PROJECTIVISM

Word count: 2949

Projectivism is a position in philosophy that makes acts of projecting a mental state upon an external reality central in the explanation of certain concepts that seem problematic. These have included ethical and aesthetic concepts, and also concepts of modality (notably, necessity). It is primarily an aetiological (or developmental) view about the origin of such concepts; yet it may have implications for our view of whether such concepts can be applied to the world truly or falsely.

Seminal, though not novel for their time (cf. Joyce, 2009: 54), are two passages in David Hume (see HUME, DAVID), respectively from A Treatise of Human Nature and An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals:

'Tis a common observation, that the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impressions, which they occasion, and which always make their appearance at the same time that these objects discover themselves to the senses … The same propensity is the reason, why we suppose necessity and power to lie in the objects we consider, not in our mind, that considers them; notwithstanding it is not possible for us to form the most distant idea of that quality, when it is not taken for the determination of the mind, to pass from the idea of an object to that of its usual attendant (2007a: I iii 14, para. 25).

The distinct boundaries and offices of reason and of taste are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: The latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects, as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: The other has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises, in a manner, a new creation (1998: app. 1, para. 21).

Richard Joyce emphasizes that talk of projection is metaphorical (2009: 60). Hume’s variation between ‘spread,’ ‘gild,’ and ‘stain’ invites the same comment. What does he intend to convey by such terms?

In the Treatise passage, he advises us to suppose that necessity lies in our mind; and he has already said that it is ‘nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another,’ and that it is ‘something, that exists in the mind, not in objects’ (2007a: I iii 14, para. 20). All this suggests that he takes a relation of necessary connexion really to obtain, though within our minds and not within the external world. Yet he cannot really mean this, for his grounds for denying that we can have any ‘impressions’ of such a relation outside us are also grounds for denying that we can have any of such a relation within our own minds. How could it be that necessary connexion is imperceptible between external events, but introspectible between mental events? Surely at best, according to Hume’s psychology, I might detect the emergence, out of repeated pairs of a perceiving that p and a true prediction that q, of a new vividness that attaches to my idea that q in the context of an impression that p.
While it may be that Hume is making somewhat different claims in the two passages, we should also note that, in the *Enquiries*, he writes of ‘a new creation’. This phrase would not fit an attribution to the external world of qualities or relations already familiar within the mind. His thought must rather be that something within the mind generates, through a process of spreading or gilding or staining, a conception of something new that is *of a piece with it*, but not *identical to it*. Crucial here is a distinction that Richard Wollheim draws between *simple* and *complex* projection:

In its simple form the course of projection runs as follows: A person is, say, sad; his sadness causes him anxiety; as a result of this anxiety, he projects his sadness on to some other figure in the environment; now he no longer believes that he is sad, but he believes that this other figure is sad … The course of projection in its complex form runs as follows: A person is (to re-use the example) sad; his sadness causes him anxiety; as a result of this anxiety he projects his sadness on to, more generally, the external world; and now, along with no longer believing that he is sad, perhaps no longer being sad, he begins to experience the external world as of a piece with his sadness (1997: 82, cf. 1984: 214-15, 1993: 151-2).

Thus, within simple projection, the subject of a mental state comes to ascribe the very same state to (what he takes to be) another subject; within complex projection, he ascribes to (what he takes to be) an external object not the state itself, but some correlate that matches the state in the manner in which, for instance, *being saddening* (or *such as* to sadden) matches *being sad*. Wollheim takes his conception of simple projection from Freud (see FREUD, SIGMUND), who memorably illustrates it as follows: ‘The proposition “I hate him” becomes transformed by projection into another one: “He hates (persecutes) me,” which will justify me in hating him.’ Laplanche & Pontalis cite this (1973: 353), and attach to it the apt label ‘disowning projection’ (351). This involves a double and paradoxical motivation: the subject at once disowns his own hatred, and licenses it (as if with the thought that the second may yet succeed if the first fails). Wollheim here illustrates complex projection by an example that shares the same paradox. Other and happier cases may involve the same anxiety but to more amiable effect: loving a person, I may come to perceive him as being lovable; here the anxiety is, as it were, not *because of* my love but *on behalf of* it, so that projecting it becomes a way not of expelling but of preserving it.

Yet how does this connect with Hume’s wider explanatory interests? The process need be driven by anxiety at all. Take another example that Wollheim likes to cite:

Looking out over an estuary and the salt-marshes through which it winds its way to the sea and a broken tower on some high ground, or looking at Constable’s *Hadleigh Castle*, which depicts a landscape with much this character, and in each case touched by melancholy, I respond by judging the scene itself to be melancholy – that is, metaphorically melancholy (1984: 215).

This experience is not a monopoly of those who suffer from melancholy (or else indulge it à la Werther or Senancour); rather, it enriches a transient aesthetic experience. Here, projection involves a new and metaphorical application of a psychological term (‘melancholy’). More pertinent to us are cases ‘where novel predication is brought into play,’ as arises with ‘the assignment of value,’ which is the ‘projection of a complex form, which on the level of
judgement is represented by the application of a new predicate introduced for this very purpose’ (ibid.).

Here is where the Freudian story applies to Hume’s ‘beauty and deformity, vice and virtue’ (and may suggest an analogous reading of Hume on causation). And it serves to correct things he inclines to say. Parallel to things he says, but cannot mean, about necessary connexion are passages such as this about aesthetic qualities:

Though it be certain, that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external; it must be allowed, that there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings (1987: 235).

If ‘belong to’ means *qualify*, this is neither plausible nor explanatory. We must suppose, more charitably, that it rather means *are owed to*, with the thought that it is in virtue of our sentiments that we ascribe beauty and deformity to their objects.

Even with such clarifications, projection remains a metaphor. What are its metaethical implications? Rival positions associable with it are the following:

(a) *Expressivism*: To express determinations or sentiments of the mind, we invent a language that has no pretension to describe the world outside us – a language that may possibly permit sentences of the form ‘It is true that $F_a$’ (or, relationally, ‘that $R_b$,’ where ‘$F$’ or ‘$R$’ marks the place of a term invented for this purpose), but is neither supposed, nor supposable, to enable us to achieve truth.

(b) *Error-theory*: The language that we invent falsely purports to describe the world outside us, and so supplies us with sentences of the form ‘It is true that $F_a$’ that are always false.

(c) *Realism*: The language that we invent can succeed in describing the world as it exists independently of ourselves us, so that some sentences of the form ‘It is true that $F_a$’ are true objectively (in a strong sense that excludes any infusion of subjectivity).

(d) *Anthropocentrism*: The language that we invent describes a world that is our world, a world that is guaranteed to match the way we agree to view it – though note that this speaks not of my opinion but of our agreement, and that this agreement may rather be a future aspiration than a present achievement.

Within the framework set by Wollheim’s conception of complex projection, (a) misses the point, (b) appears gratuitous, (c) becomes speculative, but (d) is well accommodated. Let us take these in turn.

On (a), as I have stated it, the invention of a new terminology generates not new concepts, but a new grammar for the verbal display of attitudes; hence the innovation is minimal and linguistic, not substantive and conceptual. Whether I say ‘Rice is nice’ or ‘Two cheers for rice!’ I invoke conditions of sincerity (for in either case I count as insincere if I don’t like rice), but not of truth (see NON-COGNITIVISM). Even if I am permitted to say ‘It is true that rice is nice,’ there is no question that in doing this I could be stating the truth. When Simon Blackburn writes,
Nobody denies that the surface phenomena of language – the fact that we use moral predicates, and apply truth or falsity to the judgements we make when we use them – pose a problem for projectivism (1984: 196), he would appear to have such a minimalist projectivism in mind. For on the other conceptions, these ‘phenomena’ are precisely what are being explained. Familiarly, (a) has a particular problem with embeddings (e. g., within ‘if’-clauses): saying ‘If rice is nice, …,’ I do not count as insincere if I don’t like rice. This problem does not arise with (b) to (d). (b) permits a more interesting conception of what is involved in projection (see ERROR THEORY). Yet how plausible is it once we have distinguished simple from complex projection? George Santayana has a good joke that does justice to a confusion of the two (1913: 146):

For the human system whiskey is truly more intoxicating than coffee, and the contrary opinion would be an error; but what a strange way of vindicating this real, though relative, distinction, to insist that whiskey is more intoxicating in itself, without reference to any animal; that it is pervaded, as it were, by an inherent intoxication, and stands dead drunk in its bottle!

Evidently the logic of ‘I am drunk; so it (the whiskey) is drunk’ is fallacious. Simple projection is bound to generate error, unless its object is such that it can share, and coincidentally does share, its subject’s mental state. But why suppose that complex projection must do the same? With the application of the term ‘melancholy’ to an estuary, we have a metaphor that we are free to interpret without imputing error. (There is no need here to speak of a ‘pathetic fallacy’.) With a term such as ‘beautiful,’ talk of projection is itself a metaphor that leaves the pretensions of the resultant concept open. Indeed, an objection that has force is that what is on offer is not a theory that could succeed or fail in explaining the phenomena, but a mere suggestive analogy. I have borrowed from Wollheim the phrase ‘of a piece with’: when this relation is so imprecise, and the initial mental state (in most cases) also imprecise, the danger must be that the resultant term means too little, not that it means too much and so imports error. If the term takes on determinate criteria of application, this must be through the emergence of a practice of applying it that supplements what initially was inchoate, and could only intimate refinements to come. Yet this later stage is no more plausibly viewed as importing fundamental metaphysical error than its starting-point.

Here, however, it may well be that different projections have different upshots (cf. Sainsbury, 1998). Take first Hume’s proposal that it is the projection of a strong expectation that leads us to suppose that, on some occasion, one billiard ball will and must impart motion to a second. He writes in An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding,

It must certainly be allowed, that nature has kept us at a great distance from all her secrets, and has afforded us only the knowledge of a few superficial qualities of objects; while she conceals from us those powers and principles on which the influence of these objects entirely depends (2007b: ch. 4, para. 16).

It becomes a question whether projection transcends this restriction, or respects it. Do we come to conceive that causal powers attach to sensible qualities, or that they underlie them? Characteristically of Hume’s text, it is hard to tell. On the one hand, he writes, ‘We always presume, when we see like sensible qualities, that they have like secret powers, and expect that effects, similar to those which we have experienced, will follow from them’ (ibid. , my italics).
On the other, he argues that, if the sensible qualities of bread had ‘any connexion with the secret powers of nourishment and support’, we could infer the latter from the first appearance of the former ‘without the aid of experience,’ which is contrary not only ‘to the sentiment of all philosophers,’ but even ‘to plain matter of fact’ (ibid., para. 21).

This uncertainty is significant, for it is relevant to the choice between (b) and (c). If projection imports the impression that secret powers can be read off from sensible qualities, it generates a systematic error of the kind that (b) alleges. If it rather respects the fact that causal powers are secret, and operate at a depth that is hidden from us, it may possibly impart to us an inkling of real relations, though the ideas that it generates fail to connect intelligibly with any ideas derived from external impressions. This makes (c) a possible option, though also a wholly speculative one: it could be that, through projection, we form a concept of causation that does apply – but beyond our ken, and in ways that make our expectations of the future often reliable, but never demonstrable. It may be objected that a projection from the mind cannot match an unknown external reality, but the ‘cannot’ is too strong: again, the right objection is not that the resultant conception of causation must be mistaken, but that it may escape a mismatch with reality only by indeterminacy. Hume might be happy to accept that.

What of ‘beauty and deformity, vice and virtue’? These are not secret but apparent, and must differ in status. It remains true that no semantic determinacy is yielded by the projective aetiology. What this may dissolve is any undue puzzlement at a relation between the inner and the outer that David Wiggins has stated as follows (2002b: 106): ‘An adequate account of these matters will have to treat psychological states and their objects as equal and reciprocal partners, and is likely to need to see the identifications of the states and of the properties under the states subsume their objects as interdependent’ (see VALUE, FITTING-ATTITUDE ACCOUNT OF). Should we embrace this as a modern marriage, or eschew it as a mystical one? Wollheim’s conception of complex projection plausibly dissolves any mystery, so long as we recognize that these properties stand in a proprietary relation to ourselves. Thus Wiggins domesticates ‘judgements of value’ as ‘being what they seem to be, viz. statements about features of reality, albeit essentially anthropocentrically categorized, that are discovered to us by our interest in them’ (2002a: 32, n. 38). This falls within option (d), for it places projection at the starting-point of a continuing history of the elaboration of value concepts whose content can only be grasped, and their instantiation only assessed, from a distinctively and (it may be said) parochially human point of view. It should be noted that the same parochiality may affect many concepts (such as color ones) not plausibly originating from projection; also that such instantiation can still constitute a truth, and be an object of knowledge (see TRUTH IN ETHICS).

There are two complications. First, new ways of perceiving and conceiving the world generate new pleasures and desires that lend themselves to new and more refined projections, which in turn … (and so on, indefinitely, through a stepwise progression). Secondly, through linguistic exchange the process becomes social as well as personal, yielding generally agreed criteria of application that are finally answerable not to present conceptions, but to a consensus that is partially achieved and endlessly aspired to. Whence the alternations of determinacy and of open-endedness or even contestability that are characteristic of values that are living and unossified.
Thus projection lends itself to a projectivism, as ambivalent as most ‘ism’s, whose effect is not to reduce our options, but to enrich them.

SEE ALSO: ERROR THEORY; FREUD, SIGMUND; HUME, DAVID; NON-COGNITIVISM; TRUTH IN ETHICS; VALUE, FITTING-ATTITUDE ACCOUNT OF.

References


Suggested Readings


