

Lecture 9b: Hume's Consequentialist Ethics



Against a Rationalist view on morals

Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Astell all thought that what makes humans essentially human is our rational abilities. All our knowledge, scientific or moral, is linked to our capacity of reason, thinking and deliberation.

Recall that Mary Astell proposes that women, as well as men, must nourish their immortal souls, morally and intellectually, rather than just focusing on material things. Astell emphasises virtues such as self-control and wisdom, and, in line with her rationalism and mind – body dualism, she argued for the mastery of the rational soul over our bodily passions.

David Hume, on the other hand, opposes the rationalist idea of a constant combat between reason and passion.

Nothing is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason, and to assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates. Every rational creature, 'tis said, is oblig'd to regulate his actions by reason... (Hume, Treatise, book II, part III, section III).

To Hume, the role of reason is much more modest than what the rationalists suggested. Reason is able to deal with truth and falsehood in (a) relations of ideas (mathematics, logic) or (b) matters of fact. Reason concerns agreement or disagreement of these factual matters, but not our feelings, will or values.

The naturalistic fallacy: deriving values from facts

Plato and Aristotle assumed that virtues such as courage can be discovered through reason: Plato, because our souls used to live in the World of Forms together with the virtues, and Aristotle, through applying the principle of virtues as the Golden Means between two vices. We will later see that also Kant takes morality to be a matter of rational principle.

In contrast, Hume made a clear distinction between facts and values. Facts are about truth and falsity, while values are about what ought to be the case. According to Hume, what ought to be cannot be discovered as facts. When we say how something ought to be, we are not stating a matter of fact, but something about our own judgement about the world.

In his treatment of induction, we saw that Hume was concerned with logically valid inferences. Our conclusions should follow from our premises, and not go beyond. When we derive what ought to be from what is, this is a logically invalid inference:

Premise: Children are dying from starvations.

Conclusion: We ought to prevent this.

To make this inference valid, we need to add a principle containing "ought":

Premise 2: We should prevent children dying from starvation.

But premise 2 cannot be derived from another fact. So for any moral claim, we need a moral premise to back it up. No facts are ever sufficient for drawing a moral conclusion.

Our actions are not rational or irrational

Actions, he said, cannot be called "reasonable" or "unreasonable" on this view, since reason only concerns truth and falsehood.

'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to choose my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me. (Hume, Treatise, book II, part III, section III)

To be called "unreasonable", our actions must be guided by false judgement. I might have misjudged the outcome of my action, for instance, or the best means to my aim. **Example:** I want to teach my niece how to swim, so I throw her in the water, hoping she will learn by doing. Instead, she almost drowns.

This is an example of poor judgement of reason. My passion to act in this way was founded on a false assumption of what was the best means to my aim. In this sense, my choice was irrational, in the sense that it was guided by poor reasoning. Still, this does not mean that reason can influence what I want, only my choice of how to get what I want: *"Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions."* (Hume, *ibid.*)

Pleasure and pain

According to Hume, what motivates us to act in one way rather than another is that we want to *gain pleasure* and *avoid pain*. Humans and animals share this motivation.

Moral judgement differs from our usual strive for pleasure, because we sometimes put other people's pleasure before our own. We base our moral judgement of an action on the feeling it produces in us. If an action gives me satisfaction when I observe or think about it, I judge it as praiseworthy, or virtuous. But if an action gives me a feeling of uneasiness, I judge it as blameworthy, or vicious. From this, we get ideas of virtues and vices, Hume thought.

Sympathy gives us our moral capability

Hume's philosophy of human nature is biologically motivated: as humans, we share more than separates us. "The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations..."

Sometimes, we get pleasure from observing the pleasure of a stranger. This is because of a moral capacity we have, which Hume calls *sympathy*. Sympathy, or empathy, is our ability to recognise our own feelings in others: of pain, pleasure, love, hatred, pride, humiliations, and so on. Our shared feelings give us a moral compass for how to treat others. This also includes animals, since humans and animals are much alike.

The feeling of sympathy is something we are born with, but it can be destroyed. A psychopath lacks this ability, but this would be a defect rather than a natural state of human psychology. In this sense, Hume takes our most basic moral capacity to be a natural part of our biology and psychology.

Some virtues have evolved because they are beneficial to society. Hume calls these artificial virtues. Examples of artificial virtues are justice, punctuality, cleanliness, chastity, fidelity and modesty. Women, he said, are not naturally modest, faithful or chaste, but it's seen as beneficial for society.

But we are not naturally just, punctual, clean, and so on. Natural virtues are sympathy, gentleness, friendship, compassion, gratitude, wit, and kindness towards children and animals.

Moral arguments using consequentialism

- Morality is a natural ability in humans
- Empathy or sympathy is a natural ability
- We recognise feelings in others
- Inflicting pain is morally bad, pleasure is good
- We share out moral ability with animals

Discussion questions

What is the difference between facts and values? Why did Hume argue that we cannot derive values from facts?

Do you agree with this distinction? Why/why not?

How did Hume see as the relation between reason and passions? What can affect our actions?

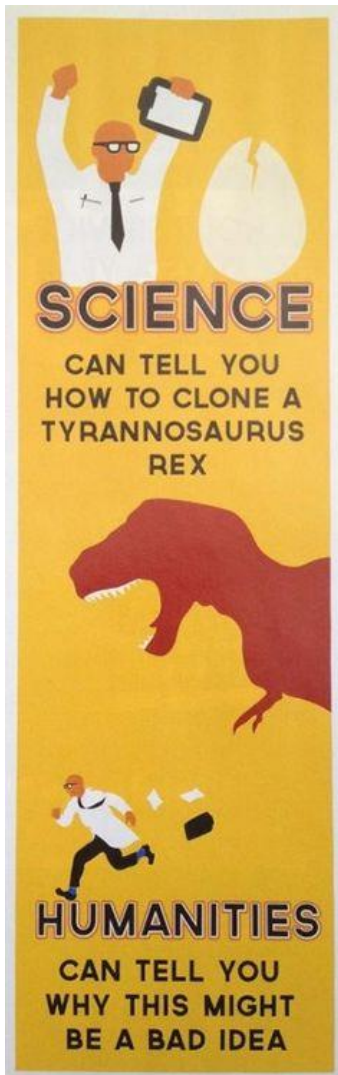
Why did Hume say that an action is never rational or irrational?

What, according to Hume, makes us judge an action as morally good or bad?

How would you compare Hume's view on virtues with the view of Plato and Aristotle?

Compare Hume's philosophical views with Astell's views.

Facts versus values. Science is good with facts, but how much is science actually concerned with values? Should it be?



Consequentialism and Conservation

The case of Cecil the lion



Cecil with a lioness

Photo: Brent Stapelkamp³⁾

SUMMARY

- Cecil was killed by a trophy hunter in July 2015²
- The hunt was sanctioned by the Namibian Government¹
- Hunt permit fee: US\$350 000¹.
- Trophy fee to kill Cecil: US\$50 000³
- Income from permits supports conservation projects¹
- Various studies show that managed trophy hunting is a good way of funding conservation projects, and managing vulnerable species¹
- Cecil was shot with an arrow, suffered considerably, and probably died 12 hours after he was wounded³

Nelson et al. discuss consequentialism in conservation. They criticise the utilitarian approach (cost/benefit analysis) for justifying trophy hunting to fund conservation. They also make a good case for the value of emotion in decision-making.

Empathy is part of Hume's consequentialist ethics. Hume reasoned that animals can feel pain and pleasure and that our moral considerations should extend to animals.

If we consider the pain and suffering of animals that are hunted for trophies, consequentialist ethics do not view trophy-hunting to fund conservation as justifiable.

1. Di Minin et al. (2016) "Banning Trophy Hunting Will Exacerbate Biodiversity Loss", *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 31(2), 99-102
2. Nelson et al., (2016) "Emotions and the Ethics of Consequence in Conservation Decisions: Lessons from Cecil the Lion", *Conservation Letters*, 9(4), 302-306
3. National Geographic, (2018), "Exclusive: An Inside Look at Cecil the Lion's Final Hours". Excerpt from "Lion Hearted: the Life and Death of Cecil and the Future of Africa's Iconic Cats" (Andrew Loveridge, 2018, Regan Arts). <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2018/03/wildlife-watch-cecil-trophy-hunting-andrew-loveridge/>

Andrew Loveridge is a biologist, and a member of the research team that has studied Cecil and the other lions since 1999).

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