

Knowing right from wrong

Reason, Relativism, and Reality

Spring 2005

Two kinds of moral claim

- A *first* order claim is a claim about what we ought morally speaking to do, e.g. "Kicking cats is deplorable and to be avoided"
- Attempts to make sense of first-order claims are second order or *metaethical*.
 - Do first order moral claims have truth-values? Are they evaluable as true or false?
 - Or are they just fancy ways of expressing disapproval?
 - If the former, how do tell which ones are true?
 - If the latter, why should anyone listen to them?
- These are all second order questions.

Harman and Thomson

- Their discussion is entirely at the second or "meta" level. They are not making any particular moral recommendations.
- Thomson's concern to begin with is the knowability of (first-order) claims.
- Harman's concern is less with knowability than with truth.

Moral objectivity

Moral Assessment Thesis Moral assessment is pointless unless it is possible to find out about some moral sentences that they are true.

Moral Objectivity It is possible to find out that moral sentences are true.

Moral Skepticism No it isn't.

Ordinarily we are moral objectivists. But there are plausible-seeming arguments for skepticism.

Traditional skeptical argument

A sentence is factual/moral if it speaks to what *is* the case/what *should* be the case.

- 1) Moral sentences are not entailed by factual sentences.
- 2) The only way to find out that a moral sentence is true is by inferring it from factual sentences.
- 3) This counts as "finding out" the moral sentence is true only if the factual premises entail it.
- 4) One can't find out that a moral sentence is true.

This generalizes!!

Skeptical Toolkit

- (1) You can't establish C-type conclusions except by inference from K-type premises.

K-type premises	C-type conclusions
past and present	future
perceptual appearances	external objects
others' behavior	other minds

- (2) But K-type premises don't entail C-type conclusions!
- (3) An inference is no good unless premises entail conclusions.
- (4) So C-type conclusions are unknowable

Where does this leave us?

- If the argument works, lack of moral knowledge is the least of our problems!
- So we are committed to thinking it doesn't work.
- Three premises: (1) The only way to know C-sentences is by inference from K-sentences. (2) K-sentences don't entail C-sentences; (3) The inference is no good unless premises entail conclusion.
- Which of (1)-(3) should we reject?

Responses

- (1) One knows C-sentences directly -- not by inference from K-sentences. "I *see* that this is a chair," "I see they are behaving atrociously." (Direct realism, intuitionism)
- (2) K-sentences do too entail C-sentences. "This is a chair" is *equivalent* to a statement about experience. "Cat-kicking is wrong" is equivalent to a statement about the pain it causes. (Phenomenalism, reductionism)
- (3) Premises can support a conclusion even if they do not entail that conclusion. The best explanation of chair experiences is a chair. The pain that cat-kicking causes gives us good reason to think it is wrong. (Scientific realism, standard-issue moral realism)