

The Aftermath of Moral Realism

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Abstract:

In “The Aftermath of Moral Realism”, I try to argue for the existence of a supernatural moral authority - namely, “God” - as a direct consequence of accepting moral realism as fact. Then, I attempt to draw further conclusions from the truth of the existence of God that affect the theory of ethical intuitionism. I maintain that the depravity of mankind is objectively true, and that moral intuition is rendered subjective as a result of this. I conclude with this statement - that “we do not gain moral knowledge by way of moral intuition, but perhaps we gain access to it.”

In developing the ethical theory of intuitionism, we begin by laying out the presuppositions. In the process of laying out these presuppositions, there is the thesis of “moral realism” typically discussed as a theory which has been generally accepted as true by most intuitionist philosophers. This theory basically states that there exist mind-independent moral facts. My project is to demonstrate that there are further ideas implicit in the theory of moral realism that, in our accepting or rejecting them, drastically affect our development of the rest of the theory of intuitionism, especially in the realm of applied ethics. Ultimately, my postulation is that there are certain consequences of moral realism that usher us into the realm of theology, and that various theological conclusions will reveal holes in the intuitionist argument in the realm of applied ethics, making intuitionism by itself a dubious ethical theory. In this paper I will argue that the truth of moral realism entails the existence of a supernatural moral authority, and argue for the ensuing inclusion of theology in the discussion of ethical intuitionism. I will also discuss further how exactly theological conclusions affect the development and validity of the ethical theory of intuitionism.

Central to the view of moral realism is that moral propositions (e.g. “Raping your mother and killing your father is wrong”) are statements of fact, just as the statement “two plus two equals four” or “the chemical composition of water is H₂O” is fact. Crucial to our understanding of the argument for moral realism is the epistemological view called “foundationalism”, which states that there must be some set of epistemologically basic propositions, lest justifications of beliefs build and build onto each other into infinite regress. Classic foundationalism posits that there are irreducible facts about reality - facts that are entirely self-evident and thus completely unwanting of justification. In moral realism, foundationalist thought is applied to moral principles. Statements such as “injustice is wrong” are thought to be self-evidently true. In response to this simple assertion, an anti-realist might respond that moral realists beg the question of the truth of moral statements, since they simply assert that it is obviously true. However, moral realists would also claim that moral claims such as “injustice is wrong” or “kindness is good” are more obviously true than any premise of any possible skeptical argument. As our purpose is to explore the implications of accepting moral realism rather than defending moral realism itself, we will say little more than the aforementioned ideas that constitute the views of moral realism. Basically, if one can admit to there being moral properties that are just as real as mathematical properties, one can call him or herself a moral realist. From here on out, we will assume the truth of moral realism.

Now, to the person who has recently made a decision to become a moral realist, this is a giant step - in my opinion the most significant step to take in the study

of ethics. The reason why I should place such emphasis on the magnitude of the acceptance of moral realism is because of the grand implications of and colossal conclusions to be drawn from the idea that there exist mind-independent, objective moral truths - conclusions that will radically alter the development of any ethical theory with moral realism as its presupposition. Because of our adherence to moral realism, it behooves us to inquire into the nature of moral truth. For instance, on the source of morality - Where do moral truths come from? How do we know they are true? These questions and more will be answered as we delve into what must be true about the nature of morality.

Firstly, humans discovered good and bad - we did not create it. We, as humans, have found ourselves with self-evident moral principles such as the goodness of justice, and the evil of suffering and pain. Following from the foundations of moral realism, it follows that injustice is to bad as $2 + 2$ is to 4 . There are moral axioms that humans can neither create nor change. In fact, it is impossible for a human, animal, deity or any being capable of action to make something good that is evil; to make $2 + 2 = 7$; to make rape a righteous action. Such axioms are inseparable from the nature of existence, and could not be created or altered (one might even define such axioms as being “eternal”).

This view, that humans discovered good and bad, flies directly contrary to the views of various existential philosophers. For instance, Jean-Paul Sartre maintains that there are no objective moral guidelines in life; that morals are created by individuals, just as artists create works of art without any aesthetic rules or guidelines. Of course, Sartre then fails to account for Thomas Kinkade - an artist who makes bad art. One look at a Kinkade painting and one will see plainly that there must somehow be a standard for aesthetic beauty. There is good art and there is bad art, and thus the conclusion that follows from Sartre’s own analogy ultimately leads to the downfall of his philosophy. People can certainly lead better lives than others (i.e. the life of a caring mother is better than the life of a child rapist), just as artists can certainly make better works of art than other artists.

There remains then an inescapable, universal, and timeless standard of good and bad (in both ethics and aesthetics) that, in its traversing of geography, culture, and time, leads us to believe that humans contriving moral facts such as “justice good, rape bad” is most improbable.

And so, if we did not create it, where did morality come from? Remember, in trying to answer this question, we are assuming that there is a “moral intuition” by which we can perceive moral truth, and that moral properties are real properties in the real

world. If you tend to hold to a naturalistic ontology, you might attribute the “sense” by which we are perceiving moral properties to evolution, genes, or cultural memes. But this is most odd, because by way of this explanation, the naturalist’s category of moral properties inevitably reduces to mere chemical reactions, by way of which they seem to lose any claim to the term “moral”. Despite this fact, the naturalist will still maintain that some purely physical properties produced by chemical reactions and evolution are indeed mind-independent moral properties representative of reality. Even if this dubious claim is true, that these “moral properties” would exercise some kind of physical force which would be required for a “moral sense” to evolve in humans seems even more unlikely. It seems then that a naturalistic ontology states that we evolved into a way of thinking, and thus could not account for moral properties being real, mind-independent properties, and could not hold up as the most probable explanation for the nature of real morality.

It must also be considered that many philosophers are simply not bothered by the thought “where do moral truths come from”, but consider moral truths to be “brute facts”. These philosophers, for instance, would accept “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” as necessary truth, and would not think it reasonable to look for further truth from whence this truth originates. The same, these philosophers would say, should be said for moral truths. However, if it is true that moral truths are not necessary truths, but contingent truths, then they still want explanation. And I maintain that moral truths are indeed contingent. They are contingent on the existence of humans. Two plus two would equal four with or without the human race existing on planet Earth. However, moral truths would not. Would we say that it is wrong for a fish to eat another fish? No. Yet we would say that it is wrong for a human to eat another human. Thus, moral truths are contingent on whether or not humans exist, and thus the inquiries into the nature and source of moral truths remain valid.

From here there are a few different options to lean towards, but it seems that any movement from this place will lead us to the conclusion that morality is of a non-natural source. However, many philosophers (i.e. intuitionist philosophers G.E. Moore, W.D. Ross) will make a distinction between what is “non-natural” and what is “supernatural”. According to an article called “Moral Epistemology” by Richmond Campbell in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, those that believe that moral knowledge has its basis in the “non-natural” aspects of the world maintain that “Moral reality, so conceived, is posited as *sui generis*, reducible to neither the natural nor the supernatural.” *Sui generis* is a Neo-Latin expression, literally meaning of its own kind/genus, or unique in its characteristics. Little else than this is said about the actual source of morality, other than that it must be “*sui generis*” and that it is non-

natural, but not supernatural. What the non-naturalist philosopher intends to say by this is that although morality is non-natural, it is in no way related to or based in a supernatural deity of any sort. It must be said that I agree with the non-naturalists' philosophy on the nature of morality up to the point where the possibility of a deity or supernatural moral authority is excluded from realm of non-nature. (Note: there is a bit of a semantic issue to be discussed here before moving on - in my opinion, I don't think it is appropriate or reasonable to distinguish between what is non-natural and what is supernatural. I think they mean the the exact same thing.) In any case, the definition of "supernatural" in this paper will be "that which is non-natural". Still, the view of the "non-naturalist" remains clear: morality is not of natural nature, and also it is not related to a deity of any sort. The "non-naturalist" disagrees with morality based in a deity primarily for the following reasons: 1. God probably doesn't even exist anyways - if it were demonstrated that God didn't exist, right would still be right and wrong would still be wrong. 2. Even if he did exist, it's impossible to interpret the commandments of God as moral without first having moral knowledge (this problem arises from something called the Euthyphro Dilemma - will be discussed later). I maintain however that the existence of a supernatural moral authority (e.g. God) can be argued using conclusions drawn from what we have already established as true about moral reality. Further, I believe that the objections given by non-naturalists about the Euthyphro Dilemma can be responded to such that the argument that God is the source of moral truth is neither inconsistent nor circular.

In approaching the question of the existence of God, it is important to establish which presuppositions we are permitted to have in order to come at the argument in an unbiased manner. First of all, we have already ruled out the possibility of morality being a natural, physical trait evolved in humans over time. We have also admitted to the high probability of morality being of a non-natural source. It is important for us now to clear out any presumptions we might have about the likelihood or unlikelihood of the existence of God. We should come at the question with as little outside presuppositions on the subject of the existence of God as possible. Now, it must be said that God, being supernatural, is inevitably included the realm of non-nature, even as defined by the non-naturalist opinion. Therefore, God is at the very least a plausible source of morality, given what we have already established - that morality is non-natural. The fact that we have actually admitted to there being something in existence outside of what is natural should be taken careful note of. We must remember that this presupposition is crucial in our attempts to assess the probabilities of what is true about the source of morality. Any future argument against deity-based morality because of the fact that it seems like magic, or it seems physically impossible, is hereby invalid because we have already admitted to things

in existence to which the laws of physics and nature do not apply. Going along this same line of thought, for instance, is the especially frustrating case of a theist who, just after admitting to the existence of a supernatural deity who is not subject to the laws of physics, denies any possibility of Jesus Christ doing miracles because “that’s magic and magic isn’t real”. To me, this seems blatantly illogical and stems from a lack of realization of the implications of one’s philosophical presuppositions. This kind of thinking is prominent among Deists - who believe that God created the world, but does not intervene in it. The belief that God would create the world but couldn’t or wouldn’t intervene in it grows out of a larger reformation of beliefs and ideals (a.k.a. the Enlightenment) that has molded what is now the common conception of the laws of the universe - the conception being that scientific laws are absolutely universal, exceptionless, and unvarying. The fear of deists and of your typical academic is that God’s intervention would undermine this concept. The fear, I believe, is irrational, and the widely accepted concept of scientific law as invariant is probably a mirage. We must remember that we have admitted to the existence of the non-natural, and therefore must tread carefully as we consider what is most probably the source of morality.

Also, we must accept that there is a source of morality. We established earlier that we discovered morality, we did not create it, and we certainly did not evolve into it. Therefore, it must come from somewhere. That is the question we are faced with - what is the source of morality?

The source of morality, it should be said, is also inevitably the authority of morality. This is an important transition to make because it forces us to realize the implications of there being a source of morality outside of ourselves - the implications being that wherever/whoever absolute morality comes from has absolute authority in “determining” what that morality is. Because we have already determined that there must be a source of morality, we can in turn say that there must be a moral authority. So the question now becomes - what or who is most probably the non-natural moral authority?

Answering this question is essentially a game of probabilities, given that there are a certain number of viable answers to choose from, and given that the answer “it is impossible to know” is not an acceptable one. The options as to what stance one would take on this question are limited. To weigh our options, we must consider things such as direct perception, history, and testimony. Incidentally, many religions attempt to provide an answer to this question, and despite whatever biases we might carry against religion, we must consider these religions as plausible answers to the necessary question of moral authority. Indeed, in exploring the history of world religions, we find that some trace back as far as the study of history can take us. We

find that the question of moral authority has been at the core of the heart of inquiry of mankind for as long as we know that man has existed. Thus, the study of religion is a perfectly valid pursuit of inquiry into the question of moral authority, mostly because it is the only option we have for going about such an inquiry. This pursuit should be made with goals of testing religions for historical validity, and also with goals of testing the theology of religions with what we know to be true about morality given that that knowledge is correct (for example - an ancient pagan religion that promoted cannibalism is most likely not the source of moral authority). In sum, the most important conclusion reached so far for the purposes of my paper is that there must be a non-natural moral authority given the truth of moral realism, and that that moral authority somehow “determines” what morality is. We will now proceed to defend the consistency and validity of the existence of a moral authority.

The objection that follows from the above conclusion relates to the alleged inconsistency implicit in the view that a moral authority, namely God, would “determine” what morality is. In order to respond to this objection, it is important to clarify what we mean when we say that God “determines” what morality is and isn't. But first, let us expound upon the nature of the aforementioned objection. The objection arises from a philosophical and theological problem called the Euthyphro Dilemma, posed in Plato's Euthyphro. In this dialogue, Socrates famously asks a man called Euthyphro whether the gods love the pious because they are good, or whether the pious are good because the gods love them. In the context of our paper, it makes more sense to put Socrates question in the following form: are things good because God has commanded them, or does God command things because they are good? An objector to the existence of a non-natural moral authority would bring up this dilemma because there appears to be horns, or stings involved with accepting either side of the Euthyphro Dilemma. For instance, if one were to accept the first horn of the dilemma (that things are good because God commands them), it entails that morality becomes completely arbitrary - that morality is based “merely upon God's whim” (Campbell - “Moral Epistemology”). This implies that God could feasibly decide one day to command that rape and injustice be the highest goods - and so they would be, just as arbitrarily “good” as we would consider justice and honesty to be good things.

Of course, this is most unreasonable given that, via our a priori moral intuition (i.e. our conscience - we will address this topic in greater depth later on), we learn certain morals to be as true and unchangeable as mathematical axioms. Recall that earlier we addressed the impossibility of “a human, animal, deity, or any being capable of action to make something good that is evil; to make $2+2 = 7$; to make rape an honorable action - such axioms being inseparable from the nature of

existence, and unable to be created or altered” in our discussion of the necessary implications of moral realism. Also, the possibility of God commanding something evil is unacceptable “...for believers who regard God as supremely moral” (Campbell - “Moral Epistemology”). Thus, we must rule out the acceptance of such an idea that what is good is based merely upon God’s whim. In order for our view of moral authority to remain consistent then, it must be true that even God himself is confined to what we know to be good in terms of morality.

This brings us to the second horn of the Euthyphro dilemma - that God commands things because they are good. The apparent sting to accepting this horn is that it implies that God really isn’t the highest authority - that God doesn’t really “determine” what morality is. God is reduced to a communicator of what is good and what is bad. And so, it appears that there are consequences implicit in accepting either horn of the Euthyphro dilemma that make dubious that claim that “a moral authority, namely God, would ‘determine’ what morality is”. What do we do then?

I would insist on punting to the second horn of the dilemma, as described above, while making certain clarifications about the nature of God and about what is meant by God’s “determining” morality that should suffice to make consistent a view of deity-based, non-natural moral law. While things are not good merely because God commands them (as with the first horn), God does determine what is good by virtue of his unalterable character. To respond to the objection that accepting horn 2 dilemma leads to circular reasoning, one need only remember that we’ve already determined that there is necessarily some sort of moral authority (God), and to make the qualification that God’s very nature is itself moral goodness. Thus, God “determines” morality not necessarily by the standards that He commands, but by the standards which comprise His very being. God determines what morality is by virtue of His being the source of moral goodness. The source of evil is another issue. I am partial to the view of evil which sees it as a negation - a failure of someone or some situation to be what it was intended to be, not requiring creation, but only that those things which are created having the capacity to change what they were supposed to be, which itself may be part of what they were supposed to be - that is, having the ability to change, not the changing itself. This is compatible with the classic “free-will” defense of the existence of evil.

Moving down the line of objections to this developing philosophy, the proceeding objection is roughly as follows: If God equals moral goodness, and God commands things that are compatible with his nature, what about the book of Joshua? God seems to command things there that are, at least intuitively, not good (e.g. killing women and children). A possible response to this objection goes along with Kierkegaard’s classic “teleological suspension of the ethical” - that God can temporarily suspend

ethics for the sake of accomplishing a higher purpose. But then, a further objection to this response would be: God's suspending the ethical sounds a lot like Divine Command Theory, which brings us back to Horn 1 of the Euthyphro Dilemma, which we have already thrown out. So, how do we respond to this objection?

First, it is important to mention that this solid objection should really sting the Judeo-Christian intuitionist/moral realist who has just professed adherence to the 2nd Horn of the Euthyphro Dilemma. The only response one Christian intuitionist moral realist can make at this point is to, rather than suspend the ethical on behalf of God as did Kierkegaard, suspend the ethical intuition we apparently have in regards to the violence commanded by God in the book of Joshua. It is permissible to do this for the following reasons: My ethical intuition stems from an intuition that killing innocent people is wrong. When I think of killing women and children, I immediately equate such actions with killing innocent people. However, I can't be certain that the women and children killed in Jericho were indeed innocent. Indeed, according to Judeo-Christian belief, no human is innocent, yet it remains that some humans allegedly go to heaven and some don't (narrow is the way). Given the existence of the free-will of a mankind under the dominion of a God who ordains things to happen - judging the actions of an eternal God in relation to humans from a temporal human perspective seems difficult, if not useless. It must be understood that an all-powerful, all-knowing God may have faculties of intuition that I do not have. When it comes to God's actions that don't seem to line up with my moral intuitions, it seems more reasonable to attribute fault of judgment to myself - the human - rather than to attribute the fault of judgment to God, who we've already determined is the embodiment of moral goodness. Remember, "that God equals moral goodness" is a proposition that was determined to be true before and in spite of the Joshua objection. Therefore, we are stuck with it as a foundational proposition. Unless the Joshua objection (the objection that says - "God's actions seem wrong to me") provides evidence that outweighs our initial evidence arguing for God's equaling moral goodness, the fundamental proposition that God equals moral goodness remains undefeated.

So far, I hope to have made the case that morality is supernatural in nature, and that the truth of moral realism necessitates the existence of a moral authority (assumed in this paper, namely, to be God). From here on out, the study of theology inevitably will have great influence on the philosophy of ethics, and specifically on the intuitionist philosophy discussed in this paper). We will now turn our focus towards

dealing with how previously deduced theological truths affect the validity of the intuitionist argument in the realm of applied ethics.

The key theological proposition that will affect our development of the ethical theory of intuitionism is roughly as follows: that there is something radically wrong with mankind, and it is the problem of moral failure. While there isn't something initially wrong with our faculties of moral intuition, there is certainly the inevitability that there will be as a result of our experiences with what is actually wrong with mankind - this being not our faculties of moral intuition themselves, but our ever-present tendency fail to do what we know (via accurate moral intuition) to be right and good. Our moral failure is not our inability to know what is right a priori, but our inability to act rightly. This inability results in a posteriori alterations of our moral beliefs.

For example, we know that we ought to be kind to people, but we must make a concerted effort to be able to act this virtue out in our daily lives. This seemingly universal defect of mankind has drastic psychological effects on us (and thus on what were our initially unscathed faculties of moral perception) at a very young age, and continues to affect us throughout our lives. Our inability to do what is right when we know it's right affects ourselves and affects others (for example - someone who was abused as a child may develop certain dispositions leading to failure of faculties of moral intuition and may likely turn out to be an abusive parent when they grow up). In addition, guilt psychologically affects us. If we know something to be right, yet we fail to do that action and instead do something wrong, an individual may experience guilt. Guilt should be distinguished from shame, as it is a crucial and undeniable component of our faculties of moral intuition. Universal and timeless examples of moral failure followed by guilt provide evidence that guilt is something related to the conscience, which is unique to humans (e.g. a puppy can feel shame, but not guilt. A human can feel shame and guilt). A strong feeling of guilt, brought about by what was described above as the real problem with humans, may also alter a person's moral beliefs.

This is how we get universally varied manipulations of consciences and consequently the most solid objection to the intuitionist argument in the realm of applied ethics - that of the subjectivity of the morals of individuals. In order to unconditionally accept the application of the intuitionist argument in applied ethics, one must be willing to trust the moral judgments of a sociopath. Needless to say, your average person would not place such trust in such a person. If there were a system by which we could distinguish between a person whose moral faculties are functioning properly and a person whose moral faculties are not (e.g. a sociopath), then perhaps we could accept intuitionism as a viable theory of applied ethics. The fact is, however,

that we cannot know who is a sociopath and who isn't, nor can we know that we ourselves aren't making a mistake in our moral judgments. Our moral beliefs are scathed by virtue of their being formed a posteriori in a world full of broken people.

The moral beliefs of a human, we could say, are hit or miss. For although moral intuition is a priori, moral beliefs certainly aren't. Moral intuitions in all people are superseded by the moral beliefs that people form as they grow up - these moral beliefs being inevitably warped to varying extents based on experiences had. As to how exactly peoples' consciences are manipulated is shrouded in mystery. Nevertheless, we must admit to the fact that, by virtue of our being humans who interact with other humans, it happens. Although we are all capable of correct moral intuition (sometimes we hit, sometimes we miss), we are all rendered deaf and blind, to varying extents, to correct moral intuition because of the "human condition" as described in the paragraphs above. Moral intuition should thus be "conditionally trusted", or "partially trusted". It should be conditioned on that "varying extent" to which the person under whose moral intuition is under scrutiny has been rendered blind to properly functioning moral intuition. The a priori nature of moral intuition allows us to draw probable conclusions on the nature of morality that, if moral properties are real properties, lead us to the acceptance of a non-natural moral authority as most probably true. We can allow ourselves to trust that these basic moral intuitions (i.e. injustice is wrong, rape is bad, charity is good) lead us to fact, but we can't know it for sure. We cannot unconditionally trust the moral intuitions of any given human to lead us to what is truly the absolute right thing to do in a situation, the reason being that, as previously discussed, any given human is bound to have a warped conscience, even if to a very slight extent. Even if one is not a sociopath, as in the extreme case described above, any person could have any degree of warped moral perceptions based on the experiences they have had with other people or with their own consciences. It is impossible for us to know, however, exactly to what degrees of deviance from absolute moral truth any given person has strayed. Because we all are a part of the human race (that for some reason must struggle to do that which is right and good even if we already believe it to be right and good), we are all susceptible to being wronged or hurt by others, and we are all susceptible to the powerful guilt described above. Thus, we are all susceptible to having wrong intuitions about what is morally true. The correctness of our moral intuitions will vary directly with the amount of manipulation our faculties of moral perception have undergone. This amount, even if trace, seems to be inevitably existent in any human being by the very virtue of that human being's existing in society. All of this argument gives weight to the objection of subjectivity widely held against intuitionism. The objection ultimately renders intuitionism as a dubious theory in the realm of applied ethics. Moral intuition should be trusted on

the condition that the person isn't a sociopath, or at least has relatively little deviance from what is actually moral truth. Still, we are only trusting in the lack of deviance of an individual from moral truth based on what we perceive about the person's character, and our own perceptions and judgments could still be wrong. Thus, we cannot know by ourselves what is moral truth. We can only make good guesses.

And so, the ethical theory of intuitionism initially (in its propositional foundation of moral realism) takes us to some fascinating places in the realm of theology, but consequently falls short of validity in the realm of applied ethics. We do not gain moral knowledge by way of moral intuition, but perhaps we gain access to it.

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