Evolution and Moral Realism

Lecture for PHIL 3334: Philosophy of Biology

Evolution and Moral Realism
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ABSTRACT

We are moral apes, a difference between humans and our relatives that has received significant recent attention in the evolutionary literature. Evolutionary accounts of morality have often been recruited in support of error theory: moral language is truth-apt, but substantive moral claims are never true (or never warranted). In this article, we: (i) locate evolutionary error theory within the broader framework of the relationship between folk conceptions of a domain and our best scientific conception of that same domain; (ii) within that broader framework, argue that error theory and vindication are two ends of a continuum, and that in the light of our best science, many folk conceptual structures are neither hopelessly wrong nor fully vindicated; and (iii) argue that while there is no full vindication of morality, no seamless reduction of normative facts to natural facts, nevertheless one important strand in the evolutionary history of moral thinking does support reductive naturalism—moral facts are facts about cooperation, and the conditions and practices that support or undermine it. In making our case for (iii), we first respond to the important error theoretic argument that the appeal to moral facts is explanatorily redundant, and second, we make a positive case that true moral beliefs are a 'fuel for success', a map by which we steer, flexibly, in a variety of social interactions. The vindication, we stress, is at most partial: moral cognition is a complex mosaic, with a complex genealogy, and selection for truth-tracking is only one thread in that genealogy.

1   *Realism about Scientific and Normative Thought*
2   *The Folk and Science*
3   *Reduction, Vindication, and Error*
4   *Moral Facts and Moral Opinions*
5   *Is Moral Knowledge a Fuel for Success?*

1 Realism about Scientific and Normative Thought

This article is about evolution and moral realism, and so we begin with a brief characterization of moral realism as we shall understand it, since distinguishing realism from other options is notoriously fraught. We take realism to have two aspects. One is epistemic: realists are not sceptics. A philosopher who thinks we can know nothing of atoms and their constituents is not a realist

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What is the paper about?

1) Read the abstract. Then read it again.

2) The goal of the paper is to defend a version of moral realism together with an account of how evolution has led to our moral thinking

3) This requires defense against the worry that evolution debunks morality

Defining Realism

1) Moral Realism requires that some moral claims are true and

2) that they are true independently of what anyone thinks (they are "stance-independent")

3) They add that realists aren't skeptics. This doesn't really change anything of importance

The worry about debunking

From the very first section they point out that a number of authors have versions of debunking arguments - arguments that understanding the evolution of moral cognition undermines moral realism. It shows that our moral beliefs aren't responding to the moral facts

— (This is Horn's argument)

comparison with religious debunking

A helpful analogy for moral debunking is religious debunking

It is very plausible that religious commitment is evolutionarily adaptive (through enhanced cooperation and social cohesion)

Then plausibly religious belief could spread and persist even though it is not truth tracking

comparison with religious debunking

The point is "we would believe in gods, whether gods were real or not."

The thought is that since this is true, our religious beliefs are unjustified

Likewise, we would have moral beliefs whether or not there were moral facts so maybe they aren't justified either

comparison with religious debunking

Ultimately, Sterelny and Fraser conclude that the cases aren't parallel because they think:

1) the effects of religious belief depends on us being unaware of its evolutionary function
2) being aware of the evolutionary function of morality does not undermine its effects

Section 2: Reduction

There will be a reduction of normative (ethical) facts to natural facts

—examples of possible reductions—
1) classical genetics reduces to molecular genetics
2) pleasure/pain reduces to neurophysiology
3) water is H_2O
4) beliefs and desires vs. cognitive psychology

(They think this last one is the best model)

Section 3: partial vindication

A folk theory of a subject is a common sense or pre-scientific theory

—examples of folk theories—

1) folk psychology - beliefs and desires
2) pre-modern astronomy
3) theories about witches

Section 3: partial vindication

While the theory of witches is best understood as an error theory (turns out, there are no witches) partial vindication is possible

For example, ancient astronomers had a lot of knowledge even though most of their general (theoretical) beliefs were wrong

The suggestion is that morality is a mixed case like pre-modern astronomy

Section 4: morality vindicated

Morality is complicated with beliefs from lots of different sources

To partially vindicate morality, realists need to do two things:

1) show that moral facts are not redundant

2) develop a positive case for how moral knowledge could be a "fuel for success"

moral truth vs. falsity

How can we learn to be morally reliable?

1) guided by pro-social emotions (shame, guilt, pride, regret)

2) trial and error in heterogeneous environments

3) cultural group selection

Section 5: moral knowledge as a fuel for success

Why would it be beneficial to be morally good?

   1) reputation is huge. Lots of examples of 'partner choice' - we choose who to interact with

   2) we can influence the norms around us. Norms that enhance cooperation will be better for us

Conclusion

Moral truths are principles of action and interaction that support forms of cooperation and they are stable because they are fair enough to give almost everyone an incentive to continue to cooperate

In favorable cases, these norms are endorsed because they are true, and when endorsed, they support successful social interaction