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CSE300

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**Research Proposal**

Meta-ethics is the philosophic study of the nature of morality. The two most prominent theses in the field are moral realism, which posits that morality is universal, and moral relativism, which claims that morals are just the product of people’s attitudes and totally subjective. For example, moral realism would claim that murder is wrong irrespective of what people think, whereas moral relativism claims that some cultures believe murder is wrong, some believe it is right, and no culture is more correct. The most recent literature on the dispute between moral realism and relativism has tended to fall on the side of realism, however the thesis is still far from airtight. A strong argument has been made against the morality of following a proven universal moral code in circumstances where that code disagrees with people’s actual moral attitudes. Arguments for moral realism do very well for proving that there exists a universal morality, but they neglect to address this problem of what is to be done after universal morality is discovered. In order to do a small part in addressing the gap this leaves in the moral realist argument, I propose to do empirical research on the malleability of people’s moral attitudes: I will test if people are willing to change their moral beliefs in the face of an opposing moral code so long as it is demonstrably universal.

The recent landscape of meta-ethical discourse is robustly realist. Professor Chris Meyers argues against the simplest form of relativism, that which points to cultural disagreement, by showing that what is usually presented as empirical evidence for cultural relativism tends to instead usually lend support to a more nuanced thesis of moral realism, that is, tends to show that the purportedly disagreeing cultures are actually agreeing on universal moral principles and only disagreeing on more minute details. Adding to that nuanced view of cultural disagreement, Professor Gilbert Harman likens our mechanism for moral acquisition to our mechanism for language acquisition. Just as we have the cogs of grammar and syntax in place from birth, he argues, humans also ubiquitously have cogs for moral valuations in place; just as the cogs are turned in certain directions depending on the language they encode, the same moral cogs are turned slightly different depending on the minute valuations they encode.

As for more pointed critiques of moral relativism, both Professors Tan Seow Hon and Michael Huemer offer compelling logical rebuttals. Hon points out the contradiction inherent to the thesis that reveals itself when one examines the relativistic view on moral disagreement. When making the claim that all moral values are equally worthless, relativism tries to protect the equivalence of truthfulness of an individual’s values to all others, Hon argues. This insistence on equivalence of value is itself an attempt at universal moral truth, which fundamentally breaks from moral relativism’s central tenet on the nonexistence of universal moral truths. Huemer, by way of syllogism, proves the necessity of acting as if moral realism is already known to be true. If there is a non-zero probability thing is true, he says, that adds some reason to behave as if it is: if moral realism is true, that’s a reason to follow it; if it is not, then that still does not detract from our reasons for following it.

Yet there also exists the unanswered criticism for the moral realist, provided by philosopher Melis Erdur. She argues that even if some independent moral reality were found which vindicated moral realism, there would be no moral reason to follow it unless this moral reality agreed with human beliefs about morality. This is where the necessity becomes clear of empirical research into whether human beliefs about morality will follow suit with any universal moral code, if it were discovered. If human beliefs were shown to just align to whatever is perceived as objective morality, then the scenario presented in her argument can never happen.

For my experiment, I would collect 300 participants by using Amazon’s online Mechanical Turk (mTurk) service. The way mTurk works is by allowing Amazon users around the world to complete tasks (such as surveys) online for monetary compensation. It is preferable to using university students as experiment participants because mTurk provides a more varied sample pool, which adds to external validity, that is, the confidence with which the results of a social science experiment can be extrapolated to people other than its participants. The compensation for completing my survey would be $1, owing to the brevity of it. First, it would present participants with 5 statements about certain ambiguous moral issues (e.g. one statement would be “Murder is never morally permissible.”) and allow them to rate their agreement with the given moral statements on a scale of 1-10 (1 indicating total disagreement, 10 indicating total agreement). After completing this, participants would be given a passage that claims that philosophers from many universities have logically proven solutions to the ambiguous moral questions the participants encountered at the start, and then those solutions will be provided to the participants. These solutions will always state that the moral statements the participant had been given at the start of the experiment have been proven to be objectively true. Finally, the same 5 statements about the ambiguous moral issues will be given to the participants, and they will once again rate their agreement with the statements, and then finish the experiment.

After I collect my data, I would compare the mean of agreement scores participants gave before reading the passage on philosophical agreement to the mean of agreement scores they gave after reading the passage. If they pass a *t*-test, that is, a test showing that the difference between these two means is not due to chance, and the latter agreement scores are shown to be significantly higher, then we will have reason to believe that people’s moral judgments are malleable enough to follow suit with whatever universal moral code is discovered, thus shielding the thesis of moral realism from Melis Erdur’s argument. Otherwise, proponents of moral realism must either accept the criticism or find another way of rebutting it.

If my proposed experiment is performed, we will have greater insight into whether human attitudes about morality will persist in the face of a disagreement in universal moral code, and thus whether moral realism is, in fact, a moral meta-ethical idea. If they do not persist, and are shown simply to follow suit with whatever objective moral code, then moral realism can go on with one fewer argument against it. Otherwise, moral realists will have to abandon their thesis or come up with a way to reconcile disagreement between actual moral attitudes and objective moral codes.

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