’s fear is borne out. To say that one rationally ought to have the corresponding backwards-looking emotion given that one experiences the forward-looking emotion is to articulate the *transitional commitments* involved in these emotions—commitments concerning the temporal transitions from one emotion to another.

Second, consider tonal commitments. Here we need to make a distinction in kinds of emotions in terms of their evaluative tone as positive or negative; this distinction is orthogonal to that between forward- and backward-looking emotions. *Positive emotions*, like satisfaction and hope, are emotions directed at good things that have happened or might well happen, whereas *negative emotions*, like disappointment and fear, are emotions directed at the corresponding bad things. To say that emotions involve *tonal commitments* is to say that if one experiences a positive emotion in response to something good that has happened or might happen, then, other things being equal, one rationally ought to have experienced the corresponding negative emotion if instead what happened (or
conspicuously might happen) were something bad; not to experience this emotion would be rationally inappropriate. Thus, to feel satisfaction is normally to be committed to feel some corresponding negative emotion: disappointment were it the case that you did not get what you wanted, or anger if you didn’t get what you wanted because someone else maliciously prevented you from getting it. (The same goes, mutatis mutandis, for negative emotions imposing tonal commitments on the corresponding positive emotions.)

Notice that these descriptions of transitional and tonal commitments have been vague in identifying the “corresponding” emotions one is committed to. In part this is because which emotions are the “corresponding” emotions depends on the details of how we imagine the counterfactual situation, as the examples given above illustrate. Nonetheless, what defines the range of emotions to which a particular emotion commits one (no matter what the counterfactual situation) is that emotion’s focus: the background object of the subject’s concern that makes intelligible the evaluation implicit in the emotion. Thus, my fear of earthquakes and my anger at you for having thrown the baseball in the house are both made intelligible in light of my concern for my prize Ming vase, for it is this vase that the earthquake threatens and it is in virtue of your callous disregard for the vase that you offend me. It is only because the forward- and backward-looking emotions in this example share a common focus that we can understand them as imposing transitional commitments on each other. The same goes for positive and negative emotions imposing tonal commitments on each other: we can understand my satisfaction now imposing a tonal commitment on my feeling anger in certain counterfactual situations only because the satisfaction and anger share a common focus. Furthermore, this notion of a focus helps us understand rational connections among emotions that do not neatly fit into this categorization of transitional and tonal commitments, such as the connection between relief that the vase was not destroyed in the earthquake and the appropriateness of anger if, counterfactually, it were destroyed by the baseball you threw.

In general, emotions impose rational commitments on other emotions with the same focus: to experience one emotion is to be rationally committed to feeling other emotions with the same focus in the relevant (actual and counterfactual) situations. Thus, for example, if one is hopeful that some end can be achieved, then it would be rationally inappropriate (other things being equal) not also to be afraid when its accomplishment is threatened, to be relieved when the threat does not in fact materialize, to be angry at those who impede one’s progress, or to be satisfied when one finally attains the end (or disappointed when one ultimately fails). In this way, the mutual commitments among emotions define a pattern with a common focus. This pattern is rational in the sense that the pattern is partly definitive of the rationality of its elements: it is normal and appropriate to feel emotions that fit into such patterns, and it is abnormal and inappropriate either to fail to feel emotions that fit into such patterns or to feel emotions that do not. Moreover, the pattern of emotions is projectible by
virtue of the commitments emotions impose to feel other emotions with the same focus in the relevant circumstances. In short, these emotional commitments constitute an *attunement of one’s sensibilities* to the focus of that pattern.

3. Constituting Import: Evaluation and Motivation

These projectible, rational patterns in emotions as defined by their mutual commitments are fundamentally important because they enable us to understand how emotions are partly constitutive of the patterns’ foci as objects of one’s care or concern—as having import for one. To understand this it is first necessary to consider import itself.

Intuitively, at least part of what it is to have import is to be a worthy object of attention and action: insofar as something has import for one, one ought to pay attention to what happens to it and so be prepared to act on its behalf when otherwise appropriate. Consequently, that something is worthy of attention and action means not merely that it is permissible or a good thing to pay attention to it and act on its behalf; rather, it means that attention and action are, by and large, required on pain of giving up or at least undermining the idea that it really has import to one. After all, it is hard (though perhaps not impossible) to credit someone with caring about, say, having a clean house even though he never or rarely notices when it gets dirty, or never or rarely does anything about it even when he does notice. Of course, this is not to deny that someone who genuinely cares may in some cases be distracted by other things of greater import and so not occasionally notice that his house is getting dirty or act so as to clean it up; indeed, such a failure to attend to cleanliness can be explained away in such a case by the greater import of these other things. Absent such cases, what is required is a consistent pattern of attending to and acting on behalf of the object in question.

Consider first how to make sense of something as having import as, in part, being worthy of attention.\(^\text{10}\) Insofar as the attention of the subject is, by and large, required by such worthiness, the subject must therefore be vigilant for what happens or might well happen to it. The kind of vigilance required here is not merely *active vigilance*, in which one consciously directs one’s attention at it, as when waiting impatiently for the traffic light to change. Given the range of things that have import to us, such active vigilance on its own would rapidly overwhelm our abilities consciously to attend to the relevant objects. Rather, the kind of vigilance primarily at issue is *passive vigilance*: an attunement of one’s sensibilities such that one’s attention is naturally drawn to the appropriate kinds of situations involving import.

At this point we can see that there is a two-way conceptual connection between import and the pattern of emotions defined by their mutual commitments to a common focus. First, the kind of passive vigilance normally required for import is to a large extent an attunement of one’s emotional sensibilities of a sort made possible by the relevant pattern of emotional commitments. More-
over, the rationality of the pattern of emotions makes intelligible the idea that
the focus of that pattern is worthy of attention, for one ought to pay attention
to that focus precisely because of these mutual commitments: a failure to feel
an emotion when otherwise appropriate is a failure to respond as one’s prior
commitments have determined one ought. Consequently, import is perspectiv-
ally subjective insofar as it is essentially the object of a particular evaluative
perspective of passive vigilance without which import would be unintelligible. 11

This may make it look as if the pattern of emotions is conceptually prior to
import, but that would be to ignore the second conceptual connection between
that pattern and import. In my discussion of the mutual commitments that de-
fines the projectible pattern of emotions with a common focus, I have so far
merely described those commitments and claimed that the pattern of such com-
mitments imposes a rational requirement on one to have subsequent emotions
with the same focus. Now we can see that what explains the rationality of this
requirement is that these emotional commitments are to the import of the focus.
For insofar as particular emotions are intentional feelings of import, to feel a
particular emotion is to feel its focus as having import and so as a fit focus for
other emotions—as calling for these other emotional responses in the appropri-
ate circumstances precisely because of that import. Consequently, we can make
sense of the kind of circumstances that are such as to engage one’s emotional
sensibilities—one’s passive vigilance—only in terms of the import of those cir-
cumstances. Indeed, in this way we can understand import to be objective in
the sense that it is conceptually prior to particular emotions as a standard of
their appropriateness, even while that import itself presupposes the kind of pas-
sive vigilance made possible by one’s overall pattern of emotions. Thus, we
might say, particular emotions, as instances of our being attuned to import, are
a kind of receptivity to that import, whereby import impresses itself upon us.

This means that import and such a projectible, rational pattern of emotions
come together as a conceptual package, each partially constitutive of the other.
Nonetheless, as I claimed above, to have import is to be not merely a worthy
object of attention but also a worthy object of action. Here, too, we find the
same two-way conceptual connection between import and emotions that makes
import intelligible as simultaneously both perspectivally subjective and objective.

To see this, consider first this conceptual connection from the perspective of
import as perspectivally subjective and so as depending on a projectible, ratio-
nal pattern of emotions. The emotional commitments that define this pattern are
commitments to the import of their common focus. As such, they are commit-
ments not merely to attend to that focus by feeling the relevant emotions when
otherwise appropriate but also to act appropriately on behalf of that focus. Just
as a failure to attend to import in the relevant circumstances is, other things
being equal, rationally inappropriate, so too a failure to act is, other things be-
ing equal, rationally inappropriate given the import to which one has commit-
ted oneself to. This means that the commitments that emotions involve are not
merely commitments to attend to their focus in the future but also to act on its
behalf, precisely because these commitments are commitments to the import of that focus. Consequently, just as gaps or abnormalities in the pattern of emotional attention with a common focus can, if they are widespread enough, undermine the coherence of that pattern and so the import of its focus, so too gaps or abnormalities in the pattern of emotional action can, if sufficiently widespread, undermine the coherence of that same pattern: in each case, the commitment to import purportedly undertaken in feeling particular emotions is revealed not to be genuine given the failure of the overall pattern. Import therefore presupposes not only a pattern of attention but also a pattern of motivation of the sort these emotional commitments provide.

This same point can be made from the perspective of import as objective—as impressing itself on us in our having particular emotions. Just as import, as worthy of attention, impresses itself on us, grabbing and holding our attention in particular instances of our emotional receptivity, so too import, as worthy of action, enthralls us by moving us to act. Of course, in having our motivation “gripped” by import in this way, we are not automatically led to act accordingly. Reasons other than that provided by such import may also provide motivation to act in conflicting ways. Nonetheless, in being enthralled by import we feel some pull to act accordingly.

This idea that import can enthral us may sound mysterious, an appeal to some magical power, but it is not. For just as import’s impressing itself on us presupposes that we be already attuned to that import in our emotional receptivity, so too import’s enthralling us presupposes that we be already prepared to act on its behalf. In each case, the attunement and the preparedness is made possible by the mutual commitments among emotions defining the pattern constitutive of import. Yet we should not think that all the work here is being done by the commitment, for that commitment is essentially to import, and the attunement and preparedness the commitment makes possible is essentially an attunement to, and preparedness to act on behalf of, that import, and these are not intelligible otherwise: emotions and import are a conceptual package, each partially constitutive of the other, with neither prior to the other. In this way, emotional evaluation (and normative reasons) and motivation (and motivating reasons) are indivisible, with no motivational gap needing to be bridged.

This is not, of course, how emotions are commonly understood. According to standard cognitivist theories, emotions are to be understood reductively in terms of antecedently intelligible states of belief, desire, and sensation. Thus, fear is to be understood as a constellation of a belief that a danger looms, the desire to avoid that danger, and a sensation of queasiness localized in one’s stomach. The evaluative component of emotions, then, is typically understood to come via the belief, whereas the motivational component comes via the desire. In this way, cognitivists are able to make sense of the appropriateness of emotions in terms of the warrant of the constitutive belief and desire—in terms of the match between the belief and desire and how things actually are in the world. Thus, fear can be inappropriate if there really is no danger present or if what is
being threatened is not really desirable to preserve. Of course, it is always possible to have the belief and desire without the emotion, and cognitivists do not claim that simply to have the belief and desire is all that’s required; rather, what is distinctively emotional about emotions is typically understood to be the way in which these components are combined together. Thus, as William Lyons has claimed, what makes the belief about danger and the desire to avoid it be partly constitutive of an emotion is that the belief and desire cause one to have the requisite bodily sensation of queasiness.\textsuperscript{13}

In light of this theory, cognitivists would object to the overly simple account I have just presented of the connection between normative reasons and motivating reasons as involving an equivocation on the notion of a commitment. Insofar as fear is an evaluative commitment to the import of its focus, that is because it involves the requisite belief, together with the usual normative standards to which we hold beliefs; yet insofar as fear is a motivational commitment to act on behalf of that focus, that is because it involves the requisite desire and its attendant causal efficacy. Consequently, to conflate these two notions of commitment is illicitly to conflate belief and normative reasons with desire and motivating reasons. In the context of the motivational problem, this is simply to beg the question.\textsuperscript{14}

In reply, the objection presupposes that we have an understanding of the notion of desire as conceptually independent of emotions and so as able to provide a partial reduction of emotions. This is a mistake. Desire must be carefully distinguished from mere goal-directedness insofar as to have a desire is not merely to have a disposition to pursue a goal in, for example, the way a chess-playing computer has a disposition to win the game; it is in addition to find the object of desire to be worth pursuing or avoiding—to have import—where such import provides a reason for acting as a kind of pro- or con-attitude.\textsuperscript{15} However, the notions of something’s being worthy of pursuit and of its being an appropriate focus of emotions generally are parts of a more general notion of import and must go together,\textsuperscript{16} so that desire cannot be conceptually prior to the emotions as the objection presupposes.

To see this, consider the rational interconnections among emotions and desires. On the one hand, if one did not in general feel fear when an end one is pursuing is threatened, relief when the threat doesn’t pan out, frustration at repeated failures to achieve the end, anger at those who intentionally impede one’s progress, satisfaction when one finally does achieve it, etc., we’d be hard-pressed to make sense of that end as worth pursuing for one and so as an object of one’s desire. In short, if something is worth pursuing for one, it ought also to be an appropriate focus of one’s emotions, and a consistent failure to have the relevant emotions undermines the rationality of the desire: to desire something and so find it to be worth pursuing is in part to be committed to it as having import and so being a fit focus of emotions generally. On the other hand, if something is an appropriate focus of one’s emotions, it must also be worth pursuing or the basis of other things being worth pursuing. Thus, if my Ming vase
has import for me, then certain desires—to buy or make a display case to protect it from earthquakes or errant baseballs, for example—are warranted. A consistent failure to have such desires and be motivated by them when otherwise appropriate undermines the rationality of the emotions focussed on the vase by undermining its import. In short, emotional commitments to import are commitments to have not merely other emotions but also other desires with the same focus when these are called for by the circumstances. Consequently, the projectible, rational pattern in one’s emotions constitutive of import must include one’s desires as well.

As a result, it is clear that desire cannot be used to give a partial reduction of emotions, as cognitivist theories of emotions require. Talk of a reduction here implies that the notion of desire is intelligible independent of and prior to that of the emotions. Yet in order to make sense of the capacity for desire, we must make sense of things as potentially being worthy of pursuit, and such worthiness, as a part of a more general notion of import, is intelligible only in terms of patterns of rationality in one’s emotions. It is because of these rational interconnections between desires and emotions that the notion of desire is not intelligible independent of the emotions. Indeed, rather than saying that emotions are something like a kind of desire, as some cognitivists do, we might just as well say that desires are something like a kind of emotion. Indeed, precisely for this reason we can see that desire must have the same two-way conceptual connection between desire and import: something can have import only because one in general displays the relevant pattern of commitments (including desiderative commitments) to attend to it and act on its behalf, and one is intelligible as having and exercising the capacity for desire only because one is receptive in this way to import impressing itself on and enthralling one.

What is important for the purposes of solving the motivational problem about this account of import and the projectible, rational patterns of emotions and desires is the way in which evaluation and motivation are inextricably linked. Emotions and desires motivate insofar as import impresses itself on one and enthralls one; in the absence of that implicit evaluation, we cannot make sense of one’s being motivated to intentional action. In this way, motivation presupposes evaluation. Nonetheless, that import is itself partially constituted by the projectible, rational patterns of emotions and desires. Insofar as these emotions and desires essentially involve commitments to act, we cannot make sense of that import apart from the way emotions and desires motivate. In this way, evaluation—the constitution of import—presupposes motivation. Consequently, it is only as feelings of import, of an implicit evaluation, that emotions and desires motivate, and it is only as motivating that they constitute that import.

4. Emotions and Judgments

My claim has been that import is constituted by projectible, rational patterns of emotions and desires. It should be clear, especially in the context of the moti-
vational problem, that emotion and desire cannot be all there is to constituting import—to evaluation—for evaluative judgment, especially as deliberate and so something we have direct control over, must also be central in any account of import. At this point it might be objected, to my insistence on the importance of emotions in understanding the nature of evaluation, that evaluative judgments are the primary way in which we make evaluations. After all, it is by making judgments that we articulate evaluations and so make them explicit to ourselves in a way that allows us to think self-consciously about their justification. Insofar as it is by deliberating and arriving at considered judgments that we exercise rational control over our evaluations, it begins to look as though the evaluations made explicit in judgment are intrinsically more rational or more fundamental than the evaluations implicit in emotion. The motivational problem remains, therefore, in spite of any role emotions may have in our pre-deliberative evaluations, for having deliberated and judged what imports things really have for us, it is at least as much of a problem to get our emotions to fall in line as it is to get our desires to do so. The considerations of §§2–3, the objection concludes, are simply irrelevant to an understanding of the connection between evaluation in the relevant sense (as deliberate) and motivation.

There is much that is right about this objection, for our deliberative judgments are indeed central to our having control over our evaluations and, ultimately, what we do. However, this indicates only that we need to understand more clearly the rational interconnections between emotions and judgments. The objection assumes that evaluative judgments are rationally prior to emotions insofar as in any case of conflict between them it is the emotion that ought to be brought in line. I shall reject this assumption in this section, arguing that either one’s emotional or judgmental evaluations can, in particular cases, be blind or involve an overly narrow view of one’s circumstances, and as such each can potentially be corrected by the other. The upshot (in this section) will be that emotions and judgments are part of a single rational framework constitutive of evaluation and (in §5) that it is only in light of this reconception of evaluation as having both emotional and judgmental aspects that we can make sense of the connection between evaluation and motivation in a way that solves the motivational problem.

When emotion and judgment coincide, a subject will have a single, unified perspective on the world. Thus, at dusk you may see a large brown dog charging through the trees directly at you and respond simultaneously with the thought that it’s a Rottweiler and with fear of it, and it is this joint response that constitutes your overall perspective on the situation. Of course, this perspective might be mistaken, and we can rationally assess both the judgment (as right or wrong) and the emotion (as appropriate or not) in terms of whether the perspective they afford reveals the world, their common object, as it is. Consequently, to revise your judgment so as to arrive at a clearer perspective on the world will normally involve corresponding changes in your emotion. Thus, as the dog rushes at you, you hear the owner, whom you had met earlier, of the friendly,
toothless Bernese mountain dog yelling, “Stay!” In hearing this sound, you make
the inference and come to perceive the brown blur more accurately, a more ac-
curate perception that simultaneously undermines both your former belief and
your fear. To achieve the clarity of perspective the inference makes possible is
to rule out alternative inconsistent perspectives, such as that provided by one’s
fear. Hence, to make the inference in this case just is to change your emotion
as well as your belief.

One’s emotions and judgments can, of course, come apart and so present one
with inconsistent perspectives on the world. In such cases, we ordinarily think
of the emotion as being at fault. Thus, if, upon realizing that the dog must be
the friendly Bernese, your emotion does not change, then it would seem the emo-
tion is rationally inappropriate because it conflicts with your considered judg-
ment. Judgment in this case has a kind of rational priority in part because of its
stability and coherence with other things one believes, a coherence that enables
one to perceive the situation differently and in a way that achieves a measure
of confirmation in a more careful scrutiny of the animal rushing at you. How-
ever, not all cases of rational conflict between emotions and beliefs need to be
like this. When an inexperienced camper camps alone for the first time, the rus-
tling noises coming from the nearby undergrowth may cause him to be afraid.
In the face of this fear, he may try to calm himself by telling himself that it is
probably just a harmless rabbit bedding down for the night and so is not dan-
gerous. Nonetheless, his fear may persist: the noises continue, and he continues
to feel them as vaguely threatening, a threat that is ultimately confirmed by a
loud noise followed by the high-pitched squeal of a small animal in pain. Be-
cause of this rational conflict with a persistent emotion, it may well look like
this belief, isolated as it is from other judgments, is much more akin to wishful
thinking than a considered judgment. It seems plausible, therefore, that the best
way to resolve this conflict, even before the final confirmation, is to give up (at
least by withholding) on the belief. In such a case, the emotion may well turn
out to be more rationally appropriate and so to correct the belief in the minimal
sense that it provides a reason to reconsider that belief in order to achieve clar-
ity of perspective.18

In the examples just provided, the conflict between emotions and judgments
concerns largely non-evaluative facts: whether some animal may well intend to
harm me, regardless of whether such harm would be good or bad. As I shall
now argue, the same moral applies when we turn to conflicts over the imports
things have for us: emotion and judgment are each rationally responsive to the
same thing, and each can correct the other in cases of rational conflict. This
understanding of emotion and judgment is possible only because import is an
object about which we can be right or wrong. This is clear in the case of emo-
tions, as I have already argued in §2: particular emotions might be rationally
inappropriate insofar as they respond to things which, by failing to be the focus
of a broader pattern of emotions and desires, do not really have import to us.
The same is true of evaluative judgments: merely to judge—even sincerely—
that something is important to one doesn’t mean that it really is so, for one can misjudge the importance things have for one, as in cases of self-deception. In such cases, one’s evaluative judgments misrepresent the imports things have for one.

Import, of course, is not an object that is fully independent of either emotion or evaluative judgment. As I argued above, import is partly constituted by projectible, rational patterns in emotions instituted by emotional commitments. Nonetheless, such a pattern of emotional response is also subject to rational criticism in making evaluative judgments, and it is by making such judgments that we can exercise control over what we care about. By investigating the rational interconnections among emotions and evaluative judgments, therefore, I shall be articulating more fully the pattern of rationality constitutive of the imports things have for one.

To begin, consider the following example.

Beatrice pays much attention to her personal appearance. For example, she keeps up with the latest trends, eagerly buying current fashions and scorning those who are out of style; she’s fastidious about the condition of her clothes and often gets upset when the dry cleaner doesn’t clean or press them just so; etc. In short, she invests considerable emotional energy and time in her appearance—a pattern of emotions and desires that constitute the import it has for her. Eventually, however, Beatrice begins to think and read systematically about ethics, becomes a confirmed utilitarian, and is articulate about the reasons why. Moreover, she realizes that the money, time, and energy she has been spending on fashion is excessive, and that the excess ought to be used to promote worthy causes, such as helping the needy. She therefore resolves to cut out these excesses by, for example, buying new clothes only when the old ones are looking seriously worn: fashion and appearance, she judges, are not very important in the larger scheme of things. In spite of this resolve, however, Beatrice continues to feel emotions consistent with her earlier pattern of concern, and becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her appearance and even annoyed at her newfound principles, even as she intellectually rejects these emotions as groundless.

Here Beatrice faces a conflict between her emotions (and the coherent, projectible patterns they form) and her judgments (and the patterns of inference she has come to endorse). In the face of this conflict, what can we say about the import her appearance now has for her? If we focus narrowly on this pattern of emotions, it seems clear that she still does care about her appearance, yet if we focus narrowly on her judgments and patterns of inference, it seems clear that she does not (at least to the same extent). Nonetheless, in this case it seems that her judgments ought to have priority: her considered view is that fashion should not matter to her, that it does not have import to her. Insofar as we can say that this is her considered view, it seems as though her judgments
have corrected her emotions, which now ought to fall in line; their failure to do
so merely exhibits the irrationality of these emotions. Judgment, in this case of
evaluative conflict, seems to have a kind of rational priority.

Part of what makes these judgments intelligible as articulating her consid-
ered view is her ability to justify them in light of a broader evaluative frame-
work. Equally important, however, is the way in which this evaluative framework
as a whole generally resonates with her emotions and desires insofar as it pro-
vides her with an evaluative perspective on the world that is both consistent
with, and that in terms of which she can make sense of, those emotions and
desires, perhaps with the exception of a few isolated domains such as fashion.
To see this, assume that Beatrice’s intellectual assent to utilitarianism does not
generally resonate with her emotions. She finds more and more cases where the
dictates of utilitarianism clash with her emotions, as when she is forced to make
choices between loyalty and devotion to her loved ones and helping others self-
lessly. For her assent to utilitarianism to represent her considered judgment, the
perspective it provides must be able in general to rule out alternative, inconsis-
tent evaluative perspectives and so make the best sense of her overall sensitiv-
ity to import. Yet the conflict with her emotions is precisely a conflict with an
inconsistent evaluative perspective, thus bringing into question the idea that her
judgments represent her considered view and so the idea that there is a clear
fact of the matter about what she really values. In the face of this sort of con-
flict, judgment is not rationally prior to emotion and, we might say, Beatrice’s
emotions have corrected her judgment at least in the minimal sense that, so long
as the alternative evaluative perspective they provide persists, she has reason
to reconsider.

That emotion can in this sense correct judgment is also clear when we con-
sider an example of a less radical clash between emotions and judgments. 19

Charlie is a serious and studious college freshman who tries to fit in with a
group of other students on his dorm floor. In part as the result of consid-
erable peer pressure, he comes to judge that he ought to join a fraternity
because of the opportunities it allows for an active social life, the enduring
close friendships it fosters, the social causes it promotes through fund-
raising and community involvement, etc. That same fraternity, however, also
spends much of its time throwing large parties with vast quantities of al-
cohol (and occasional drugs) and generally disparaging and avoiding seri-
ous academic work, all of which Charlie finds objectionable. In spite of
this, he judges that he should join and is articulate about the reasons why:
friendship and community involvement have been and, he thinks, should
continue to be an important part of his life, and, since he can always re-
frain from the excesses of fraternity life, the positives outweigh the nega-
tives. When it comes time to pledge, however, he finds himself unable to
follow through. He finds himself disgusted at the initiation and ashamed of
the kind of life into which his friends are entering and encouraging him to
Insofar as these emotions are a part of a broader pattern of emotions, including pride, anger, relief, and regret, with the right rational shape, they constitute a disapproval of fraternity life, in spite of his judgments to the contrary.

Here we find Charlie’s judgment that he should join justified by an appeal to a broader evaluative framework, this time of friendship and community involvement as well as partying, alcohol, and academics. This example differs from that of Beatrice insofar as the central conflict between Charlie’s emotions and judgments is not over the components that make up this evaluative framework but over how to balance the various components of that framework against each other in the case at hand—about how joining the fraternity fits into that evaluative framework. Nonetheless, different ways of balancing these components result in different, inconsistent evaluative perspectives that undermine the idea that there is a clear fact of the matter here. Indeed, in this case in particular it might seem that Charlie’s judgments are distorted by peer pressure and so are blind to the imports his emotions both constitute and reveal. Once again, therefore, we find emotions correcting judgments at least in the minimal sense that, so long as that alternative evaluative perspective persists, he has reason to reconsider those judgments.

In short, emotions and judgments are tightly interconnected insofar as they are located within, and assessable in terms of, the same rational framework such that each can correct the other and so impose rational commitments on each other. When things go right, emotions and judgments provide us with a single perspective on the world. Changes in one’s perspective as the result of changes in either one’s emotions or judgments ought to bring the other along with it by virtue of the kind of rational responsiveness imposed by the mutual commitments among emotions and judgments, a responsiveness in terms of which we can make sense of the projectibility of the pattern that constitutes that perspective. If such changes in perspective do not bring these other emotions or judgments in line, the idea that one’s perspective really has changed is undermined, and one’s perspective may be fragmented as a result. When what is at issue is an evaluative perspective, insofar as the imports things have for one are constituted by a kind of overall rational coherence among one’s emotions, desires, and judgments, a fragmentation in the evaluative perspective these emotions and judgments provide undermines the idea that there is a clear fact of the matter about what has import to one. Deliberation is a means of taking responsibility for, and so having control over, what has import to one. Nonetheless, as I have just argued, deliberation on its own does not guarantee success in achieving a new clarity of evaluative perspective and so changing that import. One’s emotions may be resistant to new evaluative perspectives one may try to achieve through deliberation, and such resistance, so long as it is systematic and so provides one with an inconsistent evaluative perspective, provides one with reason to reconsider.
This conception of the connections between evaluative judgment on the one hand and emotion and desire on the other is in striking contrast to that of Smith. For Smith, evaluation is to be understood simply in terms of evaluative judgment; as such, it is that by virtue of which we articulate our normative reasons and it is subject to direct rational assessment. Motivation, according to Smith, is a distinct faculty, in principle entirely separable from evaluation; as such, it is arational or at best derivatively rational and is only contingently and causally connected with evaluation. By contrast, my claim is that evaluation is constituted not by particular evaluative judgments, nor even by particular emotions or desires; rather, import emerges in the projectible, rational patterns of judgment, emotion, and desire, patterns instituted by their rational interconnections. Because the motivating states of emotion and desire have an indispensable role in constituting these rational patterns, motivation has a conceptual connection to evaluation. As we shall see, it is in virtue of this conceptual connection that we can understand how it’s possible for us to have rational control, not only over our evaluations but also over what we do, in a way that makes room for the possibility of weakness of the will.

5. The Motivational Problem Solved

My central thesis is that there is a conceptual connection between evaluation and motivation insofar as normally, in cases in which things go right, there is no need for some extra ingredient to mediate between them and so no inevitable motivational gap to be bridged. To suppose that an agent loses her motivation altogether is not to “leave [her] evaluative outlook intact,” contrary to what Smith claims (pp. 120–21), for in such a case the evaluation will be defective insofar as the agent fails to appreciate its practical import. We are now in a position to see why this is so.

Something’s genuinely having import for one, I have argued, is constituted by the projectible, rational pattern of emotions, desires, and judgments, a pattern that is a kind of attunement of both one’s evaluative judgments and one’s emotional and desiderative sensibilities to that import. Thus, particular evaluations, whether made actively in judgment or felt passively in emotion, are correct or incorrect, appropriate or inappropriate, depending on whether their objects really have import for one—on whether, that is, those objects are the foci of the relevant projectible, rational patterns. Moreover, although such patterns like any pattern can tolerate some noise—isolated occurrences of elements inconsistent with the rest of the pattern or isolated gaps in the pattern—systematic inconsistencies or gaps undermine the coherence of the pattern itself, the import that pattern constitutes, and so the rationality of the particular evaluations that make it up.

As a result, we might say, a particular evaluation, whether a judgment, emotion, or desire, is complete insofar as it fits into a projectible, rational pattern providing one with an unfragmented perspective on, and thus constituting, im-
port. Anything less than a complete evaluation—for example an evaluative judgment that systematically fails to move one emotionally or an emotion or desire that fails to garner one’s intellectual assent—will be defective insofar as, in the absence of the broader projectible pattern constitutive of import, the rationality of that evaluation is undermined. Of course, an evaluation can be complete even if the pattern into which it fits contains some noise, and there is no sharp line to be drawn between cases in which the inconsistencies or gaps are isolated (and so mere noise) and those in which they are systematic (and so undermine the pattern); consequently, there will be no sharp line to be drawn between cases of complete and incomplete evaluation. Nonetheless, there are clear cases on either side of the line, and for such cases it is complete evaluations that, in light of their rationality and lack of fragmentation, constitute our considered view and so provide us with justificatory reasons; incomplete evaluations, whose rationality has ipso facto been undermined, represent a perspective that cannot yet be said to be truly our own and so fail by our own lights fully to provide justificatory reasons.

To deliberate and arrive at an evaluative judgment, therefore, is to provide one with an evaluative perspective that, if things go right and the evaluation is complete, is also an attunement of one’s emotional and desiderative sensibilities. This means that one will normally feel the corresponding emotions and desires when appropriate and not otherwise. Yet to feel an emotion or desire is have the import of its focus impress itself on one and enthral one in such a way that one is motivated to act. Hence, when evaluation is complete, no inevitable gap between evaluation and motivation needs to be bridged and there is no need for some extra ingredient to mediate between them. To have the justificatory reason as articulated by the evaluative judgment, by virtue of the completeness of the pattern of emotions, desires, and judgments constitutive of import, is normally to be motivated when appropriate.

One might object to this use of the notion of complete evaluation to close the motivational gap. After all, one may think, a complete evaluation is one that by definition involves the appropriate desires so that of course, defined that way, there will be no gap between complete evaluation and motivation. Simply to stipulate a definition of a particular kind of evaluation where there is no gap, however, cannot solve the motivational problem which concerns how we can make sense of the possibility of there being gaps between evaluation in general and motivation without undermining our rational control over what we do.

In reply, this objection misses my point in using the notion of complete evaluation to articulate a conceptual connection between evaluation and motivation. This connection is not merely stipulated in a definition but earned by philosophical analyses of both the rational interconnections among emotions and judgments constitutive of justificatory reasons and the way in which emotional evaluations, as commitments to attend to and act on behalf of import, essentially motivate. Hence, once we understand complete evaluation in terms of these analyses, we can see that this is a substantive claim about what it is to have reasons.
Moreover, these analyses provide me with the resources to handle cases in which evaluation does not motivate one to act, even in cases of complete evaluation. These are instances of a kind of gap, to be sure, but on my analysis such a gap cannot fruitfully be understood as a gap between reason on the one hand and motivation on the other hand, and it is not a gap that threatens the idea that we have rational control over what we do. To the contrary, a failure of motivation on my account would be a failure to have emotions or desires in accordance with one’s evaluative judgments, and, given the rational interconnections among emotions and judgments, that just is a failure of reason. Such a failure, however, does not in general undermine our rational control over what we do. To see why this is so will require distinguishing several different kinds of case and hence the different failures of reason that are possible, failures that involve both complete and incomplete evaluations.

1. First, the failure might be a failure in the context of a complete evaluation. The agent has, therefore, achieved a unitary evaluative perspective overall that involves not only assent to certain judgments and patterns of inference, but also the attunement of her emotional and desiderative sensibilities. Yet somehow, irrationally, she has failed in this particular situation to respond with the emotion or desire that is called for by import; this is a failure to adopt here and now a certain evaluative perspective that reveals the situation as it is given the kind of objectivity import has. Such cases are possible because the requisite projectible, rational pattern of emotions and desires into which that judgment, as a complete evaluation, fits can tolerate some (but not too much) noise, including isolated (albeit rationally inappropriate) lapses of emotion or desire. In the face of this failure, however, the agent can attempt to gain rational control of her actions by articulating in judgment the import the current situation has for her, thus adopting the requisite evaluative perspective self-consciously so as to get herself to perceive the situation more accurately. Given that this is a complete evaluation, the perspective she adopts in judgment will also be an emotional perspective, and given the mutual commitments among judgments in a complete evaluation, to re-shape her perspective on the current situation in this way will normally be to come to have the relevant emotion, as I argued in §4. In such a case, the exercise of control takes place solely within reason, with no mediation required between reason and motivation.

This account of how we can gain rational control over what we do may look superficially similar to the account Smith gives (cf. note 3). After all, for Smith what bridges the gap between our evaluative judgments and our being motivated is pure practical reason: the causal disposition to have desires with motivational strength equal to the deliberative weight we give the corresponding normative reasons. Moreover, for Smith this kind of reason, this disposition, can be engaged by self-consciously bringing to mind how one’s evaluations bear on the current situation. However, the similarity is only superficial. According to Smith, the disposition that is pure practical reason is merely causal and is, consequently, conceived as something external to evaluation itself. Moreover, the existence of this disposition is simply stipulated, without independent mo-
tivation, as what is needed to bridge the gap between evaluation and motivation. By contrast, on my account the connection between the judgment (and the evaluative perspective it affords) and the emotion or desire (and the motivation it provides) is conceptual and fundamentally normative: a failure to display the connection in particular cases is not merely unusual, a malfunction in the motivational mechanism, but rationally inappropriate in a way that potentially undermines the judgment. Moreover, the same commitments among emotions and judgments that make this rational inappropriateness intelligible also supply the rational pressure for emotion and judgment to conform to each other. As a result, on my account the rational interconnections among judgments, emotions, and desires are an essential part of the rationality of evaluation itself, and the exercise of control on my account takes place wholly within reason. Hence, there is no essential gap between evaluation and motivation to be bridged.

2. Of course, it is always possible that this attempt to exercise rational control will fail: abnormal cases are clearly possible. In a second kind of case, the agent has similarly achieved the unitary evaluative perspective constitutive of a complete evaluation but still fails to be motivated even by the kind of attempt at rational control just described. Such an agent, by virtue of this sort of irrationality, has temporarily lost rational control in a way that does indeed open up a kind of gap between complete evaluation and motivation. Nonetheless, this kind of case is necessarily parasitic on cases in which there is no gap, on pain of undermining the idea that the evaluation is complete. Because the requisite pattern of emotions can tolerate some noise, it can be contingent in each situation in which action is called for that a gap does not arise between evaluation and motivation. Nonetheless, because the pattern is a pattern of rationality, it is necessary that in general this gap does not arise in order for the requisite pattern of emotions, desires, and judgments constitutive of a complete evaluation to be maintained. What makes possible this understanding of the conceptual connection between evaluation and motivation is the idea that import is constituted not by particular judgments, emotions, or desires but by patterns (even somewhat noisy patterns) of judgments, emotions, and desires. This means in part that, contrary to Smith’s claim, it is unintelligible that we could remove the motivation entirely and leave the evaluation intact, for, given the rational connections among emotions and judgments, this would be to undermine the rationality of the evaluation, and hence the evaluation itself. Consequently, such temporary and isolated cases of gaps between evaluation and motivation do not in general threaten the idea that we have rational control over what we do.

3. In a third kind of case, the agent has only a clearly incomplete evaluation, with frequent and systematic noise in the relevant emotions, desires, and judgments, so that it is unclear what the relevant pattern(s) of these evaluations really is (are). Here, to the extent to which an agent’s deliberative evaluative judgments fail to achieve a perspective on the world that engages her emotions, the pattern of emotional and judgmental rationality constitutive of import is undermined. The evaluation is for this reason defective, and the agent has reason to reconsider. Given the rational interconnections among emotions
and judgments I have articulated, such a reconsideration will be justified only insofar as it is able, by and large, to shape one’s emotions, for otherwise one will not have achieved the clarity of evaluative perspective such justification requires. Consequently, in cases in which the agent has attained only an incomplete evaluation, without a unified evaluative perspective, there may be no fact of the matter about how the agent really evaluates the current situation, and so no fact of the matter about how she ought to be motivated. Questions of whether she has or fails to have rational control are therefore premature because of this indeterminacy in what her reasons really are, which is something she can determine only by undergoing a sympathetic and imaginative process of rational deliberation. So once again the gap that arises between evaluation and motivation is a gap wholly on the side of reason insofar as nothing other than reason is required to close that gap.

4. Of course, the interesting cases lie somewhere between the second and third kinds of case just articulated, cases in which the relevant evaluations are neither clearly complete nor clearly incomplete. This is the case for Beatrice insofar as her evaluative judgments about fashion represent her considered view in part by virtue of a more general resonance with her emotions, in spite of their conflict with her more narrow pattern of emotions focussed on fashion. Here, in spite of these defects in her evaluations, questions of whether she has rational control are not premature; rather, given that her judgments represent her considered view, precisely what she needs is control over the conflicting emotions and desires that are so deeply ingrained in her. So long as the conflict persists, she has lost rational control over what she does, though it may be possible to regain it by removing these irrational emotions and desires through extensive retraining of one’s habits of perception and response, a process that may require considerable reliance on others for help and support. Nonetheless, as with the second kind of case, such lapses in rational control are intelligible only as parasitic on cases in which we have control by virtue of having attained a general resonance of our emotions and judgments with each other.

6. Conclusion

I have been arguing against widespread misconceptions about the connection between evaluation and motivation. We should not, I have argued, understand evaluation to be one thing and motivation to be something else, in a way that involves an inevitable split between normative reasons and motivating reasons. We should not, therefore, search for something outside of our ability to reason as what is required to bridge this motivational gap. Rather, in the normal case to have a normative reason just is to be motivated, and there is no inevitable gap that needs to be bridged. Of course, a gap between evaluation and motivation is surely possible (and happens all too frequently in cases of weakness of will), but when it occurs there is nothing outside of reason that’s required to close it.

Once again, this amounts to an expansion of our understanding of practical reason in a way that essentially includes the emotions. To anyone not in the grip
of a philosophical theory, this should not be surprising. In making hard evaluative decisions about whether to join a fraternity, what profession to enter, whom to vote for, whom to marry, or more generally how to live, we very often find our reasons grounded ultimately in an appeal to “gut instinct”—a previously unarticulated feeling or sense of what is most important.24 This appeal is not a lapse of reason, something we could fill in completely only by grounding it ultimately in some first principles, nor is it simply a matter of arbitrary choice. Rather, it is a process of reason itself, grounded in the intimate connections between judgment and emotion. What is needed is a clearer conception of how that is possible, but that is a task for another paper.25

Notes

1The Moral Problem (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), especially Chapters 4–5. All references to Smith, unless explicitly noted otherwise, will be to this text.

2This approach to the motivational problem is analogous to common attempts to understand how perception works in the face of problems posed by illusions. Thus, common sense tells us that what we perceive in ordinary cases are the objects of the world directly—this chair, that tree, etc. However, in cases of illusions, one might think, we must acknowledge an epistemological gap that fails to be bridged between the way the world is and what we perceive. For in cases of illusion, we do not perceive how things are, and yet we do perceive something, and this something must be an image. This thought then gets carried over to normal cases in which there is no illusion: when our perception gets things right, that’s not because we perceive the world directly; rather, what we perceive is still only the image, and we must make some further move in thought to bridge this gap and so have reason to believe that this really is how things are. Even when we get it right, however, the epistemological gap remains: the image continues to play its role as an intermediary, caused by the world and in turn hopefully justifying our beliefs. The problem of understanding perception, therefore, is that of understanding how to bridge that gap in cases in which there is no illusion.

3According to Smith, the extra ingredient that mediates between evaluation and motivation and so has the potential to close the inevitable motivational gap just is “pure practical reason”: a causal disposition to have desires with motivational strength equal to the deliberative weight we give the corresponding normative reasons. (To continue the analogy to the epistemological problem, this is much like a conception of reliability as a disposition to have the degree of credence of a belief correspond to the likelihood of things being that way.) Thus, Smith would object to my characterization of practical reason on his view as motivationally impotent: we can have control over our desires, he claims, by self-consciously bringing to mind an understanding of how our normative reasons for action bear on the situation at hand, for focussing our attention in this way is what causally engages pure practical reason and so causes us to have the relevant desires. However, this account fails insofar as this whole process of having control over our motivation lies on the evaluative side of the motivational gap and does not by itself bridge that gap. Whether or not it will actually engage “pure practical reason” and so cause us to have the relevant desires is exactly the question at issue. Far from giving us an answer as to how we can have rational control over our actions, Smith is simply begging the question. (For details on how Smith works out this view, see Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, “Practical Unreason,” Mind 102 (1993), pp. 53–79; Jeanette Kennett and Michael Smith, “Philosophy and Commonsense: The Case of Weakness of Will,” in Michaelis Michael and John O’Leary-Hawthorne (eds.), Philosophy in Mind: The Place of Philosophy in the Study of Mind (Boston: Kluwer, 1994), pp. 141–57; and Smith’s The Moral Problem, pp. 177–80.)

4This difficulty with the solution to the motivational problem is again analogous to that with the solution to the epistemological problem mentioned in note 2. Insofar as reason is applied only on one side of the epistemological gap, reason is itself impotent to assure us that our judgments about how the world is correspond to the world itself. Whatever extra ingredient is needed to bridge
this gap must therefore be extra-rational. Beliefs about how the world is consequently come to seem to be based ultimately on the mere faith that our belief-forming apparatus is reliable, a faith that seems to undermine any epistemic warrant we might have had. This possibility of radical skepticism has, to many, seemed reason enough to reconceive the relation between our reason and the way the world is in a way that avoids opening up the epistemological gap in the first place. (For arguments against the intelligibility of some intermediary “given” as what’s needed to bridge this epistemological gap, see, e.g., Wilfrid Sellars’ “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” in Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven, eds., *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 253–329.)

An alternative strategy for solving the motivational problem is offered by David Velleman. (See his “The Possibility of Practical Reason,” *Ethics* 106 (1996), pp. 694–726; his “The Guise of the Good,” *Noûs* 26 (1992), pp. 3–26; and his *Practical Reflection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), especially Chapter 7.) Velleman accepts the distinction between normative reasons and motivating reasons—between reasons and motives, as he would say—and would accept Smith’s claim that we can “leave someone’s evaluative outlook intact while removing their motivations altogether.” For Velleman, however, the connection between reasons and motives is itself a motive constitutive of our agency: to be an agent means in part having the motive to comply with the recommendations (normative) reasons offer. With such a motive, we can now see that the normative force of reasons can get transferred into motivating force. Of course, there’s no guarantee that the resulting motivating force will be sufficient to move one all the way to action, so weakness of the will is not ruled out. Nonetheless, Velleman says, gaining control over our actions involves focussing on our reasons, and letting our agency-constituting motive to act on such reasons do the rest.

The trouble with this strategy is that, like Smith’s, it involves accepting an inevitable gap between evaluation and motivation, so that all we can do is focus on reasons, and hope that our agency-constituting motive will be there for us to bridge that gap. In the extreme cases of weakness of will that I am worried about, where one makes the evaluation but is not at all motivated to act accordingly, such an agency-constituting motive must be absent. Velleman rightly thinks that this means we have temporarily lost our autonomous agency, though, he would admit, we would still be motivated by our beliefs and desires, albeit without, or not because of, our endorsement of them. Nonetheless, for Velleman there is nothing we can do to regain our autonomy once it is lost; all we can do is wait until we regain that agency-constituting motive. Consequently, as was the case for Smith’s account, this mediating link between evaluation and motivation is not itself under our rational control. That is precisely the kind of capitulation in the face of the problem I aim to avoid in this paper.

This is what Smith merely asserts in the passage I quoted above from *The Moral Problem*, pp. 120–21; see also p. 123 and p. 178 for similar claims.


One might object that it is not the emotion itself that motivates such actions but rather a desire that is somehow associated with the emotion. Indeed, for this reason it might seem odd to include a specification of the kind of action worth taking as a part of the import to which emotions are responsive. I shall argue in §3, however, that a proper understanding of import normally requires that we be moved in this way by our responses to it and that this presupposes that we reject an understanding of desire (and the way in which desire motivates) as independent of emotion (and the way in which emotions motivate).

Of course, the conditions of the appropriateness of emotions depend on much more than this sort of normality, and so it is not trivial to spell out when other things are equal.

I shall return below to the idea that to have import is also to be a worthy object of action.

In this way we can make sense of the intuition that an unemotional creature is one that fails to care about anything, as well as the more fine-grained intuition that it is hard to make sense of something having import to someone if she does not respond emotionally no matter what when it is affected favorably or adversely. I say that it is “hard to make sense of” such import in the absence of such a broader pattern of emotions because there are other elements that go into constituting import, such as one’s desires and judgments, and these may enable us to make sense of import
even in the face of a failure of emotional response. (I shall return below to the contributions desire and judgment make to constituting import.) Doing so, however, requires a special story about why the pattern of emotions is absent so as to explain away that absence (and its irrationality) while preserving the coherence of the overall pattern of vigilance. (I have tried to describe such a case, in which the import defined largely by one’s emotions and that define largely by one’s judgments pull apart, in my “Integration and Fragmentation of the Self,” Southern Journal of Philosophy 34 (1996), pp. 43–63.)


13See his Emotion. Cognitivism, of course, has its critics. One of the most persuasive has been Patricia Greenspan, who argues (“Emotions and Evaluations,” Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 62 (1981), pp. 162–63) that cognitivism requires that we understand rational conflicts between the way an emotion presents a situation to us and our beliefs about that situation as incoherence in judgment, but we cannot neatly assimilate conflicts between emotions and judgments to this. I think this is right, but that it is merely a symptom of deeper problems about cognitivism’s implicit conception of rationality. This criticism will be implicit in my discussion below; for more complete arguments, see my “The Significance of Emotions.”

14Thanks to Leon Galis for help clarifying this objection.

15Indeed, this means that import becomes a problem for solving the mind-body problem that philosophers of mind have not adequately confronted. For more on this, see my “The Significance of Emotions.”

16This may sound patently false, especially in the context of the motivational problem: cases of weakness of the will precisely are cases in which something is worth pursuing for one even though one’s emotions and desires are not engaged; indeed, it’s common for emotions to be engaged only after the fact, as when one feels remorse or regret for one’s weak-willed actions. In part, the worry here stems from a sense of the importance evaluative judgment has in constituting something as worth pursuing for one; I shall return to discuss evaluative judgment and its connections with the emotions in §4. Recall, however, that my claim is not that one must experience every particular emotion when appropriate in order for something to have import for one. Rather, my claim is that it is patterns of emotions that constitute something’s having import and so being an appropriate focus of one’s emotions generally; this is consistent with there being occasional lapses in these patterns by virtue of failures to feel particular emotions. I shall return to this point in §5 in an extended discussion of various kinds of failure of motivation.

17I shall in §4 make a similar claim about the rational interconnections between emotions and evaluative judgments, further undermining cognitivist theories of emotions.

18One might object that in this example what is at issue is wishful thinking and not a genuine belief insofar as it can be quickly doubted and shown up as irrational by the emotion; thus, one might think, the case isn’t one of the emotion correcting the belief. There is some truth to this, though it only serves to reinforce my point. First, just because it is wishful thinking does not mean it does not function as a belief in the relevant ways: as a cause of behavior, as a premise in an
inference, etc. Second, doubt that one has the belief here must be based on one’s having the emotion—a doubt that is well grounded only in light of the rationality of the emotion, thus confirming my claim in the text.

19 For further examples of evaluative conflicts between patterns of emotions and judgments, see my “Integration and Fragmentation of the Self.”

20 Notice that it may well be a non-trivial achievement in such a case to articulate one’s emotions as those of disgust and shame (rather than, say, simple nervousness). Such a discovery can be one movement in a larger dialectic with oneself that ultimately constitutes one’s having non-instrumental reasons for values.

21 The possibility of such cases, described below, shows that I am not simply defining the notion of a complete evaluation as automatically motivating, as the objection charges.


23 One implication of this understanding of reason and import is that our freedom to determine what has import for us is not complete: you cannot simply decide to value something and have that settle the matter. But this should be no more surprising than the idea that we don’t have complete freedom to determine what we believe. What one can value is constrained by how one can be motivated to act, since reasons for valuing and motives for acting are intricately intertwined, as I have been arguing. Consequently, coming to articulate one’s values in judgment can be a matter of discovering something about oneself, as is clear in the case of Charlie coming to articulate his emotions as those of disgust and shame (cf. note 20). Nonetheless, this element of discovery is wholly consistent with the idea that we have freedom to create the values things have for us, the possibility of which seems to be an essential part of what it is to be human. This is discussed in more detail in my Emotional Reason, where I explicitly connect the kind of rational control at issue here with an account of how deliberation about value is possible.


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