

Should political philosophy be done without metaethics?

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The problem: the relation between ME and NE

First-order questions concern what are the actual right actions to perform in a given situation and why. *Second-order questions* concern what is actually happening in moral reasoning, what persons are doing when they engage in moral reasoning.

In recent years, a general distrust towards metaethics has been raised:

- Unintelligibility
- Meaninglessness
- Metaethics simply is normative ethics

Ronald Dworkin: "there are no sensible independent, second-order, metaphysical questions about value"

Outline and general aim

- 1) The problem of quietism and its varieties
 - 2) Metaethical quietism: rebutting Dworkin's anti-Archimedeanism
 - 3) Philosophical quietism: Rawls and the "so what question"
 - 4) Inescapable metaethical problems for political philosophers
- Defeat quietism and arguing that, questions of political philosophy (at least, some of them) should be done with metaethics. Methodologically, metaethics cannot simply be ruled out.

The problem of quietism

A difficult definition: very different philosophical traditions and commitments. E.g. Blackburn, Rorty, Dworkin, McDowell, Putnam, the Positivists.

In Ethics:

- a) Moral theories are not to touch upon any philosophical dispute and debate (Rawls)
- b) Metaethics belongs to normative ethics, metaethical debates should be addressed by substantive theorizing (Dworkin)
- ↘ The autonomy thesis: normative theories are independent from changes and developments in other fields

Confusion: metaethics, metaphysics, ontology.

Metaethical quietism

- 1) There is no metaethical grounding for normative ethics, thus morality is autonomous
- 2) We should give up on ontology and moral theories need to be metaphysically light
- 3) Moral philosophy is to provide normative judgments and practical solutions to moral problems

Dworkin: metaethics is Archimedean for it purports to “stand outside a whole body of belief, and to judge it as a whole from premises or attitudes that owe nothing to it.”

→ Problem of skepticism

Dworkin's two-stage argument

Dworkin's hypothesis: metaethics *is* normative ethics

Claims are genuinely metaethical iff

(1) cannot be interpreted or translated into positive moral judgments

(2) can be shown to be philosophically distinct from substantive claims

Condition (1) is never met: metaethical claims are emphasized versions of normative claims

> abortion is objectively wrong = abortion is *really* wrong

Condition (2) is defeated by “there is no right answer to the question whether slavery is wrong”

> it entails a substantive thesis about slavery

First Challenge

Is anti-Archimedeanism an Archimedean position about the relation between ME and NE?

Dworkin is judging metaethics from an external perspective holding that there is no Archimedean leverage > arguing against the possibility of metaethics is itself a metaethical position

Dworkin's possible answers:

- 1) It is a metaethical position: self-refuting
- 2) It is not metaethical for metaethics does not exist: efficiency error

Second challenge

Consider: “there is a right answer to the question whether slavery is wrong”

- It is not a substantive claim for it implies both that slavery is wrong, nor that slavery is right: there is no prescription
- It asserts that there is an answer: a realist and a relativist would disagree, so it is not metaethically neutral, but distinguishes a genuine metaethical dispute > it is meaningful on its own

Third Challenge

Dworkin's argument:

- (1) If ME is neutral, then it is independent of NE
- (2) ME is not neutral for it does not pass the test
- (3) ME is not independent, so it is part of NE
- (4) NE is independent of ME

Does non-neutrality imply dependence?

Does being dependent necessarily mean being a part of what is independent?

Neutrality = *freestandingness*?

→ ME may bring some N outcomes, but cannot settle normative controversy

Philosophical quietism

Rawls's idea of PP in *Political Liberalism* is to propose a political conception independent of philosophy, metaethics, and substantive moral theories > a freestanding conception that can be justified without reference to controversial moral principles

It is not that metaethics is of no value *per se*.

But, PP aiming at finding practical solution should avoid it.

ME is misplaced in PP, it is counter productive

→ Rorty: Stop the debate! For there is no practical benefit from philosophical debates

Is ME irrelevant for NE?

Answering the “so what question”: can ME be practically important and theoretically relevant for NE?

Disagreement about normative matters:

Different kinds of disagreement employ different standards and rules > disagreement about maths \neq disagreement about the best female tennis player

→ Rules of judgments in moral disagreements are set by ME

Different perspectives in ME shape different understandings and dealings for the problem of disagreement > ME shows what is important for deliberation

Conclusions

- (1) Dworkin's argument about ME quietism is refuted
- (2) I answered the "so what question"
- (3) I provided some ground to resist the idea that ME should be methodologically ruled out

Should PP be done without metaethics?

There are some normative problems which benefit from metaethical understanding