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Philosophy 3710G

29 March 2011

Against Railton's Objective Values

The essay question presently under investigation is “How does Peter Railton defend his naturalist moral realism? Is he successful?” To answer this question, I will first explicate the Railton's particular brand of moral realism, and reiterate the arguments he offers to support his viewpoint. Following my review of his position, I will argue against the objective moral and non-moral values he suggests exist, ultimately concluding that he was unsuccessful in defending his naturalist moral realism.

Railton's Moral Realism

Before presenting arguments in support of his position, Railton first articulates the precise form of his moral realism (Railton, 187). He states that moral properties are objective relative to the states of mind of human beings, however the value spoken of in moral properties is human-dependent, and exists only because humans do. He also states that moral properties supervene on natural properties (and may be reducible to them), and that moral inquiry is a part of empirical inquiry. Railton suggests that it is reasonable to think we know a fair amount about morality (however also reasons to think that current moralities are wrong in particular ways, and could be wrong in more general ways). Importantly, Railton stipulates that a rational agent may fail to have a reason for obeying moral imperatives, although they may nonetheless be applicable to him or her, and that although there are general criteria for moral assessment, no one kind of life is likely to be appropriate for all individuals, and no one set of norms is likely to be appropriate

for all societies and all times.

Railton's Argument for Value Realism

To begin providing for a positive account of moral realism, Railton first outlines an account of a naturalist non-moral value for an individual. Central to this exposition is the idea of an *objectified subjective interest*. Non-objective subjective interests usually reflect ignorance, confusion, and a lack of consideration, insofar as an individual often desires something that, if she or he had better knowledge of it, she or he would never have desired to begin with. An objectified subjective interest, however, is what an individual would want herself or himself to want, if he or she had unqualified cognitive and imaginative powers, with full factual and nomological information about her or his physical and psychological constitution, capacities, circumstances, history, etc. (Railton, 191).

Importantly, the motivational link to one's objectified subjective interest is preserved in Railton's view, in that if one were to learn that when fully informed and rational, one would want oneself *not* to want X in a given circumstance, this knowledge would (presumably) add force to the worry that X is not really part of one's good; in essence, the knowledge would provide motivation not to pursue X (assuming one values one's own good).

Railton also suggests that these objective interests might play an explanatory role in the evolution of one's desires. He calls this interaction the "wants/interests mechanism" (Railton, 193). Self-conscious and unself-conscious learning about one's interests occurs through experience; pleasant association leads one to a tendency, conscious or unconscious, reasoned or unreasoned, to act in one's own interest. As such, one's desires evolve through experience to conform more closely to what is good for oneself, in the naturalistic sense. Railton is careful to explain, however, that there is no guarantee that the desires learned through the wants/interests

mechanism accurately reflect an individual's real good, or that the individual will comprehend the origin of these new desires.

Railton's Individual Normative Realism

At this point, Railton has only presented a model for the realism of non-moral goodness for an individual, and so turns to a demonstration of strictly moral value/norms.

Railton states that although we are imperfect deliberators, our behaviour may come to embody traits and strategies that enable us to approximate optimal rationality more closely than our defects would lead us to expect; behaviours that do not exhibit much instrumental rationality will be self-defeating, and correspondingly there will be an inherent incentive to change them. This tendency to develop, through experience, rational habits and strategies may cooperate with the wants/interests mechanism to provide the basis for an extended form of criteria explanation. In this explanation, an individual's instrumental rationality is assessed relative to her or his objective interests (as opposed to her or his occurrent beliefs/desires) (Railton, 196). These evaluations of degrees of instrumental rationality play a prominent role in our explanations of individual behaviour, and also have normative force for the agent.

This connection between normative and explanatory roles of the instrumental conception of rationality is traceable to their common ground: the human motivational system. Thus emerges the possibility of saying that objective facts that may be substantially independent of, and more normatively compelling than, an agent's occurrent conception of his reasons.

Railton's Social Normative Realism

Following the lead of capturing the special character of moral evaluation for an individual by identifying a moral point of view that is impartial, we can extend this objective viewpoint to be equally concerned not only with one individual, but with all those potentially affected by a

given circumstance to offer an equation of moral rightness with rationality from a social point of view. That is, what is socially rational is what would be rationally approved of were the interests of all potentially affected individuals counted equally under circumstances of full and vivid information, and therefore relative moral rightness is a matter of relative degree of approximation to this criterion.

Similar to the frustration of an individual's good that occurs when that individual does not act according to their objective subjective interest, social dissatisfaction will arise when the objective moral interests of a society are not met. Corresponding to that social dissatisfaction, in the long run (barring certain exogenous effects), Railton states that one could expect an uneven secular trend toward the inclusion of the interests of social groups that are capable of influencing the social collective through negative reaction to social dissatisfaction (199).

Addressing a common criticism of moral realism, Railton reasons that one need not subscribe to a theory of moral progress to see that such a feedback mechanism (as described above) can have an explanatory role for social rationality. He holds that the argument against moral realism that there is no common progress toward a worldwide consensus on moral norms can be easily addressed with a comparison to scientific realism; in that there are contemporary subcultures that are not moving in the direction of accepting a scientific worldview, and as such it can be seen that the fact that all cultures worldwide are not moving toward holding a specific worldview does not mean necessarily said worldview is not grounded in fact.

Imperfection of Objective Subjective Interest

At the heart of Railton's argument is the idea that given an individual A, and her fully informed counterpart A+ (i.e. with full factual and nomological information about A's physical and psychological constitution, capacities, circumstances, history, etc.), what A+ wants for A is

her objective subjective interest. In line with this position, the morality of A's behaviour is given by the degree of approximation of the behaviour recommended by A+ for A in a given circumstance. In a larger societal context, the morality of A's behaviour is assessed as the degree of approximation to the behaviour recommended by A+, where A+ is now fully aware not only of A's relevant considerations (her physical and psychological constitution, capacities, circumstances, history, etc.) but also of the relevant considerations for all individuals in the given circumstance.

As stated, Railton provides that the objective subjective interest of an individual A is given by what A+ would want for her in a certain situation, given perfect knowledge of her past and present circumstances. This conception of an individual's objective subjective interest seems open to error, however, in that at some point in A's the future, A+ might in retrospect wish herself to have wanted a different behaviour for A. It is conceivable that by not acting according to her present objective subjective interest as given by A+, A might ultimately be furnished with better results for her projects overall. For example, by acting in discord with my objective subjective interests in the present (and being denied entrance to a demanding graduate program that would provide good financial prospects upon graduation) it might ultimately be shown that that behaviour was better for me overall (because it forced me to start my own company, which was ultimately more lucrative, in a way my ideal rational self could not have predicted given my present physical and psychological constitution, capacities, circumstances, history, etc.).

In this way, due to A+'s inability to predict unforeseen future outcomes of present situations, it is no longer certain that the recommendation of A+ for A is truly in her best overall interest, given that at some point in the future (with the addition of knowledge from unpredictable interim events) A+ may in hindsight have wished for some different behaviour on

the part of A. As such, A+ can no longer be said at any given point to be able to provide insight into A's objective good, because due to unforeseeable consequences of various behaviours, A's objective good is not temporally determinate, and therefore can no longer be said to exist at any given point.

Criticism and Response

To my position against Railton's objective subjective interest offered above, my critic might argue that I have left A+ unduly impotent. My critic could argue that A+ might be (more charitably) be conceived of as having a full knowledge of not only A's past and present physical and psychological constitution, capacities, circumstances, etc., but also a prophetic knowledge of the outcomes and consequences of A's present and future behaviour. In the conception, A+'s wants for A would no longer be defeated by the temporal indeterminateness of the present behaviour of A, and A can again be said to possess an objective subjective interest (this time guided by full knowledge of the multitude of possibilities for action and consequence forever into what A's future).

Although my critic could quite adeptly address my earlier criticism with the above increase to the ontological knowledge of A+, in so doing a further fault in Railton's objective subjective interest for an individual surfaces. Let us grant an extension of the faculties of A+ such that she not only knows about A's present and past circumstances, but about A's future provided any given behaviour, thereby allowing A+ to provide for A some list of behaviours that would allow for the maximum fulfillment of A+'s ideal projects and goals for A. Unfortunately, we are now left wanting a conception of what A+'s ideal projects and goals for A would be – that is, what ultimate interest for A would A+ want for A if she had a seemingly limitless capacity to guide A's action toward a particular end? By providing A with what is practically an omniscient

and omnipotent A+, it is no longer clear what A's objective subjective interests would be in any given circumstance, because her interest as provided by A+ in that circumstance would presumably be only instrumental in the service of an overall goal for A – be it overall utility, pleasure, accumulation of adoration from others, personal wellbeing, etc. As such, we are left with an A+ who could in theory produce (through a set of objective subjective interest recommendations) a life for A that is whatever a person fully informed about A's physical and psychological constitution, capacities, circumstances, history, etc. would want for A – however the answer to the question of 'what would A+ want for A if she could deliver any sort of life for A?' remains an open question of value theory.

Conclusion

In sum, I have presented Railton's position for an objective set of moral and non-moral values for and individual and a society. In response to his position, I argued that an individual's ideal, fully informed self cannot actually provide an objective subjective value for an individual, and that ultimately, Railton's position is left at an unconvincing dead-end where moral theory meets value theory.

Works Cited

Railton, Peter. "Moral Realism." *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*. Ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, Terence Cuneo. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Print.