

A Romp Through Ethics for Complete Beginners

**Session Four:
Non-Cognitivism: Hume, the passions and moral motivation**

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Last week we looked at Virtue Ethics:

- **considering man's proper function and purpose in life;**
- **deciding whether virtue is necessary for happiness;**
- **examining the metaphysics and the epistemology of virtue ethics;**
- **considering the charge that virtue ethics lacks a decision-procedure**

This week we are turning to non-cognitivism....

...the type of moral theory...

...traceable to the views of...

**...the Scottish philosopher, David Hume (1711
-1776)**

We will be:

- **reflecting on the differences between ‘reason’ and ‘passion’ ;**
- **considering the roles played by reason and passion in the production of action;**
- **deciding whether you agree with Hume that reason is the ‘slave of the passions’ ;**
- **examining the implications of Hume’ s view of mind for Aristotle’ s ethics;**
- **learning about Hume’ s positive views on the nature of morality**

Humean ethics is the view that the right action...

... is that towards which a 'true judge' would feel approbation...

...the wrong action is that towards which...

... a true judge would feel disapprobation.

Um...does this remind you of anything?

You might think that Hume's theory sounds like Aristotle's....

...if 'feeling approbation' is identical to 'knowing what is right' ...

... and 'true judges' are identical to 'virtuous persons' ...

... these theories could be identical.

**But ‘feeling approbation’ is very different
from ‘knowing what is right’ ...**

**... and ‘true judges’ are not the same as
‘virtuous persons’**

There are many modern forms of Humean ethics....

...they are grouped under the title 'non-cognitivism'

...they include emotivism, prescriptivism, expressivism, error theory and quasi-realism...

...all of these can be looked up in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/contents.html>

Hume's ethics was built on his philosophy of mind...

... in particular on his account of the nature of mental states...

...such as 'reason' and 'passion' ...

...which we might think of as 'desire' and 'belief'

To understand Hume's view properly we need to understand:

(a) the difference between *reason* and *passion*

(b) why Hume claims that reason cannot motivate us

(c) why morality is intrinsically motivating

(d) Hume's positive theory of morality

**Let's start with the difference between reason
and passion**

To understand Hume's theory of mind...

...we must first understand the distinction...

...between ideas and impressions...

Ideas, for Hume, are cognitive states...

...they represent the world, admit truth and falsehood, and enter into rational relations....

...beliefs are the most obvious example of ideas....

...Hume calls ideas 'reason' because, in virtue of their representational content...

....they are all embedded in a web of rational relations with each other.

Impressions are states like sensations, desires and emotions....

...there is something *it is like* to experience such states....

...they are not representational, they are neither true nor false and they do not enter into rational relations....

...they cannot properly, therefore, be called 'reasonable' or 'unreasonable' .

Hume says:

“It is not contrary to *reason* to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.”

Sect. iii. A Treatise of Human Nature, by David Hume
‘Of the Influencing Motives of the Will’

Do you see what he means?

**Now we understand the difference between
'reason' and 'passion' ...**

**...we can take a look at why Hume claims that
reason cannot motivate us**

Hume believes there are only two types of reasoning:

(a) demonstrative reasoning

(b) probabilistic reasoning.

Demonstrative reasoning informs us of the relations between various ideas...

.... (for example it shows us that circles can't be square)....

....or that daffodils are yellow....

...or that making coffee requires water

Probabilistic reasoning informs us...

...on the basis of experience...

...about causes and effects...

**...that doing A, for example, will result in its
being the case that B**

**In the absence of a *desire* for something
though...**

...neither sort of reasoning...

...will prompt any sort of action...

...we move *only* if we *want* some end

Hume claims:

“Reason is the slave of the passions”

Treatise, ii. iii. 3

On Hume' s account reason and passion...

.... play different roles in our psychology....

...reason *informs us* of matters of fact and relations between ideas....

...passion *motivates us*.

Someone might insist that...

...when they gave up smoking it was *reason* that motivated them....

...is this a counterexample to Hume's claim?

Hume distinguishes between the ‘calm passions’ ...

...and the ‘violent passions’ ...

...desires for such things as life, health etc...

...are ‘calm’ ...

...whereas desires for things like cream cake and smoking...

... are ‘violent’

**He believes it is easy to mistake the calm
passions...**

...for reasons...

**...because experiencing them isn't so
obviously...**

...experiencing a qualitative state

But what has all this to do with morality?

Morality is essentially active...

...moral beliefs essentially *motivate us*...

...to believe *doing A is wrong*...

...is to be motivated not to do A

To believe lying is wrong...

... is to believe that we *shouldn't* lie....

...this belief is intrinsically motivating...

...the move from 'is' to 'ought' indicates...

.... a move from *fact* to *value*

If beliefs are causally inert...

...says Hume...then moral judgements...

... cannot express beliefs.

Consider the statement ‘lying is wrong’ .

Does this seem to you to be an expression of a belief about a certain type of action?

Would you say that it is either true or false?

‘Lying is wrong’ may *look* like a belief...

...it may *seem* to admit of truth and falsehood...

...it may *appear* to be embedded in a web of reasons...

...but as it *motivates us*, says Hume, it can’t be a belief

Some have called Hume's theory an 'error theory' ...

...because it claims that our belief that moral judgements...

...are beliefs...

...is simply false: an error.

If we think the statement ‘lying is wrong’ ...

...*describes* the world in some way...

... then we are wrongly *projecting* our own feelings...

... onto the world.

If we accept Hume's account of mind...

...and the resulting account of moral judgement...

...then we will see Aristotle...

... must have been wrong about morality

According to Aristotle we act morally when we act...

...not only *for reasons*...

...but for *the right* reasons....

...if Hume is right *reason* doesn't come into it

It is not our reason...

... that prompts us to act morally...

...it is our passions

Do you think agree with Hume that moral motivation requires a passion?

Or are you with Aristotle believing that morality requires passion to be overcome by reason?

A problem for Hume's view is that it seems to commit us...

... to believing that 'lying is wrong' means nothing more than 'I don't like lying'

....this would be a highly subjectivist view.

Is Hume's claim the claim that there is no more to morality than our own likes and dislikes?

**To see that it isn't we need to consider
Hume's *positive* view of morality**

Hume secures a sort of objectivity for moral judgements...

... by requiring that before an expression of approval or disapproval...

... can be deemed *moral* it must be made by a certain type of person

The only person whose approval and disapproval is properly *moral*...

...according to Hume...

...is a 'true judge', a person who has adopted a...

.... 'stable and general perspective' on the issue

But what is involved in the adoption of a...

.... ‘stable and general perspective’

...how do we become ‘true judges’ ?

To become true judges...

**... we must move from the 'pre-moral'
deliverances of sympathy...**

...to truly moral attitudes.

These ‘pre-moral deliverances of sympathy’ ...

... are those we experience when we empathise with others.

If a child cries because her friend is crying...

...she is experiencing such a state.

To become a true judge we need more than the ability to empathise....

....we need a great deal of knowledge about the nature of the world...

.... and about the causal relations that obtain in the world.

Acquiring such knowledge is a natural process....

....our parents, teachers and experiences teach us that if...

....we eat a lot of ice-cream we will get sick...

.... if we hurt our friends we will lose them...

.... things are not always as they seem, and so on.

We learn in particular that...

... we are just one person amongst many....

....and that we can be wrong

We become true judges only when we have extended our natural ability to empathise so we:

- Acquire the desire to consider every action from the perspective of *all* those who will be affected by it**
- Never decide whether we approve or disapprove until we *have* considered an action from every perspective**

If we allow bias to cloud our judgement...

**.... or we neglect to consider someone who' ll
be affected by our action...**

....our attitudes of approval and disapproval...

.... will not qualify as moral attitudes

If and when we do succeed in adopting a stable and general perspective...

....the modern Humeans who call themselves 'quasi-realists....

.... say that we thereby 'earn the right' ...

... to think of our moral judgements as true or false (even though they are not)

So even though moral judgements are still...

...expressions of passion not reason...

...the passions they express are so informed by reason...

... they *almost* attain the status of beliefs

The passion, though, is still central....

....because if it wasn't...

....these judgements...

.... would not be motivating...

...and then they couldn't be *moral* at all

If moral judgements express passions...

....then right and wrong can't be properties...

.... that actions have independently of the way we feel about them.

**But this doesn't mean Hume is not a realist
about moral properties...**

**...in fact he believes that moral properties are
'secondary qualities'**

If you are asked what ‘redness’ is you might make one of these three replies:

- **redness is a quality of experience (entirely subjective)**
- **redness is the wavelength of light emitted by objects (entirely objective)**
- **redness is the appearance certain objects have when seen by normal people under normal circumstances (inter-subjective)**

The first answer implies that 'red' refers to an experience that is essentially private to individual

If this were the case it would be impossible to:

- tell whether, when we talk about redness, we are talking about the *same* colour.....**
- teach the meaning of the word ‘red’ to anyone.**

As we can do both these things this cannot be the right account of redness

The second answer implies that were a cosmic ray...

.... to change the wavelengths of light associated with redness (650 nanometres)...

.... without changing our experiences...

...we would have to say that tomatoes have changed colour

This is implausible...

...our judgements about colour are based on our experiences...

... not on our knowledge of wavelengths.

The third answer is the right one....

....redness is the way in which normal human beings...

.... under normal conditions...

.... see objects that emit light at wavelength 650 nanometres.

We mean the same thing by ‘red’ because...

.... those of us with normal visual systems will...

.... when asked under normal conditions, to identify the red objects...

....identify the *same* objects

It is *possible* we all associate different experiences...

....with the word 'red' ...

....but as we'll never know whether or not that is the case...

.... it is irrelevant

Secondary properties, like redness, and if Hume is right, right and wrong...

...are *ways in which we see the world*...

...these ways of seeing the world are real...

...even if they are not quite objective...

...they are *inter-subjective*

Hume is, therefore, a realist...

... though he differs from Aristotle...

...who believed that moral properties exist in the world...

... quite independently of our passions

Can you now explain:

- **the distinction between ‘reason and ‘passion’ ?**
- **why Hume’ s account of motivation is a threat to Aristotle’ s ethics?**
- **why you might accept Hume’ s account of motivation?**
- **some of the advantages and disadvantages of Hume’ s moral theory?**
- **your own attitude towards Humean ethics?**

Next week' s reading:

'The Good Will' an excerpt from Kant' s Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (pages 525- 530 of the set text).

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/i/immanuel_kant.html

You might also like to read the introduction to, and papers in, part IX of the text book.