

Moral truth as based on relational properties

THE 'IS-UGHT' GAP

Whatever facts you get together to support your moral judgment (e.g. the action will cause happiness), it seems that you cannot logically infer the judgment (it is morally right). Hume noted the gap between describing the facts and saying something ought to be done: 'this *ought*...expresses some new relation [of which it] seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it'. (*Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part 1, §1)

This argument has often been used to support the view that there is no moral truth. The gap occurs because morality is not a matter of fact, but a matter of attitudes that we take to the facts.

REASONS FOR ACTION

The is-ought gap makes it seem that appealing to the (natural) facts when we are trying to justify a moral judgement is silly. In fact, we think of the facts as reasons that support our moral claims, for example that eating meat is wrong, because of the suffering it causes to animals. Now the idea of a 'reason' only makes sense in relation to a rational creature – us. Reasons are always reasons for someone. Moral reasons are reasons for someone to do something. That some fact, e.g. the suffering of an animal, is a reason, e.g. for us not to eat meat, is a relational property – it is only true (if it is true) in relation to us.

Understanding moral properties as reasons for action can be used to argue for objective moral truth. On this view, whether some fact is a moral reason for or against some action is objectively true or false. Compare reasons for other types of belief. If radiometric decay indicates that the dinosaur bones are 65 million years old, this is a reason to believe that dinosaurs lived on Earth 65 million years ago. It is not proof, but it is a reason. (Reasons can come in different strengths – there can be good reasons, really good reasons, and proof. Bad reasons are not actually reasons at all.) The result of radiometric dating dinosaur bones is a reason to think dinosaurs lived on Earth 65 million years ago, whether you think it is a reason or not. Facts about reasons are objective.

Facts about reasons are not identical with natural facts. Natural facts are not (necessarily) relational, but whether a natural fact is a reason is relational. Furthermore, there is no scientific or empirical investigation into what reasons there are. Facts about reasons are normative facts. They are facts about justification and reasoning.

Moral reasons

We can now understand moral judgments like this: to say that something is wrong is to say that the moral reasons against doing it are stronger than any moral reason in favour of doing it. Because this is a statement of (normative) fact, then moral judgments can be true or false. Of course, it can be difficult to establish whether a natural fact constitutes a reason for action, and how strong this reason is. But the truth is often difficult to discover.

This theory explains the connection between natural properties and moral judgments and so bridges Hume's 'is-ought' objection. Hume is right that we cannot move directly from natural properties to moral judgments. Appealing to natural facts as reasons doesn't prove a moral judgment to be true or false. We cannot deduce moral judgments from considering the natural facts; instead, we must weigh up the reasons that the natural facts give us. But once we recognise that whether a natural fact counts as a reason for believing a certain value judgement is itself a matter of objective fact, we can cross the gap.

OBJECTIONS

But isn't the idea of 'truths about reasons' a very strange notion? But reasons aren't strange, and we need them even to do science. Aristotle claims that certain facts about being human means that a certain way of living is the best, most flourishing life. We therefore have reason to develop our characters in ways that allow us to live like this and meet ours and other people's needs. This isn't strange.

We can object that if reasons are related to us, dependent on us, then surely they must be subjective. Facts are part of the world. The fact the dinosaurs roamed the Earth millions of years ago would be true whether anyone had found out about it or not. But whether something is a reason or not depends on us.

This misunderstands the way in which reasons depend on us. There are lots of facts – for example, facts about being in love, or facts about music – that 'depend' on human beings and their activities (there would be no love if no one loved anything). But they are still facts, because they are independent of our judgements, and made true by the way the world, in this case the human world, is. You can make mistakes about whether someone is in love or whether a piece of music is baroque or classical.

But are reasons dependent on 'human beings' in general or on individuals? Take the case of animal suffering: surely this is only a reason for me not to eat meat if I care about animals. Or again, the fact that studying hard will increase my understanding of philosophy is only a reason to study hard if I want to understand philosophy. So what we (individually) have reason to do depends on what we (individually) want. So reasons aren't objective, they are subjective. Moral judgments are expressions of what we care about, they are not expressions of truth.

THE ANALOGY WITH SECONDARY QUALITIES

Primary and secondary qualities

The distinction between 'primary qualities' and 'secondary qualities' was developed during the rise of modern science. We can think of this as a distinction between properties that science says objects have – size, shape, motion; and properties that depend upon particular ways of perceiving objects – colour, sound, smell, taste. Colour, by definition, is something that is experienced in vision. According to science, what we experience as colour is wavelengths of the electromagnetic field. There are theories for sound, smell, taste and other secondary properties. But these theories – that colour is frequency of electromagnetic radiation, that smell and taste are chemical compounds – suggest that the world as we experience it through our senses and the world as science describes it – all 'particles in motion' and empty space – are quite different.

Hume thought that this showed that secondary qualities exist only in the mind. Objects aren't coloured; instead, their parts have certain properties of size and motion and so on, causing them to emit or reflect wavelengths of light (which is a type of vibration, not itself a colour). It is not until we turn to human experience – something mental – that we need the concept of colour, that we come across 'colour experience'.

The analogy with moral values

Hume argued that moral judgment is analogous:

when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that... you have a feeling... of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which... are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind' (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part 1, § 1)

Vice and virtue are not properties of actions and characters, and so moral judgments are not 'true' or 'false'. Instead, moral judgments are expressions of our feelings (of approval and disapproval).

But is Hume right about secondary qualities? The idea of a secondary quality, such as colour, is defined in relation to a perceptual system. But that doesn't mean the quality is subjective. McDowell argues that secondary qualities are properties of the object that enable it to cause certain experiences in us. When we perceive the colour of an object, we still perceive the object, but as it appears to us.

'Us' means 'human beings', not 'me' or 'you'. An object's colour is not subjective, because it is independent of how any individual person perceives it. To be brown is to look brown to normal perceivers under normal conditions. Secondary qualities are no less real than primary qualities; it is just that they are a different type of property, one defined in terms of how we (human beings in general) perceive the world.

If secondary qualities can be understood objectively, then we can use the analogy with secondary qualities to defend the view that there is moral truth. The idea that something is a moral value (e.g. honesty) only makes sense in relation to valuers. Moral judgments are defined in the context of human responses to the world. But what values there are doesn't depend on what any individual person finds valuable or not, just as what colour something is independent of any individual person's perception of it.

We can link moral values and reasons: a value gives us a reason to act in a particular way. So McDowell is arguing that whether some fact (e.g. animal suffering) is a reason to act in a certain way (e.g. stop eating meat) depends in general on human responses; but it is independent of any individual's response, so it is not subjective.