First Prize

Non-cognitivists believe that when we act morally, we must act to satisfy a desire of our own. Can such an action be truly moral?

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Introduction

The philosophical question of whether actions can be truly considered moral when motivated by a desire of our own has long been subject to ongoing debate in ethics. Non-cognitivists, who reject the idea that moral statements are 'truth-apt', see them as expressions of non-cognitive attitudes, and maintain that moral actions are motivated by desires or emotions rather than by beliefs about objective moral truths [1].

In this essay, I will investigate why non-cognitivism provides a compelling account of moral motivation, and how moral actions motivated by our desires can still be truly moral. To this end, I will - **First** provide an overview of non-cognitivism and its implications for moral motivation;

- **Secondly** explore the idea of moral reasons, and how they relate to desires and moral actions; and
- **Thirdly** conclude by arguing that moral actions motivated by desires can still be truly moral, despite not being based on beliefs about objective moral facts.

1. Non-cognitivism and moral motivation

Firstly, we need to establish what non-cognitivists imply when declaring that moral statements are 'non- truth-apt' [2].

By denying any association between moral statements and truth values, non-cognitivists claim that moral statements do not relate to objective facts in the world, but rather express non-cognitive attitudes, such as approval or disapproval. In this metaethical framework, moral judgments manifest our emotional or volitional states, rather than objective realities.

A non-cognitivist might claim that declaring "lying is wrong" is not a factual statement about the world. Instead, it expresses our disapproval of dishonesty. Thus, if someone decides not to lie, it is not because they deem the action objectively wrong or violating a moral principle. Rather, it is because they have a desire not to lie, which could be aimed, for example, at avoiding the repercussions of dishonesty, such as guilt and social alienation.

However, if moral judgments are merely expressions of our desires or attitudes, does this indicate that acting morally is a sheer matter of satisfying our own, socio-culturally shaped preferences, rather than fulfilling a Kantian categorical imperative [3]? To

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[1] van Roojen, Mark, "Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2018 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/moral-cognitivism/> [Accessed 22.3.2023].

[2] Fischer, Andrew, Metaethics: An Introduction, Routledge, London, 2014, pp. 6–7.

[3] Kant, Immanuel, et al., Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019

investigate this question, we must understand the bond that connects moral reasons to desires.

2. Moral reasons and desires

The incestuous relationship between moral reasons, desires, and moral actions has been a topic of philosophical debate for centuries. In particular, metaethical investigation has focused on how desires and moral reasons relate to each other, and how both influence our moral actions.

To explore this correlation, it is important to clarify each definition first. Moral reasons are the explanations that warrant moral judgments or beliefs, such as the justifications for why something is right or wrong. Desires, on the other hand, are emotional states that fuel action, often in the pursuit of a particular outcome. Finally, moral actions represent deeds that can be declared right or wrong in light of moral judgments or beliefs.

If we contextualise the relationship between these terms within a non-cognitivist framework, the first objection to arise is that, on a surface level, non-cognitivism appears to undermine the very essence of moral reasons. If moral judgments are not based on beliefs about objective moral facts, then it might seem that there are no moral reasons that warrant acting in any given way.

However, non-cognitivists challenge this statement, asserting that moral reasons are not objective facts in the world, but rather reasons that are generated by our desires and emotions. When we have a desire to act in a certain way, that desire generates reasons for us to act in accordance with it. In other words, desires generate reasons, and moral reasons are simply a subset of these.

A desire-based portrait of metaethics is painted by Hume, who argues reason is “the slave of passions” [4] and that desires are the ultimate source of motivation for action, including moral action. According to Hume, moral reasons lack any intrinsic motivational power, therefore it is only through our desires that we are propelled to act. For instance, if one desires to help others, then the moral reason to do so becomes motivating. If one does not have that desire, then the moral reason is not motivating.

On the other hand, deontologically inclined philosophers maintain that moral reasons have a specific, underlying engine that is independent of desires. In this context, Kant argues that moral reasons have a categorical imperative, meaning that they are universally binding for all rational beings, regardless of their desires or preferences. Because of categorical imperatives, we have an inescapable moral duty to act in certain ways, even if we do not desire to do so.

A third position on the matter is represented by a somewhat hybrid view, which argues that both desires and moral reasons are necessary for motivating moral action. By further refining this argument, Christine Korsgaard established that desires provide an

[4] Cohon, Rachel, "Hume's Moral Philosophy", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), < https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/hume-moral/> [Accessed 23.3.2023].

initial impulse, while moral reasons embed the justification for acting on those desires [5]. Korsgaard suggests that moral reasons have a normative force that desires alone do not possess, concluding that, while moral reasons can provide a moral obligation to act, desires alone cannot. For instance, a person may desire to keep a promise but may not feel obligated to do so: it is the moral reason that provides the obligation to keep the promise.

The intellectual plausibility of this hybrid position, capable of reconciling the seemingly unbridgeable gap separating reason and desires, suggests that the moral actions performed under a non-cognitivist framework may still be considered truly moral after all. This argument, which will be consolidated in our conclusions, has a complex network of interdependencies that will likely continue to warrant further philosophical investigation for decades to come.

3. Conclusions

From our first to our last breath, morality permeates every aspect of our lives as individuals, and represents the oxygen that maintains the lungs of our society clean and healthy.

The motivations underpinning moral actions can stem from a variety of different sources, such as desires or beliefs about objective moral facts. Following a concise excursus on some of the principal views in this field, there seem to be sufficient grounds to suggest that moral actions motivated by desires could still be deemed truly moral, even if they are not based on beliefs about objective or universal moral facts.

Firstly, it is essential to recognise that, despite the abundance of academically established deontological literature, there is no universally agreed set of objective moral facts. Even among those who firmly believe that moral facts exist objectively, no consensus could be reached as to what those facts are or how they can be discovered. Thus, the idea that moral actions must be based on objective moral facts is not necessarily useful towards understanding what makes actions moral. Instead, the motivation, or desire, behind the actions may be of greater strategical importance.

Secondly, moral actions motivated by desires can still be consistent with universally justifiable moral principles and values, and ultimately generate positive consequences for the collectivity. For example, an individual may feel a strong desire to tell the truth, not because they believe in an objective moral duty to do so, but because, as part of their value system, they appreciate integrity, or they fear the implications of dishonesty. In this case, the action of telling the truth, is driven by a desire, which then shapes the moral reason. The outcome, regardless of its roots and motives, still aligns with the moral principle of honesty, thus allowing us to consider their actions truly moral.

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[5] Korsgaard, Christine M. “Skepticism about Practical Reason”, The Journal of Philosophy, vol. 83, no. 1, 1986, pp. 5–25. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026464> [Accessed 27.3.2023].

Thirdly, set moral actions motivated by desires could be more authentic and morally meaningful than those driven by a belief in objective moral facts, as they can be elicited by unobliged empathy and spontaneous compassion for others. When an individual performs a moral action based on a belief in objective moral facts, they may be doing so unwillingly, out of a sense of duty or obligation. While this should still be considered moral, it will not be as genuine as an action purely motivated by a sincere desire to do good.

In conclusion, while it is important to acknowledge the need for continued philosophical enquiry on the matter, it is possible to state that moral actions motivated by desires can still be truly moral, despite not being based on beliefs about objective moral facts. Personal values, desires, empathy, and compassion can all serve as powerful motivations for moral action. Furthermore, even if the motivation for a moral action is not based on objective moral facts, the action itself can still have positive consequences for all.