

Early Modern Moral Philosophy

Lecture 3: Sentimentalism

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Introduction

Section 1	Recap: what is sentimentalism?
Section 2	Shaftesbury
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Section 5	Costs and benefits of sentimentalism

Recap: what is sentimentalism?

So what do we mean by sentimentalism...?

‘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)

Recap: what is sentimentalism?

Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality

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

The fact that torture is morally wrong is (at least partly) the fact that we have an aversion to torture.

Justificatory Sentimentalism About Morality

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

My belief that torture is morally wrong is justified (at least partly) by the fact that I have an aversion to torture.

Recap: what is sentimentalism?

Epistemological Sentimentalism About Morality

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

If we had no emotions or desires then we would have no moral knowledge.

Epistemological Rationalism About Morality

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

We could still have moral knowledge even if we had no emotions or desires.

Recap: what is sentimentalism

So which philosophers are we talking about...?

Anthony Ashley-
Cooper (aka
Shaftesbury) 1671-
1713

Frances
Hutcheson 1694-
1796

David Hume
1711-1776

Adam Smith
1723-1790

Shaftesbury

‘...not only the outward beings which offer themselves to the sense, are the objects of the affection; but the very actions themselves and the affections of pity, kindness, gratitude, and their contraries, being brought into the mind by reflection, become objects....

...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*, p.200)

Shaftesbury

- Step 1 I perceive someone torturing a baby for fun, by means of my external senses.
- Step 2 This perception produces emotions in me...
 ...pity for the baby, resentment towards the torturer...
- Step 3 I perceive these emotions of anger and pity, by means of my reflection, or internal sense.
- Step 4 This perception produces second-order emotions in me...
 ...a 'liking' for my first-order emotions.

These second-order emotions constitute my 'sense of right and wrong'.

Shaftesbury

Is Shaftesbury a *Metaphysical Sentimentalist About Morality*?

Consider gratitude (or grateful action) towards a benefactor.

Does he take the fact that gratitude (or grateful action) towards a benefactor is virtuous to be (at least partly) the fact that gratitude (or grateful action) towards a benefactor produces in us a particular second-order emotion – a ‘liking’?

Shaftesbury

Shaftesbury describes himself as a *Realist About Morality*. He explains this as follows:

‘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*)

Shaftesbury

The *Metaphysical Sentimentalist* interpretation...

‘in respect of virtue... it is... not arbitrary or factitious... not... dependent on custom, fancy, or will; not even on the supreme will itself...’

Here it looks as if *Realism* is just *Anti-Voluntarism*.

And *Anti-Voluntarism* is perfectly consistent with *Metaphysical Sentimentalism*.

Shaftesbury

The *Non-Metaphysical Sentimentalist* interpretation...

‘in respect of virtue... it is really something in itself, and in the nature of things... not constituted from without...

...even... the supreme will... being necessarily good, is governed by it and ever uniform with it.’

In conjunction with *Metaphysical Sentimentalism*, this has peculiar consequences...

Shaftesbury

- P1 The fact that God wants (or commands us) not to torture babies for fun is dependent upon the fact that torturing babies is morally wrong.
- P2 The fact that torturing babies is morally wrong is dependent upon the fact that torturing babies produces a particular negative emotion in us.
- C The fact that God wants (or commands us) not to torture babies for fun is dependent upon the fact that torturing babies produces a particular negative emotion in us.

So God's will is governed by our emotions!?!?

Shaftesbury

So it appears that Shaftesbury is not a *Metaphysical Sentimentalist About Morality*.

Perhaps he is instead a *Justificatory Sentimentalist About Morality*.

He thinks that the fact that we have a positive emotion towards ϕ -ing (at least partly) constitutes our evidence or justification for believing that ϕ -ing is virtuous.

This implies that, for Shaftesbury, our negative/positive (second-order) emotions are reliable indicators of virtue and vice.

Shaftesbury

A problem for this view...

How are we to explain the fact that our negative/positive (second-order) emotions are reliable indicators of virtue and vice?

Pre-established harmony?

Natural selection/adaptation?

Hutcheson

‘...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.’

(Inquiry Concerning the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue)

Hutcheson

If Hutcheson takes the same view about virtue that he takes about beauty, then, unlike Shaftesbury, he is a *Metaphysical Sentimentalist About Morality*.

He takes the fact that gratitude (or grateful action) towards a benefactor is virtuous to be (at least partly) the fact that gratitude (or grateful action) towards a benefactor produces in us a particular sensation.

Hutcheson

	Shaftesbury	Hutcheson
Moral facts are independent of facts about what God (or the Queen) wishes or commands.	✓	✓
Moral knowledge is dependent upon facts about our emotions.	✓	✓
Moral facts are independent of facts about our emotions.	✓	✗
Moral knowledge is not dependent upon facts about the causal tendencies of actions.	✓	✓
Moral actions cause happiness; immoral actions the reverse.	✓	✓

Hutcheson

Hutcheson claims that moral facts are analogous to facts about secondary qualities (e.g. cold, heat, sweet, bitter).

This is a claim that is often made by sentimentalists. But we need to treat it with care.

There is more than one way to understand the metaphysics of secondary qualities.

So there is more than one way to understand the secondary quality analogy for moral facts.

Hutcheson

Locke (as Berkeley understands him)

Secondary qualities are mere sensations in the mind.

Locke (as Berkeley should have understood him)

Secondary qualities are mere powers to produce sensations in the mind.

‘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*)

Hume

Hume also endorses the secondary quality analogy...

‘...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.’

(*Treatise of Human Nature*, p.503)

Hume

Here Hume subscribes to *Metaphysical Sentimentalism*.

But his view is not the same as Hutcheson's.

'...it is evident, that *reason* must enter for a considerable share in all decisions of this kind; since nothing but that faculty can instruct us in the tendency of qualities and actions, and point out their beneficial consequences to society and their *possessor*...'

(*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p.594)

Hume

‘But... reason... is not sufficient to produce any moral blame or approbation... It is requisite a *sentiment* should here display itself, in order to give a preference to the useful above the pernicious tendencies. This sentiment can be no other than a feeling for the happiness of mankind. Here, therefore, *reason* instructs us in the several tendencies of actions, and *humanity* makes a distinction in favour of those which are useful and beneficial. ’

(*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*,
p.594)

Hume

For Hume, our knowledge that gratitude (and grateful action) towards a benefactor is virtuous depends on...

...our knowledge that gratitude (and grateful action) towards a benefactor is a cause of general happiness..

...a positive emotional response towards the general happiness.

Hume

	Shaftesbury	Hutcheson	Hume
Moral facts are independent of facts about what God (or the Queen) wishes or commands.	✓	✓	✓
Moral knowledge is dependent upon facts about our emotions.	✓	✓	✓
Moral facts are independent of facts about our emotions.	✓	✗	✗
Moral knowledge is not dependent upon facts about the causal tendencies of actions.	✓	✓	✗
Moral actions cause happiness; immoral actions the reverse.	✓	✓	✓

Costs and benefits of sentimentalism

Some versions of *Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality* (e.g. those defended by Hume and Hutcheson) score highly in terms of *ontological parsimony*.

They avoid the *queerness* concerns associated with John Mackie (1977).

Moral facts are simply facts about our emotional responses.

They are discoverable in the same way as other facts about our emotional responses, whether that is by introspection, or by the observation of external behaviour.

Costs and benefits of sentimentalism

If Shaftesbury thinks that moral facts are natural facts – say, facts about which actions and emotions are in the public interest – then his position also scores highly in terms of ontologically parsimony.

However, his position is then open to the objection that a person without emotions could acquire moral knowledge simply by using their reason to calculate what is in the public interest.

Facts about our emotions are *sufficient* for the justification for our moral beliefs. But they are not *necessary*.

Costs and benefits of sentimentalism

‘The weakness of our reason, and the avocations arising from the infirmity and necessities of our nature, are so great that very few men could ever have formed those long deductions of reasons that show some actions to be in the whole advantageous to the agent, and their contraries pernicious. The Author of Nature has much better furnished us for a virtuous conduct... He has made virtue a lovely form, to excite our pursuit of it, and has given us strong affections to be the springs of each virtuous action.’

(Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue)

Costs and benefits of sentimentalism

Both varieties of *Sentimentalism About Morality* score highly in terms of explaining *moral motivation*.

Intuitively, I cannot know that torturing babies is morally wrong without being motivated not to torture babies (even if this is overridden by more powerful motivations).

Now, positive/negative emotions motivate us to action.

So if I cannot know that torturing babies is morally wrong without having a negative emotion towards torturing babies, then I cannot know that torturing babies is morally wrong without being motivated not to torture babies.

Costs and benefits of sentimentalism

There is a concern for *Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality* about the necessity of moral facts.

P1 There is a possible world at which we have completely different emotional responses.

P2 If *Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality* is true, then any possible world at which we have completely different emotional responses is a world at which the moral facts are completely different.

P3 There is no possible world at which the moral facts are completely different.

C *Metaphysical Sentimentalism About Morality* is false.

Costs and benefits of sentimentalism

A related concern for Metaphysical *Sentimentalism* has to do with the objectivity – i.e. the non-relativity – of moral facts.

‘...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.’

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

Costs and benefits of sentimentalism

Suppose there is a person who doesn't have ordinary human emotions.

Suppose this person claims that torturing babies is *not* morally wrong.

Can a *Metaphysical Sentimentalist* claim that this person is mistaken?

Should a *Metaphysical Sentimentalist* be content with claiming that if someone who *does* have ordinary human emotions claims that torturing babies is not morally wrong, then this person is mistaken?

Conclusion

Next week...

...Egoism