

HOW OBJECTIVE IS VALUE DISAGREEMENT? (PROBLEM DISCUSSION)

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1 Background

2 Better-making Properties

A General Remark

Standpoints pro or contra reductionist hypotheses are very hard to formulate adequately.

- Example: Mind \approx Brain
- How do you formulate this without presupposing a substantial metaphysics of the mind which renders the statement dubious from the start?
- Reductionist positions require careful formulations: supervenience, functionalism, special equality relations, special metaphysical terminology like persistence vs existence and possibility vs actuality, etc.
- Non-reductionist theses are equally hard to formulate without becoming trivial. For example, if you admit a rich metaphysics of the mind, then this requires special notions such as emergence to “explain” how this can be reconciled with the physical world.

The Autonomy Thesis

- One way of defending value realism is to argue for the Autonomy Thesis.
- Intuitively, the Autonomy Thesis states that ethics is independent from empirical nature and mathematics. (descriptive vs. normative)
- Slogan: You cannot derive an Ought from an Is. (“naturalistic fallacy”)
- However, the Autonomy Thesis is notoriously hard to define.

Example: Prior (1960)

Simple Logical Autonomy

No descriptive statement entails an ethical statement.

Prior's argument in the formulation of Maguire (2018: 432):

- 1 D entails $D \vee E$.
- 2 $(D \vee E) \wedge \neg D$ entails E .
- 3 Either $D \vee E$ is ethical or not.
- 4 If so, then 1 constitutes a counterexample to simple logical autonomy.
- 5 If not, then 2 constitutes a counterexample to simple logical autonomy.
- 6 Therefore simple logical autonomy is false.

The Trivial Position (to be avoided!)

Any value statement is either true or false. If a value statement turns out to be true, it will be true due to a specific fact. So it appears that there are only facts.

Narrow Facts

Making a distinction between fact and value only makes sense if we do not include moral facts in the characterization of a fact.

Narrow Facts

Narrow facts are either empirical facts [...] or abstract mathematical and logical truths.

empirical facts = facts that can be confirmed by empirical evidence and are principally testable by experiment

Values

Values

We have an intuitive grasp of what counts as *value*, *evaluative*, and *value comparison*. Ordinary speakers can identify certain adjectives as evaluative. Competent speakers of English, for example, understand that “good” and “brilliant” are evaluative adjectives and that “tall” is not evaluative in the same sense. An ordering structure reveals a value and, in turn, potential uses of the comparative form of value adjectives constitute value structure. For example, comparisons by “better than” and “more brilliant than” define specific value structures.

There is a broader sense of *value* used e.g. in sociological surveys such as Inglehart (1990) as any standpoint that is value-laden. For instance, being pro or contra abortion would be values in this parlance. Following Hansson (2001), Carlson (2018), Rast (2022), I continue to restrict my terminology to values in the sense of value structure.

Value Statements and Narrow Facts

Question: Are value statements *made true* by narrow facts? **Answer:** Yes.

But this doesn't mean that they are *justified* by these facts!

Better-making Properties

Definition

A property P is *better-making* for a value ordering \succeq and comparison objects a and b if and only if $P(a) \& \neg P(b) \supset a \succ b$.

Why should there be better-making properties?

Suppose that $a \succ b$ and there is no better-making property with respect to \succeq . Object a would have no properties that might be cited to justify why it is better than b . This position is absurd. A given comparison object must have *some* property that makes it better than another object, whatever that property may be.

Example

Two kitchen knives a and b are compared and a is deemed better than b . It is implausible to assert that a possesses no properties that could be used to justify why a is better than b . On the contrary, several properties may make it better; it may be sharper than the other, have a better handle than the other, have better steel, and so on. People rarely run out of possible candidates for better-making properties in evaluative practice.

Properties of Better-making Properties

- 1 Better-making properties cannot be contradictory under the same value. If there are two properties, P and P' , and two items a and b such that $P(a) \& \neg P(b) \& \neg P'(a) \& P'(b)$, then P and P' cannot be better-making properties belonging to the same value relation (\approx the same subvalue, value aspect, feature).
- 2 Better-making properties need to match the conditions imposed on the underlying order relation \succeq .
- 3 Example transitivity of \succeq : For any three objects a, b, c , if there is a better-making property P_1 that implies $a \succ b$, and there is a better-making property P_2 that implies $b \succ c$, then there is a better-making property P_3 such that $a \succ c$.

Better-making Properties and Value Disagreement

- Better-making properties are sufficient conditions for individual value comparisons.
- If knife a is sharper than b and sharpness is a decisive better-making property, then a is better than b .
- Value disagreement often concerns better-making properties.
- But: Better-making properties only form part of a justification of a value comparison.

Justification

Take justification as a theory T that can be instantiated by two comparison objects. Write $T[a, b]$ for this instantiation. Then we have:

$$T[a, b] \supset P(a) \& \neg P(b) \quad (1)$$

$$T[a, b] \supset (P(a) \& \neg P(b) \supset a \succ b) \quad (2)$$

for some better-making property P . In the simplified and not really adequate logical account of “necessary” and “sufficient”, this means that $P(a) \& \neg P(b)$ is a sufficient condition for $a \succ b$, and $P(a) \& \neg P(b)$ is a necessary condition for $T[a, b]$. (But T is only one specific justification, so P need not be a necessary ingredient of any other justification of $a \succ b$.)

What does justification involve?

- What counts as a better-making property. **normative?**
- Whether the comparison objects have the better-making property. **descriptive & objective**
- How to aggregate different value aspects into an overall betterness assessment. **mixed normative & descriptive?**

Can justifications be subjective?

- If the justifications of $a \succ b$ are subjective, then the two discourse participants do not really disagree.
- We do not call a disagreement that can be resolved by resorting to personal preferences a *value disagreement*.
- At least disagreements about whether comparison objects have specific better-making properties are clearly objective, since the properties themselves are objective.

What could “subjective” and “objective” mean?

- costing \$10: objective property
- being known by Alice to cost \$10: objective property
- being believed by Alice to cost \$10: subjective property
- being a deductively valid consequence of an antecedent: supposedly intersubjective property

Tentative Characterizations

Subjective: A subjective property is one that an object can only have if some person has a non-factive attitude and if the property cannot be reduced by logical inference to a property that does not entail an attitude of that person.

Intersubjective: An intersubjective property is one that an object can only have if any rational person can be expected to hold a specific attitude upon sincere reflection.

Objective: An objective property is one that does not involve any reference to attitudes or only involves factive attitudes like knowledge.

Intersubjective properties can be treated like objective properties. Both might require some attitudes of some persons, but these are either factive or can be expected to be held by any rational person.

Can better-making properties be subjective?

Suppose a better-making property P was subjective. According to the definition of a better-making property, $P(a) \& \neg P(b)$ implies the value comparison $a \succ b$. Since a person needs to hold a non-factive attitude about an object for that object to have a subjective property, the rule states in this case that it is a sufficient condition for the truth of a value comparison that a particular person holds a certain attitude.

- This consequence is absurd for attitudes like belief and similar truth-holding attitudes like certainty. Just because someone believes a is better than b because it has a certain property P that b lacks doesn't actually make a better than b .

What about desire?

- Desire alone would not suffice. The desire for a would have to be higher than the desire for b .
- There still needs be an objective property P that a has *why* it is more desirable than b .
- This P is the better-making property even in a theory based on desires.
- But do desires add anything of substance to the *better than* comparison?
- This view is feasible, but amounts to restating the *better than* comparison in the language of desires.
- Moreover, the Lack of Disagreement Objection applies like with preferences. We do not call disagreements value disagreements if they resolvable by resorting to what a specific person desires or wants.

Not a Value Disagreement (probably not a disagreement at all)



What about intuitions?

Could intuitions help us determine “moral facts”? The problem:

- Intuitions are not a source of evidence (Hintikka 1999).
- Case 1: Intuitions about a value statement are mostly shared.
 - Then there is (mostly) no value disagreement in the first place.
- Case 2: Intuitions about a value statement are conflicting.
 - Then they cannot resolve the value disagreement.
 - Error-theories about intuitions are particularly implausible.

Even if intuitions can help to reveal moral facts (as indicators of them), they cannot help resolving value disagreement.

Questions

- 1 What counts as a better-making property?
Is this question purely normative? To what extent is it a normative question?
- 2 What better-making properties do the comparison objects have?
Is this question only objective and empirical?
- 3 How can/should better-making properties be aggregated?
How normative is this question? To what extent is the choice objective or subjective? What role do the mathematical constraints play?

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