

Introduction to Cognitivism; Motivational Externalism; Naturalist Cognitivism

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- 1 Cognitivism, Non-cognitivism, and the Humean Argument
- 2 Externalism: Defeating the Humean Argument
- 3 The Moral Fetishism Objection to Externalism
- 4 Questions for Cognitivists
- 5 Error Theory and Fictionalism
- 6 Introducing Naturalist Realist Cognitivism (a.k.a. Naturalism)
- 7 Notes

Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism

Cognitivism:

Moral psychology

Moral semantics

Moral judgments are beliefs.

Moral sentences have descriptive meaning. They can be true or false.

Non-Cognitivism:

Moral psychology

Moral judgements are not beliefs. They are non-cognitive mental states, like desires, intentions, approval and disapproval.

Moral semantics

Moral sentences *express* the above attitudes, and do not have descriptive meaning. They cannot be true or false.

Attractions of Cognitivism

- 1 Cognitivism makes sense of the belief-like behaviour of moral judgments e.g. in moral reasoning
 - If one can create a significant well-being increase at no significant cost to oneself, one ought to do so.
 - By donating to an effective aid charity, I can create significant well-being increase at no significant cost to myself.
 - Hence I ought to donate to an effective aid charity.

Attractions of Cognitivism

- 2 Cognitivism makes sense of the descriptive form of moral claims, and of embedded contexts:

Snow is white.

It is not the case that snow is white.

It is (not) true that snow is white.

It is a fact that snow is white.

Snow is necessarily white.

Is snow white?

Lying is wrong.

It is not the case that lying is wrong.

It is (not) true that lying is wrong.

It is a fact that lying is wrong.

Lying is necessarily wrong.

Is lying wrong?

Core problem for Cognitivism: Moral Motivation

The Humean Argument for Non-cognitivism:

- Internalism'': In practically rational people, moral judgements all by themselves cause motivation.
- Humean Theory of Motivation': No belief can cause motivation all by itself.
- Hence moral judgements are not beliefs.

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Outline of Externalism

- Externalism is a possible cognitivist response to block the Non-Cognitivist argument: deny one of its premises.

Externalism

- No moral judgment causes motivation all by itself. Moral motivation always requires some additional factor, e.g. a desire to do whatever is right.

Externalism as a way out of the moral problem

Externalism and the moral problem

The following claims are consistent:

- ~~Internalism~~: ~~In practically rational people, moral judgements all by themselves cause motivation.~~
- Externalism: No moral judgment causes motivation all by itself.
- Humean Theory of Motivation': No belief can cause motivation all by itself.
- Cognitivism: Moral judgements are beliefs.

(One form of) Externalism and Moral Motivation

How externalism explains the phenomenon of moral motivation, as well as its exceptions.

- Typical reliability of moral motivation:
 - You judge that you ought to give money to charity, and are motivated to do so.
 - If you come to judge that you ought not to give money to charity, you will be motivated to not give.
- Explanation: You have a standing desire to do the right action, whatever it turns out to be.
 - Judgment that you ought to ϕ + desire to do what is right \rightarrow motivation to ϕ .
 - Judgment that you ought to not ϕ + desire to do what is right \rightarrow motivation to not ϕ .

(continued)

- Exceptions to moral motivation
 - A depressed person judges that they ought to visit their friends, but are not motivated to do so.
- Explanation: The person lacks a standing desire to do the right action, but she still holds the same moral judgment.

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The moral fetishism objection (Michael Smith)

- For externalists, the motivation to ϕ is derived from a more fundamental desire to do whatever is right.
- If you have this desire, you care about actions only in so far as they are morally right. This is being fetishistic about rightness.
- Contrast: Good people care about right actions in virtue of the natural features that make them right.
 - Examples: that an action would save someone in need of help, or would be benefit your friend, or would be a keeping of a promise.
 - The moral fetishist only cares about them insofar as they are right.

Why internalists are safe from the fetishism objection

- According to internalism, moral judgments directly cause motivation.
- Consider: A good person judges that she ought to ϕ because doing so helps someone in need.
- The person will then be motivated to do ϕ because doing so helps someone in need.

Externalist reply to the fetishism objection

- The good agent does not have a standing motivation to do whatever is right.
- Instead: He wants to (have a non-derivative motivation to perform an action just in case the action is morally right).
- It is this second-order attitude that explains the change in motivation:
 - Suppose that I have a non-derivative motivation to ϕ , and it comes to my knowledge that ϕ is not morally right.
 - I want to be a person whose non-derivative motivations track moral rightness, and I don't want to be a person who desires something that is wrong.
 - My second-order attitude will be triggered and I will try to stop being motivated to ϕ .

Example

- I want to care, non-derivatively, about my friends only if they are not deeply immoral.
 - That is, I want to care about them just because they are my friends.
 - But I do not want to have this attitude if they are deeply immoral.
- Suppose I care, non-derivatively, about John, and it comes to my knowledge that he is deeply immoral.
- Then my second-order attitude will be activated and I will try to make myself stop caring about John.

Improved externalism and the phenomenon of moral motivation

Externalism'

- No moral judgment causes motivation all by itself. Moral motivation always requires a second-order desire to (have a non-derivative motivation to perform an action just in case the action is morally right)
- Judgement that ϕ -ing is right + the second-order desire \rightarrow Non-derivative (hence non-fetishistic) motivation to ϕ .
- Judgement that ϕ -ing is wrong + the second-order desire \rightarrow Non-derivative (hence non-fetishistic) motivation to not ϕ .
- Judgment that ϕ -ing is right, but no motivation to ϕ : You lack the second-order desire, or or unable to produce the first-order non-derivative motivation.

Ruling over first-order motivations to act

- Do our second-order desires have power over our motivations?
 - Sometimes, we may be unable to bring about non-derivative motivations.
 - Can we then fall back to fetishistic standing desires to do what is right?
 - If so, then we need a more complex form of externalism.

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Questions for Cognitivists

Moral psychology

Moral semantics

Moral metaphysics

Moral epistemology

Moral judgements are beliefs.

Moral sentences have descriptive meaning, and can be true or false. Q: What kind of fact do moral sentences purport to refer to? What is the meaning of moral terms like “right”, “good”, etc.?

Do the described moral facts actually exist? If so, what kind of fact are they? What kind of property is the property (if any) referred to by “right”, “good”, etc.?

If there are moral facts, can we know about them, and if so, how?

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Error Theory

Moral psychology

Moral semantics

Moral metaphysics

Moral epistemology

Moral judgments are beliefs.

Moral sentences have descriptive meaning. They can be true or false. But they are all false.

There are no moral facts and properties.

We can not have moral knowledge or justified moral beliefs.

Error theory: The best of both worlds?

- Error theory does not have to meet the metaphysical and epistemological challenges of cognitivist realism.
- Takes with it the advantages of cognitivism:
 - Accounts for moral argument and for the *prima facie* form of moral sentences.
- Problem: Error theory is extremely revisionist in normative ethics: Implies that all positive moral beliefs are false.
- Dialectic: The attractiveness of error theory depends on the success or failure of more realist forms of cognitivism.

A small step back: Hermeneutic moral fictionalism

Moral psychology

Moral judgments are not beliefs, but evaluative attitudes.

Moral semantics

Moral sentences have descriptive meaning. They can be true or false, and strictly speaking, they are all false. **But they are not uttered in error. Speakers use these sentences fictively, and use them to express their attitudes rather than beliefs.**

Moral metaphysics

There are no moral facts and properties.

Moral epistemology

We can not have moral knowledge or justified moral beliefs.

Evaluating fictionalism

- Not as revisionist as error theory.
- Can easily explain moral motivation: via attitudes.
- Can use standard truth-value semantics and logic on moral sentences:
 - Deals with the embedding problem like cognitivists do.
 - Explains moral inferences like cognitivists do.
 - Needs to explain the irrationality of uttering inconsistent sentences in the non-cognitivist way.
- Challenge: Phenomenology of using moral language: Do we really talk fictively?
 - Fictionalism is a claim about how we actually use language, so this claim should square with how our use of language appears to us.

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Naturalist Realist Cognitivism

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Moral judgments are beliefs.

Moral sentences have descriptive meaning. They can be true or false.

There are moral facts and properties. These are natural facts.

We can have knowledge of moral facts just like we can have knowledge of natural facts.


What are “natural” facts and properties

- Properties that feature in empirical sciences: physical, chemical, biological, psychological, and social sciences.
- Natural properties have causal powers.
- Natural properties are instantiated in time and space.
- Contrast: non-natural moral properties as *sui generis*, of their own kind.

Why be a *naturalist* realist cognitivist?

Naturalism. . .

- . . . is ontologically parsimonious: we do not need any additional properties in our ontology.¹
- . . . does not posit any metaphysically strange or alien properties.
- . . . does not introduce any new epistemological problems: We know moral facts just like we know any other natural facts.

¹Ontology: a theory or account of what kinds of things there are. 

Specifying Naturalism

- 1 What natural property of actions is rightness?
 - candidates: to be desired by the agent, to be desired by an ideal well-informed agent, to maximize goodness
 - also: to be approved of or commanded by God:
(supernaturalism): can be treated analogous to naturalism: Moral properties are part of some other class of descriptive properties, and share the same metaphysics and epistemology as these. They are not *sui generis*.
- 2 *Next week*: Prior question: Where does naturalism come in: metaphysics and/or semantics?

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Discussion seminar this week

Is there any plausible way for a cognitivist to be a sophisticated internalist about moral motivation?

Discussion seminar week 5

The term “naturalistic fallacy” is used both to refer to deriving an “ought” from an “is”, and to refer to identification of moral properties with natural properties. How do these two different (supposed) fallacies under the same name relate to each other (if at all)? (In other words: How does Hume’s claim that you cannot derive an “ought” from an “is” relate to Moore’s Open Question Argument?)

Contact

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