

porting reason and a moral principle. Thus the judgment that this particular action is wrong follows from the fact that it involves taking the property of another person and from the moral principle that one ought not to take someone else's property. Since there is an 'ought' in the premises as well as in the conclusion, the argument is logically sound. However, this is to postpone the problem, not to solve it. For now the question is, What reason is there for accepting this moral principle? To provide it with a supporting reason is again to create a situation where 'ought' is illogically derived from 'is': not to provide a reason is to leave the moral principle devoid of rational support. One might perhaps appeal to a still more basic principle but clearly this process cannot continue indefinitely. It must end with a moral principle which is accepted on non-rational grounds.

Some moral philosophers believe, however, that this argument is fallacious. Every proof, they point out, must begin with something which is left unproven. If this were sufficient to establish that moral judgments are lacking in objectivity, then it should also mean that all human knowledge is subjective. The most basic moral truths do not need proof or supporting reasons, since their truth is self evident. But there is a difference of opinion concerning the character of these basic moral truths. Rationalist-minded moralists believe that they have the same sort of self evidence as the truths of logic, that is, that they cannot be denied without involving oneself in self contradiction. Intuitionists, on the other hand, treat them as similar to descriptions of our immediate experience. Thus we do not need proof that certain things are right or wrong since their rightness or wrongness are obvious to us, just as we do not need proof that this object is yellow, since its yellowness is before our eyes.

The dilemma today

Neither of these solutions carries much appeal nowadays. There can be no doubt that certain moral principles are self evident in the sense that they cannot be denied without self contradiction, but they appear to owe this self evidence to the fact that they are lacking in any real content. One cannot reasonably deny, for example, that murder is immoral, but this is because the term 'murder' means 'the unjustifiable killing of another person',

so that the principle 'murder is immoral' means no more than that the unjustifiable killing of another person is morally unjustifiable and is therefore an assertion about the meanings of words rather than about the morality of deeds. Clearly this type of moral principle cannot provide an answer to the problem posed by Hume. The intuitionist answer, on the other hand, seems equally ineffective, for an examination of the way in which terms such as 'right' or 'wrong' function in moral discourse makes it clear that they are different in character from observation terms such as 'red' or 'yellow'. The fact that we require reasons for moral judgments indicates this difference, since it would make no sense to demand a justifying reason for a judgment of the form, 'this object which is before me is red'.

A number of contemporary moral philosophers attempt to counter Hume's argument by claiming that it is based on an unreal dichotomy between non-moral or purely factual assertions on the one hand and moral judgments on the other. Certain aspects of human behaviour and experience, they believe, can be adequately described only by means of language that is undeniably factual and at the same time has a moral import. Thus, if I say that John has promised to lend me his car, for example, my statement is objectively true or false, since it is a description of a state of affairs, but it has also an in-built moral significance, since John has, other things being equal, a moral obligation to do what he has promised. Supporters of the Humean approach to ethics argue against this that while some assertions have both a moral and a factual content, these two elements may be separated from each other, and when they are, the moral aspect of the assertion is seen to be lacking in objectivity. This controversy is still in progress and it would be premature to predict its final outcome. What one can safely say, however, is that it has already enlarged our understanding of the nature of moral discourse.

Suggestions for further reading

- Foot, P (editor) (1967). *Theories of Ethics*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hudson, W D (editor) (1969). *The Is/Ought Question*. Macmillan, London.
- Prior, A N (1949). *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*. The Clarendon Press, Oxford.