

Moral realism: two objections from Hume¹

Metaethics is the branch of philosophy that asks about what morality is, philosophically speaking. It asks questions in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology. For example, can ethical claims be true or false? If so, are these truths objective? Are there moral properties, like being right or wrong, that are part of reality? And if there are ethical truths, how do we discover what these truths are?

Cognitivism is the view that ethical language expresses ethical beliefs about how the world is. Cognitivists argue that moral judgements can be true or false, and so aim to describe the world. Furthermore, we can be mistaken about whether a moral judgement is true or false. Our thinking it is true does not make it true.

But if there are truths about morality, what kind of truths are they? Moral realism claims that good and bad are properties of situations and people, right and wrong are properties of actions. Just as people can be 5 feet tall or run fast, they can be morally good or bad. Just as actions can be done in 10 minutes or done from greed, they can be right or wrong. These moral properties are a genuine part of the world. Whether moral judgements are true or false depends on how the world is, on what properties an action, person or situation actually has.

Moral realism in the last 150 years has focused on trying to clarify the precise nature of the relation between moral properties and natural properties. This has led to two positions: moral naturalism and moral non-naturalism. Moral naturalism claims that moral properties are natural properties; moral non-naturalism claims that they are a distinct, non-natural kind of property.

In this handout, we discuss two objections from David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* to any form of moral realism - indeed, to any form of cognitivism.

HUME'S ARGUMENT FROM MOTIVATION

The first argument Hume presents that we shall discuss is this:

- P1. Moral judgements can motivate actions.
- P2. Reason cannot motivate action.
- C1. 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.

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 350, 368-71

Hume assumes (P1) to be true. His argument for (P2) depends on Hume's 'fork', the claim that we can have knowledge of just two sorts of claim: relations of ideas or matters of fact. Relations of ideas can be discovered just by thinking, by recognising 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 sense experience and causal inference. Hume understands the faculty of knowledge as 'reason'. So because there are just two types of knowledge, reason makes just two types of judgment - judgments about relations of ideas and judgments about matters of fact. Neither relations of ideas nor matters of fact are motivating.

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. They don't show us how the world is, they motivate us to act on it, to change it. By contrast, judgements of relations of ideas and matters of fact show us how the world is. 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. Knowing that $3 \times 5 = 30/2$ doesn't motivate us one way or 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? What could knowing that there is food in the kitchen lead me to do anything without some desire (to eat, to cook...) to act upon? So judgements of reason cannot motivate action.

Discussion

One way of escaping Hume's argument is to claim that (P1) - 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.

On this view, to say 'Murder is wrong' is simply to describe murder. Strictly speaking, someone could hold this belief, but not care about what is wrong, and so be quite willing to murder if it suited them (a sociopath perhaps?). If we think, like Hume, that moral judgments are motivating, this is because people almost always *do* care about morality, and want to do what is right. So making claims about what is right or wrong is something that is relevant to what they do. But the moral judgment alone doesn't motivate them.

A second response would be to deny (P2) and argue that there are some judgments of reason that can motivate us. However, realism claims that moral judgments are matters of fact - they ascribe (natural or non-natural) properties to actions, states of affairs or people. It remains difficult to understand how such judgments could be motivating.

HUME'S IS-UGHT GAP

Hume presents a second argument against cognitivism, and so moral realism, 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. What is the relation between what is and what ought to be? 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' (or 'ought not') expresses some *new* relation or affirmation, it needs to be pointed out and explained; and a reason should be given for how this new relation can be—inconceivably!—a deduction from others that are entirely different from it.'

How is this an objection to cognitivism? Hume is commenting on how moral arguments work. Suppose I say 'Eating meat causes animal suffering. Therefore, you shouldn't eat meat.' According to cognitivism, the conclusion states a truth, and this truth is inferred from the premise. But how is this a rational inference, Hume asks? The premise tells me how the world is; the conclusion tells me how the world ought to be. But I can't infer one from the other. There is a 'gap' between what is and what ought to be, so that we can't reason from one to the other. If moral judgments were true or false, we *would* be able to infer them from other truth claims, such as matters of fact. But we can't. This is a reason to think that moral judgments don't make truth claims, and so cognitivism is false.

(For further discussion of responses to Hume's objections from non-reductive naturalism, see the handout 'Moral reasons and non-reductive naturalism'.)