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ESSAY

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

David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature.

1 Introduction

“Just because it makes sense, doesn’t mean it’s right” is what I think G.E. Moore thought as he wrote down the Moorean shift as a response to Descartes’ skepticism. While modus ponens logically made sense, that didn’t mean it was necessarily right. In this essay, I aim to support this idea that reason is not the dealbreaker nor the central figure of the study of ethics. Rather, it is grounded in the tension between the normative nature of one’s intuition, and the impossibility of resolving deep ethical disagreements on a societal level. Through the examination of the resolution to this problem, I will conclude that the only tenable stance to take is that of Error Theory.

2 Hume’s Claims

Before that, let us examine Hume’s claims. He puts forward two claims. First, Hume makes the argument that moral statements are “a feeling or sentiment of blame” and a “perception of the mind” – in other words, they are statements about oneself that are indisputable: subjective sensations and sentiment that are exclusive to the individual. Second, Hume makes the argument that “you mean nothing” when you make a moral judgement. This means moral statements or judgements are not propositional statements that make claims about objective reality. This presents a strong moral relativist position that highlights that moral statements are simply descriptive of your intuition and feelings and do not track an objective set of moral facts.

3 The First Claim



I concur with Hume and other moral relativists who claim that moral statements are an expression of “a feeling or sentiment of blame” or a “perception of the mind”. This arises from the observation that all philosophical papers, from Aristotelean Ethics to Kant’s deontology, are premised on an appeal to one’s intuition about what is right or wrong. Even Kant’s seemingly absolutely logical formulation of the Categorical Imperative rests on the intuition that the Golden Principle – that we should treat others the same as we desire others to treat us – is correct. In other words, the level of persuasion of any ethical theory arises from the level to which it appeals to the individual’s intuition and perception of what is right and wrong, and therefore its notoriety rises with its ability to coherently and completely describe people’s intuitive beliefs. This shows the centrality of intuition in morality and how intuition is the eventual key determinant of moral judgements. This is used by the moral relativist to explain the lack of an objective set of moral facts: morality is fundamentally subjective and simply an expression of your own intuition, causing deep disagreements between people regarding moral judgements which are irresolvable. This is seen in, for example, fundamental disagreements about the moral status of abortion or animal cruelty, where even when given the same facts, two people may disagree on the action that should be taken since they are simply describing their intuition. Overall, the subjective nature of intuition seems to support moral relativism.

4 The Second Claim

However, stopping there would be to miss a fundamental distinction between other perceptions and senses that Hume raises such as “sound, colours, heat and cold” and the *moral* sentiment and perception. The distinction is in what this perception *consists* of. The visual or olfactory perception consists only of a descriptive component, just as the moral perception consists of only a description of one’s moral intuition. The difference is that the moral intuition itself consists of a normative component that believes it to be the absolute truth and the “right right”. So built into one’s moral sentiment is the inkling that “this should be commonly accepted as the objectively right thing”. This means that it doesn’t follow from the fact that your moral claims are subjective *expressions of sentiment* to the conclusion that “*you mean nothing*”, since your sentiment includes a propositional claim that this should be objectively correct! This means that, paradoxically, the moral claim is descriptively only about one’s intuition, and yet the normative nature of one’s intuition leads to the moral claim becoming a statement of a morally existing truth rather than merely a statement of self-expression. It is difficult for Hume to dispute this since it would mean reducing every person’s moral claim to simply “I believe this is right for me and me only as a mere description of my past nature and current contemplation which has no bearing on you”. For issues such as the claim that killing a child for fun is wrong, this seems an impossible claim.

5 The Problem

Hence, we have arrived at a position where the moral intuitions of people are the foundation of any ethical theory. When examining humanity as a whole, deep disagreement supports the fact that these perceptions and intuitions do not seem to be tracking an objectively existing set of moral facts and hence are completely subjective facts expressing one’s own opinion. Conversely, when examining humans as individuals, the intuition seems to be that one is still trying to track an objective truth. How do we square these two facts?

6 The Solutions



There are three possible solutions to this tension. We will examine and evaluate their feasibility before coming to a conclusion.

6.1 Egoism

Firstly, egoism – not in the sense of egoism about virtue, but in the sense of privileging one's own opinion as the right way and discrediting all others. This means accepting that one's own intuition is the right one and ignoring the intuition of others as simply misguided and weird. This would be analogous to sitting in front of a computer doing the International Philosophy Olympiad Essay Competition, while your friend tells you that that is not true and you are in a swimming pool doing the breaststroke. In such a scenario, one dismisses the friend as misguided and weird. In the same way, if someone has a moral disagreement with you, treat them as simply weird and misguided. The appeal of this egoism comes from the epistemic privilege that one gives to self-knowledge given its immediacy and irrefutability. In this case, epistemic privilege is given to one's own moral intuition.

The problem is that this position seems to sidestep rather than resolve the issue at hand. The egoist seems to avert the crisis by claiming ignorance to the possibility of others being more correct than him, attaining a level of epistemic arrogance impossible for any reasonable philosopher to hold. As a result, this position is untenable.

6.2 Reasoning

Alternatively, one can adopt reasoning as a tool to resolve moral disagreements. After all, it seems that intuitions and perceptions can change over time. A devout atheist might turn from a moral anarchist to a staunch believer in divine command, or a utilitarian may be convinced through Kantian ethics to deontology. Hence, reasoning can resolve the first problem of deep disagreement set out in the second paragraph.

While this is the dominant theoretical stance of many philosophers today, I hold that this position seems reasonable but is an idealistic and unachievable goal. After all, if the hope of this position is that over time, more complete and nuanced ethical theories will emerge that no one can rationally doubt, aligning all subjective moral intuitions to the true set of moral facts and thereby, after millennia of debate, bringing a close to ethics as a field, then it seems impossible. This is simply because deep disagreements are oftentimes irresolvable. It is hard to defend the position that all deep disagreements are resolvable through logic and persuasion. For example, for all the merit of Kant's deontology, few are willing to accept the argument that you should tell the truth to a murderer and sacrifice the life of your friend to be morally consistent. Alternatively, if the point of this use of reasoning is simply to express one's moral system and make a complete, coherent picture of what one thinks is right and good, then surely it does not resolve the tension between universal disagreement and the normativity of personal intuition. It merely expresses more completely one's own personal intuition.

6.3 Error Theory

This leads me to the most acceptable stance, error theory. This is the ethical stance that while ethical statements are propositional, they are all wrong. It accepts the notion that the person's intuition tries to track an objective truth, but argues that such a truth is impossible and hence that statement is simply false. I will support Error Theory through the Argument from Wishful Thinking. It goes as follows:



Premise 1: There is deep disagreement, i.e. fundamental differences between people's notions of what is a right and wrong action even when presented with the same facts

Premise 2: This can be explained through differential access, wherein there is an ontological world of moral facts but different people have different access to this world, leading to different moral stances or judgements.

Premise 3: This can also be explained through wishful thinking, where one simply believes that this is the case without adequate reasoning.

Premise 4: Differential access is impossible since there is no reasonable explanation for differential access.

Premise 5: There is no other way to explain deep disagreement than these two options.

Conclusion: Therefore, moral judgements are just wishful thinking.

There are two ways to object to this.

The first is to dispute premise 1 by stating that there are commonalities between all moral positions that humans take. This shows that since humans in seemingly disparate situations and cultural contexts can concur about the nature of morality, this intuition is specifically a "sixth sense" about an objective ontological world that humans have access to – similar to how since humans across the world can agree about colour, we take it as an objective sense rather than mere preference.

The second is to dispute premise 4 by showing that even though there are deep disagreements, these arise from differential access to the world of moral facts rather than from each individual simply referring to their own intuition of what is right and wrong. For example, factors ranging from one's rational capacity to life experiences causes one to focus more on certain ethical issues than others and hence respond differently when asked the same question. For example, a worker in a chicken meat factory may empathise more with veganism as compared to other people without experience in the field. This shows there is a reasonable explanation for differential access.

The first objection can be taken to be *prima facie* untrue since any two people likely differ on many ethical controversies even when presented with the same facts.

The problem with the second objection is that it does not show that one person has more or less access to the objective set of moral facts. It simply provides a reason for why there is disagreement rather than why this disagreement is a result of differential access, and it seems that there is no potential answer for why specifically, any one faculty, from memories to reason,



grants one better access to morality. The attribution of this faculty to explain differential access seems simply arbitrary.

As a result, it seems reasonable to accept that moral statements are fundamentally grounded in intuition and perceptions, and yet these perceptions do not seem to be tracking an ontologically existing world of moral facts. The objective component of one's intuition exists, but is a failure since while it tries to track the true moral facts, there is no objective set of moral facts – leading to disagreements between people as to what is right and wrong. In this way, we have accounted for both the individual intuition and societal disagreement through Error Theory.

7 Conclusion

What have we discussed in this essay? We have set up the problem by agreeing with Hume's claim that moral judgements are statements about one's own intuition and perception. However, we disputed the fact that this means that moral statements are merely about one's subjective preference since one's own intuition includes a component of objectivity wherein it tries to track the true set of moral claims. However, this objective set of true moral claims seems impossible on a societal level due to deep disagreement. Three solutions have been proposed to resolve this tension. Either to accept only one's own intuition as the normatively right intuition, to use reason to convince others and hence resolve deep disagreement, or to adopt Error Theory which acknowledges the desire to track objectivity but shows it is an ultimate failure. Error Theory was eventually adopted since it was best able to account for both deep disagreements and the intuitive desire for one's moral claims to be objective.