Internalism and Externalism

103 Ethics: Metaethics, Michaelmas Term 2013

Felix Pinkert, University of Oxford
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Overview of different metaethical views

Are moral judgments beliefs?
- Yes: Cognitivism
- No: Non-Cognitivism

Are there moral facts and properties?
- Yes: Moral Realism
  - What kind of properties are moral properties?
    - Natural properties: Naturalism
    - Non-natural properties: Non-Naturalism
  
- No: Moral Irrealism
  + some semantics
  = Error Theory

What natural properties are moral properties?
- Actual desires: Actual Desires Subjectivism
- Hypothetical desires: Hypothetical Desires Subjectivism
- Whatever properties play the rightness... roles: Moral Functionalism
What we did so far

- Metaphysical questions that you have to answer if you go for cognitivism:
  - Are there moral facts? We have assumed: yes.
  - What kind of facts are they?
- One answer: Naturalism: Moral facts are natural facts.
  - Further question: Which natural facts are moral facts?
- Another answer: Non-Naturalism: Moral facts are *sui generis* non-natural facts.
Moral motivation as a challenge for cognitivists

- Topic today: Cognitivism in general.
- We shall see that moral motivation is a challenge to cognitivists.
  - Either turn the challenge into an objection and argument for non-cognitivism.
  - Or find a way to answer the challenge.
The Moral Problem

The following three independently plausible claims apparently cannot be jointly held:

- **Cognitivism about moral judgments**: Moral judgments are beliefs.
- **Internalism about moral judgments**: Moral judgments necessarily motivate.
- **Humean theory of motivation**: No belief necessarily motivates.
The moral problem turned into an argument against cognitivism

<table>
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<th>The Non-Cognitivist Argument</th>
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<td>1. Moral judgments necessarily motivate.</td>
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<td>2. No belief necessarily motivates.</td>
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<td>3. Hence moral judgments are not beliefs (i.e. Non-Cognitivism is true).</td>
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Internalism and the phenomenon of moral motivation

- Any metaethical view needs to account for the phenomenon of moral motivation:
  - When we judge that we ought to do something, we are typically at least somewhat motivated to do it.
  - When we change our moral judgments, our motivations typically change accordingly.

- The internalist answer:

  **Internalism**

  Moral judgments, by nature of what they are, necessarily motivate.

  - Judgment that you ought to $\phi$ directly causes motivation to $\phi$.
  - Change to judgment that you ought to not $\phi$ directly causes motivation to not $\phi$. 
Weak and Strong Internalism

- **Strong internalism:** Necessarily, if you judge that you ought to $\phi$, then you have *overriding* motivation to $\phi$.
  - Obviously false: I can judge that I ought to apologize to someone I offended, but am weak-willed and cowardly dare not do it.

- **Weak internalism:** Necessarily, if you judge that you ought to $\phi$, then you have *some* motivation to $\phi$.
  - This motivation can be overridden by other motivations, and hence does not always translate into action.
Sometimes internalism is stated in terms of reasons

"Necessarily, if you judge that you ought to φ, then you have some reason to φ."

Warning: “reason” is ambiguous. It means either

1. Motivating reasons: explain why you did something.
2. Normative (justifying) reasons: explain why something is ought to be done.

Internalism about motivation is about motivating reasons.

Better stick with talk of necessarily motivating.
Example: Moral judgments without motivation?

- **Conversation:**
  1. “I ought to send money to charity.”
  2. “So, why are you not doing it. I know that you have money to spare.”
  3. “I could not care less. I have no motivation at all to do it.”

- **Who would say that?**
  - A depressed person: does not have any motivation to do anything.
  - An amoral person: does not care at all about morality and is never motivated by it.
  - An evil person: is actively motivated to do what is wrong.

- **Internalism seems to get the phenomenon of moral motivation wrong here:** The link between moral judgment and moral motivation seems to allow for exceptions.
An internalist reply

- Given that you really are not motivated to give, you do not really judge that you ought to give.
  - You are only paying lip-service to a moral view. You are not being sincere.
  - or: You are talking about “ought” in an “inverted commas” sense.
    - Cf. “Lukashenkov (the Belarusian dictator) won the recent ‘election’”.
    - You acknowledge that others in your society think that you ought to give.

- But: Had you sincerely judged that you ought to give, then you would have been motivated.
Evaluating the internalist reply

Main objection:
- The internalist reply entails people lose their moral judgments when they get depressed, and regain them when they recover.
- This does not seem to be the case. The moral beliefs are the same, but they seem not to matter when one is depressed.
A better reply: Modify internalism

- Unqualified internalism gets the phenomenon of moral motivation wrong: There are exceptions where genuine moral judgments do not motivate.

- Internalism’: Necessarily, if you judge that you ought to $\phi$, and your motivational capacities are intact (i.e. you are not depressed), then you are motivated to $\phi$.

- But: amoral and evil people need not be depressed: They are motivated by other considerations (self-interest, reverse moral motivation).

- Internalism’’: Necessarily, if you judge that you ought to $\phi$, and you are practically rational, then you are motivated to $\phi$. (Practical rationality here also includes absence of depression).
What does “practically rational” mean?

- “Practically rational” does not just mean: “If you judge that you ought to $\phi$, you are motivated to $\phi$.”
  - Then Internalism would say: “Necessarily, if you judge that you ought to $\phi$, and you are such that if you judge that you ought to $\phi$, you would be motivated to $\phi$, you are motivated to $\phi$.”
  - This is trivially true.

- Better: “you comply with all the true principles of rationality”.
- One of these principles may turn out to be: “If you judge that you ought to $\phi$, be motivated to $\phi$.”
  - This principle needs to be defended independent from internalism to avoid circular reasoning.
The new internalism

**Internalism”**

- Not: Moral judgments necessarily motivate.
- Instead: In practically rational agents, moral judgments, all by themselves, directly cause motivation.

**A new Non-Cognitivist Argument**

- 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.
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.

- This additional factor explains the phenomenon of moral motivation, as well as its exceptions.
(One form of) Externalism and Moral Motivation

- 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 $\phi +$ desire to do what is right $\rightarrow$ motivation to $\phi$.
  - Judgment that you ought to not $\phi +$ desire to do what is right $\rightarrow$ motivation to not $\phi$. 
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.
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.
The moral fetishism objection (Michael Smith)

- For externalists, the motivation to $\phi$ 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 $\phi$ because doing so helps someone in need.
- The person will then be motivated to do $\phi$ because doing so helps someone in need.
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 $\phi$, and it comes to my knowledge that $\phi$ 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 $\phi$. 
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 $\phi$-ing is right + the second-order desire $\rightarrow$ Non-derivative (hence non-fetishistic) motivation to $\phi$.

- Judgement that $\phi$-ing is wrong + the second-order desire $\rightarrow$ Non-derivative (hence non-fetishistic) motivation to not $\phi$.

- Judgment that $\phi$-ing is right, but no motivation to $\phi$: You lack the second-order desire.
Best form of internalism

- Strong internalism is implausible.
- Moral judgments do not always motivate, hence they do not necessarily motivate.
- Best internalist claim: In practically rational agents, moral judgments directly cause motivation.
- This claim, plus the Humean theory of motivation, is still a problem for cognitivists.
Internalism and Externalism

Intermediate conclusion

Best form of externalism

- Externalism that refers to standing desires to do whatever is right assumes that morally good agents are fetishising rightness.

- Best externalist claim: Morally good agents have a second-order desire that their non-derivative desires are in line with their moral judgments.

- Externalists can easily be cognitivists even if they hold the Humean theory of motivation.
Idea of the solution

- **Goal:** Uphold cognitivism, internalism, and Humeanism about motivation.

- **Idea:** Cognitivist internalists must give an account of the content of moral judgments that explains why they directly cause motivation in practically rational agents.
Recall Michael Smith’s new school subjectivism

- Expresses a platitude we all seem to accept: “suitably idealized, we are in fact the best people to give ourselves advice.”

**Michael Smith’s subjectivism**

- \( x \) is right for \( S \) to do in circumstances \( C \) \( \equiv \text{def} \) \( x \) is a desirable thing for \( S \) to do in \( C \).
- \( x \) is a desirable thing for \( S \) to do in \( C \) \( \equiv \text{def} \) we would desire that \( S \) does \( x \) in \( C \), *if we were fully rational*.
- Hence: \( x \) is right for \( S \) to do in \( C \) \( \equiv \) we would desire that \( S \) does \( x \) in \( C \), *if we were fully rational*.
Ideally rational desires and moral motivation

Smith’s argument

- You judge that you ought to $\phi$. This means that:
- You judge that you would desire that you $\phi$ if you were fully rational.
- Hence if you are practically rational, you will desire that you $\phi$. 
How not to read the argument

- The argument is valid only if you in fact ought to $\phi$:
  - You would desire that you $\phi$ were you fully rational.
  - If you are fully rational, you will desire that you $\phi$.

- But what if you are mistaken: How does the mere belief that you would desire that you $\phi$ if fully rational make it necessary that you in fact desire it if you are rational?

- The argument is valid only if you equate full rationality with practical rationality. But this is implausible:
  - Fully rational $=$ Fully informed $+$ has desires of a Maximally Unified and Coherent Kind (MUCKy desires).
  - You can be practically rational without being fully informed.
If you judge that you ought to $\phi$, you judge that your fully rational (and fully informed) self would desire that you $\phi$.

You hence judge that your best possible advisor – your own idealised self – would desire you to $\phi$.

If you are practically rational, you are going to listen to what you believe your best possible advisor to say.

Hence you are going to also desire that you $\phi$. 
How Smith is still an internalist

- Smith’s argument does not posit any standing desires or second-order desires.
- Moral judgments directly cause moral motivation in practically rational agents simply in virtue of
  - the content of our moral beliefs (they are about our ideal advisors’ desires), and
  - what it is to be practically rational (to listen to our ideal advisors).
Overall summary

- Externalism as a way out of the non-cognitivist argument is tenable, and need not be fetishistic.
- Internalism still poses a problem for cognitivists, unless you adopt a particular account of naturalist moral metaphysics and semantics, and of practical rationality.
Feedback

- Go to Faculty of Philosophy Home Page
- Click on Lectures
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Recommended Reading

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry “Moral Motivation”.
You can reach me via email to felix.pinkert@lincoln.ox.ac.uk.
Much of the outline and content of these lectures is adapted from Krister Bykvist’s MT 2012 lectures.