

Egoism, scepticism, realism: Mandeville, Williams, Smith, Nichols

MANDEVILLE'S MORAL PSYCHOLOGY. Here are its main elements (page references are to the numbers on the margins):

Egoism: People are driven by selfish desires. Praise by others and sensitivity to contempt are presumed to be among them, too. 27

Problem of co-existence: Egoism makes it difficult or impossible to ensure peaceful co-existence. 28

Flattery: Certain 'Lawgivers' and 'wise men' hit upon a solution: people should be flattered to control their selfish desires and to work for the public good. These Lawgivers are best understood as evolutionary forces (of uncertain nature) that enable this change. 28–29

Co-existence built on flattery: The 'Savage Man was broke', since it was impossible to ignore the opinion of others and to indulge one's (selfish) appetites. 33

Roots of morality: The 'very worst of the people' soon learned to preach sociability in public and to gratify their appetites in private. Thus they 'agreed with the rest' to call gratification of appetites 'vice' and their control for the sake of common existence 'virtue'. 34

WILLIAMS' AMORALIST. The amoralist is someone with a set of concerns that, on the face of it, might not exclude specifically moral concerns, like telling the truth or helping others. So how to exclude these? Perhaps the amoralist claims that it is 'OK' for others to infringe on his interests (lying, not helping), just like it is OK for *him* to infringe on the interests of others. But what's the import of this 'OK'? 4

Williams holds that the person who refuses to 'moralise' about the traditional moral issues indeed steers clear of the moral practice. Yet he must also not develop moral emotions like resentment toward any action directed at him (the putative 'wrongdoings'). 5

So the outcome is that the amoralist exists in a moral environment where there are recognised moral practices, yet he is unmoved by any of them. How realistic is this picture? Not very. For example, some moral habits are internalised. There is little chance for the amoralist to be unmoved by those habits. But, he says, these habits are cultural, contingent products. 7 8

Remark 1. Here it is worth comparing the amoralist's with the views of a pioneering anthropologist Edvard Westermarck.

In response, we observe that other attributes of average humans are similarly products of cultural learning. But the idea may be that, stripped of these cultural attributes, the person will be revealed as he *really* is. 8

Well, why think that the 'real' nature of a person is revealed in extraordinary circumstances? These circumstances, by assumption, are unusual. So it is not clear why real nature must be revealed in such rare circumstances. If, for instance, it's discovered that a person can spend a week without food, is this any proof that he 'normally' doesn't require food, or that he isn't much interested in food? 9

Quite apart from this line of argument, we should also consider the question of the amoralist's affections. Is he at all into other people? If he isn't, then we're dealing with a psychopath. Fascinating as he may be, there is no reason to expect him to offer us a compelling way of human life. If, on the other hand, he does have interest in others, then he is no longer an amoralist, properly speaking. He is rather someone who perhaps is not consistently moral. So far as he has sympathy for others, his outlook is already tinged with moral concerns. 9 10 11

INTERNALISM AND EXTERNALISM. Internalism and externalism are views about the sources of moral motivation. Smith invests most of his effort in characterising internalism. He characterises it with two features:

Practicality requirement: $[A \text{ judges } \phi\text{-ing right in the situation } C] \Rightarrow [\text{either } A \text{ is motivated to } \phi, \text{ or he is practically irrational}].$ 61

Rationalism: $[\phi\text{-ing is right for } A \text{ in } C] \Rightarrow [A \text{ has a reason to } \phi \text{ in } C].$ 62

Example 2. Suppose I think (strongly believe? am totally convinced?) it's my duty to donate funds to a dog shelter. Then, unless I am irrational, I am motivated to donate funds (PrReq). Also, I have a reason to donate (Rat).

What of externalism? As Smith presents it, externalism interprets morality as motivationally idle. Just because you have judged ϕ -ing 'right' you aren't motivated to act one way or another. (This is a view familiar to Hume's readers.)

TWO VERSIONS OF RATIONALISM. Let's register Mackie's (and Smith's) two interpretations of rationalism:

Conceptual: The concept of a moral requirement is the concept of a reason for action. Rationalism provides an analysis of moral terms.

Substantive: There actually are reasons for action that correspond to objective, realistic moral facts.

Smith claims that Rationalism above is a conceptual claim about the content of moral judgement. It doesn't follow that these judgements are true. What follows, rather, is the Practicality Requirement.

Remark 3. Nichols calls substantive rationalism 'empirical rationalism'.

BRINK'S AMORALIST. It is possible that a person understands all the moral arguments, all the moral philosophy, yet fails to act morally. Notorious examples include Thrasymachus in *Republic* I and the Fool in *Leviathan* XV (Uriah Heep is a questionable example, I think). This possibility, if a possibility it is, may be used to shew that the Practicality Requirement is false (and that externalism is true).

SMITH'S RESPONSE IN SHORT. The amoralist has no mastery of moral terms. Thus he fails to make moral judgements altogether. This is precisely because the amoralist is not motivated to act on that judgement. Instead, the amoralist merely parrots what *other* people say about morality.

But this response depends on the prior rejection of an alternative account, according to which the mastery of moral terms is exhibited by their fluent use.

SMITH'S RESPONSE AT LENGTH. Smith proposes to imagine a debate in the course of which you 'convince' me that ϕ -ing is wrong: at the outset I held that ϕ -ing is right, now I am convinced by you that it is wrong. You convinced me to 'change my most fundamental values'.

Before going any further, one might protest about the setup. Yes, at the end of some conversation it may *very rarely* happen that your views change. Perhaps even your fundamental views. I'm not sure about the 'values'. But in any event, how plausible is to say that you 'convinced' me? that you gave me arguments, I examined them, and changed my views? It is worth looking deeper into the phenomenology of these (arguably rare) exchanges.

Notice also other assumptions. Smith asks: how to explain that a 'good and strong-willed person's' motivation is correlated with his judgement? Well, we saw earlier that this assumption may well be vacuous. There may be no such people in the first place, if their motives are different in public and in private.

Let's carry on. Smith envisages two alternatives: either the motivation follows directly from the judgement (internalism), or it follows from some other dispositions of the said good person (externalism). In symbols:

(15-1) Judgement \Rightarrow Motivation \Rightarrow Action. [Internalism]

(15-2) Judgement And (Motivation \Rightarrow Action). [Externalism]

In fact, we can think of two *further* alternatives:

(15-3) Motivation \Rightarrow (Action + Judgement).

(15-4) Motivation-private \Rightarrow (Action-private + Judgement-private); Motivation-public \Rightarrow (Action-public + Judgement-public)

But let's stick to internalism and externalism. Smith argues for an inference to the best explanation: Internalism can explain why motivation-change follows judgement-change. Externalism can't (plausibly) explain it. In detail:

Internalism The moral judgement ‘Voting Labour is wrong’ causes the ‘non-derivative’ desire to vote Tories (or: it is an expression of just such a desire).

Externalism Strictly, it is true that the moral judgement of a good person causes (for example) the desire to vote Tories. But the stress is on the ‘good’: The active causal factor is not the judgement itself, but rather the special disposition (virtue, character) of the good person.

Externalism is at a disadvantage. For what exactly is the motivational structure there? What does the structure amount to? It cannot be a non-derivative ‘concern’ or desire to do the right thing. At the beginning I have: I am motivated to vote Labour. How? According to the externalist, it can’t be that the non-derivative desire to vote Labour was my motive qua the good person. For: (i) the ensuing discussion made me change my judgement. (ii) My motivation changed too (we assume). (iii) My initial motivation was not rationally (from my point of view, anyway) determined by my judgement and is, therefore, not tracked by my judgement. According to externalism, when I find a reason to do one thing, I may still desire to do the opposite—which, from my point of view, is wrong.

What motivational element, therefore, is able to track the judgement-change, also characterise the good person? It is the desire ‘to do the right thing’. Smith puts the contrast between externalism and internalism in terms of the *de dicto/de re* distinction. This is familiar to Kant readers. On some interpretations of Kant, the unique characteristic of moral motive is to follow a moral principle. I may help you because I see you suffering. That is, your suffering causes me to help you. That’s not a moral motive. Instead, there must be an intermediate motive to, say, ‘alleviate suffering in general.’ A moral person is ultimately concerned with principles, not people, animals, cabbages, or the universe.

If this is the externalist account, then we may accuse the externalist of having one idea too many. We may further disparage him as fetishising morality.

PSYCHOPATHS AND CONCEPTUAL MORAL RATIONALISM. Nichols argues that the phenomenon of psychopaths undercuts conceptual rationalism, since it shows why the concept of moral requirement is not the one provided by rationalism. It also undercuts substantive (empirical) rationalism, since psychopaths have a faulty moral judgement as a result of an emotional deficiency, rather than a rational one.

As we saw earlier, the rationalist’s diagnosis of a psychopath (Brink’s amoralist) is to say that he doesn’t really form a moral judgement, that he has no competence with moral terms. But this, Nichols claims, flies in the face of our reactions to John the psychopath and Bill the mathematician. On one hand, we think that John understands moral principles (like the principle of not hurting others), even if he has no aversion to hurting others. That is, his lack of motivation is no evidence for the lack of understanding. On the other hand, we think that Bill does *not* understand moral principles, precisely because he lacks the right emotional response to hurting others (although his purely rational reasoning yields that no-one should hurt others). That is, the presence of motivation to behave morally is not sufficient evidence for moral competence.

Another problem with conceptual rationalism is that it assumes a single folk concept of morality (or of moral judgement) that psychopaths supposedly lack. Because there is, allegedly, such a concept, the rationalist may claim that the psychopath (every psychopath) lacks it. But there is evidence that there is no such concept in the first place. Therefore, it is conceptually possible that the psychopath’s actual moral judgement is included under the heading ‘moral judgement’.

So, to repeat, there *is*, according to Nichols, a problem with the psychopath’s moral judgement, but not because it doesn’t satisfy some conceptual criteria of what counts as a moral judgement. It is not a defect in his *rational* capacities that accounts for his bad moral judgement.

PSYCHOPATHS AND SUBSTANTIVE MORAL RATIONALISM. Along with moral rationalists, we assume that psychopaths have a defective moral judgement. That is because we do in fact observe a broken link between judgement and motivation. However, the rationalist must explain by a defect in the psychopath’s reasoning. Yet there is no good evidence for this kind of defect.

The rationalist may insist on several sources of such a defect. Nichols sketches the relevant possibilities. Let me mention two. The psychopath may lack the perspective-taking ability, where it is interpreted as a *rational* defect, presumably weaker than ‘empathy’. But this rational perspective-taking is unlikely to be missing. It is required for manipulating others, something that the psychopath often

knows to do well. Conversely, an autistic child that lack it often does have a proper moral judgement, at least better than the psychopath's.

Another option is that the psychopath is highly intellectually arrogant. That may be true, but many people who are similarly arrogant do not, we think, lack moral judgement. There is little evidence that the psychopath's arrogance is out of the ordinary. 80

A much better explanation, then, is that psychopaths are emotionally deficient. Whatever intellectual impairments they may have, these can't account for their defective moral judgement. 81

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