Reflective Moral Sentimentalism and the Challenge of Moral Disagreement

CSMN 4030, høst 2015, University of Oslo

According to Reflective Moral Sentimentalism (RMS), moral values originate in the sentimental responses of people to facts of various kinds which affect them. In order to avoid the consequence of agent relativism of moral evaluation, RMS tries to establish conditions for the adequacy of the respective sentiments.

Moral disagreement plays an important role in RMS: Since RMS defends an objectivist account of moral evaluation the phenomenon of moral disagreement threatens its plausibility. But moral disagreement can also be used as an integral part of RMS: It can function as a challenge that encourages the disagreeing parties to communicate with the aim of overcoming their disagreement. Underlying is the assumption that moral disagreement is not faultless but rather originating in errors at least one of the disagreeing parties has made. Such errors stand in the way of meeting the conditions of adequacy for moral sentiments. Topics of discussion include moral judgment, moral sentiments, moral disagreement, errors of moral responses and judgments, moral testimony and conscience.

We shall first study some accounts of RMS and then look into some contributions to a current debate on moral disagreement.

We shall be exploring mainly two questions: How can we defend RMS’s objectivist claims about moral evaluation against sceptical objections from moral disagreement? How can we conceptualize, identify and eliminate errors in moral sentiments and judgment?

Requirements

Students who want to get the credit points will have to attend the meetings on a regular basis and participate actively in the discussions. They will have to submit (a) one summary of a text from the reading list with 3 questions, (2) a draft of their semester paper on which they will get feedback, and (3) the semester paper. The summary and questions will also have to be presented in class.

Semester papers can be submitted either in English or in Norwegian (bokmål). The feedback will be given in English.

Course Plan and Reading List (starting week 34)

1. Introduction


Adam Smith’s Moral Theory
Adam Smith (1759/1790/1984) The Theory of Moral Sentiments. (selected passages)


Christel Fricke on Conscience in Butler and Smith (work in progress)


Concluding Discussion

Background reading:
