

Norms, Emotions and the Causal Question

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Contemporary meta-ethics

Three main alternatives:

- Naturalism: a reduction of normativity to the descriptive (conceptual content or reference)
- Non-naturalism (usually *a priori* ethics)
- Expressivism (non-cognitivism): naturalism without scientific study of normative questions

=> No scientific study of ethics (without reductionism)

Ethical empiricism?

- What could act as the empirical basis for ethics?
- *Emotion* as analogous to *observation*
 - Offering (defeasible) justification to a normative view
 - E.g. a (type of) act gives rise to a feeling of indignation, counting in favour of thinking that the (type of) act is wrong

A little help from Peirce

- Emotional interpretants
- Statistical methods applied on emotions/feelings
 - “Study of Great Men” (1883-4): to “explode the ordinary notions that mathematical treatment is of no advantage when observations are devoid of precision and that no scientific use can be made of very inexact observations” (7.256).
- Peirce’s reservations about scientific ethics (1898)
 - But conservatism analogous to common sense in general, not necessarily particular to normative (ethical) questions

Pragmatist approach

- Emotional interpretants have dynamic objects
 - Emotions can be more or less “appropriate” of their objects
 - Normative inquiry a matter of striking a balance between our norms and emotions – analogously with theories and observations
- Peirce’s account of truth as the opinion that would withstand indefinite (scientific) inquiry
 - Analogously with normative (moral) opinion
 - *Pragmatism*: there is no object/property that would “surpass” such inquiry

The causal question

But is e.g. a feeling of indignation *caused* by the wrongness of an act?

- We seem assured that e.g. the observation of a diamond being hard is *caused* (to an extent) by an external object, diamond, having certain properties
- We are far less assured that our emotions are caused by something of the sort – a *moral* property with causal powers

Reactions

- “Common point of view” views
 - E.g. forms of Aristotelianism, Humean sentimentalism, even Kantianism
 - “Constructivism”
- Or response-dependent views about the conceptual content of moral terms
 - E.g. X is wrong = X elicits certain feelings in us
 - Reductionism

Pragmatist responses

1. The insistence that emotions have no dynamical objects (or caused by “external” properties) is a form of skepticism blocking the way of inquiry.
2. The causal question is a version of the problem of perception, viz. that there is no way of telling an illusion from reality from the subjective point of view. However, objectivity can be reached by collateral observation.

Recap

- Peirce's views of emotional interpretants, statistical methods, pragmatism, science and realism to be exploited in developing an empirical ethics
- The causal question nevertheless seems to push philosophers to alternative views
- Can be met by pragmatist means
 - Anti-skeptical argument
 - Objectivity by means of collateral observation