

SYMPOSIUM

# Moral Beliefs and Cognitive Homogeneity

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**Abstract** The *Emotional Perception Model* of moral judgment intends to account for experientialism about morality and moral reasoning. In explaining how moral beliefs are formed and applied in practical reasoning, the model attempts to overcome the mismatch between reason and action/desire: morality isn't about reason for actions, yet moral beliefs, if caused by desires, may play a motivational role in (moral) agency. The account allows for two kinds of moral beliefs: genuine *moral* beliefs, which enjoy a relation to desire, and motivationally inert moral beliefs acquired in ways other than experience. Such etiology-based dichotomy of concepts, I will argue, leads to the undesirable view of cognition as a non-homogeneous phenomenon. Moreover, the distinction between *moral* beliefs and moral beliefs would entail a further dichotomy encompassing the domain of moral agency: one and the same action might possibly be either genuine moral, or not moral, if acted by individuals lacking the capacity for moral feelings, such as psychopaths.

KEYWORDS: Moral Beliefs; Cognitive Homogeneity; Moral Agency; Motivation; Psychopathy

**Riassunto** *Credenze morali e omogeneità cognitiva* – L'*Emotional Perception Model* del giudizio morale offre un approccio esperienzialista alla moralità e al ragionamento morale. Il modello, che propone una spiegazione di come le credenze morali vengano prima formate e poi applicate, intende superare il disallineamento tra ragione e azione/desiderio: la moralità non riguarda le ragioni per agire, tuttavia le credenze morali, se causate dal desiderio o in relazione con esso, svolgono un ruolo motivazionale nell'azione (morale). Questo approccio consente di identificare due tipi di credenza morale: le credenze *morali* genuine, che trattengono una relazione con il desiderio, e le credenze morali senza relazione alcuna con il desiderio e dunque caratterizzate da inerzia motivazionale. Tale tassonomia, la cui origine è da rintracciare nell'eziologia dei concetti, porta alla sgradita visione della cognizione come fenomeno disomogeneo. Inoltre la distinzione tra credenze *morali* (genuine) e credenze morali (non genuine) introdurrebbe una ulteriore possibile dicotomia interna al dominio dell'azione morale: una medesima (buona) azione può essere al contempo genuinamente morale oppure no, a seconda che venga agita da un individuo con la capacità di esperire sentimenti morali o da uno che ne sia privo, come nel caso di soggetti psicopatici.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Credenze morali; Omogeneità cognitiva; Agentività morale; Motivazione; Psicopatia

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## Quasi-Humean nature

IN *HUMEAN NATURE*, NEIL SINHABABU offers an elegant explanatory model of human psychology: “desire” is the most important term in accounting for both intentional action and moral reasoning. The proposed model can be regarded as an updated version of David Hume’s framework, and as such it enjoys some of the “Humean virtues”, among which ontological parsimony and simplicity are perhaps the most widely praised. The ethical anti-rationalist stance is as radical as in *A Treatise of Human Nature*: reason is treated as motivationally inert, and its role in moral reasoning and judgment seems to be intrinsically redundant.<sup>1</sup> Strongly rejecting the desire-as-belief view, the model disrupts any causal power of reason over desire, which is never affected by reason, as «desires cannot be created or eliminated as the conclusion of reasoning».<sup>2</sup>

The mismatch between reason and action/desire is twofold: first, actions are only driven by desires and not by reasons; second, morality itself isn’t about reasons for actions, since «the rightness and wrongness of action can’t be explained in terms of reasons to act or not to act».<sup>3</sup> The first mismatch concerns with the very nature of action, and more generally with human psychology *tout court*. Yet, the second mismatch regards the moral dimension of human psychology and agency, that is, it affects the domain of moral concepts and judgments, where questions such as “how *should* we act?” become relevant.

Sinhababu’s proposal is to tailor moral questions to experientialism, which treats them as being about the objects of our experiences (or feelings), rather than about actions: «What should I feel guilty about? What should I hope for? In general, which moral feelings objectively describe the world? [...] Fidelity to moral feeling, not causing behavioral outputs, is the essential feature of moral concepts».<sup>4</sup>

In order to account for experientialism about morality and moral reasoning, in Chapter 4 Sinhababu develops the *emotional*

*perception model* of moral judgment, which explains how moral beliefs are formed and used. The characterization of moral concepts, judgments, and of their process of formation, however, seems to overcome the second mismatch, thus adding a *quasi-Humean* component to the account. Appealed by the idea that «Experimental psychologists and neuroscientists will ultimately discover whether the Humean Theory is true»,<sup>5</sup> I will shape my comment as a critical reflection on the efficacy of Sinhababu’s proposal to overcome the second mismatch. In particular, I will focus my discussion on the notion of moral beliefs, their taxonomy, and their motivational role in agency, under the concern that the emotional perception model of moral judgments fails to fully succeed in offering a convincing account of human morality, because of its dependence upon the subjects’ capacities of experiencing moral feelings.

## Moral beliefs

*Humean Nature* provides a simple and elegant account for action: our actions are driven by desires, yet not by reason, since only desires possess the motivational force required for human agency. Such a view contrasts with the perhaps more common assumption that people are motivated to act in accordance with what they take to be the right thing to do. However, the rejection of internalist positions is accompanied by an account of morality and moral judgment in which reason turns out to play some role in moral agency. According to the *emotional perception model* of moral judgment, moral concepts (e.g., good, right, virtue, bad, wrong, and vice) are produced by moral feelings, such as guilt, admiration, horror, etc. In other words, moral feelings are the typical cause of moral judgments, and when moral judgments are actually caused by feelings, then they also possess motivational force (although not intrinsically). Here Sinhababu departs from Hume: «Hume himself probably wouldn’t accept the emotional perception

model. Much of his work suggests noncognitivism or subjectivism about moral judgment, and some of it suggests internalism about moral judgment and motivation». <sup>6</sup>

In contrast with Hume's idea that moral judgments are not beliefs, and that therefore they lack cognitive content entirely, the emotional perception model displays a non-Humean component, which makes the whole model *quasi*-Humean. When it comes to moral judgments, the mismatch between desire and reason is overcome, at least to some extent. Sinhababu's cognitivist and externalist view of moral judgment individuates an analogue in color judgment: in order to master the concept of yellow you need to know what the experience of yellow was like for you, and analogously, you cannot master the concept of wrongness if you didn't know what wrong felt like. Reasons and concepts are redundant in agency, and the very formation of genuine moral concepts depends upon our experience of moral feelings. At this point, the simplicity of the model is sacrificed by two constraints explaining how concepts relate to agency, and to moral agency, respectively: (i) only concepts enjoying a causal relation to desire have the capacity to *motivate* subjects to *act*; and, (ii) only concepts relating to *accurate* feelings might motivate subjects to *act morally*.

Constraint (i) sacrifices the simplicity of the model, as it characterizes the category of moral beliefs as twofold: within the category we must distinguish between moral beliefs caused by desires (or, more generally, experience), and moral beliefs caused by reasoning, testimony, argument, and communication. Indeed, despite the centrality of desire and experience in his account of human psychology, Sinhababu does allow for the formation of moral beliefs via *routes* other than experience: «Since moral judgments are beliefs, things that change beliefs change them. Arguments and testimony can convince people that something is morally permissible even though it feels wrong, or wrong when it feels ok». <sup>7</sup> Moral beliefs not originated from ex-

perience are very dissimilar from those caused by experience: only the latter possess motivational force, whereas the former are motivationally inert. By positing the existence of two different sorts of concepts, namely, concepts with or without motivational force, constraint (i) leads to the undesirable result that the category of concepts *lacks homogeneity*. The distinction between desire-related and desire-unrelated concepts turns out to be a quite relevant one, as it directly affects the theory of action.

The second constraint (ii) explains why subjects' actions might or might not be told genuinely moral. While moral beliefs can be acquired via testimony, communication (with both experts and non-experts), and arguments, only moral beliefs caused by experience are *moral*, where "*moral*" is intended not just as a semantic category, but more precisely as referring to the possession of motivational force. *Moral* concepts alone, yet not moral concepts, which do not trace back to desires/feelings, are required in order for people to behave morally. Hence, by combining constraints (i) and (ii), the category of moral beliefs can be divided into two subcategories: moral reasoning includes both motivationally inert moral beliefs, as well as *moral* beliefs possessing motivational force.

Moreover, constraint (ii) provides, although indirectly, an answer to the question about the ultimate nature of morality, and it seems to suggest that the subjects' capacities for moral judgment and action are strictly dependent upon their capacities for experiencing accurate feelings. The simplicity of the model is thus further challenged by the recourse to the notion of accuracy, which is approached within an experientialist framework leaving many questions – such as “what makes a moral feeling accurate?”, and “how to distinguish between accurate *vs.* inaccurate feelings?” – unanswered. Sinhababu discusses the example of Jefferson Davis's hope to preserve slavery, and he understands his hope as an instance of inaccurate feeling leading to a false moral belief: «Since the

slaves' suffering instead objectively makes slavery something that hope misrepresents, David's hope is inaccurate, leading him to false moral belief».<sup>8</sup> One problem that I see in this account of moral belief is that the truth conditions of *moral* beliefs seem to depend upon the accuracy, or accuracy-conditions, of the moral feeling representing facts (states of affairs, actions, character traits) objectively. Letting aside the problem of how to precisely identify the accuracy conditions relating facts to feelings (e.g., what if my feeling is caused by a hallucination or perceptual illusion?), it is not clear how to treat moral beliefs not acquired via experience. Let's suppose that Jefferson Davis's belief that preserving slavery is morally good was not caused by his (inaccurate) feeling of hope, but it was rather formed after his reading of *The Sword and the Distaff*, a novel by William Gilmore Simms containing numerous pro-slavery arguments that Davis found quite convincing. In this scenario, Davis's moral belief is not related to any feeling, and therefore cannot be told either true or false.

Perhaps, the emotional perception model of moral judgment would benefit from a further explanation of how exactly *moral* (yet not *moral*) concepts are formed, and what are the features (properties?) of objective facts and events experienced by the subject to give rise to the *moral* aspect of concepts. *Humean Nature* seems to ground human morality on a slippery terrain: since the formation of *moral* concepts depends on the subjects' accurate moral feelings, it ultimately depends on the subjects' capacity for accuracy in experience, as well as on the subject's capacity to phenomenally tell an accurate from an inaccurate experience.

### ■ **Amorality: A matter of experience or cognition?**

The case of psychopathy has recently gathered the attention of philosophers engaged in metaethical disputes, as it represents a real-life case particularly relevant to the discussion on whether human morality is based on reason or on emotions (or, more generally, experience).

Psychopaths are regarded as an instance of *amoralism*. Differently from the immoralist, who occasionally fails to act in a moral fashion (because of weakness of the will or other reasons) in spite of his or her full capacity to take moral considerations into account, the amoralist is incapable of morality. However, such notion of amorality is somewhat ambiguous as it can either refer to someone who entirely lacks the capacity to form moral judgments and take them into account, or to someone who is capable of forming moral judgments, yet remains indifferent.<sup>9</sup>

Studies about psychopathy are discussed in Chapter 4 as providing evidential support to the emotional perception model of moral judgment. In particular, Sinhababu explains the amorality of psychopaths in terms of their impaired capacity for experiencing moral feelings. As the model of moral judgments predicts, lacking such capacity would result in a failure of forming moral concepts and judgments, and therefore in the incapacity of acting morally.

We can also test the emotional perception model by seeing how moral beliefs are produced in people who lack emotional responses that the rest of us have. Since the emotional perception model has emotion typically causing moral belief, it predicts that people lacking the right emotions would only be able to form beliefs about moral facts through testimony. This would leave them less motivated to act morally, since moral beliefs produced by testimony need not come with motivationally potent emotions.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the prediction is based on the previously discussed distinction between moral beliefs vs. *moral* beliefs; the assumption is that psychopaths, even if capable of forming moral beliefs, do not have the capacity to form *moral* beliefs due to their emotional impairment. The motivational inertia of moral beliefs posited by constrain (ii) is the key for understanding the amoral behavior of psychopaths.

In a way, Sinhababu's understanding of psychopathy can be regarded as compatible with both of the possible readings of the amoralist. On the one side, the model – if we take the distinction between *moral* beliefs and moral beliefs into account – can explain the amoralist's lack of the capacity to form *moral* judgments in terms of her incapacity of experiencing genuine moral feelings. On the other side, the amoralist, whenever capable of forming moral beliefs (yet not *moral* beliefs), remains indifferent to them in the sense that they cannot play any role in agency. Such a reading follows three basic claims of the model: (a) moral judgment is a belief that something has an objective moral property; (b) moral judgments are typically caused by feelings; (c) *automatic* motivational force accompanies moral judgments because the emotional dispositions causing the feelings include desires.

The claims jointly describe the specific relation between experience, belief, and action. Claim (a) – one which Hume would not endorse – speaks for the Humean Theory's goal to regard morality as being about objective facts. «Moral judgments are beliefs caused by feelings about actions, people, and states of affairs»,<sup>11</sup> and therefore, provided that we have (accurate) feelings about actions, people, and states of affairs, the beliefs they cause are about objective moral properties possessed by the objects of experience (and this is what makes a moral concept actually *moral*, as discussed in the previous paragraph). Claim (b) sets the experientialist ground for the formation of *moral* judgments (e.g., that an action is right or wrong), which are caused by, or emerge from, pleasant and unpleasant moral feelings (such as guilt, horror, admiration, etc.). Here the Humean Theory correlates moral feelings with agential dispositions, so that «guilt about an action involves aversion to doing it or having done it, admiring people involves desiring to emulate or help them, and horror at some future possibility includes aversion to it». <sup>12</sup> Finally, claim (c) sets the (automatic) relation between *moral* beliefs and action via motivation.

The case of psychopathy seems to provide

support to claim (c), in particular; more generally, it helps to account of the notion of amorality as grounded in the subjects' incapacity for experience and feelings. Consequently, human morality seems to be essentially grounded in, and dependent upon the subjects' capacity for experiencing emotions.

The emotional perception model suggests that psychopaths lack the emotions driving moral motivation, generating moral beliefs, and leading to the possession of moral concepts. The situation with motivation is clear: lacking motivationally potent emotions, psychopaths don't act as the rest of us do. They have moral beliefs, but these seem to be acquired by communication from others who have moral feelings.<sup>13</sup>

Such a conception of morality might path the way to the following criticisms. First, if human morality depends upon the subjects' capacity for experiencing feelings, how is it possible to claim the amoralist (morally) responsible for his or her despicable actions? A second criticism regards the nature of moral agency: the distinction between *moral* beliefs and moral beliefs entails the analogue and counter intuitive distinction between *moral* actions and moral actions. Notably, “successful psychopaths” or “high-functioning psychopaths”,<sup>14</sup> while possessing all the core traits of the condition, are perfectly capable to act in accordance with the moral standards, as well as to appear to others as morally sane individuals. Their callousness, manipulative attitude, aggressiveness, lack of remorse, and sometimes utterly criminal actions might stay concealed for a very long time, and occasionally for all their lives. These subjects seem to be capable of feigning moral feelings, yet they still display the capacity of forming and using moral concepts despite their widely recognized abnormal emotional response.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, their emotional flaws do not prevent them from being perfectly capable, for example, to attribute moral concepts and feelings to the others. For example, sadism is a common trait of psychopaths: «In-

deed, they logically could not engage in sadism unless they were capable of identifying what their victims are thinking or feeling. To intentionally cause pain to someone else, it is logically necessary that one should know that the other person is feeling pain – I could not be sadistic toward a stone, say, or a block of wood».<sup>16</sup>

As noted by Gary Watson, «they frequently enjoy forcing others into painful submission»,<sup>17</sup> thus acting out of the goal of making another person suffer. Indeed, it is not necessary for a psychopath to lack *moral* motivation in order to behave with sadism: the appeal to the psychopath's desires and feelings would already be enough to explain his behavior (e.g., a sadistic psychopath has pleasant feelings when experiencing the sufferance of another person). Hence, if their actions are not driven by moral feelings, their moral-like behavior cannot be considered genuinely *moral*. Moral agency becomes a twofold concept, and in analogy to the distinction about beliefs, the model seems to be committed to two kinds of moral actions, which share the same content, yet have different causes: *moral* actions (caused by genuine moral feelings), and moral actions (acted by psychopaths).

In conclusion, the Humean Theory deprived of its quasi-humean component, would provide a simpler and more effective account of cases of this sort. At the light of this alternative interpretation, psychopaths are not morally blind: the experience of psychopaths is phenomenally abnormal, yet their capacity of forming moral concepts and judgments is independent from experience. An explanatory model of human psychology and action might not necessarily be enhanced in its explanatory power by the recourse to *moral* concepts. The commitment of the framework to such special concepts, which appear to be explanatorily redundant with respect to a theory of action, seems to be problematic.

The motivational inertia of *moral* concepts seems to be a relevant condition for the homogeneity of cognition, yet their relation to desire may need to be sacrificed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1793), edited by A. SELBY-BIGGE, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1960.

<sup>2</sup> N. SINHABABU, *Humean Nature. How Desire Explains Action, Thought, and Feeling*, Oxford university Press, Oxford / New York 2017, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ivi*, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> See T. SCHRAMME, *Being a (A-)Moral Person and Caring about Morality*, in: T. SCHRAMME (ed.), *Being Amoral*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2014, pp. 227-244; D.O. BRINK, *Moral Motivation*, in: «Ethics», vol. CVIII, n. 1, 1997, pp. 4-32.

<sup>10</sup> N. SINHABABU, *Humean Nature*, cit., p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> *Ivi*, p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> *Ivi*, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> *Ivi*, p. 78.

<sup>14</sup> See Y. GAO, A. RAINE, *Successful and Unsuccessful Psychopaths: A Neurobiological Model*, in: «Behavioral Sciences & The Law», vol. XXVIII, n. 2, 2010, pp. 194-210; O. SCOTT, A. LILIENFELD, L. WATTS, S.F. SMITH, *Successful Psychopathy: A Scientific Status Report*, in: «Current Directions in Psychological Science», vol. XXIV, n. 4, 2015, pp. 298-303.

<sup>15</sup> See J. BLAIR, D. MITCHELL, K. BLAIR, *The Psychopath: Emotion and the Brain*, Blackwell, Oxford 2005.

<sup>16</sup> E. MATTHEWS, *Psychopathy and Moral Rationality*, in: T. SCHRAMME (ed.), *Being Amoral*, cit., pp. 71-90, here p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> G. WATSON, *The Trouble with Psychopaths*, in: R.J. WALLACE, R. KUMAR, S. FREEMAN (eds.), *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 2011, pp. 307-331, here p. 316.