

How to explain the possibility of wholesale moral error: a reply to Akhlaghi

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Abstract

Farbod Akhlaghi has argued that noncognitivists and naturalists cannot explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. He thinks this shows that noncognitivism and naturalism are false. I argue that noncognitivists and naturalists have no trouble explaining the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error and that the requirement to explain this possibility is plausible only on one particular conception of epistemic possibility.

KEYWORDS

epistemic possibility, moral error theory, naturalism, noncognitivism, nonnaturalism

1 | INTRODUCTION

Akhlaghi (2021) presents an original argument against both noncognitivism and naturalism in metaethics. The argument revolves around the idea that wholesale moral error is at least epistemically possible. Akhlaghi thinks that neither noncognitivists nor naturalists are able to explain this on the assumption that their theories are true. He takes this to show that noncognitivism and naturalism are false.

In this reply, I argue that metaethical theories should at most allow for the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error on one particular conception of epistemic possibility, and that neither noncognitivists nor naturalists have trouble doing so.

In Section 2, I argue that metaethical theories should allow for the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error only if epistemic possibility consists in having a non-zero probability given our evidence. In Section 3, I reconstruct Akhlaghi's argument against noncognitivism and naturalism. In Section 4, I argue that it fails. Section 5 concludes.

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2 | WHAT NEEDS EXPLAINING?

A moral error theory is (roughly) the claim that all moral judgements are false.¹ This view is considered a serious theoretical option, but Akhlaghi thinks that noncognitivism and naturalists cannot explain the epistemic possibility of such 'wholesale moral error'. More precisely, he thinks they cannot explain this on the assumption that noncognitivism or naturalism are true. If so, this counts heavily against these theories, since error theories seem epistemically possible even if we suppose that a success theory is true (where a 'success theory' is any theory according to which not all moral propositions are false).

Akhlaghi does not commit to a particular conception of epistemic possibility, but the argument is supposed to work at least with the following two: (1) a proposition *p* is epistemically possible just in case *p* is consistent with everything we know (*the consistency conception*) and (2) *p* is epistemically possible just in case *p* has a non-zero probability given our evidence (*the evidential conception*).

Although I agree with Akhlaghi that a moral error theory seems epistemically possible, it is not clear whether it actually is on the consistency conception. The problem is that we do not know everything we know. If we know at least some moral truths, then wholesale error is inconsistent with everything we know. But we may not know *that* we know those moral truths, in which case we do not know whether an error theory is epistemically possible in the first place.

Notice, moreover, that Akhlaghi's neutrality entails that no metaethical theory should incorporate an epistemology which likely gives us moral knowledge. For if we knew any moral truths, then an error theory would not be epistemically possible on the consistency conception. So if it were reasonable to require explanations of the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error in this sense, then we could reject a very large number of theories including nonnaturalist views that posit self-evident moral truths (Audi, 1998), conceptual moral truths (Cuneo & Shafer-Landau, 2014), direct access to moral reality (Huemer, 2005), etc. This seems far too quick.

The evidential conception says that a proposition *p* is epistemically possible just in case *p* has a non-zero probability given our evidence. This does not have the same undesirable consequences. For, even if we know that *p*, there can be a non-zero chance that *p* is false given our evidence. Suppose, for instance, that I know that I have hands on the basis of sense perception, but do not know that I know that I have hands. In that case, the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis still has a non-zero probability relative to my evidence.²

So, it is not reasonable to require that metaethical theories are able to explain (or allow for) the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error given the consistency conception. It is at most reasonable to require that they can explain (or allow for) the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error given the evidential conception. In Section 4, I will argue that neither noncognitivism nor naturalism have difficulty doing so, but I will first explain Akhlaghi's argument.³

3 | AKHLAGHI'S ARGUMENT

If we restrict ourselves to the evidential conception of epistemic possibility, then it is reasonable to require that success theorists are able to explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error given the truth of their

¹Complications arise due to non-atomic moral judgements such as those expressed by 'Everything that is good is good' and 'If something is good, then it is good'. Streumer's (2017) solution seems promising: a moral error theory is the claim that all moral judgements that entail that a moral property is instantiated are false.

²Whether this is really so depends on the nature of evidence and probability, but I assume that suitable analyses are available. If they are not, then it is unlikely that metaethical theories need to allow for the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error at all. For in that case, we are unlikely to know much about what is and is not epistemically possible.

³Of course, no metaethical theory will struggle to explain a slightly different phenomenon: the psychological fact that we are less than fully confident that error theories are false. This can be explained simply by the fact that the evidence for metaethical theories points in different directions and that all theories have some counterintuitive implications. So this is no problem for noncognitivism or naturalism (provided they are compatible with this evidential situation).

theories. Akhlaghi thinks that nonnaturalism meets this requirement easily, since, according to that view, moral thought concerns nonnatural properties and facts. If such things do not exist, then moral thought would be in systematic error. Given our evidence (and even if nonnaturalism is in fact true), there is a non-zero chance that nonnatural properties and facts do not exist. In this way, nonnaturalists can explain why wholesale moral error is epistemically possible.

Noncognitivists would not be able to achieve the same feat. They believe that moral judgements are noncognitive states, like desires and emotions, and we know that they exist. This by itself does not entail that an error theory is epistemically impossible, since the error theory says that all moral judgements are false, not that moral judgements do not exist. But if noncognitivists also hold that moral judgements are neither true nor false, then they would not be able to explain how all moral judgements could possibly be false. Furthermore, allowing that moral judgements are truth-apt would not improve the prospects of such an explanation. Akhlaghi sees two options: either what counts as a mistake in moral judgement is left unexplained, or it is explained in terms of the possibility of improvements by the light of standards internal to the ethical domain. If what counts as a mistake is unexplained, then we lack an explanation of the possibility of wholesale moral error. But if it is explained in terms of standards internal to the ethical domain, then a different problem emerges: Akhlaghi thinks we *know* that some attitudes (such as non-racist attitudes) cannot be morally improved.⁴ If what it takes for a moral judgement to be false is for it to consist in an attitude that can be morally improved, then noncognitivists cannot explain how the judgement corresponding to a non-racist attitude (presumably the judgement that racism is bad) could possibly be false. And so Akhlaghi thinks that noncognitivists lack the resources to explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error.

Akhlaghi's argument against naturalism is even simpler. Naturalists believe that moral properties are natural properties (the sort of properties studied by the natural and social sciences). Akhlaghi's argument is basically that for each candidate natural property, we know that it exists. If so, then an error theory would not be epistemically possible. Consider the suggestion that the property of being morally right just is the property of maximizing happiness. In that case, there is bound to be some action that has that property and so there is some true proposition regarding what action is morally right. More generally, given that we are assuming naturalism, whatever natural properties are identified as moral are guaranteed to exist (naturalism is after all a form of realism). So there are bound to be true moral propositions. Akhlaghi thinks this shows that naturalists cannot explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error.

4 | THE PROBLEM WITH AKHLAGHI'S ARGUMENT

Akhlaghi's argument is based on a conflation of two different ideas: (1) the idea that if a success theory is actually true, then that should make no difference to our current epistemic situation regarding wholesale moral error and (2) the idea that if a success theory is actually true, then the possibility of wholesale moral error should be explicable in terms of theoretical commitments of the success theory itself. Whereas the first is plausible, the second is not.⁵

⁴Akhlaghi cannot allow that this knowledge consists in knowledge of an ethical truth of the kind ruled out by error theories. He proposes that it consists in knowledge of what moral standards rule out or rate highly, whether or not there is anything that corresponds to moral standards in the first place (2021, p. 242).

⁵Notice that it is not in general required of a theory about a subject matter that it incorporates an explanation of the epistemic possibility of the truth of other theories. Furthermore, although Akhlaghi suggests that the explanation of the epistemic possibility of an error theory must be part of the metaethical theory itself (pp. 238–239), he does not respect that requirement in the case of nonnaturalism. For Akhlaghi believes that nonnaturalists can explain the epistemic possibility of an error theory by appeal to the possibility that nonnatural properties and facts do not exist. But it is not part of the theory of ethical nonnaturalism itself that they may not exist. Nonnaturalism is the theory according to which moral judgements concern nonnatural facts and that such facts exist.

The sense that wholesale moral error is epistemically possible arises because the evidence for metaethical theories does not conclusively point in the direction of a success theory and at least partially supports an error theory. So, as long as the hypothesized truth of a success theory does not change anything about our epistemic situation in this regard, the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error is not a threat to the success theory. But none of Akhlaghi's arguments establishes that our epistemic situation would have to be different than it actually is if noncognitivism or naturalism were true.

With respect to noncognitivists, Akhlaghi argues that if they deny that moral propositions are truth-apt, then they cannot explain how all moral propositions could possibly be false. But the assumption that this form of noncognitivism is true does not entail that our evidence would raise its probability to 1. So it does not follow that our actual epistemic situation would be different than it actually is.

Similarly with a version of noncognitivism according to which a moral proposition can be false only if it can be improved by the light of ethical standards (let us call this quasi-realism). Even if we grant that we know that some attitudes cannot be improved by ethical standards, the truth of quasi-realism does not entail that our evidence for metaethical theories would be different than it actually is. So there would still be a non-zero chance of wholesale moral error.

The same problem afflicts Akhlaghi's argument against naturalism. All he shows is that if naturalism is true, then there are likely some true moral propositions. But that does not mean that our epistemic situation would be different than it currently is. For the fact that naturalism guarantees that there are some true moral propositions does not entail that our evidence reduces the likelihood of error theories to 0.

So, although Akhlaghi is right that wholesale moral error should have a non-zero probability given the truth of a success theory, he has not shown that this is not the case with noncognitivism or naturalism. For he has not shown that the truth of these theories entails that our epistemic situation would be different than it actually is.

Notice that Akhlaghi's argument fails even if we suppose that metaethical theories should also allow for the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error on the consistency conception, according to which p is epistemically possible if p is consistent with everything we know. For the assumption that noncognitivism or naturalism are true does not entail that we *know* that they are true. Nor has Akhlaghi clearly shown that the truth of either theory entails that we have some moral knowledge.

Akhlaghi does not address whether naturalism entails that we have some moral knowledge, but he comes close to arguing that quasi-realism entails this when he argues that we know that some attitudes cannot be improved by moral standards. But that is doubtful too. For even if quasi-realists cannot explain how racism could fail to be bad in terms of their own theory, we would still have evidence against quasi-realism. So, even if quasi-realism is true, the evidence against it may undermine the status of the belief that racism is bad as knowledge.⁶ If so, then wholesale moral error would still be consistent with everything we know.

5 | CONCLUSION

If wholesale moral error should be epistemically possible given the truth of a metaethical theory, then this is so at most given the evidential conception of epistemic possibility. But neither noncognitivists nor naturalists have trouble explaining how wholesale moral error can have a non-zero probability given our evidence, since the truth of neither theory entails that our evidence raises the probability of noncognitivism, naturalism or any moral proposition to 1 or close to 1. However, Akhlaghi also failed to show that the truth of noncognitivism or naturalism

⁶There are interesting questions in the vicinity of Akhlaghi's argument. For instance, quasi-realists owe us an account of evidence such that evidence for moral judgements can be undermined or counterbalanced by theoretical evidence for error theories. If no such account is viable, then the truth of quasi-realism would entail that our epistemic situation must be different than it actually is (or at least this would be so provided Akhlaghi is otherwise correct about quasi-realism and our knowledge of ethical standards and non-racist attitudes). But Akhlaghi has not offered an argument for this conclusion.

would make wholesale moral error epistemically impossible on the consistency conception, since the assumption that noncognitivism or naturalism are true does not entail that we *know* that they are true or that we have any moral knowledge. So neither noncognitivists nor naturalists have anything to fear from the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error.

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