Companions in Guilt Strategy

[Word Count] 1974 words

Philosophers often seek to defend the credentials of one set of disputed claims by comparing them to other claims with which they are said to have important features in common. Some arguments of this kind have a 'companions in guilt' form (Mackie 1977, 39). Companions in guilt arguments are designed to defend the credentials of one set of claims, A, by showing that some of the features of A-claims that are thought to be problematic are shared by another set of claims, B, the credentials of which are less controversial. With respect to these features, A-claims and B-claims are said to be companions in guilt. In other words, if the credentials of A-claims are undermined by possessing these features, then so are the credentials of B-claims, all other things being equal. On the assumption that the credentials of B-claims are not undermined by the fact that they possess these features, then neither are the credentials of A-claims.

The companions in guilt strategy has long formed a central part of the philosopher's toolkit and is frequently put to work across the discipline, from fundamental questions in metaphysics to practical questions in political philosophy. In moral philosophy, the strategy has played an important role in discussions of the nature and status of ethical claims, in particular in discussions of ethical objectivity (see METAETHICS; METHODOLOGY IN METAETHICS). Companions in guilt arguments for ethical objectivity are designed to defend the epistemological, metaphysical or semantic

credentials of ethical claims by showing that some of the very features of ethical claims that have led sceptics to question their objectivity are shared by non-ethical claims the objectivity of which is either agreed to be beyond doubt, or is at least not subject to the same degree of controversy (Lillehammer 2007).

The companions in guilt strategy can take more than one form. Some companions in guilt arguments postulate a relationship of entailment between B-claims and A-claims. When put to work in defence of ethical objectivity these 'arguments by entailment' purport to show that some set of ethical claims the objectivity of which is in dispute actually follow from a set of (ethical or non-ethical) claims the objectivity of which is less controversial. We are therefore forced to accept the objectivity of the disputed claims on pains of having to reject the objectivity of the companion claims from which they are said to follow.

One powerful argument by entailment has been developed by Hilary Putnam, who has argued that the objectivity of value (including ethical value) follows from the objectivity of basic semantic, ontological and epistemological notions, such as truth, fact, and reason. According to Putnam, our very capacity to think about the world in a rational way is laden with evaluative commitments, including commitments about what is objectively good (Putnam 1981, 2002). Another argument by entailment has been developed by philosophers influenced by Immanuel Kant, including Christine Korsgaard (Korsgaard 2008). According to Korsgaard, the objective validity of desire independent *categorical imperatives* traditionally associated with moral obligation is actually presupposed by the

objective validity of *hypothetical imperatives* traditionally associated with desire

satisfaction (see CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE; IMPERATIVES, CATEGORICAL

AND HYPOTHETICAL; KANT, IMMANUEL). A third argument by entailment can be

extracted from the view that everyday attributions of propositional attitudes such as

beliefs and desires are inherently evaluative. According to Donald Davidson, for

example, we have no choice but to interpret rational agents as believers in the true and

lovers of the good (Davidson 2004). To deny the objectivity of ethical and other

evaluative claims would therefore be paramount to denying our capacity to interpret each

other as genuinely minded (see NORMATIVITY).

Arguments by entailment have three limitations. First, claims of entailment are often hard

to establish. Thus, an argument by entailment will only work if it can be shown that B-

claims cannot, in fact, be understood without a further commitment to A-claims. Given

the variety of philosophical views normally available about most areas of human thought,

this is rarely beyond question. A second limitation of arguments by entailment is their

scope. Even if some A-claims are implied by B-claims, it does not follow that all are.

Many sceptics about ethical objectivity, for example, are willing to accept that certain

evaluative claims have genuinely objective credentials. The target of their scepticism is

often quite specific ethical claims, such as claims about rights, obligations or

responsibility that are further removed from the core of evaluative claims on which

arguments by entailment have often been focused. A third limitation is that a successfully

established entailment cuts both two ways. Instead of removing the problems about the

credentials of A-claims, B-claims might be thought to inherit them, thereby creating

additional pressure to either account for B-claims in a way that avoids the entailment or to reject the credentials of B-claims as well as A-claims.

Other companions in guilt arguments postulate a relationship of similarity between A-claims and B-claims (see ANALOGICAL ARGUMENTS). When put to work in defence of ethical objectivity these 'arguments by analogy' relate certain ethical claims to certain less disputed (ethical or non-ethical) claims, and then aim to show that both sets of claims exhibit the same features that, in the case of ethical claims, have been a source of doubt about their objectivity. The conclusion of these arguments is the that we have no more reason for doubting the objectivity of the disputed ethical claims on account of having these features than we have for doubting the objectivity of the less disputed claims, all other things being equal.

One influential argument by analogy in defence of ethical objectivity appeals to an analogy between values and secondary qualities, such as colour (McDowell 1998). On this view, there is no contradiction implied by the combination of the claims that a) the property F is objective or real and b) the property F is dependent on our dispositions to experience things as F [see IDEAL OBSERVER THEORIES; RESPONSE DEPENDENT THEORIES]. On this view, to be ethically good or right is to be appropriately favoured by ethically competent judges in favourable circumstances. Another historically influential argument by analogy appeals to one or more similarities between ethical claims on the one hand and logical or mathematical claims on the other. Thus, neither ethical values nor the objects of logical or mathematical thought have an

obvious place in the causal nexus, as perceived by the senses. Second, and as some philosophers inspired by the later Wittgenstein have argued, the possibility that basic logical or mathematical claims are made against a background of natural human dispositions that have no intelligible vindication from a perspective outside of those claims does not imply that we ought to reject the objective credentials of logic or mathematics (see WITTGENSTEIN, LUDWIG). By analogy, if ethical claims exhibit the same combination of features there is no implication that we ought to reject the objective credentials of ethical claims either (Wiggins 1987). A third argument by analogy appeals to various ways in which ethical and scientific thought are importantly similar in ways than have traditionally been overlooked by critics of ethical objectivity (Mackie 1977). Thus, Putnam and others have argued that both science and ethics are essentially holistic, perspectival and evaluatively laden forms of rational inquiry in which theory is underdetermined by evidence and there is room for objective indeterminacy (Putnam 1981; McDowell 1998). The presence of one or more of these features in ethical thought is therefore insufficient to undermine the objective credentials of ethical thought in particular (see DISAGREEMENT, MORAL; QUEERNESS, ARGUMENT FROM).

Arguments by analogy also have three limitations. First, everything is similar to everything else in some respect. It is a further question whether the similarity is philosophically in dispute. Second, non-identical things are not perfectly similar in every respect. The relevance of any particular similarity must therefore be evaluated with respect to at least two further factors. The first is the centrality of the shared feature to the claims in question. The second is the potential presence of other features that would

distinguish the two sets of claims with respect to the dispute at hand. Thus, arguments by analogy can be undermined either by the fact that the similarity in question is not the similarity on which the philosophical issue depends or by the fact that the similarity in question is compensated for by other differences between the claims compared. Third, the fact of similarity can cut both ways. Instead of removing the problem identified with A-claims, B-claims might now be thought to share them, thus creating additional pressure to either reject or explain away the apparent analogy.

Not all arguments by analogy have a companions in guilt form. There is a closely related argumentative strategy that appeals to shared features of ethical and non-ethical claims without implying that the relevant non-ethical claims have the same problematic features as ethical claims do. For example, the objectivity of ethical claims is sometimes defended by analysing them in terms of broadly naturalistic claims about human function and some associated notion of excellence (Foot 2001). Just as there is nothing mysterious about saying that a plant or a non-human animal is doing well or badly by appealing to broadly natural facts about what it is for a life of that kind to go well, so there need be nothing mysterious about saying that a human agent is doing well or badly by appealing to broadly natural facts about what it is for a human life to go well [see FOOT, PHILIPPA; NATURALISM, ETHICAL; NEO-ARISTOTELIAN ETHICAL NATURALISM]. Although this is an argument by analogy, it does not have a companions in guilt form. It is one thing to ague that contested A-claims have some problematic feature, F, and then point out that B-claims, which are not thus contested, have the same problematic feature, F, as well. It is quite another to argue that although contested A-claims may appear to

have some other problematic feature, F, they in fact have some non-problematic feature, G, which they share with B-claims, and which is the objectively credible cousin of F-ness, no commitment to which is therefore entailed, either by A-claims or by B-claims. The naturalist strategy defended by Foot and others is more plausibly interpreted as belonging to the second category.

Some defenders of a companion in guilt strategy employ both arguments by entailment and arguments by analogy in support of their conclusions. Thus, Putnam argues independently both that the norms of scientific inquiry imply a commitment to objective ethical values and that scientific inquiry share with ethical thought the feature of being value-laden. It is clearly possible to accept the second claim without accepting the first. More recently, Terence Cuneo has argued that rejecting the existence of moral facts (or facts about reasons for action) implies rejecting the existence of epistemic facts (or facts about reasons for belief (Cuneo 2007)). Like Putnam, Cuneo's argument that the metaphysical credentials of ethical and epistemological claims are on a par employs a companions in guilt strategy that includes both appeals to important analogies between ethical and epistemic claims and the thesis that epistemic and ethical claims are conceptually intertwined (see REALISM, MORAL).

The success of any companions in guilt argument depends on at least three things. The first is an accurate description of the A-claims. The second is an accurate description of the B-claims. The third is an accurate description of the relation between A-claims and B-claims. Each of these elements is often deeply contested among parties to the

philosophical debate, which is why applications the companions in guilt strategy have a tendency to confuse as well as to illuminate. This does not, however, imply that an accurate and case-by case application of the strategy will never result in genuine philosophical progress. On the contrary, the companions in guilt strategy deserves a central place in the philosopher's toolbox, both in ethics and elsewhere.

[Cross References]

ANALOGICAL ARGUMENTS; CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE; DISAGREEMENT, MORAL; FOOT, PHILIPPA; IDEAL OBSERVER THEORIES; IMPERATIVES, CATEGORICAL AND HYPOTHETICAL; METAETHICS; METHODOLOGY IN METAETHICS; NATURALISM, ETHICAL; NEO-ARISTOTELIAN ETHICAL NATURALISM; NORMATIVITY; KANT, IMMANUEL; RESPONSE DEPENDENT THEORIES; QUEERNESS, ARGUMENT FROM; REALISM, MORAL; WITTGENSTEIN, LUDWIG.

[References]

Cuneo, Terence, 2007, *The Normative Web*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davidson, David, 2004, *Problems of Rationality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Foot, Philippa, 2001, *Natural Goodness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Korsgaard, Christine, 2008, *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lillehammer, Hallvard, 2007, *Companions in Guilt: Arguments for Ethical Objectivity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mackie, J. L., 1977, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

McDowell, John, 1998, *Mind, Value and Reality*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Putnam, Hilary, 1981, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Putnam, Hilary, 2002, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Distinction*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Wiggins, David, 1987, *Needs, Values, Truth*, Oxford: Blackwell.

[Suggested Readings]

Bambrough, Renford, 1979, *Moral Knowledge and Moral Skepticism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Bloomfield, Paul, 2001, *Moral Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hampton, Jean, 1998, *The Authority of Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hurley, Susan, 1989, *Natural Reasons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kramer, Matthew, 2009, *Moral Realism as a Moral Idea*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Lear, Jonathan, 1983, 'Ethics, Mathematics and Relativism', *Mind* 92, 38-60.

Schneewind, Jerome, ed., 2002, *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shafer-Landau, Russ, 2006, 'Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism', in Horgan, T. & Timmons, M. eds., *Metaethics after Moore*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 209-232.

Williams, Bernard, 1985, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London: Fontana.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.