

IS A SUBJECTIVE THEORY OF MORAL LANGUAGE POSSIBLE?

Ali R. Shahrukhi
Reading University

The contents of an individual's consciousness may be divided, after Hume, into two distinct categories: Beliefs about the way things are and desires about how he would like them to be. On this view, only beliefs can be true or false, while only desires can motivate action. A belief is impotent without a desire but a desire is blind without a belief. Language may therefore be similarly divided into factual assertions and evaluative prescriptions, which include moral judgments.

If I adopt an introspectionist methodology then my claims to factual knowledge will encounter the problem of scepticism: First, whether the supposed referents of my descriptions, actually exist independently of my perceptions. And second, if they do exist, how accurately my descriptions or perceptions map onto them. That is, a gap is opened between my claims to factual knowledge and the truth of those claims.

Wittgenstein argues in his Private Language Argument that the failure of these attempts to ward off scepticism derives from the methodology they assume. If the solitary introspectionist is left as the sole interpreter of his consciousness he will never be able to distinguish something's being the case from it seeming to be the case. The application of a conceptually meaningful language must be governed according to generally accepted rules; and successful rule following necessitates at least one other conscious individual. A meaningful language must be public. This provides a possibility of disagreement which ensures that a concept delineates some particular thing. If this is correct then the sceptic seems to defeat himself since he must presuppose that the questions he poses are themselves meaningful. Claims to

Shahrukhi is a second-year honors philosophy student at Reading University. His other interests include moral psychology and existentialism.

factual knowledge can therefore be reasonably supposed to avoid complete referential failure and the precision of their mapping onto this independent reality becomes a matter of correctly following the applicatory rules which govern the concepts involved.

A similar analysis can be carried out on moral language. It may be either public or private. If moral language is viewed introspectively then it seems that two sceptical questions can again be asked: First whether good and bad actually exist independently of the introspectionist's feelings and, second, if they do, how well these evaluations correspond to that objective realm.

However, the moral introspectionist is aware, after Wittgenstein, that the adoption of his position has a certain consequence: It forces him to deny the existence of objective moral facts, that is, generally accepted rules of application. What I have called moral introspection therefore amounts to ethical subjectivism: the view that moral interlocutors are solely concerned with their private feelings. Here, moral judgements, unlike factual ones, simply represent linguistic expressions of an underlying sentiment. They cannot, and therefore do not, relate to any objective realm in the same way that the propositions of factual language do. In other words, the theory is necessarily anti-realist.

Moral realism, on the other hand, views moral language as being public. It asserts that moral language is meaningful in the same sense as factual language. The application of moral concepts being governed, either actually or potentially, by generally accepted rules which are learned within the language-using community. The aim of this essay is to examine whether or not a truly subjective theory of moral language is possible.

In assessing the moral worth of any agent it seems that two distinct factors have to be considered: His moral opinions and his actions. I might agree with someone that I believe it is wrong to cause others to passively inhale cigarette smoke but nevertheless be responsible for occasioning precisely that state of affairs only five minutes later. I might remark that "I know it's wrong, but I really feel like a

cigarette." Thus, moral theories try to explain how discussion is related to practice.

Moral discussion is concerned with reasons for acting one way or another. In the above case there are two possible reasons for action. First, my belief that having a cigarette would be wrong and, second, my strong desire to have a cigarette five minutes later. Both the subjectivist and realist admit that the moral reasons supplied by an agent imply that he has a motivation to act accordingly and are aware that the Humean picture indicates that only desires can motivate.

The subjectivist claims that this demonstrates that apparent moral beliefs employed in discussion are actually expressions of desires. But it will still remain for him to provide a plausible account of a moral discussion, given that we do feel we are talking about something. The realist asserts that the judgements employed in discussion are beliefs which can be true or false, that is, there are or could be, generally accepted rules which govern their application. But, if he is to link discussion to practice, he must show how such beliefs are able to motivate.

I have already dismissed ethical subjectivism in its simple form: The idea that moral judgements report one's attitude towards an issue. Here, a statement such as "stealing is wrong" is equivalent to "I do not approve of stealing". As long as I am sincerely reporting my feelings I cannot be wrong. For example I may, on reflection, conclude that stealing is, in fact, morally permissible. But, logically, my two conflicting evaluations cannot both be right. Second, moral disagreements do exist. But, by claiming that being correct is a matter of sincerely reporting one's feelings, simple subjectivism has the absurd consequence of admitting that both speakers are correct.

Expressivist theories, such as emotivism, are more promising. Instead of asserting that moral judgements report one's attitude, emotivism claims that they are performative expressions of desires which are designed to influence the behaviour and attitudes of others. Saying "stealing is wrong" is the same as saying "boo to stealing!". Since these expres-

sions can be neither true nor false the objections to simple subjectivism are avoided.

But emotivism must also provide a satisfactory account of moral discussion. The emotivist seems to be committed to saying that moral reasons are those statements which are considered the most likely to influence the behaviour and attitudes of others. For example, I might convince you that voluntary euthanasia is right, on purely psychological grounds, by revealing that your favourite pop star endorses it.

Because emotivism does not seem to require that the reasons employed in discussion are relevant to the issue it has generally been rejected. In order to maintain a subjectivist stance, some have stipulated that only those desires which are expressed subsequent to a thorough deliberation can be counted as moral reasons. Such a process is deemed likely to shape the agent's feelings by bringing to light relevant facts and possible consequences which had not previously been considered.

But it is possible, and perhaps probable, that strong differences of opinion would still remain. A further modification attempts to overcome this. The final version of subjectivism states that a moral opinion is correct only if one also considers that it would also be sustained by someone who was completely reasonable and impartial.

I will now examine how realists may attempt to make sense of moral practice. Smith provides the following example. You are bathing a screaming baby and are motivated to drown him which, on the Humean view, suggests that you have a reason to do so which is beyond rational criticism. But this is counter-intuitive.

According to Smith, common sense indicates that "the desire is not worth satisfying" because you believe that you would not be motivated to drown the baby if you were "cool calm and collected". Thus he concludes that moral beliefs are not based on our actual motivations but on "the independent rational ideal" of those desires which we would have under ideal conditions of reflection. It is beliefs about these desires which provide reasons for action. For the belief about what

I would desire under ideal conditions, about what I have a reason to desire, provides a motivation not to drown the baby. Therefore I am not beyond rational criticism if I do so.

One problem remains. Would beliefs about desires under ideal conditions converge for different agents in the same physical circumstances? Smith asserts, contrary to the claims of many, that the nature of moral discussion indicates that such a convergence would occur.

Returning to the example which initiated this discussion: The subjectivist will say that my statement "I know it's wrong to smoke in public" did not really purport to state a moral fact. It was nothing more than a verbal gesture motivated by one of two factors: First, it was not a representation of my feelings towards smoking but a representation of my stronger desire to appease my non-smoking friend. Second, it was a representation of my desire to stop smoking in public, subsequent to an impartial deliberation, whose intention was to motivate others and, perhaps, myself into according with it. If this latter possibility is accepted then my subsequent action was simply a result of a stronger desire to have a cigarette. And, since this stronger desire was not the result of an impartial and rational consideration, I acted wrongly.

The moral realist, on the other hand, will say that my statement was indeed a claim to moral knowledge. He may say that being "cool, calm and collected" my statement that "I know it's wrong to smoke in public" did claim to state a moral fact. Five minutes later and still aware of my belief that if I was "cool, calm and collected" I would not desire a cigarette, but now craving nicotine, I failed to desire what I believed I ought to and, as such, acted wrongly.

Both these theories, in their final formulations, appear to be fundamentally similar in proposing that desires may be shaped by reason and, as a consequence, are likely to converge among different agents giving rise to genuinely moral desires. Significantly, both theories assume that the phenomenon of rational moral discussion indicates an implicit presumption by all of the possibility of such a converge. As a result, both attempt to remove strong and potentially

distortive personal feelings by positing considerations such as impartial deliberation and beliefs about one's views in better circumstances.

It is unclear why the subjectivist who was initially identified as a moral introspectionist identifies moral reasons as being impartial. His methodology, if he is to remain a true introspectionist, does not permit him to presuppose the existence of other moral agents, just as the Cartesian cannot presuppose the existence of an external world. But if the subjectivist is not entitled to draw into his considerations the approval of an imaginary ideal moral agent then he is forced to remain at the stage where the desires between moral interlocutors will simply continue to conflict. Of course, Smith's proposal, that the beliefs about what sort of desires we ought to have will converge, is necessitated by his realism, even if it is unfounded.

Thus, both these theories propose that moral discussion converges toward a set of specifically moral desires and in this sense they are both objective. To the realist the relevant desire is that which we would all have under ideal conditions of reflection. To the subjectivist, it is the desire which would be rationally and impartially approved of. I will now examine why the subjectivist has collapsed into objectivism and whether or not this can be avoided.

The subjectivist identifies two aspects of morality: Actions and discussions, while also recognising that something must initiate and then sustain the latter. He proposes that moral discussion is initiated by a clash of desires, of which spoken reasons are performative expressions. But now he must explain how the conversation is sustained. He rejects the idea that reasons are simply those statements which will most effectively alter the psychological state of his opponent, and that this is the goal which sustains the conversation. He claims that, empirically, a moral reason appears to be more than this: It is the expression of a desire which remains after a rational and impartial deliberation of facts and possible outcomes. But by introducing rational deliberation and impartiality he suggests that desires will converge, and thereby converts his theory into an objective one. Presum-

ably, the moral conversation is sustained by this process of convergence.

The subjectivist is correct in denying the emotivist's assertion that any fact which has the desired psychological effect can be counted as a moral reason. Moral discussions do have a distinctive language, often based around considerations of impartiality. But the subjectivist seems to be relying on the premise that expressions directly represent the underlying desire: For example, that the use of a concept such as impartiality indicates an actual desire to be impartial.

But this premise seems incorrect. When a manual labourer says that it is unfair for a company director to earn his yearly wage in a month, is it to be supposed that his statement is not at all the expression of an egoistic desire? Similarly, when such a director replies that, since his company generates wealth for the whole community and he is only motivated to work extremely hard when paid a competitive salary, his pay can be impartially justified through its maximisation of overall utility.

While the language here is centered around impartiality there does not appear to be a convergence of desires, but merely two parallel expressions of egocentricity. The cause seems to be the inherent vagueness and redefinability of moral concepts. Impartiality, for example, does not relate only to material goods, but also to interests, preferences, needs and aggregate utility.

So a desire which produces an expression of impartiality might actually be wholly egoistic. This suggests a distinction between the desire a moral judgement seems to express and the desire which it actually expresses. This subjective thesis (S) would thus claim that rational deliberation and attempted impartiality do not shape one's desires, rather one's desires shape how facts and concepts must be employed in order that those desires are fulfilled. And therefore, moral reasons are a sub-set of intentionally psychologically effective statements, namely those which can be used to satisfy desires in terms of the culturally favoured moral concepts.

S concludes that, if the possibility of using moral language exists, that is of consciously saying to one's self "I can

satisfy egoistic desires by making them appear altruistic" then the use of moral language itself becomes morally questionable. If this happens then moral discussion becomes synonymous with moral practice and is not further analysable, since every analysis imports a morally questionable motive.

Given that this exactly what moral theorists attempt to do it follows from S that they are not talking about moral discussion but partaking in it or, more accurately, simply continuing to act. They may therefore be asked whether their theories are themselves the result of morally questionable desires: One might wonder, for example, whether some realists propose moral theories which marginalise the so-called mentally ill because of a dislike for such persons.

The objectivist might reply that while the rules governing moral concepts are not presently clear the dialectical process of moral discussion will eventually converge upon the truth about which desires are good. But if S is true how is such a convergence possible when the employment of opinions which are to facilitate this process are themselves amenable to moral criticism? Surely the morality of applying moral language must first be established, by a similar dialectic. But, of course, a vicious regress would ensue.

While S is superficially attractive it would not actually be possible, on the subjectivist view, to consciously mask an egoistic desire as an impartial one. This is because S relies on the false premise that the individual has his own meaningful concept of altruism and egoism, while others are unable to access his real desires. Take the following two sentences: A: I gave to charity from an egoistic desire to relieve my conscience and B: I gave to charity from an altruistic desire to help others. If a private rule governed language is impossible then the subjectivist must admit that I will be unable to tell A from seeming to be A. Thus, I cannot meaningfully employ the terms egoism and altruism. If I apply them it is simply as if I am saying to myself "don't bother giving to charity" or "well done for giving to charity" in order to shape my future desires. And if "I" is replaced with "John" then I still cannot tell A from seeming to be A and, again the terms refer to nothing. If I assume A is the case then I am saying,

"Thumbs down about John giving to charity" and if I assume B, "Well done to John for giving to charity". Again, I am attempting to alter the attitudes that people take regarding his action and therefore, indirectly, the chances of him, or someone else, repeating it. This applies equally to other moral interlocutors. The origin of an individual's evaluation of their own or another's desires will be discussed shortly.

Thus these attributions are primarily aimed at the action, not the agent. It should also be noted that they do not purport to describe something inherent in the action itself because, in the absence of applicatory rules, seeming to be amount to being. Rather they intend to either commend or disparage that type of action in order to encourage or discourage its performance. It is likely, from an evolutionary perspective, that we have developed a particular psychological sensitivity to moral praise or blame, perhaps due to an association with physical reward or punishment. Thus moral language may have evolved as a specialised behaviour regulating mechanism. If the expressions of desires by moral interlocutors do have this attitude influencing role then the emotivist may propose a deterministic model of moral discussion.

The perceived moral worth of a certain action within a community, and therefore the likelihood of it being performed, becomes the aggregate of individual expressions for and against it. Behaviours will tend towards the prescribed direction with a speed roughly proportionate to the imbalance of opinion. The origin of each individual's evaluation of personal or public actions becomes a net result of opinions expressed by friends, parents, the media etc. This is more plausible when it is coupled with the overwhelming desire that each individual has to be part of the community and to enjoy the obvious personal benefits which that brings. In addition, biological and social factors, such as genetic similarity or social relationship, may determine the extent to which moral assertions impact upon individual evaluations of given desires. The development of an individual's own desires will be influenced by factors such as material wealth and physical predisposition. An individual will tend to perform those actions which he desires and perceives as most

worthwhile.

Thus, moral discussion governs a self-regulating system of behaviours to maintain the community's stability or some other unknown factor. Each discussion is an exchange of expressions of desire, on a local level, designed to psychologically determine the behaviours which will be most useful in that respect. Despite appearances, this model remains essentially subjective.

First, each moral assertion is still the expression of an individual desire even though that desire is largely the result of factors external to him. Second, and more importantly, the factors impinging on the community, for example the prosperity and health of its individuals, are dynamic and sometimes extreme. Thus there will never be a particular set of actions which will consistently maintain the stability of the community and which will, therefore, be consistently promoted or discouraged. That is *the application of moral concepts will never be governed by generally accepted rules*. In addition, the effect of different impinging factors will be likely to vary among different individuals according to their physical differences and within the same individual at different times. These dynamics should be compared with factual language whose rules, while not static, change very slowly. However, the *publicity* of moral language may vary from being almost wholly rule governed, for example in a religious climate, to almost the opposite extreme.

Every culture has prevalent pairs of moral polar opposites for describing actions. Ours is dominated by altruism and egoism. In addition to these descriptive terms are pairs of consequential terms which purport to describe the state of affairs which an action produces. These include maximum utility-minimum utility, equality-inequality and fairness-unfairness. With both sets of terms, it is the first member of each pair which is deemed morally preferable and whose attribution to an action is intended to promote it.

The nature of moral language is such that an environmental factor necessitating the promotion of previously discouraged actions does not necessitate an immediate change in vocabulary. Moral concepts are peculiar in that they lend

themselves well to the prescription of contrary behaviours. In a sense they seem to contain their opposites. For example, the ideal of equality dictates that people are treated equally. But this means nothing by *itself*. It might imply that as a doctor I administer the same amount of pain killer to all patients. But the principle of diminishing marginal utility seems to indicate that I administer it in a way which will result in the greatest reduction of aggregate pain. And this implies that, while interests are to be treated equally, individuals are not. By being impartial in one sense I may be partial in another and vice-versa. Thus a morality which favours impartiality might come to emphasise need, and this may or may not supersede impartiality as the central tenet of moral discussion. Indeed impartiality may become a derogatory term if the actions which were once beneficial become the cause of harm in the community. In this way moral vocabulary evolves and diversifies but the nature of the terms is always such that they may refer to very different actions, according to the qualifications which are continually being appended to them.

The deterministic emotivism that I have suggested here still remains subjective in many respects. Perhaps most importantly it does not assign to moral discussion a static set of criteria which govern the type of desire converged towards. Nevertheless, the fact that individual evaluations of desires are largely determined by the expressions of others does seem to base the model on impartiality. However, there will be many situations where the greatest benefit to the community will be produced if a small number of individuals, perhaps doctors, are treated preferentially. Furthermore, individuals may be impartial in this sense in order to benefit personally from belonging to the community. Perhaps it is not incompatible with any impartially grounded theory, whether nominally subjective or objective, to say that all moral discussion is fundamentally the expression of an ego-centric and biological desire not to be marginalised from society.

The adoption of an emotivist stance is supported by Festinger's theory of Cognitive Dissonance (1957) which has

continued to receive strong empirical support. This suggests that an agent's beliefs about his past actions and his attitudes are engaged in a dynamic equilibrium which minimises the dissonance arising from the inconsistencies between those cognitions. Neither assumes any long term priority in this process. If, as this suggests, attitude and action are indistinguishable kinds then, given that desires motivate action, it must also be admitted that they motivate moral opinion.

The Humean thesis needs to be supplanted by a holistic appreciation of the essential similarity between both moral assertions and actions and, if Smith is right, moral beliefs and desires. This would unite desires, moral beliefs, and actions as the same kind of happenings. If moral discussion is to be likened more to physical behaviour than factual language, then moral philosophy might do well to view itself as an undistinguished part of human behaviour, rather than as a privileged and distanced meditation upon it.

WORKS CITED

- Ayer, A.J. *Language, Truth and Logic*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1952.
- Dancy, J. *Moral Reasons*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
- Eiser, R. & J. van der Plight. *Attitudes and Decisions*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Singer, P., ed. *A Companion to Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.