

The Mental and the Normative: a Non-psychological Account

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"It has been widely held that, in the history of the human race, judgements of right and wrong *originated* in the fact that primitive men or their non-human ancestor had certain feelings towards certain classes of actions (...) so that, in a sense, our moral judgements were *developed out of* mere feelings. And I can see no objection to the supposition that this was so. But, then, it seems also to be often supposed that, if our moral judgements were developed out of feelings – if this was their origin – they must *still* at this moment be somehow concerned with feelings: that the developed product must resemble the germ out of which it was developed in this particular respect. And this is an assumption for which there is, surely, no shadow of ground"¹

As Moore thinks that the view about the origin of moral judgements is different from the one about ontological *status* of moral judgements, even if the two views are very liable to be confused with one another, so I think that the account about the origin of normative judgements relating to how we ought to act is different from the account about what normative judgements are.

When you have to solve a problem, you have to deal with information. Information comes from the outside world into the sensory registers in the human brain. This input consists of things perceived by our senses. We are not consciously aware of most of the things we perceive; we become aware of them only if we consciously direct our attention to them. When we do focus our attention on them, they are placed in our working memory (short-term memory). Each piece of information that comes into this short-term storage area, if one does not forget it, is moved out of this area by being shifted to long-term memory.

We all take in information through our senses and this information is processed by our brain resulting in behaviour, our response to the situation. We all have the same sensory systems, yet we may respond very differently to the same input information. We have all experienced situations in which people have very different reactions to the same inputs. Different processing can result from people accessing different reference experiences from their personal history memory or utilizing different processing patterns. But it is important to analyse, independently from any difference, the essential structure of normative judgements relating to how one ought to act, i.e. the nature of the concept of the normative judgement.

A human being can solve a problem or satisfy a desire because, in first place, he is able to figure out how the things will be after his actions. If the situation is different from what he wishes and has pictured, he has to select an

¹ G. E. Moore, *Ethics* (Oxford UP, 1978), pp 48-49.

immediate aim, i.e. something that is desired immediately for itself (if one is hungry and he does not have food, he establishes finding food as an immediate aim: the aim is *principium in intentione et terminus in executione*). If an aim is not immediately available, one must choose adequate means to get it, i.e. he formulates a normative judgement relating to how he ought to act, on the basis of the own belief and the own memory. This is the origin of normative judgements and this is an essential feature of practical reason, or, using Kant's phrase, of "reason in its practical employment".

Any normative judgements is based on a belief and there is, as Hume says in the *Treatise*, a close correlation between belief and passions: "As belief is almost absolutely requisite to the exciting our passions, so the passions in their turn are very favourable to belief; and not only such facts as convey agreeable emotions, but very often such as give pain, do upon that account become more readily the objects of faith and opinion (...) When any affecting object is presented, it gives the alarm, and excites immediately a degree of its proper passion; especially in persons who are naturally inclined to that passion. This emotion passes by an easy transition to the imagination; and diffusing itself over our idea of the affecting object, makes us form that idea with greater force and vivacity, and consequently assent to it" (I, III, 10, p. 120)².

The predominance of a belief is determined by the intensity of the passion that is correlated. The belief, which is a constitutive element of a normative judgement relating to how one ought to act, is able to excite new desires and interests. By the memory and the custom, the normative judgements can become a general rule. It is important, before dealing with the formation of general rules, to examine the place of pleasure in the account about the origin of normative judgements.

According to Hume, any passion, not only the direct passions, is founded on pleasure or pain:

"The chief spring or actuating principle of the human mind is pleasure or pain; and when these sensations are remov'd, both from our thought and feeling, we are, in a great measure, incapable of passion or action, of desire or volition. The most immediate effects of pleasure and pain are the propense and averse motions of the mind; which are diversified into volition, into desire and aversion, grief and joy, hope and fear, according as the pleasure or pain changes its situation, and becomes probable or improbable, certain or uncertain, or is consider'd as out of our power for the present moment." (III, III, 1, p. 574).

According to Hume's hedonistic view, the pleasure is the ultimate account of any human act of volition, it is not only the cause of the origin of normative judgements:

"It appears evident that the ultimate ends of human actions can never, in any case, be accounted for by *reason*, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependance on the intellectual faculties. Ask a man *why he uses exercise*; he will answer, *because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire, *why he desires health*, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries

² D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

farther, and desire a reason *why he hates pain*, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object. (...) And beyond this it is an absurdity to ask for a reason. It is impossible there can be a progress *in infinitum*; and that one thing can always be a reason why another is desired. Something must be desirable on its own account, and because of its immediate accord or agreement with human sentiment and affection."³

If it is evident that pleasure and pain are the cause of the origin of normative judgements, this statement does not imply that if something must be desirable on its own account, it is so because of its immediate agreement with human sentiment and affection. The human mind is not only a set of atomistic mental images and representations, as Hume thought, which are united by a "gentle force". Before Hume, the psychological hedonism, the view according to which desiring a thing, and finding it pleasant, are, in the strictness of language, two modes of naming the same psychological fact, was already criticized and disapproved by Joseph Butler, who, in the eleventh Sermon preached at the Rolls Chapel in London, in a Sunday of Advent in 1726⁴, held that it is normal for a man to have an instinct of self-interest, which leads him to seek his own good, and equally normal for him to have an instinct of benevolence, which leads him to seek the good of others individually and generally, and that the two aims do not in fact conflict.

Our conscious active impulses are so far from being always directed towards the attainment of pleasure or avoidance of pain for ourselves, that we can find everywhere in consciousness extra-regarding impulses, directed towards something that is not pleasure, nor relief from pain; and, indeed, a most important part of our pleasure depends upon the existence of such impulses. As Sidgwick wrote, such impulses "are in many cases so far incompatible with the desire of our own pleasure that the two kinds of impulse do not easily coexist in the same moment of consciousness; and more occasionally (but by no means rarely) the two come into irreconcilable conflict, and prompt to opposite courses of action."⁵ It is important to point out that the familiar instances of conflict between impulses directed towards the attainment of pleasure and some extra-regarding impulse are not paradoxes and illusions to be explained away, but phenomena which the analysis of our consciousness in its normal state, when there is no such conflict, would lead us to expect. If we are continually acting from impulses whose immediate objects are something other than our own pleasure, it is quite natural that we should occasionally yield to such impulses when they prompt us to an uncompensated sacrifice of pleasure.

Therefore if we want to understand the essential structure of the normative judgements, if we want to get a constitutive account about normative judgement, we have to analyse the relation between the will and the desire, disregarding the role of pleasure in the determination of the will. A constitutive account cannot be captured in purely modal terms. Giving a

³ D. Hume, *Enquires Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 293.

⁴ J. Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (London: Botham, 1726)

⁵ H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, (London: MacMillan, 1907) I, IV, 3.

constitutive account is not the same as specifying modally necessary and sufficient conditions. For example, being a type of polygon that can be inscribed in a circle regardless of the lengths of its sides is necessary and sufficient for being a three-sided polygon. But a correct constitutive account of a triangle will plausibly mention the latter but not the former property.

Not all modal determinants of a phenomenon are constitutive determinants. One who agrees with that point might nevertheless conceive of a philosophical account as an attempt to specify *constitutive* determinants of the target phenomenon that make up a non-redundant supervenience base for the phenomenon. A philosophical account into this form leaves out elements that are modally redundant, but may be explanatorily or ontologically significant. For example, when a constitutive account has multiple levels, the different levels could be modally redundant. Formulating the account as a specification of a base of constitutive determinants will therefore flatten the account into a single level. The pleasure is a modal determinant for the will: one can conceive it as a necessary and sufficient condition for the origin of normative judgements, but a constitutive account about the normative judgment is possible disregarding the role of pleasure in the determination of the will.

A normative judgement is usually a consequence of a rational judgement about the suitability of some means for the aim that a rational being desires to reach; i.e. reason in its practical employment is usually an instrumental reason. The principle of the instrumental reason is analytical because it is constitutive of the act of will: he who undertakes to choose an end, he undertakes at the same time to choose the means to get that end. Acting in conformity with the principle of instrumental reason is the consequence of the normative nature of the agent's mental states, when the agent feels his acts as his own ones. But a rational being can use his reason even to judge about what is desirable as an aim in itself, and not only as a means to another end. We can name *factual ultimate aim* the aim that is desired only as an aim in itself, and it is never regarded as a means. From a logical point of view, the existence of the factual ultimate aim is postulated by the order of priority according to which a human being ranges his immediate and intermediate aims, even if many persons are not aware about what their factual ultimate aim is. If the order of priority according to which the aims are ranged is rational, then the factual ultimate aim is known by the agent. Can the factual ultimate aim be conceived as a non-moral intrinsic value? The meaning of the term "value" that I use is the same that we find in David Lewis' account of value, according to which "necessarily, for all x , x is a value if and only if under ideal conditions we would be disposed to value x ".

The distinction between fact and value, in league with such equally grand and obscure distinctions, as those between objectivity and subjectivity and between receptiveness and activity in the knowledge development, has been vastly influential. Yet it appears on inspection to rest upon surprisingly discretionary foundations. If it is true that any value judgement is a normative judgement, the question about the ground of normative judgements is posed. About this topic, the *is-ought thesis* (or Hume's law), according to which no normative sentence is logically inferable from a consistent set of *purely*

descriptive (non-normative) sentences, has been stated by numerous philosophers. The acceptance of Hume's law as a logical-linguistic thesis (the thesis according to which it is impossible to derive a normative sentence from two premises which does not contain an obligation operator, or any other normative operator) does not involve that the difference between descriptive and normative level is based on absolute irreducibility.

The *great division* between prescriptive and descriptive in itself is neither true nor false and the *is-ought thesis* (i.e. the impossibility to logically derive prescriptive sentences from descriptive premises) is definitely correct, but on the condition of having chosen to adopt the *great division*. Therefore the statement «all sentences of a formalized language are divided into descriptive and prescriptive» is not analytical, (his opposite is not contradictory) but it *must* be assumed (with prescriptive value) if you want to analyse the language of morals (as many philosophers of morals do) or if you want to develop, for instance, a deontic logic. The attempts to disprove Hume's law on the logical-linguistic plan have decidedly failed and therefore the critics of the ethical non-cognitivism can only follow the two remaining roads: (a) Hume's law, valid from the formal point of view, is however «empty», since the purely descriptive plan does not exist; (b) Hume's law is irrelevant from a practical point of view, as there are some evaluative sentences universally approved (of the type: «it is better to be healthy than sick» or «you must do what it is right»). To get a constitutive account of the normative judgement we have to choose the first road and therefore we assume that the normative judgements are grounded in intrinsic features of human believing or intending.

The factual ultimate aim could be regarded by a human being as better than any other his aims, according to a relational view of good. It is important to understand that relationalism is distinct from ethical relativism. Volume, for instance, is a relational concept: nothing is absolutely voluminous. But the two-place predicate "x is more voluminous than y" has an objectively determinate extension. Perhaps the simplest relational theory of goodness is that of Hobbes, who held that to call something good is always to refer to someone's good, and that the only sense in which something can be good for someone is that he desires it for its own sake. This theory is deeply misleading and it is incapable of capturing important features of value judgement. Often we wish to raise questions about the intrinsic desirability of the intermediate ends that now are the main focus of our desires, even after any mistake in the use of the instrumental reason have been corrected. And so it is about the factual ultimate aim: one can wonder whether his factual aim is part of one's good. For instance, a niggard who uses perfectly and without mistakes the instrumental reason to get money can raise questions about the intrinsic desirability of wealth. For a niggard wealth is the factual ultimate aim, but is it an intrinsic value?

We can name the ultimate aim *normative ultimate aim* if, and only if, it is an intrinsic value, i.e. if it is the objective interest of the agent. We can define the intrinsic value as what is desired by an ideal agent who is endowed with unqualified cognitive and imaginative powers, and full factual and nomological information about his physical and psychological constitution. Such ideal agent, if he were, would have only rational desires. The normative ultimate aim is the

factual ultimate aim of an ideal agent and it is his objective interest. If one were to become fully convinced that one's desire for his aim is not supported by right reflection upon the facts, one presumably would this to be a count against acting in conformity of the desire. Using the reason to judge whether the factual ultimate aim is an intrinsic value for the agent is a non-instrumental use of reason, even if we are always regarding normative judgements in both the cases.

Is the normative ultimate aim necessarily a moral normative ultimate aim? The answer to this question depends on the view about the intrinsic value. Is the intrinsic value always a moral value? In the second half of the twentieth century, many ethical theorists sake to capture the special character of moral evaluation by identifying a moral point of view that is impartial, but equally concerned with all those potentially affected. Other philosophers have come to a similar view by investigating the sort of reason treated as relevant in moral discourse. They held that moral norms reflect a certain kind of rationality, rationality not from the point of view of any particular individual, but from the social point of view. In the nineteenth century, Henry Sidgwick distinguished between egoistic hedonism and universalistic hedonism, i.e. the utilitarianism. The egoistic hedonism is the method of determining reasonable conduct that implies the adoption of his own greatest happiness as the ultimate end of each individual's actions⁶. In this view the ultimate end could be conceived as a non-moral intrinsic value, if we hold that the greatest surplus of pleasure over pain is an intrinsic value for an agent, i.e. his objective interest. While, on the contrary, by utilitarianism he means the ethical theory, that the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right, is that which will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct⁷. He conceives the ultimate end of an utilitarian as a very moral intrinsic value. All these points of views assume that an intrinsic value for a human being is not necessary a moral value.

On the opposite, according to the aristotelian-thomistic view of ethics, only moral value is the intrinsic value for an agent, i. e. his objective interest: aiming at self-fulfilment is the same that aiming to moral values.

This account of the normative judgement postulates the negation of the absolute heterogeneity between fact and value, as the pragmatism holds. During his Italian lectures at the University of Roma in March 1992, Hilary Putnam stated that at least two ideas typical Dewey pragmatism were still fertile: the pre-eminence of practical reason and the holistic interdependence between fact and theory and fact and value. For Putnam as well as for Dewey pure data do not exist: nothing is given if not in relation to an idea or an operational level that can be formally expressed; from a formal point of view, both in natural languages and in formalized ones, a fact is expressed in singular statements, while a scientific law is a statement with a universal quantifier, but this difference is not based on absolute irreducibility.

In other words: facts are operational in the sense that they are the consequences of organization and choice; concepts are operational because

⁶ H. Sidgwick, *ibidem*, II, I, 1

⁷ H. Sidgwick, *ibidem*, IV, I, 1

they are nothing but the proposals and plans intervention activities on existing conditions. Each procedural choice in a survey is the consequence of practical judgement and, for Dewey, each practical judgement is an evaluation (i.e., in other words, the evaluation is engendered by a criticism to problem-solving procedures). Putnam explicitly states that Anglo-American philosophy has overlooked Dewey's insistence on the intertwinement between facts and values. Besides, about epistemology, pragmatism refuses the distinction between observational and theoretical terms suggested by Carnap and by neopositivistic philosophers. Carnap and neopositivistic philosophers were non-cognitivist about values, meaning they thought that value statements were cognitively meaningless. Dewey, on the other hand, believed that evaluative judgments were integral to scientific inquiry. For Dewey, inquiry is rooted in practice: "All controlled inquiry contains a *practical* factor; an activity of doing and making which reshapes antecedent existential material which sets the problem of inquiry"⁸. The judgments of scientists are not merely descriptive or factual assertions, but also judgments of practice, i.e. "decisions as to what to do and what means to employ in doing it"⁹ Because inquiry is an intervention into a problematic situation, decisions must be made as to the appropriate means of resolving that situation. The inquirer is thus constantly evaluating possible courses of action. According to Dewey, any genuine deliberation proceeds by institution and examination of alternative courses of activity and consideration of their respective consequences, which are always operational rather than terminal; for Dewey means and ends are always interdependent in inquiry.

This interdependence between means and ends is the ground for the view according to which any normative judgement has the same structure and nature, irrespective of the fact that it is a judgement about a means, or an immediate, intermediate or ultimate aim: purely theoretical or descriptive judgements do not exist, but they all postulate some kind of normative structure in the use of the human reason. Knowing and understanding something allows and encourages every human being to have a reason to act, i.e. a consideration that counts in favour of an action or attitude. The normative judgements are grounded in intrinsic features of believing or intending and surely they are an irremovable element in constitutive aims of believing or intending.

Many philosophers have claimed that the *intentional* is *normative* (this claim is the analogue, within the philosophy of mind, of the claim that is often made within the philosophy of language, that meaning is normative.) The "intentional" is a subset of the mental. All conscious mental states are *about* something; they are "directed towards" or "concerned with" something. For example, some of my beliefs are *about Italy*; some of my intentions are *about going to Rome*; and some of my feelings are *about God*. These mental states all have intentional content, and so may be called "intentional states"¹⁰. The normative judgements are grounded in intrinsic features of the intentional states of the human mind. Our intentional states are always correlated with

⁸ J. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938), p. 160

⁹ J. Dewey, *ibidem*, p. 161

¹⁰ J. Searle, *Intentionality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), chap. 1

our dispositions; when I refer to our "dispositions" here, I do not mean to focus exclusively on our behavioural dispositions; I mean to include our mental dispositions as well, such as our dispositions to revise our beliefs and intentions in response to various conditions. For instance when a human being possesses a concept, he has a disposition to use this concept to formulate judgements. This disposition is part of what it is about you that makes it the case that you possess a concept. If one possesses a concept, the dispositions in virtue of which one possesses it must be rational dispositions. Then we can hold that the normative nature of our judgement is intrinsic with our rational dispositions: the rational dispositions of our mind have essential normative properties, even if we must not identify mental properties with their normative role in mental activity.