

Pragmatic naturalism and moral objectivity

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Suppose that Darwin is right that human morals or something like them originated and persisted among our remote ancestors as a set of adaptations fashioned through natural selection. Suppose further that in his new book Philip Kitcher (2011) is right that during the past 50 thousand years of cultural evolution our ancestors, living until the past 10 thousand mostly in small groups diversified by age and sex, built on these primitive quasi-moral functions to create rules and precepts, in response to the tensions and difficulties of social living, and that they refined these functions and sometimes created new functions, similar enough to the others, to qualify as being moral or moral-like. The process of improving the old functions and creating new ones in response to new problems is iterative on his account, resulting in a long procession of small and large moral changes in diverse and changing populations. As we view them in retrospect, many of us perceive some changes as ‘morally progressive’, others as ‘morally regressive’. Kitcher (2011: 140–1, 145–53, 153–62) gives, as examples of progressive change, the dropping of the idea of exact retribution – eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life – from the earliest legal codes, the abolition of slavery in 19th-century America, and important changes in the civil status of women in Western Europe and North America in the past two centuries.

To suppose that this kind of story captures the essence of moral evolution is to endorse a type of moral naturalism that Kitcher calls ‘pragmatic naturalism’, since the moral changes in the story are pragmatically motivated as responses to practical difficulties in living together as interdependent humans. The question we address in this article is whether pragmatic naturalism can explain moral change in a way that allows it to be, at least at some later stages of evolution, *objectively* progressive (or regressive). More exactly, can progressive/regressive moral change as conceived within this theory of moral evolution be normatively objective in a way that is consistent with the theory’s demand that moral change be explained with psychological realism? We will argue that it can, even given a surprisingly robust conception of normative objectivity.

Consider the idea articulated by Russ Shafer-Landau (2003: 15) that an objective moral truth (or fact) must be ‘stance-independent’ in that it exists independently of all our evaluative attitudes, taken collectively, whether we have them now or would have them on reflection under ideal conditions. Sharon Street (2006) has argued that this conception of moral objectivity leads to scepticism about moral knowledge when combined with the above assumptions about moral evolution. Kitcher (2011: 178–86) offers an objection to the existence of such ‘external’ moral truths (or facts) that is related to

Street's but is more general since it doesn't depend on the Darwinian origins of morals. Kitcher's objection is that the moral innovators who push toward progressive moral change in the examples above, especially the more recent ones for which we have much relevant written evidence, do not enter into psychological processes that give any indication that they are responding to mind-independent moral facts that would make the changes objectively progressive on the supposed conception of objectivity. Indeed, if we suppose the reformers to be sincere, they view the reasons for moral change in ways that are entirely mind-dependent. Moreover, what we know about human psychology gives no hint of the existence of faculties of perception or reasoning that support beliefs about such truths or facts. We find the objection to be convincing and consistent with our own published research (Campbell and Kumar 2012), but even a relatively brief assessment of the possible replies would take us far beyond the limits of this short article. We propose, therefore, to accept Kitcher's objection conditionally and ask whether an alternative conception of objectivity is available that would avoid Kitcher's objection yet be alive to the sense that many people have that the authority of morals is objective in a way that transcends convention and consensus in moral opinion, even when these are the products of serious, extended and collaborative reflection.¹

The nub of our idea is evident in situations where people are faced with morally hard choices such that whichever way they choose they will go contrary to some of their deep-seated moral inclinations. In such cases, even if they feel sure of what they have to do, they can believe, nevertheless, that it is possible that they have misunderstood what is morally required. Why would they think that? They believe that they are morally fallible, that they can be in moral error, even when one path may appear to be morally right on balance and when their compatriots would agree about what appears right. In such cases, moral doubt of this kind presupposes that what is morally right transcends conventional rules and moral consensus, however broad, and is in this respect objective. How moral rightness can have that transcendence is of course controversial. The point here is that thinking this way does imply an intuitively recognizable sense in which what is truly morally right is an objective matter.

The problem for this essay is to explain how moral objectivity of this kind can be coherently used to describe progressive (or regressive) moral change within the terms of pragmatic naturalism as outlined above. Put another way, the problem is to explain within the resources of pragmatic naturalism how massive moral error is possible, individually and collectively, about which changes are morally progressive and which are morally regressive.

1 For empirical evidence that ordinary people think that morality is objective in roughly this way see Nichols 2004; Goodwin and Darley 2008.

Before we move to that task, three caveats are in order. First, throughout Kitcher's (2011) discussion of moral change, there are examples where changes in people's information about non-moral facts occasions conflicts about how to proceed, such as where a principle or rule permitted an action that now is seen in light of new information to have bad consequences according to standards presupposed in other principles and rules (e.g. 147–50, 157–62). A solution requires modifying the principles and rules in a minimal way so that the old functions of the precepts are accomplished but now in a way that doesn't issue in conflict in light of the new non-moral facts. It is perhaps not too difficult to imagine scenarios in which people are collectively mistaken about these non-moral facts and because of that they are collectively in error about what is morally required. To make our task more challenging but more interesting, we propose that in regard to what is objectively morally required it must be possible for everyone to be collectively and persistently mistaken about what is morally required *even when they are making no mistakes about the non-moral facts and are not ignorant of any morally relevant non-moral facts*.

The second caveat is that we are not supposing that it makes sense to have this kind of doubt about basic moral demands, such as caring for family or helping strangers in dire need when the costs are minimal, especially when these are taken to be *prima facie* moral demands that can be overridden by conflicting moral demands. What could a massive collective moral error come to in this kind of case when we are making no mistake about non-moral facts? We can think of no answer, but the argument below does not turn on this issue. It will be enough to establish our conclusion if massive moral error is possible for *at least some* situations involving conflict among moral demands even when (i) no non-moral mistake is being made and (ii) the explanation of error is consistent with Kitcher's overall conception of how progressive and regressive moral changes occur.

The third caveat is that we will amend one of Kitcher's assumptions about how morals evolved but do so in a way that makes our task harder. (The argument below doesn't depend on this amendment, but for reasons to be given it makes our conclusion more significant for the nature of moral objectivity.) Kitcher (2011: 5–6, 67–103) postulates that the origin of morals and hence the most basic moral functions, such as caring for one's community, as in helping non-kin in great need, or treating others fairly, as in keeping one's word in agreements, evolved in the main as remedies for 'failures of psychological altruism'. While we concede that Kitcher does embrace a considerable degree of pluralism in values and functions, we suggest that pluralism should extend even to this basic level of moral demands. In particular, we think some basic moral functions, for example keeping agreements that afford the benefits of social coordination, are not best conceived as remedies for failures of altruism. Let us concede that Kitcher (2011: 57–66) is right that psychological altruism evolved from voluntary

coalitions among non-kin rather than iterated prisoner's dilemmas (though our argument would go through in the latter case too²). Did moral norms about keeping faithful to one's promises or about resolving moral conflicts arising from such norms evolve as remedies for insufficiencies in psychological altruism? We find it implausible to think so.

Consider keeping a promise not to plow with someone's ox, when in the circumstances one would be acting altruistically in breaking that promise. While keeping a promise because one has promised may count as altruism on Kitcher's (2011: 29) broad definition of psychological altruism, the practice of promise keeping remedies the need we have to coordinate our actions for mutual benefit, *however altruistic we might be*, not the need to be more altruistic. A parallel point can be made for the basic moral demands that are associated with different social roles involving responsibility and authority. These demands also remedy coordination problems, not lack of altruism, in situations where a diversity of talent and need for division of labour give rise to rules that regulate how people treat each other in different social roles. In short, at the most basic levels of moral norms there appear to be a plurality of functions, and while some of these, such as involving refraining from harming others and loyalty to one's group, are plausibly conceived as remedying failures of altruism, many others are not. Moreover, in cases of moral conflict, which can occur at the most basic level (such as between keeping a promise and refraining from harming, or between the latter and fulfilling one's social role), there is no obvious common denominator, such as the need to remedy failures of altruism, to which one might appeal in seeking a resolution of conflict that might serve as an 'objective' point of reference. The pluralism implicit in pragmatic naturalism is, in sum, deeper and more complex than Kitcher recognizes and our central task is thus more daunting.

How then is it possible, on a psychologically realistic conception of progressive moral change, for there to be a massive moral error on the part of those who resist the change, independently of any mistakes they might make about non-moral facts? We appeal to a mode of reasoning about conflicts in moral feeling and thinking that we have labelled elsewhere 'moral consistency reasoning' (Campbell and Kumar 2012; Kumar and Campbell 2012; see also Campbell 2009; Campbell and Woodrow 2003). This mode of moral conflict resolution is reflected in numerous examples of moral discussion in which there is disagreement about what is the right way to respond morally to a situation and is distinct from seeking a Rawlsian reflective equilibrium among particular judgments and general principles (Campbell and Kumar 2012: 304–10).

2 Those who always cooperate, even with known defectors, for the sake of the other serve to encourage defection and demonstrate the need for less altruism, not more (see Axelrod 1984).

Put schematically, suppose person P^* questions a moral response R by a person P to a situation S , such as P feeling no moral demand to give to famine relief in another country past the point where it creates a significant burden for P and P 's family. Imagine that P^* asks P to imagine another situation S^* that is purely hypothetical but to which P has a moral response R^* that is morally opposite to R . For example, S^* might be a situation in which a toddler is drowning in a shallow pond and can be saved only by P wading into the pond and ruining an expensive suit that P cannot easily replace, where R^* is feeling strongly the moral demand to save the child (Singer 1972).³ Unless P sees some morally relevant difference between S and S^* , P is caught in moral inconsistency. Most persons are uncomfortable when their inconsistency is exposed publicly, since they appear unreliable morally, and they try, sometimes successfully, to locate a morally relevant difference. When Peter Singer uses this type of example to argue for famine relief, he imagines that P might point to the fact that in the case of famine relief many others are available to help, but he argues that the hypothetical example can be altered to block this escape from inconsistency, by imaging that many others are standing around the pond but are indifferent to the toddler's plight (S^{**}) (Singer 1972: 232–3; for discussion see Campbell and Kumar 2012: 292–6). Would P feel less of an obligation in S^{**} ? If not (as is likely), then the problem of inconsistency remains. Other possible escapes can be tried, and the process iterates. Some escape of this kind may succeed despite counters and counter-counters, and so on; but it is possible that the only escape that works is a moral change in which either P rejects R as an appropriate response to S or P rejects R^* as an appropriate response to S^* . If, however, it is more difficult for P to give up R^* than to give up R , the moral change will be in the direction of rejecting R . In the example this would be for P to no longer remain morally indifferent to famine relief.

Three key observations bear on the relevance of this kind of reasoning for the task of this article. First, moral consistency reasoning (CR), while by no means the only factor that can play a role in moral change, is reflected in many examples of actual moral change, including what Kitcher calls 'revolutionary moral change', (Kitcher 2011: 333) and is compatible with, indeed we have argued is supported by, the developing evidence for an interactive dual process model of moral thinking (Campbell and Kumar 2012: 289–99). In short, CR qualifies as psychologically realistic. Second, CR does not require that the subjects involved in the reasoning discover new non-moral facts in order for the change in moral perspective to be achieved. Third, CR can be seen to motivate moral change without assuming that the change is progressive or regressive from an objective standpoint. That is, the application of CR does not guarantee that the change in moral view is

3 We have modified the example somewhat to better illustrate the power of consistency reasoning.

progressive and, as will become clear below, leaves open the possibility of collective moral error.

What then would make a moral change motivated by CR progressive? When CR leads to the discovery of inconsistency between P's moral responses R and R* to S and S* respectively, the rejection of R (because it is less deeply held than R*) is moral progress just in case two conditions are met.⁴ Each has the form of a negative existential proposition. (1) There exists no further pair of situations that would, once reflected upon, undermine P's rejection of R rather than the more strongly held R*, for example, no pair S* and S** that would bring P through CR to reject the moral demand to rescue the drowning child in S*, thereby releasing P from accepting, on pain of inconsistency, the apparently comparable moral demand to rescue the child who is a victim of famine. In the first instance P gives moral priority to the moral demand to rescue the drowning child (over that of being morally indifferent to famine relief) in order to avoid inconsistency but another pair of cases might exist, that has not occurred to P, one that would reverse this priority if P were to reflect on it. (2) There exists no difference between S and S* not yet thought of that would, when taken into account by P, undermine P's perception that no morally relevant difference exists between S and S*. In Singer's example, the second option may seem the more likely, since the moral demand to save the drowning child in the immediate vicinity at little cost may appear so basic to morality, like the examples mentioned above, that to reject it would be the same as rejecting moral demands tout court. However that may be, the two conditions specify how the rejection of R (say, moral indifference to famine relief) can be moral progress in the objective sense on offer.⁵

It will be noted that moral progress achieved through CR is mind-dependent, indeed relative to the moral perspectives of those engaged in CR, including seeing one of the apparently inconsistent responses as more difficult to relinquish, and so is consistent with pragmatic naturalism as Kitcher presents it in his discussion of moral progress.⁶ The progress is at the same time fully objective in the precise sense that moral error is always a possibility that cannot be ignored. To bring this point home, imagine someone engaged in CR (that might be an inner debate that occurs within a single person) who

4 These conditions do not define an 'external' standard of moral progress for all possible worlds but offer a revisable standard that we apply in the context of basic moral norms of the kind noted earlier.

5 By the same token, when these conditions are met, moral change from rejecting R to accepting R would be moral regression in the sense on offer.

6 Critics might object that there is something other than the relative strengths of two moral responses, or their coherence with other moral responses, that determines which response should be rejected when they are inconsistent. However, insofar as the objection insists upon an external moral standard it begs the question against pragmatic naturalism and abandons psychological plausibility.

worries whether there is not another situation S^{**} for which her response R^{**} is inconsistent with her response R^* to S^* unless there is a morally relevant difference between S^{**} and S^* . She may worry about whether her feeling that she and others are obliged to support famine relief may be a mistake on her part. We contend that for any morally serious person, that is, for any person who cares about having a justifiable moral response, the chance of being morally inconsistent will be viewed as a real possibility when facing complex moral questions, even when she feels reasonably confident of her initial response. She recognizes that she can be responding to a situation in a way that she may see – if only she had sufficient moral imagination to think of the relevant situation – as morally in error by her own lights. The worry is that condition (1) or condition (2) or both may be false. Of course, even if she thinks she sees how one or the other is false, the possibility exists of further error that might be revealed through parallel forms of reasoning. The general point is that while moral progress is understood, in keeping with pragmatic naturalism, to be relative to the moral perspective of those engaging in CR, there remains a clear sense in which moral progress, so understood, is objective in allowing the possibility of moral error that transcends convention and current moral opinion.

Could admission of the possibility of moral error of this kind ever be viewed as possible for an entire collectivity of morally serious persons and be such that they may not ever be able to uncover the inconsistency regardless of how long they might debate whether they are in error? We suggest that it could be, for the reason that being able to imagine the right kind of situation that brings the inconsistency into focus is a feat of moral imagination. Any number of ordinary factors, such as the history of moral education in a society, can be a lasting impediment to being able to imagine the scenario that would elicit a moral response at odds with the present response to the present situation when there is no morally relevant difference between the situations. Notice the problem is not that there exists some external standard of moral objectivity that the population fails to notice. Rather they have within themselves the wherewithal to respond to the hypothetical situation in a morally appropriate way – *appropriate by their own lights* – if they had only a sufficiently rich moral imagination to think of the relevant hypothetical situation.

Does this conception of moral objectivity allow the possibility of degrees of moral progress, or does it entail that moral progress must be understood always in absolute terms if it is to be objective?⁷ Imagine someone, Paul, feeling morally indifferent about his eating meat from factory-farmed animals (response R to situation S). Paul then forms an emotional bond with a young farm animal in a situation where the animal is not suffering under factory conditions, indeed is enjoying life, but will eventually be slaughtered for

7 We are indebted to an anonymous referee for raising this question.

human consumption. When Paul is questioned about the prospect S^* of selling to a factory farm this animal with whom he has an emotional bond, Paul responds with moral revulsion R^* , though he knows that this animal will eventually be killed for food if the animal is not sold and R^* includes no revulsion to that prospect. Paul is then asked what could possibly be the morally relevant difference between S and S^* . For the sake of argument let us suppose that Paul, after considerable thought, can see no morally relevant differences but also cannot shake his strong moral response R^* and is thus moved to reject R . Suppose, for the sake of argument, that this moral change from accepting R to rejecting R because of R 's inconsistency with R^* satisfies conditions (1) and (2) for objective moral progress. Next imagine that Paul is challenged to consider whether he would sell his own pet to the farm that treats its animals well before slaughtering them, situation S^{**} , and he responds with equal moral revulsion R^{**} to S^{**} , yet can find no morally relevant difference between S^* and S^{**} that would dispel the apparent incompatibility of R^* and R^{**} , one response directed only at the terrible conditions of factory farming, the other at the use of his pet for food when it has been having a relatively good life. Finally, suppose, again for the sake of argument, that the transition from R^* to R^{**} satisfies the two conditions for moral progress. Intuitively (if we accept what is assumed for the sake of argument) moral progress has occurred not only twice but also across the two moral changes, so that a greater degree of moral progress has been achieved in moving from R to R^{**} than was achieved in moving from either from R to R^* or from R^* to R^{**} . Is our understanding of objective moral progress consistent with that intuition?

We think so, for two reasons. First, although R^* is undermined in relation to R^{**} through contemplation of the pet example, that undermining does not reverse the moral priority of R^* over R , and given the way conditions (1) and (2) are defined the undermining would have to affect the rejection of R in favour of R^* for the moral progress not to be objective. It is true that R^* is rejected finally in favour of R^{**} , but that rejection is fully consistent with the rejection of R in favour of R^* being moral progress in the objective sense defined. The second reason is that the revulsion R^{**} contains that part of R^* that is directed toward the suffering of factory farm animals raised for slaughter. It is not as if Paul at the end would not experience revulsion at the prospect of animals suffering under factory farming conditions but never being killed for food. The sequence of moral progressions under CR tracks the intuitive sense of moral progress by degrees reflected in the example, while each transition remains consistent with the conditions of objective moral progress.

We conclude by stressing two points. First, moral changes could be seen by members of society as progressive, but still be open to the possibility of later being viewed as morally in error by their own lights. That a change is seen as progressive does not entail that it is so, even for them, *but it could be so*; in

that limited but still robust sense, objective moral progress is possible within the terms of pragmatic naturalism. Second, moral progress is possible even granting, as suggested in the third caveat above, that the pluralism in basic values and functions is even more extensive than Kitcher allows. Indeed, the resolution of moral conflict engendered by this pluralism may be viewed as one of the many functions of morality that has emerged in its evolution – a function served by moral consistency reasoning.⁸ In sum, this conception of objectivity that we propose, while non-trivially robust in allowing the possibility of massive collective moral error, is in the spirit of Kitcher’s overall vision of moral progress in which there exists deep pluralism in basic values and functions and no fixed and external moral standard. In his words:

Despite their differences, almost all approaches to normative ethics share a static vision. Correct principles and precepts await discovery, and once apprehended they can be graven in stone. Pragmatic naturalism sees things differently. The ethical project evolves indefinitely. Progress is made not by discovering something independent of us and our societies, but by fulfilling the functions of ethics as they have so far emerged. The project is something people work out with one another. There are no experts here (Kitcher 2011: 285–6).

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8 On how this function could have evolved, see Richmond Campbell, ‘The Origin of Moral Reasons’.

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Causal nominalism and the one over many problem

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1. Introduction

The dispositional theory of natural properties, on which properties are identified with causal potentialities, has gained a significant number of advocates in recent years (e.g. Bird 2007, Mumford 2004 and Shoemaker 1980). So far, the theory has nearly always been developed within a realist rather than nominalist framework, which is to say that dispositionalists have taken properties to be *sui generis* entities in their own right, such as universals or tropes. But could the central claims of dispositionalism be preserved without this realist commitment, thereby leaving us with a more ontologically parsimonious theory? Surprisingly, this question is severely underexplored in the philosophical literature and is in need of discussion. Indeed, Whittle (2009) appears to be the only philosopher to have devoted an article to this question. Interestingly, Whittle argues that a coherent and defensible nominalist version of dispositionalism is available, a view she calls ‘causal nominalism’. At first glance, causal nominalism promises to provide a novel nominalist approach and one that, importantly, is able to provide an illuminating solution to the traditional one over many problem (Whittle 2009: 249), among other things.

Although Whittle does an admirable job of addressing many of the objections facing causal nominalism, there is a problem that is not given enough consideration, one which arises when we try to distinguish causal nominalism from other common versions of nominalism such as set or resemblance nominalism. The problem is that it is not easy to distinguish causal nominalism from these more traditional nominalist approaches without the one over many puzzle re-emerging. At this point, the realists will say that the causal ‘nominalist’ had better accept universals or tropes after all, on pain of leaving