Is There Moral High Ground?

Paul Bloomfield

*University of Connecticut, Storrs*

As a bit of empirical data with which to begin, a recent internet search using the Google search engine on the quoted phrase “moral high ground” yielded links to 27,500 webpages. Undoubtedly, there will not be a single sense of the phrase upon which all completely agree, but the concept of one party's having “the moral high ground” in a dispute is indisputably a part of commonsense moral discourse and thought. In lieu of a universally univocal definition, it may still be helpful to metaethical debate to try to capture the driving force behind what superficially is merely a metaphor. The thesis to be explored is that the notion of “moral high ground” is a bit of commonsense metaethics: that a belief in moral high ground is best understood as an attempt to capture a naive form of moral realism. I will argue here that the denial of a belief in moral high ground is a particularly undesirable form of moral relativism that I will call “metaethical relativism.” Moreover, I will argue that many forms of moral non-realism (irrealism, prescriptivism, and emotivism) are all tacitly committed to metaethical relativism.

The contrast between believing in moral high ground and metaethical relativism can be pursued by way of enriching the original metaphor of “moral high ground.” We may engage in what might be called the “theoretical topology” of normative ethical positions or theories. The question that arises is whether or not the metaphysical underpinnings of morality, at bottom, place all moral positions (or theories) on a “flat two dimensional
map” (a level playing field) or if, in fact, the map of moral positions is considered “three dimensional” by which we may understand that some moral positions have the “high ground” over others. Thus, we might stand off from an engaged normative dispute and ask, from a God’s-eye point of view, whether the positions of the disputants vary in terms of their correctness or objectivity, as measured by the “height” of the ground (position) they occupy or if, at bottom, no side has this sort of correctness or objectivity on its side and everyone is on a “level playing field.” Understood in these terms, a belief in moral high ground carries with it a commitment to a fairly robust form of moral realism, while the denial of moral high ground implies an insidious form of relativism.

Of course, space does not permit me to address every possible variation of irrealism. I choose as my initial stalking-horse the work of Mark Timmons (1999), whose “assertoric non-descriptivism” is a hybrid irrealist theory that innovatively utilizes a variety of devices typical of metaethical irrealism. From here, the problem of metaethical relativism found in Timmons 1999 will be generalized to show how it infects the positions of R. M. Hare (1981) and C. L. Stevenson (1937, 1949). By inspecting the views of these philosophers, we find three irrealist positions with different theories of the nature of moral language: Timmons takes it to be assertoric, Hare finds it prescriptive, and Stevenson says it is emotive. Despite these differences, all face the same problem of metaethical relativism. It is my suspicion that this problem is also latent in the quasi-realism of Simon Blackburn (by way of his discussion of Ramsey’s ladder [1998, chap. 7]), the norm-expressivism of Allan Gibbard (by way of his conception of “normative validity” [1990]), and Richard Rorty (by way of his ethnocentrism [1991]). Indeed, as mentioned above, I suspect that the only sort of metaethic that can avoid the problem of metaethical relativism is a robust form of moral realism; for example, I think secondary quality analyses of value like those given by John McDowell (1983, 1988) and David Wiggins (1991) face the same problem, even though their work is typically thought of as being versions of moral realism. In any case, discussion of the last five named philosophers will be left to another day, and attention here will be focused on the first three.

We begin with an introduction to the issues via Mark Timmons’s recent book *Morality without Foundations* (1999), which is an excellent example of very careful moral irrealism. Timmons is first and foremost a naturalistic moral irrealist. This means that ontologically he is committed to denying the existence of fully objective or mind-independent moral properties; on the ontologically positive side, he thinks that there are only natural properties at this metaphysical level. It is a mistake to infer from this, however, that Timmons thinks that
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there is no such thing as moral truth. This would be the result if one assumed a correspondence theory of truth, for from this point of view the naturalistic irrealist is denying the existence of what would normally be the naturalized truth-makers of moral claims. And no such moral truth-makers means no moral truth. But in our philosophically sophisticated modern day, a moral irrealist can be a minimalist about truth and say therefore that, for moral discourse, a proposition is true if and only if (roughly) it is correctly assertible. (It may merit note, by the way, that both Blackburn and Gibbard share with Timmons this rough picture of moral truth.)

It is crucial for Timmons, however, and it is what makes his position so distinctively interesting, that we can make genuine assertions in moral discourse. Leaving aside Mackie and other error theorists, past irrealists have thought that moral evaluations are not actually attempts to describe something in the world but, rather, have claimed that evaluating is something like expressing an attitude. Expressions of attitude, however, are not assertions, which leaves these old-school irrealists having to explain why so much moral language has the syntactic structure of assertoric discourse. These irrealists have had to accommodate this fact by feverishly working to show that the superficial syntax of moral language is misleading, and their attempts have (to my mind) never quite been fully satisfactory. It takes quite a bit of below-the-surface machinery to make it all work and this always seems (again, to me) like an ad hoc stretch. For example, Hare's last-minute switch of "satisfaction" in place of "truth" when explaining what is preserved in a valid moral inference is itself unsatisfying to a more commonsense point of view.

Timmons sidesteps the problems of having to gerrymander a theory of moral syntax by ingeniously making a claim about the semantics of moral language: he asserts that moral language can be both assertoric and non-descriptive. What we get is a theory of moral evaluations as truth-apt assertions, in virtue of their being correctly assertible (or not), where the point of correctly asserting a moral evaluation is not to describe the world but to guide our actions in "ways that promote survival enhancing coordinative behavior" (Timmons 1999, 172). With Timmons's version of irrealism, we get genuinely assertoric and truth-bearing moral discourse while not having to claim that there is anything misleading about the surface grammar of moral language. What more could a denier of moral reality wish for? We get to guide our actions truly toward success in a way that allows us to eat our moral cake without having to make the metaphysical posit of its existence.

So how does metaethical relativism arise for Timmons? It comes from the fact that he thinks moral assertions are always semantically both engaged and categorical. Interestingly, he
makes these claims so that he can avoid a different, more traditional and familiar, sort of relativism. To see how this unfolds we'll start by looking at the engaged character of moral language. Moral language is, for Timmons, engaged insofar as it always issues from a moral stance or a moral outlook. Correct assertibility is always taken from the point of view of people who share a particular moral stance or outlook. This is what Timmons means when he says that moral “truth is immanent because truth ascriptions to moral statements are morally engaged” (1999, 169). When we make moral evaluations they serve to guide and promote our coordinative efforts; that is, the efforts of we people who buy into our moral outlook. Now, one might think that a sort of relativism can be spotted at this point: the engaged aspect of moral language indexes it to a particular point of view or outlook, and so moral truths are what is correctly assertible for those that share that moral point of view.

Undeniably, this does sound like relativism, but Timmons rightly denies that it need be (1999, 146, 149–50, 151–2, 166). This is because, according to him, moral language is not only engaged, it is categorical too. “Categorical” here means that a moral prescription applies to everyone, regardless of outlook or point of view. The traditional, familiar sort of relativist says there is no truth simpliciter or “absolute truth”; there is only “true for me” and “true for you”: it may be true for us that educating women is good but it may also be false for the Taliban that educating women is good. Timmons is not a relativist in this sense because he thinks that moral truth is truth for everyone, categorically and tout court, and not only for those who share a particular moral outlook. Let us call the traditional sort of relativism that Timmons successfully avoids here “normative relativism.” When we say that it is true that educating women is good, we do not mean that this is only true for us; rather, we think it is true for everyone. Our claims are categorical in scope; we think they would apply to us even if we didn’t believe in them. So we get to think to ourselves, “Even if we were part of the Taliban and thought it bad to educate women, we would then be wrong because this is a false view.” If there is relativism here, it certainly is not what was just called “normative relativism.”

There are problems with the categorical nature of moral language being described in this way: there still seems to be something self-congratulatory about everyone’s moral language if it is correct. Nevertheless, the problem to be presented for Timmons accepts his accounts of the “engagement” and “categoricity” of moral language. Positions holding moral language to be both engaged and categorical moral language are tacitly committed to metaethical relativism.

Metaethical relativism infects any position that is committed to thinking that, from a morally disengaged point of view, all
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moral outlooks that are equally consistent from an internal point of view are all equally correct; equal internal consistency yields equally true moral truth. Equal correct assertibility yields equal moral truths. In any dispute where the parties are equally justified in what they believe (when they are judged according to the standards of their own point of view), then the metaethical relativist will deny the existence of an objective moral high ground capable of making one party truly in the right and the other truly in the wrong.

Note that from the engaged point of view, each party in a normative debate thinks that it has the moral high ground; this is what justifies to the members of that party the categorical nature of their moral language. It is this belief that saves Timmons's position from normative relativism as discussed above. This comes out clearly when we note that the Taliban claims that it is categorically true, or true for everyone tout court, that it is bad to educate women. We claim that the opposite is categorically true or true for everyone tout court, Timmons claims over and over that it is the categorical nature of moral language that keeps it from being relativistic. What Timmons does not acknowledge is that in an engaged normative moral disagreement everyone's moral language is equally categorical.

If Timmons is right, however, then from a disengaged point of view, the situation is different; from this point of view, there is no moral high ground in situations in which the disagreement is a product of two equally consistent theories. From a disengaged standpoint, in cases like this, there is no objective fact as to who is correct and who is not correct; from a disengaged point of view, there is no "deep" or "high" moral truth out there capable of impartially adjudicating stubborn cross-cultural moral disagreement. There is no higher authority. From a disengaged point of view, there is no moral truth as such. This is the unhappy theoretical downside to truth's being immanent. (It is, by the way, the reason Putnam in *Reason, Truth, and History* [1981] had such trouble with "the rational Nazi.") In the most intransigent sort of moral disagreement, all both sides can do is fall back upon whatever moral outlook they actually have and categorically assert that it (or some improvement of it) yields a moral truth that applies to all people whether they recognize it or not. If one denies that there is a "higher" moral truth at the disengaged level, then when both parties in a dispute use theories that are equally consistent or rational from their own points of view, they are both equally in the right. And if this is not an insidious form of moral relativism, then there isn't one.

We may consider the proposition "It is good to educate women." For us, this is categorically true. For the Taliban, it is categorically false. From a disengaged metaethical standpoint
we must relativize truth. The only other option is to accept both ours and the Taliban’s claims and conclude that there are true moral contradictions: it is both true and not true that it is good to educate women. *Pace* dialethism, we should assume that true moral contradictions are untenable. We may therefore conclude that Timmons is forced to accept the fact that his brand of irrealism is committed to metaethical relativism.

A moment is warranted to block an easy way to misunderstand the point about metaethical relativism. One might think that since all moral language is engaged, Timmons would be committed to denying the possibility of taking the disengaged standpoint that is necessary to formulate the dilemma that has been posed for him. Such a denial would be expected by Simon Blackburn and Richard Rorty; it is an open question, however, whether this denial leaves them unable to distinguish the metaethical position they reject, moral realism, from their own. Be that as it may, Timmons is a more traditional metaphysician. Timmons’s irrealism is one which accepts the existence of what we might call the “God’s-eye point of view” and claims that at this level we objectively find no objective mind-independent moral properties. For this reason alone, he is committed to there being a disengaged point of view. But Timmons makes use of this point of view himself, especially in his discussion of the political differences Putnam writes of between himself and Nozick; Timmons uses the differences between Putnam and Nozick on property rights to call our attention to “the possibility of there being two incompatible moral outlooks, each of which being internally consistent” (1999, 170). Timmons considers this case in his discussion of moral commitment, but it is in regards to moral truth that it gets him into trouble. If we had two countries here on earth, Putnamania and Nozickia, and each had the moral outlooks of their name-sake, what would we have to say here about moral truth? Each moral outlook is equally consistent, so their truths are all equally correctly assertible and so are equally true despite the fact that they disagree with or contradict one another.

While the following may be an *ad hominem*, I take it at least partly to be a compliment to say that I think some of what gets Timmons into trouble is that he seems to let his metaethical views be infected by his own personal and good normative moral nature.¹ The reader may take this for what it is worth, but it is my sense that Mark Timmons is a good person (given a number of professional and personal interactions) and that when he categorically tells us to be good he is in fact telling us to be as we ought to be. The problem arises when we consider what we would have to say about bad people if Timmons’s metaethics were actually true. What we call their bad moral views will be justified for them as much as Timmons’s and mine are justified for us. At the normative level, I’m on Timmons’s
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side. I don’t, however, think this bias should affect our meta-ethics.

The problem comes out in Timmons’s explanation for why there is a categorical aspect to moral language and how the categoricity is related to the point of moral practice of action-guidance. This deserves to be pursued here because it will aid in the discussion of Hare below. Timmons says:

If the whole point and purpose of moral practice is action guidance in ways that promote survival-enhancing coordinative behavior, it makes sense that we engage in assertion that is categorical in pressing our moral views. Moreover, the typical manner in which one takes a moral stance and categorically asserts one’s moral views is respectful in the sense that (typically) one is prepared to give reasons for her moral convictions and expects others to do likewise. Failure to be respectful of the views of others, by dogmatically clinging to whatever moral views one currently holds, often cuts off the possibility of fruitful exchange and mutual agreement on matters of deep importance. (1999, 172–3)

The point to notice here is that being non-dogmatic and respectful to others is only a part of Timmons’s engaged normative moral outlook; it is the product of his moral outlook that values non-dogmatic “fruitful exchange and mutual agreement.” It is a mistake, I think, to build this value-laden stance into one’s metaethical theory. True, Timmons asserts that we all ought, categorically, to be non-dogmatic and respectful, and we must applaud the assertion. But normative dogmatists typically are not respectful and nevertheless hold their views to be at least as categorical as we non-dogmatists hold our views.

In particular, we can see that for Timmons’s irrealism, there is no outlook-independent right or wrong about normative dogmatism itself; Timmons values “promoting survival enhancing coordinative behavior,” but this is his moral stance. A hermit might have a moral theory that does not value coordinative behavior in the least. Still, according to Timmons, the categorical nature of moral language is justified by the need for non-dogmatic respectfulness. It is hard to know what to say about the unusual normative dogmatist who is also a Timmons-style irrealist. There is nothing that will justify the categorical nature of this dogmatist’s language. Perhaps this is why dogmatists are typically realists themselves: it is not their respect for others that makes them speak categorically; it is their belief that they are objectively in the right. Categorical language is justified by realist dogmatists by their own claims to know the objective moral truth that is, of course, true for everyone.

Now Richard Hare is, I think, what I have just called a normative dogmatist of an irrealist stripe. His “universal pre-
scriptivism” is one that takes moral language to be a combination of descriptive and non-descriptive elements. The descriptive elements concern the content of a moral prescription and the non-descriptive element is its universalized prescriptivity. Moral language is imperatival according to Hare; it describes a certain behavior and tells us to act accordingly. It is this sense in which his theory says moral language demonstrates the sort of engagement discussed above by Timmons (who, by the way, readily admits the similarities between his view and Hare’s). The correlate in Hare’s thinking to Timmons’s categoricity of moral language is Hare’s conception of universalizability. Hare says that, when we are reasoning morally, we go through a fairly complicated act of imagining ourselves in the position of others and then telling them what we think they ought to do based on this. This allows Hare to explain how our moral judgments exhibit supervenience, the idea that people ought to act with relevant similarity when they are in relevantly similar circumstances. This moves keeps universal prescriptivism from being infected by what I called above “normative relativism.” When I prescribe some sort of action in some situation, I am saying that anyone similarly situated ought to do the same; there is no sense, according to Hare, to the idea that what I ought do in a situation is somehow relativized to me. The prescriptions I follow ought to apply universally or categorically.

The reason I think that Hare is committed to normative dogmatism is that he thinks that reasoning in this way is constitutive of moral reasoning. Someone who rejected this sort of normative view, rejected the universalized nature of moral thought, would not (according to Hare) be thinking morally. And if this is true, then Hare is in a dilemma. Either it is a fact that moral stances are universalized, in which case there are facts about morality that Hare’s irrealism rejects or there are moral stances which are not universalized and may be as justified for those who subscribe to them as Hare’s is for himself. Assuming Hare would not opt for the former option, on pain of admitting the truth of moral realism, we find him being committed to metaethical relativism.

If we have a disagreement with people who do not subscribe to a moral view that builds in universalizability, there would be no way to adjudicate between us. If the Taliban says that women ought not to be educated, even though this prescription is not universalizable, then there is no way for us to say they are wrong without assuming the truth of our moral position. It is our view against their view and there is no “higher” moral truth to say who is right and who is wrong. Hare might say that the members of the Taliban are not capable of critical thinking or he might call them “fanatics” of one sort or another, but such name calling is neither argumentation nor to any avail: the indubitable fact is that the members of the Taliban are as cer-
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tain of their moral views as Hare is of his. Without moral high ground, we are left with incompatible moral stances and no place from which to judge right from wrong; we end up with a variety of incompatible moral systems that are all playing on a level field. We are left with metaethical relativism.

Though not in so many words, Hare does deny the existence of moral high ground. In his discussion of objectivity in his book *Moral Thinking*, Hare discusses the possibility of fully impartial or unbiased moral thought. Hare thinks that a combination of “putting yourself in someone’s shoes” and its relationship to universalizability and the utilitarianism he thinks this entails allows moral thought as much impartiality or unbiasedness as possible. Beyond this, he thinks that the calls for impartiality are calls for moral judgment that does not issue from a particular point of view and this, he thinks, makes no sense: even if there is a God who is a perfect moral judge, God’s judgements still must issue from God’s point of view. (This is Hare’s correlate to Timmons’s idea that all moral language is engaged.) In *Moral Thinking*, Hare says, “I shall affirm baldly that there can be objective prescriptions in the sense [his sense] of impartial prescriptions, but that I cannot extract more from the notion of impersonality than this” (1981, 211–2). What Hare doesn’t seem capable of recognizing is that the sort of impartiality that we are looking for is one which, when evaluating a moral disagreement, does not *eo ipso* favor one view over the another. The sort of position of evaluation we are looking for is a neutral one, a disengaged one, and not one with a theory built in; this is exactly what those who would condemn metaethical relativism are demanding.

If the best Hare can do for objectivity is the result of the prescribed imaginative act of “standing in someone else’s shoes,” it is not hard to see how biased this is from a commonsense point of view, and despite Hare’s inability to extract more from the notion of “objectivity” than this, we can imagine not being biased, being fully impartial, even if we are always actually (necessarily?) biased by our own point of view. When we are standing in our own shoes, Hare tells us we have to imagine ourselves in another person’s situation with that other person’s preferences (1981, 95). (We then compare the intensity of everyone’s preferences and do our utilitarian calculation from there.) But don’t we often enough have trouble figuring out our own preferences, never mind their intensities? Even if someone is explicit in telling us their preferences, why should we think that we can imagine what it is actually like to have those preferences? We will find it difficult to stand in someone else’s shoes and, indeed, this might be impossible for creatures like us. Even if we grant to Hare that it is possible, a bias toward looking at things from our own point of view will end up being a part of Hare’s “standing in someone else’s shoes.” If we first
consider our own preferences and then imagine ourselves with someone else’s preferences (assuming we can do this), the result will nevertheless almost invariably be that we will be biased toward ourselves. This is not a new thought. It is in Plato’s Symposium, where Socrates says:

The trouble with ignorance is precisely that if a person lacks virtue and knowledge, he’s perfectly satisfied with the way he is. If a person isn’t aware of a lack, he can’t desire the thing which he isn’t aware of lacking. (1994, 204a)

It is perhaps a bit more explicit in Hobbes:

for such is the nature of men that howsoever they may acknowledge many others to be more witty, or more eloquent or more learned, yet they will hardly believe there be many so wise as themselves; for they see their own wit at hand, and other men’s at a distance. ([1651] 1985, part 1, chapter 13, p. 184)

We are not good at seeing things from other’s people’s points of view, even if they explain them to us, and we are expert in seeing things from our own. It should be no surprise to anyone that even when we are doing our best to be objective, we tend to be biased toward ourselves and this fact is perhaps less contingent than a tendency; it might be the case that members of Homo sapiens are not capable of understanding well what it is to have a conspecific’s preferences, and this makes us necessarily biased toward those preferences we do have a hope of understanding, namely our own.

Regardless of how the modal issues turn out, however, we can imagine the situation from the point of view of one who is free of all bias. We can stand off from moral discourse, from all normative moral position taking, and say from a purely metaethical point of view that everyone tends to favor their own normative position but then go on to recognize a way to objectively model the situation in an fully unbiased way. The exact same thing happens in natural science: different quantum physicists each have their own pet theories (interpretations) about how to explain the predictive power of quantum physics; they differ over the question of what makes quantum physics so successful. This does not leave us without the ability to say that some interpretation of quantum theory is the (objectively, robustly) true one, that all theories are not equally well placed to capture the truth. There is a truth about quantum physics, whatever it may be, and those who proclaim it have the high ground in the debate whether they can prove it or not. Nothing more nor less is needed for morality, and Hare is merely being dogmatic (and rather poor at imagining things from another’s point of view) if he says he cannot “extract more from the
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notion of impersonality” than the scant biased bit he can extract.

Perhaps the element of moral evaluation which the meta-
ethical relativist cannot accommodate needs a bit more fleshing
out. This can be done fairly formally and in the end the problem
will (probably) turn on whether a metaethic is committed to an
indexical being implicit in the syntax of a prescription or an
“ought” statement, which refers to the normative theory from
which that prescription issues. The formal idea is that the
metaethical relativist’s prescriptions come with a normative
moral theory built into them in such a way that they assume
the truth of or are indexed to that particular normative theory.
On the other hand, those committed to the idea of a moral high
ground think that prescriptions issue from normative theories
but do not ipso facto assume the truth of them.

This can be seen in a fairly informal manner. Consider the
difference in the truth conditions for the following two for-
mulas:

(1) The function of a heart is to pump blood.
(2) According to our biological theory, call it T, the function of the
heart is to pump blood.

Whether or not (1) is true is going to be determined by facts
about hearts and pumping and blood. Whether or not (2) is true
is going to be determined by facts about theory T. Note that if
we assume theory T is the true theory of biology, then there will
be no pragmatic difference between (1) and (2). It is true that
(1) issues from a biological theory, but it is neutral among
different theories; (2) is not neutral in this way. We can say that
(2) is dogmatic in a way that (1) is not.

Similarly, we can understand prescriptions as being like (1)
or (2). If, for example, we assume that a moral prescription
must universalize in order to be a moral prescription, then we
are dogmatically assuming a particular normative moral theory.
But if there is a moral disagreement that we want to evaluate
in an impartial manner, we want to be able to disinterestedly
not take sides, so that we can ask which party in the dispute
has the moral high ground. Irrealists, like Hare, reply that they
cannot make sense of being disinterested in this way, that eval-
uating a normative dispute assumes the need for a normative
theory. Importantly, perhaps this is true for epistemic reasons.
Nevertheless, we need not admit that from a metaphysical point
of view there is no theory-independent truth to the matter of
which party in the dispute is in the right and which is in the
wrong. What we want is to recognize the existence of a theory-
independent moral high ground, which our normative theories
are doing their best to capture. Believers in moral high ground
think that defenders of the normative position which in fact
holds the moral high ground ought to win the debate, whether or not defenders of that position are skilled enough to win; possessing the moral high ground means having the correct (right, true) response to a moral situation, independent of the epistemic question of whether or not this can be proved. Metaethical relativists, by denying the existence of moral high ground, are left only with a variety of different normative theories that they may or may not accept dogmatically or undogmatically. Regardless of how dogmatic they are however, the irrealist, qua metaethical relativist, must recognize that at bottom, normative moral theories are all of a piece. If, following Emerson, I think that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, I might adopt a normative theory with blatant contradictions in it and the metaethical relativist would not be able to undogmatically claim that it is not a worse normative theory than a splendidly consistent and universalized one.

And there is a sense, I think, among philosophers that if Hare's philosophy is problematic, it is due to a sort of dogmatism. Admittedly, it is perhaps most common to think that his dogmatism about utilitarianism gets him into trouble. A deeper sort of problem, however, is his view that thinking morally means thinking like him: if you don't, then you are out of the moral game. This is similar to what I above argued that Timmons was guilty of: Hare builds his normative view into his metaethical view, though I think the problem is worse for Hare than for Timmons. For Hare, his entire normative view is built into the very meaning of the word “ought,” as he thinks universalizability and supervenience are packed into it. It needs to be stressed that one need not disagree with Hare about the need for universalizability and supervenience in moral thought in order to make this claim. Even given a correspondence theory of truth, one might hold that true moral prescriptions are universalized and thereby obey supervenience. Nevertheless, I think it is wrong to build normative elements like these into the meaning of “ought,” such that any theory that issues prescriptions which do not respect what Hare (and many others) respect thereby fails to be a moral theory. This smacks of hegemony at worst or at least should strike one as a power play in the normative moral game. Metaethical debate has been left behind. We need, on the other hand, to be able to neutrally assess theories which respect universalizability and those that do not. At the least, we need to avoid begging questions at the level of normative ethical debate by making claims about the meanings of moral terms that by definition favor one point of view. Our metaethical theories ought to be normatively neutral.

Stevenson does not make the same kind of error. While he does provide an analysis of moral language, it is not one that is implicitly attached to a particular normative point of view. There is room here only for a brief discussion, but it should be
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sufficient to make the point. Stevenson agrees with Hare that moral prescriptions have a descriptive component but does not think that they have an imperativical nature that makes them distinctively moral; rather, he thinks that they have an emotive force that makes them moral. For Stevenson, ethical sentences are attempts to create an influence, attempts at suasion rather than being some sort of command. (Etymologically, by the way, “suasion” or “persuasion” are linked the Latin “suavis” meaning “sweet” or “pleasing to the taste.”) As Stevenson says in “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”:

“This is good” has something like the meaning of “I do like this; do so as well.” But this is certainly not accurate. For the imperative makes an appeal to the conscious efforts of the hearer. Of course he can’t like something just by trying. He must be led to like it through suggestion. Hence an ethical sentence differs from an imperative in that it enables one to make changes in a much more subtle, less fully conscious way. Note that the ethical sentence centres the hearer’s attention not on his interests, but on the object of interest, and thereby facilitates suggestion. Because of its subtlety, moreover, an ethical sentence readily permits counter-suggestion, and leads to the give and take situation which is so characteristic of arguments about value. (1937, 425)

Stevenson counts as an irrealist, in the sense used here, because he denies that the objects of interest, upon which ethical sentences center, are themselves intrinsically, objectively, or truly valuable (assuming, again, a correspondence theory of truth). Thus, Stevenson will not think that there is a theory-independent or stance-independent truth of the matter about which party in a moral dispute is in the right and which is in the wrong. It is in this sense that Stevenson must deny the existence of a moral high ground and counts as a metaethical relativist.

And there is really no way around this result for Stevenson. In fact, in the paper just cited, he makes it a desiderata of an account of goodness that it “must not be discoverable solely through the scientific method.” Any metaethical theory, for Stevenson, that does not make room for the possibility of permanently unresolvable moral disagreements is to be dismissed. In assessing this claim, we should not limit our attention to the trivial disputes which make it look so plausible, like the one Stevenson uses about whether we should go to a movie or a symphony tonight. Surely, there is no robust sense of right or wrong here. But consider our dispute with the Taliban. According to Stevenson, we see that there may be nothing we can do to persuade them that they are wrong and there may be nothing that they can do to persuade us that we are wrong. And the lesson Stevenson would have us learn from this is that
there are no theory independent moral facts about which party is wrong. It is our attitudes against their attitudes, our rhetoric against theirs, and we assume our position and they assume theirs. We try to influence them and they try to influence us, and there is no right or wrong beyond who is more influential or powerful.

This is exactly the sort of position that common sense condemns. We think that it is not just from our point of view that the Taliban is wrong, but they are wrong in fact and the Taliban thinks the same thing vis-à-vis us. With regard to the existence of moral high ground, our common sense agrees with Taliban common sense. Contra Stevenson, the sense of dispute at play in moral disagreement ought to be modeled on scientific dispute. Evolutionary biologists may not be able to persuade creationists that they are wrong, and creationists may be in the same situation, but we do not conclude from this there is no theory-independent truth about who is right and who is wrong. Our common sense tells us that the Taliban is wrong in the same way that evolutionists think that creationists are wrong.

We must be careful about what general metaethical conclusions we draw from this data about how moral disputes are conceived. Nothing said so far should be taken as some sort of proof of moral realism over irrealism. For example, none of what has been said keeps the irrealist from adopting a Mackien sort of error theory about moral discourse. Irrealists like Timmons, Hare, and Stevenson might be empirically right in thinking that there are no mind-independent moral facts, or no moral high ground. Commonsense believers in moral high ground might be making an existential or metaphysical error, and there may in fact not be any moral high ground. If so, then we would need to reconstruct our normative views on this metaethical basis. The question is what sort of picture of morality would result.

A sketch of what such a picture might look like will comprise our conclusion. With regard to the metaethical debate at hand, every option will eventually fall into one of two categories. Those options that accept the existence of a moral high ground will say that moral disputes ought in the end to be adjudicated based on who has the moral high ground. This is to appeal to mind-independent, theory-independent facts of the matter as being the final arbiter of who is right and who is wrong. Given a fairly robust, but nevertheless fairly commonsense understanding of truth, or at least a notion of moral truth which does not beg questions by presupposing a particular normative theory, believers in moral high ground can appeal to the moral truth as being what we are trying to capture when we make a determination that one party to the dispute is in the right, or has the moral high ground. If a normative moral dispute is serious enough to call for war, then those committed
Is there moral high ground?

will go to war with the belief that there is a robust sort of moral truth out there to be known. The parties can then justify their actions based on their belief that they know the moral truth. This side of the metaethical debate has, again on this understanding of truth, the moral truth on its side.

Metaethical relativists, or deniers of moral high ground, cannot appeal to such mind-independent facts about the moral truth. For them, moral disputes serious enough to require warfare will in the end be resolved as a pure power struggle between parties that cannot at bottom appeal to a robust sense of moral truth to justify their actions. For them, moral disputes will be determined by the strongest and there is ultimately no right or wrong about it.

So our options are either truth or power. Of course, as mentioned above, this cannot be taken to be an argument that the believers in moral high ground know the truth about morality while the irrealists, qua metaethical relativists, do not. That is a different question entirely. The point here is not to argue for one metaethical theory over another. Rather, it is to be clear about what follows from our adopting one type of metaethical theory over another. If there is an open question about what metaethical debate is for, or why it is important, the answer may be this: We (and I mean by this you, the readers of this journal, and I and not necessarily everyone in the world) typically think that disputes which are at bottom power struggles should proceed along a different set of constraints than disputes about which there is a truth at bottom. All is fair in love and war, but all is not fair in scientific inquiry. If the metaethical relativist is correct about the metaethical debate, then we will most likely be more willing to let our ends justify our means, for there will be no higher authority from which to evaluate our position as moral or immoral. If, on the other hand, we take there to be a moral truth out there, then our actions must attempt to be responsive to an authority that is independent of our moral theorizing. This option would, in all likelihood, make us less dogmatic, more cautious and more circumspect in our moral thinking. If we accept the existence of moral high ground or of robust moral truth, then we will recognize an objective authority external to anyone’s view; if there is only power, then there is less reason to refrain from privileging our own views over others simply because they are ours. If we think there is a moral high ground, then we shall be less likely to go off half-cocked, and we shall be more likely to act wisely. We will be more wary of walking around calling people who disagree with us “evil” (or “evil-doers”), though this will not come at the price of denying the existence of true evil.

Independent of what the metaphysical truth is about the ontological status of moral properties and from a purely pragmatic basis, if we commit ourselves to the existence of moral
high-ground, we will then be more likely to think about morality as clearly and objectively as possible and be more conscious of our all-too-human ability to be wrong. Our moral thinking will be more distinctively humane as a result and will be more likely to be on the side of the right and the good. And this is the case, independent of the metaphysical truth about the right and the good.

Notes

1 “It had sometimes struck me that perhaps conscience was the expression of a high moral development, so that its influence was strong only in those whose virtue was so shining that they were unlikely to commit any action for which they could seriously reproach themselves” (W. Somerset Maugham, “A Man with a Conscience,” reprinted in Cakes and Ale, and Twelve Short Stories [Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1967]).


3 Another option would be to model intransigent moral disputes on theological disputes about the existence of God. We think all the data regarding God’s existence is in and still the dispute continues in which theists and atheists are at loggerheads. No one concludes from this is that there is no substantial truth about whether or not God exists, independent of our ability to prove one side right and the other wrong.

Bibliography

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