MORAL REALISM AND THE SEARCH FOR OBJECTIVITY

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We live in a post-modern world, or so we are told. Within it, every group dictates its own standard of meaning and truth, and communication failures between such groups commonly result from the incommensurability of the languages they rely upon. Given such a world, innumerable, contradictory systems seem likely; each characterized by its ethnocentrism and its difficulty handling cross-group, hard cases.

If this is the world we experience, can we expect the study of ethics to offer anything other than idiosyncrasy? And if this is the most we can expect, then the interminable debates between divergent theoretical camps may be principally viewed as academic exercises. While some may hope that debate will periodically promote clarification, anyone foolish enough to claim that such exchanges could provide access to more universal moral truth would understandably expect derision.

Must we repudiate every vestige of universal moral truth? Must we accept either a variant of the many worlds conception of morality or some rigid standard borne of the fear of skepticism? Must those who claim that certain moral questions can be definitively answered be said to suffer from latent absolutist tendencies and the unresolved desire for a "tidy world"?[1] And must we accede to the claim, of some, that moral decisions are little more than matters of preference. Or, is there an ethical alternative capable of providing escape from this apparent cul-de-sac?

One candidate for this task is a revived moral realism, and the variety envisioned in this paper represents the union of the current and independent work of Richard Boyd and Peter Railton. I intend to sketch a workable synthesis of their efforts and to suggest how such a model may resolve certain seemingly intractable moral disagreements.

Both theorists contend that thinkers assent to moral scepticism not from a well-reasoned position but by default. The fear of succumbing to absolutism or of reverting to an untenable form of logical positivism has pushed many to an unwilling acceptance of relativism in the form of constructed realities. Here they find no palpable moral facts. What they do find is agreement about language only within small and distinct subgroups, even though the moral languages of these groups often display an unusual similarity. This, at times, profound resemblance may be thought a felicitous by-product or an indication that the languages are erected on the same foundation.

The suggestion that diverse moral formulations may share a common ancestry is more than the assertion that they often agree about acceptable outcomes. Rather, it is the claim that moral judgments have ultimate truth values which are discernible within the confines of a real world. As such, these "moral facts" are objective in that they are independent of the opinions of those holding them.

Such statements may be perceived as absolutist. The skeptic may reasonably ask where the realist has been during the discussion of theory-dependence. For it would seem that any attempt to articulate moral facts would be forced to contend with the constraints of the thinker's theoretical, temporal, and linguistic framework; and this would surely force the argument for moral realism to claim that what we (in this time and place) know to be real, is real, while all previously held notions of real were simply not real. The skeptic could justifiably attack this stance as both indefensible and pretentious.

Fortunately for moral realism, Boyd and Railton reject absolutism and endorse both theory-dependence and indeterminacy. Superficially, this may appear contradictory. Would not this position force realists to claim that there is a real world, but that we cannot know it? The realist must explain how this paradox can be overcome.

Boyd accomplishes this by considering the role of theory dependence in science. He concurs that there is no presupposition-free, scientific method, but rather than weakening science, this realization strengthens it. All science is dependent upon a vast array of theoretical assumptions about everything from unobservables to the nature and operation of detection and measurement equipment. The combination of these theoretical assumptions function not only to aid in predictive success, but also to suggest ways in which a potentially defective theory must be corrected or why and when it must be discarded. Unlike the logical positivist, the realist willingly ventures into the realm of the theoretical, and in so doing, speculates on the properties and behavior of unobservables which she holds to be theory-independent. This tact permits a scientific flexibility the positivist could not know, and offers the realist a legitimate frame of reference from which to access her practice.[2]

Despite the admission of theory dependence, the critic may ask why a theory dependent methodology should reveal anything about a theory independent reality. The realist may reply that only her conception is capable of explaining the pronounced reliability of modern science. Science's success cannot be explained by convention where its ability to predict is merely the product of a circularity of thought and where we find only what our theory predicts. Were this actually the case, notions of progress and revisability would be nonsensical, and the incorrigible difficulties that prompt Kuhn's widely accepted paradigm shifts would never occur. Conversely, the realist will argue that revisability and progress are anticipated consequences of an orientation that views science as a cumulative process that seeks "successive approximations to the truth." This movement toward the truth and the concomitant plausibility of the theory are measured not by reference to the theory itself but by the strength of the evidence. Moreover, working theories are capable of producing additional plausible evidence to the extent that they are "relevantly, approximately true". Although never presupposition-free, relevantly, approximately, true theories are objective to the degree that they point to the discovery of an independent reality. In lay terms, science works not because we have designed it to do so, but because it corresponds to the way things really are.[3]

If the objectivity of science derives not from adherence to a fixed, known standard but from successive approximation to the truth, then we might consider a comparable objectivity for morality. Were the methods of morality to parallel those of the hard sciences, what types of claims would have to be made? Alone, the theory-dependence of scientific methodology and the presence of theories that provide epistemic access to an independent reality cannot explain the success of science. Science responds to the promptings of the researcher that come in the form of scientific intuitions. These intuitions are inherently theory-dependent, and correspond to trained judgments. While intuitions may not substitute for observation, they may, given the resultant evidence, be said to be sufficiently near the truth.

If one transfers, as Boyd does, the behavior of science to that of morality, then moral intuitions must be seen as trained judgments derived from interaction with evolving moral theories that are relevantly, approximately true. As observation allows the scientist to check the reliability of her theories, moral observation permits the moral theorist to evaluate the reliability of her intuitions and judgments. If her background theories stand relevantly, approximately, near the truth, then it is reasonable to believe that they may by successive approximation move nearer the truth when bolstered by additional social, scientific, and historical evidence.[4]

Note that the realist model does not require that science or morality necessarily begin near the truth. Nor does it require that the methods or definitions of either remain permanently fixed, for scientific and moral fruitfulness demand a less determinant stance. What is required is that successive approximation to the truth accompany genuine moral and scientific deliberation.

If asked how realism could imagine that the patterns of science were transferrable to morality, the realist might well answer, “why not?” She would note that the idea that science and morality are incommensurable systems is of quite recent origin. Further, she could reasonably argue that the hard distinction between the two is likely grounded in a suspect fact/value split.[5] If non-realists are now questioning the validity of the marked separation of fact from value, then a coherent realism may spell its demise.

Even if we accept the justification of moral realism derived from

Boyd's philosophy of science, difficulties remain. What would it mean to say that morality was to be judged on the basis of the empirical evidence? Would the realist's proposal suggest that goodness was a natural property on par with gravity, and if so, would it be the same across cultures and periods? And as a natural fact (in the form of a relevantly, approximately, true proposition), would goodness have commendatory force?

Both theorists address these concerns, but quite differently. For Railton, the argument for a normative goodness must be grounded in an objective nonmoral good. His argument begins by distinguishing between desire and one's interest. While our subjective interest may be captured by our desire for some thing, there is no reason to believe that the desired entity is ultimately desirable. The actualization of certain desires may well produce catastrophic consequences. Hence, it would be improper to designate something a nonmoral good simply because it was a subjective interest.

Through his lengthy discourse on a hypothetical and marginally dehydrated, foreign traveler, Railton posits the operation of an "objective interest."[6] A's unwise desire for a glass of indigestible milk satisfies her subjective interest, but perpetuates her malaise. With the introduction of A-Plus, Railton reveals an "objectified subjective interest" as that vantage point from which we can know what is really in A's best interest. A+'s knowledge of what she would want to want were she in A's shoes (in this case plentiful, clear liquids) reflects a true desirableness, and it may be said to be an objective interest of A's. Note that A+'s objectified subjective interest becomes A's objective interest and is, therefore, a nonmoral good for A. The key insight here, however, is that A's objective interest results not from A+'s superior knowledge or enhanced reasoning capabilities, but from what Railton calls the "reduction basis" which contains the facts and interests pertinent to a particular situation. This may appear to be semantic jockeying, but the distinction between a nonmoral good derived from a transcendent, neutral observer and one borne of readily accessible facts is critical to a realist account. It firmly ties the nonmoral good to naturalistic roots in physical and psychological well-being while it allows us to speak of the objective quality of subjective value.

Two complementary views of objectivity in moral realism have been presented. Boyd's version derives from the perceived similarity between the moral and the scientific. Those intuitions and observations are objective that are obtained by applying theory-dependent assumptions which are sufficiently, relevantly, approximately near the truth. Railton's reduction basis grounds objectivity in the contextual and dispositional facts surrounding an event. While the origins of objectivity in their arguments differ, their applications of it converge.

In demonstrating how morality might behave as one of the "special sciences", Boyd utilizes a nonutilitarian consequentialism to develop what he calls "homeostatic consequentialism." In so doing, he accedes to a model not unlike Railton's description of the nonmoral good. He asserts that there are a number of unspecified human goods which satisfy human needs. These goods are "clustered" and mutually supporting which mitigates against any single good establishing hegemony. The indeterminacy associated with any evolving science prevents the model from exalting reason or utility or beauty or happiness to the detriment of the others. It strives, instead, for higher levels of homeostatic unity where an individual good is maximized just short of the diminishment of other goods.[7]

Railton extends the notion of non-moral goodness to consideration of moral norms. In the process, he argues for ought being a special case of the way things are.[8] Given the popularity of the fact/value split, this is a rather bold claim. To make it work, Railton postulates "criterial explanations." In such explanations, the selection of phenomena that most closely approximate the intended criterion are said to possess an ought. The use of aspirin rather than talcum powder to combat a headache is understood as what one ought to do given knowledge of the properties of the two substances.

Patterns that produce an ought are said to be instrumentally rational. They may be derived from formal reasoning, but they are as likely to result from trial and error or chance. Regardless of their source, instrumentally rational behaviors are self-perpetuating and organism-enhancing, while those that lack these properties tend to be self-defeating. Railton writes, "[i]n such cases we may be said to acquire these habits or strategies because they are more rational, without the intermediation of any belief on our part that they are."[9] Curiously, these non-deliberative patterns often serve us better than do those derived of explicit reasoning.

These behaviors may display incongruity if they are restricted to immediate wants/needs. It is unlikely that one desires the appointment with the accountant or the surgeon, and yet we may say that she ought to keep such appointments. An understanding of this ought requires an extension of the criterial explanation so as to include what is in a person's objective interest. We may even say "that facts exist about what individuals have reason to do, facts that may be substantially independent of, and more normatively compelling than, an agent's occurrent conception of [her] reason."[10]

Railton makes a strong case for instrumental rationality, but to speak of the rightness implicit in moral norms, the argument must be extended. This final extension converts the instrumental rationality of the individual to that of social rationality. Social rationality reflects the objective interests of all affected persons under conditions of "full and vivid information." The objective interests revealed are none other than those contained within the conception of nonmoral goodness. Given a societal application of nonmoral goodness, the argument identifies moral rightness as the degree to which nonmoral goodness is approximated.

The convergence of the work of Boyd and Railton must be counted both optimistic and controversial. Neither proposes that the question of moral realism is definitively settled by their respective contribution. Both do, however, admonish colleagues to consider this plausible alternative. Setting aside questions of moral realism's ultimate verity, what might it resolve?

Consider moral realism's response to the absence of a worldwide moral consensus. The skeptic may ponder why a plethora of contradictory moral systems operate if there exist moral facts in an independent reality. The realist will suggest that we need not expect consensus. The expectation of such agreement actually has its roots in the acceptance of a monolithic ethical theory. If one believes (or undermines the beliefs of those that do) that the ethical standard is fixed and known, then she will justifiably question why it is not universally held, and she will encounter real disagreements between those immersed in conflicting systems. If, however, she takes a realist stance, she will predict that differing social and environmental conditions will produce disparate moral theories in much the same way that the scientific explanations of divergent cultures differ.

Regardless of whether these conflicting moral systems operate between cultures or within them in the form of intractable disagreement, the realist may address the apparent irreconcilability similarly. She may first try to determine whether the presumed source of the conflict is correctly identified. Do the differences persist because of the imposition of notions foreign in a particular setting? Does the irresoluble quality actually come from an adversarial attitude that precludes systematic discussion of the issues? Are the perceived concerns in question really the source of the disagreement, or do they simply conceal underlying issues that are resolvable? At the very least, the realist's rejection of presupposition-free theory makes all moral assumptions, judgments, and theories subject to deliberation, and by not compelling morality to adhere to one, preeminent component of a single ethical theory, say, the rule of reason, the realist may find agreement among previously hostile parties.

The possible, eventual agreement may result from the clarification of the real issue or it may be seen as the likely outcome of moral progress. Considering the real issue, it is not surprising that dominant ethical theories often disagree dramatically in principle but converge when making applications to actual cases. Could it be that the explanation lies in a second-order disagreement regarding principles and a first-order agreement regarding purpose. In other words the primary ethical theories actually concur that morality's ultimate, but unarticulated, purpose is the enhancement of human good through the satisfaction of complex human needs; but separated from this knowledge, they generate principles that are, by nature, coherent but antagonistic.

Although Railton argues that moral realism need not embrace moral progress, the notion of progress fits comfortably with it. This results, in part, from the quite tenable role of progress in scientific realism. In science we find disagreement, but we do not expect it to be permanent, and the realist's position provides a plausible explanation for why not. In time, the competition between differing scientific conceptions ends, and the victorious formulation is that which most closely approximates the truth. With few exceptions, and contrary to the notion of multiple realities, the more plausible and reliable alternative becomes part of the evolutionary scientific standard.

The skeptic may ask whether moral progress does not suffer from the illusion of a systematic unfolding of truth by shielding its eyes from multiple counter-examples. Referring again to scientific progress, the realist will agree that a systematic unfolding is an illusion, but it is one that has been attached to science by those outside it. Rather than progressing predictably and incrementally, science moves by spurts and some of these represent mistakes that occasion sideways movement or retreat. The process may even appear chaotic to those unable to discern its general direction of motion. Science is better served by the image of the periodically halting and somewhat changeable movement forward of a "thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field" than by any reference to a "cutting edge."

The case for moral realism is not damaged by apparent counter-examples to moral progress. Examples of moral immobility or regression are unfortunate (and may well be immoral), but they present no real challenge. If we understand moral objectivity to result from successive approximation to the truth via theoretically dependent and relevantly, approximately true judgments while we simultaneously hold a realistic image of how progress functions, then we need only ask the direction the fire is burning.

When we examine general moral history it is difficult to refute that the movement has been in the direction of greater moral sophistication and clarity. This assertion rests not in an imagined theoretical homogeneity, but rests instead in the dramatic evidence of change. The physical manifestations (e.g., the emergence of rights, egalitarian sentiments, social and distributive justice) associated with the last three centuries can clearly rival the growth of science in the same period. Placed within the proper temporal framework, the fact that the discord over, say, the issues of abortion and euthanasia appear irreconcilable after only two decades of active debate leads to one question whether these are truly examples of issues that cannot be settled.

That moral progress has not been uniform or that countless examples of inhumanity persist does not weaken the claim for moral realism. Were circumstances capable of discrediting moral realism, we could expect the popular admonition to avoid dark vegetables during pregnancy to prevent birthmarks to invalidate the study of genetics. Further, that certain political regimes have governed such that moral salubrity is conspicuously absent is to provide the correlate to science by edict, and hence, leaves the theory intact.

Note that the representation of moral progress proffered here is not one that claims “every day, in every way, we’re getting better and better.” Although it predicts a trend toward progress, it is silent on the relative rate of movement for different groups. The variety of moral realism described does, however, predict that mistakes will be made, but further expects that when the errors are discovered they will play a role in selecting their successors rather than in defending their standing as permanently ensconced in some supernal theory.

This paper offered one theoretical configuration of moral realism. It sought less to fault the thesis in its formative stages than to reveal the potential richness of this line of research. The, at times, unseemly union of the efforts of Boyd and Railton was necessary to portray a reasonable realist account of moral objectivity. Minimally, this effort has suggested that a morality borne of the belief in the superordinance of human flourishing holds promise for the resolution of certain debates. And of one who remains a skeptic, I would ask what Railton does, namely, to show how a skeptical account of our epistemic or moral practices could be as plausible, useful, or interesting as the account the naturalist offers, and how a skeptical reconstruction of such practices . . . could succeed in preserving their distinctive place and function in human affairs.[11]

ENDNOTES

1. Elliott Eisner, “Anastasia Might Still Be Alive, But the Monarchy is Dead,” Educational Researcher 12, 5 (1983): 13-24. In response to D. C. Phillips’ “After the Wake: Postpositivistic Educational Thought” same volume.
2. Richard Boyd, How to be a Moral Realist Forthcoming, pp. 11-17.
3. Ibid., p. 14.
4. Ibid., pp. 46-47.
5. Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 51-61 and James Garrison, “Some Principles of Postpositivistic Philosophy of Science,” Educational Researcher 15 (1986): 12-18.
6. Peter Railton, “Moral Realism,” The Philosophical Review XCV, 2 (1986): 173.
7. Boyd, pp. 39-41.
8. Railton, p. 185.
9. Railton, p. 187.
10. Railton, p. 189.
11. Railton, p. 164.