

3-25-2011

A Non-Realist Response to Revisionism

Stuart Hudson
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/phil>

Recommended Citation

Hudson, Stuart (2011) "A Non-Realist Response to Revisionism," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/phil/vol17/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester Journal of Philosophy by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

A Non-Realist Response to Revisionism

Stuart Hudson

Prelude

When thinking about morality, communication, and conflict resolution, we generally stress factors which bring us together and provide for understanding between different viewpoints and belief systems. The Utopian side of human thought fantasizes about underlying languages or ideas common to all people, eventually resulting in one large imagined group hug. This warm fuzzy feeling is often, if not always, shattered by everyday reality. Political, religious, ideological, and sometimes purely psychological forces drive us to argue and sometimes to war over conflicting beliefs. Much of philosophy involves a search for the “truth” about “reality.” As philosophers though, we are careful to separate notions of inter-subjective “truth” from objective “Truth.” Given our scientific knowledge and skeptical nature, we refrain from making the assumption that there is a direct connection between what we experience and what is actually outside of us (the objective). As such, we are left using logic to assemble whatever agreement we can find. In attempting to resolve conflict between different people, we often attempt to find and build on those things which are inter-subjectively verifiable.

Many conflicts are born out of the belief that a certain group is right and another is wrong. When this isn't due to differences about the ‘facts’ which a mediator could settle by facilitating dialog, recreating experiences, or introducing

evidence, it's because of differences in ethical systems due to cultural experience. One way to try to resolve conflicts in moral belief would be to move debate to the level of meta-ethics, or the theory of ethics. The hope is that with a solid foundation for ethical discussion, we can better promote understanding between people. It is in this train of thought that this paper is written.

Introduction

Let's assume that we are non-realists.¹ We believe that our moral beliefs are in no way connected to an objective, stance/mind independent, moral reality. Good. There is a movement within non-realism, called revisionism, which suggests we should alter our language to reflect the meta-ethical reality that we have no connection with a moral reality. A serious proponent of this approach is Joshua Greene. His dissertation, "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and What to Do About It," presents an argument for the non-realist to take up the charge of revising our moral language. The process of revision, revisionists such as Greene hold, will not only bring our language closer to this reality, but will also reduce the number of conflicts (i.e. pain and suffering) born out of the use of this supposed connection to an objective moral reality. The focus of this essay is a response to this charge and its most likely negative effects.

This essay is in three parts. First, I will argue that revisionism is self-defeating, dangerous and unreasonable. Second, I will discuss an alternative method of achieving what the revisionist has in mind by looking at ethical statements in a pragmatic light. Third, I will discuss what my argument means for the non-realist and his place within conflict resolution.

¹ Non-Realists are also often referred to as Irrealists and Anti-Realists. I will treat these terms synonymously.

Revisionism and its Roadblocks to Resolving Conflict

In examining revisionism our first topic of interest is, “Why should we revise our common moral language?” Revisionism's main goal is to lessen conflict by revising language to fit the individual's relationship with objective ethical reality. Getting rid of terms which suggest a connection to the objective universal moral concepts, such as “right” and “wrong,” allows us to bypass conflicts based on competing realist belief systems. If this revision can be achieved, the majority of remaining conflicts will be based upon factual disputes or superficial cultural misinterpretations. These remaining conflicts are not to be solved strictly by philosophers, but only mediators and fact checkers. The second question becomes, “Who are the parties who might come into conflict?” For the revisionists and frustrated non-realists, the natural opponent would be the realist.

The most obvious difference between the realist and non-realist is in their views of the metaphysical foundation of ethics. For the purposes of this paper I will separate realists into two camps: progressive and absolute.² Both groups believe in the objective moral facts independent of the human mind's existence and that we, in our moralizing, have a direct connection with the moral reality from which those facts are derived.³ The absolute realist believes that since there are

² Normally I would want to stay away from creating this type of dichotomy. They are usually inaccurate, but in this case I don't foresee much harm. Those who I would be leaving out would probably hold the same tenants as the progressive realists, while engaging in more absolutist behave like proselytizing.

³ Those who believe that moral beliefs are real in the sense that they exist in our mind and are projected into reality hold an awkward place in between realists and non-realists. Their view of reality is fundamentally different then that considered in this paper. The separation between have the quality of mind-dependence and -independence is the foundation for most, if not all realist, non-realist debate.

moral facts, it is the individual's moral duty to follow those facts and to force others to act accordingly. The progressive moral realists, which I believe most moral realists are, believe that while there is a moral reality, individuals should not always be forced to act in accordance with the facts of that reality. Neither one of these groups is in favor of revisionism, since they believe the normative terms we use are accurate in relation to objective reality. From here, I consider how these groups will most likely interact with each other, and I attempt to show that Greene's prescription for conflict reduction is internally inconsistent.

The Revisionist and the Progressive Realists

Given our current state of moral language the non-realist and the progressive realist are in many ways in the same boat. Their ultimate goal is a cooperative system in which groups with different, but not too different, reasonable moral and religious beliefs live together peacefully. Someone like Rawls might call this a society of reasonable pluralists. But, unfortunately, with the addition of revisionism, problems would most likely arise. It would become very apparent to any progressive realist that the revisionist was operating on an entirely different playing field. As he does not subscribe to the terms commonly used in ethical discourse, it is clear that the revisionist would be skeptical of the fundamental beliefs of the progressive or any realist. This difference would obviously be present whether or not actual attempts at revision occurred. They would create a certain level of tension and miscommunication not otherwise present. While the revision might not immediately result in any additional conflict, the resulting minor difficulties and the action itself would create a psychological barrier between the two sides.

The Revisionist and the Absolute Realist

The absolute realists are those who believe that what they do and the way it's done is the only right way. They

believe this to the extent that they are willing to change the way other people act by amending laws and using coercion to enforce them. When disagreement occurs between people on this level it can often result in violent conflict. This is the type of conflict the revisionist is hoping to eventually avoid by revising moral language. As this sort of conflict might be quite dangerous, it's important to look at the revisionist's role in its creation.

In approaching this discussion/potential conflict, at both sides are looking to change the mind of the other in some way. The realist believes his side is validated by its connection to the objective moral reality, and the revisionist holds certain values to be of the utmost important in his community's life. Neither side necessarily came to compromise. What makes things worse is that the revisionist's methods of thinking and possibly language actively undermine the realist position, and vice versa. This, as many have experienced, can be quite frustrating. It might be easier or simpler for the absolute realist to deal with someone who has different beliefs, as long as they shared a meta-ethical foundation, namely that there is an objective moral reality. To help elaborate the point, envision two conversations, one between a Muslim and a Christian and one between a Christian or Muslim and an Atheist revisionist on the topic of religion or morality. It seems more likely that mutual respect, admiration, understanding, etc. between the Christian and the Muslim would develop than between the Christian or Muslim and the Atheist. For a realist to work with someone whose core beliefs, if true, negate the foundation of their own is a recipe for trouble. This is especially the case if the two groups live in close contact with each other. The most important aspect of this relationship is that both sides (the revisionist and the realist) act more like two absolute realists. Neither one is willing to budge. One believes he knows objective moral reality and the other believes he understands the meta-ethical nature of morality itself. With both sides grounded strongly in their own belief

systems, the revisionist, who has previously been thought of as a person of cooperation and clear communication, looks much like an absolute moral realist. This raises the question: What separates the revisionist from the absolute realist in terms of conflict resolution? Both have the belief that if everyone adopted their belief system that conflict resolution would become a fairly simple process.

The Revisionist and any Non-Realist

This, at first, seems like a simple category to examine. The revisionist is a non-realist, and they have much in common, especially in the eyes of the revisionist. However, the revisionist has to worry about alienating other non-realists. One of the more confusing aspects of Greene's manuscript is the section on how to apply revisionism. He suggests that we are resigned to using "moral solutions, which are achieved when individuals decide to change their behavior on their own, presumably out of a sense of moral obligation to the community."⁴ Unfortunately, not every non-realist will want to change their behavior to reflect Greene's formulations. It's possible, although not always necessary, to create another demographic: conservative non-realists. You might define this group as not having belief in a stance independent system of morals, but also wanting to refrain from changing social conventions too quickly. This, they could argue, would only add fuel to the fire that constantly polarizes the realist and non-realist camps.

Revisionism is self-defeating

By revising moral language as the revisionist hopes, the revisionist is actively undermining the foundation of realism, possibly impairing the goals of the conservative non-

⁴ Greene, Joshua, "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and What to Do About It," (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2003), 336.

realist, and he risks not only alienating progressive realists, but also radicalizing absolute realists. The combination of these two effects might further consolidate the realist/non-realist dichotomy in society, setting the stage for greater conflict down the road.

A More Satisfying Way to Look at Moral Statements

If you are a revisionist, or would-be revisionist, the prospect of using terms like right and wrong, even though you believe them to be a false account of reality, doesn't seem as exciting as having your language consistently and accurately reflect meta-ethical reality. In reaction to these worries, I'd like to propose an alternative, pragmatic way of thinking about moral statements.

Typically, non-realists have two ways of looking at moral statements; as cognitivists or as non-cognitivists.⁵ Revisionism by way of error theory is cognitivist, entailing that our moral utterances claim to describe some objective moral reality, but universally fail (because none exists). Cognitivists believe that statements about morality have truth-values. By contrast, non-cognitivism holds that our moral statements don't have any aspect which can be categorized as true or false. A non-cognitivist explanation of ethical statements given by A.J. Ayer is that when saying something like, "Stealing money is wrong!" we are really only saying, "Stealing money!"⁶ While both cognitivists and non-cognitivists draw examples from the same types of ethical statements, they differ over how to interpret the speaker's intent.

Indeed, analyzing the intent behind ethical statements seems more productive than making conjectures about meta-ethics. We can divide a statement into two parts, a personal

⁵ Non-cognitivists are also known as expressivists.

⁶ A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth & Logic*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 64.

claim and an objective claim. The personal aspect is the "I believe" phrase, which is sometimes not verbally communicated, but always contained within the statement itself. The objective aspect is the attempted connection to an objective moral reality in the form of "is wrong," or "is right." Every time we make an ethical statement these two parts are present, but non-cognitivists and cognitivists are pulling from different levels of the same statement.

The non-cognitivist's position draws on the meta-ethical non-realist viewpoint. Since terms like "right" and "wrong" are either drawn from connections to an "objective" morality which only exists in our minds, or are used by individuals to communicate effectively to others, the non-cognitivist takes these terms to be simply reflections of our own belief systems, and therefore neither true nor false. The cognitivist (our error-based revisionist) looks at the intent of the ethical statement and then compares it to the non-realist view of meta-ethical reality. Very often when someone says, "Killing a sentient being is wrong," they are actually stating that there is an objective moral reality which is mind/stance-independent, according to which this action is wrong. But, according to the error theorist, this isn't the case. The statement is false, because there isn't an objective moral reality from which to draw or to which to connect. These two accounts of ethical statements, however, aren't incompatible if we focus on the intent of the individual making the statement. On the personal level, they aren't truth-functional, but as the issuer of the statement attempts to connect to an objective moral reality, they develop truth-values.⁷ If these two types of thought can merge in this way, then it is the intent of the issuer that matters the most when ethical statements are made. In this way, we sidestep the

⁷ I'm assuming here that ethical claims, outside of their issuer's intent, do not have any connection to some objective moral reality.

cognitivist/non-cognitivist quandary and weaken the foundation of both the revisionist and the absolute realist.

In order to further explain and hopefully clarify my point, I'll give a few examples of ethical statements. With each, I will show how this pragmatic, intent-based view of ethical statements would interpret each.

- “I believe that abortion is wrong.”
 - This example is obviously one in which an individual is stating their opinion and is making no connection to an objective moral reality. Further statements, however, might complicate this assessment.
- “Abortion is wrong.”
 - This statement is ambiguous between both the personal and objective aspects of ethics. An individual hearing such a statement should focus upon the way in which and by whom the statement is made.⁸
- “Your beliefs about abortion are wrong.”
 - Statements of this type are linked directly to a connection with an objective moral reality. The alternative explanation is that the person meant that you're only wrong according to their or their community's belief system. This latter view might be the interpretation given by a non-cognitivist, but it is less likely to be true according to the individual who made the statement.⁹

⁸ Important factors include tone, personal history of the individual making the statement, and context within which the statement was made.

⁹ An error-based revisionist would assign truth-value according to the speaker's intention.

While my view of ethical statements as a pragmatic combination of cognitivism and non-cognitivism rids us of the need to revise all moral language it does permit revisionism in a much weaker form.¹⁰ Revising moral language can be helpful in cases where communities or societies involved in negotiation understand that their belief systems are significantly different and the use of the terms right and wrong would produce little to no headway. However, this does require each community to place the political goal of conflict resolution above their respective belief systems to some extent.

The other advantage this move possesses is that it allows us to sidestep the attacks brought by fictionalism, the view that we merely talk *as if* there were some objective moral reality. Many, including Greene, attack fictionalism by noting that it makes moral language necessarily inauthentic and deceptive. These objections can't be raised against my account of the non-realist theory above, because using common moral language such as "right" or "wrong" doesn't mean that the non-realist is referring to an objective morality, and not his internal system of beliefs. If the latter is true, no deception is being committed and no internal fiction is being espoused or advanced. There is the possibility that this use of language might promote confusion, but the confusion is much less devastating than the direct conflict brought on by full scale revision.

Aside from this assessment of ethical statements, there are pragmatic and utilitarian reasons for a non-realist to keep our moral language the way it is, even though it may not perfectly reflect the meta-ethical reality. Our moral language, as well as morality, is one which has evolved with human beings and is a very natural part of our psychological make up. Being natural, of course, doesn't mean that it is morally right, but can be very useful. It allows us all to share the

¹⁰ This should also calm the worries surrounding fictionalism.

experience of conviction. This conviction is one which is best understood in forceful and emotive terms like “right” and “wrong.” These terms are of such use that it seems quite odd to imagine others that could effectively replace them. Even if we could find terms or phrases to replace “right” and “wrong,” the question remains whether or not they would carry the same psychological power. Our common moral language also allows for a less complicated and initially effective means of communication over a wide audience. It helps individuals motivate themselves and others in ways other expressions cannot. While these are just a few of the advantages that common moral language has, when combined with the negative effects of revision, I believe maintaining our current language becomes at least a sound option.

What Can a Non-Realist Reasonably Expect?

If revisionism is dangerous due to the increased social strife it would create, and if a mixture of cognitivism and non-cognitivism would make it possible for a non-realist to discuss questions of morality using common ethical terms, what benefit can the non-realist reasonably expect from of their meta-ethical beliefs? They can't expect the language spoken by society to match their beliefs about the lack of connection between moral thoughts and an objective moral reality. They can't expect a change in common moral language to resolve conflicts between those of competing realist belief systems. What then, makes his contribution to society through politics or discussions of morality any different from a progressive realist? In conversations on ethics we usually differentiate between those who take an action's consequences and those who take the intent behind an action to be of primary importance. We can separate the progressive and absolute realists from each other based on their projected behavior in a variety of situations. It might leave a non-realist with a poor taste in his mouth if there isn't any behavioral or linguistic difference between himself and

the progressive realist with whom he shares no meta-ethical beliefs. This is particularly frustrating because the meta-ethical difference between the two is so obvious. One of the most annoying aspects of conversation for a non-realist is the confidence and sometimes smugness with which an absolute realist discusses morality. There must surely be some way for the non-realist to distance himself from the absolute realist. This way, as error theory and revisionism believe, is to reject the meta-ethical foundation of realism and therefore realism itself. Revisionists like Greene hope that the rejection of a realist foundation and a subsequent change in vocabulary will solve the conflicts born of the strong will and stubbornness of realism. This is the wrong approach. In his manuscript, Greene states,

Once again, the enemy, the wolf in sheep's clothing, is moral realism. Conflicts of interest may be inevitable, but they need not be exacerbated by people's unflagging confidence that they're *right* and that their opponents are *wrong*. The solution, then, is to get rid of realist thinking and to start by getting rid of realist language. Speak only in terms that make the subjective nature of value plain.¹¹

In order to achieve the basic goal of minimizing conflict, it is more effective to emphasize similarities in ethical beliefs and promote conversation, as opposed to polarizing society even further. What does this mean for the non-realist? To be consistent with his ultimate goal of conflict reduction, the non-realist must relinquish his insistence on meta-ethical uniformity and accept that he has no better answer to the problem of conflict resolution, according to those goals, than does the progressive realist.

While the former revisionist might not be so distinguishable in moral life without his revisionism, there are still a number of alternatives that he can promote to achieve

¹¹ Greene, 236.

his goal of reducing conflict. One avenue would be encouraging the creation of political agreements that discourage realist and non-realist ideals of oppression based on meta-ethical beliefs. These political agreements could help shape societies in non-realist or progressive realist ways which promote political unity above comprehensive doctrines.¹² This move towards a reasonable pluralism, as Rawls might put it, conveys the original goals of the revisionist without the darker side-effects of internal strife within or between communities. This move would mean that absolute realists and continuing revisionists might be influenced in one manner or another to cease promoting conflict in the political sphere, but this seems like something the revisionist has always been willing to do.

The last element of my proposal is that one would have to accept the persistence of conflict due to both realists and non-realists possessing the “realist” attitudes which Greene renounces. I find this to be a challenging, but nonetheless essential, burden to carry. Achieving the level of linguistic and meta-ethical homogeneity necessary to change the common system of moral language, even if it was possible, wouldn't stop the type of conflict at which Greene aims his revisionism. While, to some degree, purely realist beliefs exacerbate conflict, the conviction with which a realist can hold beliefs is only a little different from that of non-realists. It's hard to imagine that non-realist convictions are any weaker than realist ones, and it is almost certain that serious differences would exist in a hypothetical discussion between non-realists. If a realist and a non-realist held similar values, what would keep the non-realist from being just as adamant as the realist? Whether or not the non-realist is a revisionist ought to play no part in this. Just because we (non-realists) denounce the meta-ethical arguments for realism doesn't mean that we disagree with their ethical

¹² John Rawls, *Law of Peoples*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

beliefs. For those whose main aim is to reduce conflict, a system of non-realist linguistic homogeneity is less important than the approach one takes to ethical discourse and conflict resolution. Hardliners are the root cause of persistent conflict, and they are to be found on both the realist and non-realist side, as Greene makes clear.

Conclusion

Revisionism fails because it would increase, rather than decrease, conflict, and because my analysis of moral statements makes it unnecessary. Even after this setback the former revisionist shouldn't lose heart. As long as the goal of revising moral language is to reduce instances of conflict based on ethical disagreements, while ensuring that our language fits non-realist meta-ethical beliefs, then the former revisionist should be happy with the alternative path (joining with the progressive realist) laid forth in this paper.

I can foresee two objections to this paper. One is a rejection of my interpretation of the meaning of moral statements, what Greene calls the reformation of analytic naturalism. The second is that the methods proposed here will lead to even larger conflicts and would render the paper self-defeating. I'll respond to them both in the order presented.

Greene states that

“Reforming analytic naturalism is a non-starter, a half baked notion of an inkling of a thought about how we might make true moral principles out of nothing. The more reasonable hope in the neighborhood of analytic naturalism is that we might someday come to a consensus about how we ought to organize our public and private lives and that maybe...we could attempt to institutionalize it by building it into our language.”¹³

¹³ Greene, 265.

I would argue that my interpretation of moral statements is not redefining what is right or wrong. I'm not worried about what is right or what it means to be right, but the way in which we communicate our beliefs to others.

The second objection claims that the political agreements I proposed, which systematically exclude the more radical elements of society, create a reasonable/unreasonable dichotomy which is obviously biased against those who don't hold certain centrist ideals. This segregation and bias might well lead to further conflicts with even greater negative consequences. In many respects, it might produce better consequences to follow the adage, "Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer," and loosen restrictions on which types of doctrines can participate in political discourse. By taking this approach, a society would ensure a greater level of inclusion and be less likely to create enemies.

The best response to this worry is that this is a problem for every politically liberal society, not just revisionist or anti-realist ones. As long as comprehensive political doctrines exist, there will always be the prospect of political polarization in society, which threatens whatever peace exists. This worry is not one which this paper endeavors to quell, but is worth a few words in closing.

Greene's project is an attempt to remedy the exacerbation of conflict caused by immovable moral beliefs. I would propose that there is no solution to this problem beyond the naturally imperfect attempt to raise future generations to be respectful of others and their beliefs. The confidence with which even non-realist revisionists hold their beliefs seems to be just as natural and inevitable as possessing the simultaneous gift and curse of morality itself. In attempting to rid ourselves of these feelings by making adjustments in our language, we are, in the end, choosing a path which will ultimately be unprofitable, as we struggle against our very nature to believe passionately in something outside of our own existence.

Bibliography

- Ayer, A.J. *Language, Truth & Logic*. New York: Dover Publications, 1952.
- Greene, Joshua. "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and What to Do About It," (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2003).
- Rawls, John. *Law of Peoples*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.