

Johann Marek und Maria Reicher (Hrsg.): Experience and Analysis. Papers of the 27th International Wittgenstein-Symposium. Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, Kirchberg am Wechsel 2004, 315-317.

Externalist versus Internalist Moral Realism

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Abstract: For more than twenty-five years now there is a vivid debate on moral realism in analytic philosophy. I would like to argue that this debate is to a certain extent misleading and its significance for ethics overestimated. The reason for this is that if you deny the existence of a necessary (“internal”) connection between moral truth and rational motivation, then it is all too easy to adopt a realist stance on morals. No matter what your moral theory is, you can always fix the reference of moral terms realistically and claim that there are objective moral truths – provided that you do not make the claim that every rational person acquainted with such a truth will be motivated to act in accordance with it. In fact, many contemporary moral realists do not make such a claim, they are so-called “externalists”. This position misses the point of moral realism. Only an internalist realism that upholds the mentioned claim is interesting for ethics.

The metaethical debate about moral realism concerns the question whether there are moral facts or not. The realist, of course, holds that there are, and that by virtue of them some moral statements are true. So the realist may also be characterized as saying that moral statements are true or false (cognitivism), and that some of them are true. Now, the question is which position in moral philosophy is actually excluded by this thesis.

Take an emotivist who claims that moral statements are in fact no statements at all, but expressions of the speaker’s attitude or feelings towards certain actions or states of affairs, and are thus not capable of having a truth-value. This is certainly an anti-realist position, but we can change it slightly and say that moral claims are not *expressions* of feelings or attitudes, but *reports* of them. This certainly does not make a great difference *to ethics*. Since reports of feelings or attitudes are true or false, the emotivist can be called a realist according to the above-mentioned characterization. When Brian says “Stealing is morally wrong”, his statement is true if he has unfavourable feelings towards stealing, and false, if this is not the case. But if the emotivist position can thus be construed realistically, which cannot?

At this point you may protest and say that I have presented the realist doctrine in an extremely weak way. That there are moral facts is no doubt necessary for moral realism, but, as the example shows, not sufficient. We have to say more about these facts. Here is a seemingly stronger proposal: Moral realism claims that moral statements, when construed literally, are true or false, and that some of them are literally true. If Brian says “Stealing is morally wrong”, the emotivist certainly cannot claim to have construed this statement literally when she ascribes to it the same truth conditions as to “Brian has unfavourable feelings towards stealing.” Or can she? The problem with the “literally” is that it is notoriously unclear what it means to construe a statement literally, and that it depends largely on your theory of statements of the kind in question. For example, many moral realists are consequentialists. Let us take a realist who is, more specifically, a rule utilitarian. According to him, “Stealing is morally wrong” means (i.e. has the same truth conditions as) “If everybody refrains from stealing, then the average utility in terms of preference satisfaction or happiness is greatly increased.” Now, is *this* a literal reading of “Stealing is morally wrong”? I have no idea whether the answer is *yes* or *no*, or what could count as an argument for the one or the other, but I suspect that if the moral realist is able to maintain that his reading is a literal one, the emotivist can do so as well with respect to her reading. The realist’s construal is as a *literal* construal at first glance as implausible as the emotivist’s one, and if you do not consider the first impression to be relevant and bring in more theory, everybody will bring in his or her theory about morals. So, I conclude that the “literally” clause is no improvement in the characterization of moral realism.

Another quite obvious idea is to add an independence condition. Moral statements have to be true or false, i.e. moral facts have to exist independently from . . . now, from what? We have to be careful here, since we are not talking about physics or chemistry. The subject matter of ethics presupposes at least the existence of sentient beings. There would be no moral facts if there were nobody who could be better or worse off. And certain moral facts, for example, that somebody is in certain circumstances obliged to do such-and-such, or facts that concern such phenomena as humiliation or disrespect, presuppose even the existence of intelligent beings. So, one cannot demand that moral facts be ontologically independent from the existence of humans – that might well turn out to be too strong, for human beings are the only intelligent beings we know of. Moral reality, if there is such a thing, would no doubt be much poorer, or even non-existent, if there were no human or intelligent beings. So the existence of the subject matter of ethics, moral reality, if you want, is as dependent on our existence as social reality, the subject matter of sociology. Is it perhaps independent from our recognizing it? That would be another kind of independence, namely, epistemic independence. Could stealing be morally wrong without anybody judging it so? Would injuring someone deliberately be morally wrong, even if nobody noticed that fact? I think that the answer to *some* questions of this kind may be *yes*. Progress in our moral judgements is a perfectly intelligible phenomenon that has to be explained by realists and anti-realists alike. We may very well say: “Slavery is morally wrong, but the ancient people did not realize this, not even the slaves themselves.” But it seems to me very doubtful that all of the supposed moral reality could be independent of our judgements in that way. Morality is deeply

entrenched in our lives, it is not some strange or far-fetched subject matter for which we could easily lack the epistemic capacities or interest. To think differently about morality in certain fundamental respects we would have to feel very differently, and a realist should not commit himself to the view that a very different emotional life of human beings would have no effect at all on the moral facts. In particular, at least on some very plausible views, somebody can be obliged to do something only if he is able to recognize that obligation, or even actually recognizes it. There are no obligations that we cannot or do not comprehend, and this, of course, excludes epistemic independence of “obligation facts”.

So it seems to be quite difficult to formulate an appropriate epistemic or ontic independence condition for moral realism. All those conditions tend to be too strong to apply to a thing that is as entrenched in human life as morality is. But our task was more modest, we just wanted to exclude the emotivist from the range of realist doctrines. Couldn't this be done simply by saying that the truth conditions of (general) moral statements may not depend on subjective states of the speaker? They may depend somehow on “our” feelings (whoever “we” are), but not just on the feelings of a certain individual. A general moral statement is true or false independently of who utters it. This proposal to characterize moral realism does not distinguish between intersubjectivity and objectivity, and so the label “realism” may not be appropriate for it, it seems to be too weak to capture our intuitions concerning realism. But at least it seems to rule out emotivism, and if realism is something even stronger, all the better for it. In order to react to this proposal, the emotivist must further modify her position. She can no longer say that the statement “Stealing is morally wrong”, if uttered by Brian, is true if and only if Brian has unfavourable feelings towards stealing, and if uttered by herself, is true if and only if *she* has unfavourable feelings towards stealing. Instead she must claim that “Stealing is morally wrong” is true if and only if *she* has unfavourable feelings towards stealing, no matter who utters the statement. And she can further rigidify her use of “morally wrong” by claiming that even if she had very different feelings about it, stealing would nevertheless be morally wrong, because actually she has unfavourable feelings towards it, and that is what counts. This rigid-designation manoeuvre stems from Saul Kripke, who in *Naming and Necessity* claims that, for example, heat not only *is* molecular motion, but would even be molecular motion if we did not experience molecular motion as heat, but very differently or not at all. The characteristic feelings of warmth or heat provide our epistemic access to what heat really is, but heat would always be just this, namely, molecular motion, no matter how we experienced it. Analogously, the emotivist can give the label “morally wrong” to the descriptive properties, whatever they are, that are responsible for the unfavourable feelings that certain actions cause in her, and maintain that these actions would also be wrong if she did not feel that way towards them, simply because then they would still have those descriptive properties that *actually* cause unfavourable feelings in her.

Therefore, even an emotivist can agree that the truth conditions for moral statements do not refer to anybody's feelings – they are merely singled out by those feelings. This, of course, is not what emotivists originally said, and you may well deny that the sketched position is still properly called “emotivist”. Also, you might have qualms about Kripke's rigid designation, or about its application to moral terms. But the point I wanted to highlight is how

surprisingly difficult it is for the moral realist to come up with a definition that is not compatible with every position in moral philosophy. A few twists and turns, and even the emotivist can claim she's a realist. Perhaps her manoeuvres will not be successful in the end, but it should in any case be much easier to mark her position as definitely anti-realist. And not only the emotivist position, which is certainly extreme. Given these difficulties to come up with an appropriate definition of moral realism, one wonders what difference the whole debate about it can make to ethics – what was so interesting about it in the first place?

Generally speaking, the difficulties seem to me to have their source ultimately in the fact that most contemporary analytical moral realists are not willing to endow their purported moral facts with normative power, and therefore do not include such a feature in the definition of moral realism. The claim that there are moral facts which make moral statements objectively true or false, sounds, when one is confronted with it for the first time, very far-reaching. This is because one construes this claim as saying that there are, after all, objective values that make some preferences or preference orderings rational and others irrational, that endow you with reasons to adopt a certain preference ordering rather than another. There are facts that have a certain normative power – they tell you what you should value, how you should behave or what you should aim at, on pains of irrationality. For example: If it is morally wrong to injure other people (except in certain special situations), then everybody has reasons not to injure other people. A rational person will *qua rationality* not injure another person (except in certain special situations). It is precisely this kind of claim that makes moral realism interesting in the first place. There is a parallel to probabilities here. Objective probabilities are sometimes construed as entities that make certain subjective probabilities, i.e. certain degrees of belief, rational. Every rational being that knows the objective probability of an event will, *qua rationality*, fix its subjective degrees of belief accordingly. And so will every rational being that is acquainted with a certain moral fact fix its subjective preferences accordingly. Objective probabilities yield rational degrees of belief, objective values yield rational preferences, and if they did not do that, neither the objective probabilities nor the objective values would deserve their name. So the appropriate definition of moral realism would be something along these lines: Moral realism is the view that there are facts which make certain preference orderings rational for everybody.

But this is not, in general, the view of contemporary analytical moral realism. Most of its advocates are externalists, e.g., Richard Boyd, David Brink, Frank Jackson, Peter Railton, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, Nicholas Sturgeon, or, in Germany, Peter Schaber. They hold, for example, that it is a fact that injuring another person is morally wrong (except in certain special situations), but that it is a separate question under which circumstances one has a decisive reason, or a reason at all, not to injure another person. There may be someone who simply does not care for the moral facts, without being ignorant of them and without being irrational. “Morally wrong” and related notions are, as far as their reference is concerned, analyzed in purely descriptive terms, for example as “diminishing average utility”. Why anybody should care, or has good reasons, not to diminish average utility is regarded as a separate, or additional, question that does not touch the heart of moral realism. But cutting the link between moral fact and rational motivation deprives moral realism largely of its point, on

the one hand, and it is, on the other hand, precisely this externalism that makes moral realism so easy to achieve. No matter how we construe our moral judgements, or our value judgements in general, about actions or states of affairs or whatever entities one could put in this place – these judgements surely do not discriminate between two of those entities that are exactly alike in their relevant descriptive properties. Almost everybody would agree that moral properties or other value properties supervene on perfectly natural or otherwise unproblematic descriptive properties. Supervenience is quite a weak relation. The emotivist, for example, who has unfavourable feelings towards a certain action, will have the same unfavourable feelings towards any other action that is descriptively relevantly similar, which she will express by saying “Actions of this kind are morally wrong.” And so we can always, no matter what we think about morals or values in general, say that the corresponding judgements are made true or false by these unproblematic descriptive facts, whichever they may be. Moral properties, or value properties in general, are thus easily found to be identical with unproblematic descriptive properties, and moral statements are found to refer to purely descriptive or even natural facts.

I think that for moral realism to be an interesting doctrine it has to stick to internalism, i.e., maintain a necessary, or at least a strong connection between moral fact and rational motivation. Such a connection – the stronger the better – lies at the very heart of moral realism, because the search for answers to questions like “Why should I take into account the interests of others and, e.g., not injure them?” is central to ethics. We should not bother whether the statement “Injuring other people is morally wrong” is true in whatever realistic sense, if that didn’t mean that everybody has reason not to injure other people. Purported moral properties or facts deserve their name only to the extent to which they show a strong connection to rational motivation. Internalist realist doctrines were advocated by such by-now-classical authors as George Edward Moore, Max Scheler or Nicolai Hartmann, and by some contemporary writers, e.g., Jonathan Dancy or John McDowell. Most contemporary realists, of course, want to avoid the ontological obscurity and epistemic inaccessibility of the purported normative facts. Indeed, it is no easy and perhaps a hopeless task to defend successfully the existence of normative parts of reality that endow every rational being that is aware of them with certain preferences. But it seems to me that a moral realist cannot avoid this task.

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