

## XVII Moral Judgement and Motivation I

### META-ETHICAL BACKGROUND

Some very broad (and horribly simplified) distinctions:

*Kantian* theories take moral understanding to be a standard form of intellectual understanding (in terms of the categorical imperative). The motivation to act morally is now derived from this intellectual understanding. The immoral person acts irrationally; our motivation to act morally is, in some important sense, akin to our motivation to act rationally.

*Humean* theories understand moral judgement as basically driven, not by the intellect, but by sentiment. That is, we have certain *feelings* upon which our judgments are based. For Hume himself the central feeling is sympathy: the suffering, or happiness, of others produces similar suffering or happiness in us, in proportion to how closely we identify with them. Moral motivation is now understood as desire, not reason, based: we act morally in order to quieten these feelings.

Both accounts require an empathetic element, though in very different ways: the former to implement the categorical imperative, at least in one of its formulations (act only on maxims that you could will to be universal law); the latter to generate the sympathetic response.

### THE MORAL/CONVENTIONAL DISTINCTION

There are many findings on children's ability (from a very young age) to distinguish between moral and conventional obligations. Moral obligations are seen as less permissible, more serious and less authority dependent.

Nichols argues (in his book) that this counts against 'perspective taking' accounts, i.e. accounts that require us to take the perspective of another. Basic argument: (i) perspective taking accounts require us to have a theory of mind for other people, but this comes in after children get the conventional/moral distinction; (ii) autistic children get the conventional/moral distinction, but find it very hard to empathize with others. (Is this opposed to a Kantian or a Humean view? Or both? Nichols seems to think that it only counts against the former.)

### EXPLAINING THE MORAL/CONVENTIONAL DISTINCTION

Blair's account: the Violence Inhibition Mechanism (VIM): compare the response of dogs to other dogs who submit. Roughly the idea is that the distress gives rise to an aversive feeling, which is what characterizes moral transgressions. In contrast, where there is no distress, there is only a judgement of conventional obligation. This doesn't require a perspective taking judgment. Evidence for the account: imprisoned psychopaths seem to be unable to make the moral/conventional, classing all wrongs as conventional (or, sometimes and disconcertingly, as all moral). They also tend not to have aversive reactions to distress. In contrast, autistic children do make the distinction, do have aversive reactions to distress, but are not able to make sophisticated mind readings (they are bad on the false belief task).

Nichols' criticism: Blair's account doesn't distinguish between *bad* and *wrong*.

#### NICHOLS' SENTIMENTAL RULES ACCOUNT

The basic idea is that whilst the emotional response is necessary for a moral sensibility, it is not sufficient. It needs, in addition, a rule based system, though this requires sufficiently little mind reading that autistic children are capable of it.

Supposed evidence for this: a non-conventional response to emotions other than distress. This comes out in responses to disgust. But how does this help? It does suggest the centrality of emotion; and it suggests that Blair was wrong to focus purely on distress (couldn't this be easily corrected?) But how does it help support the more significant departure from Blair, the claim that moral thinking involves a two-part structure, combining emotional responses and *rules*?

#### NEURO-PHYSIOLOGICAL FINDINGS

Greene *et al.* on the trolley problem