Moral Knowledge and Evolutarionary Debunking Arguments

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Phil 450: Epistemology

Lecture 14

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1 Course Outline

2 Moral Realism

3 Discussion

Course Outline

- ▶ Unit 1: Theories of knowledge and justification
- ▶ Unit 2: Empirical/inductive knowledge
- ▶ Unit 3: Mathematical and moral knowledge

Moral Realism

Here are some intuitions you might have about morality ...

Moral facts and not perceptible

Intuition 1: Moral properties are obviously not perceptible/sensible.

- For example, I cannot see, touch, smell, or hear virtue or morality in the same way I can see orange mushrooms, touch hanging moss, and smell pine trees.
- And moral properties don't seem like electrons or faraway galaxies either. That is, no matter how much we improve microscopes or telescopes, it doesn't seem like I will ever be able to "see" virtuous.
- Note, I might see a virtuous act or person, but it seems like I must *judge* the act or person to be virtuous.

Intuition 2: Moral facts are neither empirically confirmed nor empirically refuted.

Example: Suppose you found out that social scientists conducted the following survey. One randomly selected Americans were asked 100 two questions: (1) Is rape wrong? and (2) Is murder wrong?

All survey participants said "yes" to the first question, and 98 said "yes" to the second question. Two participants answered the second question with "no", however.

The social scientists concluded that the survey confirms that rape is wrong. However, it upends consensus that murder is always wrong.

Moral Platonism

These intuitions are often used to support

Moral Platonism:
- Moral properties are not physical properties.
- Moral facts (about which actions are right/wrong, which states of affair are good/bad, and which character traits are virtues) are **mind independent**.
- Note: Moral Platonism is often defined to be the conjunction of several theses, but this is good enough for us now.

- This week and next, we'll study a wide-class of views called moral realism, which includes a classical Platonist view.
- **Important:** Moral realism (and Platonism) are meta-ethical theses, not normative theses.
  - Meta-ethical theses might tell us what moral properties are, what moral statements mean, and *under what conditions* moral statements are true.
  - However, meta-ethical theses do not tell us which specific moral propositions are true. In other words, meta-ethical theses might tell us what "right", "good", and "virtue" mean without telling us anything about which specific actions are right, which states of affairs are good, and which character traits are virtuous.

Review: Benacerraf argued that we face a dilemma: either
- We lack mathematical knowledge, or
- Mathematical propositions have entirely different truth conditions from other sentences.,
  - E.g., Some have argued that mathematical propositions are true if and only if they are derivable/provable from a set of self-evident axioms. But we cannot "derive" most other truths (e.g., that there's a projector in this classroom) from self-evident axioms!

Philosophers have likewise argued that moral propositions have different truth-conditions than other seemingly grammatically identical sentences.

- **Example 1:** Some philosophers have argued that moral propositions are akin to expressions of taste. For instance, "Pizza is good" might be synonymous with "I enjoy eating pizza", moral propositions like "stealing is wrong" might simply mean "I dislike when others steal."
- **Example 2:** Others have argued that moral propositions are more like imperatives than declarative sentences, e.g., "stealing is wrong" is more akin to "don't steal!" Moral propositions don't have truth-values in the standard way.

The first account makes moral knowledge easy, as one just introspects about one's tastes. The second rules out the possibility of moral knowledge (as there aren't moral facts).

Both views on the previous page are often criticized for at least two reasons.
- They rule out the possibility of genuine moral disagreement.
  - E.g., If I like chocolate and you don't, there's no inconsistency. Similarly, if "stealing is wrong" is akin to "I dislike when others steal", then when you assert "stealing is wrong" you don't disagree with someone who asserts "stealing is morally permissible."
- Neither makes moral **reasoning** possible in the standard way.
  - In other words, we often give **arguments** of the sort, "If such-and-such is wrong, then so-and-so is also wrong." But, on the second view, for example, moral statements don't have truth values and so there's no sense to applying rules of logic to them.

Discussion: The purpose of these questions is to understand

- ▶ Review question two from the reading assignment.
- ▶ Discuss question 11 from the reading assignment.
- ▶ Some versions of moral contractarianism and contractualism are often called "realist" among philosophers. The purpose of this question is to investigate whether Street would call such views realist. According to contractarians, for example, moral norms are simply the rules of conduct that self-interested individuals would agreed to abide by in order to achieve their own ends (and avoid conflict). The view is typically thought of as "realist" because, just as there are facts about whether a teaspoon sugar would dissolve were it put in a glass of water, there are facts about what people would agree to in certain types of negotiations.

Question: Is Street's argument different from Benacerraf's?

My Answer: It seems so.

- ▶ On the face of it, Street doesn't assume a particular theory of knowledge or justification. Instead, she seems to endorse something like, "If we cannot explain, in principle, why our moral beliefs are reliable, then those beliefs are not justified."
- ▶ She argues that, if moral realism is true, then there is a good reason (namely, Darwinian pressures) to believe that our evaluative beliefs would have a particular form, even if those beliefs were false.

Discussion:

- ▶ Review questions 3, 4 5, 7, and 12 from the reading assignment. Note: You were not required to answer question four, but you should discuss it before moving on to questions 5, 7, and 12.
- ▶ Can you think of examples of widely-accepted moral beliefs or moral norms that are likely evolutionarily **maladaptive**?

Writing Prompt: Could Street's "Darwinian Dilemma" also undermine our justification for our mathematical beliefs? Explain.