

Webpage: <http://homepages.ed.ac.uk/rholton/2B/metaethics.html>

I THE MORAL PROBLEM; EXPRESSIVISM; SUBJECTIVISM

THE MORAL PROBLEM

As Smith sees it, we are strongly pre-theoretically committed to three claims:

- I. Moral Objectivity: moral judgements are beliefs about matters of fact.
- II. Internalism: moral judgements, by themselves, motivate those who make them
- III. Humean Theory of Motivation: beliefs and desires are distinct states; beliefs on their own cannot motivate.

MORAL OBJECTIVITY

This seems to be required by our practice of arguing about moral facts. Perhaps more pressingly (although Smith does not mention this) it seems to be required by the phenomenology of moral experience. When you are faced with a difficult moral problem, and wrestling with it, it feels as though you are trying to discover what you ought to do. It doesn't feel as though you can make an option right simply by deciding that it is right. Put another way: it feels as though you could make a moral mistake. (Of course, it is up to you to decide what to *do*; but that is another matter.)

Smith also thinks that it is part of our moral experience that we judge that agents in similar circumstances all have the same obligations. Perhaps that is right, but it seems to be a further claim.

INTERNALISM ('PRACTICALITY')

Suppose an M.P. were convinced by the arguments favouring the repeal of Section 28. Suppose they then, in a free vote, voted against its repeal. Wouldn't we think that there was something odd going on? Perhaps we would think that they had succumbed to pressure of some kind. But suppose there had been no such pressure. Wouldn't we then doubt that they had really judged that it should be repealed. And if they had succumbed to pressure, wouldn't we expect them to feel some guilt, or regret, at what they had done. In short: isn't the test of whether someone really judges a certain outcome to be right, that they are, to some extent, motivated to do it. Can we make sense of someone who judges a certain action to be right, but shows no motivation whatsoever to make it happen?

THE HUMEAN THEORY OF MOTIVATION

The appeal of this idea is much less obvious: it is more of a philosophical thesis, and less of a claim about ordinary experience. But as a philosophical thesis it has a lot going for it. One way of bringing it out is in terms of direction of fit. It seems to be a feature of beliefs that, if they don't fit the world (i.e. they are false) we change the beliefs. Whereas it seems to be a feature of desires that if they don't fit the world (i.e. are unsatisfied) we try to change the world to fit them.

But if that is right then beliefs on their own cannot lead you try to change the world. You need a desire. (In fact you need a belief too, since you need some view of how the world is before you can embark on action to change it.)

The three claims all look plausible, yet they seem to be in conflict. How should we respond? One response is to give up on morality altogether; to abandon it as incoherent. This is to adopt an *Error Theory*. Alternatively we could abandon one of the three principles. *Expressivists* and certain types of *subjectivists* abandon the first; *externalists* abandon the second; and various theorists (for whom there is no well established name) abandon the third. Finally we could try to show that the three principles are not really in conflict. This is what Smith tries to do.