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Intuitions and Self-evidence in Moral Theory

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Aim

1. There is a view that (a) there are such things as “moral truths”, (b) at least some of these can be termed “self-evident”, apprehended “non-inferentially” by common sense or intuition, at any rate not by empirical means or by arguing logically from prior principles.
2. Renford Bambrough applies this idea to propositions about particular actions, claiming that we all know by “common sense” that this child should be given an anaesthetic if he is about to undergo otherwise painful surgery (Bambrough, 1979: 104). WD Ross, mostly supported by Robert Audi, applies the same idea to our apprehension of what he calls “*prima facie* duties” (Ross, 1930: 19), i.e. general moral principles such as that we should keep promises or avoid injuring people; our apprehensions are “of the nature of knowledge” (23). He says that the rightness of an act *qua* fulfilling a promise, for example, is “self-evident” if we have thought about it long enough, i.e. “evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself” (29).
3. A key method used by the proponents of “intuitionism” (as, with Audi, I’ll loosely term the views outlined above) is the use of analogy between propositions about the world-as-it-is and propositions about the world-as-it-ought-to-be. My aim is to show that such analogies undermine rather than support the role of intuition and self-evidence.

Preamble

First, some background, which I hope will be taken as “common sense”. We are all brought up by our parents to believe all sorts of things. Some of these are moral claims, such as that stealing and lying are wrong. We are taught such principles by extrapolating from particular examples (being ticked off when stealing a sweet) and/or by being told the general principle (never steal). As we are taught these things from the year dot, it would be surprising if they were not ingrained in our personality by the time we grow up. We may also be taught some general moral theory that underlies all the principles (e.g. “God says so”), or we may in later life adopt our own overarching theory (e.g. utilitarianism or Kant’s Categorical Imperative). These moral principles, at all three levels, are expressed (and taught) in the form of propositions, e.g. “lying is wrong”, or “you ought not to lie”.

Ways of believing

- 1.1. Let us look at the ways in which we might come to believe any of the following types of proposition:
 - (a) empirical statements about the way the world is [e.g. “it’s raining outside”]

- (b) logical statements [e.g. “2+2=4”]
- (c) moral statements [e.g. “abortion is wrong”]

[There may be other types, but these are all that are needed for my purpose.]

1.2. I suggest that any of these propositions can be believed in one of at least four ways:

- (a) I may believe something uncritically because it was **inculcated** into me at an early age.
- (b) I may believe it after careful **consideration** of all the facts and logic.
- (c) I may find the proposition **self-evident**.
- (d) I may have an **intuition** that it is true.

These are not, of course, rigidly differentiated. Some of the things I find self-evident may be so because they were inculcated in me. I may test an intuition until I’ve established its truth (or falsehood) and it moves from category (d) into category (b). Ditto beliefs that were originally of types (a) and (c).

2.1. In the case of statements about the world-as-it-is, i.e. excluding moral statements, it is easy to see that *any proposition at all* could be believed in any of those four ways. To take an example of a contingently true/false statement, suppose Gordon, a pupil, tells me someone has stolen his calculator. I believe the proposition “Gordon is lying”. That could be because (a) I was brought up (rather strangely) to distrust everything anyone says [inculcated], or (b) I had earlier heard Gordon plotting with someone to claim that his calculator had been stolen in order to get the insurance money [considered judgment], or (c) I can see a calculator sticking out of his bag and can hear other pupils sniggering outside the door [self-evident], or (d) there is something about Gordon’s eyes and demeanour which I can’t quite pin down but which, after years of experience, makes me suspicious [intuition].

2.2. In the case of self-evidence (c) and intuition (d), there are four things to notice:

(i) Nothing about that proposition makes it *intrinsically* self-evident or subject to intuition. Whether I apprehend it in one way or another depends on how much evidence there is to hand and on my mood, nature, and intelligence.

(ii) The belief does not arise out of the blue: in (c) the evidence seems so plain that I don’t need to look further. In (d) I’m not sure what the evidence is, but it seems that there *is* evidence; it’s as if my brain, practised over several years, is inferring from the scant signs by some kind of subconscious short-cut reasoning – which I could analyse properly if I had time.

(iii) I may be wrong. In (c) it’s possible that the calculator sticking out of the bag is not Gordon’s and the pupils outside the door are sniggering about something else; and I may be prone to “jump to conclusions”. In (d) I know very well I may be wrong and that clear evidence is needed to support my tentative belief.

(iv) In neither case do I imagine that the nature of my belief is evidence for its being true.

3.1. In the case of *a priori* statements, let us examine Ross's own example: $2+2=4$. We find "by experience", he says (Ross, 1930: 32-3), that various instances of two things next to two other things are four things, and so "by reflection" become aware that "it is of the nature of two and two to make four". [I doubt very much if that is actually what happens in childhood, but we can suppose it does for the sake of argument.] The initial stage is simple empirical observations, for which the evidence is there to be seen: crudely put, you count two matches, you count another two matches, then you count all of them and find there are four. The next stage – realising that " $2+2=4$ " is *self-evident* – is either a piece of induction (deriving a general truth from examples) or – as Ross must mean – it is the discovery that " $2+2=4$ " is an *a priori* truth. This piece of reflection requires reasoning: we realise that the meaning of "four" and "two and two" are the same, regardless of what objects they refer to. The same would apply to any piece of *a priori* reasoning whatever, including Audi's more sophisticated example (Audi, 1999: 116): if p entails q , and q entails r , and r is false, then p is false. Audi claims that the conclusion is "self-evident" – either immediately (if you already know that entailment is a transitive relation) or "mediately" (after reflection). But whether you see the logic immediately or after working it out, it's still logic.

3.2. So in the *a priori* category, too, a proposition is true for perfectly logical reasons regardless of the existence of any believers. It may be grasped by different believers at different speeds, but it is not *intrinsically* "self-evident". A believer could be wrong, and – even if he's right – his belief is not the reason for the truth of the proposition.

3.3. To summarise: any proposition, whether necessary or contingent, is true for reasons that are independent of the way it is believed.

4.1.1. Let us now see how these concepts of self-evidence and intuition can be used of **moral** propositions. Big overarching theories are not normally thought to be of that kind, but moral judgments about particular acts ("I should not break that promise") and generalisations about *prima facie* duties ("promises should be kept") are sometimes said to be either self-evident or intuitions (or both).

4.1.2. Bambrough compares his **particular judgment** (that this child should be given an anaesthetic) to G.E. Moore's raising his two hands and challenging anyone to deny that there are at least two material objects; common sense requires that we believe both propositions (Bambrough, 1979: 103-4). But let us look more carefully at Moore's challenge. We do not make the judgment with our eyes shut: we have fairly clear evidence that there are two hands there because we see them. We may of course doubt the 100% reliability of our senses, but all our experience to date supports the idea that they are reliable, in the absence of any exceptional circumstances such as tricks of the light or sleight of hand. We realise that it is not our certainty that is the evidence for the statement being true, but the sensory evidence that is the reason for our being certain. Similarly, when Ross compares our seeing that this or that particular fulfilment of a promise is *prima facie* right with our observation "by experience" that two things together with two other things are four things (Ross, 1930: 32), he is using an example that is quite simply, like Moore's two hands, an empirical observation.

4.1.3. In the case of the moral propositions, however, that particular instances of anaesthetic-administering or promise-fulfilment are right, there appears at first sight no such evidence or reason for believing them. In that case why believe them? Ross and Bambrough claim that we just know, as a matter of self-evident common sense; these intuitive beliefs are “self-evident” (Ross, 1930: 33), and “unprovable” (Bambrough, 1979: 109). Ross implies that the fact of their being believed by “the best people” is evidence of their being true; “the moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics just as sense-perceptions are the data of a natural science” (Ross, 1930: 41). If they are right, then the parallel with Moore’s material objects and Ross’s two pairs of matches breaks down: both those beliefs are clearly held for a *reason*. One could *argue* for them, adducing empirical evidence.

4.1.4. There is, I suggest, a much simpler explanation for our believing these particular moral propositions. Those people who do in fact find acts of promise-keeping and anaesthetic-administering self-evidently right are those who have had such principles drummed into them in their impressionable years. It is admittedly unlikely that our parents indoctrinated us specifically with the need to administer anaesthetics if ever we became surgeons. But they are almost certain to have taught us the more general notion that it is wrong to cause people avoidable suffering; the particular case of the child undergoing surgery is a very obvious example of that principle, and so we immediately see that to withhold the anaesthetic would be wrong. I suggest that the “self-evidence” of our moral beliefs about particular actions is the immediate realisation that they do or do not conform to our already existing general moral principles. Indeed, when someone is challenged about his view on a particular act, his normal response is not to say “I just know”, but to argue from some general moral principle(s) which the challenger accepts.

4.2.1. In the case of more **general propositions** (Ross’s *prima facie* duties), such as “stealing is generally wrong”, I would suggest that, where these seem self-evidently true to one who has been brought up to believe them, that is precisely the reason for their seeming self-evident.

4.2.2. Ross, however, using the analogy with our discovery of the self-evidence of “ $2+2=4$ ”, argues that we generalise from the particular beliefs discussed above (that this or that act of promise-fulfilment is right) to the principle that fulfilling promises is generally right (Ross, 1930: 32-3). Leaving aside the problem of how we come to hold the particular beliefs, the generalisation is a straightforward piece of reasoning. Indeed, if someone had parents who repeatedly expressed approval of individual instances of promise-fulfilment but failed to tell her that promise-fulfilment was generally right, she would work that out by induction. So there’s nothing very strange about the general principle, even if one works it out for oneself; if we call it “self-evident”, that is just because the logic of arguing from particular instances to general principles is so simple. There is nothing intrinsically self-evident about the belief itself.

4.2.3. Audi (1999: 111-2), rather than inferring the generalisations from particular instances, explains them as examples of “foundationalist beliefs”; in arguing back to justifications for moral beliefs you have to stop somewhere, and these self-evident *prima facie* duties are where you stop. Here again, if that is true, there is no parallel

in the world of empirical or *a priori* propositions, and the analogies he uses – such as the “*p* entails *r*” example – are as invalid as Ross’s and Bambrough’s.

4.2.4. Just as we tend to justify our view of a particular moral action by reference to a general moral principle (as in 4.1.4), similarly we normally feel the need to justify any assertion we make of a *general* moral principle. If challenged to defend a mathematical proposition such as “all multiples of 10 end in zero”, we would not say “it’s self-evident”, but show its truth by precise reasoning. Similarly, if I’m asked why I think stealing is wrong, I do not say “it just is” – which is merely to say that it’s ingrained in me since birth – but I infer it from some more general principle: for example, stealing causes misery to the victim and misery is bad, or you wouldn’t like it if someone stole from you – implying a do-as-you-would-be-done-by principle. The wrongness of stealing may indeed seem self-evident to me after my upbringing, but I don’t seriously believe that it is “evident without any need of proof, or of evidence beyond itself” (Ross, 1930: 29).

4.3. One particular type of intuitive moral judgment arises when there is some **clash between two general principles** that someone holds dear. Most will believe that, if one has control over how many people will suffer some awful fate, one should ensure that as few as possible suffer it. But consider one of those trolley problems: if you can save three people from their death under the wheels of the trolley by pushing a fat man off a bridge into its path, thus killing him, where that is the only possible way of saving the three, should you do it? It seems the rational choice, yet most people feel intuitively that it would be wrong. That seems to me exactly what one would expect from a consideration of the way people are brought up as children. We are taught, repeatedly, never to cause physical injury to anyone; the examples where we might be warned or chastised are usually simple acts of pushing, hitting, etc. We are much less likely to be in situations where we have the power to decide which of a number of people should suffer in some way; that is a sophisticated problem which is likely to occur only at an age when we are past indoctrination. So it is to be expected that pushing the man off the bridge will offend our more deep-seated principles, i.e. those with which we were inculcated at a young age, irrespective of any utilitarian calculus we may now make.

5.1. One notorious problem for those who give evidential weight to convictions or intuitions is that different people have contradictory convictions. It may be possible to spot some areas of agreement between the views of “civilised people” (Audi, 1999: 117), or “thoughtful and well-educated people” (Ross, 1930: 41). But it is only to be expected that most people described by philosophers as civilised and well-educated are those who were brought up in the same traditions as the philosophers using those terms; they will therefore have been taught much the same moral principles, which they now embrace as true. The argument reminds me of politicians who talk about “all right-thinking people” – i.e. all those who agree with the speaker! I suspect that, in fact, it is precisely those educated people who will feel the strongest need to *justify* their moral beliefs.

5.2. Just as problematic is the fact that the same person can believe the same thing to be self-evidently wrong at one stage of his life and self-evidently right at another. In my mid-teens I took it as self-evident – as did most people of my “civilised” background – that homosexual acts were deeply immoral, having something to do

with their being “unnatural”. That view now, some decades later, seems to me (and to those same other people) self-evidently silly. One of these self-evident beliefs must be wrong.

Conclusion

Insofar as moral propositions are analogous with contingent or *a priori* propositions, they must be justified by evidence and/or reasoning; if someone believes such a proposition intuitively or as self-evident, that is a fact about their personal psychology rather than about the proposition itself. If, however, one believes that some moral propositions (whether particular or general) are known *without* external evidence or reason, merely as self-evident or common sense or intuitively, then they are something quite different from all empirical and *a priori* propositions, and the various analogies designed to show that it is rational to believe them are simply false. If that is the case, then these “moral facts” are very strange beasts, and our method of apprehending them equally strange; even stranger is the idea that our believing them – or, rather, the fact that many people of our sort believe them – is evidence, in fact the only evidence, for their being true. I contend that a much simpler explanation, supported by observed evidence (admittedly not yet, as far as I know, scientifically analysed) that children tend to share the moral principles (or lack of them) of their parents, is that moral beliefs which we hold as self-evident – both about particular actions and general principles – are held thus because our parents instil them into us from our earliest years.

Bibliography

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