The Case Against Moral Realism

Blithering Genius

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1 Introduction

Moral realism is an explicit version of the ordinary view of morality. It has the following assumptions:

- Good and evil are objectively real.

- We have the ability to recognize good and evil.

- We have an objective moral obligation to do good and not do evil. Likewise, we have an objective moral right to not have evil done to us.

- Society depends on morality to exist. The social order is created by human goodness, and it is destroyed by evil.

There are many problems with moral realism, including:

- Moral realism has no definition of good and evil. If good and evil are objectively real properties or substances, like temperature or oxygen, it should be possible to define them in scientific terms.

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- Why are we obliged to do good and not do evil? Moral realism does not explain why we have this obligation, nor how it is imposed on us.

- Moral judgments vary between individuals, cultures and societies. If good and evil are objective, and humans have essentially the same ability to recognize good and evil, then we would expect moral judgments to be mostly the same. But they are not.

- In most cases, moral disagreements cannot be resolved by rational persuasion. If good and evil are objective, and humans have the ability to recognize good and evil, then we should be able to resolve moral disagreements with evidence and arguments. But we can't.

- Morality is ad hoc. Moral judgments can't be reduced to a small number of principles applied consistently. The ad hoc nature of morality is hard to explain if morality reflects objective good and evil.

- If moral realism is true, then most people would be morally good. But evil is pervasive. Individuals and societies don't behave in a morally good way, generally speaking. Morality is often linked to hypocrisy.

Let's go through these problems in more detail, starting with the definition of good and evil.

2   What Are Good And Evil?

If good and evil are objectively real, then we should be able to measure them, analogous to how we measure height or temperature. We could construct a device to measure things on this objective moral dimension, in a way that is free from personal biases. Then we could use the device to resolve moral conflicts, in the same way that we can use a ruler to resolve a disagreement about height. But of course, we can't do any of those things for good and evil.

The idea of measuring good and evil raises more questions. Are good and evil physical properties, consisting of matter and energy? If so, then we'd have the question of why certain arrangements of matter and energy are "good" and others are "evil". If not, there must be another dimension to objective reality: the moral dimension. But what would that dimension be, and how could we observe it?

Maybe good and evil involve something that is non-measurable, such as subjective experiences. For example, suppose that "good" is defined as whatever makes other sentient beings feel pleasure, and "evil" is defined as whatever makes other sentient beings feel pain. There is no way to measure the feelings of another being, so this definition would be exempt from the requirement that we can measure it with a device. However, that would also make moral judgments highly dependent on guessing what other beings are feeling. And it would not explain why subjective feelings are objectively valuable.

3   Are Good And Evil Defined In Terms Of Intentions Or Outcomes?

If good and evil reside in intentions, we need to define what makes an intention good or evil. Is it a property of the intended outcome? Or is it a property of the mental state, such as hatred? If the former, then we need a way to evaluate the goodness or badness of outcomes. If the latter, then we need to explain why some mental states are good, while others are evil. Either way, to make moral judgments about other people, we would need to guess their intentions. There are

gray areas, such as negligence. Suppose that someone drives home drunk, intending to arrive safely, but accidentally kills another person. Do we morally condemn his action or not?

If good and evil are defined in terms of outcomes, then we have other problems. An action has many consequences, some of which we can't predict. We don't know the full outcome of any action. An apparently evil act might have good consequences. An apparently good act might have evil consequences. Apparently good consequences might have bad effects further downstream. How can we morally judge an action? We'd have to abandon the idea that we can recognize good and evil, except in a fuzzy way, based on some approximation or guesswork. There is also the huge problem of defining what makes an outcome objectively good or bad. Again, what is this moral dimension to reality?

Moral realism claims that good and evil are objectively real, but it provides no explicit definition of them, nor any method by which we can measure them. It assumes that we can intuitively recognize good and evil, but it does not explain what we are recognizing or how we recognize it.

If we abandon moral realism, then it becomes very easy to define good and evil, and explain moral intuitions. "Good" and "evil" are labels that we use to denote socially dependent values. They do not represent objective values. Moral intuitions are knowledge of those socially dependent values. That knowledge is acquired by experience living in a society. The inability to reduce morality to a few simple principles is explained by this theory. Socially dependent values emerge by a complex process that doesn't produce a simple and coherent system of principles.

See What is Morality?

4   Why And How Is Morality Imposed On Us?

Moral realism assumes that we have an obligation to do good and not do evil. But it does not explain where this obligation comes from, nor how it is imposed on us.

We can contrast moral obligations with the laws of nature and the laws of society.

The laws of nature are objective. Our understanding of nature's laws (the order of nature) is subjective, but the order that we call "laws" is objective. Nature's laws are imposed on us by nature. We can't violate them. For example, I can't violate the second law of thermodynamics or the law of gravitation. All objects and events "obey" the laws of nature.

The laws of society are created by us. They are *intersubjective*. They depend on multiple minds. We socially create them and impose them on ourselves. We can violate the laws of society. We have a social obligation to obey them, but we have the objective and subjective freedom to disobey them. They are imposed on us with incentives, such as the threat of punishment.

In moral realism, moral obligations have some properties of natural laws, and some properties of social laws. Like natural laws, moral laws are objective. However, like social laws, we are free to disobey them. Good and evil are objective, and we have an objective obligation to do good, not evil. But we have the freedom to be evil, and we must choose to be good.

Moral realism has no explanation of how moral obligations are imposed on us. Why should we choose good instead of evil? Moral realism has no answer to that question. It just presupposes the existence of moral obligations, as it presupposes the existence of good and evil. It also presupposes that we *should* obey moral obligations.

If we reject moral realism, we can explain how moral obligations are imposed on human beings. Moral obligations are like social laws, but informal. They are social, not cosmic. They exist within a social context, and they are imposed on us by society — often by social laws, and sometimes by other incentives.

5   Why Are Moral Judgments Variable?

If good and evil are objective, and we have the ability to recognize good and evil, then moral judgments should not vary much between individuals, cultures or societies. But they do. Moral judgments vary in ways that appear to depend on personality traits, personal experience, culture and social context.

Moral norms differ from time to time and place to place. The moral norms of the modern West are very different from the moral norms of ancient Rome or medieval Europe. Something that is considered to be the greatest sin in one culture, such as racism in the modern West, can be acceptable or even commendable in another culture, such as Victorian England or modern China.

Morality seems to vary depending on environmental and social factors. For example, sexual morality changed in the West during the 20th century, due to improved methods of birth control and economic changes.

Social perspective also has a big effect on moral judgments. Moral judgments often depend on in-group | out-group distinctions. For example, killing members of one's own society is evil, but killing members of another society in war is morally acceptable or even good.

For example, our culture condemns the Holocaust as the epitome of evil, presumably because it involved the mass-killing of civilians, based only on their ethnicity. However, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, near the end of WWII, and also carried out mass-bombing of civilian targets during the war. Our culture views the mass-killing of civilians by our side as regrettable, but not evil.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide is an example of a rapid change in moral norms. After the assassination of the Hutu president, the Tutsi ethnic minority was blamed as a group and targeted for annihilation. Rape and murder suddenly became permissible on a very flimsy pretext. Roughly a million people were killed, and half a million women were raped.

Rwanda was and is almost entirely Christian. Christianity preaches brotherly love, "turn the other cheek", and has a universalist view of human nature, in which all human beings have immortal souls capable of salvation. That did not stop a large percentage of the population from participating in massacres of their fellow human beings.

Morality seems to depend on the social structure. This contradicts the ordinary view that society is based on morality. It suggests that changing social incentives can change morality, in some cases drastically and rapidly.

Even within the same culture and society, individuals can make different moral judgments. Sometimes those differences are obviously self-serving or self-aggrandizing. In other cases, they reflect differences in personality traits or experiences. Individuals differ most in their moral judgments when those judgments involve gray areas or moral boundaries, such as abortion or the treatment of animals.

To explain why morality varies between individuals, societies and cultures, we must abandon moral realism. Morality is socially and culturally dependent, so it varies between cultures and societies. Moral intuitions depend on experience and personality traits, so they vary between individuals. Also, moral judgments tend to reflect individual self-interest to some extent, because individuals are selfish.

6   Why Can't Moral Disagreements Be Resolved Rationally?

Moral realism provides no way to resolve moral disagreements.

There is no device for measuring good and evil, other than individual judgment. When moral judgments differ, there is no external standard that can resolve the conflict.

Also, because moral judgments supposedly reflect objective moral facts, not self-interest, they cannot be resolved by negotiation and compromise. If individuals have conflicting interests, they can often negotiate a solution that involves a compromise. With a moral disagreement, compromise is impossible, because each side views its position as objectively correct. There is also little room for persuasion. Each side can make arguments, but those arguments always depend on appeals to intuition.

When moral intuitions differ, there is no way to resolve the conflict. Each side simply *feels* that their position is right. Each side believes that they can clearly see the objective moral facts, while the other side is dishonest or irrational.

If moral realism was true, we would expect to resolve moral disagreements with evidence and arguments. We could use reason to discover objective moral facts, and to persuade people of those facts, as we can do with scientific knowledge (in most cases). But that is not the case. By abandoning moral realism, we can understand that moral intuitions have no rational basis, and thus moral disagreements cannot be resolved with rational persuasion.

Abandoning morality would free us to explicitly define social values. We would understand that they come from us, not an external source, so we have the authority to define them. If we defined the core values of our society by social agreement, then we would have an explicit normative foundation for society, and we could use that foundation to derive specific judgments and resolve disagreements.

7   Why Is Morality Ad Hoc?

When I began thinking about morality, I tried to find a few general principles that could explain and justify the data of moral judgments. I was looking for the foundation of morality. But I couldn't find a simple foundation from which ordinary moral judgments were derived. Instead, I discovered that moral judgments are highly ad hoc.

There are some moral principles that most people explicitly agree with, but those principles cannot explain or justify moral judgments.

For example, most people subscribe to some version of the golden rule, such as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.", or more simply "Be nice to others.". But this principle doesn't generate ordinary moral judgments by itself. To apply it, you need to define (a) what "nice" is, (b) who the "others" are, and (c) how to resolve conflicts of interest. Those auxiliary assumptions are

never made explicitly. They are intuitive, and they vary from person to person, culture to culture, and even situation to situation. They are ad hoc.

People try to justify their moral judgments by appealing to general moral principles. However, the judgments never follow from the principles alone. Moral justification is almost always a post hoc rationalization of intuitive judgments. Moral principles are used to rationalize moral judgments, but not to generate them.

For example, consider the moral judgment that we ought to be nice to animals. Most people agree with it to some extent, depending on the animal. Moral judgments about the human treatment of animals are usually ad hoc and intuitive, not generated by explicit reasoning from moral principles. They seem to depend on culture, experience, personality and the animal. People are more concerned about cute animals, simply because cute animals activate our parental instincts, not because cute animals have greater intrinsic moral worth. People classify animals into friend, foe and food categories, and treat animals in each category differently. Most people in the modern West consider it morally acceptable to kill and eat cows and pigs, but not horses or dogs. Similarly, it is viewed as acceptable to kill nuisance animals such as coyotes and raccoons, but not a dog that barks too much. Whether an animal is viewed as worthy of moral concern seems to depend on that animal's relationship to human beings, not on the intrinsic properties of the animal. This conflicts with the belief that moral judgments reflect objective moral facts.

War provides another example of the ad hoc nature of moral judgments and the post hoc nature of moral justification. In a war, both sides view themselves as morally good, and the other side as evil. In WWII, the Nazis, the Soviet Union, and the liberal democracies all viewed themselves as fighting for good and against evil. Each side viewed its actions (including the mass-killing of civilians) as justified by its noble cause, while viewing similar actions committed by the other side as evil atrocities. As with religions, they can't all be right. If moral judgments reflect underlying moral facts, we would not expect such deep and persistent moral disagreements.

Moral judgments tend to be ad hoc, and moral justifications tend to be post hoc. If asked, people can provide justifications for their moral judgments, but those justifications appear to be post hoc rationalizations. They do not reflect the way that moral judgments are made.

The ad hoc nature of morality goes beyond individual judgments. Morality is not a coherent system. It is an incoherent and incomplete collection of norms. It contains conflicts and gray areas, such as how to treat animals, whether abortion is wrong, and whether a criminal deserves kindness. Even within a single person's view of morality, there can be conflicting intuitions that are activated in different contexts. Because it is ad hoc, morality cannot be reduced to simple principles.

To explain the ad hoc nature of morality, we must abandon moral realism.

Morality is ad hoc because it is socially and culturally emergent. Moral norms are ad hoc solutions to social problems, and they are applied in an ad hoc way by individuals. Moral norms emerge culturally, without rational awareness or design. People converge on shared values, which reflect the needs of society and individuals. Those values can depend on specific cultural and environmental factors.

Also, people acquire moral knowledge under the false pretense that it is cosmic, not social. This pretense adds a layer of confusion. They need various auxiliary assumptions to maintain the pretense that socially dependent values are cosmic.

Moral intuitions are culturally and socially relative, and to some extent personally relative as well.

But we pretend that they reflect a cosmic moral standard. Moral justification is framed by this false assumption. Thus, it cannot generate or properly justify moral judgments. People resort to mental gymnastics to rationalize moral judgments that have no rational basis, and whose basis they do not even understand.

Again, consider the moral distinction between pigs and dogs. We treat dogs as worthy of moral concern, because we relate to them like children or friends. We have moral norms about how to treat friends and children, because such norms have individual and social functions. Those norms are then applied to dogs, by subconscious analogy. It is not that dogs are intrinsically more worthy than pigs. It is just that we relate to them differently. However, we also pretend that moral judgments reflect objective moral values. That prevents us from understanding the real reason for our moral judgments. The moral distinction between pigs and dogs seems ad hoc because (1) it depends on a specific detail of how we relate to them, and (2) we pretend that this distinction reflects some objective difference. For that reason, it cannot be explained or justified.

Morality is ad hoc because it is a collection of norms and imperatives that depend on society, culture and the individual. Morality is further complicated by the pretense that these ad hoc norms derive from a cosmic moral standard.

8 Why Is Evil Pervasive?

Selfishness and violence are normal, not exceptional. Although almost everyone claims to be morally good, there is little evidence for human behavior that fits the modern conception of moral goodness. Moral realism cannot explain this.

The evidence of history makes a strong case against moral realism. For all of history, human beings have fought wars against each other. Those wars involved not only men killing other men in combat, but also the mass killing of non-combatants, and the seizure of resources and fertile young women. Rape, enslavement, infanticide and torture were common practices. Those are normal human behaviors, not anomalies. War is a human universal. It is not an exception to normal behavior, which requires an exceptional explanation.

Group conflict played an important role in human evolution. Humans have been the dominant predators on land for a long time. As a result, the human population was limited mostly by war and disease, instead of predation. War was one of the biggest selective pressures on our psychology and culture. In the modern West, it is popular to view war as a pathology, rather than an adaptive behavior, but that is a delusion. War is a natural human behavior.

In modern times, we have developed the concept of universal human rights, which is based on viewing all of humanity as the moral in-group. But this view does not prevent societies from fighting wars. It simply changes the moral justification for fighting wars. When the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan in WWII, killing over 100,000 civilians, it was supposedly part of a great struggle of good versus evil. The Soviet Union, one of the bloodiest regimes in history, justified its actions as necessary to create a utopia of universal brotherhood. Wars are now fought with the pretense of "liberating" oppressed people from "evil" dictators. The death toll from war has decreased in recent history, mainly because food production outpaced population growth, and also because the nuclear deterrent prevented large-scale wars since WWII. This is progress, but it is not due to human kindness.

Society does not eliminate competition between people. It raises some of that competition to

the social level. Societies compete with other societies. The competition between societies is driven by the competition between individuals. Individuals organize into societies to compete with other individuals. We cooperate to compete. Just as individuals have conflicting interests, so do societies. The conflicting interests of individuals generate conflicting interests at a larger scale. War is the result.

There is competition even within cooperative arrangements, such as societies and families. Inside every society, there is a competition for mates and resources. There is competition within sexual relationships, because the interests of the man and the woman are not exactly the same. Within a family, children compete for parental support. Creating cooperative relationships between selfish individuals is not easy.

See Game Theory and Society.

Hypocrisy is the close companion of morality. Professed values differ significantly from revealed values (revealed by what people do, not what they say). Most people break as many rules as they can get away with, and find ways to rationalize their behavior. Public behavior is more virtuous than private behavior.

When social controls on behavior are removed temporarily, as in riots or political revolutions, the social order rapidly breaks down, and many people engage in acts that are normally prohibited. Moral constraints are weak in comparison to social constraints. Without incentives, when people have a choice between acting morally and acting in their own interests (as they perceive them), they will almost always act in their own interests, although they will often try to morally justify their actions. When social constraints break down, morality is exposed as a pretense.

Under normal social controls, most people take advantage of whatever loopholes exist in the social contract. They try to maximize their benefits from society, and minimize their contribution to society. Religious people often adopt an attitude of convenience toward the moral principles of their religion, applying them only when it is convenient to do so. People do sometimes act altruistically by donating to charities, helping strangers, etc, but such actions are relatively rare: they constitute a small fraction of human behavior overall.

Human behavior is complex and variable, but there are general patterns, and those patterns do not fit the hypothesis that humans are moral or altruistic by nature. They fit the hypothesis that human behavior is selfish and governed by social instincts that are adapted to life in small societies.

In the ordinary worldview, social coercion, such as law enforcement, is assumed to be necessary only to prevent a small minority of evil or mentally ill people from doing bad things. The assumption is that most people would not commit acts such as rape and murder even if there were no penalties for such acts. The evidence suggests otherwise: that social coercion is necessary to prevent the vast majority of people from doing "evil" things. Moral behavior is not primarily due to moral intuitions. It is primarily due to incentives that create and reinforce moral intuitions. Social power is necessary to impose moral norms.

There are practical, selfish reasons for an individual to conform to moral norms. Society punishes evil and rewards goodness. Likewise, there are practical, collectively selfish reasons for imposing moral norms on individuals. The moral behavior of individuals is best explained in terms of incentives and perceived self-interest, not the intrinsic goodness of human nature. The same is true for the imposition of moral norms on individuals by society.

Evolutionary theory explains the prevalence of evil. Our brains evolved to generate reproductively

effective behavior, not morally good behavior. To reproduce, individuals must acquire resources and mates, and so they naturally compete with other individuals. Selfishness and violence are built into human nature by evolution, because competition is an intrinsic part of life.

See Life is Violent.

To a biological realist, there is no "problem of evil". There is no need to explain why people are evil. Evil is natural. Instead, there is a "problem of good". It is hard to explain how humans manage to create cooperation, especially on a large scale.

9 Conclusion

Moral realism is the delusion that collective values and imperatives are cosmic. That delusion is part of morality. If it is rejected, then the notion of morality is rejected. We can replace that delusion with the knowledge that we create collective values and impose them on ourselves.

Moses carved some laws into a stone and claimed that God had done it. He used that claim to justify laws that could have been rationally justified as a way to make society work. We are still doing the same thing today. We pretend that our collective values are carved into the universe, or into human nature. The truth is that we create them, and carve them into ourselves.