

Contingent Moral Facts and Offensive Worlds

A Presentation of Modal Considerations for the Moral Realist

Abstract: A moral realist is one that believes there are moral facts in the world. I distinguish between two kinds of moral facts: everyday moral facts and ethereal moral facts. These moral facts are similar to other facts in that they can be either necessary or contingent. Most have no problem admitting everyday moral facts to be contingent. However, ethereal moral facts are akin to moral principles, which we have a tougher time admitting to be contingent. This is because if they were contingent then we would have to admit that it is possible for moral principles to have been different than they are. I call such possible scenarios offensive worlds. I argue that ethereal moral facts are not metaphysically necessary and that offensive worlds are possible. The moral realist should believe offensive worlds to be possible because offensive worlds are useful in meta-ethical and metaphysical investigations. I conclude by presenting another type of world that the moral realist should consider: amoral worlds.

Keywords: Metaphysics, meta-ethics, moral realism, possible worlds

Near to the end of his paper outlining a dispositional theory of value, David Lewis briefly considers what the modal status of values could be.¹ He concludes that values have no necessity. The discussion in Lewis' paper is brief and in many places wanting. For instance, Lewis believes that by discussing only values he has side stepped the question of "the good." Values are close enough for Lewis. Also, his main argument against the metaphysical necessity of values is that Mackie's Error theory² seems to be true. If it is true in this world that there are no moral facts, then moral facts are by no means metaphysically necessary. This conclusion is all well and good for the non-moral realist, or at least one that is unsure of the ontological status of moral facts. However, most moral realists will not accept this conclusion. I will argue that they should.

Unlike Lewis, I do not believe what we value (that is what we desire to desire) is totally equivalent to what is good. The good and the valued do overlap each other often enough and can

¹ Michael Smith, David Lewis and Mark Johnston, "Dispositional Theories of Value" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 63, (1989), 113-137

² Presented in J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin, 1977)

be said to be approximate; nonetheless, we can still ask the question “Is what we value good?” sensibly. Also unlike Lewis, I do not accept Mackie’s Error theory. While we do not observe moral facts in the way that we do other facts, it is the case that we can reason to their existence by means of explanatory power, much like we do for other unobservables, as Nicholas Sturgeon has argued.³ I am a moral realist in a way that Lewis is not quite willing to be. Despite these disagreements, I agree with Lewis that our morals are not likely implied by any form of necessity.

Perhaps this seems strange for a moral realist to claim. In fact, moral realists are usually characterized by their belief in objective moral facts. To me, a moral realist is simply one that believes there are moral facts (usually of the mind-independent variety). This in no way makes a moral realist committed to the necessity of moral facts. I will first present a picture of what moral facts are. I will make a distinction between everyday moral facts and ethereal moral facts. Then I will argue that neither type of moral fact is metaphysically necessary. Finally I shall conclude with a suggestion for further work on the modality of moral facts for moral realists.

What are Moral Facts?⁴

When we talk about the world, we talk about the way things are (unless we are ignorant or lying). When we talk in this way, we are prone to use phrases like, “it’s a fact that...”

Sometimes when we talk, we also talk about ways the world might have been or could be.

³ Nicholas Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations” in *Morality, Reason, and Truth*, ed. David Cobb and David Zimmerman (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanhead, 1985) pgs. 49-78.

⁴ I use this section to introduce terminology that will be important in the arguments to follow. It is fair to say that some of this terminology is controversial and some will disagree with the picture presented. It is also fair to say that the disagreements will not be purely semantic. However, the picture I am presenting is based on a realist interpretation of facts (which many people hold to) and propositions (which fewer hold to). It is not the purpose of this paper to present an argument for realism, only to present an argument for the modal status of moral realism.

Usually we say things like, “It’s possible that...” or “It could have been the case that...” in these contexts. There is often little difference in the propositions that follow such qualifying phrases.

These sorts of propositions we often call *states of affairs*. When a particular state of affairs occurs we say that the state of affairs *obtains*. For instance, consider the proposition, “I am above a noisy, Roman bath house.” We would say that the state of affairs denoted by this proposition obtains, iff I am above a noisy, Roman bath house. Iff such a state of affairs obtains, then it is a *fact* that I am above a noisy, Roman bath house. We are simply saying that facts are states of affairs that have occurred in the world and *true* propositions denote those facts.

Of facts, there are two varieties: necessary facts and contingent facts. Some of the necessary type are those like, “no one is taller than herself” and “no cats are dogs.” These sorts of facts could not have been otherwise. Contingent facts, on the other hand, are accidental. These are facts like “Some mushrooms are poisonous,” and “I am above a noisy, Roman bath house.” Some contingent facts are *temporally variant*, as Alvin Plantinga has suggested.⁵ That is, sometimes they obtain, but later, no longer obtain. My being above a noisy, Roman bath house is such a fact. It obtains until I leave the bath house for a more tranquil setting. At such a point the proposition “I am above a noisy, Roman bath house” is no longer true.

Moral facts are just the same as regular facts, only they exemplify properties of value. A property of value is the sort of property that is like “good, bad, beautiful, wondrous, etc.” Moral facts deal specifically with value properties like “good, bad, right, wrong, evil, etc.” Examples of moral facts would be “Jolene is a good person” and “It is evil to kill innocent babies for no

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, “Two Concepts of Modality: Modal Realism and Modal Reductionism,” in *Essays in The Metaphysics of Modality*, ed. Matthew Davidson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) pg. 195-195

reason.” In first case, the moral fact deals with particulars, like Jolene, and in the second case is a universal fact. This latter kind, I will call ethereal moral facts.

Just like regular facts, moral facts could be both contingent and necessary. There are certainly contingent moral facts. Facts like Jolene’s being a good person, we have no problem saying is contingent. Jolene could have very well been a bad person. Jolene’s existence is itself contingent, as Jolene might never have existed at all. Thus the fact could not have obtained. Some might even be inclined, as I am, to admit that such facts are also temporally variant. Jolene might be a good person today, but tomorrow, when she takes Dolly’s man she is now a bad person. Her being a good person no longer obtains.

However, it remains a question to what extent some moral facts could be necessary. The sorts of moral facts we wish to claim are necessary are usually what we call moral principles. I have dubbed them ethereal moral facts. It might be claimed that principles are not facts, because they are mind dependent. However, one who believes such already admits that moral principles are not metaphysically necessary; that is, necessary across all possible worlds. It is hard to deny that it is possible for minds to have been configured in such a way that they yielded different principles than the ones we might ascribe to now or that there are such possible worlds in which there are no minds or agents and therefore no moral principles. There may be a case to be made that a type of conditional or deontic necessity applies to this world and others like it.⁶ However, I am also skeptical of these forms of necessity doing the work we require of them.

⁶ I am not sure that anything like deontic necessity exists in our world. It could be said that any “ought” is equivalent to “necessarily ought.” Christopher Howard, however, has convinced me that there could be conflicting oughts. If this is the case, then the “ought” does not directly imply any kind of necessity. Necessity would need to be assigned to any “ought” proposition, just like other propositions from which we cannot derive necessity.

However, for the moral realist, who believes moral properties to exist in the world, moral principles are just propositions which denote moral facts. They could still claim that such facts are metaphysically necessary. These would be ethereal moral facts like “It is wrong to kill innocent babies for no reason.” In all possible worlds, even those where rampant and unquestioned infanticide obtains, it is evil to kill babies. I doubt there to be any such necessary ethereal moral facts. I will now discuss why I think so.

Metaphysical Necessity and the Possibility of Offensive Worlds

Simply put, something is metaphysically necessary iff it is true and could not be false in all possible worlds. So a metaphysically necessary fact is a state of affairs that obtains in all possible worlds. For instance, any world W is not larger than itself. There are facts of this type, though I believe them to be pretty limited. Moral facts are no exception to this skepticism.

Before I begin my arguments, I should also say something about why we wish to say moral facts are necessary. We have strong intuitions that what is good is always good and never evil. We also have strong intuitions that those actions and behaviors which we say are good are also always good and never evil. If certain moral facts can be shown to be necessary, then both of these intuitions can be vindicated.

But, it is somewhat more difficult to make this claim than we recognize. Many will already admit that most moral facts are contingent; those moral facts like, Jolene is a good person. However, when we ask the question, “Why is Jolene a good person,” we enter territory which we believe to be more rigid. For example, let’s assume that Jolene helped your grandmother across the street recently, out of the sheer goodness of her heart. Let’s also assume principle M1 is true and also an ethereal moral fact.

M1: Anyone who helps an old lady across the street with pure intentions is good.

We are more than willing to admit that it is possible for Jolene to have not helped your grandmother or to have done so in order to further some nefarious plot. What we might be unwilling to admit is that it is possible that if Jolene helps your grandmother across the street with only the most wholesome intentions then she is an evil person. To put it another way, if M1 is true then we believe that M2 could not be true, where M2 is

M2: Anyone who helps an old lady across the street with pure intentions is evil.

It is fair to say that M1 and M2 are mutually exclusive. If one is a fact then the other cannot be. However, we are unable to say that if M1 is a fact, then M2 is impossible. More is required than just the truth of M1 to guarantee the impossibility of M2

Should we abandon our intuitions because we cannot make such a logical leap? That doesn't seem fair. After all, there is nothing in logic that says M2 is possible. Both sides are equally reasonable. If one accepts this, then we are at a bit of a stalemate. That is why I am making an argument from explanatory power and utility. If we reach a point where our intuitions cannot be verified or demonstrated, we must resort to arguments of a probabilistic sort. I know many will not find these types arguments convincing. After all, just because I can show a way of thinking to be useful (supposing that I actually do that much) does not mean that it is true. I, however, hold a premise that if something can be shown to be useful then we have a good reason for accepting it as true. I have little argument for this premise; other than I believe it is a common affair in scientific, mathematical, and ordinary investigations. So to deny this premise is to deny much about the way humans conduct themselves. The best way to justify this premise is to convince some with the kind of argument in question. I will now try to do just that.

If we assume that facts like M2 (ethereal moral facts that reverse our normal understanding of good and bad) are impossible then we preclude an infinite number of possible

world scenarios. These are scenarios in which Jolene is a bad person for helping your grandmother across the street. There is no doubt that such scenarios are repulsive to us and so I have dubbed such worlds, *offensive worlds*. In offensive worlds, at least one ethereal moral fact is reversed from what our normal moral intuitions would suggest.

We should believe that offensive worlds are possible for three reasons. The first is if they are possible and ethereal moral facts are contingent then it helps explain why we have trouble admitting to moral principles in *all possible* counterfactual situations. “I should not kill, unless I was confronted by Hitler.” “One should not steal.” “But what if you are starving?” These sorts of examples are consistently abused by amateur ethicists, but there is something to be gleaned from our reaction to them. Often we are confused how to proceed in the face of such scenarios. But, assuming that our cognitive faculties allow us to understand moral facts correctly, our hesitation is evidence that we understand moral facts to be contingent. This is because the two above examples can be restated as moral counterfactuals.

C1: If I were confronted by Hitler, then I would be justified in killing him.

C2: If I were starving, then it would be permissible to steal.

Since we can imagine scenarios, that were they to obtain, ethereal moral facts would be different than they are now, we should have little trouble believing in the possibility of offensive worlds; believing that such moral counterfactuals are coherent is the same as believing in offensive worlds.

The second reason is that we can talk sensibly about offensive worlds. Not only can we talk sensibly about offensive worlds, but in talking about them we are able to expose some very interesting problems. I believe that there are plenty of uses for these offensive worlds. I cannot

iterate all the examples I think are relevant due to space issues, so two and a challenge will have to suffice.

One example relates to questions regarding trans-world identity. Can we really call our counterpart in one of these offensive worlds as such?⁷ How much bearing do values have on our identity and the notion of resemblance? If one of my counterparts was identical to me in every way, but behaves according to different, offensive, moral facts, would it still be fair to call him a counterpart? Or are the differences totally unintelligible. This question, which I find interesting, would become illegitimate if we were to say that moral facts were necessary. Because then the answer is, there could be no such being.

I am not an ethicist, but I can only see offensive worlds as useful in ethics. They could enhance our understanding of those moral values and facts which we find offensive in this world. They could also provide a plethora of scenarios in which to investigate. This, too, would become illegitimate if values were necessary.

I would challenge the reader to think of some interest they might have in offensive worlds as well. Perhaps the challenge is an ill-fit for some. It might be ugly business for those of us that are highly moral. But for those that, as Lewis put it, “delight in the rich variety of life,”⁸ such imaginative challenges are what philosophy is about.

Finally, we should believe in offensive worlds because believing in their impossibility does little to satisfy anything beyond our own intuitions. If they were impossible, we are still left to wonder at our inability to sustain moral principles in all moral counterfactuals. Claiming such

⁷ A clarification on some terminology: A counterpart is a person like ourselves, in another world. For instance, in some possible world I never pursued a career in philosophy. Instead, I pursued my childhood dream of finding and studying the Loch Ness Monster. In this world, Brandeis is greatly impoverished, but the world is greatly enhanced due to Nessie being found. For more on Counterparts as they relate to personal-identity *cf.* David Lewis, “Counterparts of Persons and Their Bodies,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 68: 203–211 (1971).

⁸ Lewis, 126

worlds to be impossible would be equivalent to claiming that such counterfactuals are incoherent. How they are or could be construed as incoherent is not directly clear to me. Perhaps a convincing argument could be made, but I am not imaginative enough to think of it here.

Conclusion: Amoral worlds?

Though it greatly offends us, there is a possible world in which Jolene is a good person *because* she pushed your grandmother into the street, rather than help her across. I will not articulate the more horrendous examples. It may make us glad to be rid of such worlds where atrocities are good instead of evil. Disposing of them in this manner, however, is based on a prejudice, not an argument. We cease doing philosophy when we allow something that reviles us to halt our investigations. I believe I have shown offensive worlds have a place in our investigations and can enhance such investigations as well.

In doing so, I have argued against the metaphysical necessity of ethereal moral facts. I have not argued that there are no ethereal moral facts in this world or others. Ethereal moral facts are not impossible. This is a different question regarding the possibility of amoral worlds. These are worlds in which no sort of moral fact has obtained or no moral facts are capable of obtaining. I see the possibility of such worlds to be a problem for moral realists. If amoral worlds are possible then it would take some effort to show why this world is not one such world. I have my doubts as to the idea of an amoral world being coherent. We could speak of neutrally moral worlds, but neutral does not mean that a world lacks moral facts. It only means that such a world is no more evil than it is good. I am not sure we could speak of a world which lacks moral content altogether. In this is true, then all possible worlds would have to contain moral facts, just like other facts. I don't find this conclusion to be particularly problematic as I believe the

premise “Something is better than nothing” to be true. The idea of offensive worlds backs up this conclusion, because the above premise would only be reversed. So in some offensive worlds, something is worse than nothing. The issue is certainly tricky and more work is required in it.