Early Modern
Moral Philosophy

Lecture 2: Rationalism

§1. Recap: Voluntarism

§2. Rationalism and Sentimentalism

T1 ‘There has been a controversy started of late... concerning the general foundation of Morals; whether they be derived from Reason, or from Sentiment; whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense…’

(David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p.562)

T2 ‘The moral rationalists... held that morality originated in reason alone. The moral sentimentalists... held that morality originated at least partly in sentiment.’

(Michael B Gill, 'Moral Rationalism vs. Moral Sentimentalism', p.16)

Cognitivism About Morality

Moral judgments are beliefs (cognitive mental states).

Non-Cognitivism About Morality

Moral judgments are emotions or desires (or other non-cognitive mental states).

Is the modern debate between Cognitivists and Non-Cognitivists About Morality the same as the early modern debate between Rationalists and Sentimentalists About Morality?

Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality

Moral facts are (at least partly) facts about our emotions and desires.

Justificatory Sentimentalism About Morality

Moral beliefs are justified (at least partly) by facts about our emotions and desires.
Epistemological Sentimentalism About Morality

Moral knowledge is dependent upon facts about our emotions and desires.

Epistemological Rationalism About Morality

Moral knowledge is independent of facts about our emotions and desires.

§3. Varieties of Rationalism

T3 ‘…from the different relations of different persons one to another, there necessarily arises a fitness or unfitness of certain manners of behavior of some persons towards others... For instance: that God is infinitely superior to men; is as clear, as that infinity is larger than a point... And it is as certainly fit that men should honour and worship, obey and imitate God…’

(Samuel Clarke, Discourse of Natural Religion, p.226)

T4 ‘We find… that some actions are agreeable, others disagreeable, to the nature and circumstances of the agent and the object, and the relations interceding between them. Thus… we find an agreement between the gratitude of A and the kindness of B; and a disagreement between the ingratitude of C and the bounty of D. The question then is, whether we perceive them by our understanding… And might it as well be asked, how it is that we perceive the agreement between the three angles of a triangle, and two right ones? …If the agreement or disagreement of one sort of ideas be proper objects of our understandings, why not those of another? Especially since, in many cases, they are perceived with equal clearness and evidence. Let therefore our intelligent faculty either be pronounced insufficient in both cases, or in neither.’

(John Balguy, Foundation of Moral Goodness, p.451)

All there is to the fact that φ-ing is morally wrong in a given situation is the fact that there is a relation of unfitness or disagreement between φ-ing and this situation.

T5 ‘A true proposition may be denied, or things may be denied to be what they are, by deeds, as well as by express words or another proposition… If a body of soldiers, seeing another body approach, should fire upon them, would not this action declare that they were enemies; and if they were not enemies, would not this military language declare what was false?’

(William Wollaston, Religion of Nature Delineated, p.275-276)

T6 ‘…If A should enter into a compact with B, by which he promises and engages never to do some certain thing, and after this he does that thing… his act… must… interfere with the truth of that proposition, which says there was such a promise made… No act (whether word or deed) of any being, to whom moral
good and evil are imputable, that interferes with any true proposition, or denies any thing to be as it is, can be right.’

(William Wollaston, Religion of Nature Delineated, p.277-280)

All there is to the fact that φ-ing is morally wrong is the fact that, in φ-ing, we make a false statement.

T7 ‘Some actions are of such a nature that their maxim cannot even be thought as a universal law of nature without contradiction, far from it being possible that one could will that it should be such. In others this internal impossibility is not found, though it is still impossible to will that their maxim should be raised to the universality of a law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself.’

(Immanuel Kant, Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals)

§4. Arguments for rationalism

T8 ‘…it seems an insuperable difficulty in [Hutcheson’s] scheme, that virtue appears in it to be of an arbitrary and positive nature, as entirely depending upon instincts, that might originally have been otherwise, or even contrary to what they now are, and may at any time be altered or inverted, if the Creator pleases.’

(John Balguy, Foundation of Moral Goodness, p.438)

P1 There is a possible world at which we have an aversion to kindness and generosity.

P2 If Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality is true, then any possible world at which we have an aversion to kindness and generosity is a world at which kindness and generosity are morally wrong.

P3 There is no possible world at which kindness and generosity are morally wrong.

C Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality is false.

T9 ‘…let any one compare the ideas arising from our powers of sensation, with those arising from out intuition of the natures of things, and inquire which of them his ideas of right and wrong most resemble… It is scarcely conceivable that any one can impartially attend to the nature of his own perceptions, and determine that, when he thinks gratitude or beneficence to be right, he perceives nothing true of them, and understands nothing, but only receives an impression from a sense.’

(Richard Price, Review of the Principal Questions in Morals, p.678)

P1 The moral facts do not appear to be (even partly) facts about our emotions or desires.
Either the moral facts are not what they appear to be or they are not (even partly) facts about our emotions or desires.

The moral facts are what they appear to be.

The moral facts are not (even partly) facts about our emotions or desires.

§5. Problems for rationalism

There is deep and pervasive disagreement about moral facts. This deep and pervasive disagreement is easy to explain if Sentimentalism About Morality is true, because there are deep and pervasive differences in our emotions and desires. But it is difficult to explain if Rationalism About Morality is true.

‘The principal thing that can, with any colour of reason, seem to countenance the opinion of those who deny the natural and eternal difference of good and evil… is the difficulty there may sometimes be, to define exactly the bounds of right and wrong: the variety of opinions, that have obtained even among understanding and learned men concerning certain questions of just and unjust… and the many contrary laws that have been made in divers ages and in different countries, concerning these matters.’

(Samuel Clarke, Discourse of Natural Religion, p.229)

‘But as, in painting, 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… 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, p.229)

There is a tight connection between moral knowledge and moral motivation. This connection is easy to explain if Sentimentalism About Morality is true, because it is clear that our emotions and desires motivate us to action. But it is not so easy to explain if Rationalism About Morality is true.

Bibliography