

Part IA, Paper 2, Question 6, What is the strongest argument against the existence of objective moral facts? Does it work?

I consider the strongest argument against the existence of objective moral facts to be the argument from relativity. In this essay I'll expose the argument, note a counter objection that there is disagreement in science, and make three points on why disagreement in science is not analogous to that in ethics, thus vindicating the argument from this 'companions in guilt' objection.

But first, we should elucidate "objective moral facts". I will take this to mean mind-independently objective moral facts, in the sense that one who believes in them believes that certain acts for instance, are right or wrong, independently of what anyone believes about them. There is thus an objective fact of the matter about morality.

Lets start with the argument from relativity noted. I'll present it as an argument to the best explanation:

- (1) There is moral disagreement
- (2) The best explanation for there being disagreement about x is that there are no objective facts about x.
- (3) So, the best explanation for (1) is that there are no objective moral facts.

The reasoning behind (2) is that if there were an objective fact of the matter about, say, whether abortion is wrong, people would have discovered it, and stopped disagreeing. Since they haven't it's likely that there is no such objective moral fact about abortion.

The argument is simple enough. Some have challenged it by claiming that, since there is also disagreement in science, but we don't conclude that there are no objective natural facts, the conclusion is unwarranted by the premises. I'd like to give three ways in which disagreement in ethics is different to that in science, which suggest the argument does work: the widespread nature of ethical disagreement; its irresolvability; and that its method is the reversal of the scientific method.

First, widespreadness. It seems clearly true that many more people disagree on a wider range of questions in ethics that they do over questions in science. So the relatively minor disagreement in science doesn't lead us to subjectivism about it, but the significant disagreement in ethics does.

A counter objection is that everyone on the planet thinks about ethics, and has an ethical system built into their culture, which will of course result in more disagreement. Only a handful of scientists think and study the questions which they debate, whilst morality is a matter for humanity.

There are two replies to be made here: (i) the widespreadness of disagreement includes as a major component, the wide-ranging disagreement in ethics. That is, the fact that disagreement is not merely on refined details of generally agreed cases – we don't disagree just on when to abort a child – but on the very fundamental principles governing our applied ethical judgements.

We disagree over the sanctity of human life, whether pleasure should be the sole end of human action, etc. The objection misses this point. (ii) In acceding that ethical systems are built into societies and cultures, our objection may have inadvertently supported the subjectivist argument. That we have an ethical system inculcated in us from infancy by authority figures in our society is obviously an excellent subjectivist explanation for moral disagreement. Mackie writes in "Ethics" of how much more simple this subjectivist explanation for moral disagreement is, compared to the objectivist attempts to keep objective moral facts yet struggle to explain why we – who as our objector rightly points out – spend so long discussing and thinking about mentality – have yet to agree on these.

Turning to our second disanalogy between disagreement in science and ethics; the debates in science are resolvable (and resolved) whereas these in ethics continue. We are asking the same questions as Plato did! (What is justice, why be moral? Etc). Surely this indicates a lack of objective fact of the matter about ethics.

I can see two counter objections here, one more sophisticated than the other. The less sophisticated one is that we do witness moral resolution and progress, in eg the emancipation of slaves, or the victory of civil rights movements, etc. But – cynical as it may sound – I think Mackie is right to say that these are more extensions of a societies morality in ways that seem required for consistency. The civil rights champions succeeded in showing how the values of a Western society that considered God to be the loving father of all people, and yet some people to be inferior to others, didn't square. But can the objectivist give an instance in history when a society has radically upheaved its moral system in the light of the resolution of an ethical debate? It seems not.

The more sophisticated response is mentioned in Brink's reply to Mackie. It is the Coherentist View, on which justification in morality is seen not just to go from general principles to particular cases, but the other way round as well. The suggestion is that groups who disagree on their principles may find that they agree on common cases, which will allow them to justify new, shared principles. This way of seeing morality makes resolution of moral debates feasible.

Whilst coherentism may resolve some debates, I am not convinced that it can help us with all. For one thing, there seem many cases in which we would be hard pressed to find agreement even in particulars – consider the fundamentalist Islamist and secular humanists who agree on so little. Second, the following case seems very possible: A believes {X, p, q} B believes {¬X, p, ¬q} where p and q are particular cases and X is a principle. X entails q. Then we have agreement on a particular case – p – but we won't eradicate the disagreement over X just by making this agreement, since each is committed to X or ¬X by commitment to q or ¬q. So we should reject this response.

Our third and final disanalogy was that in science, disagreement arises thus: we start with shared evidence, and differ over its interpretation. Once we've

agreed on an interpretation, we develop beliefs and practices accordingly. In ethics, we start with our beliefs and practices, and invent values to accord with those. Thus the interpretational issue isn't present.

This view of ethics seems partly correct but I'd agree with an objection that there are cases which a belief or practice doesn't get over, and we are forced to consider things the scientific way round. That is, we are forced to look at the shared evidence (what harms who, how much, etc) and we differ on interpretation (how bad is this harm, how violable is this right).

It's true that this occurs. But it still seems radically different to science, for this reason (which brings us back to the resolvability question). Interpretational debates in science are resolved because we have universally agreed criteria for what makes an interpretation, a theory, an acceptable one. Putnam calls them our "standards of rational acceptability". But there is no analogy in ethics. There is no universally agreed on criteria by which we can judge whether ethical hypothesis is acceptable or not. We all disagree on what counts as acceptability here. Surely this, if anything, indicates that we're dealing with something different from science here, and that there are no objective moral facts to settle the debate.

We have seen that the argument from relativity survives the 'companions in guilt' argument concerning science. It does so in showing these important differences between science and ethics – widespreadness, resolvability and method. For these reasons I conclude that the argument from relativity works.

1: The essay is closely focused on the question that is being asked. It is structured around an argument and gives clear reasons for and against a premise of that argument. It shows good knowledge of the subject and is clearly written.