

Humean Moral Pluralism

Many perennial debates in moral philosophy are compelling because of how they bear on justification's end. For instance—does morality originate in reason or sentiment? If morality originates in reason, then it will be at least theoretically possible to provide a thoroughly rational justification for all our moral judgments. If morality originates in sentiment, then moral justification will end with concerns of ours that are not rationally required. The danger of a mistaken sentimentalism is giving up too soon: we might think a moral commitment of ours is as justified as it can be, when in fact it is based on something that can be shown to be irrational. The danger of a mistaken rationalism is unrealistic expectations: we might think a moral judgment is illegitimate because it cannot be shown to be fully rational, when in fact it is as justified as it can be.

Is morality universal or relative to culture? If it's universal, then if two cultures assign differing moral status to a single practice it will always be at least theoretically possible to show that one of them is wrong. If it's relative, then two cultures with differing views may both be as justified as can be. The danger of a mistaken relativism is, once again, giving up too soon: resting content with a practice that further moral scrutiny would reveal to be unjustified. The danger of a mistaken universalism is insisting on the impossible: refusing to accept the legitimacy of a practice because it fails to achieve a justificatory standard that is in fact unreachable.

Its bearing on justification's end is also what makes the debate between pluralists and their opponents compelling—and profoundly important to the first-person, deliberative life of a moral agent.

Moral pluralists hold that there is a multitude of basic moral principles that can come into conflict with each other. Their opponents hold that such conflict is impossible. If the opponents of pluralism are right, in every situation it will always be at least theoretically possible to justify a certain course of action by showing that it and only it follows from a correct application of basic moral principles. Every moral question you will ever face will have a principled answer. You will, of course, have to execute judgment to correctly apply principles to particular situations. But if you know what the relevant principles are and how they apply, the right answer will be clear. It will always be appropriate for you to aspire to completely principled moral justification.

If pluralism is true, in contrast, you may find yourself in a situation in which two principles require conflicting actions, and you may not be able to rely on any other principle for resolving the conflict. In morally fraught situations your final judgment may outstrip principled support, confronting you with an unfillable justificatory gap between general principles and particular judgments. Even after you have given the best justification for a course of action that it is possible to give, you may sometimes have to acknowledge that to follow that course will be to act in conflict with something of fundamental moral importance. Your best justification may fail to make all of the moral ends meet.

The danger of a mistaken opposition to pluralism is refusing to accept a course of action as truly justified because it conflicts with something of fundamental moral importance, when in fact the situation may be one in which conflict between things of fundamental moral importance is ineliminable. The danger of a mistaken pluralism is accepting as justified a course of action that conflicts with a fundamental moral end, when it is in fact possible to find a way to act that is consistent with everything morally fundamental.

In this book I explore a Humean pluralist view of morality. I elucidate how this view developed in the eighteenth century and argue for its continuing viability today.

This book is pluralist in method as well as content. I examine historical texts, empirically grounded work in moral psychology, and intuitively supported conceptual arguments. I believe the resulting view is all the more plausible for being arrived at through a variety of approaches. Looking at the same issue through different lenses is also, to me at least, more interesting.

