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No Perils of Rejecting the Parity Argument

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Abstract:
Many moral realists have employed a strategy for arguing for moral realism by claiming that if epistemic normativity is categorical and that if this epistemic normativity exists, then categorical normativity exists. In this paper, we will discuss that argument, examine a way out, and respond to the objections people have recently raised in the literature. In the end, we conclude that the objections to our way out will do little in the way of motivating those who already do not believe in categorical normativity, thereby severing the power the aforementioned parity argument is designed to possess.
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1. Introduction

Error theorists, generally, present this sort of argument against moral realism (Zhou, Borchert, 2023, p. 215):

> (L1) Moral realism implies the existence of categorical normativity.
> (L2) But categorical normativity does not exist.
> (L3) Therefore, moral realism is false. [L1, L2]

Typically, (L2) will get supported with a few appeals: (i) categorical normativity being metaphysically queer (Kassenberg, 2021, p. 313), (ii) including categorical normativity into a theory has commitments that aren't as parsimonious as rival theories (Morton, Sampson, 2014; Mackie, 1979), and (iii) categorical normativity being epistemologically queer (Kassenberg, 2021,

p. 313). Moral realists, such as Zhou and Borchert [1], then have decided to respond by constructing the following argument against (L2), known as the Parity Argument[1]:

(L4) Epistemic normativity is categorical.
(L5) Epistemic normativity exists.
(L6) Therefore, categorical normativity exists. [L4, L5]

In what follows, we will not be discussing the motivations for (L5), at least not explicitly, but rather adopt the defence of the position that does not believe (L5), and on some interpretations (L4) to be true.[2] We will in turn discuss what implications our view has and how we can engage in the same sorts of epistemic discourse without (i) appealing to any categoricity that a moral realist would invoke, and (ii) without the sorts of problems people claim we have. So, in section 2, we will be outlining our view as eliminativism about reasons. In section 3, we will discuss what moral realists call the self-defeat objection against our view. Then in section 4, we respond to Zhou and Borchert's 'Moorean objection'. Lastly, in section 5, we conclude that, in Zhou and Borchert's terms, there are no perils for someone who wishes to deny the moral realist's Parity Argument.

2. 'Denying' Categorical Epistemic Normativity

A route for rejecting the parity argument is being sceptical of (L5), and there are really, only two ways to do so. The first method is by arguing that it is false, and the second is to be agnostic on its truth value. Here, we are taking on the latter approach and even believe that the former is too strong of a claim.[3] In light of us being agnostic on the truth value of (L5), we are also not as mentioned in the first footnote, to some other metaphysical view regarding reasons such as instrumentalism. That aside, most of the problematic entailments many epistemic realists bring up stem not from the stronger claim that epistemic realism is false, but from *not accepting* that there are categorical epistemic reasons alone.

Our view is a very weak semantic one, where when we use terms like 'reason', 'should', 'good' and so on, we are merely indexing them to our desires, without accepting a particular thesis on public moral language. For example, we can engage in any sort of reason discourse excluding substantive ontological commitments. So, when we say "we have a reason to drink water" that statement just analytically *means* something along the lines of having a desire to drink water, and that drinking water will satisfy that said desire. However, we are willing to engage with moral realists on their terms. For instance, we will be willing to accept (L4) if 'epistemic normativity' is understood to mean something stance-independent. But, for the sake of clarity, we will specify which sorts of reasons are being talked about, especially in the next section, with discourse about there being no reason to not accept (L5) by our own lights. We find that once we gain such clarity, the argument becomes notably weaker substantively and dialectically.

3. No Self-Defeat

One way that moral realists argue against those that do not accept (L5) is to give a self-defeat objection. What that means is that the thesis one is committed to implies the falsity of the thesis. One clear example of this is if one were to claim: "No one has or will ever claim anything." Booth sums up how the self-defeat argument against rejecting categorical reasons goes as follows:

The Moral Error Theorist denies that there are moral reasons and moral oughts. But then should not be the Error Theorist, on pain of inconsistency, also deny that there are reasons for belief (hereafter categorical epistemic reasons)? It seems she should. But if she does, she must also then deny that there are reasons for her to believe the Moral Error Theory. (Booth, 2020, p. 2191)

We must clear up that if one rejects the CB thesis 'there are categorical reasons to believe', that does not strictly entail that they believe ~CB. For example, someone may not believe that the number of stars in the universe are even, but that doesn't mean that they then believe the number is not even. But let us even grant that it does, and someone believes 'there are no categorical reasons for belief' and they are responded to with a question such as "Do you have a reason to believe ~CB?" If the person says they don't have a reason to believe ~CB, the thesis would not be self-defeating, since nowhere are they claiming to have any reason for their belief in ~CB. So even if someone took a view that (L5) was false, that does not entail their view is self-defeating.

4. On the Moorean Responses

Here, we will be discussing Zhou and Borchert's (Zhou, Borchert, 2023) comments regarding their relatively new approach to the parity argument; their Moorean objection. Zhou and Borchert introduce their Moorean objection like this:

> If one does not object to the Error Theory on the grounds that it is toothless, it is open for one to object on Moorean grounds. By this, we mean that one can assert that one's confidence in certain judgments –call them Moorean premises– ought to be higher than any philosophical premises or theories which purport to undermine the truth of the Moorean premises. In this context, the Moorean premises would be propositions like 'a person in pain has reason to believe that they are in pain' or 'a person looking at their hands has reason to believe that they have hands'. Streumer's theory says that a person in pain has no reason to believe they are in pain and a person looking at their hands has no reason to believe that they have hands. And this is not a contingent truth, but a metaphysical necessity. So not only has no person in history ever had a reason to believe that they are in pain or that they have hands, but it is metaphysically impossible for a person to have a reason to believe that they are in pain or have hands. (Zhou, Borchert, 2023, p. 229)

Before we discuss the Moorean objection Zhou and Borchert (Zhou, Borchert, 2023) raise, we have to dissolve the seemingly clear implausibility. In this case they are claiming the implausibility of the claim that it is "impossible for a person to have a reason to believe that they have hands", and the like. However, it's unclear what is so implausible regarding that once we plug in the identifier of categorical reason. To illustrate this, if there were some agent that states "I have no reason to believe there is a computer in front of me", we can see the implausibility on some level, but it seems to dissolve once some agent states "I have no categorical reason to believe there is a computer in front of me." This represents a pervasive problem in the argument, which is to act like there is an inherent issue with denying categorical normativity, which goes largely unmotivated.

> The Moorean-inspired response to Streumer's theory is to say that no matter how convincing the philosophical reasoning in support of it may seem, it is rational to reject a philosophical theory with such wild implications. This is not a dogmatic dismissal, but an expression of relative likelihood. The claim is that it is more reasonable to believe that there is something wrong with the complex, controversial reasoning in favour of the Error Theory than it is to believe that a person looking at their hands has no reason to believe that they have hands. This holds even if one cannot identify where specifically the argument went wrong. An uncontroversial example of this move in a different context are Zeno's paradoxes. Even if, upon hearing the paradoxes for the first time, a person cannot refute Zeno's arguments against the impossibility of motion, it is still rational for them to believe in the possibility of motion. They may rationally conclude that Zeno's arguments fail, even if they cannot pinpoint where Zeno's arguments fail. Similarly in the case of the Error Theory, one may conclude that Streumer's arguments

fail, even if one cannot pinpoint where Streumer's arguments fail. Call this the Moorean Objection. (Zhou, Borchert, 2023, p. 230)

We believe this line of approach fails in two different ways. The first is that we can easily construct a reverse Moorean argument, and the second is that if you are to take a Moorean approach, it leaves you with the non-necessity of the Parity Argument

5. Reverse Moorean Argument

Similar to how the sceptic's claim "the external world does not exist" is implausible, the claim "epistemic normativity does not exist" is also supposed to be. However, there seems to be an issue, regarding those who view denying categorical epistemic normativity as being equivalent to denying epistemic normativity in general. If, when the realist is talking about epistemic normativity, it is baked into their concept that it is categorical, then it is unclear what the unintuitive implication is. Is it supposed to be that if someone desires to hold a belief despite the fact that it's false, they still have a reason to? We do not share this intuition, and in fact it seems false to us. Consider the following case:

      You have the ability to select between two sets of beliefs, A and B. For all the beliefs in A, they are true, and for a vast majority of beliefs in set B, they are true, with a small amount being false. However, for the subset of beliefs in B that are false, they have to do with propositions that, if you believed that they were true, would destroy your mental well-being.

      To us, it sounds clear that you would have a reason to avoid the truth, and pick B over A. Furthermore, if the view entails that we have a reason to select A over B, then it seems very implausible, and we could make a reverse Moorean argument.[4] In fact, regardless of this particular motivation for epistemic realism being very seemingly implausible, we could make a similar Moorean argument against *categorical* epistemic normativity broadly. Let us stipulate that, prima facie, it seems very implausible to us that categorical epistemic normativity exists. Maybe it has to do with it being non-natural, irreducibly normative, or any other defeasible reason (or for no reason at all). Since we are presented with this seemingly implausible view, that categorical epistemic normativity exists, we could make a Moorean argument in the reverse:

      (L7) If epistemic realism is true, then categorical epistemic normativity exists.
      (L8) It is not the case that categorical epistemic normativity exists.
      (L9) Therefore, epistemic realism is false.[5]

Of course, they would then argue that the denial of (L8) has unintuitive implications, as shown above, they wrote:

      Streumer's theory says that a person in pain has no reason to believe they are in pain
      and a person looking at their hands has no reason to believe that they have hands.
      (Zhou, 2023, p. 229)

This claim is either trivial or false. If "reason" here (and throughout the rest of the passage) in the epistemic sense has categorical normativity embedded into it, then of course it is true! If you do not already have epistemic realist presuppositions, this will not motivate you at all. This is analogous to the move where, say a fallibilist claims "I do not believe there's certainty," and the infallibilist replies "so you are uncertain of your uncertainty!" The only reason a fallibilist would view that as a serious objection is if they thought there was an issue with being uncertain in the first place, which is the very thing that they deny. Similarly, the realist's claim here is plainly trivial; that denying categorically normative epistemic reasons entails denying that there is some particular categorically normative epistemic reason for S to believe that P (where P is any proposition). On the other hand, if "reason" does *not* have categoricity baked into it, what was said becomes false. Clearly, if one

had the goal to hold true beliefs, and the belief that P was consistent with this goal, they would have a hypothetical reason to believe that P.

6. Non-Necessity of the Parity Argument

It is unclear why the Parity Argument is even necessary, if it is going to rely on a Moorean argument for a presupposition that the anti-realist will presumably deny (with little in the way of motivating them against that presupposition that is non-question-begging or non-trivial). Why not just start with a Moorean argument for realism, instead of adding extra steps? We develop three possible explanations: (i) that anti-realists will be more likely to accept the Moorean premise in the parity argument than in a traditional Moorean argument for realism, (ii) that the second premise in the parity argument is ostensibly self-defeating to deny, or (iii) that (L5) is even more plausible than the premise "stance-independent reasons for action exist." We will tackle them individually.

(i) It is very unclear why most anti-realists would be more likely to accept the premise that "epistemic normativity exists" than the premise "stance-independent reasons for action exist," given the fact that their scepticism of the latter due to metaphysical worries also leads to scepticism of the former, as was acknowledged in the initial paper. Perhaps there are error theorists who believe in categorical reasons for belief, but not action. However, those error theorists already think there's a disanalogy between the two, and the parity argument is tailored to those who deny categorical reasons in general (not those who accept it in the belief case but not the action case).

(ii) Of course, we have addressed the view that denying (L5) is self-defeating (in the sense of there being no reason to believe it), but regardless, it may ostensibly appear to be so. If the self-defeat merely is ostensible, but really is not so, then the argument may convince people, but it would be doing so at the cost of misleading them into thinking they are denying plausible claims such as "we have a reason to believe that the earth is not flat" when they do not have to. So, in this sense it would not be unnecessary, but instead it would fall to something worse, which is dishonesty.

(iii) We have already given counter-intuition pumps, and it is unclear why the intuition-pumps for stance-independent reasons for action would be less motivating than the ones for stance-independent reasons for belief. In fact, even as anti-realists, we find the intuition-pumps for the former to be more compelling (although ultimately not so). In terms of what most anti-realists think, it sounds like an empirical question, which we would like evidence for.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, then, there seem to be no problems for those who deny the Parity Argument. As illustrated above, the argument regarding self-defeat is one that, when read carefully, does not strictly entail any falsity regarding the ~CB thesis. And the Moorean objection either does nothing to further the dialect by those already unmotivated by the plausibility of categorical reasons for belief, or otherwise renders the Parity Argument unnecessary.

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Notes

1. However, the argument is not uniquely from Zhou and Borchert and can be found in the works of Rowland (2017), Das (2015a), and Cuneo (2012).

2. This is because if one were to claim that all epistemic normativity is categorical, there are strategies by Olson (Zhou, Borchert, 2023, p. 222; Reisner, 2011; Olson, 2014) which appeal to a hypothetical reduction. Our view may be very similar to Olson's instrumentalism, but we are not committed to any thesis regarding 'the nature of reasons', per se. If (L4) is just defining epistemic normativity to be categorical, then we do not reject (L4), only (L5).

3. As will become clear, we do not take a view with regards to the claims that there are or are not categorical normativity. The dialectic we illustrate in section 4 illustrates the end of the dialectic between moral realists and moral anti-realists once it becomes the matter of relative plausibility.

4. Note that accepting categorical epistemic normativity doesn't require accepting that one always has reason to select a true belief over a false one, this is just an objection to the particular motivation we gave.

5. To be clear, we do not use this argument to argue that epistemic realism is false. Instead, we are just demonstrating that someone can use the same dialectical move to make the opposite point, and at minimum cause a sort of draw. We are ultimately agnostic on the existence of categorical reasons.