

Lecture Notes 8 : Moral Epistemology

Lecturer: Nicholas Vrousalis

nv211@cam.ac.uk

A skeptical challenge

How do we know we are not brains in vats? Skeptics think we don't. Here's a general form of challenge:

(1) A belief is justified if and only if it is inferred from another justified belief.

∴ (2) p is justified iff it is inferred from q , which is justified iff it is inferred from r , which is...

∴ (3) The regress is (2) is infinite.

∴ (4) No beliefs are justified.

Agrippa's trilemma: of any proposition p that is a candidate for the predicate 'knowledge', any justification for p will be either:

(i) subject to infinite regress, or (ii) dogmatic, or (iii) viciously circular

Foundationalists reject (ii), *coherentists* reject (iii).

Moral skepticism

Weak moral skepticism: moral belief p can't be known

Strong moral skepticism: p can't be justified

NB. error-theoretic-skepticism \neq justification-skepticism

Resisting the skeptic's challenge

Intuitionism

Intuitionists, *qua* foundationalists, reject inferentialism (premise (1)). Cf. W. D. Ross (1930) and more recently Robert Audi (2004).

A posteriori moral intuitionism

David McNaughton: we can directly perceive things like a cliff being dangerous, or a person being worried, or of a thing being far from another, although all of these properties seem incapable of being 'proper objects' of our five senses.

***A priori* moral intuitionism**

Most intuitionists are rationalists. That is, they believe that moral properties are not properties that we come to directly observe, just like a scientist observes the stars through his periscope.

For *a priori* intuitionists certain moral claims are self-evident: naked suffering is bad, hurting the vulnerable is wrong, and so on.

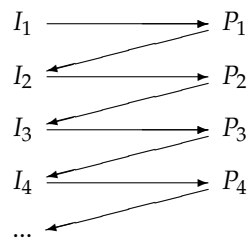
Coherentism

Coherentist moral epistemology rejects the third horn of Agrippa's trilemma.

NB. coherence \neq consistency

The most prominent contemporary form of coherentism in moral epistemology is Rawls' method of *reflective equilibrium*: e.g. the trolley-problem routine.

The intuition-principle dialectic



Cf. Ronald Dworkin's (1977) 'paleontological' model: we have never seen dinosaurs, and don't have much direct evidence as to what they looked like. The paleontologist has to match the bones at his disposal with the best theoretical knowledge about dinosaurs to construct the best possible dinosaur-skeleton he can.

Coherentism's achilles heel has always been its (dis)connection with truth: it is perfectly possible for patently absurd sets of beliefs to be coherent.

We're therefore back to Euthyphro's dilemma.

Study questions

What is moral intuitionism?

Do coherentists have an effective rebuttal of moral skepticism?

Further Reading

Fisher, A. *Metaethics*, ch. 9.

Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2011), 'Moral Skepticism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.