

Moral sentimentalism against the ethical rationalism philosophy essay

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Moral rationalism, also known as the moral sense theory is the opinion in meta-ethics which suggest that morality is in one way based on moral sentiments or moral emotions. Some sociologists take it to be basically an observation concerning the nature of moral facts or moral beliefs (metaphysical view). This view is accompanied by the name sentimentalism. Others view it to be basically about the approach of justifying moral beliefs (epistemological view). This is the view that goes by the name moral sense theory. In the history of philosophy, the strongest supporter of moral sense theory is David Hume (1711-1776). On the other hand is moral rationalism, also known as ethical rationalism. This is the meta-ethics view that moral truths are known by reason. Historically, ethical rationalism was defended by philosophers such as Plato, and Immanuel Kant. However, recently it has also been defended by modern philosophers such as Richard Hare and Michael Smith among others. Ethical rationalism is almost similar to ethical intuitionist but there is a difference in their view. Ethical rationalism is impartial on whether the basic moral beliefs are determined by inference or not.

Moral Sentimentalism versus Ethical rationalism

A good deal of interest on moral sentimentalism has developed recently with most of the interests on questions about the meaning of moral terms, and in normative concerns, about benevolence and caring, and compassion, and their place in morality. One of the most important conflicts among the modern early philosophers was between supporters of moral sentimentalism and those of ethical rationalism. The rationalist believed that morality was

founded on reason alone while the sentimentalists such as David Hume believed that morality originated partly in sentiment. In addition to this, both the rationalists and the sentimentalists developed rich correlations. Rationalists developed a significant correlation between morality and mathematics while the significant correlation developed by the sentimentalists was between morality and beauty. The two correlations indicate the main opinions, the underlying approaches, and the claims of moral phenomenology that is offered by the two positions. The whole idea of the differences between moral sentimentalism and ethical rationalism is therefore based on the analysis of the two correlations.

Ethical rationalism

Rationalists believe that reason is the main source and test of knowledge. They hold that reality itself has an intrinsically logical framework, they assert that a status of truth exist that can be grasped directly by the intellects. According to rationalists, there are particular logical principles in logic and mathematics whose denial means falling into contradiction. Rationality holds that reason is the power that can grant truths that are above the reach of sense and perception in both certain and general situations. Concerning knowledge, rationalists argue that a least part of a man's knowledge is gained through priori, or logical insight that are different from sense experience and also offer a confused and simply tentative approach. However, like other sociologists in support of moral sentimentalism, I tend to differ with the rationalists' idea that morality is based on reason.

In support of Moral Sentimentalism

I tend to disagree with the idea of rationalists that is based on reason and argue that morality is contained in our human nature. This is because our moral values are determined by our emotions, which include the feelings of passion and affection, which may direct us into acting in a certain manner. These can also be referred to as our first order sentiments since they have come from deep within us. It is our actions that will therefore reflect the sentiments in us. Secondly, we have the second order sentiments that add value to our motives. These are the sentiments that we have for other people. The initial motive to act towards ourselves or other people is therefore driven by both the first order and the second order sentiments, and not reason as it is claimed by rationalists.

Both Michael Slote and David Hume supported the idea of moral sentimentalism. The only difference in their arguments was that as Michael Slote tried to deal with the issues of morality, he used the term empathy. Hume had also tried to do a similar analysis but he instead used the word sympathy. Slote is trying to defend moral sentimentalism against ethical rationalism by using his account of empathy in accounting for normative morality and explaining the role of empathy in morality. This support is in response to the dominance of rationalism in the scene of ethics. He defends sentimentalism by showing how it can make consistent and instinctive sense in matters that are preferred by the rationalist such as justice, respect, and autonomy. Slote also shows that sentimentalism that is founded on empathy

can ethically handle some important aspects of moral life that gets ignored by rationalism.

Moral sense is usually described as offering information in a manner that is similar to other sensory modalities that include sight in perceiving colors. This differs with the process of acquiring priori, and non-experimental knowledge such as in mathematics as described in the ethical rationalism. To properly understand moral sentimentalism, one may portray analogy between it and other forms of senses. Concerning beauty, sentimentalists believes that it is something that people can see in the faces of other people, in artworks and in the landscape. Beauty can also be heard for example in a piece of music. One does not require independent artistic sense ability to be able to se beauty in the world. People's common five sense are enough to observe beauty although this is different from just observing something beautiful.

Michael Slote also defended the idea of moral sentimentalism under the concept of sentimental ethics of care. He argues that the solution to offering this united and systematic moral sentimentalism explanation depends on the concept of empathy. According to Slote, apart from providing the basics for the right action, empathy plays a significant role in putting in place the actual reference of our moral terms. He emphasizes the importance of empathy is showing providing care. In response to the ideas of psychologist Martin Hoffman about the development of empathy in the young children, Slote states that the differences in the extent of normally or fully formed empathy matches appropriately with differences in instinctive moral

evaluation. In his later works, Slote faces a criticism on his idea of moral obligation or that right actions follow our sentiments in general and in particular our empathy. He responds to this criticism there is no evidence that the racial biasness that is in founded in our sentiments is natural. Instead, it might be under the influence of family, social or cultural factors. Therefore, the bias that may be found in children might disappear with time as they increase in their cognitive maturity. Later in his book, moral sentimentalism, Slote gives a detailed account of his notion of empathy by drawing upon the sentimentalism ideas of Hutcheson and Hume and other recent psychological literature on empathy. He has defined empathy at different points in the book; first as a phenomenon of having feelings towards another person, that arouses itself in us. Secondly, as a discrete feeling that is involuntarily aroused in us in response to some particular situations or experiences that we simply hear of, remember or read about, and thirdly, an act of viewing issues from other people's point of view in order to see and feel things from their perspective.

In a manner evocative to the Hume's approach to exposition, a stimulating moral sentimentalism can use the idea of empathy to base both its normative explanation of moral obligation and its meta-ethical description of moral language. A morally upright person is empathically caring about other people and portrays the feeling of empathy in all his or her actions. However, the judgment on the righteousness or wrongness of something is dependent on an individual's empathy.

Hume's Moral sentimentalism

Hume's argument in support for moral sentimentalism starts with the ordinary loves and hatred that are vicious and differ from one person to another. He explains the process by which people change the feelings of love and hatred into a form of calm, regular moral love and hatred. On his idea of sympathy, he says that we tend to sympathize more with people who are similar or who are within our reach. Even though the ability to develop these feelings varies, Hume states that our moral approvals for these feelings do not vary. The moral approval arises from sympathy but only when we reach to a common point of view. In development of this sympathy, the first thing is that we assess the character of that person from his own perspective and that of his close people and then we sympathize with the person and his associates based on whether their character traits are good or bad.

Secondly, we control our sympathy based on the rules that judge the character traits of those people. Sympathy is therefore based not only on the character of that person, but his actions that are common for his close friends.

Hume further basis his support for moral sentimentalism on sympathy and argues that unlike ethical rationalism, people cannot not make moral judgments based on reason alone. Reason plays the role of dealing with facts and making a conclusion out of those facts. Reason alone cannot guide people in making one choice among various options. This can only be enabled by sentiments. Hume states that morality is determined by sentiments. It is these sentiments that define virtue as a mental action that

gives the viewers an appealing sentiment of approval, and the vice does the opposite of this.

Hume proposes sentimentalism to be the ground for ethics basically as a meta-ethical theory about the epistemology of morality. Hume also sides with the ant-realist arguments of morality suggested by John Mackie who also argues that it is a queer fact there can be moral facts concerning the world that can be recognized by reason and inherently motivating.

In support of his sympathy idea, Hume argues that sentiments based on sympathy can motivate people towards achieving non-selfish goals such as service to other people. According to Hume and other theorists in support for sympathy idea, the term sympathy encompasses more than just concern for the problems of other people. To Hume, sympathy is the standard for communication and sharing of both positive and negative sentiments. His idea is very close to that of other psychologists who use the term empathy in place of sympathy, such as Slote.

After making various considerations on the aspect of sympathy, he draws the conclusion that most of the behaviors that people choose are for the sake of increased public utility. He therefore differs with the opinion that people make decisions based on their self-interests alone.

Conclusion

The two ideas of rationalists and sentimentalists have a common foundation in Thomas Hobbes' moral theory. The rationalists differed with the claims of

Hobbes that there is no right or wrong in nature, this is determined by independent will and that for morality to motivate people, there must be sanctions. This sprouted up to an argument by the mid 19th century where rationalists started to argue that morality is based on reason and that our choice on the right or wrong actions is motivated by our rational awareness. On the other hand, the sentimentalists objected this and argued that reason has nothing to do with our morality. What it does is only to help in making a priority over various options. I tend to agree with the sentimentalists in the believe that our moral actions are motivated by the sentiments aroused in us by a particular situation.