

Michael B. Gill, *Humean Moral Pluralism*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 256, £ 40.00, ISBN 9780198714033

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Recent studies in moral psychology and renewed attention to the phenomenology of moral experience have emphasized the importance of questions regarding moral pluralism. The contemporary debate in normative ethics is openly characterized by questions such as: is morality the outcome of a single ultimate moral end, or is it the result of many incommensurable ends? If, according to commonsense morality, the answer seems to be the latter, do these many sources ever enter into conflict with each other? If so, how do we resolve the conflicts among them? Talk of moral pluralism tries to provide answers to these questions on a normative level. Michael B. Gill, combining original work and previously published papers, supports moral pluralism. His *Humean Moral Pluralism* is an attempt to explain moral pluralism within the sentimentalist perspective deriving from the influential work of David Hume. Nevertheless, the title, as readers will easily note, is not fully adequate for the actual content of the book. Gill certainly proposes a moral pluralism which is sentimentalist in kind. However, the value of many of his arguments on the advantages of moral pluralism over the reductionism of monism goes well beyond the Humean approach. Gill's justification of pluralism as the proper moral approach is an attractive starting point for all kinds of moral pluralists. Thus, the general aim of the work is a justification of pluralism as the normative framework of morality. Only when this first task is considered to be accomplished does the author propose a sentimentalist (Humean) account of how to treat the many sources of morality. I attempt here to give a general overview of this project, avoiding a systematic exposition of each chapter. This, I hope, will help us to distinguish the elements which are important for pluralists in general from those which are specifically so for sentimentalists.

The taxonomy which Gill endorses from the very beginning is functional to our understanding of the whole work. *Monism* is the moral approach which recognizes only one single moral end (Act-utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics are its most famous examples). Among those who recognize more than a single

moral end (*Multiplists*), the systematization is much more fine-grained. *Non-conflict Multiplists* hold that the many moral ends never come into conflict, whereas *Conflict Multiplists* think that conflict between two ends may arise. *Ordered Multiplists* (such as John Rawls) believe that, although ends may come into conflict, we can always find a lexical order, which explains away such conflicts. Both *Non-conflict Multiplism* and *Ordered Multiplism* may be considered as *Prioritarianist* views of morality, since in one way or another conflicts can be handled according to a certain priority. In short, *Moral Pluralism* is a version of *Conflict Multiplism*, which sees no consistent way of solving moral conflicts. That is, *Moral Pluralism* admits more than one ultimate moral end and holds that moral ends can enter into conflict in a way, which cannot be solved by any specific procedure.

With these distinctions in mind, in his first chapter Gill offers an interesting historical overview of British moral philosophy in the 18th century. Direct comparison of the substantial works of authors such as Samuel Clarke and Joseph Butler (but also Thomas Reid, Richard Price and Adam Smith) is an attempt to show how the debate contemporary to Hume was particularly suited to the development of a *multiplist* theory. All these authors were mainly concerned with the confutation of the benevolence-based *monism* of Francis Hutcheson. Hume, whose theory is based on our moral sentiments, continues this line of argument supporting a *pluralist* view. *Pluralism* represents the theoretical framework, which most firmly stands opposed to *monism* (which was to be considerably elaborated later in the 18th and 19th centuries by Kant's moral philosophy and Utilitarianism).

Hume's moral pluralism (to which Gill devotes the entire second chapter) concurs that we tend to be useful to others, but this (*contra* Hutcheson) is not our only moral tendency (*multiplism*). Hume is also well aware of the possibility that different things, which we take to be morally valuable, may enter into conflict (*conflict multiplism*). He deals extensively with possible conflicts between *natural virtues* and *artificial virtues*, as in cases in which justice requires us to return money to someone who is "a vicious man, and deserves the hatred of all mankind". Gill explains moral conflict by pointing out that Hume's psychology envisages two mental mechanisms upon which our moral responses are based: *sympathy* (the ability to

identify with others, in order to feel how we think they are feeling) and *addiction to general rules* (the tendency to overgeneralize those instances of conduct, which happened to be worthwhile previously). These two mechanisms lead to moral conflicts. In addition, although Hume seems to lean toward a prioritarian view (when he speaks of the great influence of *public utility*), there is no evidence in his works of a moral sentiment which discriminates in cases in which conflict arises. Hume resists the idea that benevolence *always* plays the role of ordering conflicting ends strictly (as we can see by comparing his famous examples of the “shipwreck” and the “besieged city”). As there is no moral sentiment playing the role of priority ordering, Hume cannot be considered a *prioritarian*; he is ultimately a *pluralist*.

In the light of these specifications of Hume’s moral philosophy, Gill considers contemporary instances of Humean Moral Pluralism in chapter 5. First, what makes a pluralism specifically Humean? Roughly, it is the claim that moral sentiments play an essential role in how we make moral judgments and our understanding of which ultimate moral end we have. In addition to this first condition, we must add the two standard conditions shared by all kinds of pluralism (multiplicity of moral ends, and the absence of any reliable way of solving moral dilemmas). That said, we note a certain resemblance between the Humean approach and the work of Jonathan Haidt, Jesse Prinz, Shaun Nichols and John Mikhail. For example, Haidt’s system, explicitly sentimentalist and pluralist, proposes five psychological foundations of morality (harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, purity/sanctity). Although from a methodological point of view Haidt is using experimental techniques consistently (unlike Hume), he clearly shares all three conditions for Humean Moral Pluralism. Similarly, the work of Jesse Prinz represents a typical example of Humean Moral Pluralism. He does not only claim that emotions play a major role in our moral judgments, but also that we are confronted with a variety of moral emotions, which may also differ in kind (*reactive* vs *reflective* emotions). Like Hume, this leads to the rejection of *monism* in favor of a plurality of moral ends grounded on a plurality of moral emotions. Such a conclusion is in line with Shaun Nichols’ *sentimental rules*. In his view, certain rules gain their status by virtue of their *affective resonance* with our basic emotions.

Moral rules resonate with a plurality of emotions, and this explains their multiplicity; at the same time, it also explains their possible conflicts. All three views share with Hume's theory regarding the assignment of the constitutive role of morality to sentiments. They also all share the belief that morality is not a matter of *a priori* rationalization and introspection, but also one of observing human behavior. This latter claim allows Gill to include the work of John Mikhail within the group of exemplary contemporary Humean pluralists. In fact, although Mikhail is an opponent of the sentimentalism proposed by Haidt, Prinz and Nichols, he agrees with their typically Humean considerations. Mikhail claims that human beings possess a Universal Moral Grammar, an innate set of moral rules, which are not expressed by sentiments and emotions. Nevertheless, Gill stresses how Hume was the predecessor of inquiries into moral psychology, claiming that morality is not a matter of *a priori* rationalization. This is ultimately the sense of *Humean* which Mikhail applies (like Haidt, Prinz and Nichols). The belief is that morality must be investigated through the understanding of human behavior.

However, granted that Humean moral pluralism is a coherent and distinctive moral theory, why should *pluralism* (whether Humean or not) be preferred to *monism*? What are the advantages of *pluralism* (specifically *Humean*) over *monism* and *prioritarianism*? The answers to these questions (the reach of which goes beyond the interest of mere Humean pluralists) can be found in chapters 7, 8 and 9. Gill observes that the main problem, which monists (including Kant and Mill) recognize in pluralism, is that of moral justification. This is a problem which monist theories, having only a single moral end, generally do not face. The problem is therefore more evident in cases of moral conflict, in which moral justification becomes even more stringent in order to resolve the dilemma. Perhaps prioritarianism represents a more viable option for those who have pluralist tendencies. Nevertheless, Gill tries to show that this is not so. Humean Moral Pluralism cannot account for moral justification in any case, but this does not mean that it cannot provide any justification at all. If Humean pluralism is based on sentiments, it will reflect what the agent cares about (and thus *justify* it). There will certainly be gray areas in which our moral judgment will be less supported by a theory, which does not envisage clear moral principles. However, this does not

mean that pluralism is all the way equal to mere arbitrariness. After all, we would still have good reason to think that monism is not much more promising than pluralism (in this regard, Gill analyses famous examples such as the ‘murderer at the door’). In real life, we are confronted with situations characterized by much more complex situations than those which monists and prioritarianists examine. It may be too optimistic to claim either that moral conflicts do not exist or that we can always resolve them. This is what leads Gill to speak of *agonizing decisions* in his last chapter. Humean Pluralism, in fact, can explain why in certain cases we experience remorse, although we know we have done the right thing. Since we are sensitive to a multiplicity of moral ends, remorse is what indicates that something valuable (although less valuable than what we have actually done) has been lost. Moral dilemmas can be *resolved* but not *dissolved*, and this is brought to light in the experience of remorse. *Agonizing decisions* in moral dilemmas do not only show that real-life situations are better explained by pluralist theories, but also that pluralism (in particular Humean) can explain the outcomes of the experience of dilemmatic decisions. Michael Gill offers a noteworthy work with a persuasive moral approach, clear terminology and an engaging argumentative style. Also, the fact that this theoretical framework matches recent works in moral psychology makes it even more appealing. A general aim of works of this kind is the willingness to give an account of the typical complexity of our moral lives. Moral judgment is influenced by a variety of factors (including a multiplicity of moral ends, as pluralists rightly emphasize) and this means that we cannot consider it either as the mere application of a principle or the solution of a spiny math problem. As proof of this attitude, Gill beautifully concludes his book by stating: “*Moral judgment - like deciding in general how to live - is an art not a science.*”(p.196).