

MORAL SENTIMENTALISM
ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCUSSION ON THE
FOUNDATION OF ETHICS AND ITS CONSTRAINTS

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How can we distinguish between vice and virtue? Why be moral? When it comes to these core-questions of the foundation of morality the Western history of philosophy primarily trusted in man's faculty of reason to determine the highest possible ethical virtue, to establish his own moral law or to accurately apply the greatest-happiness-principle. But next to this rationalistic paradigm in Western moral philosophy there exists also a tradition of thinking convinced that morality is closely related to or rooted in, respectively, sentiments and emotions. This tradition, starting with Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, who first postulated a "moral sense", is increasingly gaining attention of modern ethicists and evolutionist biologists alike who try to revive moral sentimentalism and to interrelate it with recent research results in the fields of psychology, neurology and biology.¹

In this short contribution I would like to outline the development of moral sentimentalism, also known as moral sense philosophy, and examine to what extent it is conducive to a better understanding of morality. The consideration of emotions in matters of ethics is especially peculiar to the

English enlightenment philosophers, such as Francis Hutcheson, David Hume and Adam Smith. Hutcheson builds on the moral sense idea of Ashley-Cooper and sets apart the moral sense from the public sense (*sensus communis*). Whereas the latter forces man to “be pleased with the Happiness of others and to be uneasy at their Misery”, the moral sense is described as the “sense by which we perceive virtue or vice in ourselves or others” (Hutcheson 1756: 5-6). The first comprehensive investigation into the key-function of moral sentiments in respect to the foundation of morality has been put forward by David Hume who attributed to them a genuine action-guiding character. Reason alone, according to him, is not able to establish moral rules for reason can only teach us which means to choose for a certain end. The end itself, its affirmation, is dependent on certain sentiments. Without them, ends just as health or utility can not be founded without an infinite regress. He writes: “But though reason [...] be sufficient to instruct us in the pernicious or useful tendency of qualities and actions, it is not alone sufficient to produce any moral blame or approbation” (Hume 1913: 126). It is our *taste* that gives us the sentiment of “beauty and deformity, vice and virtue” and ultimately motivates our action, not least in matters of morality (Hume 1913: 135): “Extinguish all the warm feelings and prepossessions in favour of virtue, and all disgust or aversion to vice: render men totally indifferent towards those distinctions; and morality is no longer a practical study, nor has any tendency to regulate our lives and actions” (Hume 1913: 4). In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which has been published only eight years after Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), Adam Smith agrees that the sentiment of empathy or altruism – which is called sympathy

in Hume's terminology – is inherent to human nature and constitutes the basis of man's faculty to overcome inclinations towards self-interest. The way empathy influences our social behavior is described by Smith as follows: "By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him [...]. His agonies [...] begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels" (Smith 1853: 4).

The moral sense philosophy has had a great impact also on Charles Darwin who declared to "fully subscribe to the judgment of those writers who maintain that of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important" (Darwin 1952: 304). According to the father of the theory of evolution man is equipped with "social instincts" that are inherited and strengthened by social influences in the form of approbation and disapprobation and that are the reason why human beings are able to feel sympathy, or more aptly named compassion, for each other. In Darwin's moral theory the civilized, morally developed man is distinguished from animals or the savage due to his unrestricted sympathy which is not only existent vis à vis the own group, but rather applied universally. The social instincts, or moral sense, as Darwin also calls them, tell us what we ought to do (Darwin 1952: 314). Anyone lacking that moral sense "would be an unnatural monster" (Darwin 1952: 312). Darwin's contemporary, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, is one of the few continental thinkers emphasising the importance of moral emotions, specifically, of compassion (*Mitleid*). In his advocacy for compassion he

most probably was influenced by Buddhism which he held in high esteem. Above all Schopenhauer argues against Immanuel Kant and his rationalistic ethics and strict aversion to sentiments and dispositions (*Neigungen*) – an aversion Kant adopted from Stoicism. It is, according to Schopenhauer, Kant's radical error to fasten virtue to abstract reflections and duty, to regard moral sentiments as some sort of weakness and to fail to recognize them as basis of morality (Schopenhauer 1985: 222). Later, moral emotions feature prominently in the phenomenology of values put forward by Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann. They attempt to overcome the ethical formalism upheld most prominently by Kant and thereby argue that moral values can be perceived a priori through emotional intuition. To Scheler and Hartmann moral values are sensible realities that do not exist independently from the subject, but rather show in course of the subject's love and appreciation. However, according to this theory, values are anything but subjective or relative. Hartmann maintains that one can only sense something as valuable in ethical terms if it is valuable in itself (Hartmann 1949: 156). Anyone unable to perceive the axiological reality and also the objective hierarchy of values, according to representatives of the phenomenology of values, suffers from what they call lack of moral sense or "value-blindness" (*Wertblindheit*) (cf. Hartmann 158).

What should have become obvious from this short insight into the history of moral philosophy is, however, that moral sentimentalism is in fact an umbrella term, comprising various, even rivalling, approaches. Hence, the question, in what ways moral sense philosophy can contribute to an adequate understanding of morality, has to be tackled on different levels. First, moral sentimentalism raises the

question of the nature of morality, i.e. the question whether right and wrong, good and bad, are relative to certain frameworks of worldview or culture, or objective “facts”. Whereas, as we have seen, the philosophical tradition of phenomenology of values assumes that it is not up to our private moral emotions to attribute value to things or actions and that a moral sense leads us to objective moral judgements, Hume on the contrary holds the view that things or actions have no value in themselves and that it is our sentiments and affection and in the end our personal preferences which lead us to approve or disapprove certain things and actions: “Objects have absolutely no worth or value in themselves. They derive their worth merely from the passion” (Hume 1964: 219). Due to the vast varieties of inclinations and preferences among people Hume considers morality to be relative, at least in large parts.² Although both the Humean position as well as the approach of Scheler and Hartmann assume that sentiments and emotions are necessary for us to make moral judgements, they differ in the way they see the mechanism of judgment formation. Whereas in the case of the phenomenology of values the value inherent to an object already does exist and only comes to the fore when our emotional intuition is added, in the Humean, emotivist theory the object has a value if and only if somebody ascribes it to it on the basis of his or her appreciation. In the tradition of Hume the Finish philosopher and cultural anthropologist Edward Westermarck states: “Whatever emotions may follow moral judgements, such judgments could never have been pronounced unless there had been moral emotions in somebody antecedent to them” (Westermarck 1932: 90). The fact that another person could ascribe to the very same object no value at all but despise it,

is not denied by opponents of Hume's relativism who rather explain it with reference to the deficiency of the moral sense or emotional intuition. If moral sentimentalism can pave the way both to moral relativism and moral realism or objectivism, which way is the right one and how to determine it? The hypothesis that "emotions can apprehend the axiological level of reality" (de Sousa 1990: 303) poses several questions: Assumed that some peoples' moral sense obviously has difficulties to grasp this alleged axiological level of reality – without this assumption the diversity of moral judgments and values can hardly be explained by moral realists – how can I know whether my moral sense is functioning the way it ought to be, i.e. producing the correct moral judgments, or not? Since the only straight way to determine its correct functioning is the comparison of my moral emotions with the alleged axiological level of reality referring to my moral emotions is to beg the question. Another, yet indirect way would be the comparison of my own moral intuitions with those of others. Assumed that their moral emotions might just as well be the product of a defect moral sense, nothing else remains to be done than referring to the moral intuition of the majority. But exactly that is what philosophers like Scheler and Hartmann shy at, arguing that murder, for example, is still vicious even if no man ever would judge it to be.

It follows from the above that moral sentimentalism is not a plausible strategy to argue for moral objectivism. The reason for this is not that emotions or intuitions per se are irrational; it is rather the apparent insuperable challenge to distinguish between correct and false moral sentiments – without relying onto sentiments again. Against this background the Humean hypothesis that morality is rather a matter of *taste* than a priori emotional knowledge admittedly

appears to be quite unsatisfying, but nevertheless more plausible. Yet remembering that Hume considered certain first principles to be universal (see footnote 2) there is hope that not all our moral emotions are entirely arbitrary. The notion that there maybe is some sort of universal basic principles or even values is also indicated by cultural anthropologists and recently biologists like Marc D. Hauser who is convinced that “moral judgements are mediated by an unconscious process, a hidden moral grammar that evaluates the causes and consequences of our own and others’ actions” (Hauser 2008: 4). Leaving aside here the question what sort of categories of moral judgments might be covered by such a universal moral grammar – basic ones or rather more differentiated ones – as well as the question how to determine whether someone’s moral sense is defect or not – a question which according to the evidence in Hauser’s book seems more likely to be answered by neurologists than moral philosophers – other crucial questions remain. It is above all the question whether the alleged universal moral grammar, evolved in course of the human development during the last two million years, has any normative relevance for beings that are able to reflect upon themselves. Or put another way: What kind of *ought* – if at all – follows from the *is* of moral instincts, as proclaimed by Darwin? The difficulty to derive norms from facts has first been noticed by Hume. According to what to today is known as Hume’s law it is logically incorrect to deduce ought statements from is statements ignoring the fundamental gap between them. This gap, however, is not insurmountable, as representatives of logical empiricism, e.g. Viktor Kraft and Hans Reichenbach, have emphasised by demonstrating that a subjective motive can function as a bridge between facts and norms; but since this

motive is a subjective one, the whole argument involving is and ought statements is too. The argument, for example, that people must not smoke because of this habit's negative effects on health is only valid on condition that the addressed actually *want* to protect their health.

Viewed in this light the question what sort of ought follows from the fact that evolutionarily developed moral sentiments and emotions do play an important role in course of the formation of our moral judgements is a totally open one. One could of course – with contemplation of Darwin's theses – argue, that without our natural moral sense and faculty of altruism and empathy the human race would not be able to prosper and that social life necessarily would collapse. Whereas this reasoning is quite unproblematic in case of personal, individual finding – for it is grounded in the subjective motive to live in harmony with one's fellow men as well as the wish that the human race as such should continue to exist – it is in effect illegitimate once it is generalised – something faded out in many advocacies of evolutionary ethics. One could counter at this stage of discussion that moral sentiments or a moral sense are not simply facts, but rather constitute an *is* with an inherent *ought* so that Hume's law would not apply for moral sentiments do exist bearing also a normative dimension. Assumed that the human mind like no other is able to rise above the human existence including its alleged immanent moral imperatives by reflecting upon it, it is obvious that man can easily rise above any moral dictates of his nature. His freedom enables man to refuse any prescriptive judgments stemming from his "natural" moral sentiments.

To argue that nevertheless one has to follow them because they are natural and what is natural is good means not only to

again conflict with Hume' law, but also with George Edward Moore's warning against the so-called naturalistic fallacy (cf. Moore 2000: 93ff.). That some thing is natural, according to Moore, by no means implicates that it is good in ethical terms. Naturalistic ethics, i.e. ethics „which declare the sole good to consist in some one property of things, which exists in time; and which do so because they suppose that good itself can be defined by reference to such property“ (Moore 2000: 93), provoke Moore's open question argument which can be put as follows: *I know it is natural but is it also good?* To declare it to be obvious that good and natural are identical, would constitute a naturalistic fallacy because according to Moore “good does not, by definition, mean anything that is natural; and it is therefore always an open question whether anything that is natural is good” (Moore 2000: 95).

To sum up and get back to the initial question of this contribution, we can say that moral sentimentalism can illuminate our understanding of morality insofar as it raises our awareness of our emotions' contribution to moral judging. But they are not only necessary to motivate our actions and do constitute the starting point of most of our moral judgements. Apparently there are some basic moral principles, e.g. the principle of reciprocity, the principle of avoidance of suffering, prevalent in virtually all human beings that are not gained by bare cognition, but are reliant on certain moral sentiments, first of all empathy. Thus ethics, as the theory of morality, should acknowledge the function of moral sentiments especially when it comes to the question whether morality can be taught or not for under the paradigm of moral sentimentalism this question needs to be rephrased to the effect that it reads: What are the best conditions for

people, especially children, to develop utmost empathy and universal compassion? This question, however, is grounded in the conviction or motive, respectively, that empathy and compassion are precious values that should be enforced. Without this particular appreciation of moral sentiments the theory of moral sentimentalism is not able to render a thorough foundation of morality. And that is also the reason why moral sentimentalism can not thrust aside moral relativism though it can confine the thesis that human moralities are totally diverse and unendingly conflicting. We may not have a moral sense in form of a bodily organ to light us the way to moral goodness. But we nevertheless seem to share the same crucial faculty in terms of moral sentiments and emotions that make the difference between a world livable and a world of beats.

NOTES

¹ Cf. especially Michael Slote 2010; Marc D. Hauser 2007; Ronald de Sousa 1990.

² Like other philosophers of the Enlightenment who affirm moral relativism in principle, Hume is somehow at odds with a strong relativistic position and argues that at least some first principles or values, e.g. utility, are indeed universal. Therefore his stance can best be described as relativistic universalism (see Frick 2010: 45ff.).

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