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Objectivity without Reality

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Herman Veluwenkamp 2020

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Objectivity without Reality

Implications of Conceptual Role Semantics in Metaethics

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the decision by the College of Deans.

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Thursday 10 December 2020 at 16.15 hours

by

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Introduction

Imagine that you happen to find yourself engaged in a conversation about women's suffrage. To your great surprise, your interlocutor thinks that the right of women to vote in elections is actually a bad idea. After a heated discussion it turns out that, to your horror, he holds the firm belief that men and women are not equal and should not have the same rights. What would your reaction be? You probably are disgusted with his position, and surely think that he is mistaken. Would that feeling change if you found out that he also thinks that *you* are making a mistake? Would you think that both positions are correct? Probably not. Most people think that in cases such as the one above, there is only one true answer.

Let us, for now, use the term "objectivity" to denote this property of moral judgements: that there is at most one correct position and that conflicting judgments are mistaken. The most straightforward way to explain objectivity is to hold that there is a moral reality. According to this explanation, moral judgements are objectively true if and only if they correspond to moral reality. This is an attractive explanation, because it is analogous to our explanation of the objectivity of (some) non-moral judgements. The objective truth of claims such as "the earth is spherical" and "the main cause of global warming is human expansion of the greenhouse effect" is explained by environmental and geographical facts.

So the initial idea is that just as geographical objectivity is explained by geographical reality, moral objectivity is explained by moral reality. The meta-physical commitments that come with such a proposal are, however, taken to be deeply problematic. J.L. Mackie, for example, famously argues that moral

entities or properties would be “of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe” (Mackie, 1977, p. 38). How could it be the case, this line of reasoning goes, that the mere fact that an action has a particular property gives us overriding reasons to act?¹

To make matter worse, even if we set aside our metaphysical qualms and allow moral entities and properties into our ontology, it is not obvious that moral reality can explain moral objectivity. One additional problem is the problem of semantic access. Many moral realists are so-called nonnaturalists. They hold that moral entities or properties exist, but maintain that they are causally inert and response-independent. Given this, the problem is how to account for the connection between our moral words and moral properties: how do our moral words manage to latch onto moral properties?²

The problem of semantic access has been neglected for a long time, but is now starting to be taken seriously by metaethicists such as Matti Eklund (2017), David Enoch (2011b) and Ralph Wedgwood (2007).³ The solution that these philosophers propose is to adopt a specific theory in metasemantics: conceptual role semantics (CRS). Metasemantics is the discipline which tells us in virtue of what expressions get their meaning, and CRS is the position that expressions get their meaning in virtue of the conceptual role that the expressions play. In the different papers in this dissertation I will explain what CRS exactly is, but for now I take this brief sketch to suffice.

So there are at least two problems for the realist explanation of moral objectivity: a metaphysical problem and the problem of semantic access. In this dissertation I want to investigate whether we can avoid these problems if we don’t understand moral objectivity as correspondence with reality. I take as a starting point the solution to the problem of semantic access that many

¹ Mackie uses different terms to express his worry and it is an open question what the best interpretation of this so-called ‘queerness argument’ is (see Olson).

² For a more detailed discussion of this problem, see Enoch (2011b, pp. 177-184).

³ That the problem has been neglected for a long time is surprising, especially given the obvious similarity to Plato’s problem for accounting for the alleged fact that our words seem to be about the Platonic Forms (Parmenides).

realists have adopted: that is, the adoption of CRS. The dissertation consists of six self-standing papers, which each discuss aspects of the different ways in which the adoption of CRS changes the metaethical landscape. Each individual paper makes a contribution to this project. One of the conclusions that I will draw is that if we adopt CRS, we can give a different, antirealist explanation for moral objectivity: we can have moral objectivity without moral reality.

0.1 Overview of the Chapters

Chapter 1

As stated above, the main question that I try to answer in this dissertation is whether we can have moral objectivity without moral reality. This question, however, presupposes a clear distinction between moral realism and moral antirealism. The main problem regarding this distinction is what James Dreier has called the problem of creeping minimalism. Many antirealists have adopted minimalism about truth, representation and even existence. That is, they hold that a sentence such as “lying is wrong” is true, that it represents lying as wrong and that wrongness, *ipso facto*, exists. The problem of creeping minimalism is that if antirealists make these realist-sounding claims, it becomes difficult to see what exactly the difference is between realists and antirealists.

James Dreier is also responsible for the best-known solution to the creeping minimalism problem. Unfortunately, however, this solution fails if we consider some versions of CRS. More specifically, it wrongly identifies Wedgwood’s moral realist inferentialism as a version of antirealism. I argue that this is a structural problem. To remedy this problem I present what I take to be a more promising explanation of the distinction between realism and antirealism. I will argue that the correct distinction is made on the basis of what explains the truth-value of a moral judgement.

Chapter 2

There is a worrying argument that is brought forward against robust realists who adopt a conceptual role semantics for moral terms. The problem is that, arguably, metaethical realists can no longer explain how moral expressions can refer to robust properties when they adopt CRS. The reason for this is that reference to robust properties is typically determined through so-called wide conceptual roles that require the referent to have causal powers. This is a problem for nonnaturalists as they typically maintain that moral properties are causally inert. However, it is also a problem for naturalists, as a variant of the Moral Twin Earth Argument can be used to show that many recent versions of naturalism conflict with intuitions on moral disagreement.

If the conclusion of this argument holds, then this would trivially show that antirealists are not in a worse position to satisfy objectivity if CRS is correct. For if CRS is incompatible with realism, then realism cannot satisfy objectivity if CRS is the correct metasemantic theory. However, this conclusion is mistaken. I show this by discussing one of the prominent versions of this argument (Sinclair, 2017). I show that this argument fails. The reason for this is that the argument implicitly assumes that all wide roles are causal roles. I take this assumption to be mistaken. In this paper I propose a non-causal wide conceptual role semantics for moral terms which is inspired by Michael Huemer's work on ethical intuitionism.

Chapter 3

Given the conclusion of chapter 2, one might think it is a good idea for proponents of CRS to adopt the non-causal wide conceptual role semantics for moral terms. However, this argument only shows that CRS is compatible with moral realism. It does not solve the usual metaphysical and epistemic problems that do not rely on the adoption of CRS.

To take away much of the force of these challenges to realism, David Enoch has recently presented an indispensability argument which purports to show

that we are justified in believing that there are robust normative entities. This argument builds on indispensability arguments in the philosophy of mathematics, but also differs in important ways from these arguments. In this paper I argue that Enoch's indispensability argument fails in its own terms.

Chapter 4

In the first half of the dissertation, I provide a detailed explanation of the distinction between moral realism and moral antirealism and argue that although moral realism is compatible with CRS, it is not clear that we are justified in believing that there are moral properties and entities. In the second half of the dissertation I focus on versions of moral antirealism.

Antirealist CRS (also inferentialism) is often combined with a minimalist attitude towards semantic terms such as truth and reference, i.e., many inferentialists hold that when we use these semantic terms we do not purport to refer to substantive properties. And it is easy to see how this combination makes CRS attractive for philosophers who see themselves as antirealists. Although the attractions of combining antirealist CRS and minimalism are easy to see, minimalism is also a controversial position. For one, minimalists maintain that truth is an insubstantive property, but it is not altogether clear what an insubstantive property is. Secondly, as minimalists maintain that truth does not play an explanatory role, it is incompatible with the position that truth should explain the normativity of truth talk. Given that minimalism faces these objections, it would be preferable if the success of antirealist CRS would not depend on the minimalist's ability to respond successfully to these objections.

For this reason I will argue in this paper that someone who is attracted to CRS because of its ability to accommodate antirealist intuitions (in the moral domain for example) is not committed to minimalism about truth. More specifically, I show that CRS combined with a very plausible view on truth

conditions is compatible with a version of truth pluralism. I call this position Inferentialist Truth Pluralism.

Chapter 5

In the previous paper I presented Inferentialist Truth Pluralism and showed that it is a position that accords well with many antirealist motivations. The relevant question that remains is whether it can help us in securing objectivity. In this paper I assess that question.

I approach this question by first looking at Tim Scanlon and Derek Parfit, two metaethicists who regard themselves as realists but who maintain that realism in the moral domain does not have the metaphysical implications that many find hard to accept in other realist views. I argue that Scanlon and Parfit can plausibly be interpreted as truth pluralists.

Given this interpretation of their view, I investigate whether it can satisfy objectivity. My conclusion is negative. I argue that Parfit's and Scanlon's non-metaphysical moral realism fails to be more realistic than contemporary versions of antirealism.

Chapter 6

So far, I have presented two versions of CRS, and have argued that they are problematic for different reasons. The problem with realist inferentialism is that it is not clear why we would consider ourselves justified in believing that there are normative entities. Inferentialist Truth Pluralism does not have this problem, as it is a version of moral antirealism, but it fails to satisfy objectivity in the sense defined above.

In this final paper I present a version of antirealist CRS that has better chances of satisfying objectivity. I argue that antirealists satisfy objectivity for those moral judgements whose truth is entailed by the normative role that our moral terms play. This requires a wider normative role than is usually

supposed, but I argue that moral realists need this condition as well if they want to secure objectivity.