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Realism and relativism about the normative

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ABSTRACT

I defend normative realism—the claim that there are mind-independent, absolute normative facts—mostly by arguing against its rivals. Against mind-dependent theories of normativity, I argue that at least one highly influential version of such a view, Lewis's dispositional theory of value, is subject to at least three severe problems: the problem of the implausible contingency of value, the problem of ideal conditions, and the problem of lack of convergence. Against relativistic conceptions of normativity, I argue that either they fail to evade a commitment to absolute normative truths, or they fail to distinguish themselves from Nihilism. Finally, against Nihilism, I argue that it is not a coherent option at least for the normative domain of rationality, since facts about rationality are presupposed by any judgment, including any judgment meant to express a skepticism about facts about rationality.

KEYWORDS Normative realism; John Mackie; mind-dependence; David Lewis; dispositional theory of value; relativism; nihilism; rationality

Introduction

In this programmatic paper, I want to point in the direction of three large claims. The first two are:

(Objectivism) If there are normative facts, then at least some of them are *objective* – i.e., mind-independent.

(Absolutism) If there are normative facts, then at least some of them are *absolute* – i.e., non-relative.

In other words, neither relativistic, nor mind-dependence, forms of anti-realism about the normative are true. Even if my arguments are successful in establishing these two theses, that would not by itself vindicate a Realism about the normative: that there are mind-independent, absolute

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normative facts. The two theses, as I have them, leave it open that an Error Theory (Nihilism) about the normative is true, according to which there are no normative facts of any stripe. I will close by indicating why I believe that Nihilism is also not likely to be a viable option, and that will be my third thesis:

(Anti-Nihilism) There are some normative facts.

Obviously, these are *very* large claims, a proper defense of which would require book-length treatment, at a minimum. Here my aim, therefore, is only to indicate, in a fairly broad-brush manner, the types of argument for these theses that I would develop if I had more space.

Normative statements

Consider the following three statements:

(1) He ought not to have tormented that cat just for his own amusement.
(2) If you see a cat in front of you, and you have no defeaters, you may believe that there is a cat in front of you.
(3) Earth is spherical.

(3) is *descriptive*: it describes a state of affairs. It is capable of being objectively true or false. And it is easy to see *why* it is capable of objective truth or falsehood: there is a mind-independent fact – the shape of Earth – which makes it true and which humans had no hand in bringing about in any sense. So, we have a handle on the objective truth of (3). Furthermore, we know how to go about *settling*, or coming to *know*, whether (3) is true, through fairly well-understood methods.

By contrast with (3), (1) and (2) are *normative* (in either the *prescriptive* or the *evaluative* sense of 'normative').[1] Moral and rationality judgments do not say how things *are*, but how they *ought* to be, or how they are permitted to be, or how it would be good for them to be, or how there is a reason for them to be.

We recognize the normativity of a judgment through the presence of canonical normative terms such as 'ought', 'ought not'; 'good', 'bad'; 'right', 'wrong'; 'has a reason to/has no reason to'. In addition to these canonically normative terms, there are other concepts that are also normative, although it might take some analysis to reveal that

[1]For more on this distinction see my (2022), 'The Normativity of Meaning Revisited.'

they are: for example, 'beautiful', 'rational to believe', 'courageous', 'cowardly'.

When people think of normative statements, they tend to think primarily of moral claims. But as my remarks just now indicate, there are at least two other domains that are also normative: the rational and the esthetic. I won't say much about the esthetic in this essay.[2] But I do want to emphasize the rational. Remembering that the normative is a broader category than the moral is crucial to understanding the normative.

Challenges for normative statements

How well do we understand statements like (1) and (2)? We certainly seem to use them quite fluently in ordinary practice; but can we answer the counterparts of the metaphysical and epistemological questions that we raised in connection with (3) and which we answered fairly easily?

To begin with, what makes (1) true? If we press this question, the first answer that is likely to occur to us is that (1) is true because a more general principle is true, namely:

> (General Moral Principle, GMP) It is wrong to inflict pain on sentient beings just for one's own amusement.

But even if we were to accept this answer, that would just push our question one step back: What makes GMP true? And assuming for the moment that it is true, how do we *know* that it is?

In recent times, the classic formulation of these epistemological and metaphysical challenges to an objectivist view of normativity was given by John Mackie (1977):

> If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else … .When we ask the awkward question, how can we be aware of this authoritative prescriptivity, of the truth of these distinctively ethical premisses or of the cogency of this distinctively ethical pattern of reasoning, none of our ordinary accounts of sensory perception or introspection or the framing and confirming of explanatory hypotheses or inference or logical construction or conceptual analysis, or any combination of these, will provide a satisfactory answer; 'a special sort of

[2] I discuss the esthetic in my 'A Challenge to an Objectivist Conception of Beauty,' (ms.).

> intuition' is a lame answer, but it is the one to which the clear-headed objectivist is compelled to resort. (38–39)

Mackie eloquently gives expression to a pair of puzzles, one metaphysical and the other epistemological. How could there be a prescriptive or evaluative fact sitting out there, in the way that the fact about the shape of Earth just sits out there? What kind of a strange thing would such a normative fact be? Does the world itself prefer certain acts or outcomes to others? And how could we know such a fact? Through what methods? As Mackie says, none of the ordinary methods – perception, deduction, induction, abduction – that we use to discover descriptive truths seem fit for purpose. To meet the epistemological challenge, he continues, one would have to resort to a mysterious faculty called 'intuition' – but would this be a helpful answer?

Notice that although Mackie is talking explicitly only about morality, his puzzles apply equally to any normative domain – including that of rationality – since the puzzles he is raising draw only on the normative character of moral judgment, a character it shares with other normative judgments.

If, like many philosophers, you are inclined to find Mackie's challenges to Objectivism insuperable, you will have two other options to consider: Either an *Error Theory* about normativity (Mackie's own preferred option), or a *Mind-Dependent* (MD) view of it.[3]

On a (nihilistic) Error view, you hold that normative discourse is systematically mistaken: we talk as though there are normative truths, but there are none. What's really going on is just social pressure and power plays, dressed up as 'truths about what we ought to do or believe'. This is quite a radical view, but as far as I can tell it is taken to be the obvious truth about normativity nowadays in vast stretches of the humanities and social sciences. I will come back to whether it is a real option.

The other alternative is to think of normative facts as somehow created by the normative attitudes of human minds. According to this MD view, au fond, our normative attitudes are not a *response* to how things stand with a mind-independent normative reality; rather, in some appropriate sense, a normative truth comes to obtain *because* we *regard* it as true. Normative truths are thereby *demystified* since they are shown to be the automatic byproducts of our own normative engagement.

[3]Many think that, in addition, there is an Expressivist option. I have yet to see a formulation of Expressivism that manages to avoid *both* a crude non-cognitivism and collapse into a view that any realist could accept.

This mind-dependent view of moral normativity has become hugely influential among those philosophers who don't want to countenance primitive normative facts, but who also don't want to give up on normative talk altogether – see, for example, Street (ms). As Street points out, the influence of such a mind-dependent view has spread well beyond the academy to popular culture, as is shown by Shakespeare having Hamlet say: 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so'. I will first discuss MD theories of the normative, in particular, of the moral.

Mind-dependence theories

Mind-dependence theories are, of course, very well-known in philosophy from a number of different domains. In the seventeenth century, for example, some philosophers became convinced that the new science had shown that objects in the external world really only have such physical properties as mass, extension, velocity and so forth. They then faced the question how to think about the other properties that objects seem to have – their colors, tastes and smells? According to one influential view, those so-called 'secondary qualities' were not intrinsic features of the objects themselves, but some sort of complex relation between them and the sentient beings that experience them. A familiar view of color, for example, is this:

> (DTC) An object is red iff it is disposed, under ideal conditions, to cause reddish sensations in normal human beings.

David Hume (1757) proposed such a theory for esthetic truths:

> (Humean Beauty) An object is beautiful iff it would be so judged by the joint verdicts of 'true judges' – critics of "[s]trong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice." (144)

Many others have offered similar theories of moral facts. David Lewis (1989), for example, proposed such a mind-dependent account of 'value':

> (DTV) Something of the appropriate category is a value iff it's among the things we are ideally disposed to value.

There are at least three different ways in which a theory such as Lewis's might be understood, stated here in decreasing order of strength:

1. As an *analysis* of the concept of *value*.
2. As an account of the *nature* of value properties, the properties denoted by value concepts.

3. As an account of the metaphysical *ground* of value properties, that is, of the facts in virtue of which an object is valuable.

The first two versions of such a theory are *reductive* – they *identify* value facts with our dispositions to value. The third version is non-reductive – it attempts to supply the metaphysical basis for there being value facts, without claiming that the one type of property reduces to the other.

Lewis's dispositional theory of value

Let me first consider such a theory as Lewis meant it, namely, as an analysis of the concept of value. As such, it's supposed to tell us what we *mean* when we say that something is valuable. Such a theory is not easy to pull off. I will develop three main problems.

First, if we say that what's valuable is determined by what human beings would value under ideal conditions, the problematic counterfactual would appear to follow that, if we had been differently minded and had ideally valued other things, such as the abuse of children solely for one's own amusement, then such abuse would have been a genuine value. DTV-style views appear to make value facts unacceptably contingent on our contingent psychologies.

Some defenders of DTV-style views have maintained that this objection can be met by employing the device of *rigidification*: we say that what counts as valuable, even in counterfactual situations, is determined by our *actual* ideal sensibilities and attitudes. Thus, they propose modifying DTV as follows:

> (DTV*) Something of the appropriate category is a value iff it's among the things we are *actually* ideally disposed to value.

But as Lewis realized, this maneuver cannot evade all the objectionable contingency entrained by DTV-style views. The crucial point is that we could have *meant* exactly the same thing by 'value' as we actually do, even if we had ideally valued very different things from what we actually do.

Assume for the moment that this claim about meaning is true (I will argue for it in a moment). Let's call the actual world '@'; and let 'W' name the nearest possible world in which we ideally value child abuse. There are two ways of reading the occurrence of the word 'actually' in DTV*. On the one hand, it could be taken to be a rigid designator for @; on the other hand, it could be read as a non-rigid indexical, picking out whichever world is considered as actual.

The second reading is obviously useless in warding off the unwelcome result that child abuse could have been a genuine value if we had been minded differently, since it would come out true in W, considered as actual, that child abuse is a value in W.

So, we must resort to the first reading. Given the requirement that we mean the same by 'x is a value' in W as in @, this has the result that even the inhabitants of W would have to mean by 'x is a value' that x is among the things valued by the inhabitants of @! But it is absurd to suppose that our non-actual possible selves in W would defer, as a matter of what they mean by 'x is a value', to the value judgments of creatures very different from them. Hence, neither reading of DTV* can evade an implausible contingency in what is valuable.

Why is it so clear that we could have meant the very same thing by 'value' even if we had ideally valued different things? Because it can be shown that the *core* of the meaning of the phrase 'is a value' is a certain positive normative role, one that's used to commend, in a distinctive way, that to which it is ascribed. And someone would count as perfectly competent with the concept of 'value' provided they understood this core normative commendatory role, even as they ascribed it to things that we would regard as clearly not valuable. In other words, this normative core could clearly remain invariant, even as we shift our views about what is ideally valuable.

This insight, that fundamental normative notions just consist in their core normative roles and do not, as a matter of analytic truth, contain doctrines about what falls under them, is, I believe, the fundamental insight behind Moore's Open Question Argument: it's what enables him to argue that for *any* proposed definition of the form 'x is good = (def) x is N', someone could competently doubt whether N is good, without compromising their grasp of the meaning of 'good'. (For further discussion, see Boghossian 2021).

I turn now to a second difficulty with the view, one that has to do with its invoking the notion of 'ideal conditions'. The use of the notion is clearly essential: we can't hope to succeed in determining what is genuinely valuable without some appeal to idealization. But what does 'ideal' mean in DTV? In particular, is it a normative notion or a purely descriptive one?

If it's purely descriptive, just an enumeration of some set of non-normatively specified conditions which we label 'ideal', then the right-hand side becomes purely descriptive and the normativity of the left-hand side is lost. And that seems like a mistake. If, however, 'ideal' is normative, then the analysis risks being circular.

It might be replied that 'ideal' could be normative, but not *morally* normative, so the analysis would not be circular after all: it could mean 'ideally *rational*', for example, even if not 'ideally moral'.

Putting aside other objections, the most such a view could achieve is a *reduction of the moral to the rational*. One of the advantages of discussing normativity in general, as opposed to specific normative domains like that of morality, is that it becomes plain that reducing one type of normative fact to another would not be much of an advance as far as Mackie's worries are concerned: Mackie's problems arise no matter what type of normativity is at issue.

However, even if we set aside this problem, there would still be a serious problem with this notion of 'ideal conditions'. The problem is that these conditions have to be specified in a *substantive* way, avoiding what Crispin Wright (1988) has called a 'whatever-it-takes' formulation. That is to say, we can't specify

> the ideal conditions under which our verdicts will count as definitive of what's really valuable

simply as

> those conditions under which 'we get the facts about value right.'

Unfortunately, long and hard experience with such theories has shown us that, when this constraint is observed, when we specify the ideal conditions in non-question begging terms, there is no chance that all the judges who satisfy them – the 'true judges', to use Hume's term – will *agree* on their verdicts about what is valuable.

This is not necessarily true in the case of color, where you would expect to be able to specify a set of physical and physiological conditions under which human subjects would converge in their verdicts about what color objects look to have.

But such convergence-failure looks thoroughly unavoidable in the case of esthetics, where even the most knowledgeable experts disagree amongst themselves about the esthetic merits of a given work of art or of a given composer's corpus. And when we consider comparisons across genres – for example, about the relative merits of classical music versus rap – it is obviously impossible to find a set of non-question-begging 'ideal conditions' under which all 'true judges' satisfying those ideals would agree (for further discussion see Boghossian ms).

This lack of convergence problem is no less severe in the case of morality. It's very hard to see how insisting that judges satisfy some set of non-

moral conditions – for example, that they be rational, clear, well-informed and so forth – could *guarantee* that they will converge in their moral verdicts – for example, on the permissibility of abortion. Even after all such conditions have been specified, true judge X may conclude that p while true judge Y may conclude that not-p. And this lack of convergence among the true judges is a fatal problem for a mind-dependence view because it implies that no (consistent) extension for 'is a value' can be determined via this kind of theory.

Let us take stock. DTV, qua one of the most influential forms that a mind-dependent analysis of value can take, is subject to at least three severe problems: the problem of the implausible contingency of value; the problem of ideal conditions; and the problem of lack of convergence.

Although I won't argue for it here, I believe that versions of these three objections, developed against DTV construed as an *analysis* of the concept of value, will apply both to the Metaphysical and the Grounding versions of the theory. Together, they indicate the case that I would make for my first claim – Objectivism.

Types of relativism[4]

One way for a defender of DTV to respond to the problem of the lack of convergence, and hence to the problem of the absence of a consistent extension, is to propose a *relativized* conception of value, according to which there aren't any facts about what is *valuable* simpliciter, but, rather, only facts about what's valuable-for-X as opposed to what's valuable-for-Y, for suitable X and Y. Put now in terms of 'right' and 'wrong', rather than 'value', MD would appear inexorably to lead to:

> (Moral Relativism, MR) There is no such thing as what's right simpliciter; there is only what's right-for-us versus what's right-for-them (for suitable 'us' and 'them').

Now, of course, not everyone will regard this as a bad thing. Some people are independently attracted to a relativistic view of morality (see for example Street ms and Velleman 2015). However, I will argue that the particular kind of relativistic commitment incurred by MD theories of the moral is not viable, and so cannot constitute a way out of the problem of lack of convergence.

How, exactly should we understand MR? Let's begin by looking at the examples drawn from science in which the rejection of an absolutist

[4]My discussion of moral relativism in this paper draws heavily on my (2017).

conception of a given property in favor of a relativized conception of that property resulted in a major advance in our understanding of the world.

For example, before Galileo, we used to think that there was such a thing as *absolute motion*: either an object was moving or it wasn't. Galileo taught us, however, that there is no such thing as absolute motion, but only motion relative to a specified frame of reference; and that none of these frames is more privileged than any of the others.

To take another example, before Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity, we believed that there was such a thing as absolute *simultaneity*: either two events were simultaneous, or they weren't. Einstein taught us that we should not think that there is any such thing as the absolute simultaneity of two events separated in space, but only simultaneity relative to a (variable) spatio-temporal frame of reference; and that none of these spatio-temporal frames of reference is any more privileged than any of the others.

In both of these famous cases, we start out with a predicate – 'moves' or 'is simultaneous with' – which we believe we can truly apply to the world. We become convinced that nothing in the world answers to that predicate, that the most we can claim is that a close *higher-degree cousin* of the predicate – 'moves relative to F' or 'is simultaneous relative to F' – applies. As a result, we recommend that people stop talking in terms of the original predicate and start talking only in terms of its higher-degree relativistic cousin.

'Moves' is replaced with: 'Moves relative to F'

'Is simultaneous with' is replaced with: 'Is simultaneous relative to F'

And we add: And none of these F's is more privileged than any of the others.[5]

These cases provide us with a template that we can apply to the moral case. Thus, to formulate a relativism about morality we take the predicate

is morally right (wrong)

and we replace it with:

is morally right (wrong) relative to F.

[5]This 'no privilege' clause is important; unless we impose it, absolute facts about motion or simultaneity can be defined as those that obtain relative to the privileged frame. My characterization of moral relativism obviously takes its inspiration from the ground-breaking work of Harman (1996), although I depart from certain idiosyncrasies of Harman's characterization.

For example, instead of simply saying

> It is right to educate girls

we would say

> It is right to educate girls relative to F.

What is 'F' going to be in the moral case? The relativization in the case of motion and simultaneity is to variable spatio-temporal frames of reference; but what are we relativizing to in the case of morality?

Here there are two importantly different options and they determine two very different types of view. On the first, we relativize to some *moral code* or other – that is, to some person's, or some community's, background set of moral values. On this view, which I will call, for reasons that will emerge, a

Thoroughgoing Relativism about morality, we replace

> x is morally right

with

> x is morally right relative to moral code M.

On the second option, which I will call for reasons that will emerge, an *Absolutist Relativism*, we relativize not to background moral codes, but to the *circumstances,* broadly conceived, in which the act is performed. On this

Absolutist Relativist view, we replace

> x is morally right

with

> x is morally right relative to its circumstances C.

These circumstances are to be conceived very broadly: any fact which might be relevant to the moral status of an act can be included in them, including facts about what moral codes the various agents involved endorse.

When people talk about moral relativism, they sometimes mean the one view and sometimes the other, often not distinguishing between them. But they are very different views.

Absolutist relativism

Let's consider first the case where we relativize to *circumstances*. This version of relativism is both coherent and is, in application to some

highly selective moral issues, plausible. For example, if we ask (this example is drawn from Scanlon 1998):

> Should I stop to help a motorist who has broken down on the side of the road?

The answer is not a straight 'yes' or a straight 'no'. The correct answer is: It depends on the circumstances. If the motorist would otherwise perish and you don't yourself have to be somewhere else urgently, then you ought to stop; however, if there are lots of other friendly people around and you do have an urgent need to be somewhere else, then you may keep going.

There are many other examples of such circumstance-dependent moral truths:

> Should I leave someone who has served me a tip? – It depends on the local customs.

There are also examples of circumstance-relative claims that are *controversial* – people argue about them:

> May I torture someone to obtain information? – It depends on how large a calamity might be averted if we had that information.

Now, it is perfectly acceptable to call circumstance-dependent relativism a type of 'moral relativism', – as I said, 'relativism' is a technical term, so there is a lot of leeway in how you get to use it, provided you are clear about it. But if you do call this a type of 'moral relativism', it's important to realize that it is not the sort of relativism that escapes a commitment to absolute moral facts. For what a statement like:

> If circumstances are C, then you ought to stop and help the broken-down motorist; but if they are C*, then you are permitted to keep on going.

says, is:

> It holds absolutely that you ought to help if circumstances are C; and holds absolutely that you are permitted to carry on if circumstances are C*.

This is the sort of content that moral claims have when they are relativized to circumstances. So, if your motivation for being a relativist about morality is that you wanted to get away from absolute facts about morality, this type of view won't help you. For facts of the form

> (Conditional Fact) If circumstances are C, you ought to do A

are just as absolute as facts of the form

(Unconditional Fact) You ought to do A no matter what the circumstances.

Absolutist Relativism has a 'relativistic' flavor since it entails that different acts are called for under distinct circumstances. But that should not obscure the fact that it is a form of absolutism.

As my examples indicate, Absolutist Relativism is the correct model for the normative truths of etiquette: In an Ethiopian restaurant you may, indeed, ought, to eat with your hands; if you are dining with the Queen of England, you probably shouldn't. Even the most die-hard realist is a relativist about etiquette in this sense. But there is a non-relative absolute norm that underlies this seeming variability, namely: with respect to a certain range of behaviors (e.g. table manners), you ought to do as local custom dictates.

There is a lesson here that extends beyond the discussion of relativism. For a long time, it was assumed that the only category of the normative that posed a real problem for a naturalistic worldview was categorical normativity, in Kant's sense: normative facts that don't depend on anyone's desires or goals. It was thought that, if one only had Hume's notion of a reason for action, according to which an agent only has a reason to do something if they have the appropriate desires, this would be naturalistically accommodatable. But this is a mistake: hypothetical reasons are just special cases of circumstance-dependent normativity and pose just as much of a challenge to a naturalistic worldview as do categorical reasons (Cf. Korsgaard 1996).

Thoroughgoing relativism

Let's turn, then, to considering the other species of relativism I identified, namely, Thoroughgoing Relativism. According to this view, the only moral facts there are, are facts of the form

According to moral code M, one ought to do A if C.

A 'moral code', as employed here, and as understood by Harman (1996), one of the principal proponents of moral relativism, is a set of general propositions that encodes a particular set of moral values. It might include, for example, such propositions as 'Slavery is impermissible' and 'Abortion is permissible'.

On this view, we really do seem to evade commitment to absolute facts about morality (which is why the 'Thoroughgoing' label is appropriate). For, if we now ask:

If circumstances are C, ought we to do A?

the answer will have to be: That depends: according to moral framework M1, yes, and according to moral framework M2, no. There are only facts about what your background moral values tell you to do, and none of these sets of background values is any 'truer' than any of the others.

The problem now is that this is not so much a *relativism* about moral judgment as a *nihilism* about it, since any trace of normativity in the 'relativized' moral judgments has been lost. If all I can say are things like

It's right to educate girls according to my moral code

and

It's wrong to educate girls according to the code of the Taliban

then I've only said things with which everyone can agree, no matter what their moral perspective. Such judgments are merely *descriptive* remarks about what particular moral codes do and do not allow. And the upshot is indistinguishable from a nihilism about moral judgment.[6]

Mind-dependence and relativism

The upshot of this discussion of relativism is that we seem to face a dilemma: 'right-for-us' but 'not-right-for-them might mean, either:

(AR) Right in our circumstances, but not in theirs; or

(TR) Right according to our moral codes, but not according to theirs'.

On AR, we get plausible results, but we don't evade a commitment to absolute moral truths. On TR, we avoid commitment to absolute moral truths, but we preserve nothing of the original subject matter, and so fail to distinguish the view from nihilism.

We found ourselves exploring relativism because relativism seemed to be entailed by mind-dependence views of normativity. As between the two types of relativism we distinguished, which type are Mind Dependence views committed to?

If what I have been saying about Absolutist Relativism is correct, then it obviously cannot be used to rescue MD views of the moral from the

[6]Some philosophers have thought that if we worked with an *alethic* version of relativism, rather than a *property* version, as I have been doing, we would evade this difficulty. I explain in detail why that is not so in Boghossian (2011). There are many further problems with Thoroughgoing Relativism some of which are also explained in the aforementioned paper.

problem of the lack of convergence. Since such a type of relativism is committed to there being moral facts that hold absolutely, it resurrects the problem of lack of convergence rather than solving it.

By contrast, the Thoroughgoing variety, does have the consequence that there is no such thing as

> what's simply right

but only

> what's right-for-us versus what's right-for-them.

But as we also saw, that is not a form of relativism that can distinguish itself from Nihilism. It would appear to follow that MD views of morality cannot evade a commitment to Nihilism, if they attempt to deal with the problem of the lack of convergence by relativizing the central moral notions.

Furthermore, since the only type of relativism that is viable is Absolutist Relativism, our discussion also puts us in a position to affirm: If normativity is real, then at least some of it has to be absolute. And that's my second thesis – Absolutism.

Where does that leave us?

Suppose I'm right that relativistic and mind-dependence forms of anti-realism about the moral can't be made to work. As I emphasized at the start, this would not by itself show that a realist conception of morality is correct. For one thing, if the argument up to this point has been successful, all it shows is the conditional:

> If you continue making moral judgments, you had better be willing to countenance some absolute, mind-independent moral facts.

It doesn't speak to whether we ought to continue making moral judgments, or whether we should forsake them, as the Nihilist recommends, in favor of talking merely about our preferences. For another thing, none of what I have said so far tells us anything about how to respond to the very real metaphysical and epistemological problems identified by Mackie and which motivated a skepticism about moral objectivism in the first place.

So, is there a way of deciding between Nihilism and Realism? Is Nihilism a real option for us?

I think that if the only normative domain we were dealing with were *esthetics*, Nihilism would be a real option. It may not be plausible to be

a Nihilist about esthetic taste (actually, I'm not sure it isn't, see Boghossian ms); but it wouldn't be incoherent. The idea that all that's really going on in esthetic disputes, when the chips are down, is one person's esthetic preference over another, is not out of the question.

What about morality? Is Nihilism a real option in that case? As I said towards the beginning of this paper, moral nihilism would be a very costly option in that it would leave us unable to say things which we very much want to say – for example, that it's not a mere preference that we now strongly disapprove of slavery; but, just like in the case of esthetics, while very costly, moral nihilism is not obviously incoherent.

Rationality

Arguably, though, there is one normative domain in which Nihilism is not a coherent option, and that is the domain of rationality. The facts that we don't have much choice about acknowledging are facts about what you ought to believe given the evidence available to you. Why do we have no choice but to acknowledge facts about rationality?

To see why, let's start with the famous paradox of Moore's. Moore-paradoxical statements are utterances of the form:

(Moore-1) p, but I do not believe that p.

E.g.:

(Moore-2) Berlin is the capital of Germany, but I do not believe that Berlin is the capital of Germany.

Moore-1 sentences are not outright contradictions: there is nothing self-contradictory about Berlin being the capital of Germany and you not believing it. So, what explains why it would be odd for someone to assert Moore-2?

The answer is that, in uttering Moore-2, you are *expressing* (not asserting) your belief that Berlin is the capital of Germany, and then following that by denying that you believe any such thing. Because you are only expressing your belief, and not asserting that you have it, it's not an outright contradiction; but it's nearly so.

Let's now consider the following utterance:

(Moore-3) Berlin is the capital of Germany, but I have no reason to believe that Berlin is the capital of Germany.

There is a similar oddity in this utterance as there was about Moore's original sentence. What is the explanation for the oddity in this case?

As we have already seen, in saying that Berlin is the capital of Germany, I am expressing my belief that Berlin is the capital of Germany. Now, when we form beliefs in ways that we consider non-defective, we do so because we take ourselves to have *reasons* for forming those beliefs: a belief is not rational if it was just believed on a whim. That explains why Moore-3 seems so odd. In expressing your belief that p, you are simultaneously representing yourself as having a good reason to believe p, a representation that the second part of the utterance cancels.

If this is right, then facts about rationality are presupposed by *any* judgment, including any judgment meant to express a skepticism about facts about rationality. If you say: facts about rationality should be rejected since, if they existed, they would be problematic normative facts, you are tacitly presupposing that there are facts about rationality, since you are claiming that the rational thing to believe, given your arguments, is that there are no facts about rationality.

If this argument works, we can't but acknowledge some normative facts since we can't but acknowledge some rationality facts.

Now, of course, facts about rationality and facts about morality are two different things, and it is not impossible for the former to exist without the latter. However, if our only reason for being skeptical about morality facts are Mackie-style worries about normative facts in general, then since we have no choice but to reject Mackie on rationality facts, we have no residual motive to accept his particular type of skepticism about moral facts. To repeat: Mackie's skepticism about moral facts derives from his skepticism about normative facts in general and does not have anything special to do with morality per se.[7]

A complainant may point out that our being committed to there being normative facts and there actually being normative facts are two different things. Perhaps we have shown that we human agents have no choice but to acknowledge rationality facts; but that doesn't mean that there actually are any. Unless we can also show us how to deal with the problems that motivated a recoil from objective normative facts in the first place, all we will have done is land us in yet another philosophical paradox: with compelling arguments for, and compelling arguments against, the existence of objective normative facts.

[7]This paper was written before I became acquainted with Terence Cuneo's (2010); in that book, Cuneo does a wonderful job of showing how difficult it is to defend an anti-realism about the normative once one takes seriously that the normative includes the rational as well as the moral.

What about the original problems for realism?

This complaint is legitimate. Escaping the paradox requires showing that there actually are plausible answers to Mackie's challenges. I believe that such answers exist although saying exactly what they are cannot be accomplished in the remaining few pages. In keeping with the programmatic character of this paper, I will indicate in closing, again with a very broad brush, what such answers might look like.

Take first the metaphysical issue of how there could be impersonal normative facts built into the fabric of the universe. Mackie says such facts would be queer, unlike any that we are familiar with from natural science; they would have a 'to-be-pursuedness' built into them. How could such facts possibly fit into the basic 'particles and the void' revealed to us by science?

The basic flaw in this movement of thought is the crude claim that science has shown us that there is nothing other than particles and the void. First, science itself is knee-deep in entities that are not just particles and the void; for example, it is knee-deep in mathematics, which, on any viable account, will involve postulating abstract objects, objects that lie outside of space and time.

Second, science is far from giving us a complete picture of the world we know ourselves to live in. There are many important truths about the world which natural science has not succeeded in explaining and which it may never explain. One obviously important feature is consciousness. Another is modality – facts about metaphysical necessity or possibility.

Finally, our very allegiance to science is based, as I've argued above, on our confidence that the propositions of science are supported by good reasons, where this is, of course, a normative fact. So, we can hardly use our belief in science as a reason for rejecting normative facts.

If we have to postulate fundamental and irreducible truths about consciousness, about abstract objects, about modality – in order to account for the world as we know it to be – why not fundamental truths about normativity as well?

What about the epistemological problem of *knowing* normative facts? Once more there is a lot to be said, but the point to observe for the moment is that we are here in the domain of the a priori. And we know, once again, that we *have* to be able to explain at least how *some* a priori knowledge is possible. I say this not only because it is overwhelmingly plausible that we have a priori mathematical knowledge and a

priori logical knowledge, but also because we are developing fairly sophisticated accounts about how such knowledge is achieved, accounts that can clearly be applied to the cases of morality and rationality. In particular, Mackie's somewhat flat-footed thought, that any view that had to appeal to intuition would have immediately disqualified itself, is obviously wrong given the burgeoning literature on the nature and epistemic power of intuitions (see Bealer 1992, 2000; Bengson 2015; Pust 2000; Malmgren 2011; Boghossian 2020, among others).

All of this leads me to be confident that we can solve these deep philosophical problems and, hence, that we will not court paradox if we embrace some measure of normative realism.[8]

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