

Simon Blackburn:
Ruling Passions

Chapter 7

The Good, the Right, and the Common Point of View

§ The Theory of the Common Point of View

Adam Smith:

[the impartial spectator within the breast]

___ We all have a duty of self-scrutiny. We listen to the voice of our conscience. “The jurisdiction of the man within, is founded in the desire of praise-worthiness, and in the aversion of blame-worthiness; in the desire of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we love and admire in other people; and in the dread of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we hate and despise in other people.”

Hume:

[the common point of view]

___ “When [a man] bestows on any man the epithets of vicious or odious or depraved, he then speaks another language, and expresses sentiments in which, he expects, all his audience are to concur with him. He must here, therefore, depart from his private and particular situation, and must choose a point of view, common to him with others: he must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string, to which all mankind have an accord and symphony.”

___ “One man’s ambition is not another’s ambition; nor will the same event or object satisfy both: But the humanity of one man is the humanity of every one; and the same object touches this passion in all human creatures.”

*** Both Smith and Hume:**

When we are properly socialized, and awareness that our behavior could not survive the impartial scrutiny of others in uncomfortable, and in principle opens the gates to reform.

Q: If it is indeed true that we act morally because we are concerned about others’ evaluations of ourselves, can we say that the very foundation of morality lies in our concern for peer evaluation?

Blackburn’s view:

___ **It is clear that mechanisms of praise and blame are responsible for the norms people come to internalize and respect. To be self-conscious is arguably to understand oneself as a potential object of the affective attention of others.**

Q: How do we come to be motivated, not by the desire for applause or praise, but by the desire to *merit* that applause and praise?

* *Q:* If we do things *simply* for the praise of others, then our action loses its moral worth. We might also become a

social conformist. How do Hume/Blackburn solve this problem?

§ An Optimistic View on Human Nature

* An Argument from Sympathy

1. If we naturally sympathize with the pleasures and pains of others, then we naturally praise and encourage actions that promote pleasures and avoid pains; we naturally dislike and discourage actions that do the reverse.
2. Sympathy *is* a natural and human sentiment.
3. Therefore, our desires for praise and aversion for blame is natural to us.

Blackburn's caution:

___ To say that we naturally desire praise and avoid blame is not to say that these desires dominate our motivations. If we are merely driven by the desire for the achievement of praise, then we only have a false simulacrum of virtue, not virtue itself. These desires are part of the molding of our nature (diachronically); they do not determine our action (synchronically).

“With this understood, we can see the ‘Law of Opinion’ not as a lamentable competitor to virtue, but as a key ingredient in the explanation of how we come to be virtuous.”

“If all has gone well, the man within will only love what is lovable.”

§ The Problem of the Sensible Knave

___ By the standard of self-interest, the knave is acting perfectly rationally.

Hume:

___ “A Sensible knave ... may conduct himself with most wisdom, who observes the general rule, and takes advantage of all the exceptions.”

He may be without the voice within. He might recognize that his behavior exposes him to the anger or disdain of others if he is discovered, but he would simply regard this as a factor to be managed in a cost-benefit analysis. He is not against social arrangements. It is just that he stands ready to exploit them when he can.

Q: What should we do about the sensible knaves?

* Three Approaches:

[A]. Smith/Hume/Blackburn:

___ A large part of education involves making sure that people’s hearts do rebel against such ‘pernicious maxims.’ We educate people to care that they share the desires we admire, but if our education has failed *then it may be too late*. We can exhort the knave to share our sentiments. What we cannot do is argue the knave back into upright behavior. The sensible knave is just a lost cause.

[B] Aristotle:

___ **The goal of life is to live well, and to live well is to live ethically. It is our nature to be social beings. To achieve a successful living in society, we need to develop various social relationships, particularly friendship. But “friendship is not possible without virtue (Cicero, ‘On Friendship’).” Social relationships need trust and integrity to sustain. Therefore, *Good* and self-interest are inseparable.**

* Blackburn’s criticism:

___ Aristotle gives us no moral lever with which to shift an ordinary, socially successful and complacent man into a more universal ethic of respect for others outside his charmed circle.

[C] Kant:

___ **A sensible knave is one who treats others as a ‘mere means,’ an instrument of his own purposes. Such a person is deprived of the moral status appropriate to all rational beings. He is thus “irrational” – defective in his rationality. But such a person still has within himself the power to see his own conduct as odious. The norms of reason underlies the norms of ethics.**

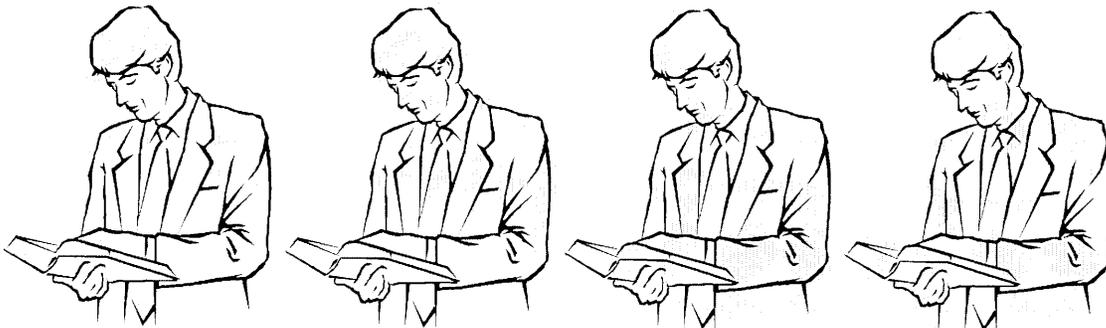
* Blackburn’s criticism:

___ Kant’s idea is a noble dream.

§ Kant’s Deontology

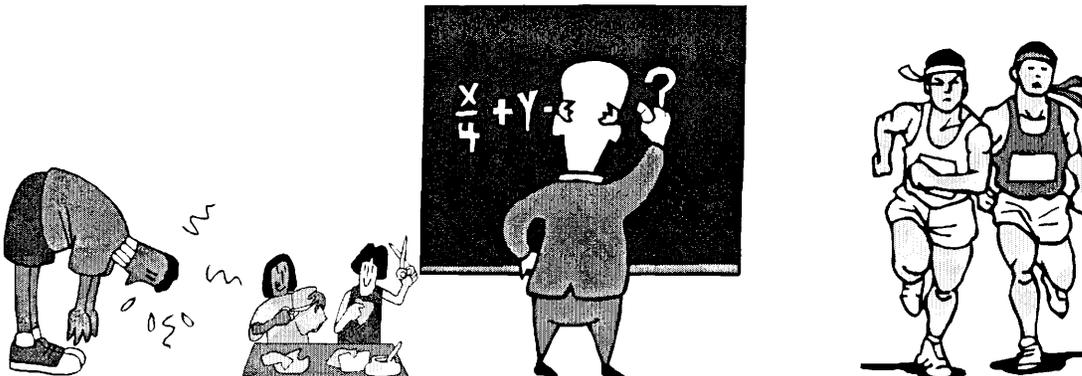
- 1. There is starry night above me; there are moral laws within me.**

2. Morality stands apart from the world of desires, and has authority over it.
3. The voice of the man within = the voice of Reason \neq the voice of others.
4. 'Autonomy' = self-governing. Man is self-governed because he is one of the law-maker in the world of morality.
5. All rational beings, simply in virtue of their rationality, are citizens of the world of morality.
6. We are citizens of two worlds – the world of morality/rationality, and the world of sensibility/desires. While we differ in the world of sensibility, we are all the same in the world of rationality.



the world of rationality

the world of sensibility



7. The central injunction: *Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*

Examples:

- (i) promise keeping
- (ii) not lying
- (iii) cultivating one's talents
- (iv) helping those struggling in hardships
- (v) not committing suicide

*** Smith and Hume start from the empirical world; their enterprise is to work out the concerns we actually have, or what genuinely motivates us in practical affairs. Kant starts from the transcendent world; he commands us to adopt theorems of *pure* practical reason.**

§ A Modern Version of the Sensible Knave: Kant's Lawyer (Korsgaard)

Korsgaard:

This is a lawyer who believes Hume's theory of the moral sentiments, and finds herself in a situation in which her deceased client has made a valid will, leaving all the money to a worthless nephew. The Humean lawyer, even if motivated to prove the valid will, should feel unsettled in doing so. Thus she is not fortified against fraud. Whereas a Kantian lawyer would be fortified by confidence in her own rectitude.

Blackburn's criticism:

___ Hume's lawyer would be motivated by, for instance, respect for the wishes of the deceased. It is not the case that she is insufficiently fortified against fraud.

Hume does realize, however, that when the disparity between general rules and public utility becomes great enough, we face genuine conflict, and the rules may have to give way.

[Conclusion]

Our emotional lives are not one-dimensional. A person may lack an effective conscience. Sometimes it takes a special social order to establish harmony between rectitude and success.

Morality is, among other things, a social achievement.