3rd Prize

Quasi-realism rescues moral truth

By Graham Cooper

Non-cognitivism has its origins in Hume's theory of ethics. Its central claim is that moral statements, such as 'it is right to keep promises', do not express beliefs and are therefore not statements of fact that can be true or false. This implies that there can be no moral knowledge and that moral judgements are expressions of personal feelings. It does not, however, necessarily lead to the conclusion that moral judgements are entirely subjective.

A cornerstone of Hume's ethics is that beliefs and other cognitive states (which Hume called 'reason') cannot motivate action. Only 'passions', such as desires or feelings, can do so, he argued. In one of his best-known quotes, he says: "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions." (Hume, (1737a) in Shafer-Landau, R. (p8))

Later in the same work, he adds: "Moral distinctions … are not the offspring of reason. Reason is wholly inactive." (Hume, (1737a) in Shafer-Landau, R. (p11))

Elsewhere, however, Hume acknowledged that reason often has a significant influence on the passions that motivate our actions. As Millican puts it, Hume believed: "that the prospect of pleasure and pain, and the belief that these will be the consequences of particular behaviour, are a chief driver of our actions". (Millican 2012, p18)

But the motivation for action, Hume stressed, comes from the passions. So, as a moral judgement like 'it is right to keep promises' certainly motivates us to act, it must be an expression of a desire not a belief. Therefore, when I act morally, I must be acting to satisfy a personal preference.

According to this anti-realist view – known as expressivism – the function of moral statements is not to assert a matter of fact, but to express a state of mind.

But, if each of us has our own emotional response and makes our own evaluations of actions and behaviour, we would each have our own moral truth. Hume escapes the charge of ethical relativism, however, as his approach to morality is not based simply on individuals' emotional responses. Rather, as Talbot points out, his view is that: "before an expression of approval or disapproval can be deemed *moral* it must be made by one who adopts a 'stable and general perspective'." (Talbot (2023) Section 4.8)

Such a character, Hume calls a 'true judge'. He then defines 'right action' as that behaviour towards which a 'true judge' would feel approbation. To qualify as a true judge, we must:

- acquire the ability and the desire to consider every action from the perspective of all those who will be affected by it; and
- act on this desire so that before we decide whether or not we approve of an action we actually do consider it from every perspective. (Talbot (2023) Section 4.9)

This sounds like a demanding, if not impossible, task but, as several non-cognitivists have pointed out, humans are continually developing in this direction without any conscious effort. As Millican says: "evolution, both biological and societal, will naturally lead us genuinely to care about others, and also about moral considerations such as fairness." (Millican (2012) p20)

Even in primitive societies, Hume claimed that the benefits of cooperation will be obvious. For example, he wrote: "it will be for my interest to leave another in the possession of his goods, provided he will act in the same manner with regard to me". (Hume (1737b) (Book 3, Part 2, Section 2))

Thus, human nature and evolution cause us to develop similar responses to the same actions. This leads us to treat our moral judgements as objective facts about the world, and our language has evolved accordingly. So, we have come to believe that moral statements are declarative and describe an independent morality, even though there are no moral facts for them to correspond to.

As Millican puts it: "Morality starts from our natural instinctive feelings, but is then refined by thought and reflection into a system whose features – though actually dependent on human nature – can easily give the illusion of being an independent aspect of reality." (Millican (2012) p13)

According to this view, moral judgements are still motivated by passion rather than reason but, because the passions are those of an idealised person with the far-ranging capabilities and perspective of a 'true judge', they are informed by reason to such an extent that they "almost attain the status of beliefs" (Talbot (Section 4.9)).

Such a view has been championed by Blackburn and labelled quasi-realism. (Blackburn (2016))

Others go further and say Hume likens moral attributes such as 'right' and 'wrong' to Locke's 'secondary properties' such as colour, sound or taste. Such properties are neither pure qualities of subjective experience, nor are they entirely objective phenomena. Rather they are the result of powers in external objects to create sensations in us, by virtue of their primary qualities (i.e. their size, mass, motion, shape and quantity).

The property of redness, for example, is an impression created in the minds of people with healthy eyesight, under normal lighting conditions, when they are exposed to certain objects (tomatoes, Chinese flags, London buses etc) which share certain fundamental features or primary properties. So, the perception of colour is internal to the observer, but we see it as external.

Similarly, moral judgements are essentially expressions of our emotions, but we project these internal responses onto the external world as though they were real objective facts. In consequence, when we make a moral statement, we act as if is 'truth-apt'.

As Talbot concludes: if Hume is correct "we see an action *as right* or *as wrong*. These ways of seeing the world are real. Even if they are not quite objective, they are inter-subjective." (Talbot (2023) Section 4.10)

Indeed, morality cannot be entirely realist, Blackburn argues, as this would not allow for the changes over time in attitudes towards issues such as slavery, abortion, homosexuality, childbirth outside marriage etc. Yet we behave as if it is realist, because evolution and our upbringing have ensured that we share a lot of the same emotional responses and, therefore, largely the same morals.

We can therefore conclude that when we act, although this is primarily to satisfy some personal desire, there will generally be a consensus about whether the action is moral or immoral. But it does not mean that we are complying with, or contravening, some objective standard of 'good' behaviour, as there is no 'fact of the matter'.

Although this seems to leave moral knowledge on shaky foundations, it should be noted that even scientific facts are never absolutely certain. Scientific knowledge is largely based on induction, in which a number of particular observations lead to the formulation of a general principle. This process leads us to assume that there is a causal connection between two phenomena that are repeatedly seen to occur sequentially. But, as Hume famously showed, this connection is nothing but a habit of our minds – something we project onto phenomena, although it is not inherent in the phenomena themselves.

In ethics as in science, the way evolution has shaped us means we cannot help having certain beliefs. As Millican puts it: "Perhaps we have to rely on our animal nature that leads us inevitably to believe certain things … and to trust that our faculties are more or less reliable." (Millican (2011) (12:00))

And, although science lacks a firm grounding in an objective truth, it still provides a reliable basis for a well-functioning society. The same is true for ethics.

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