History and Moral Realism: an essay exploring some aspects of metaethics

Tony Walton

It is an indisputable empirical claim that ethical norms change over time. One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the justification for ethical norms is relative to a particular historical period. At its most extreme form, this can be the claim that what was right at time 1 was right for time 1 because those were the norms that prevailed at that time, and that at time 2 a different set of norms prevails and that they are right for time 2. According to this view there is no way in which we can retrospectively say that the norms holding at time 1 were inadequate and that those at time 2 represent some sort of progress- they are just different. This essay will explore whether it is possible to accept the fact of normative change over time and at the same time hold to the notion of ethical progress. This question connects with a further set of metaethical questions about how far ethical norms should be seen as something to be discovered or how far they are constructed. It will be suggested here that rather than seeing this issue in binary terms we should look to ways in which to think of norms as both discovered *and* constructed.

A paradigmatic example of the view that ethical norms are something to be discovered can be found in Plato's ethics. Plato is an ethical realist in the sense that ethical norms exist independently of what any of us think or believe. They are not human constructs but properties of the world which need to be discovered. In this respect, Plato's metaethics cannot be divorced from his broader metaphysical commitments. That is, his theory of ethics cannot be separated from his theory of the Forms.

For Plato, a core idea is that the aim of human beings is to live virtuously, and to live virtuously is to pursue those ends which are worth pursuing. This means distancing ourselves from everyday desires and ambitions and coming to understand the conditions under which a virtuous life can be lived. To do that we need knowledge of the Forms which define what it is good to pursue. That requires metaphysical knowledge that can only be gained through philosophical understanding. That understanding involves a grasp of the place of human beings in the wider cosmos and a recognition that a virtuous life means tuning in to that reality. And doing so requires education and training offered by those with the necessary insight and wisdom.

There are several reasons why we might be persuaded by this view. First, it is the case that in our ordinary experience of making ethical judgements there are conflicting subjective accounts of what is or is not right, and if it is supposed that there simply are no available criteria for choosing between those different accounts we are condemned to a fundamental scepticism about what is and is not right. We are condemned, therefore, to endless and fruitless debate between subjective ethical opinions, and those opinions can be seen (on this view) as simply expressing individual or group feelings about ethical matters. Plato's approach offers a way out of this impasse. It provides the basis for a way of moving beyond and above the morass of everyday conflicting ethical opinions. It asserts the power of reason to identify what is in fact required for virtuous living.

Second, Plato's approach is consistent with the intuition that in order to know how to go about living an ethical life we need to know something about how the world is, how it is constituted, and what drives the way it is. This is the commonsense intuition that knowing how to live requires knowing how the world is, and adjusting how we go on in the light of that reality. This, moreover, means that establishing how to live is not a matter of following our subjective feelings but of discovering what the ethical facts are and seeing that ethical knowledge is precisely that- *knowledge*.

Third, there is something compelling about Plato's view that becoming a virtuous person requires education and training, induction into a set of mores and expectations, and being prepared to learn from those who have wisdom and insight. This means that there will be some who are more attuned to the requirements of virtuous living than others, and it is Plato's view that evil is largely a result of ignorance of the requirements of virtue; it is the outcome of a cognitive failure. Plato's view also means that the scope for developing virtuous ways of living will depend at least in part on the social and political arrangements in place. A properly constituted social and political system is a condition that needs to be in place for virtuous living to be realisable. This accords with a basic intuition that the circumstances in which a person lives has a critical bearing on how well they are able to learn and put into practice the requirements of virtue.

There are, though, some snags with the above which mean that Plato's position is not acceptable in the context of the modern world. First, there are the metaphysical and epistemological difficulties associated with Plato's theory of Forms. His version of transcendent metaphysics raises the obvious question as to why we should believe in the existence of Forms which structure the cosmos.

What grounds- empirical or a priori- are there for postulating the existence of a cosmic order which is eternal and independent of the thoughts of human beings? Such a view sits uneasily alongside the view that if there is meaning and purpose in the world it is a result of human thought. It is something which human beings create; it's not something that they discover. The ontological claims of Platonism are, therefore, difficult to sustain, and the epistemological worries suggest that there is no obvious way in which we could come to know anything about the Forms.

Second, there are some worries about the implications of Plato's position for human freedom and autonomy. If our ethical obligations are only realised through conformity with an externally imposed standard that says little about individual freedom and is in sharp contrast with what is taken to be a core feature of modern identity, namely our sense that we are rights bearing individuals who should have the scope to determine our own lives, then individual freedom and autonomy are fatally undermined.

Given the above discussion we have reached a tricky point. We have seen that for Plato there is a compelling core claim, namely that our account of virtue and the sources of normativity needs to be grounded in an account of the way the world is- for Plato the way of the world is defined by the Forms. Moreover, there is the additional point that arriving at ethical judgements requires the application of reason and cannot be left to the dictates of feeling or sentiment. But Plato's account comes at too heavy a price. Accepting it as it stands means giving up some of the key principles constituting experience in the modern world, namely those relating to freedom and autonomy. Following this line of argument we need an approach to ethics and normativity which acknowledges the role of reason but which does not tie us to the determinations supplied by abstract and unchanging external factors of the kind designated by the Forms. The challenge is to find an approach to the sources of normativity which: (1) is consistent with the requirements of freedom and autonomy; (2) sees human agents as in some sense the creators of normativity and not simply its passive discoverers; (3) recognises, however, that there are key respects in which normativity is tied to an account of how the world is; and (4) also recognises that normative concepts change over time.

In order to see how normativity and individual freedom might be connected one obvious starting point is Kant; And in the context of contemporary metaethical debate the interpretation of Kant offered by the ethical constructivists is a useful point of reference, principally the work of John Rawls, Christine Korsgaard and Onora O'Neill.

Kant's ethical theory has as its foundation the distinction between the domains of theoretical and practical reason. Theoretical reason concerns the understanding of the natural world while practical reason concerns what is right. The domain of nature is driven by causal laws and is therefore a domain of determination. Practical reason is the domain of freedom. How these two domains are seen by Kant to be connected (or not) is a matter for Kant scholars. What, however, is unequivocally the case is that Kant sees the domain of practical reason as one in which freedom, autonomy and the free will operate. Thus ethical principles need to be separated from an account of desires and interests. And they also need to be separated from any determining substantive objects such as Platonic forms. The free will is a will that determines itself and is not determined by anything outside itself. On Kant's view, in conforming to ethical principles the subject is conforming to something of his or her own creation. The universal laws of practical reason are laws which the free will wills. As Rawls puts it: 'Kant's idea of autonomy requires that there exist no such order of given objects determining the first principles of right and justice among free and equal moral persons……[as] when first principles are fixed by the special psychological constitution of human nature, as in Hume, but also when they are fixed by an order of universals or concepts grasped by rational intuition, as in Plato's realm of forms or in Leibniz's hierarchy of perfections' (Rawls 1980 p.559). (See also Rawls 2005, Lecture 3). For Kant, the sources of normativity are connected with rational agency. '[R]eason is accounted as autonomous, and its authority does not derive from anything outside it' Bagnoli 2021). Reason is self-legislating and governed by a norm, namely the Categorical Imperative' (Bagnoli 2021).

A broadly Kantian position has been taken up by a number of contemporary philosophers who have sought to articulate a 'constructivist' approach to ethics (Rawls, Korsgaard, O'Neill). That is, an approach which rejects the view that ethical concepts and the sources of normativity have to be discovered, but rather should be seen as being constructed by the autonomous agent exercising practical reason. It is not difficult to see the attractions of such an approach. It is consistent with the value which in the modern world is placed on individual freedom and autonomy. It frees ethical thought from dubious metaphysical entities such as Plato's forms. And it is associated with the highly plausible view that there is something distinctive about human thought and agency which enables it to distance itself from immediate desires and interests. Human subjects are conceived as self-determining beings who can reflect on and move beyond their immediate desires and interests through the application of practical reason.

There is, though, something deeply unsatisfactory about the Kantian position, namely its abstractness and formalism. That is, it does not provide a convincing account of the content of ethical judgements. The empty formalism of the Categorical Imperative merely states an abstract requirement of ethical thinking, namely its universality. But this is not sufficient to ground ethical judgements. Arguably we need to return to one of the key features of Plato's ethics, namely that ethical judgements need to be grounded in an account of how the world is. We have, of course, rejected the Platonic forms as an account of how the world is, but there is a core requirement that ethics needs to be grounded in an account of the constitutive features of our experience. On this view, we express our rationality through engagement with those features and their normative significance rather than aspiring to a contentless empty formalism.

This does, though, beg the question as to what those constitutive features are. What is it about the way the world is that provides the starting point for ethical thinking? If we accept the Kantian critique of those ethical theories that reduce ethical concepts to an account of desires and interests and which (like Hume) regard reason as merely instrumental in the service of desires and interests, then we need to look elsewhere. One place to look is neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism as developed principally by Philippa Foot (Foot 2001), Michael Thompson (Thompson 2010), and Rosalind Hursthouse (Hursthouse 2010). The core idea is that we should be looking to human nature and the conditions of its full realisation as the basis of ethical thinking. The key features of human nature are what from an ethical point of view define the way the world is.

Foot argues that judgements about ethical normativity are in the same logical space as judgements about natural normativity. '[T]here is no change in the meaning of 'good' as it appears in "good roots" and as it appears in "good dispositions of the human will"' (Foot 2001, p.29). The next stage in Foot's argument is to link the concept of good with the notion of species. To know whether something is good is to know whether it is consistent with what is necessary for being a good exemplar of its species or life form. For the human life form good exemplars are ones who recognise the essential connectedness which they have with others, and therefore the requirement that they should behave cooperatively and with regard to others. In this way individual members of the human life form achieve eudaimonia in the Aristotelian sense. That is, in exercising ethical virtues human beings realise their full potential as members of the life form. Ethics is thus grounded in human nature and the conditions of its fulfilment. An account of human nature in this sense provides an account of ways in which the world is from an ethical point of view.

The neo-Aristotelian view does, however, leave us with a snag. It posits the notion of an essential human nature, but concepts of human nature and human potential change over time. What looks like a naturalistic account of the essential features of the human life form turns out to be a culturally mediated conception, moreover a conception that changes over time. But if we concede that conceptions of the good are typified by their historicity are we not back to the problem we started with, namely that of relativism? Are we committed to simply acknowledging that whatever is right is right only at a particular point in time and that we cannot judge the ethical norms of a particular time or place as deficient?

There are some deep and complex philosophical issues thrown up by the above questions. However, a simple example may throw some light on them. Recently in the UK a number of people have been pardoned for homosexual offences carried out before the changes that legalised homosexuality. The logic of this clearly drives to the conclusion that a judgement has been made that the earlier convictions were wrong. Homosexuality, while condemned by many at the time and prohibited by law, was subsequently judged to be acceptable. It would be absurd to say that previously homosexuality was wrong but that now it is not wrong. In short, this is to recognise that there has been progress in our understanding of what is right or wrong. Or in Aristotelian terms, we have come to understand better what from an ethical point of view is necessary for human flourishing. Our ethical norms are shaped by an account of the conditions of human flourishing- eudaimonia- and in that sense are discovered. At the same time our conception of those norms is *constructed* through our culturally mediated interpretations. Normativity is both discovered and constructed.

In summary, several conclusions flow from the above discussion. First, an understanding of the nature and status of ethical norms has to be seen as connected with claims about how the world is. If they are not so connected they remain in an abstract Kantian vacuum. Ethical norms need to be grounded in something. There are two aspects of the way the world is which the above discussion has referred to. One is what can broadly be called human nature and the conditions under which humans can flourish in the Aristotelian sense of eudaimonia. The other is that our ethical concepts are historically contextualised. That is the way the world is in respect of ethical concepts and any account of ethics needs to recognise that.

Second, recognising the way in which culturally mediated conceptions of the good change over time does not preclude us from making claims about what was once seen to be right now being seen to be wrong. We can talk of ethical progress. That does not commit us to seeing ethical progress as inevitable or

uncontested, but it does enable us to see that the notions of human flourishing and historical change can be brought together. We might view this approach as the historicization of Aristotelian accounts of virtue.

References

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