

Characterizing Moral Realism

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Abstract: The challenge faced with the proliferation of various kinds of cognitivism is the difficulty of providing a straightforward characterization of moral realism and antirealism. In light of this tension, I identified a problem in Sayre-McCord's way of specifying the criteria of moral realism. Furthermore, I provided a framework that characterized the moral realism beyond the features of cognitivism. Finally, I argue that any successful characterization of moral realism must capture its ontology robustly in order to separate it from other realist-like positions that espouse the idea of truth-value and objectivity.

Keywords: moral realism, cognitivism, cognitivist expressivism, antirealism, Sayre-McCord.

1. Introduction

One of the striking characteristics of the recent development in metaethics is the burgeoning accounts of cognitivism, including positions straddling the divide between expressivism and cognitivism such as quasi-realism, cognitivist expressivism, etc. While the latter positions promised to explain the truth-value of moral claims without appealing to the metaphysics of moral realism (Blackburn 1984, Horgan and Timmons 2006), they are however generating conflicting accounts that threaten a straightforward classification of metaethical views (Asay 2013). As a result of this James Dreier notes that:

Minimalism sucks the substance out of heavy-duty metaphysical concepts. If successful, it can help expressivism recapture the ordinary realist language of ethics. But in so doing it also threatens to make irrealism indistinguishable from realism. That is the problem of Creeping Minimalism. (Dreier 2004, 26).

The emergence of these realist-like positions highlights the need for characterizing moral realism. Precisely, it calls for a delineation that helps to clarify what is meant to be at stake between moral realism and irrealism (also known as antirealism). In this paper, I argue that moral realism is not just a semantic doctrine, but also an ontological thesis. Simply put, moral realism entails moral cognitivism but not vice versa. The plan of this paper is as follows: First, I argue that Sayre-McCord's model of characterizing moral realism is insufficient as it makes positions such as cognitivist expressivism appear as moral realism. In light of this failure, I provide a framework that characterizes moral realism beyond the features of cognitivism. Second, I argue that any successful characterization of moral realism must capture its metaphysics robust enough to separate it from other realist-like positions that espouse the idea of truth-value and objectivity.

2. Sayre-McCord's Requirements

Philosophical realism is characterized by its ontological, epistemological and semantic claims. Generally, it is the thesis, which claims that facts and properties exist independently of our minds, perceptions and linguistic practices (Hettinger 1985). However, any general characterization is likely to blur its various manifestations across a large number of subject matters. Consequently, it can obscure the debate between the realists and irrealists. For instance, the realist-claims in mathematics differ from the realist-claims in aesthetics or modality. One can therefore be a modal realist while rejecting mathematical or theological realism. This concern is even more complicated in ethics, as the majority of realists from other domains would largely disagree with the kind of entities proposed by the moral realists. Against this background, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (1988, 5) offers a map that promises to delineate realism from antirealism; and consequently, to offer a better characterization of moral realism. According to him, realism maintains that:

- 1) The claims in question, when literally construed, are literally true or false.
- 2) Some of the claims in question are literally true.

Moral realists believe that moral beliefs are truth-apt (e.g. Boyd 1988; McNaughton 1988; Schaber 1997). Unlike the error theory (e.g. Mackie, 1977; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006), moral realism holds that some of our moral beliefs are true (e.g. Brink 1989; Devitt 2002). Even though the (moral) claims in question are supported by the cognitive state, Sayre-McCord's model is silent about the nature of their truth-value. That is, it does not tell us the part of reality that makes such (moral) claims true. Besides, it is unclear whether we should understand the truth-values of the claims in question robustly or minimally (Smith, 1999; Enoch, 2011; Tropman, 2013). This distinction is important since the ontology of moral beliefs is at the core of moral realist and antirealist controversy (Miller 2009). In what follows, I shall show that fulfilling Sayre-McCord's criteria does not sufficiently make a moral theory a realist position. In essence, construing moral realism on these criteria can lead to qualifying some anti-realist positions as moral realism (Asay 2013).

2.1 Not Morally Realist Enough

What Sayre-McCord's model offers us is a tool for characterizing cognitivist positions and not moral realism. His model is insufficient as moral realism entails moral cognitivism but not vice versa. To illustrate this point, let us consider a moral theory, which holds that 'Peter ought not to shoplift'. This claim can be true or false, nevertheless it cannot be both true and false for the same action. Moreover, it would be false to claim that Peter can shoplift in shop B, but not in shop A. Assuming we consider this moral claim as true, notice that the first requirement of Sayre-McCord's model is fulfilled. Additionally, suppose we have

reason to believe that ‘shoplifting is morally bad’ is actually *true*. In so doing, we as well fulfil the second requirement of the model. Thus, going by Sayre-McCord’s model, we can qualify any moral theory endorsing these views as moral realism. However, the truth-claim *alone* does not sufficiently make a position realist. If this were so, Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons’ position would be classified as a form of moral realism because it satisfies Sayre-McCord’s criteria.

In *Morality without Moral Facts*, these authors propose a position that seems to capture the structure of ordinary discourse. For them, moral beliefs possess the phenomenology of an occurrent belief, namely *what-it-is-likeness typically*, which involves:

- a) Psychologically ‘coming down’ on some issue, in a way that
- b) Classifies (sometimes spontaneously) some ‘object’ of focus as falling under some category, where one’s classificatory coming down is experienced
- c) As involuntary,
- d) As a cognitive response to some sort of consideration that is experienced (perhaps peripherally in consciousness) as being a sufficient reason for categorizing as one does, and
- e) As a judgment that is apt for assertion and hence it is naturally expressible in public language by a sentence in the declarative mood. (Horgan and Timmons 2006, 263)

Even though moral beliefs share the generic phenomenological features of non-moral beliefs, Horgan and Timmons contend that they do not have the same overall descriptive content. For them, the mental states underlying moral beliefs and non-moral beliefs are distinct psychological *sui generis* contents. Therefore, the mental states of moral beliefs are irreducible to non-moral beliefs. In addition, the mental states supporting moral beliefs lack the fittingness that represents the world in a certain way or as it might be. For them, “to construe moral beliefs in this manner is to mistakenly assimilate them to descriptive beliefs, i.e. to is-commitments. Rather, an ought-commitment is a distinct kind of mental affirmation vis-à-vis a core descriptive content” (Horgan and Timmons 2006, 271). They strongly argue that the non-descriptive contents of moral beliefs are compatible with truth and assertoric features of non-moral beliefs. One of the implications of their claims is that we can assign truth-values to moral beliefs without appealing to any moral facts and their corresponding ontologies. Precisely, moral beliefs are genuine beliefs, which can be true or false. Nevertheless, for them, we do not need such things as in-the-world moral facts, namely, truth-makers (Horgan and Timmons 2009, 275). In summary, when we utter moral statements, which can be true or false assertions, we are only engaging in semantic appraisals and nothing more. This refers to, “appraisals in which semantic evaluation are ‘fused’ with moral evaluation. These truth ascriptions thus are not descriptive, because the overall content of the first-order judgments and utterances to which they are applied is not descriptive” (Horgan and Timmons 2006, 275).

Like Blackburn's construal of truth-value (Blackburn 1984), Horgan and Timmons believe that truth ascriptions function in a minimalist Schema T: '*S* is true if and only if *S*...', where we can substitute '*S*' for any (moral) declarative sentence. In their cognitivist expressivist model, 'X is wrong' is true 'if and only if X is wrong'. Thus, the moral claim: 'Peter ought not to shoplift' translates into Peter ought not to shoplift is true if and only if Peter ought not to shoplift. In their view, the 'is-commitment' belief and 'ought-commitment' belief express some possible state of affairs. However, unlike the former, the latter does not refer to any fact in the world because such moral facts do not exist anywhere in the world. In their example, both 'John gave back to Mary the money he owed her' and 'John ought to give back to Mary the money he owes her' fulfil the requirements of genuine beliefs;

Both kinds of commitments state are beliefs since they exhibit certain generic features that are characteristic of beliefs...both sorts of commitment state have the grammatical and logical trappings of genuine beliefs: in thought and language the contents of such states are declarative, and they can figure as constituents in logically complex judgments as in 'Either John has paid what he owes to Mary or he ought to do so'. As such, ought-commitments can figure in logical inferences (Horgan and Timmons 2006, 232).

Notice that if statements such as 'Peter ought not to shoplift' or 'John ought to give back to Mary the money he owes her' are genuine beliefs, then they are accessible in terms of truth and falsity. Hence, based on Sayre-McCord's model, we can qualify Horgan and Mark Timmons' position as moral realism. Even though they construed their position as a form of moral cognitivism, it does meet the requirements of moral realism. Precisely, their position rejects the kind of ontological commitments that underlie the realist construal of moral beliefs. Thus, to characterize moral realism, we need a framework that accommodates the ontology that supports the truth-values of moral claims. On this basis, I reformulate Sayre-McCord's second requirement as follows:

(2*) Some of the moral claims are literally true because of the moral facts underlying them.

Moreover, Sayre-McCord obscures the distinction between first-order and second-order moral claims. In the former, we can make moral claims, which can be true or false without necessarily appealing to any moral facts. The latter is the thesis that the truth-values of moral beliefs are determined by objective moral facts. This distinction is crucial because moral claims may be literally true or false, where their truth-value is understood on the first-order reading (Gibbard 2003; Horgan and Timmons 2010). On this view, "when one predicates the truth of a moral statement, one is engaged in an act of affirming "metalinguistically" the first-order moral claim in question (that is, affirming first-order moral judgment expressed by the statement one is calling true). Such an affirmation, done metalinguistically by employing the semantic concept of truth, is a morally engaged "fusion" of semantic and moral appraisal" (Horgan and Timmons 2006,

234). Alternatively, differentiating between first-order and second-order claims is important as it allows a better understanding of the metaphysics that makes a moral theory count as moral realism. Accordingly, I shall argue that it is a robust ontology of truth-value that is at the heart of moral realism. In other words, such a robust construal enables us to separate moral realism from irrealism, especially, the realist-like positions espousing the idea of moral objectivity and truth-value.

3. Reconsidering Moral Realism

As a form of philosophical realism, moral realism holds that there are objective moral facts out there. The idea of objectivity is tied to some sort of metaphysical claims about the existence and nature of entities, occurrences or relations. The objectivity-claim in a domain *t* touches on the idea of an external world, namely a world in which the agents who engage in objectivity discourse are part of.¹ Roughly, objectivity is a way of referring to objects or realities existing independently of what anybody thinks or feels about it. Consider, Beverly McLoughland saying:

I usually write at the kitchen table, where I sit facing the living room window.
When I look up from my writing, I can see the woods.

Suppose Beverly can also *see* squirrels jumping off the trees and a dog lying on a mat. This activity involves entities existing independently of Beverly implying, they are out there in the world. For example, by saying that the squirrels are jumping off the trees, Beverly is referring to things – squirrels and trees – in the world. Notice that there is a sort of relationship between Beverly and these things. From a realist perspective, the squirrels and trees will continue to exist irrespective of whether Beverly (or anybody else) *sees or thinks* of them. Thus, when we say that something is objective, we talk about our relationship with the external world. Specifically, we talk about these realities insofar as they are independent of our personal preferences, thoughts, opinions, and projections of attitudes.

¹ The objectivity-talk spreads across various subject-matters of ordinary practices. Our thought and language operate in a way that presupposes the existence, or at least, the possible existence of objective entities. However, I think that our objectivity-talk would only make sense if there are beings that are capable of knowing and talking about the external world. This concern is also related to the issue of truth-value of statements: "If we imagine a world of mere matter, there would be no room for falsehood in such a world, and although it would contain what may be called 'facts,' it would not contain any truths, in the sense in which truths are things of the same kind as falsehood" (Russell 1912, 170). However, it does not mean that the *existence* of entities or truth-values of statements is not possible in the absence of such minds. Human beings appear to be the only beings capable of strictly engaging in talks about the objective status of realities. In a strict sense, stones, trees, mountains, water or lions do not engage in such talks in a way that is relevant to the domains of human inquiry.

First, notice that the idea of independence is crucial to the objectivity claim. In short, independency is the stance of standing back from personal attitudes, opinions, beliefs, etc. This fact points to a relationship between the agents and things in the world. In this analysis, entities are used in a loose sense to cover those sorts of things that *really* exist. By coming in contact with these entities, the agent enters into a kind of *relational encounter* with them. This encounter presupposes the existence as well as a link between the 'I' (subject) and the 'Other' (object), whereby the existence of the latter does not depend on the former and vice versa. For example, Beverly stands in a relational encounter with the objects – squirrels on the trees, dog, and woods. The existence of these objects is independent of her perception, conceptual practice, etc. Besides, they are not causally dependent on her thoughts or projections of feelings. Thus, one of the main features of objectivity is the independent existence of entities. This is fairly the ontological assumption underlying philosophical realism in general and moral realism in particular.

Moral realism construes moral facts as a part of the fabric of the world. Iris Murdoch argues that “they are stretched as it were between the truth-seeking mind and the world” (Murdoch 1970, 90). Consequently, the task of moral agents is not that of creating moral facts and properties, but discovering them. Thus, for the moral realist, these mind-independent facts make moral claims true. In this view, a moral claim is true if it aptly describes the property in question, otherwise, it is false. Thus far, we have two requirements of moral realism:

- (1) Moral claims (such as judgments and statements) are capable of being true or false.
- (2*) Some of the moral claims are literally true because of the moral facts underlying them.

We can add the third requirement as follows:

- (3) There are objective moral facts whose existence is mind-independent.

However, there are various construal of mind-independency in moral realism. I shall begin by briefly tracing the notion of moral mind-independency back to Plato. At least, a passage comes to mind, namely the *Euthyphro*. In this dialogue, Plato's Socrates asks his interlocutor, Euthyphro:

- Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious?
- Or is it pious because it is loved by the gods? (10a)

Apart from the classical dilemma he posits,² what Socrates asks, in other words: “Is something good because we favor it? Or, do we favor it because it's

² On the one hand, if we claim that the pious is pious because the gods loved it, then it would seem that anything the gods say is pious would be so. On the other hand, if we say that the pious is loved by the gods because it is pious, then piety would not only be independent of but also above and beyond the gods. Hence, the gods would not be almighty.

good?" (Railton 2006, 201; Miller 2013, 7). In other words, he raises the mind-independency versus mind-dependency issue. Moral realism maintains that goodness or badness exists independent of what we talk or think about them. However, irrealism holds that they depend on our feelings, attitudes, desires, etc. In what follows, I shall consider how the moral realists construe moral mind-independency. This exercise is crucial as it enables us to specify another important requirement of moral realism.

4. Moral Realism and Mind-Independancy

4.1 Weak Construal of Moral Mind-Independancy

Moral facts can be construed weakly, that is, when they are independent of any given individual agent's beliefs, perceptions, thoughts or evidence about them. Kramer writes:

Sometimes when theorists affirm that mind-independence of a certain matter, they are simply indicating that the facts of those matters transcend the beliefs or attitudes of any given individual. They mean to allow that those facts are derivative of the beliefs or attitudes that are shared by individuals who interact as a group. These theorists contend that, although no individual's view is decisive in ordaining what is actually the case about the matters in question, the understandings which individuals share in their interactions as a group are indeed so decisive (Kramer 2009, 24).

The emphasis here is on any given agent. The theorists endorsing this form of mind-independence believe that truth-makers are independent of any agent's belief, perceptions, thoughts or evidence about them. However, group(s) of individuals can create such moral facts. Suppose we apply the three requirements outlined above to this position, notice that it fits the moral realist framework. Nonetheless, it fails the moral realist test because it understands moral facts as artifacts for solving moral problems. Suffice to say that, the moral facts in question are constructed by (through interactions of) individuals. For example, while chairs and tables are constructed by a carpenter, their 'continued' existence does not depend on the mind of its maker. Similarly, the proponents (e.g. moral constructivists) of weak mind-independence argue that such facts are constructed. Consequently, they are causally dependent on rational agents. However, once constructed, their 'continued' existence does not depend on any given mind or group's minds.³ Kramer rightly notes that such

³ Korsgaard observes that what separates moral realism from moral constructivism is the role of the procedure in the construction of moral facts. She writes: "The procedural moral realist thinks that there are answers to moral questions *because* there are correct procedures for arriving at them. But the substantive moral realist thinks that there are correct procedures for answering moral questions *because* there are moral truths or facts that exist independently of those procedures and which those procedures track. Substantive realism conceives the

interactions must not necessarily involve the convergence or agreement of all the members of a given group. However, the “convergence among a preponderance of a group’s members will be sufficient to group the existence or establish the nature of some weakly mind-independent phenomenon” (Kramer 2009, 25).

Suppose we rationally converge or agree that ‘S’ is a moral fact. On the weak mind-independent construal, the continued existence of ‘S’ transcends the minds or thoughts of the agents. Assuming the agents that constructed ‘S’ suddenly disappear, ‘S’ would continue to exist.⁴ This implies that the continued existence of ‘S’ does not depend on its creators. Besides, ‘S’ would continue even if nobody observes or thinks of it. On this construal, moral facts are observationally mind-independent. Kramer notes that “Something is observationally mind-independent if and only if its nature (comprising its form and its substance and its sheer existence) does not hinge on what any observer takes the nature to be” (Kramer 2009, 25). Despite this position fulfilling the requirements listed above, it cannot be strictly regarded as moral realism. This is because it conceives moral facts as causally constructed by (a group of) individuals. Thus, we can submit that moral facts are to some extent mind-dependent entities.

Apart from not meeting the requirements of moral realism, these positions are problematic on several grounds. To begin with, imagine the cost of bringing all the members of a group to converge on what would count for and against moral facts. Given the nature and specificities of various groups, it appears difficult to bring them to a convergence point. With some groups, it may be more difficult to bring all the members to participate in the first place. On this ground, one falls back to the majority of the group to achieve such a convergence. Notice that the force of such moral facts would heavily rely on some sort of expectation. That is, an expectation that *all* members of the group (both the majority and minority groups respectively) would have to adhere to them. The ground for such an expectation might be rationality. It might be argued that since the moral facts are rationally based, they apply to all agents as such. However, given the possibility of various models of rationality, this argument fails. This is because the minority may have a legitimate reason not to adhere to the majority’s reason. Besides, the majority camp may be in an error.

Secondly, to avoid biased or prejudiced outcomes, the moral constructivist argues that rational agents or participants of rational deliberations should

procedures for answering normative questions as ways of *finding out* about a certain part of the world, the normative part” (Korsgaard 1996, 38 see also 36).

⁴ Such entities might continue to exist, but their existence is significantly tied to their utility. In other words, their continued existence would be lame just in case there will be no agent to utilize their usefulness. Consequently, the practical usefulness of the constructivist moral facts would only make sense if there are minds that construe them as practical solutions to moral problems.

become *ideal observers*. In other words, they have to enter the process of moral deliberation by taking what Rawls calls the original position:

The parties in the original position do not agree on what the moral facts are if there already were such facts. It is not that, being situated impartially, they have a clear and undistorted view of a prior and independent moral order. Rather (for constructivism), there is no such order; and therefore, no such facts apart from the procedure of construction as a whole; the facts are identified by the principles that result [from the procedure]. (Rawls 1999, 354)

However, I doubt very much the possibility of such a posture since the process of moral deliberations relies on some idea of procedures. First, the moral constructivist shoulders the burden of justifying his 'chosen' position or procedure. Precisely, he has to explain away why a given procedure is preferred over others. Second, he has to specify why the original position is to be set up in a given way in the first place. Finally, he has to secure the legitimacy of the final justifications of his outcomes. Recall the moral fact 'S' - Let us suppose it resulted from an ideal procedure of moral deliberation. Notice that there are features, which 'S' must possess for it to be regarded as an impartial outcome of an ideal process of moral deliberation. However, in the absence of some kind of pre-fixed (e.g. logical or rational) standards for evaluating 'S', it would be difficult to determine whether 'S' fulfils the requirements of a genuine moral fact. This is problematic on two grounds. On the one hand, assuming the constructivist denies the existence of such standards, he would be begging the question against the rational requirements of determinacy. On the other hand, assuming the constructivist accepts such requirements, then he has to explain away how the ideal observers are supposed to mute their pre-fixed requirements while entering the ideal procedure of moral construction. Nevertheless, the constructivist can deny the existence of such prior or fixed requirements. If he does, he would be begging the question against the realist position. Besides, the clause 'apart from' in Rawl's position above seems to transform the procedure of construction to a form of fixed requirement for an ideal moral deliberation.⁵ Similarly, Horgan and Timmons argue that the constructivist is caught up in a dilemma:

That is, in characterizing the conditions of ideal deliberation, if the constructivist appeals to the relatively uncontroversial formal and substantive platitudes associated with the concept of being an ideal moral judge, the result

⁵ Rawls acknowledges this problem and tries to address it in terms of an underlying wide reflective equilibrium. That is, the notion of a hypothetical state of affairs arrived at by resolving the expected inconsistencies between our considered judgments and the principles yielded by a candidate's description of the initial situation. Although this technique is intended to serve as a justification for the design of the original position and procedure of construction, it is not without criticisms. For example, Kelly and McGrath (2010), and Arras (2007) contend that Rawls' reflective equilibrium does not secure the convergence claim. For other criticisms of the technique see, for example, Hare 1973; McMahan 2000.

Jude Edeh

will be that there will not be enough constraints on what counts as 'ideal' deliberation to yield determinate moral norms. So, to narrow the field of competitors, the constructivist is going to have to build in some substantive moral assumptions. What will guide the constructivist here? It looks as if the constructivist will have to allow ideal deliberators to fall back on their own deepest moral convictions (Horgan and Timmons 2006, 228).

By taking the first horn of the dilemma, moral deliberation would not result in any moral outcomes. Assuming the constructivist takes the second horn, he would have to accept the fact that ideal agents will converge differently on what counts as 'S'. "But...if a particular ideal deliberator happens to start the deliberative process with deep moral convictions" (Horgan and Timmons 2006, 228), then different outcomes that fulfil the requirements of 'S' would certainly emerge. Taken together, by construing moral facts weakly, moral constructivism fails to meet the requirement of moral realism.

4.2 Robust Construal of Moral Mind-Independency

On the moral realist construal, moral facts are conceived as robust entities. The moral realists largely think that moral facts are part of the world, hence independent of any mind or thought. Here mind-independency is closely tied to the existence and nature of moral facts. Kramer writes that "something is existentially mind-independent if and only if its occurrence or continued existence does not presuppose the existence of any mind(s) and the occurrence of mental activity" (Kramer 2009, 25). In this analysis, there are two forms of existence, namely what I refer to as the 'original existence' and 'continued existence'. The former implies that moral facts do not owe their existence, namely their *coming-to-being* to any individual mind or group's minds. The latter is the view that the *continued being* of moral facts does not depend on any individual mind or group's minds. It is the robust construal of original existence that separates moral realism from moral constructivism, minimalism, and other versions of realist-like positions.

Notice that both moral realism and moral constructivism agree that the continued existence of moral facts does not depend on any minds or thoughts. Recall the question implied in Socrates' concern, namely "Is something good because we favour it? Or, do we favour it because it's good?" Given the conception of robust mind-independence, moral realism believes that we favour something because it is good. However, this claim is not unique to moral realism because the defenders of weak mind-independence endorse it as well. In other words, moral realism is not to be strictly understood in terms of:

(3) There are objective moral facts whose existence is mind-independent.

Assuming we define moral realism based on (3), notice that the concept of existence therein can refer to original existence as well as continued existence. Ultimately, for moral realism, the kind of facts that support the truth-values of

moral claims are objective and mind-independent moral facts, where moral mind-independency is understood robustly. That is, the original existence and continued existence of such facts do not depend on our beliefs, perceptions, thoughts or evidence about them. Thus, we can modify (3) as follows:

(3*) There are objective moral facts whose existence and continued existence are mind-independent.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that Sayre-McCord's model is insufficient for characterizing moral realism. Second, I provided requirements for identifying and delineating moral realism from irrealism, especially the proliferation of realist-like positions that combine elements of cognitivism and antirealism. While the various construals of moral realism are beyond the scope of this paper, I hope that the requirements outlined in this paper will contribute to the definitions of naturalist and non-naturalist commitments. Finally, assuming this paper meets its goal, it will guide us in navigating the issue at stake between moral realism and antirealism.

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Jude Edeh

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