Moral Realism vs Moral Rationalism

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Introduction

Moral realism and Moral rationalism are both theories within ethics aiming to explore and explain what morality is and what makes something right or wrong within these views

- What are the belief that these views hold
- What is right or wrong?
- Where do they draw similarities?
- Which is the better view to follow?

Moral Realism

- Moral properties are real properties of people and their actions
  - "Good" and "bad" define people like "square" and "round define objects
- Moral "facts:"
  - "Stealing is bad"
  - "Telling the truth is good"
- Problems with these moral properties:
  - Cannot be sensed (like hot or cold)
  - Do not exist outside of one's mind or thoughts
    - e.g. disgust is not naturally occurring when one feels it
  - Properties are supposed to be inert i.e. they do not imply action
    - e.g. a shirt being yellow does not imply action
- Naturalistic fallacy
  - Cannot derive "ought" from "is"
  - Cannot imply good and bad from is and not
  - "People get sick naturally (**is**), thus we should not treat people for illnesses (**ought**)"

Moral Realism (Cont.)

- Open Question Argument
  - It makes sense to ask if a natural property is good
  - Thus, "good" and "bad" cannot be names of natural properties
  - Ex: "Generosity is good" implies "Is generosity good?" is trivial
- G.E. Moore's notion of "seeing" good
  - Unnatural properties require unnatural senses
  - Come from conscious

Moral Rationalism

- Rationalism takes a slightly different approach to understanding morality
  - Moral realists model moral reasoning on perception, but rationalism focuses not on any faculty of perception, but on our ability to think and judge, and that reason operates on "matters of fact" and "relations of ideas"
- This idea was most notably propagated by Thomas Reid, who believed:
  - "In all rational belief, the thing believed is either itself a first principle, or it is by just reasoning deduced from first principles. When men differ about deductions of reasoning, the appeal must be made to the rules of reasoning...But when they differ about a first principle, the appeal is made to another tribunal; to that of common sense" (Reid, 1788, 1969: 380)
- Chess and Table Manners
  - An example provided in the book was promoted by John Searle, who explained that rules, like ones for polite table manners, regulate the activity of eating, which already exists. Rules for a game of chess, however, are a bit different. Chess doesn't exist outside of the scope of the game, just itself.

Moral Rationalism (Cont.)

- What does this mean for our context?
  - With the existence between the two, we can model it after our own moral reasoning. Reid believes that there are foundational principles that humans have that lay the groundwork from which we can develop our own moral reasoning, like the rules of chess creating the game
  - These foundational principles are ones like "human beings are essentially social", some things human beings do deserve praise; others blame", "a greater good is to be preferred to a lesser one, and a lesser evil to a greater one", etc.
- Rebuttal
  - These principles technically have to be subscribed to by the person to 'agree' to them. Reid's argument followed the logic that these principles are essentially so ingrained in humans that rejecting these ideas and debating them would not make sense. This can lead to an argument surrounding bias in that regard, however, if we look at the case that we as humans have some things acting as a base from which we can reason, these pillars create a more sound structure for reasoning, as well as throws objectivism into the mix, since we'll have a set of standards that ring true no matter what circumstances surround the event which we reason about

Comparison

- Based in perception of morals as objective (Real) vs. subjective (Rational).
  - Realism treats morals as though they are rigid and objective, like immutable truths of the world.
  - Rationalism defines morals through individual thoughts and judgement, so it they are much less clearly defined.
- Problems with both:
  - If we take "murder is bad" to be true, is there no situation where murder can be justified?
  - On the other hand, rationalism places judgement in the hands of the individuals: couldn't people twist their judgment enough to justify anything?
- Potential for coexistence?
  - It may be possible to reach a middle ground of real and rational morals.
  - We can have real definitions of "moral" and "immoral" actions, while still providing room for rational thought under extenuating circumstances.

Dilemma: Honest but <u>Dangerous</u> Truth

You've discovered a flaw in a new nuclear energy system that under specific circumstances could cause a meltdown, killing millions, permanently affecting millions and making hundreds of miles of land uninhabitable. However, your government classifies it and forbids you from speaking of it If you leak the info, the public could demand reform and prevent disaster. If you stay quiet, you're complicity but saving your own face.

Moral Realist - Believes right and wrong and always facts to be discovered rather than old social customs or opinions.

There is a **objective** duty to prevent the harm of others: remaining silent would be <u>harming</u> others. Regardless of any laws or personal consequences.

The <u>fixed truth</u> the realist finds here is that letting people die when you could have prevented it is objectively immoral. So leaking the information is **morally justifiable**.

Moral Rationalist - Believes that society built on rational trust requires people to <u>honor</u> their rules no matter what.

A rationalist **influenced by their government** would have no problem coming to the conclusion that ignoring the law whenever <u>you feel justified</u> would always result in chaos.

From this angle the correct move is to follow the system(s) in place even if they may feel **emotionally wrong.**

Questions?