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Objectivity

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Synonyms

Absolutism; Moral realism; Objectivism

Definition

Objectivity – the quality of existing independently of a subject's beliefs or desires. Not dependent for its properties on any person's subjective experience. Typically discoverable by publicly available and evaluable means.

Introduction

For purposes of this entry, a domain of facts is objective if those facts both (a) *exist* and (b) are *mind-independent*, meaning they do not depend for their existence on any human beliefs, attitudes, or desires (though for simplification, this article will only refer to beliefs in what follows). Accordingly, moral facts are objective just insofar as they both exist and are mind-independent. Here, the focus will be on how evolutionary considerations bear on the objectivity of morality. This article will not consider other ways in which evolutionary considerations bear on other moral phenomena, including how they might have shaped core moral emotions such as compassion or shame or widespread moral practices such as reciprocation and punishment.

For many philosophers, the objectivity of morality constitutes a "fundamental commitment" (Wong 2014, p. 337); the objective demands of morality are "nonnegotiable" (Joyce 2006, p. 117). Psychologists also discuss morality in objectivist terms, drawing clear distinctions between social or conventional norms on the one hand and moral norms on the other. According to one influential account, moral norms are distinguished in being universalizable and, more importantly, applicable independent of any authority or sanction (Turiel 1983).

Additionally, nearly all philosophers and psychologists also maintain that ordinary folk are committed to objectivism about morality, such that if two people disagree about the moral status of a moral claim – say, whether or not discriminating against someone on the basis of their sexual orientation is morally permissible – at most one of them can be correct (e.g., Smith 1994; Shafer-Landau 2003). The "philosopher's task," according to one prominent account, is to make sense of precisely the puzzling objectivity of morality (Smith 1994). Philosophers predominantly base their claims by canvassing the nature of moral language and debate, by examining ordinary intuitions about the moral domain, and by

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reflecting on the phenomenology or felt experience of moral life (Gill 2009). Psychologists, by contrast, have tested this claim using experimental methods, with several studies showing that individuals do, in fact, show objectivist tendencies (for a review, see Sarkissian 2016).

Evolutionary Arguments and Skepticism About Objectivity

Recently, some researchers have suggested that evolutionary theory can pose a serious threat to the purported objectivity of morality. Specifically, it can undermine the notion that most commonsense and widespread moral beliefs are justified by referring to mind-independent moral facts. Evolutionary explanations of commonsense moral beliefs do not, in themselves, lead us to deny or rule out the existence of mind-independent moral facts. Indeed, this is not the general strategy of such "debunking" explanations (Nichols 2014). Instead, evolutionary explanations are thought to undermine the warrant or justification of these beliefs. They can do so in several ways. Such explanations can provide a complete or convincing account of the causal processes giving rise to the belief in question without, at any point, having to say anything at all concerning whether or not that belief tracks any facts or truths about the world (Joyce 2006). Or, such explanations can show that the psychological processes that generate the belief in question are not the sorts of processes that could plausibly result in true, factual beliefs (Nichols 2014) or argue that whatever ends are supported by a theory of Darwinian natural selection – be they the flourishing of the gene, the individual, or the group – such ends cannot be moral ends (Sommers and Rosenberg 2003).

Regardless of these differences, all such accounts have the same strategy of arguing that the best evolutionary account of the origins of humans' moral faculties and beliefs will refer to their fitness-enhancing properties, which have no bearing on whether or not the beliefs track mind-independent moral facts. Presumably ancestral humans gained adaptive advantages over their rivals by cultivating or maintaining certain moral beliefs about themselves and others – whether in-group or out-group members. The differential reproductive success conferred on ancestral humans by adopting these beliefs would lead to their propagation. Humans inherit these beliefs today as part of their cognitive architecture. However, whatever moral beliefs they have as a result of such a process cannot be justified by claiming that they track mind-independent moral facts.

One widely cited account presents a dilemma for moral realists (Street 2006). If evolutionary forces played a pervasive role in the production and maintenance of moral beliefs, what could be the relation between these evolutionarily shaped beliefs and any mind-independent moral facts? There are two options, neither of which is attractive or acceptable, hence the dilemma. The first horn of the dilemma claims that mind-independent moral facts are not at all related to the evolutionary pressures on moral beliefs. But this implies an implausible general skepticism about the truth of many commonsense ethical claims, even intuitive claims such as that it is right to take care of one's children. This is because even though this judgment seems obviously true – indeed, true in a way that does not require the endorsement of any particular person's beliefs – ancestral humans would have not converged on this belief because it referred to a mind-independent fact. Instead, those who had such beliefs were simply more fit than others. The second horn of the dilemma claims that there is, indeed, some relation between mind-independent moral facts and the evolutionary pressures on moral beliefs. The ancestors of modern humans reaped adaptive advantage precisely by means of tracking independent moral truths. However, this leads to a different, but no less serious, problem: it requires some plausible "tracking" account, and. *any* such account seems otiose. It would be more parsimonious to leave out mind-independent moral facts and just focus on the adaptive links that ancestral humans forged between their circumstances and their responses to those circumstances. The latter account would also have greater explanatory power through its ability to describe how they had beliefs that

contemporary society now regards as false (like the tendency to prefer in-groups to out-groups; Street 2006, p. 134). By contrast, a tracking account fails to easily explain the origin or persistence of such false beliefs.

Joyce (2006, 2016) makes a similar argument, criticizing accounts of moral judgment that attempt to show that evolutionary forces produced in human minds a moral truth-tracking faculty. Joyce focused on the *function* of moral judgment in human beings: could it be to track mind-independent moral facts? Some faculties do appear to be truth-tracking in this sense: mathematical representations seem to track mathematical truth because an organism only derives adaptive advantage from true mathematical judgments and not from false ones. (E.g., a person that judged that $2 + 3 = 6$ would be at a significant disadvantage compared to another that judged that $2 + 3 = 5$). However, as Joyce argues, there is no comparable benefit to making true moral judgments. The moral faculty (such as it is and putting to one side the question of whether such a faculty even exists) does not appear to give its bearers advantage on the basis of its truth-tracking (Joyce 2006). Instead, to the extent that a moral faculty can be given an evolutionary explanation, it appears to have given ancestral humans an advantage in virtue of its other (non-truth-tracking) features, for example, signaling one's sincere commitment to social projects or maintaining one's reputation in the group (c.f. Miller 2007; Nesse 2009). Since one should not expect moral judgments to do anything other than what they were selected for, and since they were not selected for truth-tracking, this provides a plausible reason for doubting that moral judgments are formed by a reliable process.

Many theorists have argued that in the absence of good arguments against the justification of moral beliefs, those beliefs ought to be regarded as justified (Wielenberg 2010; Enoch 2011). However, the arguments above turn the tables on any such account when applied to the moral domain. Any account which claims that there exist moral faculties that in fact track objective moral facts must now present plausible explanations arguing for the existence of such facts and their respective faculties. Given the success of evolutionary accounts to provide explanations for a range of phenomena, the burden of proof shifts to those who wish to defend mind-independent moral objectivism.

Evolution's Contribution to Perceived Moral Objectivity

However, even while maintaining that mind-independent moral facts are a fiction, Joyce (2006) nonetheless speculated that a tendency to see morality in objective terms is an evolutionary adaptation. Evolutionary forces selected for individuals who were highly motivated to act upon fitness-enhancing beliefs, including moral beliefs. Seeing morality as objective (independent of oneself) would be a much stronger motivator to act than seeing morality as mere subjective preference. For example, when one says that a person ought not to steal, one does not take oneself to be merely asserting that it is within the person's set of current desires that she not steal. Even if she does strongly desire to steal and thinks it a great idea, this has no impact on the fact that she *ought not steal*. The challenge for anyone who endorses moral objectivity is to show exactly how such "categorical imperatives" are possible. The standard approach is to show that every agent (or at least every *rational* agent) has some reason to be moral. This article will not be detained with the details of that discussion. The important point is that when one condemns those who commit atrocities such as genocide, coming to learn that the perpetrators are furthering their goals through genocide would not at all mitigate one's condemnation. It does not matter how the perpetrators feel about moral norms; moral norms apply to them *regardless* of what they feel. This seems a pervasive aspect of moral life.

As noted above, some take this objective categoricity to be a "nonnegotiable" part of the moral domain – a central tenet that any theory of morality must explain. Discovering that such a central tenet is false can reveal the discourse to be systematically flawed. If moral discourse is in fact committed to such categorical judgments,

then evolutionary debunking arguments (as discussed above) will imply moral skepticism. This leaves a question: Why do some philosophers take objectivity to be such a central part of moral discourse and practice to begin with? Why does it seem to be a feature of morality that moral facts exist? Whence comes the perception that morality is mind-independent in the first place?

Here, it may be instructive to separate two issues, following Edouard Machery and Ron Mallon (2010). The first concerns why one would be expected to adopt norms of behavior that, in general, come with costs and may serve to stifle or frustrate some of one's current desires. Call this "normative cognition," involving such concepts as "should" or "ought" or "ought not." It is rather uncontroversial that humans have evolved to pick up on prevailing norms in their groups (whether these norms are implicit/informal or explicit/formal), assimilate or internalize them, and feel motivated to adhere to them. Normative cognition also includes expectations that others comply with the same norms, along with a desire to sanction or punish those who do not. Finally, normative cognition can be accompanied with feelings of guilt and shame if individuals fail to adhere to norms that they have come to adopt or endorse. Indeed, people are, in general, adept at reasoning about norms (Cosmides and Tooby 2005).

However, any such account of normative cognition will not require anything like the sort of mind independence that moral objectivism entails. Normative cognition can include esthetic matters (e.g., how one ought to dress), prudential matters (e.g., how one ought to climb the mountain), or matters of propriety (e.g., how one ought to lay the dinner table). These all seem to depend, in some way, on the existence of contingent motivations in individuals to adopt them; *if* one wants to appear beautiful or be prudent or adhere to etiquette, then one ought to adopt certain norms of behavior. But, as just noted, moral norms seem to be different from these norms. Moral norms apply regardless of a person's contingent preferences or desires. How can one, then, explain the emergence of distinctively moral norms of this objective kind?

Some have speculated that *moral* cognition – that is, a form of cognition that sees certain norms as mind-independent, factual, inescapable, and nonnegotiable – was an evolutionary adaptation of our species to spur us to prosociality (Joyce 2006). Joyce (2006), for example, speculated that even though mind-independent moral facts are entirely fictional, it would have been beneficial for our species to have evolved a tendency to think they exist. A tendency to see the world as filled with such mind-independent moral facts would be a much stronger motivator to act prosocially. Thus, humans project objective moral facts into the world through our emotional reactions to morally relevant events. Goodness and badness, virtue and vice – these are not properties that exist in the world to be perceived by the mind. Instead, the mind *projects* these values into the world, which then motivates individuals to act according to moral norms. Thus, evolution selects for a capacity to objectify morality even while moral facts do not exist. This account, while speculative, merits further research.

Responses to Evolutionary Debunking

Those who aim to secure objectivity in ethics have responded to evolutionary debunking arguments in a number of different ways. On the one hand, some have offered *third-factor accounts* that purport to show that moral judgments do track moral facts even though they were not selected for this purpose. On the other hand, some have argued that that the standards of reliability being invoked in debunking arguments are too strong; if they were adopted for other areas of common knowledge, this would lead to an untenable radical skepticism. These two approaches constitute well-developed contributions to the debate about the implications of evolution for moral objectivity, and they will be considered in turn.

Third-Factor Accounts

The most prominent response to evolutionary critiques of moral objectivity involves arguing that

moral judgments do track real moral facts. However, they do so as a by-product of some other epistemically respectable cognitive faculty. The strategy is straightforward: if a plausible evolutionary story can be told about how humans came to track objective moral facts in spite of the adaptive pressures which influenced ancestral humans' moral judgments, this might secure the reality of objective moral facts and maintain their objectivity at the same time. Different proponents of this type of response have different capacities in mind when they propose such "third-factor" accounts – accounts about some third factor that humans evolved to track that happens to also align with moral facts.

Enoch (2010) puts forward a quintessential third-factor account, which starts from the premise that survival is (on balance) a good thing. The advantage of such a starting point is that it is fairly obvious that adaptive pressures on ancestral humans did tend to favor their survival. He then argues that by making choices that assured their own survival – a good thing (on balance) – ancestral humans were in fact tracking moral facts indirectly. They developed the judgments they did because those judgments were adaptively advantageous, and it just so happened that such those judgments tracked moral facts as a by-product. Put another way, the capacity to track moral facts was not directly "selected for" by adaptive pressures but rather was merely "selected," because it was not adaptively advantageous to separate it from other faculties that were themselves selected for by adaptive pressures. It may be an accident that such an adaptation arose, but once it did, it conferred on ancestral humans a reliable way of making objective moral judgments. The capacity to perceive moral facts might be like the capacity to perceive stars (Huemer 2005); having the capacity to see stars did not itself give early humans any adaptive advantage but rather came about from other capacities that did confer such adaptive advantage. Other candidates for such third factors include the badness of pain (Skarsaune 2011), the importance of having personal boundaries that others cannot transgress (Wielenberg 2010), the goodness of altruism (de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2012), cooperating with others (Brosnan 2011), or enhancing society's ability to meet its needs (Copp 2008). Each of these appeals to capacities or tendencies which enjoy better evolutionary pedigree than any purported faculty of moral judgment.

Nonetheless, Street (2006) objects to third-factor accounts on the grounds that these accounts are themselves vulnerable to a Darwinian dilemma: whatever capacity tracks this third factor must itself have been selected for as a result of adaptive pressures on ancestral humans. The question, then, is what the relation would obtain between objective moral facts and the evolution of this capacity. If there is no relation, Street says, this looks like an implausible and convenient coincidence. If there is some relation, then the realist must specify what that relation is. But, she argues, the capacity that allowed early humans to (indirectly) track moral truth would have to be fairly specialized and complex. It is implausible to think that such a specialized and complex capacity could have arisen as a by-product of some other cognitive capacity (Street 2006).

Proponents of third-factor responses generally deny the claim that grasping moral facts really requires a complex or specialized capacity in the first place. For instance, de Lazari-Radek and Singer (2012) argue that this capacity simply springs from our ability to reason in general, which is the same capacity involved in grasping other types of *a* priori truth (like truths of mathematics; see also FitzPatrick 2014). Similarly, the capacity to track facts about pain is not specialized or problematically complex (Skarsaune 2011). (For a more general defense of third-factor accounts, see Berker 2014.) If the capacity is suitably general, this allows the third-factor proponent to say that the relation between moral truths and the capacity which tracks them are unproblematic: humans track moral truths by their capacity to reason, and this capacity has an excellent evolutionary pedigree.

Finally, it should be noted that all third-factor responses invoke a moral assumption from the start, whether it be the goodness of survival, the

badness of pain, or any of the other candidates. Thus, another prominent objection to third-factor responses targets the legitimacy of this move. Street argues that any such assumption is "trivially question-begging," because it simply assumes the reliability of our moral judgments, but those are the very judgements which the evolutionary critique is meant to undermine (Street 2008, pp. 216–217). This brings us to the second major response to evolutionary critiques: the overgeneralization response.

The Overgeneralization Response

The second response to evolutionary critiques of moral objectivity seeks to undermine the epistemic standards implicit in these critiques. This approach tries to show that if these standards were adopted universally, they would imply radical skepticism. This has also been dubbed "the containment problem" for evolutionary debunking arguments (Millhouse et al. 2016). In fact, some authors argue that the source of doubt implicit in these evolutionary critiques does not derive from evolution at all but rather an unjustified suspicion about the genealogy or causal history of any source of knowledge.

Evolutionary critiques of moral objectivity largely trade on a suspicion about the genealogy of certain beliefs, but the epistemic standards that lie behind this suspicion are not often well articulated. As was covered above, the problem introduced by evolution seems to be that adaptive pressures on the moral judgments of ancestral humans were not tracking mind-independent moral facts, and this seems to undermine their reliability. But one can further ask exactly what about this lack of truth tracking seems to undermine the objectivity of moral judgments. One possible thought is that if judgments are not tracking mind-independent moral facts, this means there is no good reason to believe they are true. In general, if one has no good reason to believe that a belief is true, one ought not to maintain it (Vavova 2014).

Though this standard looks quite reasonable at first glance, proponents of the overgeneralization response think it goes too far. Crucially, it depends on whether a "good" reason is one that must come from outside the realm of moral judgments themselves. Street (2008) argues that "third-factor" accounts are trivially question-begging, because they rely on moral beliefs in the first place, which are themselves questionable on evolutionary grounds. However, proponents of the overgeneralization response think this argument implies far too exacting a standard. The reason is that if a "good" reason is one that must be independent of *all* moral judgments, a similar argument can be made about other sources of knowledge, for example, sense perception. Most people believe they are justified in believing the deliverances of their immediate sense perception, at least for medium-sized objects in conditions of sobriety and good lighting. But if they were asked to justify this judgment without reference to any beliefs gained from sense perception itself, they would come up empty-handed (Vavova 2014; Shafer 2012). This constitutes a clear reductio ad absurdum: if evolutionary critiques of moral objectivity rely on an epistemic standard that would also undermine perceptual beliefs, this is a good reason not to accept that standard and therefore also a good reason not to accept the critiques.

At this point, the proponent of an evolutionary debunking argument might grant that some judgments in the one domain can justify other judgments in the same domain (whether it be perceptual or moral). Relaxing epistemic standards in this way, however, risks allowing third-factor accounts a metaphorical foot in the door. If one is allowed to assume that one's judgments about the objective badness of pain or the objective goodness of survival are justified (despite the adaptive pressures which caused early humans to make such judgments), many of one's more substantive judgments can be justified on the basis of these judgments (Vavova 2014).

On a similar basis, some proponents of this response argue that evolutionary considerations can only fail to *vindicate* moral judgments but that they are not capable of producing any independent *skepticism* about the reliability of moral judgments (Brosnan 2011; FitzPatrick 2014; White 2010). This can be shown by imagining a situation of total ignorance of the source

of moral judgments. If one has no knowledge of evolution's influence on one's judgments, would this in any way improve the justification of one's moral beliefs? The answer seems to be "no." If total ignorance of the origins of one's moral beliefs does not improve one's epistemic lot, it is unclear how the truth of evolution's impact on one's beliefs could make it any worse, short of showing that these judgments are actually "anti-reliable." All that evolutionary debunking arguments can show is that moral judgments are made in a way that is independent of their truth, but this does not in itself imply that they are unreliable (see Brosnan 2011; White 2010).

A related point concerns the metaethical presuppositions inherent in evolutionary debunking arguments. In order to motivate the case against objectivism, these arguments take it to be the case that moral judgment is not truth-tracking. But in order to fail to be truth-tracking, there must be some truth to track in the first place. After all, if it turns out that nonobjectivist accounts of moral facts and concepts are correct, and these things depend in some way on human attitudes, it is not clear how evolutionary influences might undermine them (Kahane 2011).

As was covered in the section on "third factor" accounts above, determining the burden of proof in this disagreement is quite difficult. Joyce (2016) claims that given the fact that there is good reason to believe that humans' faculty of moral judgment was not selected for tracking mind-independent moral facts, the burden rests on the realist who wants to claim that it does so. But if the overgeneralization critique of this argument is correct, it is not clear that the burden of proof rests on the realist after all. It would seem that the proponent of an evolutionary critique must show how evolution's influences on moral judgments render them not just *independent* of moral facts but also *unreliable*. The exact connection between these two claims constitutes an area of unfolding debate. Given the implications for a claim that many psychologists and philosophers take quite seriously – the objectivity of morality – quite a lot hangs in the balance.

Conclusion

The relation between moral objectivity and evolution is complex, depending on factors such as the function of moral judgment, what one takes moral judgment to be tracking, and the epistemic standard implicit in our evaluation of moral judgment. Though many philosophers, psychologists, and ordinary people perceive objectivity to be an integral part of morality, there is quite a healthy debate about whether moral objectivity can withstand an evolutionary account of human history. Though there is not yet a consensus, this article has laid out the main fault lines between proponents of evolutionary skepticism and their realist opponents.

Cross-References

- ▶ Adaptations Designed to Deliver Benefits
- ▶ Altruism
- ▶ Altruism Norms
- ▶ Benefit Group Relative to Other Groups
- ▶ Benefits Conferred to Group
- ▶ Biological Function
- ▶ Charitable Giving
- ▶ Cheater Detection
- ▶ Cross-Cultural Universality
- ▶ Cross-Cultural Variation
- ▶ Cultural Differences
- ▶ Cultural Evolution
- ▶ Cultural Universality
- ▶ Cultural Universals
- ▶ Egoistic Vs. Prosocial
- ▶ Evolution of Culture
- ▶ Evolution of Morality
- ▶ Evolutionary Cultural Psychology
- ▶ Group Processes: Us Vs. Them
- ▶ Group Selection
- ▶ Indirect Benefits in Group
- ▶ Indirect Benefits of Altruism
- ▶ Intrinsic Value of Life
- ▶ Moral Development
- ▶ Moral Instincts
- ▶ Moral Instincts and Morality
- ▶ Morality
- ▶ Morality is Cooperation

- ▶ Naturalism (Methods)
- ▶ Naturalistic Fallacy, The
- ▶ Neuroethics
- ▶ Norms
- ▶ Observation of Altruism
- ▶ Problem of Altruism
- ▶ Products of Evolution
- ▶ Reciprocal Altruism
- ▶ Selection Pressure

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