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THE MORAL ILLUSION

When the ancient Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhisus were involved in a competition to see who could represent reality the closest in their paintings, Zeuxis has painted the grapes with such likeness that the birds came to eat them, thinking they were real. Parrhisus, whose turn was next to show his painting, instead of showing it, said to Zeuxis that he has to pull the curtain which hid it so that he could see it. Zeuxis, putting his hand forward and trying to pull the curtain, realized that it was not real, and said to his rival: "You have won, as I have tricked just the birds, but you have tricked me, a painter".

In this story from the ancient Greek tradition we see an example of how the nature of perception can be faulty. Rene Descartes, in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, shows the uncertainty of our perception by comparing our reality to dreams, and remarking on their likeness: dreaming we are not aware of the distinction between reality itself and the one that is currently conjured in our minds.

By comparing vice and virtue to "sounds, colours, heat and cold...", David Hume has associated the problems of ethics to the problems of perception. In this essay, by analyzing Hume's thought and its consequences, I will embark on, firstly, questioning the nature of the principles of vice and virtue, secondly, questioning the very idea ethics and its relation to perception, and thirdly, on questioning the proposition of an objective moral theory and our acting in the world.

I. Are vice and virtue objective concepts?

"When you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it..."

By asking the question of the existence of objective vice and objective virtue, we are asking a question that finds its answer in the empirical. The notion that *X exists in the world* is dependent on the world itself. Rather than answering the question from the empirical standpoint, I will answer it through the analytical, by asking whether the very ideas of objective vice and objective virtue are contradictory by nature.

The concepts of ethics and the rules of moral theories are, as Hume puts it, in the form of "ought to do" and "ought not do" – they rest on the principles that some actions are valid, while others are not. Vice and virtue are closely tied with real-world actions. The notion "Vice is X, virtue is Y", necessitates the existence of X and Y.



As the concepts of vice and virtue are dependent on *a posteriori*, they cannot be objective. They are, rather, interpretations of phenomena, according to the *constitution of our nature*, they originate after the fact that something has happened.

If we, on the other hand, ask the question not whether vice and virtue are objective, but whether they exist independently of the human civilization, whether they are a given of the world, we also conclude that this is false. Morality rests on interpretation. No phenomenon, as Spinoza states, has a quality of good or evil, these concepts are non-existent in the empirical. Morality occurs only when the subject interprets it. Without interpretation and rational analyzing, it could never be said for any phenomenon “P is X”, rather, only one statement would be true: “P is”.

II. The relations of ethics and perception

“Vice and virtues, therefore, may be compared to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which according to modern philosophy, are not qualities of objects, but perceptions in the mind”

By delving into the connection between the concepts of ethics and subjectivity, through the problems presented in Hume’s thought, it is important to analyze the following questions:

1. Is perception fully comparable to morality?
2. What does the existence of morality depend on?

Is perception fully comparable to morality?

As we have seen shown in the opening example, our sensory apparatus is susceptible to illusions – our perception can misrepresent objects in reality. By taking into account Hume’s remark that ethical can be compared to the perceptive, we come to the question: are there moral illusions? If morality is related to a *moral sense*, is its faultiness possible?

In order to answer this question, I will introduce John Locke’s concepts of *simple* and *complex ideas* in light of the following example:

A child curiously puts his hand too close to the fire. Feeling that it is too hot and that his hand is hurting, he takes it back. A few months pass and, he, again, sees the fire, but, this time, remembering what has previously happened, he acts with care and does not get too close.

The first feeling of pain, which initiates the child taking his hand back, is a simple idea, while the later connection between the fire, the hotness and the pain is a complex idea, merging more simple ideas together. In light of this, the distinction between morality and perception becomes clearer. Our perception is an involuntary process, being consciously or unconsciously done - the sensations which we get from perception later become interpreted, connected, reasoned about to conclusion. By seeing someone fighting in front me, I am just seeing it, while, by saying that such an act is not morally righteous, I am making a claim, based on perception and on my logical reasoning, past experience or moral education.

This is why there are no moral illusions – the illusions of perception are momentary and involuntary, we are not consciously choosing to partake in them and we realize them only by stepping out of the illusion. Zeuxis believed that the painted curtain was a real curtain, until realizing that it is painted. If Zeuxis had, on the other hand, made a claim about the moral righteousness of such an act from his rival, he could never “step out of the illusion”, as morality is not objective, but based on interpretation. Furthermore, if someone was to dispute his



judgment, he would do so on the basis of Zeuxis's reasoning or moral education, and it could not be said, if Zeuxis was proved fallacious in his reasoning, that it was an illusion, but, rather, that he was fallacious or logically inconsistent.

While there are no moral illusions, the following question can still be asked – is morality, itself, an illusion?

What does the existence of morality depend on?

Before delving deeper into the problem of *the illusion of morality*, it is important to summarize what was previously concluded. In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, from his work *On the Genealogy of Morals*: “There are no moral phenomena, only interpretations of moral phenomena”. Through our perception we gather information about the world, through the mind we interpret it. As the ideas of objective vice and objective virtue are contradictory (presupposing to be true independently of the a posteriori, but depending on a posteriori), the meaning of vice and virtue is defined by the subject, through rationality, past experience and moral education.

It is important to remark that while all phenomena are subject to interpretation, not all are subject to moral interpretation. We can find ourselves saying: “Someone who steals from others is evil”, but not “The sun is evil for not shining bright enough”. In the second sentence, in order to give such a moral interpretation, we must give human qualities to the concept of the sun. Why?

The sun bears no moral responsibility – it is a mechanism of nature, acting according to its rules. Moral interpretation doesn't depend solely, as Hume states, on the constitution of our nature, but, also, on the constitution of the nature of the one who acts. By morally interpreting human actions, we presuppose the existence of free will.

As Immanuel Kant states in his *The Critique of Pure Mind*, the existence of free will is neither provable or unprovable, together with the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. These concepts and their existence in the world is dependent on the *noumenal*, that which transcends our experience. The human mind cannot provide a complete and final answer to this problem, rather, it can give two equally strong arguments for both sides.

I am faced with a choice – by providing arguments either for or against the notion of the existence of free will, I would arrive at different conclusions. I would, also, suppose that a definite argument can be given. By saying that an answer cannot be given and that it goes beyond the limits of my mind, I accept both possibilities. The world can be both deterministic or non-deterministic, the choice to continue the essay in this manner could have been made willingly, or it was predetermined. The thought which you, the reader, are having while reading this, could have been thought willingly, or it was predetermined. Even if we, by feeling, rebel against any of those two notions, it must be accepted that the full answer cannot be given. By striving for a specific answer, we are striving for finding a property of the objective world, while we, as rational beings, always interpret it and see it as *phenomenal*, rather than *noumenal*.

Is morality, then, an illusion? As previously stated, an illusion rests on the idea of stepping out of it. We presuppose the existence of free will in our moral interpretations and in the idea of morality itself, but, in order for it to be an illusion, we would have to conclude that the world is deterministic, and that we are false in our presupposition. As this cannot be done, we cannot say that morality as an illusion. On the other hand, we can neither state the opposite, that free will is existent.



Morality, then, is a *possible* illusion, and we may never know, due to the limits of our mind and understanding, whether it is, or is not.

III. Can there be an objective moral theory? How should we act?

Having in mind everything previously stated, it can be concluded that the idea of an objective moral theory could not be argued on through morality, as the very existence of morality can neither be confirmed, nor denied. On the other hand, the idea of morality rests on free-willing beings, and, as such, an idea of an objective moral theory could not exist, as it is presupposing to be independent of the a posteriori, but is dependent on the existence of free-willing beings. Every moral theory is the interpretation of phenomena by free-willing beings, and, as such, there can never exist an objective one, rather, it can at most be inter-subjective, shared amongst all who think free-willingly. Even then, this inter-subjective moral theory rests on the notion that the world is not deterministic, which cannot be proven.

How should we act, then? If morality itself is questionable, what can be said of our acts in the world? Should we build our moral theories and strive for moral righteousness, knowing that such a thing as morality may be non-existent? In Kant's *On the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he proposes a solution to this problem by remarking that even though we cannot confirm the existence of free will, we act as if free will exists, and, as such, we should build moral theories on it.

This problem can also be approached through the form of the Pascal's bet:

1. If the world is deterministic we bear no responsibility no matter how we act, due to the fact that the reality is predetermined.
2. If the world is non-deterministic we bear responsibility no matter how we act, but, in the case of acting as if it was deterministic, we bear responsibility for our actions, even if we do not act as such.

It can be concluded that acting as if free will exists is the best possibility – in the first case we bear no responsibility, and in the second case we bear it, but are aware of it and strive for moral righteousness, we reflect on our actions and question them.

On the other hand, if we act as if reality is deterministic, we bear responsibility for our actions, but we do not act to the fullest, and we do not act for the ideal of moral righteousness. We are possibly doing harm to ourselves and others. The one who acts deterministically can be compared to the *aesthetical human* in Kierkegaard's *Either-Or*, acting according to his desires and outside the bounds of morality and rationality, because, if we were to act by our rationality, we would already presuppose our free will, through presupposing that one action is better than the other, and, thus, that morality exists.

Just as Heidegger has said that man is the shepherd of Being, we can conclude that an individual who acts according to free will is the shepherd of morality. Without morality, there is no idea of virtue, without free will, there is no morality. By acting according to free will, we not only accept the responsibility for our actions, but, also, we are one of those who put morality into existence.