Moral Qualities as Dispositional Qualities

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1. Dispositionalism says that moral qualities are response-dependent qualities that exist as a power to stimulate a response in an adequate perceiver. It is clear where the subjectivist side of the proposal is. But the proposal wants to remark an objectivist side, as well, by the possibility to distinguish between veridical and illusory experience. What is veridical, there to be discovered? The answer is indicated, among others, by D'Arms and Jacobson: "to think that X has some normative evaluative property F is to think it is appropriate to feel F in response to X" (J. D'Arms, D. Jacobson, "Sentiment and Value", Ethics, 2000, 729). The research is, then, about when it is appropriate to feel F in response to X, where it is important not to leave the research of the appropriateness apart from the crucial role of the external world to feel the evaluative response.

Although dispositionalism is primarily seen by many authors as a semantic and ontological position, in this paper, I discuss the dispositionalist epistemology. It assumes that the basic resources we have in moral research are dispositionalist moral responses. I discuss two different proposals of this kind, both, however, represent a naturalistic version of dispositionalism.

2. In order to realize the assessment of values, David Lewis assumes a real life subject with common abilities: "Something is a value iff we are disposed, under conditions of the fullest possible imaginative acquaintance, to value it" (D. Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value", Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1989, 121). I discuss two possible objections related to Lewis' proposal. Imaginative awareness is at most a prima facie reason to consider something valuable, but it cannot be considered as the final criteria. A problem is related to the fact that the needed stability of evaluative judgments would not be preserved for certain, i.e. similar cases may be judged differently. Second, when Lewis says that something would be valued under some condition, this is not really commended, because we only have a description of certain psychological facts.

3. This problem is avoided by philosophers, like Bruce Brower, who think that there is no trouble in the fact that moral judgments guide the definition of the condition of the appropriate perspective. A subject starts with some moral beliefs, and from here she develops a theory about morality, including the conditions of appropriateness for the formation of moral beliefs. There are starting moral beliefs that determine for example the conditions of appropriateness for the formation of moral beliefs, and then from this perspective (that represents an epistemological standard) moral beliefs are judged. Is Brower's model of dispositionalist multidirectional epistemological justification successful?

I think that, in one sense, we can say that some research can be done. The basic attitudes can be compared with all others, and some of them can survive that scrutiny, while others do not. It appears that real research is accomplished, research that indicates us what our real moral sensibility is, and what is the aspect of the world evaluatively related to our sensibility. It seems that we may distinguish between veridical and illusory perceptions, at least relatively to one's sensibility, which is in conformity with the dispositionalist approach. There are constraints for this research, i.e. the conditions of appropriateness as expressive of our moral sensibility. Here it appears that we have a level of objectivity that we may distinguish from mere subjectivity.

There is still a problem for Brower. His attempt fits well with a picture of moral thinking that is conservative and static. People have their beliefs and check them as real expressions of their moral sensibility towards the real external world. However, a person can merely change her moral sensibility and revise all her beliefs radically without a real research, just because of an internal mutation (although it is, most probably influenced by a life experience). What changes when this possibility is taken into consideration? If such changes are permitted (and I do not see how the dispositionalist's position I examine can stop these changes of attitudes), then it follows that in any single moment an individual can change her epistemological criteria and moral beliefs depending on the moral attitudes of the moment. The consequence is that there are no constraints for the moral attitudes, and the only thing that we have is an expression of the sensibility in a situation. If this is the result, it is difficult to say that dispositionalism, at least in its naturalist versions that I examine, can be a step forward from mere subjectivism.