A New Argument Against Moral Error-Theory

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Abstract
This paper explores a new argument – modeled on Timothy Williamson’s defence of the claim that knowing plays a role in the explanation of actions (2000: 62-63) – against an error-theoretic account of morality. The consideration is that true moral belief rather than mere moral belief at least sometimes has greater explanatory value with respect to actions over an extended period of time. This is so because typically actions like helping someone in need, or saving someone in unnecessary pain, or investigating whether someone is culpable involve interaction with, and complex feedback from, the environment over an extended period of time. The fact that a moral proposition is truly believed entails that a moral fact about one's environment obtains; that moral fact may require one’s intervention. However, the fact that a moral proposition is merely believed does not have any such possible entailment; there are no moral facts that call for one's intervention, and one is unlikely to sustain one's actions, and complete them, on the basis of mere belief at the beginning, as in the case of non-moral fancies, one is more likely to discover their baselessness over an extended period of time. Consequently, the probability of the explanandum that one acted in a certain way in the course of intervening in a situation, conditional on the explanans that one merely believed a moral fact at the time of taking the action is lower than the probability of the explanandum, conditional on the explanans that one truly believed a moral fact about the situation one is intervening in.
This paper explores a new argument against an error-theoretic account of moral discourse and practice. More specifically, the argument is that true moral belief rather than mere moral belief at least sometimes has greater explanatory value with respect to actions over an extended period of time. This is so because typically actions like helping someone in need, or saving someone in unnecessary pain, or investigating whether someone is culpable involve interaction with, and complex feedback from, the environment over an extended period of time. The fact that a moral proposition is truly believed entails that a moral fact about one's environment obtains; that moral fact may require one’s intervention. However, the fact that a moral proposition is merely believed does not have any such possible entailment; there are no moral facts that call for one's intervention, and one is unlikely to sustain one's actions, and complete them, on the basis of mere belief at the beginning, as in the case of non-moral fancies, one is more likely to discover their baselessness over an extended period of time. Consequently, the probability of the explanandum that one acted in a certain way in the course of intervening in a situation, conditional on the explanans that one merely believed a moral fact at the time of taking the action is lower than the probability of the explanandum, conditional on the explanans that one truly believed a moral fact about the situation one is intervening in.

In making this suggestion, what I have in mind as a model is Williamson’s defence of the claim that knowing plays a role in the explanation of actions (2000: 62-63). Williamson’s argument is that often actions over an extended period of time are better explained by citing what the subject knows rather than citing what he merely believes,
or merely believes truly at the time of taking the action. It is plausible that his argument applies to moral knowledge as much as non-moral knowledge. However, for my purposes, it will simply do to argue that citing true moral belief, whether or not it is moral knowledge, rather than mere belief can often make for a better causal explanation of morally relevant actions. The following examples illustrate how I use Williamson’s model.

Judging that the children are acting wrongly in setting the cat on fire, and noticing that there is no one else around to check the children, John takes some trouble intervening in the situation to stop the cruel activities: he parks his car, gets out of it, locks it, walks towards the children, negotiates with some, chases others away, fetches water, pours it on the burning cat and takes it to hospital.¹ What features of the situation bring it about that John intervened in the situation? A plausible answer is that John believed truly that the children are acting wrongly when he set out to intervene in the situation. Replacing 'believes truly' with 'believed' results in an explanatory loss. For suppose that the explanans is that John merely believed that the children are acting wrongly when he set out to intervene in the situation. Then it is likely that his intervention would not have been carried through: he would have got out of the car, perhaps taken some steps in the direction of the children, but then turned back at some point on realising the falsity of his moral belief, because for example, the children were in fact performing a complicated piece of surgery on the cat. The explanation that John believed truly that

¹ Assume that John is a normal, rational agent. In particular, assume that John is not someone who has feelings of extreme hatred towards children, or has an unusual love of animals or some such. Assume that he has the moral sensibilities of an ordinary educated adult in our society.
the children are acting wrongly when he set out to intervene in their activities is better. This is because it makes reference to objects in the environment; it entails that the children, the cat and so on, are there, and that the children are acting wrongly. The correctness of John's judgement provides him some help in planning what steps to take in the intervention by guiding his predictions about the situation. If he merely believed that the children are acting wrongly, his predictions would probably soon turn out to be false, leading him to give up his belief and the intervention.

Take another example. The provost of a college believes truly that there is something dishonest about how the college bursar is acting. In addition to acting dishonestly, the bursar is also clever enough to leave no evidence of his dishonest activities so that it is not easy to catch him. The provost needs evidence in order to make any formal charges against the bursar. To this end, he takes great measures to plan a trap for the bursar: he spends weeks trying to figure out his tactics and what kind of slips on his part could be used as evidence against him. Eventually, his hard labour is repaid: he is able to design a nice trap for the bursar and get concrete evidence against him. We want to know what features of the situation led to the fact that the provost researched so for weeks. The proposed explanation is that the provost truly believed the moral proposition that the bursar is acting in a dishonest way when he started planning a trap for the bursar. The provost’s correct negative moral evaluation of the bursar’s purported activities played a role in his planning by guiding his predictions as to the unscrupulous ways in which the bursar would be likely to behave. If the ‘truly believed’ is replaced with ‘believed’, the explanation of the provost’s actions would be weakened because the mere belief that the
bursar is being dishonest does not entail that the bursar is dishonest, while true belief
does entail that. If the provost's evaluation were not correct, many of his predictions
would most likely not be true, leading him to soon enough give up as baseless his belief
that there is something dishonest about how the bursar is acting. And if a true moral
belief can at least sometimes explain an agent’s actions better than mere moral belief,
we have reason to think that there are moral facts, and so at least sometimes our moral
beliefs are true.

Sturgeon has famously written on the explanatory role of moral facts and properties in
the explanation of moral beliefs and actions. He has argued that the fact that Hitler was
evil explains his deeds, and indirectly explains why we believe that Hitler was evil; that
slavery is wrong explains the abolition of the institution of slavery. I am sympathetic to
Sturgeon’s view that these moral facts have at least some explanatory weight. However,
I don’t find his analysis of Harman’s own example of the children igniting a cat as very
convincing. Harman claims that we do not need to appeal to any moral facts to explain
why we think that the children are acting wrongly; we would believe that the children
were acting wrongly even if their action weren’t wrong, but we believed the moral
theory that we do believe. Sturgeon’s response to this consists in sketching an
analogous case for physics. Imagine the physicist’s theory is badly mistaken but they do
not know that and accept the theory. Then, if there hadn’t been a proton, but there had
been a vapour trail, the physicist would still have concluded that a proton was present.
But, Sturgeon thinks, no “sceptical conclusions” follow from this for physics;
analogously, it is not clear how any sceptical conclusions should follow for morality.
from Harman’s challenge. While I think this response to Harman is fine as far as it goes, there is a much more effective and straightforward one available along the lines I have suggested above: that I truly believe that the children are acting wrongly explains my actions over an extended period of time much better than the mere belief that the children are acting wrongly, and that entails that a moral fact about my environment obtains i.e. that the children are acting wrongly.

References

