

The indeterminacy of morality

Sandy Berkovski

University of Oxford

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Schiffer on morality

Master argument

Refining the argument

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The place of virtue

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The explanatory role of virtue

Summary

Schiffer's argument

Claim

Moral realism is false.

Master Argument

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2. There are no such moral principles.
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▶ [Go to Deep justification](#)

‘There are no a priori moral principles’

Superficial justification (by moral diversity)

For any statement t knowable a priori, if there are two theorists present in the same epistemic situation, then they must agree on the truth-value of t . But for any **moral** statement q it is possible to find two theorists present in the same epistemic situation, who would disagree on the truth-value of q . Hence, no moral statement is knowable a priori. [▶ Skip the details](#)

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Deep justification (by the form of a priori knowledge)

If moral knowledge is a priori, then there must be a viable explanation of how it is possible *in general*. There are several ways to give such an explanation, but none of them is good. Therefore, moral knowledge is not a priori. (Since it is not empirical either, there is simply no moral knowledge.)

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The goal of moral thought is not in the explanations of phenomena, but rather in the grounds for action. The minimal condition for realising this goal is in determining whether the given action is moral or immoral.

Decision problem

For every morally significant action K , find a finite routine classifying K either as moral or immoral.

So: if there are determinate moral propositions knowable a priori, moral realists should be able to show the *actual* way of knowing them.

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Intuitionism: The idea

A true story

When I was six years old, I witnessed how an older boy burned a squirrel alive. He attached it to the trunk of a tree and burned different parts one after another. The animal was screaming. And I remember vividly how immediate and strong was realisation that such a thing should not be done, that it was wrong, not merely disgusting.

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Problems with intuitionism

- ▶ No explanation of intuitive knowledge (when not equated with analytic knowledge)
- ▶ Internal instability: no fixed rule for different cases
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Axiomatic realism: The idea

Start with a surveyable collection of principles regulating most serious elements of moral life. These primary principles are then interpreted to generate a much larger collection of propositions pertaining to every area of moral life. Within the second paradigm, moral law is treated very much like an axiomatic system. Its axioms are laid out in advance and remain indisputable. A major effort is invested in accommodating them to the vastly diverse moral phenomena.

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Some monotheist religions.

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Axiomatic realism: Some aspects

- ▶ Offers *transparent* reasons for action
- ▶ First principles are indisputable (rest upon revelation or intuition)
- ▶ First principles are few in number (since they have to be surveyable).
- ▶ First principles are laid down in a particular epoch and are limited by the conceptual setting of that epoch.
- ▶ First principles address only the most central areas of moral conduct.

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Can axiomatic realism cope with the Decision problem?

Beyond computational complexity

Even if some genius is able to convince his opponent in the relevant derivations of the multitude of moral propositions from first principles, damage will have been done. These derivations, taking the more and more complicated form, will underscore the distance between first principles and derived propositions. The sceptic is likely to suspect some trickery; he is likely to question the authority of first principles and the status of inferential machinery allowing derivations of those many propositions from a meagre stock of first principles. And, of course, the longer and the more indirect a derivation is, the less confidence one would have in it.

Appeal to virtues

The virtue-based model of moral justification is most attractive when there is no easy way of identifying the normative properties of the given action. A virtuous person:

- ▶ internalises the first principles (along with the more closely related moral propositions)
- ▶ decisions in difficult cases guided by virtuous habit, character traits
- ▶ not a super-computer, or a super-thinker
- ▶ comes up 'naturally' with the morally correct decisions in particular instances.

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Virtues: ethical or epistemic?

If **ethical**, then moral realism is reduced to the position of virtue ethics. At some level they remain incompatible:

The virtue-ethical approach sees moral actions as a result of an *ethical* decision. For the axiomatic realist, the initial frame of reference is given by first principles. Moral action is being taken on the basis of transparent, explicit reasons, and it is to be evaluated on the basis of similarly explicit reasons.

If **epistemic**, the task of making a morally correct decision is conceptually no different from making a correct decision in any other area. The difference resides in the nature of first principles, and not in the dispositions of the agents.

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Chess analogy

Often a grandmaster makes a string of winning moves:

- ▶ Not on the basis of an exceptionally fast computation: he cannot supply a proof why this or that move is winning.
- ▶ Nor at random: we can legitimately say that the he *knows* that such-and-such move is a winning one.
- ▶ No a priori chess intuition.

Therefore: even lacking a proof routine, the grandmaster knows that such-and-such move is winning *because* he is a grandmaster (compare to the case of a novice).

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The explanatory role of virtue: chess

No disengagement from a proof-based justification:

- ▶ The identity of the player does not itself **classify** a move as winning or losing.
- ▶ The ultimate, conceptual justification of the move comes from considering various scenarios in great detail.
- ▶ The identity of the player may only provide a **recipe** for discovering a correct decision and for classifying the epistemic state of the player.
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- ▶ Another challenge is in providing sufficient grounds for action (moral theory as a basis of legal practice).
- ▶ A virtue-based approach may provide a way of knowing moral truths *given* that the first principles are accepted.
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