
**ABSTRACT**

Recent thinking holds that substantive ethics is independent of meta-ethics. This paper argues that this is not the case, that in fact meta-ethical anti-realism leads to an instrumentalism which includes the totality of desire in ethical reasoning. Such an ethics would force a dramatic revision of political theory.

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Anti-realism and the Consequences

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I. There is No Relation Between Judgment and Moral Facts

*All ethical judgment is non-rational*

Experience suggests what Hume's is-ought problem confirms, that a priori logic itself cannot prove the existence of any moral code. Nonetheless, both those cognizant of the is-ought dilemma and those unaware of “proof paradigm” moral theory (i.e. categorical imperative, religion) issue ethical judgments such as “in this case, I judge this action to be wrong.”

There are two possible origins of such a judgment: either the judgment is created by reference to an earlier judgment e.g. “I judge slavery to be wrong because it is the opposite of freedom and I judge freedom to be good,” or the judgment is not created by reason of other judgments. I will call such a judgment *axiomatic*. This observation does not pretend to show that judgments are unrelated to moral facts, only that the judger is not deductively reasoning when he arrives at axiomatic judgments.

The foundation of all moral judgment is axiomatic. The tree of judgments must begin with initial ethical judgments created without reference to any other ethical facts. We might imagine these judgments to be simple, something like “suffering is wrong” or “harming others is wrong” etc, but we must remember that in each case the judger cannot, after an infinite regress of questioning, point to any reason for his claim except “x feels wrong and therefore I believe that x is wrong.” Perhaps the judger says merely that “I believe x is wrong” but if the judger were pressed for an explanation his justification would retreat to feeling, or some other word for the inexplicable or self-evident. Felt moral sense is the foundation of all moral judgment. The relation between moral facts and judgment therefore relies either upon causality or coincidence between moral facts and moral feeling, not reason.
**Claims of causality are improbably absurd**

So as to avoid the spectre of the straw-man I wish to declare openly that no moral realist to my knowledge argues that moral feeling is caused by moral facts. In his defense of realism Ronald Dworkin parodies the claim of causality as the “moral field thesis”, according to which judgments of wrong are caused by moral facts.¹ According to the thesis, wrongness is surrounded by moral particles or 'morons' which, though otherwise completely undetectable, interact with the human nervous system in such a way as to produce sensations of wrongness.

I claim no originality in observing the moral field thesis to be absurd. However, it is worth noting that absent some causal relationship between moral facts and the mind, moral facts cannot be the cause of axiomatic moral feeling.

**Claims of non-causality are absurdly improbable**

If moral facts are not causing judgments, then realist confidence in the congruence of human judgment and moral facts becomes an indefensible tautology. I will use Talbott’s moral discovery paradigm as an exemplar of this reasoning.

Talbott argues that the philosopher can use the record of human judgment to illuminate the nature of moral facts. He analogizes judgments in morality to observations in science which, though fallible, qualify as positive evidence of objective fact and underlying objective principles. For example we might observe cruel cold-blooded murder and judge it to be wrong, take that judgment as evidence of the actual wrongness of cruel cold-blooded murder, and then extrapolate from the judgment evidence of the underlying wrongness of all cold-blooded murder. Talbott recommends we find the “equilibrium” between the observation (I judged cruel cold-blooded murder to be wrong) and the principle (cold-blooded murder is wrong) such that the sphere of our moral beliefs is maximally coherent.

It is possible that human judgments generally align with moral facts, but there is no reason to believe it is so. The ‘alignment’ supposition has three major weaknesses: the character of human judgments seems determined by non-inevitable forces, there is a significant diversity even within human judgments-

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within which the alignment hypothesis has no power to evaluate relative truth—
and ‘alignment’ is infinitely improbable.

The network of forces which underly axiomatic judgment is complex and not
inevitable. Unless human will is outside the domain of causality, judgments are
the product of evolution and social circumstance. If we accept evolutionary
psychology at all, we must concede some relationship between our moral
feelings and Darwinian circumstances. Likewise if we accept social determination
at all, we must concede that environmental idiosyncrasies have some effect on
our moral attitudes. If we discount both free will and moral-fact causality, the
totality of judgment lies within these two forces.

Read this way, claims of alignment become epistemologically ridiculous. Even if
we avoid the facile moral imperialist claim that “our culture got it right” (thereby
attempting to remove environmental causality from our account of the good) we
are still making basically the same argument about Homo sapiens.

For the sake of unusual argument let us imagine we are visited by the Nerubians,
a rather sadistic breed of extra-terrestrials. Due to the high population instability
which characterized their species’ evolution, they often eat their young (who are
born with powers of sentience similar to an adult human) for whom they feel
zero empathy, but find very tasty. When their sentient off-spring discovers our
abhorrence for the practice, they contact us, asking for help. Our outraged
response results in the following dialogue between the general secretary of the
United Nations and Anub’arak, Nerubian high-lord:

Secretary: The people of Earth find your practice of infanticide to be categorically
wrong. By which we mean that the practice of infanticide is universally,
objectively bad regardless of view-point. By definition, once we convince you
that infanticide is wrong you will feel impelled to stop doing it.

Anub’arak: I see, but of course we disagree. What is your evidence for the
wrongness of infanticide?

Secretary: The benefit you receive from killing your children is far less than the
harm done them.

Anub’arak: Ha, I suppose that is true. But tell me, do you believe your meat-
meals provide you more good in tastiness than they do bad for the meat-
species?

Secretary: No... but our livestock is not sentient. Your children are.

Anub’arak: Intelligence makes value? That is a startling claim. Again I must ask for
your evidence.
Secretary: Well no, intelligence does not ‘make value’ but there is an intrinsic value in all sentient life. Killing any sentient being is wrong. It feels extremely wrong.

Anub’arak: To you. But if I said “eat your children because we Nerubians feel it to be right” surely you would not count that as evidence of our objective rightness. How can you expect the same from us? The forces which created our attitudes are different than the forces which created yours. I see no more in it than that.

Evolutionary psychology indicates that Anub’arak is correct in saying moral attitudes are at least partially determined by evolutionary circumstance. There is no reason to believe that our evolutionarily determined judgments are in any accordance with objective moral facts about what sentient beings ought to do. The same reasoning implies that there is no reason to believe our own individual axiomatic judgments to be more correct than those of anyone else. It is important to emphasize that I do not mean humans are incapable of any moral mistakes, only that axiomatic judgment is subjective. Felt judgments vary, and the moral equilibrium model does not provide any way to determine which among the variance is more or less correct.

If, for example, we wished to persuade the psychopath of the wrongness of murder, we would find ourselves woefully short of epistemological ammunition. Assuming, as seems to be the case, that psychopaths really do not feel empathy, arguments for the objective wrongness of murder become impossible. The astute sociopath can question the infinite regress all the way down to the axiomatic judgment-feeling underlying our belief that murder is objectively wrong. At this point, like Anub’arak he can confidently rebut the argument that “my feeling that x is wrong justifies my belief that murder is objectively wrong” with the observation that x does not feel wrong to him.

If we wish to continue the argument from here we are forced to invoke the opinion of the majority. The sociopath would be correct to observe the absurdity of the argument that “Alex believes the table is red. Mark believes the table is blue. This evidence justifies the belief that the table is red.” However, “Alex, Henry, and Peter believe that the table is red, while only Mark believes the table is blue. This evidence justifies the belief that the table is red” is more plausible. We could make an argument that the overwhelming majority of people believe murder to be wrong, and therefore the sociopath is epistemically justified in believing murder to be wrong.
The majoritarian is argument is problematic, even forgetting the fact that it relies on the unlikely premise that mere existence of a non-rational belief is itself positive evidence that the belief is correct. If we are to take the majoritarian argument seriously, the landing of the Nerubians would be compelling evidence that actual moral facts lie around the mean of average human and Nerubian beliefs.

To use a less exotic example let us imagine the case of a child born in an isolated penal colony for psychopaths. This child objects strongly to the depravity of his society; he is especially revolted by the practice of torturing babies for fun, which enjoys a great popularity among the axiomatic judgments of the colony. When the child is eventually called upon to participate in the communal torture he exclaims “I will not, it is wrong.” “Not at all”, respond his fellows, “the vast majority of us agree that it is not wrong, and therefore you are epistemologically justified (and perhaps obliged) to agree.” If the average opinion is to be held as positive evidence that the average opinion is correct, the child must concede the argument. A casual stroll through the asylum shows that faith does not prove anything.

The equilibrium model cannot epistemologically justify any set of axiomatic judgments above any other. But even if every sentient being in the universe judged identically and it could, the alignment hypothesis would still suppose a spectacular providence. Absent the moral field thesis or something like it, there is simply no reason to suppose any relation between judgment and moral fact.

II. Anti-realism is Therefore Strongly Justified

The fact that judgments are unrelated to moral facts, taken together with the impossibility of the proof paradigm, demonstrates that if moral facts exist, we have way of knowing what they might be. The total disconnect between judgment and moral facts means also that judgments cannot be evidence for moral facts.

Excepting our own conviction, there is no positive evidence for moral facts. No argument outside of the proof paradigm can be made for realism that does not in some way reference human belief. It is possible for realists to claim proof an unnecessary threshold for the justified belief in moral facts, just as it is possible for one to claim that reality is as it appears to be, even though we cannot be absolutely certain this is so. It is not, however, justified for realists to claim the
existence of moral facts without evidence, just as one is not justified in saying “reality is not as it appears to be” without some cause.

Human opinion is the last surviving evidence for moral facts; even moralists must agree that all previous attempts to ground moral facts in a priori logic have been unsuccessful. The futility of the proof paradigm forces supporters of moral facts to draw evidence from the world. Our own conviction is the only possible qualified evidence, but it is evidence of nothing but itself.

*The lack of evidence for moral facts justifies the belief that moral facts do not exist.*

Mackie was correct in observing that if moral facts do exist, they are profoundly unlike anything else in the universe. Out of an otherwise meaningless universe morality imagines a purpose, an ought. The concepts of right, wrong, good, and evil demand a fantastic ordered universe out of a prosaic chaos. Like theology, the extravagance of moral claims bear the burden of proof. All of nature suggests the law of parsimony, and so coherence makes the universe itself powerful evidence that the simplest explanation for all the observed phenomena is best. Perhaps nothing but God more complicates the universe than moral facts. The lack of evidence for the claim therefore strongly justifies belief in anti-realism.

Because the above reasoning is perhaps unfairly compact, I will use an example to illustrate the general process. Reality may be an illusion, but I have no positive reason to suppose that it is. Illusion and reality explain my evidence equally well, but illusion is a far more complicated explanation. Therefore, unless some positive evidence suggests otherwise, I am justified in believing that reality is not an illusion and may say so with as much confidence as I can say anything except the most basic existentialism (I am experiencing being). If moral conviction is not evidence for moral facts, then there is no evidence for moral facts, making the case against moral facts superlatively strong.

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