

On the Alleged Laziness of Moral Realists

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1. Introduction

Melis Erdur has recently argued in this journal that there is something morally wrong with moral realism. Moral realism promotes “moral blindness or lethargy as a moral ideal, which is morally objectionable.”¹ This claim is motivated by a thought experiment in which we have easy access to the moral truths, either via some magic arrangement according to which moral truths arrive in our minds when we formulate moral questions, or via acquaintance with the few fundamental moral principles from which we can derive every other moral truth. In this thought experiment, the moral realist allegedly is happy to trust the truths or the moral deductions without bothering to engage further with morality. This is morally objectionable, because morality requires us to be wakeful, alert, and reflective with respect to moral questions, rather than simply accepting an easy answer. Moral “success,” according to Erdur, requires “some sort of wakeful and open encounter with life and other people.”² Because the moral realist in the thought experiment is permitted or even required to bypass this wakefulness in favor of simply apprehending the moral truth, moral realism must deny this point about wakefulness and moral

¹ Melis Erdur, “Moral Realism and the Incompleteness of Morality,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 52, no. 2 (2018): 228.

² Erdur, 230.

success, and so much the worse for moral realism.³ But the moral realist need not be worried, or so I shall argue.⁴ Moreover, Erdur's argument generalizes to moral anti-realism, so the moral realist in particular has nothing to worry about.

2. What Answers Do You Get?

The moral realist's reply is easiest to see if we first turn to the magic arrangement example, which I will refer to as the telegraph from the moral realm. Let us assume Erdur is right that moral wakefulness is morally valuable and that to avoid being wakeful is to be immoral. The telegraph lets us bypass this wakefulness by providing the right answer directly: no wakefulness is required. Thus, to trust the telegraph's answer and to act on the basis of it rather than on the basis of wakeful investigation into moral truth is to do something immoral. (One can even ask the telegraph about this, and it will dutifully reply that it is immoral to form judgments and act solely on the basis of its answers.)⁵ But this is no knock against moral realism. The moral realist thesis is merely that moral truths are objective, mind independent truths. This does not commit the moral realist to thinking that we ought to listen to a morally objectionable telegraph. (Again, the telegraph, if we ask it, will confirm that we have a duty not to do whatever it says merely on the basis of its having said it.)

Of course, the moral realist is presumably going to think that it will be morally good, at some point, if we come to apprehend at least some moral facts, somehow, because without apprehending at least some moral facts, it will be difficult for us to do the right thing except by

³ Erdur, 231.

⁴ Subsequent to the submission of this piece, a pre-print of Justin Horn's arguments along these same lines was posted online: Justin Horn, "On Moral Objections to Moral Realism," *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 2019. My arguments share much in common with Horn's argument in section 2 of his article.

⁵ If the telegraph does *not* say this, then Erdur must be wrong about the value of moral wakefulness, and her argument fails. If she does say this, then her argument fails for the reasons discussed below.

accident. So Erdur could object that although in principle the barebones thesis of moral realism itself doesn't contain a commitment to any particular moral views, once we fill out the commitments of each particular moral realist view, each particular moral realist will end up committed to rejecting the value of wakefulness for the same sorts of reasons. And thus every particular moral realist will end up endorsing an immoral view, and moral realism itself must therefore be rejected wholesale because each instance recommends immoral action. But no moral realist has to sign off on any given method of becoming familiar with the moral facts, no matter how morally objectionable that method may be, merely because the method happens to be accurate or effortless. The moral realist can veto certain ways of becoming acquainted with moral facts because these ways are morally objectionable. To use a rather stark example, it may be that it's morally objectionable to torture people with a new torture device. But one ought not to learn this by trying out the device. Does the moral realist need to worry about this? Certainly not. The moral realist need not endorse any old route to moral knowledge. They need only endorse the morally good routes.⁶ If the moral telegraph is a morally bad route, we ought not to avail ourselves of the moral telegraph to learn moral truths any more than we ought to avail ourselves of the torture device.

In some cases, this suggestion might seem implausible. If I am deciding whether to kill some to save others, and I must make up my mind very quickly, surely I ought to use the telegraph, one might think. The stakes are high and getting it right is of overwhelming importance.⁷ One option is to think that this would show us that the value of moral wakefulness is not *always* "essential to the success of moral inquiry" and that wakefulness is not "arguably,

⁶ For a similar objection see Horn, "On Moral Objections to Moral Realism," 8.

⁷ This is similar to an argument David Enoch makes about moral deference to peers: David Enoch, "A Defense of Moral Deference," *Journal of Philosophy* 111, no. 5 (2014): 241–43. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this reference. Enoch notes that his point about deference extends to "general norms of appropriate response to moral uncertainty," which includes cases like asking the moral telegraph.

the whole point” of morality, as Erdur puts it.⁸ We would have found a counterexample to Erdur’s argument. Moral wakefulness would perhaps sometimes be important to successful moral inquiry, but not always, and certainly not the whole point of morality. Although I think there is much to say in defense of this view, its truth would spell trouble for Erdur’s argument, so we will instead assume that moral wakefulness is indeed essential to any successful moral inquiry, perhaps so essential as to constitute the whole point of morality.⁹ This would mean biting the bullet and saying that one ought not to use the moral telegraph in the killing case, or more accurately it would mean admitting that one who uses the telegraph would not be engaging in successful moral inquiry and would thus be missing the whole point. But moral realism is not troubled by this answer. If we ought not to use the moral telegraph even in cases where getting it right matters quite a bit, then the moral realist can happily accept this.

Thus, even assuming that the moral realist must commit to some way of getting in touch with the moral facts, Erdur is wrong to suggest that the moral realist must commit to the moral acceptability of using the moral telegraph. This is because moral realism doesn’t imply any particular moral claims at all, and even if it does, it need not imply the very particular moral claim Erdur imputes to it, which is the claim that there is nothing wrong with using the moral telegraph.

3. It Matters What You Ask

There is another response the moral realist can give to the telegraph example. The telegraph, we are imagining, gives us the answer to any moral question we form. But forming a question is not a trivial matter. If Erdur is right about the value of wakefulness, this value may

⁸ Erdur, “Moral Realism and the Incompleteness of Morality,” 231.

⁹ Horn provides some arguments in favor of this view (and thus against Erdur): Horn, “On Moral Objections to Moral Realism,” 6–7.

manifest itself in the ability to know when to ask a moral question, which question to ask, and how to ask the question. Otherwise one might not be able to get much of anything out of the moral telegraph.

Imagine I face a moral choice about whether to lie to Val. I ask the telegraph “ought I to lie to Val, or tell the truth to Val?” with the intention of (among other things) finding out the answer without being wakeful and then acting upon that answer. The telegraph will reply that both options are morally wrong. Lying to Val and refraining from lying to Val are not full descriptions of what I am asking about. What I am asking about is lying to Val on the basis of having been told that this is the right thing to do by the telegraph, or refraining from lying for the same reason. Both sorts of actions are intentional. Because in this case the intentions underlying both actions fail to include doing my duty by “reflect[ing] upon the nature of loyalty and honesty, or what should take precedence in that particular case, or in general,” both options – lying and not lying – are immoral.¹⁰ I am effectively asking the telegraph whether I should do one wrong thing or another wrong thing. The two wrong things are lying to Val on the basis of having been told to do so by the telegraph without having engaged in sufficient reflection first, and refraining from lying to Val for the same reason. The telegraph will balk at these two options the same way it would balk a question like “should I steal from a helpless child, or a helpless senior citizen?” Analogously, a mathematical truths telegraph would balk at a question like “is the square root of two larger than seven, or smaller than one?”¹¹

¹⁰ Erdur, “Moral Realism and the Incompleteness of Morality,” 229.

¹¹ One might object and say that it is not wrong to fail to lie to Val for the wrong reasons, or even to lie to Val for the wrong reasons, so long as everything turns out well in the end. That is a characteristically consequentialist approach, as opposed to the more deontological cant that I have used to describe the situation. Anyone inclined to make this objection will not agree with Erdur that it is always morally wrong to bypass wakefulness, and so if this objection succeeds, Erdur’s argument fails.

In this way the telegraph can refuse to let anyone wiggle their way out of the reflection that Erdur advocates.¹² The only questions which will admit of answers conducive to action are questions which are asked by people who have already undergone the wakeful deliberation which is necessary to make their eventual actions moral. If I have deliberated about lying, then when I ask the telegraph whether I should lie to Val, I am asking whether I should act on the basis of my moral deliberation, not on the basis of the telegraph's answer. The same goes for everyone who has engaged in sufficient moral thoughtfulness prior to asking the telegraph. These people will not need the telegraph, at least insofar as their wakeful deliberation did not go astray. So, the telegraph is not very useful in most cases. Perhaps if one has gone astray, the telegraph will remedy this. Maybe once we have been wakeful enough, it is afterwards okay to use the answer the telegraph gives us. What counts as wakeful enough? Erdur says that "the answer depends on the circumstances."¹³ So, the most we can say is that the telegraph will refuse to give a useful answer unless one has deliberated enough, given the circumstances. Maybe the telegraph will refuse to give us a useful answer until we've already arrived at one ourselves, because there is no moral action unless one has first engaged in wakeful deliberation.

4. There's No Such Thing as a Free Moral Lunch

Let us dispense with the telegraph and approach the point directly. Morally acceptable access to the moral truths doesn't come free. We have to work for it. (This is by hypothesis: if we deny this, we deny Erdur's central claim.)¹⁴ This fact itself is one of the moral truths. Moral

¹² Another way to put this is that the moral telegraph refuses to let anyone act on the basis of what Enoch calls "opaque evidence." Enoch, "A Defense of Moral Deference," 237.

¹³ Erdur, "Moral Realism and the Incompleteness of Morality," 233.

¹⁴ Erdur's claim shares much in common with Allison Hills's suggestion that acceptance of moral testimony is objectionable because it doesn't necessarily give us "moral understanding," which is separate from moral knowledge: Alison Hills, "Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology," *Ethics* 120, no. 1 (2009): 94–127. Sarah McGrath has argued that issues with moral deference, which is acceptance of moral testimony as dispositive for

realism includes this moral truth among all the other moral truths in its repertoire. Any attempt to cheat by avoiding this moral truth will make no more sense than trying to cheat by avoiding any other moral truth, even if one cheats for the sake of finding out some other moral truths. If one of the moral truths is that it's wrong to cut the heads off of chickens in order to divine what one ought to do, then it's not legitimate to charge moral realists with salivating at the thought of an accurate chicken divination procedure. Of course the realist will reject such a procedure (at least insofar as they are getting things right). They may do so with a sigh, because it would nice to reach all those other juicy moral truths, but alas, among the moral truths that they do have access to, there is the one which protects chickens. Any moral argument against moral realism akin to Erdur's will in fact just be a moral argument against some process of knowledge acquisition rather than against moral realism itself. Moral realism is just a metaphysical thesis: it doesn't tell us whether anything goes when it comes time to apprehending those objective truths.

Erdur suggests that the rejection of moral realism is the only way to value "moral alertness and open-mindedness," virtues which must be rejected the moral realists, who must be lethargic and close-minded if the opportunity ever presents itself in the form of easy access to moral truths.¹⁵ "Can the realist plausibly promote" these virtues, she asks, "even when... there is

determining one's view on a moral matter, poses a threat to moral realism: Sarah McGrath, "Skepticism About Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism," *The Journal of Philosophy* 108, no. 3 (2011): 111–37. My own view is that questions about testimony and deference turn on issues unrelated to Erdur's point, because the telegraph to the moral realm or the easily deducible moral truths do not involve complications about our relationships to other agents. Thus for instance a solution to McGrath's attack on moral realism which relies on the status of other agents, like McGrath's own or Cory Davia and Michele Palmira's, would not work as a solution to Erdur's objection to moral realism: see Sarah McGrath, "The Puzzle of Pure Moral Deference," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23, no. Ethics (2009): 321–244; Cory Davia and Michele Palmira, "Moral Deference and Deference to an Epistemic Peer," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 65, no. 261 (2015): 605–25. But one might think that the worrisome nature of trusting the telegraph or easily deducing the moral truths is linked to the worrisome nature of accepting moral testimony or engaging in moral deference. For an overview of the topic of testimony see Alison Hills, "Moral Testimony," *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 6 (2013): 552–59. On moral deference and understanding, see also the aforementioned Enoch paper. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I mention these issues in relation to Erdur's argument.
¹⁵ Erdur, "Moral Realism and the Incompleteness of Morality," 231.

the option of obtaining all the desired moral truths at once?”¹⁶ The answer is yes: the moral realist can promote this, because they can promote anything which is morally good. If (as Erdur must accept) we grant that it’s morally good to be morally alert, why would the realist wish to contest this? More appositely, what would force them to contest this? Erdur suggests, from the point of view of the realist, that “there really is no point in continuing to stare at the circumstances and to second guess ourselves” if we are offered the truth in some other form.¹⁷ But there *must* be a point, if Erdur’s argument has any bite at all. The point is that it’s morally objectionable not to continue staring and to second guess ourselves. If one finds it intuitive that one ought not to keep deliberating once one has the right answer, then one’s quarrel is with moral wakefulness, not moral realism. One would be making a moral mistake, if Erdur is right. But one way or another, none of this impugns moral realism.

Effectively, Erdur is proposing a picture of moral inquiry which the moral realist does not need to endorse, and then objecting to moral realism on the grounds that it endorses the picture. The moral realist does not recommend that everyone apprehend the moral facts via whatever methodology they so choose, regardless of the morality of that methodology. Even if the moral realist *does* suggest this procedure, their mistake would be a substantive moral mistake which does not damage the moral realist thesis.¹⁸

5. The Lethargic Anti-Realist

¹⁶ Erdur, 231.

¹⁷ Erdur, 231.

¹⁸ Erdur elsewhere argues that moral realism is a substantive moral thesis, but not that it is *this* substantive moral thesis. See Melis Erdur, “A Moral Argument Against Moral Realism,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19, no. 3 (2016): 591–602. That is, even if we grant Erdur’s other argument, moral realism is not the thesis that there is nothing morally wrong about acquiring the moral facts, no matter how one goes about it. For a response to Erdur on this other point see Joshua Blanchard, “Melis Erdur’s Moral Argument Against Moral Realism,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 22, no. 2 (2019): 371–77. For another response see Horn, “On Moral Objections to Moral Realism.”

Although Erdur confines her argument to the moral realist, it generalizes to all metaethical views which posit moral truths to which one might gain access. It is not clear whether Erdur thinks the argument generalizes: her stated reason for avoiding moral anti-realism is that she thinks “regarding moral inquiry as amounting to the tracking of our actual attitudes and opinions isn’t a vindication of it.”¹⁹ This leaves open the possibility that the argument generalizes, and in fact it does, at least with respect to versions of anti-realism according to which there are true answers about what one ought to do. If Erdur’s argument works, then these versions of anti-realism should say that a moral telegraph which informs us of these true answers is very helpful. But, in following the moral telegraph we bypass wakefulness. Thus we have a moral argument against moral anti-realism.

For example, if Erdur is right, then a cultural relativist who believes that moral truths are determined by a society’s moral view would have to endorse a moral telegraph which delivers answers about society’s views, and this endorsement would be morally objectionable. Thus cultural relativism cannot be true. But cultural relativism contains no commitments that require the cultural relativist to endorse the moral telegraph as a morally acceptable method of acquiring moral truths. The only morally methods the cultural relativist must endorse as morally acceptable are those which are so endorsed by their culture. If a culture endorses the moral telegraph, then perhaps Erdur would want to run her argument against that culture, but at that point the target is not cultural relativism as a metaethical thesis but rather a particular culture’s substantive moral views. Whatever the outcome of that debate, it would hardly impugn cultural relativism as a form of moral anti-realism. The same can be said for any form of moral anti-realism. There is no

¹⁹ See Erdur, “Moral Realism and the Incompleteness of Morality,” 228. I do not think moral anti-realists must be committed to the view that moral inquiry amounts to tracking our actual attitudes or opinions, and even if they are committed to this, they need not be committed to the further view that this vindicates moral inquiry. So, this may be a non-sequitur. But this point is not important for the argument at hand.

reason to saddle anti-realism with a commitment to the moral goodness of the moral telegraph or any other procedure which bypasses wakefulness.

So, the reply from the anti-realist can be the same as that given by the realist. Anti-realism is a thesis about what makes the right answers right, not about how one is morally allowed to discover and act on the right answers. Even if we assume that any form of moral anti-realism will entail a commitment to some particular moral facts, it need not entail a commitment to the particular moral fact Erdur singles out, which is that one ought to bypass moral reflection. Rather, the moral anti-realist can say that, if Erdur is correct about the value of wakefulness, then when one investigates the various moral anti-realist truths, one must do so in a wakeful manner, lest one act immorally.

Erdur may accept that her argument generalizes like this. She is clear about claiming that her rejection of moral realism “doesn’t mean a return to moral anti-realism,” so she need not defend anti-realism from the argument.²⁰ So the fact that the argument generalizes is not an objection to it. However, it is worth noting that the argument generalizes, because this helps us get clearer about what is at stake. Ultimately the issue is not about moral realism (or moral anti-realism) at all. It is about the claim that easy access to moral truths would be morally objectionable. Put this way, though, it is clear why the claim is not an argument against moral realism: moral realism doesn’t claim that easy access to moral truths is always morally unobjectionable. It merely claims that the moral truths are objective. Indeed, one of those objective moral truths could be that easy access to moral truths is morally bad. Both the realist and the anti-realist should be happy with this result, because both are equally subject to Erdur’s objection. Since Erdur herself rejects both realism and anti-realism for other reasons, she too can

²⁰ Erdur, 228. Erdur elsewhere rejects moral anti-realism, along with moral realism, because she thinks they both constitute substantive moral mistakes: Erdur, “A Moral Argument Against Moral Realism.”

accept that her argument here generalizes. Thus everyone ought to be happy with this expansion of the scope of the wakefulness argument from moral realism to moral anti-realism too.

6. Objection: How Can Moral Realism be Self-Effacing?

One might object that it is strange for moral realism to be self-effacing in this way. Why would moral realism tell us to avoid learning about the moral facts? And since the argument generalizes to anti-realism, why would moral anti-realism be self-effacing in this way too? The answer is that putting a moral limit on access to moral facts is not self-effacing. Moral realism and anti-realism are theses about whether moral truths are or aren't objective and mind independent. They are not theses about how to arrive at these truths in a morally acceptable manner. Even if we marry realism and anti-realism to various epistemological views that tell us how to get in touch with the truths, this still doesn't entail a commitment to the morality (or lack thereof) of these epistemic methods. For instance, Cornell realists, whose epistemology recommends an *a posteriori* investigation into the natural moral facts, are not committed to thinking that all such investigation is always morally acceptable.²¹ If Val's entire family extracts from Val a solemn promise not to study homeostatic property clusters over the weekend, Val ought not to study homeostatic property clusters over the weekend, even if doing so would uncover some moral truths.²² Thus although various forms of moral realism and anti-realism may involve commitments about how one epistemically ought to ascertain moral truths, they do not require any commitments about how one morally ought to ascertain moral truths. A naturalist realist or anti-realist will say that one ought to investigate with naturalistic methods in order to

²¹ On Cornell realism, see for instance Richard Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 181–228; David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²² On homeostatic property clusters see Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist," 196–99.

discover moral truths, but this is an epistemic ought, not a moral ought. Neither naturalist moral realism nor anti-realism, nor any other metaethical view, requires a commitment to the idea that morally one ought to reach moral truths in any particular way.

7. Conclusion

Ultimately, Erdur is on the horns of a dilemma. Either moral wakefulness is morally important or it is not. If it is, then the moral realist need not ignore its moral importance in favor of endorsing a mad dash towards the moral facts by any means necessary. The moral realist can rule out using the moral telegraph the same way they rule out murder: on the grounds of immorality. If moral wakefulness is not morally important, then we cannot generate Erdur's argument against moral realism in the first place. So, the moral realist can sleep soundly, as can the anti-realist, who turns out to have been a possible target of the argument from the importance of moral wakefulness.