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PARFIT ON MORAL DISAGREEMENT AND THE ANALOGY BETWEEN MORALITY AND MATHEMATICS

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In his book On What Matters, Derek Parfit defends a version of moral non-naturalism, a view according to which there are objective normative truths, some of which are moral truths, and we have a reliable way of discovering them. These moral truths do not exist, however, as parts of the natural universe nor in Plato's heaven. While explaining in what way these truths exist and how we discover them, Parfit makes analogies between morality on the one hand, and mathematics and logic on the other. Moral truths "exist" in a way that numbers exist, and we discover these truths in a similar way as we discover truths about numbers. By the end of the second volume, Parfit also responds to a powerful objection against his view, an objection based on the phenomenon of moral disagreement. If people widely and deeply disagree about what's the moral truth, it is doubtful whether we have a reliable way of discovering it. In his reply, he claims that in ideal conditions for thinking about moral questions, we would all have sufficiently similar moral beliefs. But we often find ourselves in less-than-ideal conditions due to various factors that distort our ability to agree. Therefore, differences in moral opinion can be expected. In this paper, I draw a connection between these parts of Parfit's theory and comment on them. Firstly, I argue that Parfit's analogy with mathematics and logic and his answer to the disagreement objection are in tension because there are important epistemic differences between morality and these fields. If one would try to account for the differences, one would have to sacrifice some measure of similarity between morality and them. Secondly, I comment on Parfit's reply to the disagreement objection itself. I believe that, although his description of ideal conditions has some potential for reaching moral agreement, it may be difficult to tell if ideal conditions prevail. This obscurity spells further trouble for Parfit's overall theory.

Keywords: Moral disagreement – Moral truth – Mathematics – Similarity – Companions in guilt – Agreement distorting factors – Non-naturalism

Introduction

In his book *On What Matters*, Derek Parfit defends a version of moral non-naturalism, a view according to which there are objective normative truths, some of which are moral truths, and we have a reliable way of discovering them. These moral truths do

not exist, however, as parts of the natural universe nor in Plato's heaven. While explaining in what way these truths exist and how we discover them, Parfit makes analogies between morality on the one hand, and mathematics and logic on the other. Moral truths "exist" in a way that numbers exist, and we discover these truths in a similar way as we discover truths about numbers. By the end of the second volume, Parfit also responds to a powerful objection against his view, an objection based on the phenomenon of moral disagreement. If people widely and deeply disagree about what's the moral truth, it is doubtful whether we have a reliable way of discovering it. In his reply, he claims that in ideal conditions for thinking about moral questions, we would all have sufficiently similar moral beliefs. But we often find ourselves in less-than-ideal conditions due to various factors that distort our ability to agree. Therefore, differences in moral opinion can be expected. In this paper, I draw a connection between these parts of Parfit's theory and comment on them. Firstly, I argue that Parfit's analogy with mathematics and logic and his answer to the disagreement objection are in tension because there are important epistemic differences between morality and these fields. If one would try to account for the differences, one would have to sacrifice some measure of similarity between morality and them. Secondly, I comment on Parfit's reply to the disagreement objection itself. I believe that, although his description of ideal conditions has some potential for reaching moral agreement, it may be difficult to tell if ideal conditions prevail. This obscurity spells further trouble for Parfit's overall theory.

I use the concept of *moral truth* frequently in this paper, so I start by putting forth some of Parfit's moral truths in order to make the concept more tangible. A longer interpretative section follows in which I first explain in what ways is morality analogous to mathematics and logic according to Parfit, and then describe his reply to the disagreement objection. Next, I'll present a short argument stating that claims of analogy between morality on the one hand, and mathematics and logic on the other, are part of an implicit companions-in-guilt strategy. Therefore, they are key to the justification of Parfit's overall theory. In the second and critical section of the text, I first point out the tension I see between the claims of analogy and Parfit's reply to the disagreement objection, and then proceed to criticize the reply itself.

I start with some of Parfit's examples of objective moral truth. In the first volume of his book, Parfit asks rhetorically: "Who could possibly deny that the nature of agony gives us reasons to want to avoid being in agony, and that the nature of happiness gives us reasons to want to be happy?" (Parfit 2011a, 57) Or to put it positively and simply:

A Suffering is bad.
B Happiness is good.

Claims A and B are supposed to be *objective* moral truths in the following sense: Parfit's favoured conception of normativity is reason-involving (Parfit 2011b, 268). The concepts of good and bad are normative in the sense that the fact that X is good gives us reasons to want X, and the fact that Y is bad gives us reasons to avoid Y. Claims A and B are objective in the sense that the reasons to avoid suffering and to want to be happy are not given by our desires, attitudes, or decisions, but are given by the objects themselves – in case of A and B, by suffering and happiness.

It is not clear in what sense are A and B objective moral *truths*. Parfit does not shy away from talking about "normative facts", which suggests that A and B are true in the sense that they correspond to moral facts or correctly describe moral reality. But he claims that normative (and moral) truths, as well as mathematical and logical truths, are not true in virtue of corresponding to facts or describing reality correctly (Parfit 2017, 60). In what sense, positively, are they true, remains unclear to me. (Much less than what a "fact" means here, given that there's no moral reality to speak of.) Perhaps Parfit would claim that the concept of *truth* (and fact) is primitive, and therefore its sense cannot be explicated.

Parfit's claims of analogy between morality and mathematics

Now I turn to the claims of analogy between morality, mathematics and logic. In the first instance, morality is epistemologically analogous to mathematics and logic. In Parfit's view, moral, mathematical, and logical knowledge is non-empirical. We discover moral truths like A and B in "something like the way in which" we discover mathematical and logical truths – that is, "merely by thinking about them" or via the "intuitive ability." (Parfit 2011b, 488-489).

For example, if we have a sentence like "17 x 3 = 51", we think about its content and recognize, via reason, that it is true. Similarly, we recognize via reason that both *P* and *not-P* cannot be true, or that if *P* is true and *if P, then Q* is also true, then *Q* must be true. The same process ought to apply to A and B. Simply by thinking about suffering we recognize that it is bad, and simply by thinking about happiness we recognize that it is good. These and other moral truths are supposed to be necessary and self-evident, although not infallible. They are self-evident but not infallible in the sense that A, B, or some other moral judgement could seem obvious to us, but nonetheless we could still be mistaken about it.

However, making morality epistemologically analogous to mathematics and logic comes with a problem. For any view that treats a class of truths and facts as if they were not part of this universe faces a traditional epistemological challenge. If these truths are not part of this universe, then they are not concrete, spatio-temporal

objects, and they are not causally efficacious. The challenge then is to explain how we, concrete, spatio-temporal objects, can have epistemic access to these truths.

The epistemological similarity between morality and mathematics and logic is retained in Parfit's reply to this causal objection. Although moral, mathematical, and logical truths are not causally efficacious, we are able to "respond" to reasons to believe in these truths "non-causally". Parfit explains that when we are aware of some moral fact, like that suffering is bad, this awareness gives us reason to avoid suffering, which in turn can prompt us to avoid it. Correspondingly, our awareness of a valid argument with true premises gives us a decisive reason to believe in its conclusion, which in turn can lead us to believe in its conclusion (Parfit 2011b, 493, 500, 502).

The second claim of analogy concerns ontology. Morality is ontologically analogous to mathematics and logic. I already touched on this kind similarity in my comment on Parfit's concept of moral truth. Moral truths, numbers, the property of validity, and similar entities are not natural entities, nor are they denizens of Plato's heaven. Parfit writes that "there are" moral truths, numbers, the property of validity, and such, but they "do not exist in an ontological sense" and have "no ontological status" (Parfit 2011b, 481). This need not concern us because, as we can see in the case of mathematics, we do not have to determine if numbers exist or in what sense they exist in order to successfully do mathematics (Parfit 2011b, 480).

These claims raise several questions and could seem baffling. However, I will leave their interpretation and evaluation to others, as my interest lies elsewhere. I do want to argue here, however, that the claims of analogy between morality on the one hand, and mathematics and logic on the other, are vitally important for Parfit's overall theory. Imagine that morality was the only area of enquiry with the aforementioned epistemological and ontological profile. The only non-empirical objective knowledge we would know of is moral knowledge. Only moral truths would be such that, although we could say that there are these truths, they nonetheless don't exist as part of this universe nor as part of any other kind of reality. Such a view about morality would face traditional epistemological and ontological attacks and would be much less plausible if we could not point to other respectable disciplines with similar profile. Hence, the point of the claims of analogy is to add plausibility to the overall metaethical theory.

Claims of analogy between morality and mathematics are not new and a view on close relation between mathematical and moral knowledge goes back to Plato (Cowie and Rowland 2020, 4-5; Burnyeat 2000, 8). They are also important because they could be used as part of a defensive strategy against arguments in favour of moral anti-realism.[1] Cowie's and Rowland's elucidation of the strategy, known as

[1] I classify non-cognitivism, moral relativism, subjectivism, moral skepticism, and error theory as versions of (robust) anti-realism.

companions-in-guilt, is, in my view, the most useful. In their view, the strategy attempts to show that arguments in favour of anti-realism over-generalise in the sense that "if they were sound, they would also undermine the credentials of some non-moral domain of thought or enquiry." (Cowie and Rowland 2020, 1) If Parfit's claims of analogy were accepted, then competing arguments could implausibly over-generalise to mathematics. Schematically:

(A) If moral anti-realism is true, then mathematical anti-realism is true.

(B) Mathematical anti-realism is not true.

(C) Therefore, moral anti-realism is not true.

Where (A) is justified by the claims of analogy and (B) accepted by assumption. Therefore, without claims of analogy, the justification for Parfit's overall theory would suffer. In the section following the next, I attempt to show that they are difficult to maintain.

Parfit's response to the argument from moral disagreement

Now I move to the objection from disagreement, as Parfit formulates it, starting with a remark about sense perception. Skeptic notwithstanding, perception is a reliable way of knowing the world around us. Most people, most of the time, agree on what they see and hear, etc. We agree on perceptual matters unless, of course, there are unfavourable conditions for perception. We might disagree about what we see if, for example, we are in an altered state of mind or in a differently lit environment. But we would expect that, given that sense perception is a reliable way of knowing the external world, in good conditions for perception, virtually everybody would have the same perceptual beliefs.

In Parfit's view, we have a reliable way of knowing moral truths: our intuitive ability. We notice, however, that unlike perception, the use of our intuitive ability results in widespread and possibly deep moral disagreement on many issues. How could this be? Perhaps the substantial disagreement arises due to unfavourable conditions for intuitive ability. If we truly have a reliable way of discovering moral truths, we should expect that in ideal conditions for intuitive ability, virtually everybody would have the same moral beliefs.

Some have denied this and claimed that even in ideal conditions, we would still widely differ in our moral beliefs. In such a situation, we would have to think that only we can discover moral truths, as opposed to everybody else. Thus, it would hardly be rational for us to believe that only we can discover moral truth or that there is any. For the most part, this is Parfit's version of the disagreement objection and an outline of his reply.

Parfit attempts to show both that the perceived moral disagreement may not be as severe as some believe and that we can hope that in the future, in better or ideal conditions, there would be widespread moral agreement (Parfit 2011b, 552). However, we are not in ideal conditions due to various factors that distort our intuitive ability and our ability to morally agree. So, let us now look at these distorting factors in greater detail.

First factor:

1. We morally disagree because we disagree about non-moral matters, natural or supernatural.

For example, we may disagree about whether it is right to legalize cannabis. But this disagreement can be based on our differing (empirical) beliefs concerning the health effects of cannabis, the consequences of its prohibition and legalization, etc. If we agreed on these empirical matters, we might agree on the proper legal status of cannabis.

Also, we may disagree about whether we ought to obey God's commands. But this disagreement can be based on conflicting beliefs concerning God's existence. If all of us believed in an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God, then, Parfit believes, we would agree that we ought to obey him.

Second:

2. We morally disagree because we are self-interested and have egos.

Self-interest can often taint our moral beliefs. For example, "[i]f we ask how much of their income the world's rich people ought to give to those who are poor, our answer may depend on whether we are rich or poor" (Parfit 2011b, 533). But such facts about us, our wealth, race, sexual orientation, etc., are not, Parfit believes, morally relevant. Thus, if we considered the matter blind to these kinds of facts about us, we would agree on how much of their income the rich ought to give to the poor.

Also, "[m]any disagreements cannot be ended, for example, because some people become committed to their beliefs, and are unwilling to admit that they have been mistaken" (Parfit 2011b, 533). We can differentiate this factor from self-interest and call it simply *the ego*.

For instance, if I have defended the moral permissibility of euthanasia in the past, but now think that I may have been mistaken, it may be too hard for me to admit my mistake. Not just because I would have to admit a mistake, but also because I would have to admit a grave mistake. If euthanasia is in fact impermissible, it might be true

that I have defended murder. Therefore, with regard to moral questions, a lot tends to be at stake, so moral mistakes tend to be big and admitting them can be extra hard.

Third:

3. We morally disagree because we think moral truth must be precise.

According to Parfit, comparisons of value are very often imprecise. When we compare the quality of two lives, the outcomes of two acts, etc., it is possible that it cannot be precisely said which of the two is better, much like it cannot be precisely said which of two rooms is more untidy, or which of two theories is more complicated.

For example, I may be unable to choose which of two career paths, A and B, is better for me. Therefore, we judge that A and B are equally good for me. But I may be unable to choose between A and B even after learning later that B has some added perks, like that it is better paid than I previously thought. If A and B would be *precisely* equally good, then, after learning that B is better paid than I had though, I should see that B is better. But this need not be the case. I can remain indecisive even after learning that B is better paid. Therefore, A and B are *imprecisely* equally good. In such cases, we can maintain both that (i) neither A nor B is better, *and* that (ii) A and B are not precisely equally good. Someone can claim that A is better than B and someone else can deny it, because they both mistakenly presuppose that such comparisons can be precise.

Since comparisons of value are very often like this, we should avoid expressing them in terms of numbers, ranges of numbers, positions on a line, or as a scale of value. Numbers, ranges, positions on lines, and scales of value imply precision and are therefore misleading.

Fourth:

4. We morally disagree because we think all moral questions have answers.

Parfit thinks some moral questions simply don't have answers. He suggests that questions regarding early abortion and some questions about war and population ethics might be like this. In the case of early abortion, it can both be true that (i) early abortion is not right, and (ii) early abortion is not wrong (I simplify here). Early abortion can be morally undetermined as a matter of fact. People may then disagree about the moral status of early abortion and other acts because they mistakenly presuppose that their moral status is determined.

Fifth:

5. We can morally disagree when we consider borderline cases.

Some moral questions are about borderline cases. Here, again, Parfit mentions abortion. We may agree that it is wrong to kill innocent human beings but disagree about which entities are human beings. Is a human embryo or a foetus a human being? It is hard to say which concept to apply. In such cases, it is understandable that people disagree.

I am going to mention the remaining four distorting factors only briefly, since they are not as important for my critique. (6) Some moral questions do not have either-or answers, but more-or-less answers. Rightness and wrongness can be a matter of degree. If people presume that rightness and wrongness cannot be a matter of degree, they can artificially differ. (7) Sometimes people adhere to the same moral principles but apply them differently because they are in different conditions. Their moral disagreement is only apparent but not real. (8) Other times people equivocate on "right", "wrong", and other moral terms. If they used these terms in the same sense, they might not disagree. (9) And lastly, when people adhere to different moral theories, they disagree about why certain acts are wrong, but might not disagree about which acts are wrong. The former kind of disagreement is not fundamental and can be expected.

A critique of analogy between morality and mathematics

So far, I have mostly presented Parfit's claims and arguments. In the remainder of this paper, I will turn to my commentary and critique of them.

My first comment relates to the analogy claims between morality on the one hand, and mathematics and logic on the other. The claims of analogy are true only if a certain conception of mathematics and logic is true. Namely one according to which mathematical and logical truths are non-natural, non-normative, objective, without ontological implications, and which we access via our intuitive ability that is different from perception. But the question of what's the correct conception of mathematics and logic is not settled in the philosophy of mathematics and logic, as evidenced by the fact that, in a survey of professional philosophers and with regard to the philosophy of abstract objects, about 39 % are Platonists, about 37 % nominalists, and 23 % hold some other view (Bourget and Chalmers 2014, 478). Furthermore, Parfit does not deal with alternative theories. The analogies hold only if Parfit's conception of mathematics and logic happens to be true. Otherwise, morality has no companions.

For the sake of argument, let's assume that Parfit's conception of mathematics and logic is correct. The overall problem I see with a defence of objective moral truth based on mathematics and logic is that it can focus only on similarities and ignore differences. Traditionally, the indispensability of mathematics in science has been perceived as a main disanalogy between mathematics and morality. According to Quine-Putnam indispensability argument, some of our best theories that explain observations refer to mathematical objects. These objects are therefore explanatorily

indispensable and we ought to add them to our ontology (Putnam 2010, 57). This seems not to be the case in ethics. As Harman argued, "[i]n explaining the observations that support a physical theory, scientists typically appeal to mathematical principles. On the other hand, one never seems to need to appeal in this way to moral principles" (Harman 1977, 10).

I do not wish to defend nor reject this difference between morality and mathematics. The claim I want to make is that in Parfit's theory, there is a tension between the claims of analogy and his answer to the disagreement objection because of some other difference. We could claim that just like there is non-empirical, objective mathematical and logical truth, there is non-empirical, objective moral truth, and all are accessed simply by thinking. But if these claims are informative or substantial, we ought to be able to draw some implications from them. Firstly, if we discover moral truths in a similar way in which we discover mathematical and logical truths, then we should expect that our ability to resolve moral and mathematical disputes be similar, and that the extent of (dis)agreement on moral matters compared to that of mathematics and logic be similar as well. This, I think, is not the case.

Admittedly, it is hard to compare different areas of enquiry in terms of how much we agree in them. Perhaps, as Parfit might say, such comparisons can only be imprecise. Nonetheless, I assume that such comparisons are not impossible. For who would deny that morality is substantially different from mathematics and logic with regard to our ability to reach agreement? After all, when we want to give example of an area of enquiry in which agreement is normal and to be expected, at least in time, we bring up mathematics or logic. And when we want to give example of an area of enquiry in which disagreement is normal and to be expected, we bring up ethics (or politics, which is arguably closely related to ethics). The difference in ability to agree and resolve disputes then translates into difference in similarity of beliefs. We share many more mathematical beliefs than we share moral beliefs. This, I think, is the clearest disanalogy between morality on the one hand, and mathematics and logic on the other.

Clarke-Doane argues that, although many more people disagree about moral propositions than about mathematical ones, the disagreement is not epistemically significant (2020, 49 – 55). Firstly, this is consistent with my criticism of Parfit that if ethics and mathematics are ontologically and epistemologically similar, then we should expect, but do not observe, similar extent of agreement. And secondly, Clarke-Doane argues for the claim that mathematics has no better claim to a priori justification by pointing out the extent of disagreement or agnosticism among mathematicians with regard to truth or falsity of mathematical axioms (2020, 50 – 51). This is consistent with the empirical claim that there is *higher* proportion of disagreement or agnosticism among (professional) ethicists. Admittedly, one could object that I overly

stress the extent of disagreement in ethics and downplay it in mathematics. But this is an empirical question in the end. Before we have good empirical evidence supporting one answer or another, I think it is better to stick with what seems plausible. And it does not seem plausible that professionals in mathematics disagree just as much professionals in ethics do.

Some would reject the claim that mathematics and logic are paradigms of agreement for a different reason. These people might refer to the deep disagreements regarding the fundamental or philosophical questions of mathematics and logic. From this point of view, mathematics and logic do not seem like paradigms of agreement.

However, even if there are deep disagreements on the fundamental level of mathematics and logic, there are also deep disagreements concerning the fundamental questions of morality, whether they are metaethical or about the first principles of normative ethics. The disagreements in morality are not confined to the fundamental level but pertain to the non-fundamental level of judgements about particular cases as well. We not only disagree on whether there is a moral reality or what is the supreme moral principle of action, we also disagree, for example, whether hereditary gene editing, donating 10 % of one's income to an effective charity, abortion, euthanasia, and many other acts are moral.

Moreover, in context of Parfit's non-naturalism, this reply is problematic for another reason as well. As I said earlier, Parfit assumes certain conception of mathematics and logic in order to posit companions for morality. Stressing the controversial nature of debates concerning the philosophy of mathematics does not serve well his assumption.

The extent of disagreement is the first difference between morality and mathematics and logic. The second one relates to factors that distort agreement. By postulating various factors that distort our intuitive ability and our ability to reach moral agreement, Parfit attempts to explain why there is as much moral disagreement as there is. But here's the second implication. If we access moral truth in a similar way in which we access mathematical and logical truth, then should we not expect that similar distorting factors apply to both? For when it comes to distorting factors, morality differs from mathematics and logic.

Consider (1), the factor of differing beliefs about the natural and supernatural. It does not apply to mathematics and logic. Our beliefs about the natural and supernatural world are largely irrelevant to our ability to agree in mathematics and logic. There isn't much that I can add here. Perhaps only that the fact that natural and supernatural beliefs are largely irrelevant to mathematical and logical thinking is one reason to think that mathematical and logical truths are non-empirical. Since our moral beliefs are sensitive to our natural and supernatural beliefs, it gives us a reason to think that moral truths are not non-empirical, contrary to what Parfit believed.

Consider (2), the influence of self-interest and ego on our moral beliefs. Facts about us and our position in the world, like the fact that we are rich or poor, are irrelevant to our ability to agree in mathematics and logic. There are no mathematical views affiliated with either the rich or the poor.

I suppose the same thing exactly could not be said about the ego factor. We may be generally unwilling to accept a piece of new information that contradicts our beliefs. I presume this applies to mathematical and logical beliefs as well; but I still think that there is a difference.

Let's say that I don't like a particular mathematical conjecture, maybe because I have ridiculed its author in the past or because it contradicts what I believe about mathematics. But now let's say that I find out there's proof of it. If the proof is correct and I am able to understand it, then, no matter how much I don't like its conclusion, I will, perhaps grudgingly, accept it. Mathematical and logical arguments can have this kind of leverage or exhibit us to this kind of forcing. I am not saying that no moral argument can have such a leverage or forcing, but it seems to me that the phenomenon of accepting an uncomfortable conclusion under force of reason is less common in ethics than in mathematics and logic. If this is true, then the distorting influence (2) is not very applicable to mathematics and logic.

Clarke-Doane suggests that it is questionable that mathematics generates convergence in mathematical beliefs and that we have a reliable method of resolving mathematical disputes. Moral claims, in his view, admit of proof in the same way that mathematical claims do, which is by logically following from the chosen set of axioms (Clarke-Doane 2020, 3 – 4, 37 – 40). This is a reason to think that our abilities to reach moral and mathematical agreement are on a par.

However, mathematical terms, in contrast to moral terms, tend to be more precisely defined (implicitly in axioms or explicitly). It is the precision of definitions of mathematical terms that in part allows us to use them and to deduce theorems. But in moral dispute, definitions of key moral terms are usually part of the problem.[2] While we may agree on what precisely a point, a line, or a complex number is, we tend to disagree about what freedom, justice, or welfare is. Hence, due to ambiguity of moral terms, we may have problems formulating moral axioms precise enough to deduce theorems and to agree on the correct interpretations of both. This may be one of the reasons why, as I have claimed, moral proofs tend to lack leverage or forcing.

And finally (3), the imprecision of moral truths. In Parfit's view, comparisons of value are very often imprecise, and we should avoid expressing them in terms of numbers, ranges of numbers, positions on lines, or as scales of value. Moral matters are

[2] I thank Róbert Maco and his *Mathematical Propositions as Rules* (2019; 2020) for this insight.

rarely precise and exact. But this again contrasts with mathematics and logic, as precision and exactness are their characteristic features.

These dissimilarities suggest either that morality is not epistemologically and ontologically analogous to mathematics and logic, or, if the analogy is maintained, that distorting factors (1), (2), and (3) are not genuine factors and should not be used to explain away moral disagreements. In the latter case, Parfit's reply to the disagreement objection is weakened, as it cannot utilize these distorting factors.

One could reply by saying that there still remain six distorting factors that can explain away our moral disagreements. But I don't think they can help.

The challenge can be summed up like this. If morality is both epistemologically and ontologically analogous to mathematics and logic, then why is there a difference in our ability to agree? In an attempt to meet this challenge, we postulate various factors distorting our ability to reach moral agreement. But then, if a distorting factor applies only to morality but not to mathematics and logic, it suggests that morality is dissimilar to mathematics and logic. Alternatively, if a distorting factor applies to all: morality, mathematics, and logic, then it cannot help us in explaining the difference in our ability to reach agreement.

One could say that a distorting influence applies to all: morality, mathematics, and logic, but more to morality and less to mathematics and logic. But then the difference in degree again suggests dissimilarity.

In another reply, one can claim that we cannot draw the implications that I have drawn. That is, even if the fields of morality, mathematics, and logic are similar in philosophically important ways, we cannot expect that similar distorting factors apply to them or that the extent of agreement be similar in them. Similarity does not equal sameness; it allows for differences.

I disagree with this objection and maintain that we can have these expectations. If I say that Frank and Mark are similarly big, then I can expect that their shirts and shoes will be of similar size because the size of a person is closely linked to the size of their shirts and shoes. (Although I cannot expect that their shirts or shoes will be of similar colour.) If someone says that morality is, with regard to knowledge and being, similar to mathematics and logic, then I can expect that they will be similar with regard to agreement and agreement distorting factors because knowledge and agreement are closely linked as well. I believe they are closely linked because we judge a cognitive ability, like perception or mathematical ability, as reliable partly (or mainly) because, on its basis, we generally agree.

In still another reply, one could say that it is nonetheless perfectly possible that morality is similar to mathematics and logic in some ways (epistemology, ontology) but dissimilar in others (extent of agreement and agreement distortion). I do not deny

that possibility. It is, however, important to emphasize that it is merely that – a possibility. It is one thing to say that, in effect, because of its similarity, morality has companions in mathematics and logic, and quite another to say that it is possible that morality has companions in mathematics and logic.

And finally, one could respond by saying that even when our expectations are not met, it doesn't prove much. After all, according to Parfit, we discover moral truths in "something like the way in which" we discover mathematical and logical truths, although not the same way. Moreover, morality has different subject matter, which is distinct from mathematics and logic. Therefore, some differences are to be expected.[3]

Fair enough. I respond by saying that mathematics and logic (if they are separate fields) are much more similar to each other than they are to morality. At least with regard to epistemology, our ability to agree, and our vulnerability to various distorting factors. It seems to me that morality still sticks out.

A critique of Parfit's response to moral disagreement

My second comment relates to Parfit's response to the disagreement objection, and I would like to start here on a positive note. I think Parfit's distorting factors could be very beneficial, as they could potentially provide practical guidance in resolving our moral differences and lead to progress in ethics. That is to say that if we disagree on an answer to a moral question, we could at least in principle go through the checklist of various distorting factors, rule them out one by one, and see if our disagreement persists. Under the presumption that the distorting factors that Parfit described are genuine, we should come to an agreement. And that must count for something.

However, it is not clear to me whether such a method is applicable in practice, as some distorting factors may be hard to rule out. Let's say that we give conflicting answers to an important moral question, MQ. Perhaps MQ is the question "Is early abortion morally permissible?", or "Is it better for me to live with worsening dementia or undergo assisted suicide?", or "Is it right to save my own child rather than to save two children of a stranger?", etc. If we disagree about the right answer to MQ even after carefully thinking about it, then we should make sure that no distorting factor is in play. To do that, we have to answer some other questions first:

[3] When Parfit says that we discover moral truths in "something like the way in which" we discover mathematical and logical truths, we can read the passage as suggesting that morality, mathematics and logic are accessed via somewhat different cognitive abilities. But Parfit does not postulate any difference between these abilities. Positively, what he says about how we form moral, mathematical, and logical beliefs is the same. We form all of them "merely by thinking".

i. Does MQ have an answer?
ii. If MQ does have an answer and it is about comparison of value, can the comparison be precise?
iii. If MQ does have an answer, is it an either-or or a more-or-less kind of an answer?
iv. Is MQ about a borderline case?

The problem I see here is that answering (i) – (iv) may be just as hard as answering MQ in the first place, partly because questions (i) – (iv) are fairly abstract and partly because it is not clear how we should approach them.

Answers to questions (i) – (iv) are claims about moral facts. In Parfit's theory, we form beliefs about moral facts via our moral intuitive ability. Therefore, answers to questions (i)-(iv) should be either self-evident intuitions, or they should be inferred ultimately from such intuitions. But who could say about any of the answers to questions (i)-(iv) that they are self-evident to them or that they could infer them from self-evident moral truths?

The way I read Parfit suggests that answers to these questions are either brute intuitions or that they are inferred from the fact that MQ is a hard question (Parfit 2011b, 560). The latter is a tempting possibility, but as long as "hard problem" means "one that we disagree about", I do not think it is a promising one. For suppose we judge that MQ does not have an answer or that it is about a borderline case *because* we fail to agree on an answer to MQ. In the context of Parfit's theory, such a reply would be circular. Consider the following kind of reasoning: "We disagree about MQ because distorting factors (4) or (5) are in play. How do we know that distorting factors (4) or (5) are in play? Because we disagree about MQ." Since we could reason this way with regard to any MQ, genuine moral disagreement could become impossible.

Another possibility is to infer that MQ has no answer from the fact that when we think about MQ, simply no answer comes to mind. But I don't think we could say that about early abortion; some answers clearly come to mind. Maybe there are other MQs regarding which no answers come to mind. Parfit mentioned some problems of "ethics of population or the morality of war", but he was not specific, so I will not discuss the matter further here (Parfit 2011b, 560).

The problem of answering questions (i) – (iv) is not just a practical one, but a theoretical one as well. Parfit postulates the distorting factors in order to defend the so-called convergence claim, which says that in ideal conditions for thinking, we would all have pretty much the same moral beliefs. However, we are not in ideal conditions due to several distorting factors. If conditions improve in the future, Parfit believes we would see moral convergence. The claim is crucial for a non-naturalist like Parfit, since if we would not have the same moral beliefs even in ideal conditions,

it would be hard to believe that we have a reliable way of discovering the moral truth or that there is any. Therefore, the convergence claim makes or breaks the theory.

The convergence claim implies that we should expect moral convergence when distorting factors are no longer in play. What's needed then is the ability to recognize when distorting factors are no longer in play. If we are unable to say whether a distorting factor is in play or not, the convergence claim loses its meaning, as it becomes less clear how it could be disproven. Therefore, in attempting to find out if we genuinely disagree on an answer to MQ, questions (i) – (iv) and other questions corresponding to the remaining distorting factors, would have to be settled first. In effect, we would have to converge on the absence of distorting factors in order to find out if we morally converge at all. And I am not sure how much hope there is for the first kind of convergence.

Perhaps I am simply overly skeptical and someone could come up with plausible answers to (i) – (iv). But my skepticism has a reason, as even Parfit had some trouble determining answers to questions (i) and (iv); that is, the questions of MQ having or not having an answer and MQ being or not being a borderline case. He suggests that the question about moral status of early abortion has no answer; but in discussing borderline cases, he mentions early abortion as an example as well. Arguably, early abortion cannot both be morally undetermined and a borderline case. For unless borderline case (5) is the same kind of distorting factor as some moral question not having an answer (4), then questions about borderline cases still have answers. So, does the question "Is early abortion morally permissible?" have an answer?

I believe it's simply hard to tell. Consider the possibility that Parfit thought that the moral status of early abortion is undetermined. Then he would disagree about that with both sides of the abortion controversy, since virtually everybody who engages in the controversy thinks that the moral status of early abortion is determined one way or the other. In that case, the situation would be similar to that of facing widespread moral disagreement in ideal conditions. It would not be very rational for Parfit to think that he, as opposed to almost everybody else, intuited that the status of early abortion is undetermined. The remaining possibility is that the question of the moral status of early abortion has an answer. But then why would he suggest it as an example of a moral question with no answer?

If it is really as hard to answer questions about the presence of distorting factors as I suggested, then it is really hard to actually test the convergence claim and with it Parfit's theory. And the harder it is to test, the less meaningful it is.

Conclusion

To sum up, thanks to their a priori appearance, it can seem like moral thinking is similar to mathematical and logical thinking. But there are also important differences. One

would have to find a way to defend objective moral truth with mathematics and logic while at the same time be able to account for the existing epistemic differences between them. As for the phenomenon of widespread moral disagreement, one could claim that we morally disagree because we are not in ideal conditions for discovering moral truths. But it is not very helpful nor theoretically meaningful to postulate ideal conditions whose presence or absence is as hard to determine, if not more so, than to resolve the initial disagreement.

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