Five Challanges to Naturalistic Moral Realsim

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Introduction

Moral realism is the belief in the existence of moral facts and values (such as the claim "murdering babies for fun is wrong" is a proposition that can be truth-evaluable)[1]. Metaphysical naturalism, despite not having a precise meaning [1], is the belief that there is nothing supernatural in the world and that reality is exhausted by nature. Naturalistic Moral Realism, or what I will subsequently refer to as NMR, refers to belief in both moral realism and metaphysical naturalism. In this paper I want to discuss five meta-ethical challenges to NMR, which includes secular moral codes such as Secular Humanism that, in my view, naturalists need to address to keep their commitment to moral realism from looking like special pleading.

While none of these problems are necessarily unique to NMR, these five seem to be especially challenging given naturalism. In particular, it emphasizes the need for naturalistic forms of moral realism like Secular Humanism to justify their claims to moral objectivity naturally, independent of the supernatural or theistic basis historically used. The naturalists' ability to answer these challenges will ultimately determine the legitimacy of their belief in moral realism in the eyes of non-naturalists and moral nihilists. To motivate these challanges, I argue that any form of reasonably robust moral realism holds a commitment to the following principles for it to be useful, applicable, and justified. Each of these assumptions has an analogous question or challange, which form the main sections of this essay:

1. Ojective moral facts exist (OP)

2. We can come to know such moral facts by our moral faculties (EP)

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[1]I am also assuming such facts are "mind-independent," as naturalists often take scientific truths and facts to be "mind-independent."

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3. Such facts are have an obligatory nature, with the authority to supervene on our behaviors and desires

4. These facts (or their prescribing authority) specify who/what they apply to (AP)

5. There is a methodology for arbitrating conflicting moral claims and prescriptions (MP)

The Five Challanges to Moral Realism:

1. The Ontological Problem (OP): How do such moral principles exist?

2. The Epistemic Problem (EP): How does our moral sense/intuition track such principles?

3. The Influence Problem (IP): What authority does the existence of such principles have to supervene on our behavior?

4. The Axiological Problem (AP): What entities have moral value and deserve moral consideration?

5. Methodological Problem (MP): How do we go about arbitrating between moral claims when they conflict?

Note that these five are closely related, and have direct bearing on the biggest challenge of any form of moral realism (one that is certainly not unique to naturalism): *what are the moral principles that constitute true facts, and how can we come to know them?* If the moral principles discovered as facts clearly state, for instance, "treat all humans as equals," then the axiological problem (or AP) will no longer post a problem to moral realism, naturalistic or not. However, if moral facts dictate "treat others as equals," then the AP will still present the problem of determining who or what classifies an "other" deserving of moral consideration.

NMR has the additional difficulty of answering these challanges within the bounds of *a priori* naturalistic assumptions. This imposes constraints on how such challanges can be answered, especially when a supernatural explanation may be the most simple or initially straightforward. MR makes the following additional assumptions to harmonize moral realism and (metaphysical) naturalism:

10 Constraints to Moral Realism under Naturalism

1. Objective moral facts have a natural basis (Naturalistic Constraint to the OP)

2. The process for how moral truth influences thinking has a natural basis/explanation (Naturalistic Constraint to the EP)

3. A natural basis to moral realism does not undermine its *truth* or objectivity (Naturalistic Constraint to the EP + OP)

4. The *prescriptive nature* of moral claims exists naturally or can be found within nature (Naturalistic Constraint to the OP + IP)

5. The authority of moral prescriptions to supervene on our behavior is derived from nature, which is often assumed to be a blind, unguided process (Naturalistic Constraint to the IP)

6. Naturalistic evolution does not place humans in a special place in the world, but natural moral facts give them moral value (Naturalistic Constraint to the AP)

7. The methodology to arbitrate competing moral claims is part of nature and is analogous to the scientific method in some sense (Naturalistic Constraint to the MP)

8. There is no special or divine revelation to give any individuals' moral claims special epistemic status (Naturalistic Constraint to the MP)

9. Belief in moral realism is different from religious or supernatural belief so EDAs for moral realism do not apply (while EDAs for religious and supernatural belief do) (Naturalistic Constraint to EDAs)

10. Moral principles like equality and egalitarinaism, previously justified by theistic or supernatural belief, can be justified naturally (Naturalistic Constraint to Humanism) [2]

1 The Ontological Problem (OP)

1.1 Overview of the OP

The Ontological Problem (OP) for NMR asks how moral facts can exist under the assumptions of naturalism. Perhaps the most famous statement of this challenge is made by J.L. Mackie, whose Argument from Queerness states,

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[2]This only applies if the moral facts themselves somehow imply humanism, equality, and/or egalitarianism, etc

> "If there were objective values, they would be things of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Yet, we have no philosophically satisfying account either of the existence of such things [the OP] or of how we could come to know about them [the EP, described in Section 2]. Therefore, we should not believe in objective values [2]."

However I think we can go even further than Mackie, and argue that moral claims involving prescriptive demands on our behavior are incompatible with the assumptions of naturalism. To make this argument, we need to first talk about Moore's "Open Question Argument," which argues that no nonmoral property is identical to a moral property [3].

1.2   Descriptive vs Prescriptive Moral Claims

I wish to argue that we can only reduce the descriptive parts of a moral claim to natural properties, not the prescriptive parts. When someone makes the claim "It is wrong to murder babies for fun," it appears on the surface they can describe "right" and "wrong" in terms of natural properties. This is the move Sam Harris makes in The Moral Landscape: he defines "good" as human flourishing, and by reducing "human flourishing" to brain states referring to pleasure and pain, it appears he has defined good in terms of a natural property [4]. To Harris, the claim "it is wrong to murder babies for fun" would be true because the state of being murdered would constitute negative brain states for the babies in question.

To illustrate this, consider the following:

1. P1: Murdering babies for fun reduces human flourishing

2. P2: Anything that reduces human flourishing is wrong

3. C: Therefore, murdering babies for fun is wrong

It would appear that "wrongness" is just a stand-in for human flourishing and does not need to be invoked. However, I think this is a crafty sidestep of the underlying language issue. When people make the claim "murdering babies for fun is wrong", they are making a *prescriptive* claim about the action, not a descriptive one. This prescriptive claim is the difference between using the word "wrong" and simply using the word for the natural property in question.

The word "human flourishing" is a descriptive term that on its own has no prescriptive weight, i.e., it has no connotation of "to be done-ness." However, when people use the words "right" and "wrong," they usually want these

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words to be taken prescriptively, i.e., "one *ought* to do X" and "one *ought not* to do Y." Thus, the statements "one ought to do what is right" and "one ought not to do what is wrong" are tautologies. The statement "one ought to promote human flourishing" is more than a tautology: it attaches prescription to a (in Harris' case, naturalistically defined) descriptive entity.

1.3   Naturalism and Prescriptive (Moral) Claims

This is where NMR runs into trouble: as Hume argued, we cannot make claims about what "ought" to be simply by observing what "is" [5]. Of course, we can make subjective claims about how we would like things to be, but the difficulty lies in claiming this process is objective. A claim about the existence of objective prescriptive values seems to favor a non-natural basis since the prescriptive nature of such claims cannot be reduced to nature and are difficult (maybe impossible) to find within the natural world. As a result, the naturalist will likely rule out objective moral obligations with objective prescriptive weight *a priori*. As Mackie himself argues, "objective intrinsically prescriptive features, supervening upon natural ones, constitute so odd a cluster of qualities and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events, without an all-powerful god to create them [2]."

The prescriptive part of a moral fact under NMR must be reducible to nature while also remaining mind-independent to be objective [3]. Here a parallel to theism is useful: many theists employ arguments in natural theology to argue for the existence of God that do not appeal to personal experience or claims of divine revelation. Similarly, a naturalistic case for mathematics can be made from its usefulness at describing nature. However moral realism does not have the same luxury. It is difficult to make a case for the existence of objective moral facts by ignoring our phenomenological experience with morality, especially sense the scientific method (favored by naturalists as the "gold standard" methodology for finding truth) often seeks to describe laws indepedent of our phenomenological experience. Can NMR provide a reason to believe in existence of objective moral facts independent of our phenomenological experience with morality (while remaining in the boundaries of naturalism)?

While naturalists may appeal to the apparent agreement of moral values between different human cultures, there is also significant disagreement that makes harmonization difficult. As a result, the naturalist who believes in

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[3]I mention only the prescritive part becuse I think the descriptive parts of morality *can* be reduced to natural properties

moral realism but dismisses the supernatural due to lack of (natural) evidence needs to provide a reason why belief in the existence of objecive moral facts is somehow different than supernatural belief. While naturalists will no doubt claim objective moral facts *must* have a natural basis (by their a priori assumptions), moral facts have traditionally and historically been justified with a supernatural basis. By rejecting the supernatural, NMR needs to make sure it does not also throw out "the baby with the bathwater" and undermine the truth of moral objectivity in the process.

The moral facts NMR proposes must have both a natural ontology and a naturalistically-based *prescriptive nature.* I find it difficult to see how this perscriptive nature can be objective and be derived from the blind forces of nature alone. While there may be other ways moral realism can exist without the existence or concept of God, but it is difficult to see how moral realism can exist within the premises of naturalism. As Mackie observed, an objective "prescriptive nature" is quite unlike anything else in the natural world.

2 The Epistemic Problem (EP)

2.1 Moral Facts and Minds

A naturalist who solves the OP also needs to contend with the Epistemic Problem (EP). Even if NMR can argue for the existence of objective prescriptive values as facts, they must also account for how we come to know such facts. There is a more fundamental problem than just moral disagreement between human societies: it has to do with whether we can trust the moral code of *any* human society to be epistemically relevant. Since the naturalist will reject any claims to supernatural or divine revelation, arguments that give certain individuals special epistemic status fail. For moral epistemology to be objective, it must involve the supervention of mind-independent moral facts onto minds.

Consider a compass: for a compass to work, both a magnetic north "pole" must exist (analogous to the OP) and the compass's needle must be able to track it (analogous to the EP). Similarly, our moral faculties must be tuned in such a way that they are able to "receive" the content of mind-independent moral facts. Alternativelty, these mind-independent moral facts somehow "tuned" natural selection so moral intuitions have the capacity to produce true moral beliefs (a position I'm sure most naturalists will rule out). Note that not everybody's moral faculty needs to agree for the EP to be solved: just as compasses can be tricked, minds can as well. Still, NMR owes us

an explanation of how our moral faculties could arrive at moral principles, since they dismiss claims to special revelation. If these moral facts and prescriptions cannot be discovered through mental processes like reason or observation, moral thinking and moral discourse are hopelessly flawed from the start.

2.2   Relationship to EDAs

There are naturalistic explanations for the *belief* in objective moral values without these values needing to exist, [6, 7]. Even if a naturalist solves the OP and EP, they have the additional hurdle of rejecting the evolutionary debunking arguments (EDAs) for the belief in moral realism that undermine their epistemic status. If the naturalist accepts EDAs for religious belief, they owe us an explanation why analogous EDAs do not hold for moral realism [8]. Additionally, considering that many of the moral principles often touted by secular ethicists involve ideas such as equality or egalitarianism which directly come from a religious or are justified by religious belief [9], an EDA for religion ends up undermining the epistemic foundation that previously grounded and justified such ideas. In other words, NMR must not only explain why EDAs extend only to religious (and not moral) beliefs, but it must also re-ground any of the principles left "floating" by religious debunking (or abandon them altogether).

While there is no scholarly consensus to what explicitly defines a religion [10], many incorperate ideas that involve the belief in or worship of a superhuman power or powers, often a God or gods. Religious epistemology must assume the existence of such powers or supernatural forces to have a chance at being "correct" (as in the compass example above). Notice the parallel between the definition of religion and what is required for moral realism to be true: mind-independent moral facts need to exist "out there" and supervene on our behavior, much like the superhuman controlling power(s) in many religions. Naturalists should give us an account for why their rejection of religious or supernatural phenomena does not extend to analogous moral phenomena. It is not enough to just show that prescriptive moral features can be found naturalistically (already an incredibly difficult task): NMR must also explain how such features influenced the development of our minds (or influence our current state of our minds) to avoid their debunking by EDAs.

In this section, I want to detail the options available to the naturalist for belief in moral realism. Prescriptive moral facts either have a natural or supernatural basis. If they require a supernatural basis, the naturalist will reject them *a priori*. If naturalists believe such values can exist within a natu-

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ral basis, they have the additional hurdle of demonstrating what these values are and how we come to know them under naturalism. This is especially challenging because naturalism does explicitly reject prescriptive supernatural and religious claims, so it owes us an additional explanation for why analogous rejections for moral realism and moral epistemology are different. Note that agnosticism about naturalism does not suffer from this additional challenge because it does not reject supernatural claims or epistemology a priori (which could implicitly justify an agnostic's belief in moral realism).

3 The Influence Problem (IP)

3.1 About the IP

The next challenge to NMR is what I call the "influence problem" (IP) or the "authority problem," which involves why the existence of such values, assuming they do exist and we can know them to be true, have the authority to change our behavior. Considering that morality often involves asking us to do things we "don't want to do, [11]" we need to ask if we have any reason to follow the prescriptive claims discovered by NMR. For example, I know that gravity tends to pull objects towards the earth, and I am ontologically and epistemically justified in believing that this is an objective and mind-independent "fact." Still, the existence of this fact does not stop me from getting in an airplane and going against what gravity dictates. Part of the issue here is that gravity does not make any prescriptive claims about my behavior - it just is. However even if gravity was somehow able to claim I "ought not" to fly (or we discovered a way to find such a prescriptive claim from the laws of gravity), I could simply ignore it. I do not feel any accountability to gravity.

This is a problem even with the existence of an agreed-upon teleology. In the compass example above, a compass is functioning properly (i.e., in accordance with its designed purpose/telos) when it points towards magnetic north and functioning improperly when I move a magnet near it to mess with the needle. However even the existence of a prescriptive "ought" does not change the compass's behavior, nor keep me from having fun moving the needle around with a refrigerator magnet. To claim we have a duty or responsibility to follow prescriptive claims deserves explanation. An "ought" is a different kind of thing, usually involving accountability to a prescriptive agent. For instance, I may feel I "ought" to return the money I borrowed to my friend, who will not loan me money in the future if I do not. If prescriptive moral facts can be found "in nature," it seems nature itself would be the

prescribing agent. It would be difficult to convince someone who does not feel any responsibility to the prescriptions of nature to follow or care about them. If nature is a blind, undirected process [12] (as many naturalists agree), how could it possibly offer prescritive commands like a conscious agent?

3.2   Prescription and Practicality

It is difficult to justify the non-circular nature of moral prescription. To say I "ought" to follow the directives of a prescriptive agent invokes a prescription on a higher order or authority. A parent may tell a child, "You ought to be nice to your sister." The child asks, "why?" to which the parent may respond, "because I said so." The (philosophical) child may then ask, "Why ought I care about or do what you prescribe?" At this point, the parent may invoke a higher authority, like that of God or the state, saying "God says you ought to listen to my prescriptions." To which the curious child may ask, "why should I care what God prescribes?" It seems we are at a dead end, as what could be a higher prescriptive agent than God? The answer to breaking the non-circular nature of moral prescriptions thus seems to be practical concerns.

Naturalists and non-naturalists alike usually emphasize accountability to other humans or other moral agents (which can offer prescriptions). However, without the existence a prescriptive agent with some higher authority, a person has no logical reason to allow the prescriptions of another human supervene on their own (See the Methodological Problem in Section 5 for more details). Their reason for following such prescriptions, therefore, is purely practical, such as wanting to avoid going to jail or being accepted into a social circle. Still, this only provides reasons for following the rules when the odds of getting caught outweigh the odds of gettig away with it (factoring in punishment and personal benefit with a Bayesian framework).

Classical theism appears to solve this challenge by making God an omniscient agent who people are morally accountable to. Furthermore, most religions also give practical reasons (Karma, Heaven, Hell, etc) for following the prescriptions of a deity, so the difference between theism and NMR seems to be the level that practical concerns take over. For NMR, practical accountability appears limited to non-omniscient prescriptive agents such as humans. For theism and many other religions, practical accountability is extended to omniscient agents such as the Judeo-Christian God.

Despite this discussion about practical reasons, I do not think they factor much into everyday moral reasoning. When you ask a theist or atheist why they don't steal when they think they can get away with it, their answer is usually "because stealing is wrong" or "because I wouldn't want someone to

steal from me," instead of "because I don't want to go to Hell" or "because I don't want to go to jail." For this reason, I believe practical reasons justify the authority of prescribing agents more than serving as part of the decision-making process. The exception here seems to be minor infractions that do not hold much moral valence, such as rolling through a stop sign when nobody is aroound. In the next section, we will explore why the above explanation of "do unto others" (and similar golden-rule type justifications) create an additional problem for NMR.

4 The Axiological Problem (AP)

4.1 About the AP

The Axiological Problem (AP) involves which types of entities receive moral consideration and may be the most significant challenge NMR faces. Ethical systems and codes not only involve prescribing how we "should" treat others, but (implicitly or explicitly) draw a line distinguishing who/what counts as on "other" and who/what does not. While this line can be fuzzy at times (such as with animals, fetuses, etc.) basic agreement on who/what is "in" is necessary for any shared moral system. NMR, commonly accompanied by a belief that natural selection is a "blind" process with no purpose [13, 12], needs to justify what the scope of moral facts and prescriptions are if the facts and prescriptions themselves do not.

Golden-rule type claims, such as "treat others the way you want to be treated," only work if the AP problem has been solved. I may not steal money from a stranger because I wouldn't want a stranger to steal from me. This justification works because I see the stranger inside my circle of moral concern. On the other hand, I can causally watch a bear eat a salmon (despite certainly wanting someone to step in if a bear tried to eat *me* while I was swimming) because salmon is outside of my circle of moral concern. To claim my moral circle is "misaligned" implies the existence of a (prescriptively) "correct" moral circle, and someone making such a claim must provide a reason for me to change it from how it currently is to how it *ought* to be. For NMR, such a reason would need to be within the bounds of naturalism.

4.2 Justifying Humanism under Naturalism

Perhaps the most common flavor of naturalistic ethics is secular humanism (SH), which according to Council for Secular Humanism founder Paul Kurtz is, "[belief in] in the principles of free inquiry, ethics based upon reason,

and a commitment to science, democracy, and freedom [14]." It is unclear whether secular humanists are moral realists (and whether this designation would even be important), but SH tends to use ethical language in a realist sense. According to the Humanist Manifesto III, humanism "inspires hope of attaining peace, justice, and opportunity for all." All what? Humans of course. While limiting the circle of moral concern to humans may appear obvious, must naturalistic premises do not put human beings in any special place in the universe. Most (if not all) naturalists agree with universal common ancestry, the view that all terrestrial organisms share a genetic ancestor and a genetic heritage. To say we should draw the circle of moral concern at the species level, not further "down" at the racial level or further "up" at the mammalian level requires justification.

We can imagine other naturalistically based ethical frameworks with smaller or larger circles, such as Secular White Humanism, which only extends moral concern to white humans, or Secular Sentientism, which extends moral concern to all sentient beings, and ask SH if (and how) it claims to be superior to these frameworks. One possible explanation is that through evolution, our minds developed a desire for the propagation of the species (i.e., those we can reproduce with), so SH is natural. However this would fall into the naturalistic fallacy: it does not develop a prescriptive claim nor justify why we should care about it.

Furthermore, considering that human nature can be very tribalistic and violent, selectively extending compassion and moral concern to some but not always all humans, this same "natural" justification could be used to justify racism or sexism, which SH (among many others) likely rejects. SH seems to make the teleological claim that humans *ought* to behave as if every human has value, regardless of sex or race. The question is whether they can justify the objectivity of such a claim (and if so, how) under naturalism. If they cannot, they must admit that (at least under naturalistic assumptions), their circle prescriptively arbitrary.

5 The Methodological Problem (MP)

5.1 About the MP

The Methodological Problem (MP) or arbitration problem refers to the issue of resolving conflicts between moral claims. This is the weakest challenge of the five because it only appears when moral claims conflict, meaning it only constitutes a challenge to NMR if the conflicting moral claims in question solve the other problems described or appear to have similar epistemic

weight. It is closely related to the EP because it also deals with epistemology, just at a higher level. Still, it presents a challenge to NMR because different ethical systems make conflicting demands on our behavior, such Kant's famous example of whether we have a duty to lie to a murder at our doorstep.

Proposing that moral facts "just exist" or "exist necessarily" [15] does not provide a useful mechanism for distinguishing what these moral facts are, how to resolve conflicts between such claims, or even how to act. In other words, it is not enough to simply claim one "has it right" without offering an explanation why others who disagree are incorrect (while making sure such explanation does not undermine one's claim to truth or objectivity in the process). Like the OP, which demonstrates the difficulty of explaining the existence of prescriptions under naturalism, the MP refers to the difficulty of explaining how a useful moral "standard" can exist under naturalism.

Let's compare moral realism to scientific realism [16], which argues science is a reliable way of informing true beliefs. Scientific realism proposes that the scientific method, with its focus on Popperian falsifiability, provides a methodology for arriving at truth. It does not need to claim that every scientific result is absolutely true to work; rather the process of repeated tests for falsification provides a mechanism for iterative progress and asymptotic arrival to ontologically existent "scientific truths." When two scientific theories conflict, experiments are performed to decide which one is superior and describes reality more closely.

For moral realism to similarly arbitrate conflicting moral claims, it needs to provide some methodology or standard with which to compare them. This standard not only needs to exist but be "usable" by our cognitive faculties like reason or observation. We cannot use consensus as a methodology because this not only (unjustifiably) assumes most peoples' moral sense is producing true beleifs, but more importantly this is not how we come to determine truth in any other situation. Claiming consensus produces true beliefs negates the idea of moral progress: if slaveholding is (or even was) a consensus position, it becomes the "moral" choice under relativism. As as a result we have no mechanism of criticizing the members who followed consensus in the past.

5.2   The difference between the EP and the MP

The difference between the MP and the EP is that of scope. The EP asks how individuals' faculties can detect morally relevant data used to make true or false claims. In the case of science, the naturalist would likely agree that our faculties of observation such as vision and taste have been naturally selected to produce "approximately true" beliefs, or beliefs that reflect reality in a relevant way. Moral facts (which under naturalism are reducible to natural

features) would have to supervene on our minds (which under naturalism is also a product of and informed by nature) in some way for an individual to have a chance at producing a moral belief informed by reality.

The MP, on the other hand, involves judgements about of truth of competing moral beliefs. Under moral realism, some moral beliefs are true and others are false. Just as we have a way of deciding when an individual's visual system is working to produce real versus false depictions of the world (the EP), we need a mechanism to evaluate the eventual beliefs and conclusions informed by these observations (the MP). This can only be done once it is established that such depictions are accurate. Methodologies such as falsifiability works well in the empirical sciences, while proof seems to be the methodology of choice in mathematics. For NMR to provide a way of evaluating competing moral claims and choosing the one that is superior or more factual, it needs to suggest and justify a (naturalistically constrained) methodology to do this very thing. Furthermore, the presupposition that such a methodology exists cannot contradict the naturalist's reason for dismissing the supernatural. It does not help to suggest moral realism is "true" without suggesting a mechanism for finding what these moral facts are. Calling a moral principle is called a "fact" without proposing a way of distinguishing fact from fiction is misleading.

5.3 The MP and Moral Authority

An additional difficulty of the MP under naturalism is the assumed impossibility of divine or supernatural revelation. Revealed religions allow certain individuals to have special or "prophetic" access to truth. An person claiming to "speak for God/gods" invokes an additional epistemic authority, often one with supernatural powers and (in some cases) omnisceince. Such a claim, if believed to be true, usually outranks competing moral codes by (what are assumed to be) limited human minds.

Because naturalism "rules out" the possibility of revelation by denying the existence of supernatural agents or higher "planes of consciousness," it is difficult for NMR to justify the epistemic superiority of one moral code over another. Under naturalism, no individual has special access to moral truth, meaning moral arbitration cannot be done on the basis of rank or access. This leaves the question of how one can determine if the moral code of one individual is superior to that of another. If someone claims that my moral code is "incorrect" and inferior to their own, they are claiming that they have some knowledge I do not.

Often NMR invokes a vague idea of collective moral progress, such as considering the abolition of slavery a "good" thing. The argument that

society has learned from its past mistakes is compelling and matches are common-sense notion that we know more today than we did centuries ago. In the case of slavery, one can argue we now have access to knowledge about slavery that previous generations did not. However would this argument convince a slaveholder 200 years ago (without such knowledge) that slavery is wrong and should be abolished? Under the assumed epistemic parity of differing moral codes, I don't think so. If the slaveholder thought abolitionists had no additional access to moral truth than they or other slavehoders did, any chance at revising their moral code becomes "short-circuted." Relativism seems to be the obvious answer if all individuals have equal (and indirect) access to moral truths.

Comparing this again to science, we tend not to assume any scientist has a particular "hotline" to scientific truth. A scientist may have keen powers of observation, special training, or access to a lab with specific equipment that would raise the epistemic authority of their conclusion over a layperson. However because science proposes a methodology of arbitrating scientific claims, a particularly astute layperson could (in theory) propose a theory that is more accurate than any other current theory. Because different scientific theories can be tested and compared with one another, the arbitration problem is easy to solve: a better scientific theory will describe the natural world more accurately than competing theories.

A scientist who consistently proposes more accurate models than their peers may have more "scientific authority," however it is only possible to reach such a conclusion about authority when we have a way of comparing different scientific theories in the first place. Without an agreed-upon way to similarly compare different moral codes and choose the one closest to truth, it becomes nearly impossible to decide who a "moral authority" is. The lack of universal assent regarding who deserves moral consideration, for instance, means we cannot consider a moral code like Humanism to be epistemically superior until we propose methodology that would allow us to compare moral codes and pick the one that is "most true".

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have articulated five challenges to the claim that moral realism and naturalism are compatible that I hope will open the door for further discussion and debate. While I am inclined to think the two are incompatible, perhaps naturalists have a good response to these challenges (or can show such challenges need not apply). Agnosticism about the super-natural allows that such principles could be grounded supernaturally, which

avoids the second set of problems. Further work can focus on the extent these challanges present themselves to supernatural (including religious) forms of moral realism.

Finally, I wish to point out that if naturalism does imply moral nihilism/amorality, perhaps we should only expect those who are extremely privileged to accept it. It may be easy for someone (like myself) who has lived a relatively comfortable and safe life to accept the implications of moral nihilism, but for people who have a recent history of slavery or are consistently worried about their safety, it may be a harder sell to convince them of a philosophical position that denies the objective wrongness of actions such as slavery and rape. This would mean that naturalism, *even if it is true*, may be easier to accept for some groups than others.

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