

The Trajectory of Moral Emotions: From Hume to Smith to Emotivism

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Abstract

Throughout the extensive history of human moral philosophy, Emotivism has been a prominent subject of interest. From David Hume's profound reflections on the role of emotions in ethics, to Adam Smith's emphasis on sympathy, and further to the rise of logical positivism and Emotivism, the status of emotions in ethics has continuously been challenged by rationalists. The first part of this paper delves into the detailed arguments of classical moral sentimentalists Hume and Smith regarding moral sentiments, including their discussions on human nature, the origins of morality, moral emotions, and emotional resonance. The second part focuses on early contemporary Emotivism, primarily represented by Russell and Wittgenstein, analyzing the logic of ethical language, and examining their discourse on the nature and function of moral language. Through this exploration, we aim to uncover the challenges faced by emotionalist regarding moral normativity and discuss their practical value in contemporary ethics.

Keywords

Moral sentiment, Moral motivation, Sympathy, Ethical language, Logical positivism, Emotivism.

1. Introduction

In the long history of moral philosophy, the debate over whether morality stems from reason or emotion has been a contentious topic. In the 18th century, the British philosopher David Hume, as a metaphysical empiricist, first proposed the idea of using human sciences as "the only solid foundation of all the sciences" and explored morality as a part of human nature. According to Hume, all perceptions in the human mind can be categorized into impressions and ideas. Reason, devoid of any active force, cannot give rise to any action or emotion. Moral distinctions arise from moral sentiments, and moral feelings have the power to produce or inhibit actions. Adam Smith, inheriting Hume's moral sentiment theory, "posited that humans possess an innate sense of sympathy, and morality originates from this primitive sentiment, using the general sympathy of ordinary people as the standard for moral judgment." [1]296 This lineage of thought evolved and contributed to the emotivism at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Emotivist, initially represented by Russell and Wittgenstein, closely linked ethics with linguistic logic, advocating the viewpoint that moral language expresses emotions. Although emotivism also starts from moral emotions, it evidently differs significantly from 18th-century sentimentalists.

The objective of this paper is to explore the evolution of sentimentalism in ethical philosophy, with a particular focus on the transition from Hume to Smith and then to the Emotivism. First, we will briefly introduce Hume's argument regarding whether moral judgments stem from reason or emotion, thereby examining the controversies and criticisms faced by Hume's moral sentiment theory. Subsequently, we will present Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments, including the process of evoking sympathy, the psychological processes of moral evaluation,

the impartial judge, the authority and influence of conscience, and the advocacy of self-regulating morality. Finally, we will focus on the emotivism 's discourse on the role of emotions in ethical language. In summary, this paper aims to delve into the role of moral emotions in ethics, seeking a comprehensive explanation of the research value of emotions in the moral domain through the study of emotional theories such as those of Hume, Smith, Russell, and Wittgenstein. Additionally, we will examine the challenges of moral normativity faced by emotivists in comparison to rationalists.

2. Hume's Argument on the Source of Morality: Sentiments vs. Reason

In the history of ethical thought in both the Eastern and Western traditions, understanding morality from the perspective of reason has always held significant importance. This can be traced back to the philosophers Democritus and Aristotle during the height of Greek slavery. "Democritus proposed that morality stems from the soul, which is synonymous with reason." [2]76 He believed that human sensations are relative and unreliable, and only rational cognition can provide truth. Similarly, Aristotle emphasized that human nature is rational, and living in accordance with reason is the best and most pleasant way of life, as the best way for humans is to utilize the power of reason. Consequently, many philosophers predominantly approached morality from a rational perspective. It wasn't until the 18th century that this dominance of rationality in the moral domain began to shift. Taking 18th-century Western society as an example, British philosopher David Hume was among the first to advocate for the study of human nature as a science. He argued that knowledge about humanity forms the only secure foundation for other sciences, thus asserting that philosophical inquiry should delve into the heart of human nature.

Within Hume's moral philosophy, the question of moral motivation has always been central. Hume proposed that the essence of moral philosophy lies not in determining the truth value of moral propositions (i.e., whether moral statements are objectively true), but rather in understanding why we are moved by moral facts and how this sentiment prompts us to action. According to Hume, moral judgments do not arise from rational deduction but are based on our sensory experiences of facts and values. He attributed moral motivation to the influence of sensation and sentiment, particularly aesthetic feelings of good and evil and empathy for moral norms. Then I will elaborate on Hume's arguments regarding the sentimental basis of morality. Firstly, Hume posited and argued that reason cannot serve as a motive for any volitional activity. He pointed out that reasoning activities belong to the world of ideas, while the manifestation of will lies within the real world; the worlds of ideas and reality are forever separated, making it difficult to connect reason and will.[2]447 Reason's function lies in discerning truth from falsehood, whereas actions, emotions, and volitions are self-sufficient and cannot be judged as true or false. Therefore, the distinction between moral good and evil, i.e., moral judgment, must necessarily influence actions, which reason alone cannot accomplish. Hume believed that the source of moral good and evil is not reason. Even if moral distinctions were indeed derived from judgments of truth or falsehood, according to Hume: "Then wherever those judgments occur, there must of necessity be a distinction of good and evil, and that not only with regard to one apple or kingdom, but with regard to every object, whether the errors are avoidable or unavoidable; for since the nature of morals is assumed to depend on conformity to reason, all other conditions are absolutely indifferent and can never bestow any virtue or vice on actions. Moreover, since this conformity admits of no degrees, all virtue and vice are equal." [2]496 In this argument, Hume cited examples such as ingratitude and incest, which are considered extremely sinful among humans but not among plants and animals. This difference arises solely because the degree of sinfulness of actions is not derived from rational inference.

In response, scholars of the rationalist school inevitably argue: this is entirely because humans possess reason, which constrains them, while the animal and plant kingdoms lack sufficient reason to discern the good and evil of behavior, hence ignorance excuses them from guilt. Hume's response to this is: "Evil exists before reason perceives it. Although animals lack a certain degree of reason, which may prevent them from perceiving moral duties and obligations, it does not prevent the existence of these duties." [2]504 Similarly, relationships that are considered extremely evil among humans do not carry any guilt or injustice among other entities. Hence, we can conclude that morality does not rely on any relationship to objects as scientific objects, and moral judgments are not determined by reasoning. Additionally, Hume argued that morality also does not reside in any facts discoverable by intellect. Because if we carefully observe cases of intentional murder, which are universally recognized as evil, the more detailed examination and observation we conduct, the less evil we perceive. Instead, it is the moment when we reflect on our inner selves that we experience a sense of condemnation.

In summary, Hume believed that the power of morality relies on sentiment and desire. It is these sentiments and desires that arouse the will, thereby stimulating action. Hence, the pleasure and pain within the human psyche are directly related to the moral good and evil. Hume emphasized that to understand why we feel pleasure or displeasure in evaluating a person's character, it suffices to elucidate the principles underlying these feelings, as these principles can explain why a particular character deserves praise or blame. Although reason can perceive a sense of moral duty or obligation, it can never stimulate action. Our moral judgments arise from an appreciation of an individual's character or behavior, and it is this appreciation or approval that directly arouses our pleasure.

Given that the distinction between moral good and evil is based on the feelings of pleasure and pain, this subjectivism inevitably faces criticism from rationalists. For instance, rationalists often counter sentimentalists by arguing, "Since behavior is motivated by emotion rather than reason, it means that behavior is unguided. For instance, when a sentimentalist gives alms to a homeless person, they may say it's because they enjoy doing so, and it brings them spiritual pleasure. However, rationalists argue that giving alms to others is because I should do so, and whether in the past, present, or future, I can steadfastly choose to do what I should. Thus, moral judgment can only originate from human rational activity and is not subject to emotional constraints. An important function of reason is consistency, so people will never refrain from helping others because they cannot experience pleasure at some point in the future. Such behavior should be consistent across all time and space. In summary, according to rationalists, the standard of moral judgment or evaluation must possess universality and objectivity (i.e., moral normativity).

Although sentimentalists have always been subject to criticism and challenges, we still need to have confidence in the contemporary relevance of Humeanism. Scholar Zhang Xi proposed two prospects for contemporary Humeanism in his article <The Construction of Moral Normativity and the Prospects of Humeanism>, "Firstly, Humeanism, though subjective, is a form of objectivized subjectivism. Secondly, Humeanism upholds metaphysical naturalism, emphasizing that the world we live in is entirely composed of natural laws and entities that can be explored through natural science, devoid of any supernatural elements." [3] These prospects align with Hume's theoretical viewpoints, as he advocated that moral issues should be projected from the world of ideas to the real world to guide human practical activities, and this projection is not arbitrary or subjective but is based on stable, naturally evolved foundations. This viewpoint, to some extent, resonates with the idea of moral objectivity. Furthermore, Hume's naturalistic philosophy encourages belief in personal experience and intuition while challenging metaphysical moral laws in religion, thus promoting the study of human nature in moral philosophy.

3. The Rise of Sympathy and Moral Sentiments: Adam Smith

Adam Smith is considered one of the prominent figures in classical moral sentiment theory, emphasizing the role of human sympathy as the foundation of moral judgment, wherein moral assessments depend on the empathy within emotions. Smith's argument concerning moral sentiments begins with an examination of sympathy and proceeds to explore the criteria for propriety of conduct, ultimately introducing the concept of an impartial spectator. I will now elaborate on the arguments relevant to Smith.

Smith contends that within every individual resides an innate moral instinct, wherein each person possesses an inherent goodness and concern for others. This inherent trait in human nature enables us to feel a sense of concern for the fate of others, viewing the happiness of others as our own responsibility. The sympathy described above are considered the most fundamental and indispensable emotions of humanity, enduring even in those perceived as wicked or callous criminals. So, how is this sympathy aroused? Smith believed that in real life, individuals often cannot directly experience the feelings of others due to various constraints. However, people use imagination to place themselves in the shoes of others to generate similar emotions. When assessing the propriety of others' actions, individuals tend to form moral judgments by resonating emotionally through imagination. The criterion for evaluation lies in whether others' emotions align with one's own. Smith once said, "When the passions of the person principally concerned are in perfect concord with the spectator's, he necessarily approves of them, and considers them as proper and suitable. On the contrary, when they are opposite, he necessarily disapproves of them." [4]17 So, how do we make fair moral judgments of actions through sympathy? Smith's answer lies in our capacity to naturally assume the position of a third party, becoming an impartial spectator, thereby making impartial judgments about the moral worth of an action.

Adam Smith equates the "impartial spectator" with reason, natural inclination, and conscience, residing as an inhabitant within oneself. Smith once said, "It is he who, whenever our actions affect the happiness of others, appears to call out with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, and we are merely one among the many, not superior to any in it. And when we become the object of resentment, hatred, and cursing, it is only from him that we learn our own insignificance and the insignificance of all that concerns us, and only his impartial eye can correct the natural distortion of self-love about them. It shows us the propriety of magnanimity and the deformity of injustice, the propriety of giving precedence to the greater good of others over our own greater interest, and the deformity of doing the slightest harm to others for the sake of our own greatest benefit." [4]153 Thus, whenever selfish thoughts arise or when we are about to harm others for personal gain, this inner observer immediately awakens within us to caution us against violating those sacred moral principles. In Smith's view, the emotional response of this inner spectator plays a significant role in shaping human behavior. Once an action occurs, the first judgment is made by the inner judge, and when we emotionally engage in the action, we resonate with the judge's attitude, leading to moral evaluation and reflection on our behavior, judging whether it conforms to the general societal evaluation of good and evil.

According to Smith, the mechanism behind the emergence of conscience is believed to increase with the gradual growth of human self-control. Human self-control is inherently bestowed by the Creator and, like other virtues, belongs to the great nature of humanity. It is this great self-control that enables individuals to lower their anger and all related passions in the face of great disasters, maintaining composure until the point where an observer can feel their passion through empathy. This virtue is referred to by Smith as a commendable one. In Smith's view, a person with good virtues must possess strong self-control, and the most morally perfect individual is one who can fully control their own joy and sorrow while deeply sympathizing

with the misfortunes of others— a person who embodies both admirable and amiable virtues. Furthermore, Smith suggests that the ideal spectator within us needs to be awakened by real spectators, primarily from those who may not offer sympathy and tolerance. It is from such strangers that we can more easily learn the most complete self-control. Smith once advised against immersing oneself in solitude, whether in times of prosperity or adversity, but instead encouraged interaction with others, especially with strangers and those who may not care about one's personal circumstances. By making strangers feel that the disasters or fortunes befalling us are so insignificant that their impact on us can be almost negligible, we can balance our own emotions and behaviors. Smith believed that it is these strangers, with whom we have no special interests, who may provide the most impartial and sincere evaluations, thus helping to awaken the impartial resident within us and shaping our character and behavior for the better.

In summary, Smith's <Theory of Moral Sentiments> focuses on describing the psychological processes involved in the formation of various moral sentiments. Smith argues that the primary motive behind moral judgment lies not in the utility of actions or their correspondence to truth, but rather in emotional resonance between individuals, reflecting a common psychological phenomenon in human society where people tend to connect with those whose perception and expression of emotions align with their own. This viewpoint seems to imply the relativity of morality, which has led to skepticism from rationalists. A key point of contention for rationalist critics is that since morality pertains to the realm of the self, moral judgment naturally resides within our individual minds. However, humans are complex beings, and their emotions are influenced by various factors such as circumstances, adversity, fate, personality, and others, leading to relative moral judgments.

While Smith acknowledges that the establishment of sympathy acts as a bridge between individuals, fostering altruistic behavior, this argument still holds several flaws when viewed today. Firstly, different spectators may elicit varied emotional responses to the same behavior, inevitably leading to the relativity and subjectivity of moral judgment. Secondly, the discourse mentions spectators understanding the full context of situations; however, incomplete, or misleading information may lead to emotional misjudgments by spectators regarding the actions of individuals involved. More importantly, Smith overlooks the selfish and self-serving aspects of human nature, wherein individuals tend to show more sympathy towards those they are associated with and may be influenced by selfish notions, lacking sympathy towards strangers or marginalized groups. This selectivity may hinder the elicitation of sympathy in many situations.

However, despite these criticisms, we must recognize the value of Smith's theory of moral sentiments. For instance, Smith advocates for the establishment of a self-regulating morality, attempting to reconcile the conflict between selfishness and altruism through the bridge of sympathy, which is evidently more rigorous and mature than Hume's discourse. In the article <Reflections Triggered by Adam Smith's 'Sympathy'> [5] The author describes Smith's relationship between self-interest and sympathy as follows: "Although sympathy depends on the circumstances and appropriateness of emotions, ultimately, personality plays the decisive role, and the substantive pillar in the circle established by sympathy is a shared part of everyone's personality." Thus, it is evident that sympathy is a product proposed by Smith to balance self-interest and altruism, which undoubtedly resolves a significant portion of the controversy faced by later emotivists.

4. The rise of Emotivism, represented by figures like Russell and Wittgenstein

Emotivism is one of the typical theoretical forms of modern Western meta-ethics, predominantly active in the 1930s. Its theoretical aim is to regard ethics as an expression of emotion, attitude, or belief rather than factual description. Mentioning the Emotivism inevitably recalls the immensely popular logical positivism methodology. Logical positivism, a philosophical tradition prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s in English-speaking and Western European countries, developed some ideas from David Hume. In summary, logical positivism posits a criterion of verifiability for meaningful statements, suggesting that every meaningful statement about the world outside the mind can be confirmed through sensory experience. Consequently, they argued that theology, metaphysics, and ethics are meaningless, as their statements cannot be verified through sensory experience. More precisely, they claimed that there are no meaningful statements in these fields. Hence, they proposed a theory called emotivism, which posits that moral statements do not exist as propositions but are rather expressions of emotion. "The Emotivism asserts that ethics lacks the universal certainty and necessity found in logic and science." [6]342 They emphasize that ethical propositions do not belong to the realm of science (the realm of facts) but rather to the realm of values, which cannot be resolved through logical judgment but are instead expressions of human emotions and desires. Next, I will elaborate on the main ideas of emotivism, represented by figures like Russell and Wittgenstein.

Russell initially transitioned from early non-naturalistic epistemology to emotivism. In his book "Religion and Science," he advocated that value judgments stem from individual desires and emotions, asserting that the formulation of moral principles and norms fundamentally lies outside the scope of ethics. He believed that when we claim something has "value," we are expressing personal sentiments rather than stating a reliable fact. Specifically, when someone says something is "good in itself," they are making a statement like describing the shape or taste of an object. Russell considered such statements to be erroneous; the person is expressing, "I wish everyone liked it," or more precisely, "It would be nice if everyone liked it." [7] In Russell's view, interpreting such statements as propositions is merely an affirmation of personal desires rather than an objective evaluation of the thing itself. In "A History of Modern Western Ethics," Wan Junren summarizes Russell's emotivism ethics as follows: "Russell advocates that individual moral judgments take the form of factual statements but essentially do not express factual truths; rather, they reveal personal desires and emotions." [6]363 Furthermore, Russell also asserted that there is no absolute sense of "sin" because what one person may perceive as a "sin," another may see as a "virtue." This easily leads to disagreements and animosity between individuals, yet neither can prove the other wrong in rational terms. Additionally, the theory suggests that punishment should not be based on the notion that criminals are "evil" but rather on whether they have violated societal consensus and values.

In contrast to Russell, Wittgenstein completely denied any beneficial role of ethics in human development. As a linguistics expert, he introduced the concept of "Language Games" in his work "Philosophical Investigations," which further solidified his rejection of the scientific nature of ethics. He even equated ethics with religion. Wittgenstein believed that language is essentially like a game, and it cannot be clearly defined. He emphasized that language does not exist in isolation but rather forms a complex network of various usage contexts. The meaning of language depends on its usage in specific contexts. Therefore, he advocated for a form of situational relativism in linguistic theory.

Wittgenstein's philosophical analysis delineates language usage into two main domains: scientific factual descriptions and non-scientific value expressions. In the domain of scientific factual descriptions, language is viewed as a tool capable of conveying meaningful propositions

with inherent logicity. Expressions in this domain take the form of explicit propositions, possessing the potential for logical analysis. Conversely, in the non-scientific domain of value expressions, Wittgenstein believed that language cannot encompass everything because certain areas of content cannot be described by meaningful propositions. Ethics language falls into this domain, primarily involving individual emotions or mental states, which require expression through metaphor, allegory, or symbolic metaphor of "private language." Consequently, Wittgenstein concludes that moral language does not belong to the domain of scientific factual descriptions, and moral judgments can only be attributed to individual emotions and private experiences. In summary, he

rigorously applies logical analysis to demonstrate that ethics belongs to the realm of non-cognitive emotivism, providing an intriguing perspective for understanding the Emotivism.

In general, early emotivists believed that the language of ethics merely serves to express the speaker's emotions and evoke similar emotions in the listener. They emphasized that ethics pertains to the psychological mechanisms of interaction between individuals, rather than statements about facts. While their arguments were quite refined at the time, emotivists still faced significant challenges regarding the normativity of ethics. In a chapter of "Emotivism," author Christina articulates a significant issue faced by emotivism: "Since moral language expresses emotions, what makes some emotional utterances moral and others not? Emotivists lack clear criteria for distinguishing moral emotions from non-moral ones." [8] This implies that emotivism may encounter difficulties in explaining moral issues because it fails to provide a consistent and objective basis for moral judgments.

Despite the challenges emotivism faces in addressing moral judgments, its contemporary value remains undeniable. Scholar Liu Jun pointed out in <The Inheritance and Rebellion of Emotivism>: "Emotivism inherits Hume's attention to emotional factors and establishes a unique cognition of emotions on this basis. The negation of the 'is' level directly avoids the difficulties that cognitivism may face in metaphysics and psychology, while allowing non-cognitivist traditions to remain active in people's minds for decades to come." [9] Therefore, emotivism continues to maintain an active position in meta-ethical discourse, serving as a splendid landscape in moral philosophy and providing us with new perspectives for contemplating and discussing moral issues.

5. Summary

Classical moral sentimentalists such as Hume and Smith tend to place the core issues of ethics within the domain of moral psychology. They delve into the nature of human beings — whether driven by reason, emotions, or rational intuition — explaining why we approve of certain actions or condemn certain individuals. Their focus revolves around whether moral principles are driven by reason or emotions, whether moral knowledge is gained through reasoning or arises from feelings, and whether moral concepts are universal or entirely dependent on the unique constructs of individual minds. In summary, classical moral sentimentalists still tend to lean towards sentimentalism, believing that morality originates from the emotional and desirous needs of individuals.

In the twentieth century, the emotivist while inheriting classical views, focused on the analysis of ethical language, emphasizing the exploration of standards for the verifiability of meaning. They argued that ethical language can only be used to express the emotions of the speaker and demonstrated the unverifiability of moral statements. Although diverging greatly from the content of classical sentimentalism and with the methodology of logical positivism having faded in ethics, this new form of sentimentalism theory still provides us with significant value, allowing for profound reflection on the nature and function of moral language, as well as the constant relationship between morality and emotions.

As we reflect on the development of moral sentiments today, it is not difficult to see that sentimentalists have always faced significant challenges from rationalists, particularly regarding the universality and consistency of moral standards. Despite the current focus in normative ethics on the study of moral norms and universal standards, sentimentalism still holds its importance in contemporary times. Against this backdrop, sentimentalism faces the challenge of finding an appropriate position in the field of ethics and engaging in dialogue with rationalist viewpoints. These series of issues all require further exploration.

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