

Phil 4830: Criticisms of intuitionism

I. The argument from relativity.

- a. There is fundamental moral disagreement.
- b. If objectivism were true, there would not be fundamental moral disagreement.
- c. Objectivism is not true.

Problems:

- Is (a) true?
 - Many disagreements are not fundamental.
 - Intuitions may concern 'mid-level' moral principles
- Is (b) true?
 - If people disagree about x, then there are no facts about x?
 - What if people disagree about the argument from relativity?

II. The argument from queerness.

Is this the argument?

- a. Moral properties are weird.
- b. Weird things (probably) don't exist.
- c. Therefore, moral properties don't exist.

Problems:

Is (a) true? Most people don't seem to find moral properties weird.

What is weirdness? Is it a real property?

Are the properties of modern science less weird than moral properties?

The magnetism of moral properties:

- a. If moral properties exist, they are intrinsically motivating.
- b. But no properties are intrinsically motivating.
- c. So moral properties don't exist.

Problem:

Is (a) true?

If (a) is true, (b) begs the question.

III. What is intuition?

- Is 'intuition' just strong belief?
- Do intuitions exist?

IV. Intuition cannot be checked by other sources.

Problem: all means of knowledge can be checked by other sources--really?

- Memory?
- Introspection?

- Reason?
- Perception?
- Induction?

V. Not all moral truths are self-evident.

- “What should we make of the proposal that moral truths are self-evident? Let us test it by a few examples of claims that many regard as true: It is wrong to cheat; it is wrong to engage in extramarital affairs; it is wrong to have an abortion, to murder, to engage in homosexual acts, to be dishonest or disloyal, to be unjust or ungrateful, to be proud or refuse to forgive. Are these self-evident truths?” (Smith, 25)
- “[E]ven those moral beliefs winning the widest consensus are not self-evident ... Rather, their purported truth is built on more basic propositions, such as the belief that dishonesty thwarts another person’s ability to achieve his goals or that marital infidelity causes pain or corrodes trust.” (Smith, 25)
- “Intuitionists’ assertion of the irrelevance of argument is plausible only as long as the examples invoked are carefully selected...” (Smith, 26)
- *Problems:*
 - 1st & 3rd quotations: No one ever said all moral truths are self-evident.
 - Second quotation: assumes that (a) thwarting people’s ability to achieve their goals is bad, (b) pain is bad, and (c) corroding trust is bad. Why?

VI. Intuitionists fail to produce an algorithm for resolving all moral issues.

“When two individuals’ intuitions about what is right in a given case stand directly at odds or when a person’s own intuitions pull in opposing directions...what is an Intuitionist to do? ... *How* should one study the situation more fully?...” (Smith, 27)

- Q: What is the argument here?

Formulation 1:

1. Any true meta-ethical theory would provide an algorithm for resolving all disputes.
2. Intuitionism fails to do so.
3. So intuitionism is not true.

Objections:

- a. Why is (1) true?
- b. Ethical non-cognitivism fails to provide an algorithm for resolving all disputes.
Ethical subjectivism fails . . .
Etc.
Does this show that all meta-ethical theories are false?

Formulation 2:

1. Any true, *realist* meta-ethical theory would provide an algorithm, etc.
2. Intuitionism is a realist theory, but it fails to do so.
3. So intuitionism is not true.

Objections:

- a. Why is (1) true?
- b. Ethical naturalism (incl. Smith's own theory) fails to provide an algorithm, etc. Why doesn't Smith think this refutes her theory?
- c. *Metaphysical* realists have failed to provide an algorithm for resolving all factual disputes. Does this refute metaphysical realism?

Formulation 3:

1. Intuitionism implies that there is no algorithm, etc.
2. But there is one.
3. So intuitionism is not true.

Objection: Why believe (2)?

Formulation 4:

1. Intuitionism implies that ethical disagreements can *never* be resolved.
2. But *sometimes* they can be.
3. So intuitionism is false.

Objection: (1) is false.

Formulation 5:

1. If there is a legitimate means of knowledge about subject X, then there must be an algorithm for resolving all disputes about X.
2. Intuitionism implies that there is no algorithm for resolving all disputes about ethics.
3. So, if intuitionism is true, then we lack a legitimate means of moral knowledge.

Objections:

- a. Why is (1) true?
- b. Ethical naturalism (incl. Smith's own theory) fails to provide an algorithm, etc.
- c. There is no algorithm for resolving all factual disputes. Does this refute that there is knowledge of descriptive facts?

VII. Sociobiology undermines ethical realism. (E.O. Wilson)

- Evolution created our intuitive faculty. It might deceive us, for true beliefs might not increase fitness.

Objection:

- All our other mental faculties are also created by evolution. Why wouldn't

sociobiology also undermine science (and all knowledge)?

- If it is argued that ethical beliefs are too changeable: Science is much more changeable.
- If it is argued that people disagree about ethics: There is at least as much consensus about ethics as about the theory of evolution.
- If it is said that this shows that all (purported) knowledge really is uncertain: perhaps, but ethical knowledge would be no *worse* off than scientific knowledge.