Early Modern Moral Philosophy

Lecture 4:
Sentimentalism
The plan for today...

1. What is sentimentalism?

2. Shaftesbury

3. Hutcheson and the secondary quality analogy

4. The costs and benefits of sentimentalism
§1. What is sentimentalism?
Cognitivism About Morality

The mental state expressed by a statement such as ‘killing is wrong’ is a belief/has truth conditions...

Non-Cognitivism About Morality

The mental state expressed by a statement such as ‘killing is wrong’ is not a belief/lacks truth conditions...
Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality

*Moral facts* (at least partly) consist in facts about our emotions...

E.g. The fact that torturing puppies is morally wrong (at least partly) consists in the fact that...

...we have a strong aversion towards torturing puppies...
Evidential Sentimentalism About Morality

Our evidence for our moral beliefs (at least partly) consists in facts about our emotions.

E.g. Our evidence that torturing puppies is morally wrong (at least partly) consists in the fact that...

...we have a strong aversion towards torturing puppies...
Epistemic Sentimentalism About Morality

*Moral knowledge* is dependent upon our emotions...

...either because the *moral facts* (at least partly) consist in facts about our emotions...

...or because our *evidence* for our *moral beliefs* (at least partly) consists in facts about our emotions...
§2. Shaftesbury
‘...not only the outward beings which offer themselves to the sense, are the objects of the affection...

...but the very... affections of pity, kindness, gratitude, and their contraries...

...being brought into the mind by reflection, become objects [of affection]...’ (Shaftesbury, *Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit*, R200)
‘...So that, by means of this reflected sense, there arises another kind of affection towards those very affections themselves...

...which are now become the subject of a new liking or disliking.’

(Shaftesbury, Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit, R200)
Stage 1  
I perceive somebody torturing a puppy by means of my senses....

Stage 2  
This perception causes me to have positive emotions towards the puppy and negative emotions
**Stage 3**

I perceive these emotions by means of reflection...

**Stage 4**

This perception causes me to have positive emotions towards both my positive emotions towards the puppy and my negative emotions...
‘Let us suppose a creature, who... being unable to reflect, has, notwithstanding, ...courage, gratitude, or pity....

...It is certain that if you give to this creature a reflecting faculty, it will at the same time approve of gratitude, kindness and pity...

...And this is to be capable of VIRTUE, and to have a sense of RIGHT and WRONG.’

(Shaftesbury, *Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit*, R205)
Is Shaftesbury a *Metaphysical Sentimentalist About Morality*...?

Does he think that the fact that torturing puppies is morally wrong (at least partly) consists in the fact that...

...we have a *positive* emotional response towards a *negative* emotional response towards torturing puppies...

...and a *negative* emotional response towards a *positive* emotional response towards torturing puppies...?
Shaftesbury claims to be a *Realist About Morality*...

‘...in respect of virtue... it is really something in itself, and in the nature of things...

...not arbitrary or factitious... not constituted from without, or dependent on custom, fancy, or will...

...not even on the supreme will itself, which can no way govern it; but being necessarily good, is governed by it and ever uniform with it.’

*(Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times)*
Interpretation 1...

‘...in respect of virtue... it is... not arbitrary or factitious... not constituted from without, or dependent on custom, fancy, or will...’

Shaftesbury is simply rejecting Voluntarism About Morality...

...and rejecting Voluntarism about Morality is perfectly consistent with accepting Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality...
Interpretation 2...

‘...in respect of virtue... it is... really something in itself, and in the nature of things...’

Shaftesbury is rejecting both Voluntarism About Morality and Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality...
The fact that God wishes us not to torture puppies is explained by the fact that it is morally wrong to torture puppies.

‘...the supreme will itself... can no way govern [virtue]; but being necessarily good, is governed by it and ever uniform with it.’

But the conjunction of this and *Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality* has a peculiar consequence.
P2 If *Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality* is true then the fact that it is morally wrong to torture puppies is explained by facts about our emotions...

...e.g. the fact that we have a *positive* emotion towards a *negative* emotion towards torturing puppies.

C If *Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality* is true then the fact that God wishes us not to torture puppies is explained by facts about our emotions.
So Shaftesbury isn’t a *Metaphysical Sentimentalist About Morality*... 

...but rather an *Evidential Sentimentalist About Morality*... 

He thinks our second-order emotional responses constitute a *moral sense*... 

...which allows us to *detect* the mind-independent moral properties of actions/people/states of affairs.
A challenge for this view...

What explains the fact that our second-order emotional responses are a good guide to the mind-independent moral properties of actions/people/states of affairs...?

Is it pre-established harmony...?

Is it natural selection...?
§3. Hutcheson and the secondary quality analogy
‘...by absolute and original beauty, is not understood any quality supposed to be in the object, that should of itself be beautiful, without relation to any mind which perceives it...

...For beauty, like other names of sensible ideas, properly denote the perception of some mind...

...so cold, heat, sweet, bitter, denote the sensations in our minds, to which perhaps there is no resemblance in the object just like our perception.’

(Frances Hutcheson, *Inquiry Concerning the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*)
'The word MORAL GOODNESS... denotes our idea of some quality apprehended in actions, which procures approbation, attended with desire of the agent’s happiness...

...MORAL EVIL denotes our idea of a contrary quality, which excites condemnation or dislike.’

(Frances Hutcheson, *Inquiry Concerning the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, R303)
Hutcheson is a *Metaphysical Sentimentalist About Morality*...

Moral facts wholly consist in facts about our emotions and desires...

E.g. the fact that torturing puppies is morally wrong consists in the fact that...

...we have a negative emotion towards torturing puppies...

...and we don’t wish puppy-torturers to happy.
Hutcheson tells us that moral facts are analogous to facts about *secondary qualities*...

‘...cold, heat, sweet, bitter...’

This is a common claim by early modern sentimentalists...

But we need to remember that there is more than one way to think about the metaphysics of secondary qualities...
‘...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, Treatise of Human Nature, p.503)
What are secondary qualities...?

‘Such qualities, which are in truth nothing in the objects themselves, but powers to produce various sensations in us...’

(John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p.135)

According to Berkeley, secondary qualities aren’t properties of the objects at all...
To be *red* is to be disposed to cause in us a particular sensation/type of experience...

To be *morally good* is to be disposed to cause in us a positive emotion/a desire for the agent’s happiness...

To be *red* is to cause in us a particular sensation/type of experience...

To be *morally good* is to cause in us a positive emotion/a desire for the agent’s happiness...
§4. The costs and benefits of sentimentalism
Some versions of *Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality* score highly in terms of *metaphysical/epistemological parsimony*...

If *moral facts* wholly consist in facts about our emotions and desires then they are reducible to *natural facts*...

We can know them in the same way we know other facts about our emotions and desires...
Evidential Sentimentalism About Morality is compatible both with the view that moral facts are reducible to natural facts...

...and with the view that moral facts are irreducibly non-natural facts...

But it entails that we can know moral facts in the same way we know other facts about our emotions and desires...
Sentimentalism About Morality also provides us with a nice explanation of moral motivation...

If I know that torturing puppies is morally wrong...

...then I must have a negative emotion towards torturing puppies/a desire that puppy-torturers are unhappy...

And, on one view, emotions and desires are what motivate us...
P1 Knowing that torturing puppies is morally wrong is intrinsically motivating. 

(It’s not just motivating in conjunction with some additional emotion or desire...) 

P2 A mental state is intrinsically motivating only if it is at least partly a matter of having particular emotions or desires.
Knowing that torturing puppies is morally wrong is at least partly a matter of having particular emotions or desires...

If *Sentimentalism About Morality* is true then knowing that torturing puppies is morally wrong is at least partly a matter of having particular emotions or desires...

Moral rationalists could resist this argument by rejecting either P1 or P2.
But then again there is a concern about objectivity...

P1  There is a possible world at which we have positive emotions towards torturing puppies.

P2  If Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality is true, any possible world at which we have positive emotions towards torturing puppies is a world at which we have a moral obligation to torture puppies.
C1 If *Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality* is true, there is a possible world at which we have a moral obligation to torture puppies.

P3 There is no possible world at which we have a moral obligation to torture puppies.

C2 *Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality* is false.
‘...whether, like all sound judgement of truth and falsehood, they [i.e. morals] should be the same to every rational intelligent being...

...or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species.’

(David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, R562)
Perhaps a *Metaphysical Sentimentalist About Morality* could resist P1...

...on the grounds that we could not fail to be human beings...

...and human beings could not fail to have negative emotions towards torturing puppies...

A possible world in which we had positive emotions towards torturing puppies would be a world in which we lacked the ‘particular fabric and constitution of the human species...
If moral knowledge is like mathematical knowledge, how come there is persistent, pervasive disagreement about moral facts...

...but no persistent, pervasive disagreement about mathematical facts?
If moral knowledge is like aesthetic knowledge, it is not surprising that there is persistent, pervasive disagreement about moral facts...

...since there is also persistent, pervasive disagreement about aesthetic facts...
‘...as... two very different colours, by diluting each other very slowly and gradually, may from the highest intenseness in either extreme, terminate in the midst insensibly...

...and so run one into the other, that it shall not be possible even for a skilful eye to determine exactly where the one ends, and the other begins...

...yet the colours may really differ as much as can be, not in degree only but entirely in kind...’

(Samuel Clarke, *Discourse of Natural Religion*, R229)
‘...so, though it may perhaps be very difficult in some nice and perplexed cases... to define exactly the bounds of right and wrong, just and unjust...

...yet right and wrong are nevertheless in themselves totally and essentially different; even altogether as much, as white and black, light and darkness.’

(Samuel Clarke, *Discourse of Natural Religion*, R229)
Next week

Hume