# Moral Relativism and Conceptual Analysis

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## An Inconsistent Triad

(1) All truths are a priori entailed by fundamental truths

 (2) No moral truths are a priori entailed by fundamental truths

(3) There are moral truths.

#### **First Premise**

- (1) All truths are a priori entailed by fundamental truths
- I.e. there is some conjunction of basic truths F such that for all truths T, 'F  $\supset$  T' is a priori.
  - E.g. F = physical/phenomenal/indexical/that' s-all truths
  - Or a broader set -- but not including moral truths.
  - [See Chalmers and Jackson, "Conceptual Analysis and Reductive Explanation".]

#### **Second Premise**

- (2) No moral truths are a priori entailed by fundamental truths
  - Strictly: no nontrivial moral truths

#### Grounded in two related theses/intuitions

- Failure of convergence
- Genuineness of moral disagreement

## Failure of Convergence

 Convergence Thesis: Ideally rational agents, fully informed about fundamental truths, will agree in their moral judgments.

#### Intuition 1: Convergence is false.

 Fully informed agents with sufficiently different values might diverge in their moral judgments, even though neither is guilty of irrationality from the God's eye point of view.

If convergence is false, then empirical truths plus ideal a priori reasoning do not yield determinate moral truths.

#### **Genuine Moral Disagreement**

Intuition 2: Apparent moral disagreement is genuine disagreement (not merely verbal disagreement), even between subjects/ communities with very different views.

 Presuming that the apparent moral terms play relevantly similar practical roles in guiding action, and so on.

If so, one can't protect convergence by diagnosing apparent cases of divergence as involving different concepts

Instead there are shared concepts, e.g. good and right.

### **Third Premise**

Premise 1 and 2 entail: There are no (nontrivial) moral truths.

- Noncognitivism, error theory?
- But there are still both intuitive and technical reasons to hold premise 3: there are moral truths
  - Murder is wrong
  - 'Murder is wrong' is true.

Q: Can one reconcile premise 3 with something like premises 1 and 2? Or at least, something that respects the intuitions and arguments behind them?

#### Moral Relativism

- Moral relativism (cf. Egan, Macfarlane, et al): Moral utterances (e.g. 'murder is wrong') are true not just relative to a circumstance of evaluation, but also relative to a standard of assessment
  - Likewise, the propositions expressed by moral utterances are not true or false absolutely, but true or false relative to standards of assessment.
- Relative to standard 1, 'murder is wrong' is true.
- Relative to standard 2, 'murder is wrong' is false.

#### Standards of Assessment

What is a standard of assessment?

- Many possibilities: but we can think of it as a set of values, grounded in the most fundamental commitments of a subject or a community.
  - E.g. grounded in some subset of a subject's pro-attitudes (something in the vicinity of approval, desire, utility)
  - Perhaps idealized to yield values that the subject would have on ideal reflection.

Any given subject will be associated with a standard of assessment

 Different subjects will have different standards of assessment (even on idealization, given failure of convergence).

### Moral Disagreement

Say you and I have different standards:

- I say 'Murder is wrong'
- You say 'Murder is not wrong'.

 'Murder is wrong' expresses the same proposition for both of us (one that is true relative to my standard, false relative to yours).

- So we assert and deny the same proposition -- we are really disagreeing.
- I am not asserting the proposition 'Murder is wrong according to my standard' -- then we wouldn' t be disagreeing (cf. contextualism).

#### **Relativism About Truth**

- Fixed point: Murder is wrong iff 'murder is wrong' is true.
  - So 'murder is wrong' is true" can be true relative to one standard, false relative to another.
- So relativism about 'good' leads immediately to relativism about 'true'
  - N.B. this need be only a limited relativism , involving truth of moral sentences
- When I say 'S is true', I am not saying 'S is true according to my standards'
  - Standards enter the assessment of the proposition, not the proposition itself.
  - But my assertions are governed by my standards.

#### **Moral Truth Revisited**

Premise 3: There are moral truths.

Murder is wrong
'Murder is wrong' is true
There are moral truths.

 Of course these truths are true relative to a standard (mine) -- but this is the operative standard.

#### Truth and Absolute Truth

- We can define an operator 'absolutely', such that 'Absolutely S' is true (relative to any standard) iff S is true relative to all standards.
  - Then 'Absolutely murder is wrong' is false (or indeterminate).
  - (Unless we go relativist about truth relative to a standard -- but no need to do this.)
- Define a predicate 'Wrong' so that 'x is Wrong' is true (relative to any standard) iff 'x is wrong' is true relative to all standards, I.e. iff 'Absolutely x is wrong' is true
- Likewise, a predicate 'True' such that 'S is True' is true (relative to any standard) iff 'S is true' is true relative to all standards, I.e. if 'Absolutely (S is true)' is true.
- Then murder is wrong, but murder is not Wrong. 'Murder is wrong' is true, but it is not True. There are nontrivial moral truths, but no nontrivial moral Truths.
  - According to the relativist, 'wrong' and 'true' in ordinary English express the relativistic concept (wrong, true) not the absolute concept (Wrong, True).

# Truth and Apriority

What about the link between truth and apriority? (Premises 1 and 2)

- Are moral truths a priori entailed by fundamental truths?
- It's natural to hold: the most fundamental and universal moral truths are (I) knowable, (ii) such that one can be justified in believing them, and (iii) such that this knowledge/justification can be a priori
  - Relativism about morality doesn't entail that one can't know or be justified in believing these truths, or that the knowledge/justification is a posteriori.
- What about the (false) fundamental moral beliefs of others with different standards?
  - Either (I) these are justified (and justified a priori), although false.
  - Or (ii) they are not justified.
- (ii) preserves the link between justification (especially a priori justification) and truth. But leads naturally to relativism about justification.

#### **Relativism** about Justification

- Claims such as 'S is justified in believing P' are themselves true or false relative to standards.
  - So: 'X is justified in believing that murder is wrong' may be false by my standards, true by X's standards.
  - N.B. The standards here may be the standards as before, merely involving differences in values, and affecting only moral beliefs.
- Likewise for related epistemic notions such as 'a priori', 'rational', etc.
- Then the relativist can allow that all moral truths (but not moral falsehoods) are a priori entailed by fundamental truths.
  - When M is true, ' $F \supset M$ ' is knowable (and justifiable) a priori.
  - When M is false, ' $F \supset M$ ' is not knowable or justifiable a priori.

## Whither Convergence?

- What about premise 2: No moral truths are a priori entailed by fundamental truths.
- This now appears to be false. Likewise, the convergence claim: 'All ideally rational and fully informed beings will converge in the moral judgments' appears to be true.
  - The relevant moral beliefs in beings with different standards will not be justified, and these beings will not be ideally rational (by my standards).
- However, this view can arguably save the intuitions behind the denial of convergence.

# **The Intuition Behind Divergence**

- The intuition behind the denial of convergence was: Fully informed agents with sufficiently different values might diverge in their moral judgments, even though neither is guilty of irrationality from the God's eye point of view.
- We might reconstruct this as: fully informed agents who are not Irrational might diverge in their moral judgments
  - Where an agent is Irrational if it is irrational relative to all standards.
  - If an agent is not Irrational, let us say it is Rational\* (N.B. not Rational).
- Then the relativist can allow: fully informed, ideally Rational\* agents can diverge in their moral judgments.
  - Likewise: moral truths are not A priori entailed by all truths.

#### **Three Inconsistent Triads**

(R1) All truths are a priori entailed by fundamental truths
(R2) No moral truths are a priori entailed by fundamental truths
(R3) There are moral truths.

(I1) All truths are A priori entailed by fundamental truths
(I2) No moral truths are A priori entailed by fundamental truths
(I3) There are moral truths.

(A1) All Truths are A priori entailed by fundamental truths
(A2) No moral Truths are A priori entailed by fundamental truths
(A3) There are moral Truths.

Diagnosis: (R2), (I1), and (A3) are false.

#### A Consistent Triad

- (C1) All truths are a priori entailed by fundamental truths
   (C2) No moral truths are A priori entailed by fundamental truths
- (C3) There are moral truths.
- [Also a version with (C1\*): All Truths are A Priori entailed by fundamental truths.]
- Arguably these readings capture most of the force of the original case for the three premises.

#### **Moral Rationalism**

- Rationalist Thesis: If X is rational and well-informed, and phi-ing is right, then X ought (rationally) to judge that phi-ing is right.
- Given relativism about morality without relativism about rationality, the Rationalist Thesis is plausibly not true (and is certainly not True).
- Given relativism about morality and rationality, the Rationalist Thesis is plausibly true (and indeed True).

#### Internalism and Externalism

- Judgment internalism: If S judges that it would be right for them to phi, S will have some motivation to phi.
  - Moral relativism can explain this, insofar as moral judgments reflect prima facie values, and prima facie values reflect motivating proattitudes.
- Existence internalism: If it would be right for S to phi, then if S is rational and well-informed, S will have some motivation to phi.
  - Moral relativism plus relativism about rationality can explain this (e.g. via judgment internalism plus the rationalist thesis).
  - Moral relativism without relativism about rationality cannot.

# **Multiple Concepts**

- Arguably: there are two concepts in the vicinity of each of 'good, 'rational', and so on:
  - good (relativistic) and Good (absolute)
  - rational (relativistic) and Rational (Absolute)
- Some elements of our usage may better fit the absolute concept, while some elements may better fit the relativistic concept.
  - It's an empirical question which best fits our overall use of these term.
  - Perhaps no determinate fact of the matter about which is the real content.
- It could be that e.g. the relativistic concept is a somewhat better fit for 'good' than for 'rational'
  - E.g. 'X is rational iff X is absolutely rational' is closer to being a conceptual truth than 'X is good iff X is absolutely good'.
  - This might also help to explain the pull of denying convergence.

#### Conclusion

- Moral relativism has a chance of reconciling the existence of nontrivial moral truths with the intuitions of divergence and of disagreement, and with the link between truth and apriority.
- But moral relativism may well bring epistemic relativism in its wake.