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[18] Evolution and Ethics

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0. Outline

1. Morality debunked?

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- Previous lecture:
    - Outline of 3 possible ways to bring evolutionary theory to bear on ethics:

        (i) explanatory project,

        (ii) normative ethics project,

        (iii) metaethics project.

    - Discussion of (i) and in particular of the power of evolutionary theory to account for the emergence of altruistic behaviour.
- In this lecture: brief discussion of (iii) and more specifically, of the repercussions of the putative success of (i) wrt that project.
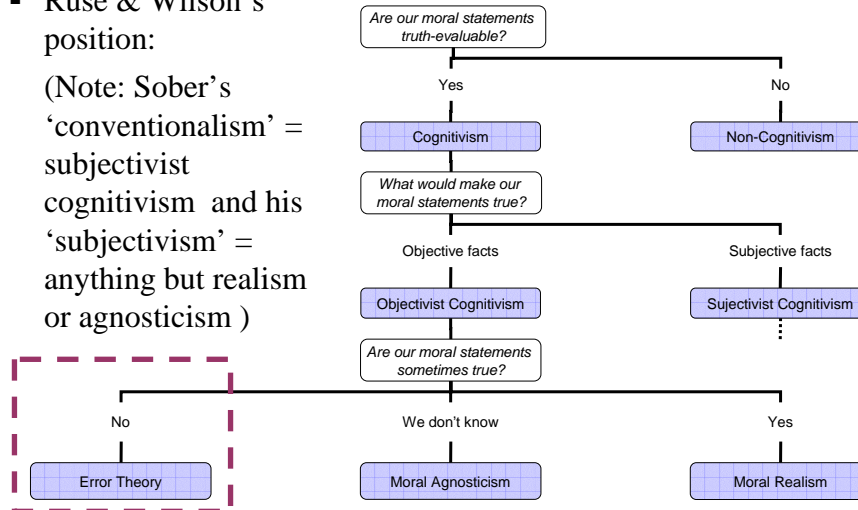
1. Morality debunked?

- According to Ruse [1991:506] (see also Ruse & Wilson [1994]):

    'Is it not the case that sometimes, when one has given a causal explanation of certain beliefs, one can see that the beliefs, themselves, neither have a foundation nor could ever have such a foundation? At least, so argues today's evolutionary ethicist. Once we see that our moral beliefs are simply and adaptation put in place by natural selection, in order to further our reproductive ends, that is an end to it. Morality is no more than a collective illusion fobbed on us by our genes for reproductive ends.'

- The argument seems to be:

    [1] Our moral judgments are adaptations.

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    [2] Our moral judgments are false (moral 'error theory').

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- Ruse & Wilson's position:

  (Note: Sober's 'conventionalism' = subjectivist cognitivism and his 'subjectivism' = anything but realism or agnosticism)

Are our moral statements truth-evaluable?

Yes → Cognitivism

No → Non-Cognitivism

What would make our moral statements true?

Objective facts → Objectivist Cognitivism

Subjective facts → Sujectivist Cognitivism

Are our moral statements sometimes true?

No → Error Theory

We don't know → Moral Agnosticism

Yes → Moral Realism

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- Note: reading through Ruse and Wilson's various works, it turns out that their position is *extremely confusing*!

- The clear error-theoretic commitment highlighted by the previous quote is complicated by the following kinds of statements:

  - Subjectivist Cognitivism?

    'This accumulating empirical knowledge [(i.e. knowledge of evolution, etc.)]… renders increasingly less tenable the hypothesis that ethical truths are extrasomatic.' (Ruse and Wilson [1994:556])

    'The question 'What ought we do?' and 'What do we (as a group) think we ought to do?' collapse into each other.' (Ruse [1991:507])

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- Non-Cognitivism?

    'The evolutionist argues that Moore was wrong in his analysis of the objectivity of morality. It is rather something subjective or *non-cognitive*.' (Ruse [1991:508] – my emphasis)

    'The position I am endorsing … is known as non-cognitivism.' (Ruse [1995:103])

- Both Kitcher [1994:579] and Sober [1994:101] interpret Wilson and Ruse as being occasional non-cognitivists (specifically: emotivists – endorsing equiv. between '*x* is wrong' and 'Boo to *x*!').

- But this interpretation is in fact explicitly denied by Ruse:

    'What I want to suggest is that – contrary to the emotivists' belief – the meaning of morality is that it is objective.' (Ruse [1995:106])

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- Let's steer clear of tedious exegetical issues in what follows and stick to our first interpretation:

    The evolution of our moral sense by natural selection supports a moral error theory.

- I'll also assume that *non-cognitivism isn't an option* (i.e. that our moral 'beliefs' are indeed beliefs, i.e are states that represent the world as being such and such and are thus truth-evaluable).

- Now, contrary to popular belief, there isn't *necessarily* anything wrong with deductive arguments from the causal origins of a belief to its falsity/truth ('genetic arguments').

- Propositions describing the etiology of the belief that *P* might entail *P* / ¬*P* (i) because *B[P]* is caused by the fact that *P* or (ii) because *P* refers to facts concerning the etiology of *B[P]*.

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- Sober [1994:106]:

    'Conclusions about the truth of a proposition cannot be deduced validly from premises that describe why someone came to believe the proposition'.

- This is obviously false.

- Of course, many naïve reasoners see valid genetic arguments where there aren't any (hence the repeated warnings, in textbooks, against committing the 'genetic fallacy'). E.g.:

    [1] Ben decided that there are 78 people in the room by drawing the number 78 at random from an urn.

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    [2] There are not 78 people in the room.

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- Sober [1994] tells us that whilst this kind of argument is *de*ductively invalid, it is *in*ductively valid (i.e. is such that Pr(*conclusion | premises*) = high).

- Why so? According to Sober:

    'The reason is that what caused [Ben] to reach the belief had nothing to do with how many students were in the room. When this independence relation obtains, the genetic argument shows that the belief is implausible.'

- Furthermore, he says:

    'In contrast, when a [(positive?)] dependence relation obtains, the description of the belief's genesis can lead to the conclusion that the belief is probably correct.'

- In support of this last sentence, Sober gives an example:

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> [1] Cathy carefully counted the people in her class and consequently believed that 34 people were present.
>
> *p* --
>
> [2] 34 people were present in Cathy's class.

- This does indeed seems to support Sober's second assertion:

  The argument seems inductively valid and a 'positive dependence' relation between the causes of Cathy's belief and the relevant fact seems to obtain.

- Sober then goes on to argue that, for their genetic argument to go through, Ruse and Wilson would first need to establish:

  The evolutionary etiologies of our moral beliefs are probabilistically independent of the truth of these beliefs.

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- And *this*, he argues, would require identifying what it would take for the moral statements in question to be true, which Ruse and Wilson don't provide.

- Indeed, Ruse and Wilson simply *assert* that independence obtains:

  'Consider two worlds, one of which has an objective morality, whatever that might mean (God's will? Non-natural properties?) and the other world has no such morality. If the evolutionist's case is well taken, the people in both worlds are going to have identical beliefs...' (Ruse [1993:156])

- And this clearly begs the question.

- Now I am not sure I entirely agree with Sober's discussion here.

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- I do agree with him that Wilson and Ruse fail to establish (even inductively) moral error theory.

- *However*: it isn't clear that he is right about what it would take for Ruse and Wilson to do so.

- Why?

- Because it isn't clear that establishing independence would by itself yield an inductive genetic argument for ¬*P*.

- Pending further evidence, what we should surely do were we to find out that our beliefs regarding moral matters were independent of their truthmakers, is to *suspend judgment*.

  (Of course: were we to find out that they *negatively depend* on their truthmakers, *that* may constitute a prima facie case for believing that they are false – but that's a different matter.)

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- So *at best*, in the absence of further consideration, assuming that they could establish independence, Ruse and Wilson could offer an evolutionary argument from evolution to moral *agnosticism.*

- This isn't to say that evolutionary considerations couldn't have a part to play in defending moral error theory.

- How this might be done... First of all, make a prima facie case for error theory (perhaps in the style of Mackie [1977]):

  [1] Draw up a list of properties that any truthmaker for moral statements would have to possess.

    Example: moral appraisability might require free will, or perhaps the existence of God, etc.

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[2] Argue that nothing satisfies these properties (e.g. that Theism is false, that determinism and incompatibilism are true, etc.) and that hence, moral statements are systematically false.

- This prima facie case for error-theory, however, generates a tension with our pretheoretic inclination towards moral realism.

- But this tension is then eased by arguing that we would be moral realists whether or not we were mistaken in being so:

[3] Provide an evolutionary account of why, in spite of their falsity, we would still hold our moral statements to be true.

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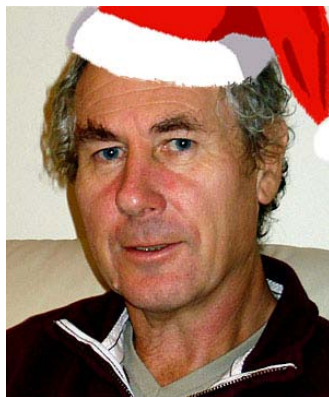
Merry Christmas and
thanks for attending.

Reference

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