Should We Be Moralists?

'Moralist' is to be understood here in two senses; answering 'yes' in the first sense suggests an answer of 'no' in the second. First, we can consider a very technical sense; it is the analogue of what is called 'modalist' in the epistemology of modality debate (Bueno and Shalkowski 2009, 2014). The modalist holds that modal claims are *not* reducible to claims about possible world and that modal relations are primitive relations which are understood in light of actual (non-modal) properties. For instance, the (im)possibility of an elephant's sitting on a glass and not shattering it is determined simply by appeal to the actual observable properties of elephants and glasses, even without any particular application of elephant to glass. Furthermore, the impossibility of snow's being white and being not white is taken to be primitive, without reference to possible worlds.

I propose an analogous account, "moralism", which is both independently plausible and addresses difficulties involved in understanding Parfit's moral metaphysics. In particular, we know which reasons obtain by appealing to our understanding of the non-normative truths, even if the non-normative truths do not fix the normative truths in a metaphysical manner. The basic idea is that phenomenological and empirical understanding of the world points towards reasons and that the reason-relations understood in this way are primitive. This helps address Parfit's puzzling claims that normative truths are true in a `non-ontological' or `non-metaphysical' sense (Parfit 2011, 2017); they do not reduce to abstract non-spatio-temporal truths, nor truths about natural truths (Copp 2017, Mintz-Woo forthcoming, Suikkanen 2017). Instead, just as the modalist says about modal truths, they are primitively graspable intuitions which hold just in light of the actual concrete non-normative truths in the actual world. This requires making morality (or normativity more generally) primitive or brute (this also fills out the suggestion by Suikkanen 2017).

While I argue that this account best captures Parfit's commitments, there are legitimate worries that it would still be unsatisfying because the non-normative truths seem to radically underdetermine what reasons there could be (debates on this topic are contained in Kirchin 2017, Parfit 2017, Singer 2017). Among other things, this means that moralism does not allow us to determine which normative epistemic peers who have adopted different normative frameworks (e.g. virtue ethics, deontology or consequentialism) are correct.

This leads to a second argument which draws on the first-order (pejorative) meaning of moralist, someone who advocates particular substantive normative claims on contested questions without giving credit to the controversy attached to those claims. The view of moral expertise which results from moralism is one of normative humility, and it suggests that moral philosophers should not be moralists in this pejorative sense. We can helpfully distinguish between weak and strong moral experts (sometimes also referred to as 'ethical' and 'moral' experts, respectively) where weak moral experts are those who can validly draw conclusions from given (normative) premises and strong moral experts can validly draw conclusions and also have some type of access to the true (normative) premises (Archard 2011, Birnbacher 2012). Philosophers certainly can be (weak) moral experts because they are aware of different normative frameworks and can draw the correct normative conclusions from different normative axioms (Hills 2012, Singer 1972). However, on the primitivist nature of moralism, there is no theoretical criterion by which to distinguish those who have the correct primitive grasp of the true normative relations from those who lack it (Cowley 2005, Gesang 2010).

If we adopt moralism at the metaethical or metaphysical level, then this argument suggests rejecting it at this first-order level. This means that, aside from drawing conclusions in a valid manner, it is difficult for moral philosophers to systematically determine which substantive conclusions are correct.

The interesting possibility which is suggested by Parfit's (2017) project of climbing the mountain is that substantive conclusions may be quite robust to the choice of normative framework. However, if this is not the case, and if moralism is the best approximation of Parfit's metaethical position, then there are substantial limits to the claims that can be developed from moral theory.

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