

## Michael Smith on Realism

**Preeti Rani**

PhD Research Fellow  
Department of Philosophy  
Delhi University

### ABSTRACT

This is a review paper on Michael Smith's article "Realism". Moral Realism is a meta-ethical position which maintains that there are moral facts i.e. they are capable of being judged as true or false. We can say that taking somebody's life/torturing/stealing and so on are wrong; and that this is not just a matter of personal opinion/choice. Smith contrasts this ethical theory with the other theories nihilism and expressivism and considers it to be most plausible one. First Smith explains the criterions that any moral theory is required to fulfill. Then he presents dilemma realism might face in fulfilling those criterions. And in the end he suggests the solutions through which realism can be rescued. Smith introduces the Humean Standard Picture of Human Psychology (SPHP), which has two features – beliefs and desires. These two presents with a dilemma- if our moral judgments express beliefs they cannot motivate us to act. If they express desires, it is odd that we would think of them as being objective. Thus these two features of our conception of morality seem not to go hand in hand. Smith shows the inadequacy of SPHP by pointing out that it fails to distinguish reasons and motives. Smith thinks that to be ideally rational one must be cool, calm, and collected (C3). Our grounds for acting don't draw from what we do desire but from what we would desire if we were ideally rational (C3). This gives Smith a way to argue that desires which are not based on false beliefs can still be rationally criticized. Smith's position can be characterized as a kind of internalist rationalism. Smith's article definitely gives strong arguments to accept realism as a meta-ethical theory but there is no denial that moral truths cannot be observed in the same way as material facts.

Key Words- Cognitivism, Expressivism, Nihilism, Realism, Standard Picture of Human Psychology.

### PROBLEM

In the "Realism" Michael Smith wants to clarify what is at stake in the debate over realism and why it seems to him that realists' stance is much more plausible than the other alternative positions

(irrealism or non-cognitivism or expressivism and moral nihilism or error theory).

It is commonplace that we appraise each other's attitude and behavior from the moral point of view. We say, for example,

that we did the right thing when we encounter a car accident and saved the child from inside the burning car and we did the wrong thing when we haven't used our cell phone at least to call for help. Philosophers' worry about moral appraisal can be seen by focusing on two distinct features of moral practice: *Practicality* and *objectivity* of moral judgment.

The idea of moral objectivity is that it is a distinctive feature of engaging in moral practice i.e. the participants are concerned to get the answers to moral questions correct. Smith summarizes this first feature of moral practice as follows, "We seem to think that moral questions have correct answers, that these answers are made correct by objective moral facts, that these facts are determined by circumstances, and that, by arguing, we can discover what these facts are. The term 'Objective' here simply signifies the possibility of a convergence in moral views". This is the agreement upon the truth.

A second and rather different feature of moral practice concern the practical implications of moral judgement, the way in which moral questions gain in their significance for us because of the special influence our moral opinions are supposed to have upon our actions. Moral judgments are thought to be practical because they are thought to motivate those who accept them.

For example, when we think that we did the wrong thing not giving famine relief we think that we failed to do something for which there was good reason and this has motivational implications. But if we also refuse to give famine relief when next opportunity come than same sort of explanation is needed. Because we seem to think to have moral opinion simply is to find you with corresponding motivation.

These two features of moral practice have both metaphysical and psychological implication and these implications are exact opposite of each other, but before talking about these implications Smith discusses the Standard picture of human psychology as given by Hume. This picture provides a model to understand human action.

There are two main human psychological states:

- Beliefs
- Desires

There are beliefs, states that purport to represent to world the way it is, and thus can be rationally criticized or assessable in terms of truth and falsehood according to its correspondence with the facts.

There are desires, states that purport to represent how the world is to be and they cannot be rationally criticized or assessed in terms of truth and falsehood. Desires are rationally natural. There is one limitation to it. Desires are subject to rational

criticism if they are based on irrational beliefs.

To make this clear Smith takes two situations. In the first case on seeing a spider I overcome with a morbid fear and thus a desire never to be near a spider. In the second case I acquire the desire never to be near a spider because I come to believe falsely that spiders gave unpleasant odor. In the first case there is no change in my desire mandated by reason, so not subjected to rational criticism. But in the second case my desire never to be near a spider is based on further desire and false belief and beliefs are subject to rational criticism, so does desires based on such - beliefs.

After having explained the standard picture of human psychology Smith gives the metaphysical and psychological implication of objectivity and practicality of moral judgments.

- **OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENT**

Metaphysical Implication: - There are not just facts about the consequences of our actions but there are facts about the rightness and wrongness of our actions having these consequences.

Psychological Implication: - (1) When we make a moral judgment we express our belief about the way these moral facts are.

(2) People who have certain moral belief may happen to have a corresponding desire

or they may not. In either way they cannot be criticized.

- **PRACTICALITY OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS**

Psychological Implication: - Since making a moral judgment entails having a certain desire, and no recognition of a fact about the world could rationally compel us to have one desire rather than other, this imply that our judgments are simply expression of our desires.

Metaphysical Implication: - There are no moral facts when we judge that it is right to give famine relief. We are not responsible to any moral fact what we are doing in judging that simply expresses our desire. So it is just like yelling "Hooray for giving to famine relief".

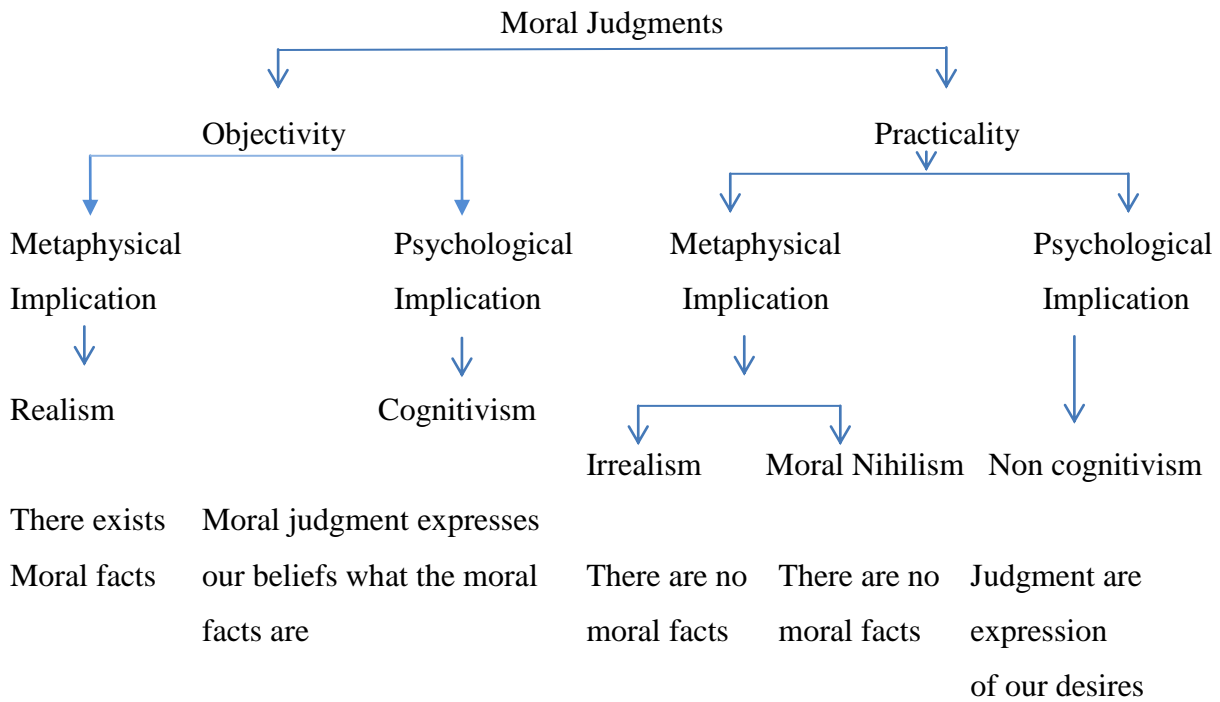
Through these implications we can see that objectivity and practicality pull in quite opposite directions from each other.

Objectivity enables us to make good sense of moral argument but do not tell how or why having a moral view is supposed to have any link with what we are motivated to do. And practicality of moral judgments on the other enables us to make good sense of link between having a moral view and being motivated but do not tell what a moral argument is supposed to be an argument about. Thus idea of moral judgment seems to be incoherent.

Practicality and objectivity of moral judgment give different theories which

stand in contrast with each other. Smith's recognition of this can be shown as

follows:



Through this chart we can see that realism is a metaphysical or ontological view and cognitivism is its psychological counterpart. Moral realism contrasts with two metaphysical views irrealism and moral nihilism and non-cognitivism is the psychological counterpart of irrealism. Irrealism or expressivism and nihilism share a conception of the world as value free and so devoid of any moral nature. However, they differ in crucial respect as well. Because Nihilism insists that moral thought and talk presupposes that rightness and wrongness are features of acts, it sees the value free nature of the world as something that demands a reform to practice. We can hardly sincerely continue to assert false once we know them to be

false. Moral thought and talk thus has the same status- as religious thought and talk once we become convinced atheists. By contrast expressivism (irrealism) holds that the value-free nature of the world has no such consequences. It holds that moral thought and talk can proceed perfectly happily in the knowledge that the world is value-free because, in making moral claim, we never presuppose otherwise.

Now, introducing each theory about moral practice Smith shows why none of them except realism can be accepted.

**IRREALISM**

After a debate between objectivity and practicality we see that idea of moral practice become incoherent, much as the moral nihilists also suggests. Here,

irrealism is an option to be considered. Irrealists have a perfect explanation of the practicality of moral judgment. But it seems utterly implausible to suppose, as they therefore must, that moral judgments are not truth assessable. They must say this because they model a moral judgment on yell of approval or disapproval.

The problem here is not simply that we say that moral judgments can be true or false but that the whole business of moral argument and moral reflection only make sense in the assumption that moral judgments are truth-assessable.

When we agonize over our moral opinions, we seem to be agonizing over whether our reasons for our beliefs are good enough reasons for believing what we believe to be true. And no irrealists surrogate seems up to the task of explaining this appearance away.

The irrealists' account of moral judgment as an expression of a desire simply fails to make sense of moral reflection. And the irrealist's account of moral argument makes moral persuasion look like it is itself immoral.

What irrealists are doing when they engage immoral argument, they are trying to get their opponent to have same desire as they have. But, at bottom, they must also say what they are trying to do this not because opponent rationally should have these desires but rather just because these are the

desires irrealist want them to have. Thus in that case moral argument begins to look massively self-obsessed, in imposition of our wants on the other.

### **REALISM**

Moral realists admit the existence of moral facts, thus they therefore have no problem in explaining the objectivity of moral judgment and related phenomena of moral reflection and moral argument.

### **PROBLEM FACED BY REALISM**

- It cannot explain the practicality of moral judgment.
- As there is no explanation of practicality of moral judgment, realists have no plausible story about what kind of fact a moral fact is.
- If there is no possible, story about what kind of fact a moral fact is then realists have no plausible story about what moral reflection and moral arguments are about.

Now, some realists answer to these challenges. They claimed that moral facts are facts that play certain explanatory role in the social world; right acts are those that tend towards social stability, whereas wrong acts are those that tend towards social unrest.

Moral reflection and moral argument are thus, they suggest, argument about which features of actions feed this tendency towards unrest and stability.

Thus we have here two competing conceptions of a moral fact, which conception seems more plausible?

On the one hand, we have the idea of a moral fact as a fact about what we have reason to do or not to do. On the other, we have the idea of moral fact in terms of what tends towards social stability and unrest. If the question is which conception allows us to make the best sense of moral argument? Then the answer is surely former. For, to the extent that moral argument does focus on what tend towards social stability, it does so because social stability is deemed morally important, an outcome we have reason to produce. But that is simply return to the original conception of a moral fact in terms of what we have reason to do.

In the end, then, there is an objection that this kind of moral realists fails to provide us with a real alternative to our original conception of moral fact.

Now the real question is whether the realist is forced to reject the idea that rightness and wrongness have to do with what we have reason to do and reason not to do.

The real problem Smith says is the 'Standard picture of human psychology'.

For the standard picture gives us a model of what it is to have a reason in terms of a desire/belief pair. If moral realist is to make headway in combining the objectivity and the practicality of moral judgment without appealing to 'queer' moral facts, he must challenge the standard picture. The trouble is that standard picture looks sustainability correct as an account of human motivation.

Smith says that there is a place to challenge the standard picture, not in the account of what motivates action, but rather in its tacit conflation of reason and motives seeing why this is a conflation also enables us to see why we legitimately talk about our beliefs about the reasons we have, and why having such beliefs makes it rational to have corresponding desires.

To explain this Smith gives an example—imagine that you are giving bath to a baby. As you do, she begins to scream, uncontrollably. Nothing you do seem to help. Now, you overcome with a desire to drown the baby in bath water. Certainly you are motivated to drown the baby. But do the mere fact that you have this desire, and are thus motivated; mean that you have a reason to drown the baby.

Common sense in this case answer that as desire is not worth satisfying so is not provided with reason. But standard picture would not accept this. According to standard picture it is beyond rational

criticism as it is not based on any false belief. But surely it is not the case.

Then what is the problem with the standard picture? Smith says that problem is that it gives no special privilege to what we would want if we were cool, calm and collected. It suggests that facts about what we have reason to do are not facts about what we do desire, as the standard picture would have it, but are rather facts about what we would desire if we were in certain idealized conditions of reflection; if, say, we were well -informed, cool, calm and collected.

Smith thus goes on to give an anti-humanian account of normative reasons. He claims to solve the moral judgment in terms of what we would desire if we were fully rational.

Thus contrary to standard picture of human psychology, there is in fact no problem at all in supposing that I may have genuine beliefs about what I have reason to do, where having those beliefs makes it rational for me to have the corresponding desires. And thus no problems in reconciling the practicality of moral judgment with the claim those moral judgments express our beliefs about the reasons we have.

But Smith argues that it is not sufficient to solve the problem of moral realists. For moral judgments are not just judgments about the reasons we have. They are the

judgments about the reasons we have where those reasons are supposed to be determined "entirely by our circumstances.

The question is whether, if we are in an idealized rational state, we would tend to converge in the desire we have, would we converge or would there always be the possibility of some non-rationally explicable difference in our desires even under such conditions? Standard picture tells us there is always such possibility.

If this is right, then moral realists attempt to combine the objectivity and the practicality of moral judgment must be deemed a failure. We are forced to accept that there is a fundamental relativity in the reasons we have. What we have reason to do is relative to what we would desire under certain idealized conditions of reflection, and this may differ from person to person.

But Smith does not want to accept this kind of relativity. He says if there is a fundamental relativity in our reason then it follows that any convergence we find in our moral belief, and thus in our desires, must be entirely contingent. It could in no way be explained by, or suggestive of, the fact that the desires that emerge have same privileged rational status.

Smith argues that why do we need to accept this, why not we think instead, that if such a convergence emerged in moral practice then that would itself suggests that

these particular moral beliefs, and the corresponding desires, do enjoy a privileged rational status.

The kind of moral realism Smith describing here endorses a conception of moral facts that is far away from the picture presented at the outset, moral facts as queer facts about the universe whose recognition necessarily impacts upon our desires. Instead Smith has achieved queer facts about the universe in favor of a more 'subjectivist' conception of moral facts.

Smith further argues that this kind of conception of moral facts may make realists' subjectivism only in the innocuous sense that they are facts about what we would want under certain idealized conditions of reflection, where wants are, admittedly, a kind of psychological state enjoyed by subjects. But moral facts remain objective insofar as they are facts about what we, not just you or I would want under such conditions.

But still it remains to see, according to Smith, whether sustained moral argument can elicit the requisite convergence in our moral and corresponding desires, to make the idea of moral fact look possible.

This kind of theory of realism can be criticized because it postulates the existence of a kind of "moral fact" which is non-material and does not appear to be accessible to the scientific method. Moral truths cannot be observed in the same way

as material facts (which are objective), so it seems odd to count them in the same category.

## REFERENCE

- Smith, M. (2013). Realism. In R. S. Landau (Ed.), *Ethical Theory: An Anthology* (Vol. II, Ch-9, pp. 63-68). Wiley- Blackwell Publishing.