Julie Abaci PHL 350-01

December 8, 2023

On Subjective Morality, God, and the Human Mind

I. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and The Argument from Atheism

In the field of metaethics, normative ethics operates under the assumption that moral properties exist and can be defined. Various theories address the task of discerning right acts from wrong acts under normative ethics, with one such perspective being subjective morality. According to this belief, an action possesses the property of moral rightness if one sincerely believes so, reflecting a realist approach. Advocates for subjective morality have presented arguments across different contexts, including religious discourse that incorporates God into the framework of moral principles. An instance of this is the argument for subjective morality from atheism, articulated as follows: "If morality is objective, it is from God. There is no God. Hence, morality is not objective. Morality must be subjective." In this essay, I will focus on the argument from atheism and will critique its logic by invoking discussions of rhetoric from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Plato's *Euthyphro* dialogue.

In essence, the argument from atheism seeks to reinforce subjective morality by falsifying the existence of objective morality. In the first premise (i.e. if morality is objective, it is from God), the atheist argues that objective morality must exist in the presence of God as its creator. In other words, morality is objective only if there is a God to assign moral rightness and wrongness to certain actions. Through the atheist's belief in there being no God, it follows that morality is not objective, and therefore must be subjective. The central critique of this logic lies in the first premise, wherein morality is linked to God's existence as a dependent factor. To assume that morality is dependent on God's existence is to overlook the alternate possibility of morality having an independent relationship with God. While the atheist's argument claims that an action is right because it is approved of by God, it is also possible that God approves of the

action because it is right. In both cases, God exists and maintains a relationship with morality, but the role of the dependent will switch in each case.

Carroll illustrates the significance of this distinction in chapter seven of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* wherein the Mad Hatter's Tea Party takes place. When the March Hare urges Alice to "say what you mean," she responds: "I do…at least—at least I mean what I say—that's the same thing, you know."[1] Alice's sentiment is met with unanimous rejection from all other attendees, who justify their criticism with examples. These examples include distinctions like "I eat what I see" versus "I see what I eat," and "I breathe when I sleep" versus "I sleep when I breathe." In each case, both statements seemingly denote the same thing, but the independent action changes to produce different outcomes. If Alice were to say what she means, what she means would be independent from what she says, but would nevertheless influence what she says. If she were to mean what she says, what she says would be independent from what she means, but would also influence what she means. To illustrate this in a more accessible manner, the distinction between "I sleep when I breathe" and "I breathe when I sleep" reflects a similar error to Alice's statements; one breathes when she sleeps, but if she were to sleep when she breathes, she would always be asleep. Ultimately, this passage in the book highlights how the structure of a statement can alter the interpreted outcome through its independent and dependent parts.

Plato's *Euthyphro* echoes Alice's exploration of statement structure in a manner that aligns more closely with the atheist's argument for subjective morality. When Euthyphro finds himself discoursing with Socrates on religious matters, he follows a similar pattern as Alice in his explanation of pious actions. He claims that piety "is that which is dear to the gods, and

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[1] Lewis Carroll, "Chapter VII: A Mad Tea-Party," Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, September 20, 2020, https://www.alice-in-wonderland.net/resources/chapters-script/alices-adventures-in-wonderland/chapter-7/

impiety is that which is not dear to them."[2] Socrates investigates this claim by highlighting the fact that gods have quarreled over differences in value, and that there are matters on which the gods cannot unanimously agree. He clarifies that this fact implies certain actions can both be pious and impious, rendering Euthyphro's definition insufficient in adequately defining a pious act. Thus, Euthyphro amends his definition to "what all the gods love is pious and holy, and the opposite which they all hate, impious." Socrates then delves into this statement by claiming that what is pious cannot be considered the same thing as what the gods love. Specifically, he claims that something is loved by the gods because it is approved of by the gods, but an act is not pious because it is approved of by the gods, but rather it is loved by the gods because it is pious. In other words, what is pious is separate from what is loved by the gods. This implies the existence of a moral standard that is independent of divine powers, suggesting that a god may love an act if it is morally correct. In this case, the rightness of an action would be independent of a god's view towards it, but would dictate a god's approval. Similar to Alice's error in her statements, a god's approval being dependent on an act's rightness is a distinct concept from an act's rightness being dependent on a god's approval. To state "God loves right acts" is not the same as "an act is right if it is loved by God." Hence, in an argument centered on God's relationship to morality, it is worth considering the alternate possibility that moral principles may not be derived from God's commandments, but are commanded because of their intrinsic rightness.

Returning to the argument from atheism, the distinction between similar statements shown in the Mad Hatter's Tea Party and the *Euthyphro* dialogue can be drawn upon to critique the first premise. The atheist claims "if morality is objective, it is from God," which aligns with Socrates' reflection of "an act is right if it is loved by God." When the atheist argues that God

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[2] Plato, "Euthyphro," The Internet Classics Archive, accessed December 4, 2023, https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyfro.html.

does not exist, moral principles are thus eradicated as there is no God to assign moral rightness. Morality is consequently rendered a subjective framework. However, when the alternate possibility of morality's independence from God is considered, the argument's logic collapses. If God commands actions because they are inherently moral, morality can be considered an objective framework that remains beyond God's existence. In this scenario, the atheist can still link God's existence to morality, but the rejection of God's existence will not disprove objective moral principles. Furthermore, the argument from atheism fails to consider that subjective morality is not mutually exclusive from objective morality; under the realist view, morality may be built into the universe and actions may possess an objective property of rightness, even if this is merely determined by the subjective assessment of what one believes is right. To assert the full invalidity of objective morality when God is excluded overlooks the nuanced relationship between divinity and morality. Ultimately, in claiming that moral principles are derived from God, one must contemplate the dual possibilities of God loving right acts and an act being right if it is loved by God.

II. A.J. Ayer on Subjective Morality

Along with arguments in favor of subjective morality, there also exist several criticisms. Alfred Jules (A.J.) Ayer presents one such criticism on the basis of logical analysis in his book *Language, Truth, and Logic*. Ayer dismisses the notion that metaphysical statements hold meaningful content and can provide insight into reality, and he places moral statements into this category in adoption of an anti-realist perspective.[3] In this essay, I will further explore Ayer's critique of moral subjectivism and will endorse his perspective through an examination of psychological egoism.

[3] Alfred Ayer, "Language, Truth and Logic ," Antilogicalism, 1935, https://antilogicalism.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/language-truth-and-logic.pdf.

Ayer's criticism of moral talk is built upon his arguments for the verifiability of statements. A central idea in his book is his endorsement of the verification principle, wherein a statement is rendered meaningless if it cannot be verified.[4] Specifically, all meaningful statements are either placed into one of two categories: analytic or synthetic. Analytic statements are verifiable in principle and depend on the logic of their symbols and components; this would include mathematics and logic. A synthetic statement is empirically verifiable and provides knowledge of the world. If a statement does not rely on tautology or empirical verification, Ayer argues that it is a metaphysical "pseudo-proposition" that holds no meaning and cannot be considered true or false.

Moral statements are then classified as a "pseudo-proposition" in Ayer's "Critique Of Ethics And Theology" chapter. Unlike statements that provide knowledge of reality, Ayer argues that moral statements are merely an expression of one's emotion that cannot be verified through tautology or empiricism. For example, the moral statement "giving to charity is the right thing to do" cannot be proven to hold any inherent quality—it is only an expression of one's fondness for charity. In other words, it reflects the sentiment, "yay giving to charity!" Ethical commands are therefore incomparable to propositions that can be verified as an inherently factual statement. This serves as a critique of subjective morality under normative ethics, as these concepts suggest that moral properties are built into the universe and have inherent "to-be-doneness" if one sincerely believes so. The claim "this is the right way to act" cannot draw upon any evidence to verify its inherent rightness, and therefore cannot speak to any intrinsic moral property. While we can empirically observe the consequences or outcomes of certain actions, it is impossible to prove the rightness of the action, as it is a metaphysical concept.

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[4] Ayer, "Language, Truth and Logic," 11.

Ayer further critiques subjective morality by investigating two forms of subjectivist moral approval. In the first, he introduces the idea that an action is "good" or "right" if it is generally approved of, which reflects a subjective perspective on right acts.[5] He responds to this by arguing that it is not contradictory to claim that certain actions that are widely approved of are neither right nor good, which serves as a flaw in the idea's logic. He then invokes the subjectivist claim that an individual who asserts the rightness of an act is asserting that he is in approval of it. This notion accommodates the reality of diverse attitudes and perspectives on morality existing across individuals. However, Ayer argues against this by claiming that, under this notion, an individual would not be contradicting himself if he admits that he is sometimes in approval of what he considers wrong. If moral rightness is purely defined by expressions of approval from individuals and societies, this subjective moral perspective does not account for the inherent contradictions that Ayer highlights in his investigation. This reinforces his notion that moral statements of rightness are only expressions of one's emotions that cannot be framed as an assertion of moral truth.

I agree with Ayer's perspective on moral commandments being expressions of emotion, rather than factual propositions. What we deem "right" and "wrong" is merely a reflection of internal approval and aversion, with no implication for inherent principle. To elaborate on my position, I will assume a psychological egoist perspective through a story from Abraham Lincoln's lifetime. According to the story, Lincoln was riding in a carriage when he came across several pigs stuck in mud. He requested that the ride be stopped so he could climb out, run to the pigs, and bring them out of the mud to safety. When he returned, he reflected on this action with the other individual in the carriage. He stated: "that [action] was the very essence of selfishness. I should have had no peace of mind all day had I gone on and left that suffering old sow worrying

[5] Ayer, "Language, Truth and Logic," 65.

over those pigs. I did it to get peace of mind, don't you see."[6] Lincoln's sentiment in this story reflects psychological egoism, or the theory that all behavior is motivated by an individual's self-interest. Although we may consider the act of saving pigs drowning in mud to be altruistic, Lincoln argues that his motivation lies in the relief of his internal dissonance when perceiving the pig's suffering. I think this perspective is compelling, as the basis of any "good" action is the initial identification of something wrong or in need of action. For example, if I encounter an individual who is suffering, I identify that there is something to be addressed in my environment. I identify this through the response that is evoked in me when watching the suffering; I am off-put by the presence of pain. If I were to experience no internal response to this sight, I would have no motivation to assist the suffering individual. As in, if I felt no internal dissonance, I would be indifferent to the pain I am witnessing. I am thus called upon by my internal dissonance to do the "right" thing, as it serves as my guidepost. While we may believe we are doing something in aid of someone else as our central reason, it is also possible that the aid is serving as a means toward our end of alleviating internal dissonance. This does not necessarily render ourselves completely selfish and uncaring individuals; the fact that our perception of another's suffering can evoke negative internal experiences points to some level of concern for those beyond the self. However, it is the internal experience that we are acting on when we take the initiative to relieve suffering beyond ourselves.

Furthermore, psychological egoism is consistent with a Darwinian perspective of human nature. If evolutionary theory points to "survival of the fittest" as a determinant of those who are fit to reproduce, it follows that we are all equipped with a natural instinct to survive and adapt to our environment. This is arguably reflected in the way we perceive and process our senses. A

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[6] Joel Feinberg, "Moral Motivation and Human Nature: Psychological Egoism," MIT - Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999, https://web.mit.edu/holton/www/courses/moralpsych/feinberg.pdf.

notable example in this context would be the existence and function of mirror neurons. Originally discovered in the premotor cortex of monkeys,[7] mirror neurons have been observed in humans and provide the basis of our response to stimuli.[8] Essentially, when an individual observes another individual's actions or emotions, these neurons fire in brain regions linked to sensation perception and motor function to replicate our external perception within ourselves. If we witness an individual in our environment experiencing pain, our mirror neurons fire to evoke feelings of distress in ourselves—generally referred to as empathy. Theorists in the field of evolutionary psychology posit that this phenomenon can be attributed to fundamentally self-serving instincts for survival.[9] Mirroring serves as an adaptive tool for learning how one should navigate the environment, as well as how to secure resources. For instance, neurological mirroring facilitates cooperation which is vital for protecting one's resources and generating reciprocal care. To empathize with another organism is to know when it is in need of aid, and to extend aid is to build upon a reciprocal network of support. Along with this, mirroring can signal vital information about one's environment, particularly through the experience of pain and sadness. In a more primitive context, if a primate shares an environment with another primate who expresses feelings of fear, the observing primate may experience mirrored fear to signal preparation against a potential threat. Consequently, the observing primate is prompted to respond to another's emotion based on the implications for its own well-being. In essence, the

[7] Giacomo Rizzolatti, Leonardo Fogassi, and Vittorio Gallese, "Neurophysiological Mechanisms Underlying the Understanding and Imitation of Action," Nature Reviews Neuroscience 2, no. 9 (2001): 661–70, https://doi.org/10.1038/35090060.
[8] Sourya Acharya and Samarth Shukla, "Mirror Neurons: Enigma of the Metaphysical Modular Brain," Journal of Natural Science, Biology and Medicine 3, no. 2 (2012): 118, https://doi.org/10.4103/0976-9668.101878.
[9] Armin Schulz, The evolution of empathy, 2017, http://people.ku.edu/~a382s825/The%20Evolution%20of%20Empathy%20RD.pdf.

neurophysiological underpinning of empathy is theorized to be self-serving, despite its vast implications for interpersonal aid and cooperation.

Returning to the context of morality, psychological egoism reinforces Ayer's perception that moral statements are merely an expression of emotion. As organisms wired for survival, we are in a continuous state of processing our environment through an indispensable self-focused lens. Suffering, pain, and other sources of negative affect in our environment elicit an adaptive response within us to address potential threats and optimize our survivability. This translates into our modern landscape when we witness tragedy and are met with feelings of distress, even if we are not in a threatening position ourselves. For example, we may vividly imagine the feeling of being cold and hungry when walking past an individual who is homeless during the winter, or the profound fear of being a civilian in an active war zone when watching the news from a safe location. This internal distress is what mobilizes us to donate to charity or extend other forms of aid; we are wired to address our internal dissonance because it serves as a crucial adaptive tool. Consequently, we deduce statements such as "this is the right thing to do" from the actions that remedy our internal discomfort, as they are satisfying our basic instinct to optimize survival. We conversely punish actions under the statement "that is the wrong thing to do" when they fuel our internal discomfort. Things like murder and inflicted suffering, for example, are met with evolutionarily adaptive feelings of aversion and are thus condemned. One cannot argue that there is an inherent immoral quality in murder, but can articulate the dissonance that signifies the potential threat that murder poses to the human population—"boo, murder!" Patricia Churchland articulates this in her book *Braintrust*: *What Neuroscience Tells us About Morality* when she states: "morality seems to me to be a natural phenomenon constrained by the forces of natural selection, rooted in neurobiology, shaped by the local ecology and modified by cultural

developments."[10] As we advanced beyond our primitive origins towards a more sophisticated civilization, our instinctive feelings were intellectualized into a framework of morality that we eventually came to perceive as an entity divorced from its neuropsychological foundation.

In sum, my perspective aligns with Ayer's critique of subjective morality under normative ethics, grounded in the rejection of inherent moral properties. While I believe moral statements are derived from subjective experiences of empathy and emotion, they are not verifiable in terms of inherent moral rightness. I believe Ayer's anti-realist perspective can be very easily met with hesitation; reducing something as grave as genocide to a simple expression like "boo, genocide" feels egregious and arrogant. However, I uphold that we often underestimate the profound role of neuropsychology in shaping our perception of abstract concepts such as morality. Because survival and environmental adaptation is our most fundamental motive, it follows that our aversion to seemingly "wrong" behavior feels so profound. When we reflect on the gravest tragedies in history, such as the holocaust, we are met with an internal dissonance so extreme that it may feel overwhelming to simply say "there is nothing inherently wrong with Nazism, I simply do not like it." It is important to clarify that "not liking" Nazism is not comparable to "not liking" a certain flavor of ice cream or movie, but it should rather be viewed through the perspective of psychological mirroring. In imagining an individual's suffering, a neurological response evokes feelings of distress that serve as recognition of someone else's humanity—as in, "I see you suffer and I imagine what it feels like through my lens, it is also causing me pain." These emotions fuel our drive to champion behavior we deem "right" and condemn those we deem "wrong." Indeed, the hyper-simplified version of this process is encapsulated in "boo, genocide," but its simplicity in language is misleading and

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[10] Patricia Smith Churchland, *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us about Morality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

disparages the profundity of the human psyche. The absence of moral properties does not necessarily diminish the profound sense of reprehensibility that certain actions may evoke. Perhaps we cannot say that genocide and murder are *inherently* wrong outside of our human sense, but our human sense makes up our lived experience. Therefore, it stands as the most profound force in shaping our assessment of the world and influencing the choices we make during our time on Earth.

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