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Moral Realism and Dummett's Challenge

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I. A Form of Moral Realism

Let us take moral realism to be the view that particular moral judgments have determinate truth-values which do not depend on our views about what the truth-values are, or on our ability to discover them.

People, actions, and states of affairs often have moral properties such as being good, wrong, unjust, or obligatory. A particular moral judgment is true just in case the subject of the judgment has the property attributed to it. People, actions, and states of affairs also have natural properties. Natural properties comprise physical and mental properties. Let us suppose that the natural properties of a thing necessarily determine its moral properties, or more precisely: If a thing of a certain naturalistic description has certain moral properties, then it is impossible that anything should differ from it in any moral respect without differing from it in some naturalistic respect.¹ If we take a realistic view of statements about natural properties, then this view of moral properties constitutes a form of realism. The truth-values of particular moral judgment will be determined by the naturalistic facts, and will not depend on our moral views, or on our ability to discover the truth-values of particular moral judgments.²

II. Dummett's Challenge

Moral realism is often defended by arguing that morality is no worse-off, in relevant respects, than other subject-matters, such as mathematics, science, or mental states. Yet Michael Dummett has offered completely gen-

¹ This is the condition of Strong Synchronic Supervenience. I have discussed it in "An Alleged Difficulty Concerning Moral Properties," *Mind* 93 (1984): 370-80.

² Realism about particular moral judgments does not entail that there is a single true moral theory. Conceivably, various moral theories might generate the same particular moral judgments, so complete sets of particular moral judgments underdetermine moral theories. Thus, moral realism in this sense is analogous to scientific instrumentalism.

eral arguments that purport to show that realism is not an acceptable account of these other areas, or of any subject-matter. In this respect, then, morality can gain no solace from its status relative to these other areas, and, indeed, must defend itself directly against Dummett's challenge to realism.

Moral realism has been thought to be, if anything, more vulnerable than certain other forms of realism. I wish to argue, surprisingly, that it is, in at least one crucial respect, less vulnerable.

From Dummett's extensive animadversions on realism, it is difficult to distill a single consistent and concise account, but Dummett's conception of the realism dispute has the following elements. We begin by isolating a class of statements about a certain subject-matter — call it the “disputed class” of statements. It is about the disputed class of statements that the question of realism will arise. For our purposes, the dispute will center on the class of particular moral judgments.

Dummett supposes that for a dispute to arise between realist and anti-realist “there is some auxiliary class of statements about which both sides agree that a realist interpretation is possible. . . .”³ Generally these statements serve as the grounds or “recognition conditions” for statements of the disputed class. Following Dummett's conception, when the dispute concerns statements about the future (or, alternatively, about the past), statements about the present will form the auxiliary class; when it concerns statements about material objects, the auxiliary class will consist of observation or sense-data statements; when the dispute concerns statements about mental states, the auxiliary class will consist of statements about behavior; when it concerns mathematical statements, statements

³ Dummett, “The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic,” in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 238. See also Dummett, “The Reality of the Past,” p. 359 of the same collection. If Dummett purports to be giving completely general arguments against realism, it might be wondered why he allows, indeed seems to insist upon, a realistic account of statements in the auxiliary class. The answer may lie in distinguishing contexts. While realism about a set of statements may be taken for granted when it is considered as auxiliary, realism about the same set may be questioned when it is considered as a disputed class. In general, questions can arise only where something is, at least temporarily, taken for granted. Dummett himself expresses doubts about the coherence of what he calls “global anti-realism” (in “The Reality of the Past,” op. cit., pp. 367-68), by which I suppose he means anti-realism about everything at the same time. (For enforcement of these doubts, see section II of Colin McGinn, “An A Priori Argument for Realism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979): 113-33.) Dummett's doubts here suggest that Putnam misinterprets him when he ascribes to Dummett the position of anti-realism “all the way down” (Putnam, “Realism and Reason,” in *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 128-29. Putnam seems to think that global (metaphysical) anti-realism is essential, and that nothing less can be defended.

about proofs and calculations will form the auxiliary class. To extend this conception to morality, I propose to take the auxiliary class to comprise statements about natural properties.⁴

In terms of Dummett's scheme, then, anti-realism about statements of a disputed class is the view that such statements have a truth-value only insofar as the truth-value is recognizable and assertible in virtue of some collection of statements from the auxiliary class. Realism is the view that such statements have a truth-value that is determined by some independently existing reality, whether or not that truth-value can be recognized and asserted on the basis of any collection of statements from the auxiliary class.

According to my formulation of moral realism, the truth-value of moral judgments is determined by the naturalistic facts of the situation being appraised, though one cannot necessarily deduce the truth-value on the basis of the naturalistic facts. All the naturalistic facts may not be known,⁵ but even if they are, knowledge of the truth-value of moral judgments does not necessarily simply consist in, or follow from, knowledge of any set of statements about naturalistic facts. This is sometimes put by saying that the truth-values of moral judgments are recognition-transcendent in relation to the class of statements about natural properties.

After all of this state-setting, what is Dummett's general challenge to realism? The challenge is to say how we are supposed to have so much as a conception of a statement's having a determinate truth-value in the absence of any evidence that would help decide the matter. It is easiest to see this difficulty by way of a few examples.

Suppose our disputed class comprises statements about fictional characters. Presumably the auxiliary class will consist of statements to be found in the fictional works in question, plus their implications. The only evidence we have about the characteristics of fictional characters is what we are told in the course of the work by the author, and what we can glean from what we are told. Consider a statement such as "Hamlet weighed

⁴ Dummett alludes to the possibility of extending his analysis to morality in "Realism," *Synthese* 52 (1982), p. 55. Some who have discussed morality in light of Dummett's work are Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Mark Platts, *Ways of Meaning: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Language* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); and Philip Pettit, "Reply: Evaluative 'Realism' and Interpretation," in S. Holtzman and C. Leich, eds., *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

⁵ Although Dummett's conception assumes a realistic interpretation of the auxiliary class of statements, he notes that "this auxiliary class may or may not consist of statements agreed to be effectively decidable" ("The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic," *op. cit.*, p. 238). I do not take the class of statements about naturalistic facts to be effectively decidable.

150 lbs.” If Shakespeare makes no pronouncements on Hamlet’s weight, and nothing else in the play allows us to infer that Hamlet’s weight was anything but normal, then there simply is no evidence relevant to the truth-value of the statement. In the absence of such evidence the suggestion is that it is implausible to hold that the statement has a determinate truth-value nevertheless. To be struck by this implausibility is to succumb to anti-realism about (statements about) fictional characters.⁶

This is, perhaps, the most favorable example for anti-realism, but similar examples can be constructed for many other subject-matters. Dummett’s favorite example is this. Suppose the disputed class is statements about character traits and the auxiliary class is statements about behavior. If we consider a statement such as “Mary is brave,” it is certainly possible that Mary has never been in a situation of danger that would elicit either brave or cowardly behavior. Insofar as there is no behavioral evidence that is relevant, one way or another, to discerning the truth-value of this statement, Dummett challenges the realist to explain how it could, nevertheless, be determinately either true or false.⁷

To the extent that there is no evidence, there is nothing for the truth or falsity of the statement to consist in, other than the fact that it itself states. Such a statement would have to be, according to Dummett’s terminology, “simply” or “barely” true.⁸ It is one thing to hold that observational facts, such as those reported in judgments of color or first-person experiential reports, might be barely true. But it is quite another thing to contend that non-observational facts, such as those concerning bravery, might be barely true. It is this contention that Dummett holds to be unjustified, and perhaps unjustifiable.

Dummett has pointed out similar difficulties in other subject-matters. Mathematical statements are decided by calculation or proof, yet there are some statements, such as the claim that there are an infinite number of twin primes, that have not been so decided, and some claims, such as the continuum hypothesis, that cannot be so decided. In the absence of evidence, the anti-realist — in this case the intuitionist — refuses to assert that the undecided sentences have a determinate truth-value. These difficulties also haunt statements about the future, statements about the

⁶ Dummett discusses the case of fictional characters in *Elements of Intuitionism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 384-86.

⁷ Dummett does not wish to take a narrow view of what might count as evidence (cf. “Realism” in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, p. 148). His interest is, rather, in exploring the import of there not being any evidence, however “evidence” is construed.

⁸ See “Realism,” in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, p. 148, for the former locution, and “What Is a Theory of Meaning? (II),” in G. Evans and J. McDowell, eds., *Truth and Meaning: Essays in Semantics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 89, for the latter.

past, statements about counterfactuals, and statements about legal rights and responsibilities. In all such cases it appears that situations can inevitably arise in which there is no evidence relevant to deciding the truth-value of a statement from a disputed class.⁹ We might put this by saying that there are inevitably gaps in the auxiliary classes of statements. The challenge to the realist, then, is to explain how statements can have determinate truth-values in the presence of such gaps.¹⁰

III. Moral Realism's Immunity

This is the general challenge I wish to consider. It has received a good deal of discussion in the recent philosophical literature. Attempts have been made to substantiate the challenge, and attempts have been made to fulfill it. I will not need to enter into this controversy, however. Even if the challenge is legitimate, and whether or not the challenge can be met in other cases, it cannot be brought against moral realism. The reason is that there are no gaps in the auxiliary class of evidence for particular moral judgments.

Suppose we limit our attention to particular moral judgments about *actions*. The auxiliary class of evidence will, then, be statements about the natural properties of actions. There is no danger that relevant evidence — i.e., natural properties — might be absent. The addition of any evidence — i.e., the addition of any natural properties — would change the action being morally appraised. An action necessarily is what it in fact is, and thus there is no logical room for evidential gaps.¹¹ The truth of a particular moral judgment about an action consists in, or holds in virtue of, certain of its natural properties. No moral judgment need be barely true. Thus, Dummett's challenge to realism is not one that the moral realist about actions must meet.¹²

⁹ The claim is not that we might be unaware of the relevant evidence, but that it might simply be absent.

¹⁰ It should, perhaps, be noted that Dummett is not a committed anti-realist (e.g., "Preface," in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, p. xxxix). He thinks that the issue is an important one, that the burden lies with the realist, and that the realist will probably not be able to shoulder the burden.

¹¹ Of course, we might not know all the relevant naturalistic properties of an action (cf. note 5), but Dummett is not premising his argument on epistemic limitations of that sort.

¹² If a realist about mental states were to take the auxiliary class to be statements about brain states, rather than statements about behavior, then Dummett's challenge could be avoided in a similar way. This suggests that the issue of realism does not arise relative to a subject-matter *simpliciter*, but only relative to a subject-matter in relation to a specified auxiliary class of statements.

The same line of argument can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to particular moral judgments about states of affairs, but it will not work for moral judgments about people. People are not necessarily what they in fact are. Defense of realism about particular moral judgments about people would require some other line of argument. It might be more natural to treat particular moral judgments about people as a separate disputed class, and take the auxiliary class to be particular moral judgments about those people's actions. This conforms to the common view that assessment of a person's actions is conceptually prior to assessment of the person's virtue.¹³ According to this analysis, then, realism about the possession of virtues and realism about the moral properties of actions and states of affairs are separate issues, and the former may encounter more difficulties than the latter. The point of interest, however, is that Dummett's challenge cannot be brought against realism about the moral properties of actions and states of affairs.

In one of his early works on realism Dummett seems to recognize this limitation to his challenge, for he specifically requires that for a dispute to arise at all between a realist and anti-realist, it must be agreed by both parties to the dispute that there may be gaps in the auxiliary class.¹⁴ But this restriction on the existence of such disputes is quite implausible. If realism is defined as the view that statements of the disputed class have a determinate truth-value independently of our means of knowing it, then it hardly seems as though a dispute over this view can or should vanish simply because there are no evidential gaps. In fact, Dummett seems to have come around to this view of the matter in his latest work on realism.¹⁵

The absence of evidential gaps does not vitiate the controversy over realism for the following reason. Evidence relevant to deciding the truth-value of a statement may well not be sufficient to allow us actually to decide that truth-value. We may have all the facts, but we do not always know what to make of them. We may have all the evidence, but we do not always know what to infer from it. Dummett's challenge presupposes that recognition-transcendence derives from gaps in evidence, but this is not always so. The issue remaining, about which realist and anti-realist can disagree, is whether there can be facts of the matter in the absence of decisive means of discovering the facts.¹⁶

¹³ Alternatively one might wish, following Aristotle and Plato, to take judgments concerning a person's virtue as an auxiliary class for the disputed class of particular moral judgments about actions. But this would undermine the defense of realism that I have been constructing.

¹⁴ See Dummett's 1963 lecture (not to be confused with the 1982 paper of the same title) "Realism," in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, pp. 155 and 156.

¹⁵ "Realism," *Synthese* (1982), esp. p. 74.

IV. Conclusion

If the truth-values of certain sentences from a disputed class can only be decided on the basis of evidence, and such evidence is missing, because of gaps in the auxiliary class of sentences, then we cannot, even in principle, be in a position to decide the truth-values of those disputed sentences. Because of evidential gaps, some sentences about mathematics, character traits, fictional characters, the past, and so forth, are undecidable in principle. And in such circumstances it is difficult to hold onto realist interpretations of those sentences. But this is not an inherent difficulty with all forms of realism. In particular, it does not arise for a moral realist: A moral realist is not committed to holding that particular moral judgments that are undecidable in principle have a determinate truth-value, because no particular moral judgments (about actions or states of affairs) can be shown to be undecidable in principle.

Whether there are other problems with moral realism, and whether there are revised versions of Dummett's challenge that would create problems for moral realism, are further issues.

¹⁶ This issue is obscured in Dummett's discussions. When he discusses mathematics, the issue is obscured by the fact that mathematical evidence (e.g., proofs and calculations) always is decisive. When he discusses character traits it looks as though evidence always is decisive, but only because he makes certain simplifying assumptions, viz., that there is no vagueness in the characterization of human actions, that no one ever acts out of character, and that no one's character ever changes ("Realism," in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, p. 148).