

Greg Doerk

Metaethics and Moral Realism

If you don't steal because it is *bad*, if you give to charity because it is *right*, and if you think bad people *do* evil things....you might be a moral realist.

Are there moral facts? We certainly talk and act as if there are. "Stealing is wrong."; "You ought to respect others property."; etc. However, when you step back and look at them, they seem to be peculiar, and different from some other facts we deal with. This became an especially acute point in the 20th century as exemplified by Gilbert Harman's notable article.

Ethics and Observation

This article may not seem that powerful, but don't dismiss it out of hand (it is usually covered with Mackie's "Subjectivity of Values", and they work very well together). I know that when I usually try to skip it, there is something that can't be ignored. Harman argues that while we make both scientific and moral "observations", scientific facts explain the observation, while moral facts do not. For example, facts about protons may explain why a phenomena (here a "vapor trail") is observed, while facts about the wrongness of animal abuse do not explain why an animal is abused (here a cat is burned). Instead, we refer to other physical and psychological facts, and the moral facts are completely unnecessary. To Harman, this casts in doubt the reality of the existence of moral facts.

The simplest rebuttle is to remark that the appearance of a vapor trail and the link with protons demands a theory about underlying physical patterns, and this is not in essence different from moral theory. Moreover, a scientific observation *alone* is not evidence for the underlying theory as it could just be evidence for the observers belief in a theory—the same complaint that Harman uses against moral facts.

However, I believe that Harman does have a point, even though his emphasis was inappropriate. The importance of the difference is in the empirical nature of scientific facts as opposed to moral facts, something that is instantiated in what I would call the "surprise" criterion. Mainly (and I invite a degree of disagreement, but I doubt one would to a significant extent) in scientific observations one can be surprised, and scientific facts can predict surprising conclusions, or better explain their cause. However, it is difficult to see how one can be morally surprised. One can prescribe (or "predict") an appropriate moral response to a difficult situation, but when would the prediction be wrong. Moreover, when we are in full knowledge of the consequences of our decisions, how can we make a decision that we would be surprised if it was *morally* right or wrong?

Explanatory Impotence, Irrelevance, and Normativity

This seems to show that moral facts are "based on your moral sensibility" (Harman 122), and do not feature in our explanation of moral observations, rendering them explanatorily impotent. Nicholas Sturgeon combats this claim, however, by pointing out that we do indeed use moral facts in our best and most succinct explanations of moral observations. For example, it seems appropriate to say that one of the best explanations for thinking that Hitler was evil is that he indeed was evil.

However, the counterargument against this came in fact from the realist camp, with Geoffrey Sayre-McCord pointing out that while it is in fact *possible* to use moral facts appropriately and successfully in explaining moral observations, it is not *necessary* to do so. Hitler's evil nature may be explained by him just being a bad person, but this is likely just a placeholder for more elaborate descriptions of him as a person capable of orchestrating a remarkable level of atrocities to which nearly everyone gravely disapproves of. Describing these atrocities would suffice to establish his evil nature. Thus, the moral fact of him being evil is appropriate, but it possesses immediacy in the observation.

At this point, it seems appropriate to introduce the concept of normativity. "Normative" means having the property of setting out norms (rules) of proper behavior binding upon the members of a group to which they apply. There are many instances of normativity outside ethics, such as in etiquette (as for example in a social club) or in sport participation. For example, in football, one gets a first down when the ball is advanced at least 10 yards in 4 subsequent attempts or less. A player may cross the 35 yard line and get a first down, yet it is not the specific crossing of the 35 yard line that grants this. Rather it is the achievement of certain standards. Any player in the game willfully consents to these standards, and thus it may be said that a player *factually* gets a first down when they meet these standards, thus meeting the requirements necessary for "football realism". A very important consequence is that now we have established "football facts" even though none of these facts can explain why they are the way they are. A first down may have been every 5 or 15 yards, or when the player carries the ball for over 7 seconds, or some other rule. The particular nature of the rules of football must be derived from outside the game itself.

Moral facts not only describe, but prescribe what we ought to do and not to do, and thus serve as rules for action. If the group to which they apply is taken as the whole of humanity, then moral facts are normative facts. And by analogy described above, then moral facts can serve as more succinct and appropriate explanations or moral observations, even if they are not absolutely necessary. Moreover, the origin of these facts will not by necessity cast doubt on either their existence or veracity. Still, their remains a lingering question of how the normatively bound group is all of humanity. The simplest and most popular theory is moral naturalism.

Moral naturalism

In the beginning of the 20th century, G.E. Moore may have been said to establish the contemporary metaethical debate with his *Principia Ethica*. In it, he claimed that if one tried to establish a definition of 'the good' such as 'the good = X', one could continually ask "But is X good?" He called any equation such as this the *naturalistic fallacy*, to which his alternative was to assert that moral facts were in fact nonnatural, and known entirely through intuition. Of course, this rubs most philosophers the wrong way, as then one wonders if we do or whether we can actually ever be sure we know what is morally right – or if some people do know what is morally right, others don't, and it is impossible to confirm one over the other. In other words, it goes mostly against the purpose of ethics.

In the face of this, moral naturalism attempts to establish the appropriate link of moral facts with empirical, physical, and psychological facts about the world. This is

generally treated in terms of supervenience, where a set of moral facts M that holds for object x with empirical facts E, also holds for object y if it also has empirical facts E. This sounds strange, but moral realists can argue for many cases of supervenience that we already accept separate from ethics.

For example, moral realists argue that the supervenience of moral facts on natural facts is not so different from that of color facts. The existence of colors is something we acknowledge as part of our daily experiences, but colors exist in virtue of various optical and biological phenomena. While this may be a compelling example, it does not feel as if it carries completely to the ethical debate. The reason is that some of the natural facts are expected to be psychological, and to the extent that these psychological facts are of a subjective nature, the objective relation of the supervenience may be questioned, in turn casting doubt on the assumption of normative universality of moral facts. For instance, if we look back to the case of the choices for a doctor given as an example by Harman, it seems very strange that similar physical circumstances could result in such dramatically different moral circumstances. Of course, this is not a decisive argument, and philosophers such as Richard Boyd have developed interesting solutions to this. For Boyd, the supervenience is instantiated in something called “homeostatic property clusters” – the end result is that moral facts may have a complicated existence, but this complication does not render them imaginary or non-natural (They might be called nonlinear).

Must Moral Facts be Natural Facts?

One final thing that should be noted is that implicit in the above definition of moral facts supervenient on natural facts, the natural facts are taken to be objective. This is to secure the universal nature of the moral facts. But must they supervene on objective facts? Is it possible for them to supervene on subjective facts, and yet for them to be universal? Perhaps the “moral intuition” of Moore and the “moral sensibility” of Harman are indeed the font of moral factuality. I believe that this scares people, because it relinquishes objectivity, but surely there is a striking degree in similarity between the subjective states that are commonly *believed* to be part of the human psyche on a near universal level. And belief is a powerful thing.