

Moral realism Michael Lacewing

Metaethics is the study of ethical concepts, such as right and wrong, good and bad, and of sentences that use these concepts. *Cognitivism* is the view that we can have moral *knowledge*. One main cognitivist theory, moral realism, claims that good and bad are properties of situations and people, right and wrong are properties of actions. Just as people can be 5 feet tall or good at maths, they can be good or bad. Just as actions can be done in 10 minutes or done from greed, they can be right or wrong. These moral properties are a genuine part of the world. This is the type of cognitivism we will discuss.

Utilitarians, virtue ethicists, and deontologists can be cognitivists if they believe the claims they make amount to knowledge. If they are cognitivists, many are likely to be moral realists. But Kant is a different type of cognitivist. He does not believe that moral concepts pick out properties in the world. Instead, moral judgements are derived from pure practical reason. His position is that moral knowledge is like mathematical knowledge – we can know mathematical truths, such as $4 + 2 = 6$, but many people do not think that numbers exist in the world. These truths are a product of reason, not part of reality.

The basics

Moral realism is perhaps the ‘default’ or ‘common sense’ position on ethics for many people. Many people believe that things really are right or wrong; it is not our beliefs that make them right or wrong. People are, of course, also aware of cultural differences in moral beliefs, a fact that can lead some to give up moral realism for relativism. But tolerance of cultural differences tends to be quite limited, and many people continue to hold on to a number of moral absolutes. For example, very few people seem to think that because murder of members of other tribes, or female circumcision, or sati (where widows are expected to throw themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands) is morally permitted in some tribal societies, that makes murder, or female circumcision, or sati right, even in those societies.

The moral realist believes that statements like ‘Euthanasia is not wrong’ are expressions of beliefs, which can be true or false. Whether such statements are true or false depends on the way that the world is, by what properties an action, person, or situation – such as euthanasia – actually has. They must ‘fit the facts’.

Facts and values

What sort of facts? Moore’s argument for the naturalistic fallacy tries to draw a distinction between natural facts, which we know through our senses, and moral values, which we know through intuition. But Moore still believed there were ‘facts’ about these values, i.e. he believed that moral properties existed as part of reality, and that beliefs about moral properties could be true or false. Moore rejected the idea that facts about moral values could be deduced from any other kind of facts.

The puzzle is how a value can be *any* type of fact. Values are related to evaluations. If no one valued anything, would there be any values? Facts are part of the world. The fact the dinosaurs roamed the

Earth millions of years ago would be true whether anyone had found out about it or not. But it is more difficult to believe that values ‘exist’ quite independently of us and our talk about values.

This contrast is unfair. There are lots of facts – for example, facts about being in love, or facts about music – that ‘depend’ on human beings and their activities (there would be no love if no one loved anything). But they are still facts, because they are independent of our judgements, and made true by the way the world, in this case the human world, is. You can make mistakes about whether someone is in love or whether a piece of music is baroque or classical.

This response is helpful, but values still seem different from the examples given. When two people disagree over a matter of fact, whether it is about the natural world (dinosaurs) or the human world (love), we normally know how we could prove the matter one way or the other. Facts are things that can be shown to be true. But if two people agree over all the facts about abortion, say, but still disagree about whether it is right, we cannot appeal to any more ‘facts’ in the same way. What we would call ‘the facts’ seem to be *all* agreed, but the dispute about values remains. Value judgements always go beyond the facts. Of course, the realist will say there is one fact that has not been agreed upon, viz. whether abortion is right or wrong. But the case brings out the point that disagreeing about values seems to be quite different from disagreeing about facts. So values aren’t facts.

Moral facts are reasons

Realists respond by pointing out that there is more of a connection between facts and values than this argument suggests. Notice that we always appeal to the facts when we are trying to justify a moral judgement. If there were no connection, this would seem silly. But we can give *reasons* that support our moral claims, for example that eating meat is wrong, because of the suffering it causes to animals. This reason – that our practice of eating meat causes animal suffering – is a factual claim, about a way that the world is. It is either true or false that the practice of eating meat causes suffering to animals. This may be hard to prove, but we know roughly *how* to prove it. Moore is right to think that no natural fact can *logically entail* a moral value. But that doesn’t mean there is no relation between natural facts and moral judgments.

The model is this: “Eating meat causes animal suffering” is a reason to believe “Eating meat is wrong”. In general terms, “Fact x” is a reason to believe “Moral judgement y”. The moral realist claims that this relation ‘is a reason to believe’ is true or false. Either fact x is a reason to believe moral judgement y or it is not. Compare reasons for other types of belief. If carbon-dating indicates that the dinosaur bones are 65 million years old, this is a reason to believe that dinosaurs lived on Earth 65 million years ago. It is not *proof*, perhaps, but it is a reason. (Reasons can come in different strengths – there can be good reasons, really good reasons, and proof. Bad reasons are not actually reasons at all.) The result of carbon-dating dinosaur bones is a reason to think dinosaurs lived on Earth 65 million years ago, whether you think it is a reason or not. Facts about reasons are objective, just like facts about the natural world. But facts about reasons are another *type* of fact.

What type? Well, it is not a fact that science can discover. There is no scientific investigation into what reasons there are. But this doesn’t mean it is not part of reality. Philosophers would say facts about reasons are *normative* facts. They are facts about justification and reasoning. Are these very ‘strange’? There are different philosophical theories of what reasons are, but it looks like we need them, and that there are going to be facts about them.

Moral realists claim there are facts about the reasons we give for our moral judgements. Like all facts, these facts about reasons are part of the way the world is. How does this help moral realism? Let's go back to the example of abortion. We said that the two people agree on all the 'facts' about abortion, but disagree on whether it is wrong. What we meant, says the realist, is that they agree on all the natural facts, but we forgot about the facts about reasons. For example, is the fact that the foetus will become a human being a (strong) reason for thinking abortion is wrong? The answer to this question, claims realism, is factual, a fact about a reason. So the two people don't agree on all the facts, because they don't agree on the normative facts. One of them is making a mistake, because they are not seeing certain natural facts as reasons at all or, at least, not seeing them as strong reasons, when they are reasons or strong reasons. If two people agree on all the natural facts and all the normative facts, then they will also agree on the value. So we can understand values as a type of fact.

Moral realism accepts that it can be very difficult to establish whether a natural fact constitutes a reason for believing something is right or wrong, and how strong this reason is. But this is the case in all types of investigation into reality. We must always 'weigh up the facts' when making judgements about what to believe. This 'weighing up' is an attempt to discover the facts about reasons. Moral judgements are judgements about normative facts.

Relativism

Different cultures have different moral beliefs and practices. If moral realism is correct, then some moral beliefs are true, and others are false. We measure our morality against the way the world is. The realist claims that different cultures are all aiming to get at the *truth* about ethics, just as scientists are trying to find out the truth about the world.

The relativist claims that this makes it difficult to understand why such a variety of cultural practices have existed. Why have different cultures come up with different moral answers? Where they disagree, how can we explain why at least one culture has 'got it wrong'? Why couldn't people in that culture see what was right and do that? The realist's story doesn't sit well with an understanding of the history of a culture and how its ethical practices developed.

Relativism understands ethical claims to be part of a culture, not part of reality; ethical practices have developed to help people find their way around a social world. But there are *many* social worlds, many cultures, and they have developed different ways of doing things. And so there is no ethical truth beyond culture. There is no single truth to ethics.

Realists have three responses. First, they can say that different ethical practices reflect the different particular conditions in which different cultures are situated, but not different ethical principles. For example, the Inuit used to abandon their old people on ice flows to die, while we try to keep them alive for as long as possible. But this doesn't mean killing old people is right for the Inuit and wrong for us. It is simply due to the harsh conditions of survival in which the Inuit lived. It would be right for us if we lived in their conditions, and wrong for them if they lived in ours.

Second, realists draw attention to just how many general ethical principles and virtues different cultures share. For example, most cultures have prohibitions on killing, lying, and theft, and encourage care of the weak. And third, realists draw attention to moral progress. We have become more humane than in the past, and there is greater agreement about moral judgements than before. This is because we are discovering real moral truths.