

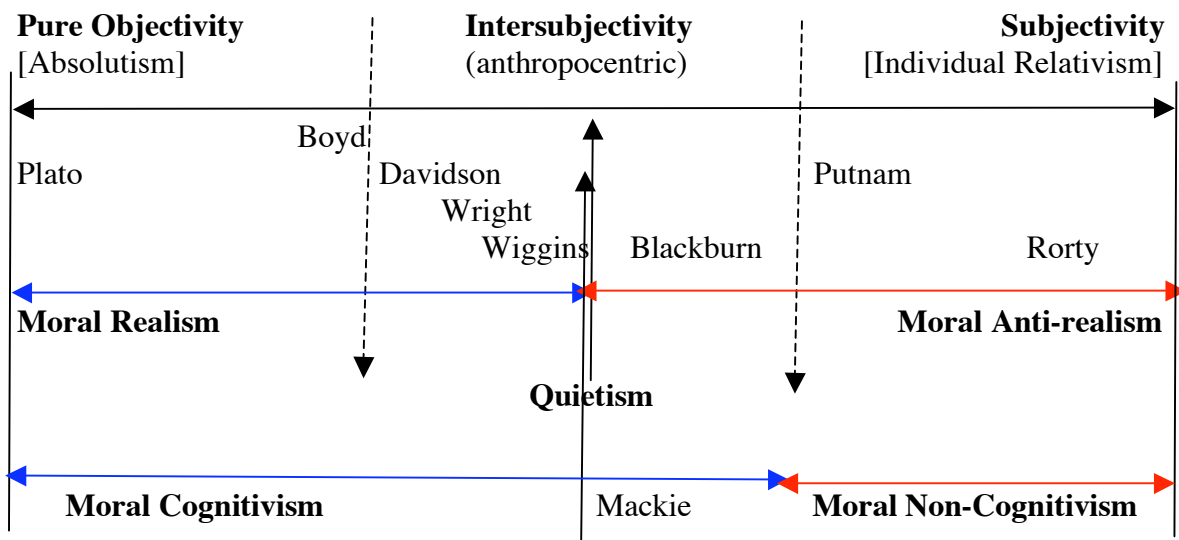
PHIL 470: Seminar: Metaphysics & Epistemology
Truth and Reality

Handout (26)

Richard Boyd: How to Be a Moral Realist

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§ **A Spectrum of Views** (My own reading – there might be different interpretations: let's discuss this in class)





Q: Does Dummett's *principle of bivalence* still work here as the dividing criterion?

§ **Boyd's Main Goal:**

___ The aim of this paper is not to establish moral realism but merely to establish its plausibility and to offer a general framework within which further defenses of moral realism might be understood.

___ What I want to do is to explore the ways in which recent development in realist philosophy of science, together with related "naturalistic" developments in epistemology and philosophy of language, can be employed in the articulation and defense of moral realism.

§ Fact vs. Value: Scientific Realism vs. Moral Realism

Scientific Realism	Moral Realism
The doctrine that scientific theories should be understood as putative descriptions of real phenomena, that ordinary scientific methods continue a reliable procedure for obtaining and improving (approximate) knowledge of the real phenomena which scientific theories describe, and that the reality described by scientific theories is largely independent of our theorizing.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Moral statements are the sorts of statements which are (or which express propositions which are) true or false, or approximately true or false. 2. The truth or falsity of moral statements is largely independent of our moral opinions, theories, etc. 3. Ordinary canons of moral reasoning – together with ordinary canons of scientific and everyday factual reasoning – constitute, under many circumstances at least, a reliable method for obtaining and improving (approximate) moral knowledge.
 Fact	 Value

* Scientific methods and theories appear to have properties – objectivity, value-neutrality, empirical testability, which are either absent altogether or, at any rate, much less significant in the case of moral beliefs and the procedure by which we form and criticize them. These differences make the methods of science seem apt for the *discovery* of facts while the ‘methods’ of moral reasoning seem, at best, to be appropriate for the rationalization, articulation, and application of pre-existing social conventions or individual preferences.

Boyd’s defense strategy: **to take away the fact/value dichotomy**

1. Show that our scientific beliefs and methods actually possess many of the features which form the core of our current picture of moral beliefs and methods of moral reasoning.
2. Show that moral beliefs and methods are much more like our current conception of scientific beliefs and methods than we now think.

§ Several Challenges to Moral Realism

1. In moral reasoning, moral intuitions play the same role which observations do in science. Doesn’t the role of moral intuitions in moral reasoning call out for a ‘constructivist’ meta-ethics?

2. Moral reasoning begins with moral presuppositions, general as well as particular, and proceeds by negotiating between conflicting presuppositions. How could any procedure so presupposition-dependent be a *discovery* procedure rather than a constructive procedure?
3. If moral reasoning is reasoning about objective moral facts, then what explains our lack of *progress* in ethics and the persistence of cultural variability in moral beliefs?
4. Our experience in science seems to be that hard scientific questions are only *temporarily* rather than permanently unanswerable. Permanent disagreement seems to be very rare indeed. Hard ethical questions, however, seem often to be permanent rather than temporary.
5. If goodness would be a natural property, then isn't moral realism committed to the extremely implausible claim that moral terms like 'good' possess naturalistic definitions?
6. If moral judgments are merely factual judgments, then the relation of moral judgments to motivation and rationality must be the same. It would be possible in principle for someone, or some thinking thing, to be entirely rational while finding moral judgments motivationally neutral and irrelevant to choices of action. How can the moral realist account for the particularly close connection between moral judgments and judgments about what to do?
7. People's moral concepts differ profoundly. How can it be maintained that our radically different concepts of 'good' are really concepts of one and the same property?

§ Features of Scientific theories

- (1) The methodology is theory-dependent.**
- (2) Currently accepted theories are relevantly approximately true.**
- (3) The scientific methodology operates to produce a subsequent dialectical improvement both in our knowledge and in our methodology itself.**
- (4) On balance, theoretical 'presuppositions' play neither a destructive nor a conventionalistic role in scientific methodology. They are essential to its reliability.**
- (5) Tacit or intuitive judgments in science are reliable because they are grounded in a theoretical tradition which is, as a matter of contingent empirical fact, relevantly approximately true.**
- (6) Many scientific definitions are "homeostatic property-cluster definitions." Bivalence sometimes fails for statements which refer to complex homeostatic phenomena.**

§ Homeostatic property-cluster definitions

Recent semantic theories in the ordinary language tradition have examined the possibility of definitions which do not provide necessary and sufficient conditions.

Some terms have definitions which are provided by a collection of properties such that the possession of an adequate number of these properties is sufficient for falling within the extension of the term.

Our concepts of such kinds are “open textured” so that there is some indeterminacy in extension *legitimately* associated with property-cluster or criterial attribute definitions. The ‘imprecision’ or ‘vagueness’ of such definitions is seen as a perfectly appropriately feature of ordinary linguistic usage.

(e.g. ‘hill’, ‘dune’, ‘pile’, ‘heap’, etc.)

In particular, the indeterminacy in extension of such natural definitions could not be remedied without rendering the definitions unnatural in the sense of being scientifically misleading.

[homeostasis]:

___ There is a family F of properties which are ‘contingently clustered’ in nature in the sense that they co-occur in an important number of cases. Their co-occurrence is not, at least typically, a statistical artifact, but rather the result of what may be metaphorically described as a *homeostasis*. The homeostatic clustering of the properties in F is causally important. There is a kind term *t* which is applied to things in which the homeostatic clustering of most of the properties in F occurs.

The paradigm cases of natural kinds – biological species – are examples of homeostatic cluster kinds in this sense. The appropriateness of any particular biological species for induction and explanation in biology depends upon the *imperfectly* shared and homeostatically related morphological, physiological, and behavioral features which characterize its members.

It follows that a consistently developed scientific realism *predicts* indeterminacy for those natural kind or property terms which refer to complex phenomena: such indeterminacy is a necessary consequence of “cutting the world at its joints.”

Thus consistently developed scientific realism *predicts* that there will be some features of bivalence for statements which refer to complex homeostatic phenomena. Precision in describing indeterminate or ‘borderline’ cases of homeostatic cluster kinds consists not in the introduction of artificial precision in the definitions of such kinds but rather in a detailed description of the ways in which the indeterminate cases are like and unlike typical members of the kind.

§ How to be a moral realist

1. Differences in conception or in working definitions need not indicate the absence of shared causally fixed referents for moral terms.
2. The moral realist may choose to agree that goodness is probably a physical property but deny that it has any analytic definition whatsoever.
3. The moral realist might reply that the dialectical interplay of observations, theory, and methodology which constitutes the *discovery* procedure for scientific inquiry just is the method of reflective equilibrium, so that the prevalence of that method in moral reasoning cannot *by itself* dictate a non-realist conception of morals.
4. The role of culturally transmitted presuppositions in reasoning does not necessitate a constructivist (or non-cognitivist) rather than a realist analysis of the subject matter.
5. Finally, if the moral realist is inclined to accept that antirealist claim that the existence of hard cases in ethics provides a reason to doubt that there is a moral fact of the matter which determines the answer in such cases, then the scientific realist's conclusion that bivalence fails for some statements involving homeostatic cluster kind terms might permit the moral realist to reason that similar failures of bivalence for some ethical statements need not be fatal to moral realism.

§ The Moral Realist's Conception of Morals: Homeostatic Consequentialism

1. There are a number of important human goods, things which satisfy important human needs. Some of these needs are physical or medical. Others are psychological or social – such as the need for love and friendship, the need to engage in cooperative efforts, the need to exercise control over one's own life, the need for intellectual and artistic appreciations and expression, the need for physical recreation, etc.
2. Under a wide variety of circumstances these human goods are homeostatically clustered.
3. Moral goodness is defined by this cluster of goods and the homeostatic mechanisms which unify them.
4. The improvement of the psychological and social mechanisms of homeostasis themselves is a moral good whose successful pursuit tends to further mitigate conflicts between various individual goods.
5. Much of the knowledge about fundamental human goods is genuinely *experimental* knowledge and the relevant experiments are (“naturally” occurring)

- political and social experiments whose occurrence and whose interpretation depends both on 'external' factors and upon the current state of our moral understanding. (e.g. Only since the establishment of the first socialist societies are we even beginning to obtain the data necessary to assess the role of egalitarian social practices in fostering the good.)
6. **Moral goodness is a real property of action, policies, states of affairs, etc., and our moral judgments are, often enough, reflections of the truths about the good.**
 7. The theory dependence of observations and their interpretation is simply one aspect of the pervasive theory dependence of methodology in science which the scientific realist cheerfully acknowledges.
 8. Moral intuitions are simply one cognitive manifestations of our moral understanding, just as physical intuitions are a cognitive manifestation of physicists' understanding of their subject matter.
 9. From the point of view either of evolutionary theory or of basic human psychology it is hardly accidental that we are able to recognize many of our own and others' fundamental needs.
 10. It is by no means required that two cultural traditions have started with initial views which approximate the truth to the same extent or along the same dimensions, nor is it required that they have been subjected to the same sorts of social distortion, nor that they have embodied the same sorts of naturally occurring social experimentation. It would thus be totally unsurprising that if two such traditions of moral inquiry should have, about some important moral questions, reached conclusions so divergent that no resolution of their disagreement will be possible within the theoretical and methodological framework which the two traditions *currently* have in common, even though these issues may possess objective answers eventually discoverable from within either tradition or from within a broader tradition which incorporates insights from both.

Q: Has Boyd successfully dismissed cultural relativism?

Conclusion:

Homeostatic consequentialism represents the common grain of truth in all normative theories.