

Arguments for Moral Nihilism

Are there any moral truths, any moral facts?

From explanatory impotence: There is no need to posit distinctively moral facts to explain any of our observations. We can instead invoke psychological facts about people's feelings and beliefs. Moral facts would be otiose.

Response 1: A priori facts involving mathematics or conceptual truths may show that we believe in facts that don't explain our observations. We don't seem to believe that $2+2=4$ *because* that fact explains some of our observations.

Response 2: Maybe moral facts are reducible to non-moral facts. If wrongness can be identified with the non-moral property of causing gratuitous harm (say), the explanatory argument fails. Problem: natural facts like causing gratuitous harm seem to lack the prescriptive element of morality.

Response 3: According to Sturgeon, moral facts *are* explanatory. Hitler's depravity caused the holocaust. Counterfactual test: suppose Hitler's depravity were irrelevant to explaining the Holocaust. In that case, if Hitler *hadn't* been depraved, the Holocaust would have occurred all the same. But if Hitler hadn't been depraved, there wouldn't have been a Holocaust. Problem: should we interpret *Hitler hadn't been depraved* as Hitler acting as he actually did, only somehow those same actions weren't depraved, or as Hitler having actually behaved differently?

From "queerness": Moral facts would have to be utterly unlike any of the natural facts we believe in, both in their intrinsic prescriptivity – their normative authority – and in their motivational powers. So we shouldn't believe in them.

Response 1: The alleged Fact-Value gap implied may be overblown. "Thick" ethical concepts like *rude* or *cruel* may serve as bridges – it may be a factual, descriptive matter that someone is being rude (insulting a host, say), even though *rude* is ineliminably prescriptive. This may count against "Hume's Law" – the alleged impossibility of deriving an "ought" from an "is."

Response 2: Maybe morality isn't "out there." Maybe moral constraints are internal constraints on rational deliberation, the way "laws of thought" are. There's a constraint on believing that p and that not-p, but not in virtue of mystical logical facts "out there." Problem: Kantian stories about internal constraints that are violated in wrongdoing must hold up for this reply to work.

From disagreement: The best explanation of radical and pervasive disagreement about moral issues is that there are no moral facts to converge on, not that people are suffering from failures of moral perception.

Response 1: Maybe moral disagreement isn't all that pervasive. Disagreement about e.g. abortion may be factual disagreement about what the fetus is; disagreement about infanticide among Eskimos may be resolved by their special circumstances – infanticide may seem permissible if practiced to avoid mass starvation.

Response 2: There are other explanations of moral disagreement. The existence of God is a factual matter, but disagreement is just as pervasive, because the relevant considerations are tricky, because information is scarce, because people suffer from biases, etc. And non-religious ethics is a young field. For thousands of years, natural science was shrouded in murky disagreement. Problem: even ideal inquirers, free from bias etc. would likely still disagree about morality.

From evolution: moral responses are in part evolved, which means we would have them whether or not there are any moral facts. Therefore, we should be agnostic as to the existence of moral facts.

Response 1: Moral responses *aren't* evolved; they are transmitted by culture or developed from normal use of our non-moral faculties (e.g., by simply reasoning correctly). Problem: kin altruism etc. seems capable of explaining why we would evolve moral responses.

Response 2: Mathematical responses are in part evolved, but we aren't skeptical of them. Problem: the evolution of mathematical responses is heavily constrained by the facts, since mistakes would often be fatal. There is no similar reason to think evolved moral responses must be truth-tracking.

Response 3: The argument only shows we should *start* the inquiry as agnostics. But it doesn't show that any reasons we might have to be moral realists are unsound. So this argument should only worry us if we think there are no reasons at all to embrace moral realism.