Hume’s emotivism

Theories of what morality is fall into two broad families - cognitivism and non-cognitivism. The distinction is now understood by philosophers to depend on whether one thinks that moral judgements express beliefs or not.

Non-cognitivism claims that ethical language does not try to describe the world and cannot be true or false. It does not express beliefs, but some other, non-cognitive mental state. Different non-cognitivist theories disagree on exactly what this mental state is, but it is usually an attitude or feeling.

**EMOTIVISM**

Emotivism claims that moral judgements express the feeling or attitude of approval or disapproval. To say that ‘Murder is wrong’ is to express one’s disapproval of murder. Ethical language is ‘emotive’. So, in one sense, emotivism claims that morality is ‘subjective’. However, there is an important distinction between emotivism and the theory that is called ‘subjectivism’. Subjectivism claims that moral judgements assert or report approval or disapproval, and there is a difference between expressing disapproval and asserting it.

One form of subjectivism claims that to say ‘X is wrong’ is simply to say that it is generally disapproved of. But this can’t be right, because it is not a contradiction to say ‘Most people approve of X, but X is wrong nonetheless’. For example, racism has been very common historically. We may argue that ‘racism is wrong’ even while acknowledging that most people approved of it.

A second form of subjectivism, ‘speaker subjectivism’, claims that the meaning of ‘X is wrong’ is something like ‘I disapprove of X’ or again ‘I think X is wrong’. This is a fact about oneself, so the statement can be true or false and is verifiable. Speaker subjectivism, therefore, is an unusual form of cognitivism: the facts that make moral judgements true are facts about the individual speaker’s mind.

Speaker subjectivism entails that we cannot make mistakes about what is right or wrong. If I say ‘Murder is right’, I am simply stating ‘I approve of murder’. If I am sincere, then I do approve of murder, and so murder is, indeed, right (‘for me’, we might say). But we naturally think that people can make mistakes about morality. Speaker subjectivism makes no sense of deliberation, trying to figure out what is right or wrong. Why should I bother to deliberate? Whatever I come to feel will be right!

By contrast, emotivism claims that moral judgements do not express any kind of truth or falsehood, because they are not cognitive. It can explain the objections to subjectivism above. To say that ‘most people approve of racism’ does not contradict ‘racism is wrong’, because ‘racism is wrong’ doesn’t state something
true or false. And one cannot be infallible in the sense of getting the answer right, there are no moral truths.

**HUME, TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE, Bk 3, Pt 1**

Many philosophers have interpreted Hume as defending emotivism, although that interpretation has recently been challenged. Our aim here, however, is to extract the main line of argument from Hume that one could use in defence of emotivism. On this interpretation, Hume makes two main claims. The first is that cognitivism is false (§1). The second is that moral judgements are expressions of our feelings of approval and disapproval (§2).

The arguments against cognitivism

Hume gives two arguments against cognitivism. The first is this:

1. Moral judgements can motivate actions.
2. Reason cannot motivate action.
3. Therefore, moral judgements are not judgements of reason.

Cognitivism claims that moral judgements express beliefs, which can be true or false. And the faculty of judging what is true or false is reason. Hence, Hume's conclusion is a rejection of cognitivism.

Hume assumes (1) to be true. His argument for (2) depends on the claim that all judgements of reason are either relations of ideas or matters of fact. Before going any further, it is worth clarifying this claim.

Relations of ideas of can be discovered just by thinking, by recognizing the truth of an analytic proposition or by deductive reasoning. To deny a relation of ideas is to contradict oneself. Matters of fact are claims about what exists, and they are established by perceptual experience and causal inference.

Hume argues earlier in the *Treatise* that we are always motivated by our emotions and desires. But, he claims, emotions and desires are not psychological states that can be true or false. As we can say now, they have a world-to-mind ‘direction of fit’. By contrast, judgements of relations of ideas and matters of fact have a mind-to-world direction of fit. A psychological state that simply presents a truth can’t motivate us to act, because there is no pressure to change the world to fit the mind. Simply understanding that some relation holds between two ideas doesn’t entail that we should act one way rather than another. And knowing facts about the world might well tell us what exists, and how to achieve what we want. Knowing such things might direct our existing desires in one way or another. But how could it make us want anything in the first place? So judgements of reason cannot motivate action.

Hume’s second argument against cognitivism is this:

4. There are only two types of judgements of reason, relations of ideas and matters of fact.
5. Moral judgements are not relations of ideas.
6. Moral judgements are not matters of fact.
7. Therefore, moral judgements are not judgements of reason.

If (4) is true, then empiricism about knowledge is true. What of (5)? Hume’s main argument for this claim is that there is no relation of ideas that applies just to morality. Any relation that describes moral or immoral actions also applies to physical objects, but these aren’t moral or immoral. Take murder, for example, which involves one thing killing another. A plant can kill another plant. There is nothing in the idea of ‘killing’ that gives us moral wrongness.

We can object that murder is not simply killing. It is wilful, premeditated killing. But, Hume responds, this just means that the action has a different cause. But the relation between cause and effect, which we describe as ‘killing’, remains the same. It is up to the person who wants to claim that moral judgements are relations of ideas to show what relations of ideas they are, and how they are unique to morality.

Similarly, if we claim that moral judgements are a matter of fact, we must identify which fact:

Take any action allow’d to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact ... which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object.

Hume concludes §1 by drawing a famous distinction between sentences that talk about what is the case (judgements of reason) and moral judgements, which talk about what ought to be the case. But how do we get from one to the other? How, for instance, do we get from the fact that some action will cause pain to the claim that we ought not to do it? What’s the connection? ‘[T]his ought ... expresses some new relation [of which it] seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it’.

**Moral judgements are expressions of feeling**

Hume’s answer is that we don’t and can’t infer an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’. Instead, morality ‘is more properly felt than judg’d of’. What arouses positive feelings of approval in us, we call virtuous; what arouses negative feelings of disapproval, we call vicious.

When you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that... you have a feeling... of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar’d to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which... are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind.

In this remark, Hume is drawing an analogy with secondary qualities. Primary qualities are properties that science says objects have (extension, shape, motion, number, solidity); and secondary qualities are properties that depend upon particular ways of perceiving objects (colour, sound, smell, taste, temperature). For example, colour, by definition, is something that is experienced in vision. According to science, the cause of what we experience as colour is vibrations of
Hume thought that this showed that secondary qualities exist only in the mind. Objects aren’t coloured; instead, their parts have certain properties of size and motion and so on, causing them to emit or reflect wavelengths of light (which is a type of vibration, not itself a colour). It is not until we turn to human perceptual experience - something mental - that we need the concept of colour, that we come across ‘colour experience’.

Hume is claiming that moral judgement is analogous. Good and bad, right and wrong, vice and virtue are not properties of actions and characters. Instead, moral judgements are expressions of our feelings (of approval and disapproval).

REPLIES TO HUME’S ARGUMENTS

One way of escaping Hume’s first argument is to claim that the first premise - that moral judgements can motivate actions - is false. To do good actions, we have to have the desire to be good as well. If moral judgements don’t motivate us on their own, then this argument gives us no reason to believe that moral judgements aren’t judgements of reason. However, this strategy leads us straight into his second argument. If moral judgements are judgements of reason, what type of judgements of reason are they?

Kant provides one account. We could argue that whether a maxim is universalizable or not is a relation of ideas, established by the test of contradiction. This was not a relation that Hume considered. A second account is provided by Aristotelian non-naturalism. Moral judgements are judgements of what reasons we have to act, so they are about normative matters of fact. Hume limits matters of fact to natural facts. He hasn’t considered the possibility of non-natural facts.

Aristotelian non-naturalism also explains the connection between natural properties and moral judgements, bridging the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. Hume is right that we cannot deduce moral judgements from considering the natural facts; instead, we must weigh up the reasons that the natural facts give us. But once we recognize that whether a natural fact counts as a reason for believing a certain value judgement is itself a matter of objective fact, we can cross the gap.

Finally, we can turn Hume’s analogy between moral judgements and secondary qualities against him. We can agree that moral reasons are like secondary qualities, but then argue that secondary qualities are not subjective. According to direct realist theories of perception, colours are properties of objects. When we perceive the colour of an object, we still perceive the object, but as it appears to us. ‘Us’ means ‘human beings’, not ‘me’ or ‘you’. An object’s colour is not subjective, because it is independent of how any individual person perceives it. To be brown is to look brown to normal perceivers under normal conditions. Secondary qualities are no less real than primary qualities; it is just that they are a different type of property, one defined in terms of how we (human beings in general) perceive the world.
Likewise, moral judgements are defined in the context of human responses to the world. But what values there are doesn’t depend on what any individual person finds valuable or not, just as what colour something is, is independent of any individual person’s perception of it. Whether some fact (e.g. animal suffering) is a reason to act in a certain way (e.g. stop eating meat) depends *in general* on human responses and our best account of eudaimonia; but it is independent of any individual’s response, so it is not subjective.