

A Critical Analysis of The Ontological Status of Moral Facts

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Abstract

This paper argued against the assumption of the moral realist that moral realism is defensible on the basis of scientific realism. The controversial issue is whether or not there are objective moral facts which have the same ontological status with scientific facts. The paper argued that moral facts must be of the same ontological status as physical facts in order to play evidential role for principles. Views of moral realist such as R.N Boyd and anti-realist Gilbert Harman were critically discussed. The method of critical and conceptual analysis was employed while existing literatures on the subject provided the background to the study. The paper concluded that there are no moral facts which have the same ontological status with scientific facts. Thus, the study carried the implication of denying the truth of the moral cognitivist's position that moral statements are capable of being true or false.

Keywords: realism, scientific, moral facts, objectivity, subjectivity

1. Introduction

This paper examines the ontological status of moral facts with a view to showing that moral facts must be of the same ontological status as physical facts in order to play evidential role for principles. This will involve investigating whether moral fact exists or not, and if it exists, to explain its nature.

The view that there are moral facts is usually defended by moral realist (Sayre-Mc-Cord, 1988:181-955). Realism is the view that there are things that exist independently of human mind. Another sense of realism is objectivity of truth conditions. This simply says that what determines the truth value of a statement makes no reference at all to persons. This contrasts with subjectivity, which holds that the truth value of a statement is determined by reference to individuals.

Moral realism is the view that there are moral values which are either true or false or which form part of the fabric of the world. In other words, it is the belief that there are moral facts which play the same role in moral that physical facts play in science (Boyd 1988:188-192). Moral realism is defensible on the basis of scientific realism. Scientific realism is the idea that theoretical entities exist independently of human minds (Harre 1978:90-99). It is the view that there is a theory independent world. This view implies that reality is prior to thought. Furthermore, scientific realism portrays operational definition of theoretical entities or natural kinds as *a posteriori* and contingent rather than being *a priori*. The crux of the matter, therefore, is that moral cognitivist claims that moral statements are (i) propositions and (ii) capable of being true or false. Thus, to the cognitivist, moral statements are truth functional.

From another perspective, the moral anti-realist such as Gilbert Harman, contends that there is no moral fact in the sense claimed by moral realists (Harman 1988:119). The reason for this position is that the role played by scientific fact is played by moral sensibility in ethics. J.K. Mackie, (1988:45) for instance, maintains that there are such moral values although they are not objective. This forms the background for his moral skepticism.

This paper represents a further attempt to show that there are no moral facts which have the same ontological status with scientific facts.

2. Challenges to Moral Realism

Mackie is concerned with the question, whether moral values can be part of the fabric of the world? This consideration leads him to moral skepticism that further culminates into his denial of objective moral values. His position is that moral values exist but that they are subjective. The reason for this position is that moral judgments are equivalent to reports of the speaker's own feelings or attitude (Mackie 1988; 102) Mackie therefore, maintains that it is an error for people to suppose that moral judgments point to something objectively prescriptive.

Mackie, however, grants that a value statement can either be true or false since there can be objective evaluation relative to standards. His own concern, however, is that there is no objective validity about the choice of standards (Mackie 1988: 111). This is because people's ways of life determine their moral codes and not vice-versa. This implies that the variations in the moral codes reflect people ways of life. This is what Mackie calls arguments from relativity. This argument is based on the premise that there are variations in moral codes from one society to another, and differences in moral beliefs between different groups within a community (Mackie 1988: 109). The problem, therefore, is if there are moral disagreements, how do we resolve them? It is in view of this that Mackie concludes that the moral values are not objectively prescriptive.

Mackie's second argument against the objectivity of moral values is based on the view that if there were objective values, they would be strange entities or qualities different from everything else in the universe. This is referred to as argument from queerness. This argument continues that even if we are aware of objective values, it would be by special faculty of moral perception or intuition, which is different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else (Mackie 1988: 109). Intuitionism, on its own, is in a sense subjective as it is essentially private.

We may reasonably ask at this juncture, what is the nature of objective moral facts of the kind that Mackie is denying its existence? How do they look like and how can we recognize them? Mackie uses the concept of 'perceiving' as illustration (Mackie 1988: 109). The issue here is not what 'perception' means but what is going on in the world when one is perceiving? He gives the analogy with 'colour'. What is colour? What does the word colour mean? Colour is a surface property of objects and reflects light etc. that is, material properties that can be sensed. But this is not what the word 'colour' means. Rather, there is here an inquiry about what goes on in the world when one is perceiving colour. It is in this latter sense that Mackie is maintaining that there are no genuine objective moral values, and as such, statements of ethical values are nothing but mere subjective reports. This is what Mackie calls an ontological thesis as opposed to meaning or linguistic thesis.

In Mackie's moral skepticism, we can identify two points of view. The first order and the second order views. First order moral view are substantive views people hold about moral values such as 'killing is bad', 'slavery is unjust' while the second order moral views are views about the nature of the moral values themselves. The difference is that while the first order moral values state values, the second order moral values discuss the values e.g. what do we mean by 'good', 'bad', 'wrong', 'right', etc. in themselves? When the question of how these moral concepts are to be understood starts to arise, then there is the second order moral view. This view, however, does not represent a total rejection of moral realism. Mackie's denial of objective values is put forward as an 'error theory', 'a theory that although most people in making moral judgement implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false' (Moore 1959; 101). This is the bases of Mackie's moral scepticism.

Mackie's moral scepticism is supported by G.E Moore's idea of moral values as non-natural qualities. Moore contends that any attempt to define a moral concept by reference to naturalistic properties will fail. This is because of his belief that moral concepts such as 'good' are not analyzable or definable. To do this is to commit the naturalistic fallacy (Harman 1988: 121). Thus, the implication of Mackie's arguments from queerness is that value entities that are quite unfamiliar are postulated by moral realists or objectivists as they are unable to explain how objective moral quality is linked with natural feature. The crux of this matter is that it is an error for the moral realist to suppose that moral values point to something objective.

Moral realists claim that there are moral facts which play the same role in moral that physical facts plays in science. Our concern now is whether moral values or principles can be tested in the same way scientific principles are tested? What Harman considers necessary in determining moral judgements as true or false is not moral fact but the moral sensibility of the agent (Harman 1988: 119). The basic issue to Harman is that we can observe someone doing something but cannot perceive the rightness or wrongness of such an act. In other words, moral principles are tested confirmed or disconfirmed by sense of feeling, desire or attitude of the agent, unlike scientific principles that are tested by experiment. In short, scientific theories are tested against the world, as physical facts explain scientific theory and not the psychological set of the scientist.

The contention at this point is that although moral claims are meaningful they are false. In Harman's own view, to be able to secure their legitimacy, they should have a place within scientific explanations. This is based on his conviction that human experiences play vital role in human knowledge. Gilbert Harman's rejection of objective moral values is linked to his view that we should believe only in what we appeal to in our best explanations of our experiences (Harman 1988:119-120). Harman presents 'thought experiment', concerning five patients who are dying in the hospital, each in need of a separate organ, such that if one healthy innocent bystander is sacrificed, the five patients will be saved, while the innocent person will die (Boyd 1988:219). Here, Harman intends to show that a moral principle was tested and disconfirmed by comparing the principle with our feelings about such imagined situations. This is why Harman is maintaining the position that

moral facts cannot play in moral the role which physical facts play in science, at least, from the point of view of testability.

In summary, the following are the list of concern entertained by the aforementioned anti-realist;

- (i) There are no objective moral values.
- (ii) Moral values are relative to standards and there is no objective validity about the choice of such standards (Cultural variability).
- (iii) If there were objective values, they will be strange entities that do not form the fabrics of the world.
- (iv) Moral claims are false.
- (v) Moral statements or principles are not testable like scientific ones.

3. Problem Associated with Moral Facts.

The anti-realists challenge the realist to explain the diversity of theoretical conceptions and the difficulty of their resolution within the relevant tradition of inquiry. In response to this challenge, Boyd adopts theories of epistemic contact and error, which reflect the best available current theories of the moral values in question. Epistemic contact accounts for the epistemologically significant causal relations between inquirers and the supposed theory-independent subject matter of the tradition. The theory of error accounts for the observed diversity of theoretical conceptions and the difficulty in resolving the theoretical disputes. These theories are then linked with a larger account of the metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, methodology and historical development of the various relevant areas of inquiry including those of anti-realist of comparable scope (Rawls 1971: 46-53).

The problem with Boyd's defence of moral realism as indicated above is that the moral properties to which epistemic access is demonstrated might be partly conventional or socially constructed. If this is the case, then it follows that Boyd's use of theories of epistemic contact and of error is not successful. The question is by which method can we gain an epistemic access of the sort that Boyd has stated above? In this case, the realist resorts to Rawls' method of wide-reflective equilibrium technique will not help (Boyd 1988: 199). This is because such procedure proceeds by negotiating between conflicting presuppositions and so cannot be a discovery procedure, but at best a constructive one. Boyd (like any other realists) is not comfortable with this objection. He argues further that wide divergence of moral concept or opinions between traditions or cultures need not indicate the absence of shared causally fixed referents for moral terms (Boyd 1988:200). The example of scientific practice is cited in which scientific realists maintain that some determined intuitions in science are examples of reliability trained judgements. Boyd concludes that the epistemic role of culturally determined intuitions in ethics can be treated on the same level as scientific model. In other words, since the scientific realists conclude that bivalence fails for some statement involving homeostatic cluster kind properties, and then these permits the moral realists to reason that similar failures of bivalence for some ethical (moral) statements needs not be fatal to moral realism (Kuhn 1970: 199-206).

The above-mentioned defense of moral realism against cultural relativity arguments seems to commit the fallacy of *Tu quoque*. Instead of Boyd putting up rationally defensible arguments in support of moral realism, he accuses scientific realism of similar failures. This is not a comfortable defence. However, Boyd seems to have successfully defended the view that some scientific beliefs and methods depend on non-objective features or social conventions. This position has been extensively defended by scholars such as (Kuhn 1970:199-206). The concern is that moral realists want to show that moral belief and methods are much like scientific belief and methods (objective, empirical and inter-intuitive), and to assimilate moral reasoning to the model of objective, empirical scientific methodology.

In science, theories are decided on the basis of observation, whereas in moral reasoning, intuitions play the same role. The moral realists claim that moral principles and theories are tested by seeing how their consequences conform or disconfirm to our moral intuitions about a given case (Platts 1988:282). But people's moral intuition reflects their culture and upbringing. Thus there will be no way to reconcile conflicting moral intuitions. What then plays in moral reasoning, the role played by observation in science? This is another challenge to moral realism.

Mark Platts defends moral realism not through philosophy of science but from the point of view of how language works. According to Platts, the crucial question is not whether there are moral facts but in the way we use language, whether moral realism is correct (Platts 1988:283). Unlike Boyd, Platts is not holding any theory of a special faculty of intuition. He does not hold that intuitions yield certain knowledge. Rather, he admits intuitionism that is austere realist such that the application of ethical expressions depends on what they designate and their use. Here, certainty plays no role. What we can get is approximate truth of moral beliefs, for they transcend our present practical comprehension. Using the 'face' argument, Platts demonstrates that our judgement that this is a face is autonomous i.e. not inferred from non-moral facts. They are not defined as necessary and sufficient conditions of non-moral facts. In other words, our moral statements are true or false not because they are inferred from non-moral facts (Platts 1988:282).

Furthermore, in his reaction to cultural variability and how to resolve the problem of moral disagreements among diverse traditions, Platts accommodates that there can be conflict in moral reasoning, at least, from his acceptance of the possibility of pluralism of moral values. Platts admits that there are more than one 'good' e.g. sincerity, honesty, loyalty, prudence etc. The question then is if intuitionism implies a direct apprehension of the 'good' i.e. that there can be only one correct apprehension of one object, how can we reconcile this with Platts' austere realism? This shows that moral realism has a problem that seems unresolvable particularly from the point of view of diverse irreconcilable theories of intuitions. The realist's conception of language, for instance holds that the statements we make have truth conditions being straight forward description of aspect of the world and make true or false by facts in the world (Platts 1988:282). At least, this view is held by realist such as Boyd. However, Platts' own conception is different from this. He talks of approximate truth of moral beliefs because such belief transcends our present practical comprehension (Platts 1988:282-283).

4. Summary and Concluding Remarks

The realists' defence of moral realism is never conclusive as they generate further unresolved problems. For instance, Boyd defends moral realism against the charge of cultural variability and moral disagreements by postulating theories of epistemic contact and of error which are not successful. The question is by which method can we gain an epistemic access of the sort that Boyd has indicated? If it is through moral intuition, as the realist arguments suggest, then we have the problem of objectivity to resolve. This is because intuitionism is conventionalist.

The moral realists' defence of objectivity of moral values from the point of view of the realist conception of science is not conclusive. If moral beliefs are expected to have the same status with scientific beliefs, then they should have a place within scientific explanation as rightly pointed out by Harman. The problem of moral realism in this perspective is the lack of testability. To argue that in scientific practice, there are conventions particularly in respect of theoretical entities will not help the matter. Mackie, for example, did not prove the plausibility of the realist conception of science but just assumed it.

The moral realists seem to leave us in doubt concerning the nature of objective moral facts they are defending its existence. They are expected to specify how they look like and how we can recognise them. Platts' argument in this regards appears plausible. He maintains that the possibility of there being divergent moral beliefs does not imply that there is no one 'good'

(Platts 1988: 287). This implies that different standards can be used to judge the same thing. For instance, the concept of sincerity or honesty may be given different interpretations in different cultures and traditions yet there exists an apprehension of one 'good'. Something is occurring in the world when someone says 'X is honest'. But such seeming state of affairs is not objective. If by objective moral facts, Mackie is looking for general moral principles that cut across cultures, then he should realize that the general principle does not play any role in local questions. Sometimes our reason for accepting local judgements is not based on this. However, Mackie rightly recognizes the fact that we agree on certain values such as 'X is good' but that does not mean that such values exist in the world. This is due to the fact that objectivity is not universalizability. Hence, even Kent's categorical imperative is not an objective moral value in this sense. This paper, therefore, concludes that there are no moral facts which have the same ontological status with scientific facts.

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