Rationalism and the Moral Benacerraf Problem

1. Introduction

Moral Rationalism is the claim that morality originates in reason alone. Rationalists often justify their belief by appealing to analogies between ethics and mathematics. As maths is generally accepted to be real, this makes moral rationalism appealing to the moral realist. This essay focuses on two epistemic analogues between moral and mathematical judgments: their shared self-evidence and a priority. These analogues are used to form a Companions in Guilt (CIG) argument, which claims that if two things are analogous and both have the same problem, that if one overcomes the problem, the other must too.

In this essay, I show that ethics and mathematics are as analogous as the rationalist desires in the ways important for a successful CIG argument. This leads to the Benacerraf problem which challenges mathematical knowledge, as the points of analogy are epistemic, and the problem is related to the epistemic status of mathematical knowledge. Insofar as mathematical and ethical knowledge are analogous, this may be a problem for ethical knowledge also.

I argue that the Moral Benacerraf Problem is only soluble by adopting ethical pluralism. However, this is unsatisfying as we cannot dissolve what Justin Clarke-Doane calls the "practical problem". In §2, I outline CIG arguments and moral rationalism in more detail. In §3, I outline Clarke-Doane's argument for rationalism and how this can motivate our CIG argument for normative ethics. In §4, I outline the Benacerraf problem for mathematical knowledge followed by how this produces problems for ethical knowledge also. In §5 then show that the mathematical problem can be solved by the relatively unproblematic mathematical pluralism while normative pluralism runs into perceived problems. In §6, I outline Eklund's defence of normative pluralism. In, §7 I discuss problems with this account. Finally, in §8 I outline some benefits to accepting normative pluralism.

2. Companions in Guilt Arguments

The CIG argument we'll be looking is specifically an argument from analogy. Lillehammer writes that this type of argument involves defending "the credentials of one set of claims, A, by showing that some of the features of A-claims that are thought to be problematic are shared by another set of claims, B, the credentials of which are less problematic." (Lillehammer 2017) Lillehammer gives us three criteria for assessing CIG arguments from analogy:

1) Everything is similar, is the similarity must be relevant to the shared guilt?
2) Are there dissimilarities which explain why only one of these sets of claims is subject to the guilt
3) Does the shared guilt make both of the companions problematic rather than both tenable?

Lillehammer also says that any CIG argument depends on accurately describing the A-claims, B-claims, and relations between the two sets of claims. Cowie provides us with another useful desideratum for CIG arguments from analogy, the "costliness question". This supplements criteria (3), he asks, "[h]ow costly or implausible it would be, should the good standing of the companion be undermined?" (Cowie 2018) If the companion is vital to how we understand the world around us or other important considerations, for instance, the existence of other minds, we should consider it more plausible that the companions are tenable.

3. Moral Rationalism

The early moral rationalists thought that ethical and mathematical knowledge were similar in three important ways. Firstly, they believed that they're both self-evident as: "nothing but the extremest stupidity of mind, corruption of manners, or perverseness of spirit can possibly make any man entertain the least doubt concerning them." (Clarke 1738, section 1) A fortiori, they also believed that ethical and mathematical knowledge are both cases of a priori knowledge. If something which is self-evident, we don't need experience of the external world to know it. They also believed that the ethical and mathematical truths underlying this knowledge were both necessary truths as they believed that a priority and necessity were coextensive.[1]

Clarke-Doane (2020) provides a contemporary defence of moral rationalism. He begins by establishing that both moral and mathematical facts appear to be known a priori as the early rationalists thought. This a priority seems to be strong under (1) as a priority is intimately linked with the epistemology of a claim (Clarke-Doane 2020). He then considers the proposed disanalogy that mathematical truths are derived from proofs. This allows him to bring out another analogy pointed out by Russell. Clarke-Doane explains that a proof is a deduction from a set of axioms and then asks whether there is a relevant difference between ethical and mathematical axioms. To this end he quotes Russell, we tend to believe axioms are true "because we can see that their consequences are true, instead of believing the consequences because we know" the axioms (Russell 1973/1907, 273-274). This seems to be true for both the ethical and

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[1] This third point of analogy is not as convincing as it once was due to Saul Kripke's "A Priori Knowledge, Necessity and Contingency" (1987) where he shows that neither a priority nor necessity entail the other.

mathematical axioms and so the perceived disanalogy turns out to be an analogy. Even better, it seems that its epistemological relevance makes the CIG argument less susceptible to (1).

Clarke-Doane has provided a strong CIG argument for the epistemological grounding of ethical knowledge. By looking at the similarities of how we come to ethical and mathematical knowledge he has provided us with two important analogies and dispelled a disanalogy. The argument looks good under (1) and (2). As to (3), the question of costliness, is our access mathematical knowledge that important? Yes, without the ability to know mathematical truths it is difficult to explain how our mathematical beliefs appear to be so accurate when used to construct models of how the real-world works.

4. The (Moral) Benacerraf Problem

This brings us to the Benacerraf problem, Benacerraf asks us to, "explain how our beliefs about [mathematical] entities can so well reflect the facts about them" (Field, 1989, 26). If we are unable to do this, we can't say that we have access to mathematical truths, our mathematical beliefs are undermined. We need to explain how our mathematical beliefs would change if the mathematical truth was different, how our mathematical beliefs are related to mathematical truths.

This worry applies equally to moral beliefs – as I showed above, they are epistemologically analogous – we need to explain how they are related to moral truth. For example, the plausible evolutionary account of morality would mean that our sense of morality isn't at all sensitive to moral facts (Joyce 2016). While the fact that both ethical and mathematical beliefs are subject to this objection strengthens the analogy making the CIG argument stronger on (1), it gives us very good reason to reject both types of belief on (3). We have another reason to consider both sets of claims problematic.

> The Moral Benacerraf Problem – How can we explain that our beliefs about normative entities reflect so well the facts about them?

If our solution to the problem is itself implausible, we have three options: We can accept that we just don't know how our beliefs about normative entities reflect the facts about them whilst still maintaining that we have knowledge of these entities. This is not an especially satisfying view. Alternatively, we could become anti-realists and claim that our beliefs about normative entities don't reflect the facts around them. Rationalists would likely be loath to do this as their view is designed to show that we have moral knowledge. This leaves us forced to give up on rationalism as a theory of moral knowledge if the solution is too implausible for the

analogies between mathematical and moral knowledge to hold the companions in guilt together.

5. Pluralism

A popular solution to the Benacerraf problem for mathematics is mathematical pluralism. Mathematical pluralists, "solve the problem by articulating views on which though mathematical objects are mind independent, any view we had had of them would have been correct" (Field, 2005, 78). Hamkins claims that there is no absolute background concept of set, rather, there is "an enormous range of set-theoretic possibilities" (Hamkins 2012, 416). All consistent set theories are equally true, some just fail to be practical. As Jonas writes in "Mathematical and Moral Disagreement", "Mathematical 'disagreements' should thus not be understood as fully-fledged first-order disagreements, but rather, as aesthetic or pragmatic disagreements about which parts of mathematical reality are most beautiful, or most useful to explore." (Jonas 2020, 320)

If any consistent set theory is true, then the Benacerraf problem is solved as there is no mystery about how we come to find the correct mathematical axioms. We simply test that they are consistent and if they are, they must be true. Now let us see the moral alternative, normative pluralism:

> Normative Pluralism – The claim that there are many systems of values which all make normative demands upon us.

This is all very well for mathematics, but normative pluralism is a problematic position. As Clarke-Doane points out, ethical claims need to be practical. When we are asked to solve the classic trolley problem it can't be that we both ought$_{utilitarianism}$ to kill the one person and ought$_{deontology}$ to allow the five people to die. There has to be one thing that we ought to do full stop. To say otherwise is to say that both actions are both right and wrong at the same time. Not only is this unhelpful for decision making, but it makes ethical judgements pointless. There is a possible ethical system out there that for any action will say that we ought to do it and another that claims we shouldn't. Normative facts seem to give us no reason for action.

Clarke-Doane believes that mathematical pluralism makes mathematical truths subjective. This also goes for normative pluralism and normative truths. Objectivity is something that normative realists tend to prize, so if he is right, they have a strong reason to reject the above solution to the Moral Benacerraf Problem, forcing us to reject rationalism. If this is not possible, normative realism is subjective due to implying normative pluralism and this is anathema to most normative realists. Normative

realism is functionally close to normative relativism, an uncomfortable position for realists.

Clarke-Doane doesn't believe that pluralism is a problem for realism itself. Pluralism is after all a form of realism as the moral truths exist and have normative power despite there being a plurality of them. His worry is that pluralism is incompatible with the view commonly held by normative realists that knowledge of normative facts allows us to settle normative deliberation. Eklund calls people with this worry *ardent realists* (Eklund 2017, 1).

The objectivity Clarke-Doane is referring to is not just that facts obtain mind-independently. It seems obvious that this objectivity survives a pluralistic view as we can still ask what ought$_{utilitarianism}$ we to do or what ought$_{deontology}$ we to do and have a mind-independent answer. What Clarke-Doane is concerned with is Allan Gibbard's notion of *what to do* (2003). Even when we are aware of *ought* and all *ought*-like properties, we are – on the pluralist's picture – left with an open question of what we ought to do simpliciter.

6. Eklund's Normative Pluriverse

Matti Eklund takes issue with this view, he claims that normative pluralism, of the sort which can effectively respond to the Moral Benacerraf Problem, allows us to be objective about normative facts. (2020) This is because, while there are many different sets of normative frameworks, their truth or falsehood simply depends on which set of axioms you are using. We can still make objective statements on what we *ought* to do. It's just that we can also make them about what we *ought+* (an ought like property) to do. Eklund, unlike Clarke-Doane, is not sympathetic to the ardent realist's belief that there must only be one mind-independent truth to the question "what to do?"

Eklund clarifies why the ardent realist's desire for a singular truth is a mistake. The issue of what normative concepts to use is not statable. If we attempt to state it with nonnormative concepts we have changed the subject as we are interested in a normative concept, not a descriptive one. If we use normative concepts, we are begging the question in favour of those normative concepts. Eklund believes that the problem being unstatable means that there is no problem. It's a mistake to ask, "what to do?" after normative deliberation as we have already committed to a set of axioms when embarking on the deliberation. We already know "what to do" according to the axioms we have chosen.

If Eklund's argument is successful, it negates Clarke-Doane's worries about normative pluralism. Clarke-Doane's worries about objectivity are unstatable and therefore unfounded. The practical problem is dispelled as

Eklund has shown us that there is no reason for us to have the ardent realist's intuition. We have in fact found another analogy. Both mathematics and morality are trivial, we must decide upon a set of axioms before embarking on any mathematical or moral questions.

7. Challenging Eklund

Eklund's argument works perfectly well when we assume moral rationalism. However, this is not an intuitive view, we have been convinced of it through a CIG argument. This is a strong argument from analogy, but CIG arguments are not bulletproof. The argument took us from our intuitions about morality to an argument ruling out a very strong intuition that we have about morality.

The question becomes, which is stronger, the intuition that morality is self-evident in some way or the intuition that assuming there are moral truths, there must only be one answer to the question of "what to do?" This strong conclusion Eklund comes to forms a reductio ad absurdum of normative pluralism. The latter intuition is stronger than the former.

There are other considerations that Clarke-Doane used to convince us of moral rationalism. He brought in the convincing similarity of mathematical axioms and moral ones. We also saw that these similarities align with (1) as they are epistemological in nature and we are interested in the epistemological companionship of mathematics and morality. These two additional considerations may allow us to stick with Eklund's pluralism despite it asking us to give up on the very strong intuition that there is only one moral ought.

8. Another benefit of normative pluralism?

I have one other point to make in favour of normative pluralism that may tip the scales. Normative pluralism has asked us to give up on a very strong intuition. However, abandoning this intuition has a strong upside. When we take an action, which is moral according to our ethical framework we often have mixed feelings about it. For instance, a utilitarian may feel bad about lying to someone to protect their feelings or a Kantian may feel bad when they tell an axe murderer where their hiding children are. This feeling may be explained by normative pluralism.

The reason these individuals are feeling bad is that they've gone against a very real *ought* or *ought*-like property, so they have done something *wrong* or *wrong*-like. This seems intuitive, but it does not when we consider every possible ethical framework of which there are presumably an infinite

number, as many of these are likely highly arbitrary. Eklund pre-empts my objection somewhat with gerrymandered normative frameworks:

> Consider the following property, *ought+* (or *being what one ought+ to do*), where an agent ought+ to φ if and only if: she ought to φ and φ-ing ≠ helping someone cross the street on a Thursday. If sometimes helping someone cross the street on a Thursday is what an agent ought to do, ought+ ≠ ought, but the property ought+ is still ought-like. (Eklund 2020, 127)

But these gerrymandered normative frameworks aren't possible. It seems plausible that there are no there can be no contradictions within an ethical framework. If an ethical framework claimed that we ought to φ and that we also ought to not-φ if that broke a rule about not helping someone cross the street on a Thursday, it is self-contradictory. This requirement of a lack of self-contradiction is also true for set theories so this strengthens the analogy.

If these gerrymandered systems are impossible our pluralism is more plausible. It eliminates many nonsense systems someone might come up with. This may not be the case as some people may wish to hold on to moral systems with contradictions within them such as rule-based systems where rules might come into direct conflict with no way of resolving these conflicts.

I have also failed to deal with other arbitrary systems such as "one ought to maximise the number of pebbles". This seems to be an irrelevant normative system. Even worse there is no contradiction in a normative framework that claims "one ought to maximise suffering" which is intuitively evil.

To explain why we don't feel bad for fulfilling these normative demands there are three paths: One is to claim that arbitrary or evil ethical systems aren't valid. However, to prove this we would require some independent normative claim which would be begging the question. Another is to claim that we have to some extent come to know these *ought* or *ought*-like properties and placed some value upon them. This would be a very controversial view of moral psychology so we cannot go forward with it. Instead we may have to admit that we don't know why people choose different ethical frameworks to make ethical judgements. We can still acknowledge the phenomenon of people being genuinely affected by *ought* or *ought*-like properties from moral frameworks they do not subscribe to and that this fits naturally within a pluralist view.

9. Conclusion

I have put forward Justin Clarke-Doane's convincing argument for moral rationalism and shown its strength by analysing it as a CIG argument. I have outlined The Moral Benacerraf Problem and how that it creates a

significant problem for moral rationalism. I looked at Clarke-Doane's conception of normative pluralism and how this solves The Moral Benacerraf Problem, while creating a "practical problem" of its own. I investigated Matti Eklund's criticisms of Clarke-Doane's view and took them to be an effective takedown, but that they unfortunately came close to being a reductio of normative pluralism. Finally, I gave an argument in favour of the plausibility of normative pluralism in explaining how we feel when we take actions considered to be right by one framework and wrong by another. Ultimately, the decision about whether moral rationalism is true and The Moral Benacerraf problem soluble comes down to whether you intuitively hold on to the idea that morality is self-evident in some way or the intuition that assuming there are moral truths, there must only be one answer to the question of "what to do?"

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