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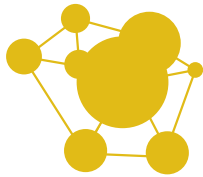
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Working Paper

Meta-ethics in need of a more naturalistic perspective: A pragmatic alternative revisited

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In discussions concerning the relevance of science to moral inquiry, science is usually considered to be instrumentally valuable. Granting that, I intend in this paper to show that science contributes differently to normative ethics and to meta-ethics. On the one hand, science can help to realize a value that is accepted in normative ethics. On the other hand, by applying a pragmatic perspective, science can support a meta-ethical criterion, with which we can distinguish morally good principles from morally wrong principles.

Keywords: Meta-ethics; Naturalistic ethics; Science; Pragmatism.

1. Introduction

After the failure of the ÷verification theoryø of logical positivism, which presupposes that scientific theories build upon foundational axioms and on mathematical rigor, we have been less convinced that traditional epistemology can give us procedures by means of which we could verify and obtain empirical truth. Quinean attacks on epistemological analyticity and Kripkean arguments for *a posteriori* metaphysical truth have directed a ÷naturalizationø of ÷epistemic normativityø, and Stichøs ÷cognitive diversityø has accelerated it. In recent years ÷naturalismøin the philosophy of knowledge has not had a negligible effect on theories of belief and knowledge. On the other hand, this sort of trend seems to occur also in ethics, the moral domain of philosophy, although Humeøs critique of inferring ÷oughtøfrom ÷isø, and Mooreøs ÷naturalistic fallacyø argument, are still influential in leading philosophers to believe that the relevance of science to ethics remains very limited.[1]

Our aim in this paper is to argue how and why the naturalistic trend can contribute to ethics in interesting and important ways. In the second section, the basic position of ÷naturalistic ethicsøis described, insofar as it is related to normative ethics. In the third section, it is argued that the naturalistic perspective is necessary to make a minimum consensus in meta-ethics, and a pragmatic alternative is proposed. In the last section, we conclude with a summary and discussion of some points of debate in our argument.

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2. What can science do for normative ethics?[2]

The phrase "scientific ethics" or "naturalistic ethics" refers to a novel philosophical movement that proceeds by using scientific methods and the results obtained by them, for normative inquiry. It does not merely describe how/why people use moral terms or how/why they behave morally. It aims also to use scientific findings to argue for and against certain values. As a result, scientific ethics is *descriptive* as well as *normative.*[3] Although there is growing agreement that science can contribute to our understanding of what human morality is, or how it might have arisen, there is less agreement that it can do something about the validity of such morality: "science can say nothing about the morality of morals" (Gould, 1999). The relevance of science to normative ethics is usually denied, against the risk of committing the "naturalistic fallacy" (i.e., deriving "ought (values)" from "is (fact)"[4] Take the following example.

Factual Premise 1: All human beings tell lies.
Factual Premise 2: I am a human being.
Moral Premise 3: It is good for me to tell lies.

Suppose the first and second premises are correct. If we deduce the last premise from the previous two, it is obviously false, because there is no logical connection that allows this deduction. In general, the naturalistic fallacy precludes the possibility of deriving directly moral statements from descriptive statements. Since the naturalistic fallacy argument is plausible and strong, many criticisms of scientific ethics concern skepticism about the relevance of science to normative ethics. Nevertheless, we think Katinka et al. (2010) clearly show that science can contribute to normative ethics without committing the fallacy above; thus, "scientific ethics" is possible and useful.

Using the Kibbutzim in Israel as an example, their argument proceeds as follows (See, Katinka et al., 2010, pp. 11–12). On the one hand, values that the Kibbutzim aim to achieve are considered right assumptions: "Moral premises: Freedom of life choice, equality and practical feasibility are all morally good." On the other hand, on the basis of various scientific research, they have revealed values that people in the Kibbutzim have held in actual fact and examined, to check whether people's actual values and the Kibbutzim's original declared values were mutually consistent: "Factual premises: In general and over a broad range of situations (varying in upbringing, culture, etc.) women value childcare more than men do." As a result, Katinka et al. offer a guide for the Kibbutzim in order that it might achieve its desired values with less conflict: "Conclusion: Sexual differences in time spent in caring for children ought not to be

totally eradicated.ö In other words, science suggests that if people in a kibbutz aim for total equality between male and female, they will, in practice, suffer great conflict between this value and their innate value. Since women value childcare more than men, other means consistent with these values are suggested.

The point of their argument is that while science is not directly concerned with the justification of ÷moral premisesø, it does help to promote ends or goals where ÷moral premisesø can be realizable: õScience does guide ethics though, not by inferring true moral principles but by pointing us to which values we do hold and which value sets are incoherentö (Katinka et al., 2010, p. 12). In a word, science is *instrumentally* valuable. People *ought* to obey the ÷conclusionø if and only if they consider these moral premises as right, and these ÷factual premisesø as correct. The oughtness of the conclusion is due not to its *categorical* normativity, but to its *hypothetical* normativity. Hence, although science contributes to arriving at moral guidance, the argument above does not commit the naturalistic fallacy.

By developing the argument that science can be *conditionally* relevant for normative ethics without committing the naturalistic fallacy, Katinka et al. (2010) explain the usefulness of ÷methodological naturalismø for ethics, also insisted on by Flanagan (1996) and Casebeer (2003). Their claim can be summarized as follows: *If* certain values or a set of values is accepted, *then* scientific methods and findings can be used to distinguish right from wrong conduct to realize these values.

This claim is closely related to the other aspect of their naturalistic ethics: non-foundationality. Compared to foundational ethics, which intends to deduce a system of true normative rules out of a set of first principles, usually considered non-refutable, naturalistic ethics does not ÷groundø values on such first norms. It does not directly concern, to say the least, the antecedent of the conditional expression above: õ*If* certain values or a set of values is accepted.ö [5] In the next section, however, we argue that science should not consider this antecedent as *given*, when justification of a meta-ethical concept cannot be completed by itself.

3. Relevancy of science for meta-ethics

In this section, after introducing ÷universalizabilityø as one of the basic meta-ethical concepts, we suggest that the conflict between morals and facts should be resolved in a different way from the case of Kibbutzim, and we propose an alternative to ease the conflict.

3.1. Universalizability: A meta-ethical concept

Nobody will deny that the main aim of moral philosophers interested in meta-ethics is to examine whether there are any moral truths and, if so, what assures these truths.[6] Nobody will deny that meta-ethics is empty without normative ethics: õThe purpose of metaethics then becomes that of rendering normative problems easier of solution by sending the normative theorist to his task with a clearer head concerning his own assumptionsö (Sumner, 1967, p. 101). In short, meta-ethics is to be õa prolegomenon or propaedeutic to the study of normative problemsö (Ibid.). Moreover, nobody will deny that there is no consensus regarding these central meta-ethical issues.[7] However, nobody, again, may deny there is among professional philosophers an agreement that if there were moral truth, it should possess the following five characteristics: prescriptivity, universalizability, overridingness, publicity and practicability.[8]

Among these five features, we take ‑universalizabilityø described below, as our subject of discussion.[9]

Universalizability claims that whatever is right (or wrong) in one situation is right (or wrong) in any relevantly similar situation (Harris et al., 2000, p. 57). For example, õit is right for people to lend a sum of money, if someone asks itö. It is a universalizable statement. A universalizable claim demands that one should make decisions not from a self-serving point of view, but from a universal, non-personal, neutral viewpoint. Thus, this claim requires: if you think that when I ask a friend for a sum of money, it is right for her/him to lend it to me, you *should* think that when my friend asks me for a sum of money, it is right for me to lend it to her/him. Otherwise, universalizability is violated.

Compared to the example above, the following statement is not universalizable: õIt is right for people to lend a sum of money, if the King Ludwig II of Bavaria asks it.ö Essentially, in universalizable discourse, no proper noun or pronoun is used.

Universalizability can be a rare meta-ethical consensus regarding a way of making, and agreeing on, moral judgments. It is worth noting that universalizability can be a basic condition of moral reasoning, but it cannot assure the rightness of moral discourse by itself.[10] Even if you accept the universalizability of the example above, it is always possible for you to refuse to give money to your friend and to refuse to be given money by your friend.

Given that the universalizability claim (henceforth the ‑U claimø) is right, it is *instrumentally* valuable; it is reasonable to consider that a universalizable moral discourse is, *ceteris paribus*, better than a not-universalizable one. If so, universalizability can provide the means to moral philosophers to make a common

platform for the evaluation of moral discourse, whereas it is very hard to think that the U claim is *intrinsically* valuable, because it can be valuable only as a claim *for* something ó for moral judgments, in this case.

Let us leave the features of the U claim and turn to its justification.

3.2 Justification of U claims

Suppose that Moral Premise 1 (MP1) is considered as a value by philosophy, and Factual Premise 1 (FP1) is confirmed by science.

MP1: A U claim ought to be accepted as right.

FP1: The majority of people do not think that the U claim is right.

Needless to say, this is an assumption. There are two reasons why we make this assumption here. Firstly, a case in which morals and facts do not correspond to each other, can clarify the role of science in meta-ethics. Secondly, as a good deal of empirical literature shows that people do not think, judge or infer as philosophers have expected, this assumption seems to be realizable.[11] For example, while Kelly et al. (2007) do not directly examine the moral validity of a U claim, their experiment showed that moral judgment changed quite dramatically when *only* a historical background was modified in a moral discourse. This experiment asked participants whether it was acceptable to whip a sailor in a cargo ship because he was intoxicated when he should have been on watch. While only 6% of participants said it was acceptable to whip the sailor in 2004, 52% of participants said this behavior was acceptable 300 years ago.

From these premises, this empirical evidence lets us know, without fear of invoking the naturalistic fallacy, that it will be difficult to make people accept a U claim as a criterion of moral judgment. But fact does not require morality to be revised or modified. So far, MP1 is treated as a *given*. In contrast, it seems obvious that, if, beyond this suggestion, we derive from FP1 that MP1 is not right, we commit a naturalistic fallacy. Nevertheless, how can we prove that, while the moral judgment shared widely by professional ethicists (MP1) is morally right, that which is shared by ordinary people (FP1) is morally wrong? We think this task has hardly been achieved, to say the least, within philosophy.

Now the main question is: how do we justify that a U claim is right? Firstly, we try to justify it in the way philosophers might: with justification of moral discourse relying solely on philosophy's traditional tools.

Linguistic analysis

If we try to justify U from the standpoint of a linguistic commitment, our argument might be as follows: a U claim is right, because we commit to linguistic conventions according to which it is right. Take the loan example again. The U claim asks us: if you think that when I ask the others for a sum of money, it is right for them to lend it to me, you *should* think that when the others ask me for a sum of money, it is right for me to lend it to them. The U claim demands we consider that the former and the latter are *morally* equivalent propositions: both propositions should be made on the same criteria and supported by the same reason, for people who accept them. Linguistic analysis assumes that we think the U claim is right because we belong to a linguistic community in which the exchange of 'me' and 'the others' between two propositions should not affect the rightness of these moral propositions, or this exchange keeps them 'relevantly similar.' We will take the following canonical form of linguistic appeal to a U claim:

(*)   A U claim is right, because it is arrived at by .

Here,   is the universal set of linguistic conventions to which we commit. Now we have to justify (*). If (*) is right, this rightness should be also made on linguistic commitment, because we are trying to justify moral rightness by linguistic analysis. Thus we recognize the following proposition:

(**)   (*)   is right, because (*) is arrived at by .

With the same argument, we have to show the rightness of the following:

(***)   (**)   is right, because (**) is arrived at by .

As a result, we have to justify an infinite number of propositions ó (*), (**), (***) . . .   ó to justify a U claim by the linguistic approach. If the regress is infinite, it would seem to make ethical justification impossible. Quine's apprehension is appropriate here also:

õIn a word, the difficulty is that if logic is to proceed *mediately* from conventions, logic is needed for inferring logic from the conventions.ö (Quine, 1936, p. 104; emphasis is Quineøs)

In addition to the infinite regress, we think that the justification of a U claim by linguistic commitment may cause another problem, if   depends only on languages to which each of us commits. If so, it is possible that while   of my language claims that the two propositions of the loan example above are morally equivalent,   of your language does not. It follows therefore that a U claim is not universalizable under these conditions.

Foundation by intuition

To stop the regress, can we posit a level of intuition from which ethical justification is derived? It can be called an *internalist* attempt, to the extent that it attempts to find justification of morals in pre-existing rational motives.[12] We use the term –intuitionø here, in the ordinary sense of philosophy: knowledge or experiential belief characterized by immediacy and its self-evidential character. Our main interest is to examine the validity of the following proposition:

( ) U claim is right, because it is logically derived from intuition.

In order that this proposition can be reasonably acceptable: firstly, intuition, on which the U claim is built, should be justified, otherwise it follows that the grounds for the rightness of moral reasoning are not robust; secondly, this intuition should be justified by itself or by –basic intuitionø that does not need justification by other elements. Otherwise, we suffer the same type of infinite regress as in the case of linguistic analysis (if institution is grounded by A, what grounds A?; if A is grounded by B, what grounds B?; . . .). Hence, we need a –basic intuitionø to approve proposition ( ). Does this sort of intuition exist?

Sense-data or –qualiaø are usually proposed as typical examples of –basic intuitionø If I say õNow I see a coffee cup on the tableö or õI have a throbbing tooth,ö it is difficult for me to be skeptical of this cognition, and it is so self-evident that I do not feel the necessity to justify it. Here, however, a problem is pointed out. This sort of intuition should lack content. Since sense-data is an immediate cognition given without rational inference, it cannot have plentiful substance. Hence, even if intuition such as sense-data

existed, it may be difficult to justify a substantial proposition like ( ), because to judge the rightness of ( ), a basic intuition should have some criteria or reasons logically connected to the content of ( ), according to which ( ) can be justified (or not). And then if basic intuition should be endowed with sufficient content to justify a moral claim, its self-evidentiality becomes ambiguous, because its contents also need to be justified.

A last resort may be Moore's ="moral intuition" argument. Moore, by refusing any kind of foundation built on a first moral principle, has thought that we could find *morally true* discourse by clearing away conceptual confusions to enable our ="moral intuition" to work appropriately. However, as far as we know, so far nobody has sufficiently endorsed the existence of such an intuition.[13]

It may be worth clarifying, in passing, two points. (i) The argument above would be to a considerable extent true for four other features of moral principles: prescriptivity, overridingness, publicity and practicability, because they might have the same difficulty in justification as a U claim. (ii) The justification problem, mentioned above, seems to be more serious in the meta-ethical case than in the normative ethics case. Because a main task of meta-ethics is to clarify a set of reasonable criteria that moral principles need to satisfy, if these criteria could not be justified, the *raison d'être* of meta-ethics would be seriously harmed.

Let us now return to our main subject. Judging from the above, philosophy can not *correct* people's belief, to put it simply, as science can do: although people believe that glass is not liquid, science can state "nonetheless it is." Should we, then, abandon the U claim together with its theoretical difficulty of justification? In the next section, we will discuss a possible solution: the pragmatic alternative.

3.3 The pragmatic alternative

Now remember that MP1 ("A U claim ought to be accepted as right") is a meta-ethical statement, and a role of meta-ethics is to construct a common platform on which people can make *morally* better judgment or decisions regarding their conduct. With this notice, let us replace MP1 by MP2: "It is better that the majority of people accept a U claim as right."[14] Now the discussion is transformed as follows:

MP2: It is better that the majority of people accept a U claim as right.

FP1: The majority of people do not think that a U claim is right.

Although a conflict between MP2 and FP1 seems to be more worrying, because the FP1 states *directly* that MP2 is difficult to accept, we think that in this case also, science can serve to reduce the conflict without committing a naturalistic fallacy. We propose that ethicists refer to empirical literatures or evidences for the reasons why and the procedure through which, professional philosophers and ordinary people arrive at different judgments. By using this empirical knowledge, professional ethicists could more easily persuade ordinary people to accept a U claim: thus, the conflict above may disappear.

In other words, we have derived the following conclusion from MP2 and FP1:

Conclusion: It is better for ethicists to use science to make more people accept that a U claim is right.

If we can accept that MP2 is a value, the reliance on science is *instrumentally* good to realize the majorityøs support for a U claim. The oughtness of the ÷conclusionø is due to its *hypothetical* normativity.

The key of the argument above is to replace the conflict between MP1 and FP1 by that between MP2 and FP1: to consider (meta-) ethics as a practical discipline, not as an analytical one. Since it is evident that MP2 does not logically imply MP1, and *vice versa*, foundational ethicists, who intend to ground ethics on *a priori* fixed norms outside the external world, such as ÷first moral principlesø or Platonic forms, disagree. However, when philosophers or ethicists want to keep a U claim, although traditional philosophical tools no longer suffice to justify the rightness of MP1, why not test their value judgments ó ÷a U claim is rightø ó by putting them into practice ó ÷is a U claim generally considered right?ø ó and by seeing whether the results are satisfactory? Our proposition is exactly along the same lines as the *pragmatic* discipline:

õMoral theory can (i) generalize the types of moral conflicts which arise . . . it can (ii) state the leading ways in which such problems have been intellectually dealt with . . . it can (iii) render personal reflection more systematic and enlightened, suggesting alternatives . . . stimulating greater consistencyö. (Dewey, 1908, pp. 7ó8)

We (i) point out the conflict between MP1 and FP2, (ii) replace MP1 by MP2 in order to find a possible solution to keep the U claim and (iii) examine whether people can accept the U claim with the help of empirical evidence.

The *pragmatic* argument leads us further into a consideration of the naturalistic fallacy. Imagine a scenario in which professional philosophers try to persuade people to accept a U claim by using empirical knowledge, yet still the people will not accept it. Do we commit a naturalistic fallacy if we revise the U claim itself by relying on this disagreement? While the naturalistic fallacy means that ÷ought (value)ø is derived from ÷is (fact)ø, our proposition privileges neither ÷oughtø nor ÷isø; rather, it examines whether a value is good in accordance with a fact and whether a fact is desirable on the basis of a value. In this *reflective* process of deliberation, not only a moral premise but also a factual premise can be revised, such that the peopleøs judgment of a U claim could be corrected by discussion with a philosopher.[15] This difference granted, we can say that our revision of ÷oughtø with reference to ÷isø does not commit a naturalistic fallacy; at least, not directly.

4. Conclusion and discussion

Practical moral reasoning or judgment is always made in a specific social environment. If meta-ethics can construct a minimum consensus to distinguish good moral judgment from bad, it can help people to conduct or judge *morally* better in a concrete situation. In this article, we arrive at the conclusion that it is necessary to elaborate this sort of consensus in the interaction between the ÷ought-worldø and the ÷is-worldø. Since science is, so far, the strongest means that we have had to examine ÷the is-worldø, we propose that ethicists or philosophers make good use of it. Let us, now, close our paper by highlighting two points of debate in our argument from a *pragmatic* perspective.

We have argued in section 3.2 that justification of a U claim would be theoretically difficult. Why do we need to justify a U claim? We may suppose an answer as follows: ðIf a U claim is an unjustified belief, it fails to be a common platform of moralities, not only because philosophers do not admit it as a criterion of moral judgment, but also because people tend to prefer justified beliefs to unjustified ones, and people tend to think it is wrong, in some sense, to believe something without justification.ö However, from a pragmatic perspective, an empirical test is needed to know, especially, whether people prefer justified beliefs to unjustified ones in moral terms.

Last but not least, is the pragmatic alternative, discussed in section 3.3, also available for normative ethics? Suppose the following example:

Moral Premise: it is wrong to tell lies.

Factual Premise: we tell lies.

Would a pragmatist propose to revise the moral premise, because õwe tell liesö is a robust fact? We think that a pragmatist would firstly transform this moral premise into a new one: õwe think that it is wrong to tell liesö and examine, as a problem of ÷moral motivationø the following conflict: although we think õit is wrong to tell liesö, we tell lies.[16] Secondly, a pragmatist would examine empirically how and why people are (or are not) motivated to act on their moral judgment. Lastly, by using empirical evidence, she/he would propose an institution or system in which people are unlikely to tell lies. Still, suppose that by any means, people are likely to tell lies. Should we abandon the moral premise, õit is wrong to tell liesö? Oneøs intuition says ÷noø but a pragmatic argument might ask us to examine this intuition in the interaction between the ÷ought-worldø and the ÷is-worldø

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[1] õQuine was sharply rebuked for slighting the normative character of epistemology (e.g. Kim 1988; Stich 1933*a*), but we are not suggesting, in a rambunctiously Quinean spirit, ÷surrender of the *ethical* burden to psychologyø And so far as we know, neither is anyone else. Ethics must not ó indeed cannot ó *be* psychology, but it does not follow that ethics should *ignore* psychology.ö (Doris & Stich, 2005, p. 115)

[2] We will use the term ÷scienceø to refer to a system of acquiring knowledge mainly using observation and experiment to describe and explain natural or social phenomena. As we use this term less formally in this paper, ÷scienceø sometimes refers to the organized body of knowledge obtained by this system.

[3] For full detail on ÷scientific ethicsø or ÷naturalistic ethics,ø see Casebeer (2003), Flanagan (1996), Rottschaefer (2007).

[4] It is sure that Mooreøs naturalistic fallacy is not the same as Humeøs is/ought gap; the former can include the latter. Mooreøs naturalistic fallacy insists that a basic moral principle (or principles), from which all of the rest of moral discourses can be deduced, can be grounded not in nature, not in metaphysics, and not in ethics. However, we use both claims interchangeably in this paper, because both of them prohibit deriving normative principles from facts. As for Mooreøs naturalistic fallacy and scientific ethics,

see diCarlo & Teehan (2004) and Katinka et al. (2010).

[5] With the term ‑foundational ethics‑, we assume a set of theories that intend to ‑ground‑ moral principles on something unimpeachable, like Natural Law theories in ethics (e.g., T. Aquinas), early social evolutionary ethics (e.g., H. Spencer) or modern metaphysical naturalism (e.g., R. Boyd), although the scope and reasoning of the ‑foundation‑ is different in each.

[6] There is not unanimous agreement about the importance of meta-ethics in ethics. For example, emotionalists, like D. Hume, A. J. Ayer, or C. L. Stevens, do not give weight to meta-ethics.

[7] õFar too many moral philosophers have been content to *invent* the psychology or anthropology on which their theories depend, advancing or disputing empirical claims with little concept of empirical evidence.ö (Doris & Stich, 2005, pp. 114ó115)

[8] õAlthough there is no universal agreement on the traits a moral principle must have, there is wide consensus about five features: (1) prescriptivity, (2) universalizability, (3) overridingness, (4) publicity, and (5) practicability.ö (Pojman & Fieser, 2009, p. 7)

[9] Although ‑universalizability‑ does not have the same account among philosophers (see, e.g., Lycan, 1969), we adopt here a very common definition of ‑universalizability‑

[10] For a more detailed argument of ‑universalizability,‑ see Hare (1952, 1981).

[11] See Doris & Stich (2005, 2006).

[12] For a summarized presentation of the internalist foundation, see Lumer (2007).

[13] For the ambiguity and novelty of Moore‑s philosophy, see Part 1 of Soames (2003).

[14] õThe meta-ethicist is not entitled to exercise his own preference here in the choice of moral codes to come within the scope of the analysis; his account must merely list the features common to all moralities or else lay itself open to the charge of exhibiting a normative bias.ö (Sumner, 1967, p. 97).

[15] Our pragmatic statement reminds readers of Goodman‑s ‑reflective equilibrium‑: õ*A rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend.* The process of justification is the delicate one of making mutual adjustments between rules and accepted inferences; and in the agreement thus achieved lies the only justification needed for eitherö (Goodman, 1965, pp. 66ó67; emphasis is Goodman's.). Although Goodman‑s ‑reflective equilibrium‑ concerns the human inference process, not her/his moral reasoning, it seems very interesting to develop Goodman‑s argument in ethics. See also Rawls (1974).

[16] For a recent empirical study of õmoral motionö, see Nichols (2002, 2004).

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