

PHI 202 | Study questions 9

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Readings:

Street, S. (2015). Does anything really matter or did we just evolve to think so?

Singer, P. (1972) Moral experts. *Analysis*.

McGrath, S. (2009). The puzzle of pure moral deference. *Philosophical Perspectives*.

Moral expertise and moral deference

(1) What does McGrath say about these behaviours? Can they be appropriate? Why or why not?

(i) *Pure moral deference*: You tell me that eating meat is immoral. Although I believe that, let to my own devices, I would not think this, no matter how long I reflected. I adopt your attitude as my own. ... It is not that I believe that you are better informed about potentially relevant non-moral facts (e.g., about the conditions under which livestock is kept). In fact, I know that I have all of the non-moral information relevant to the issues you have.

(ii) *Impure moral deference*: ... I know that you and I have similar moral sensibilities. I also know that you have relevant non-moral information about the morality of eating meat that I lack, such as the conditions under which livestock is kept.

(iii) *Non-moral deference*: We defer to the locals about matters of local geography, to the weather forecaster about tomorrow's weather, and to doctors about medicine.

(2) In discussing her Neo-Socratic Proposal, McGrath identifies two main reasons why a person with superior moral judgment would be harder to identify than an expert in another domain, such as a person with a good sense of direction or an expert in weather forecasting. What are these reasons? (pp. 332-5).

(3) In the following case, should you defer to Annie? Does this challenge McGrath's argument that a person with superior moral judgment is difficult to identify?

Annie: You have a friend, Annie, who is intelligent, thoughtful, and sensitive. In the past, whenever you and Annie disagreed about moral questions, you have later come to think that Annie was right and that you were wrong. You know that the same is true of most of your other friends who disagree with Annie. Today, you once again find yourself in disagreement with Annie over a matter of ethics.

Evolutionary debunking arguments

(1) "Sometimes learning the causal origins of a belief can undermine it. ... Other times, learning the causal origins of a belief can strengthen it." Give an example of an undermining and a strengthening genealogy.

(2) A detailed reconstruction of an argument against mind-independence of moral truths:

(A) The evolutionary argument

(P1) Moral truths are mind-independent

(P2) Evolutionary forces have influenced our moral beliefs

(P3) Evolutionary forces aim at fitness, not moral truths

(P4) The beliefs enhancing fitness and the moral truths come apart

(C1) We have good reason to think that our moral beliefs are mistaken

(B) The non-evolutionary argument

(P5) There are many possible coherent normative belief systems

(P6) Only one of these is right

(C2) The odds are very low that mine is the right one.

(P7) I have no non-question begging evidence that mine is the right one.

(P8) If the odds are very low and I have no non-question-begging evidence, then we have no good reason to think that our moral beliefs are true.

(C3) We have no good reason to think that our moral beliefs are true.

(C) Reaching moral scepticism

(P9) If we have good reason to think that our moral beliefs are mistaken, and no good reason to think that our moral beliefs are correct, then we should not think that our moral beliefs are true.

(C4) We should not think our moral beliefs are true. (No moral knowledge)

(D) Rejecting mind-independence

(P10) If our theory about the status of morality implies that we are not justified in thinking that our moral beliefs are true, then that theory is false.

(C5) The theory that moral truths are mind-independent is false.

(3) Questions about this argument

(i) Isn't P4 question-begging? The critic has to assume a moral view to claim that fitness-enhancing beliefs and moral beliefs sometimes *come* apart. Is it enough to say that they *could come* apart?

(ii) Is P4 true? Even if evolution selects for fitness, couldn't moral truths be correlated with fitness? For instance: pain is morally bad *and* avoiding pain is evolutionary advantageous.

(iii) Why do we need both (A) and (B) to reach moral scepticism?

(iv) Doesn't (B) show too much? It seems to undermine both the view that moral truths are mind-independent and the view that moral truths are mind-dependent.

(v) Is P9 true? If the view that moral truths are mind-independent implies moral scepticism, then this is worrying. But is it worrying enough to reject this view? Why care about moral knowledge?