The Method of Moral Hypothesis

Dissertation Abstract

One of the major developments in the last forty years in analytic ethics has been a resurgence of interest in normative ethics—substantive, first-order questions of right and wrong; and its sister project, moral theory—the attempt to discover general ethical principles, and to weld these principles into a coherent, systematic whole. The two projects are united by a familiar approach, which could indeed be called the ‘main method’ of normative ethics: our answers to these first-order questions—our ‘moral intuitions’—can only be justified to the extent that they are capturable by general principles; and these intuitions are, conversely, treated as evidence for these principles. Thus normative ethics becomes the search for such principles; and the abandonment, however reluctant, of the refractory moral judgments. Moral theory is this method writ large.

The aim of my dissertation is to indict this method itself. My central contention is that, however tempting it may be, the project reflects a radical mistake, a misunderstanding of moral knowledge and of the dialectics of moral argument. By treating moral intuitions as evidence, and general moral principles as, in effect, hypotheses about moral reality, the project invites moral skepticism; runs afoul of our ordinary practice of justification; and implies a story about how we gain moral knowledge from others which is false to our experience. Moral philosophers have been seduced, I contend, by an over-emphasis on considerations of simplicity and elegance, and unsound analogies with scientific theorizing.

The charge against the moral theory project is prosecuted in the dissertation by way of several, interconnected arguments. The first concerns moral knowledge itself. Here I argue that a kind of ‘etiological skepticism’ about the normative, which has recently received attention from moral philosophers, derives its force from a misunderstanding of ethical knowledge precisely parallel to that which is presupposed by the moral theory project. Skepticism of this sort about the normative realm depends on treating moral knowledge as a species of would-be empirical knowledge: the ‘moral facts’ are understood as items for which we can gain a kind of indirect evidential awareness. I argue that it is this—optional—metaphysical picture that allows arguments for ‘etiological’ skepticisms to go through. For, if the justification of our moral claims has the form of indirect evidence, then a kind of mistake becomes possible which we cannot rule out: the kind of mistake that is, in general, ruled out by direct confrontation with the facts. And this is something which we cannot have, in any ordinary sense, if, as many moral realists have held, the moral facts are causally inert. My conclusion in the first place is that there is a form of ‘realism’ about ethics that can resist etiological challenges—a full-blown cognitivism that allows for a robust sense of being wrong about matters of ethical fact; and in the second, that accepting this form of realism, and its attendant moral epistemology, compels us to reject the picture of justification that is presupposed by the moral theory project.

Similar considerations are raised by the topic I explore next: the question of whether moral testimony can transmit moral knowledge. Here I argue that pessimists about moral testimony are correct: there is something—moral knowledge or perhaps a kind of ‘moral understanding’—that
cannot be passed on by testimony. A plausible assumption is that moral knowledge involves a kind of conceptual knowledge—namely, competent use of certain ‘thick’ moral terms like ‘cruel’ and ‘kind’. But mere testimony cannot pass on moral knowledge because it is not guaranteed to transmit this kind of conceptual ‘know-how’. Moreover, I argue, the doubts raised about moral knowledge by testimony carry over to the theory project. The kinds of grounds that support accepting testimony are the same sorts of grounds that support accepting a moral hypothesis: grounds that make it likely that the moral claim is true. In each case, these grounds are insufficient to deliver moral knowledge.

Next, I aim to undercut one of the central motivations for the theory project: the idea that the justification of our actions must go by way of reference to general moral principles. Taking ‘pragmatist’ theories of explanation, and particularly action explanation, as a departure point, I argue that it is a mistake to suppose that each ethical claim must have some one, canonical justification. The justification of ethical claims is, on the contrary, always relative to some audience, and in particular to the knowledge and interests of one’s interlocutor. What emerges is a kind of pragmatist, or contextualist, picture of ethical justification. There is no reason, then, to suppose that successful moral justification requires reference to general moral principles. Indeed, given the apparently limitless number of fronts on which an action can be queried, there is no reason to suppose that there are any general moral principles at all.

What follows is a critical examination of the apparent attractions of the moral theory project—why it has remained so seductive. I argue that the project draws its counterfeit plausibility in part from its resemblance to a form of reasoning which is both common and innocent: being brought to see, in the light of certain considerations, some action as a case of something—a case of cruelty, say, or of greed. Having been brought to see things this way, one’s verdict will now be different. The theory project, in its illicit form, proceeds by a method which is superficially similar but, I argue, in a critical respect quite different: it asks us to suspend our initial verdict because it fails to fit some pattern, some general rule—even where all we have to recommend this rule is its generalizing power; and even where the considerations raised fail to effect a change in spontaneous judgment. I argue that this form of reasoning is deeply suspect—not only as a method of belief revision, but as a technique for systematizing our moral judgments. My conclusion is that the completed project could amount, at best, to an historical curiosity, without normative relevance; and that this fact robs the project of its apparent interest. These results have serious implications for the methods of normative ethics: it is illicit—a form of bad faith, in fact—for the traditional moral theorist to argue for moral principles which have consequences that she, not only concedes to be controversial, but could not herself spontaneously avow. The negative point could be summed up in the slogan: “In normative ethics, we don’t bite bullets.”

Does that mean that the whole project of normative ethics must go by the board? No; but in order to avoid the problems discussed above, that project will have to look quite different; the dominant picture of moral epistemology will have to be dropped. But there remains a successor picture which not only avoids the skepticism which threatens the traditional model, but can claim to be a form of robust realism about the moral realm. Nevertheless, this successor implies a very different model for doing normative ethics: its goal must be to produce new, spontaneous moral verdicts, or to alter existing ones; to bring about conversion, or achieve moral reform—and not to produce elegant systems.