An Independent Moral Reality

The study of ethics and how to live the good life are immediately clear as pressing philosophical questions due to how they attempt to qualify the validity of our actions as social beings. They attempt to inform us of the wrongness of murder or the benevolence of charity, depending on the situation. However, before one can seriously decide which moral system is most valid, they must decide on a more basic question: do these moral facts exist in some independent, objective state, or is what we consider good or evil just a product of our arbitrary cultural upbringings and dispositions? These two positions are respectively termed moral realism and moral relativism in philosophical jargon, and recent research seems to support a nuanced version of the first thesis.

An intuitive way in which laypeople often become quickly convinced of moral relativism is through the empirical evidence from cultural disagreement. In his paper, “Defending Moral Realism from Empirical Evidence of Disagreement”, written during his time as a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern Mississippi, Chris Meyers dissects such empirical arguments from moral relativism, synthesizes a pluralistic thesis of moral realism, and then counters with empirical evidence for this realism. First, he cites a study that gauged responses to the classic thought experiment “The Magistrate and the Mob” in different cultures. The important choice in this thought experiment was whether a decision to punish an innocent person in order to quell a mob that would likely lead to the deaths of many more was more moral than a decision not to, basically letting the mob proceed. Westerners tended to respond in a way that was more respectful towards the individual, sparing the innocent person, whereas Easterners responded in a way that showed more value for societal harmony, punishing the one innocent person to save many, showing an apparent fundamental moral disagreement between Western and Eastern cultures.

While this empirical evidence seemed to provide evidence for moral relativism, Meyers lends another interpretation: both cultures respond in a way that shows value for saving lives rather than not saving lives. The way in which they differed was in their relative evaluations of things like individual rights and societal functioning. This nuanced way of viewing interpretations of otherwise universal moral principles is Meyers’ pluralistic moral realism. Further, also empirical, support of it came in the form of formal surveys for Taiwanese and American citizens, which found that they indeed do have significant agreement in moral principles such as the value of life. Overall, Meyers constructed a rigorous response to many common cultural relativist arguments, developed an extensible framework, and added some interesting empirical fodder for the moral realist side.

Another critique of moral relativism, by Tan Seow Hon, professor of law and philosophy at Singapore Management University, critiques the thesis for the contradictions it leads to in moral discourse. Take, for example, a relativist, Ben, who holds moral beliefs that he is chastised for by moral realist Dan. According to Professor Hon, Ben would find it wrong for Dan to chastise anybody’s moral beliefs, because in a relativist’s view, all moral beliefs are relative and equally worthless, including Dan’s owns, and so he has no higher ground from which to criticize Ben. This, she argues, leads us to the argument’s inherent contradiction: moral relativism tries to protect the right of the individual to personal moral beliefs (through the equally worthless thesis) while also arguing the arbitrariness of any supposed rights. This protection of individual rights is an attempt at an objective moral fact itself, and the contradiction it makes with the fundamental thesis of moral relativism (to have no objective moral facts) is the target of Hon’s criticism. This is a robust argument for moral realism and disarms the conventional thesis for relativism by shaking its central tenet.

Approaching from the side of moral relativism, Gilbert Harman, professor of philosophy at Princeton University, in his paper “Moral Relativism is Moral Realism”, makes an analogy between moral relativism and the relativity of human language. Though he calls himself a relativist, his arguments lend themselves to the pluralist moral realism outlined by Meyers. Speaking of arguments, the contents of his paper were more analogy than rigor. There is a theory that’s been floating around in psychology and linguistics on a supposed universal language acquisition mechanism, which only needs to be passed some parameters in order to lock in a language. Harman makes comparisons between this theory and our human ability to pick up local languages in the communities we adopt as children, just as we adopt the morals of these local communities. This is weak solely as an argument for relativism given the controversial nature of the psycholinguistic theory it’s predicated on. However, with some assumptions, these similar underlying mechanisms between languages can be compared to universal moral principles that need to be fed relative valuations (just as language mechanisms are fed local language grammar syntax). Either way the argument is taken, as one for realism or one for relativism, it does slightly bridge the communication gap between the two theses.

Philosopher Melis Erdur, in her dissertation, “A Moral Argument against Moral Realism”, gives a more direct rebuttal of moral realism. First, she explains that theses like moral realism and moral relativism should be thought of as substantive moral claims in themselves. That is, when somebody posits them, they must also explain morally *why* morals should be predicated on either an independent reality or people’s moral attitudes. According to Erdur, the thesis of moral realism fails this test. For instance, if it were discovered that, according to some objective moral reality, genocide is in fact moral, then, irrespective of human thoughts on the matter, moral realism would dictate that genocide is objectively moral. However, Erdur goes on, most psychologically normal humans would find it immoral to trust the objective moral reality in that case.

This is an interesting objection to universal morality for the fact that it attacks the morality of following it, even if a universal morality were found, because it may be at odds with human judgment. It’s perhaps ethical chaos for everyone to hold different moral attitudes from each other, but simply wrong for everyone to act in a way no human thinks is moral. Erdur proceeds to suggest that the remedy to the dilemma of the somewhat limited meta-ethical discourse which her argument leads to is to limit the number of “Whys” we find it necessary to ask when questioning the reason something is moral or not, because eventually those “Whys” will lead us to problematic substantive moral claims. This, however, is a rather flippant and un-philosophical way to end an otherwise profound paper. With it, Erdur seems to suggest ignoring the problem her argument leaves – the point of philosophic enquiry is to get to the root of a problem, and in this case, the root of our moral evaluations/choices.

However unresolved Erdur has left us, Michael Huemer, Professor of philosophy at the University of Colorado, Boulder, treats us to a fairly exhaustive argument for realism in “An Ontological Proof of Moral Realism.” His argument takes the conventional form of syllogism, that is, a collection of premises/propositions that lead to a conclusion. First, he writes, we must accept that if there is a non-zero probability moral realism is a true thesis, then that fact is some reason to act as if it is. This fact is supported by our own intuitions and that moral realism has not been totally refuted. Next, Huemer continues, if moral realism is not true, that single fact does not add any reason to *not* act as if it is. If we accept these two premises, all else being equal, then our conclusion is that we have more reason to act as if moral realism is true than not. And that is the extent of Huemer’s argument. It may seem to rely too much on intuition, but Huemer anticipates this argument, and offers a similar syllogism in rebuttal: there is a non-zero probability our intuition is correct, and thus we must act as if it is.

Our review of the literature has shown us that some pluralistic moral realism, one positing universal moral principles which people tend to agree on, though interpret and act out on in different ways based on cultural upbringing, is currently among the most convincing views of meta-ethics in modern philosophy.

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