1

Introduction

1.1 Commitment, Value, and Moral Realism

In recent years the debates in metaethics over moral realism have been dominated by arguments from the philosophy of science, epistemology, and the philosophy of language. ¹ The goal of the present book is to introduce a new voice into the debate as well as a new approach. Rather than directly addressing the question of whether or not moral realism is true, that is, whether moral judgments do indeed represent subject-independent facts, I propose to ask a question which has been forgotten in these discussions, namely, what is at stake in the truth of moral realism? and in doing so to bring in action theory as an active participant in the debate.² I examine whether the truth of moral realism makes what one might call a "practical" difference, that is, a difference not just in our ability to explain, but also to retain certain ordinary, moral experiences. To this end, I focus on commitment.

1.1.1 The hypothesis

The central claim is the following: in order to explain commitment and in order for an individual's commitment to remain stable over

¹ In the philosophy of science the question includes whether moral facts figure in our best causal explanations (Gilbert Harman and Nicholas Sturgeon) and whether they are more like secondary qualities (John McDowell); in epistemology the problem is to explain how moral knowledge is possible (David Brink); and in the philosophy of language the classical question has been whether moral judgments are the kinds of judgments capable of expressing truth or falsity (R. M. Hare, C. S. Stevenson, Mary Forrester, Mark Platts).

² Nicholas Sturgeon is the most recent philosopher to pose a similar question. He focuses, however, on the question of whether the truth of moral realism makes a difference in explanations of the possibility of amoral agents, moral disagreement, and moral fallibility. See "What Difference Does it Make Whether Moral Realism is True?" Southern Journal of Philosophy, Supplement 24 (1986): 115–42.
Commitment, value, and moral realism

time and to fulfill its roles in the governance of action, enhancement of self-understanding, and constitution of identity, one must assume the truth of moral realism and so make room for the possibility of moral facts. I thus seek to provide an analysis of commitment and the conditions under which it is possible, and in so doing to offer at the same time an indirect argument for moral realism – the view that moral judgments represent subject-independent facts. For I argue that realist evaluative beliefs are functionally required for commitment, and since it is only within a realist framework that such beliefs make sense, realism about values is a condition for the possibility of commitment itself. Thus, rather than seeking to defend moral realism, as others have done, on epistemological, metaphysical, or linguistic grounds, I seek to show how one very important feature of our experience can only be explained and retained on the assumption of moral realism. Although it is still possible for others to reject realism in ethics, one cannot do so and retain commitment at the same time. In other words, the price one pays for being an antirealist in ethics is the value we place on commitment.

1.1.2 Moral realism defined

The realism underlying the position I defend is intended to be a very modest one. The temptation to interpret the claims of moral realism in strong ontological or metaphysical terms needs to be avoided, since this leads to precisely the wrong set of questions that are repeatedly posed by noncognitivists and antirealists regarding, for example, the “queerness” of moral facts and properties, how or where we find them, and the causal connection between the observation of such facts and moral judgments.

The position I defend is both cognitivist and realist. When one says, “Doing X is wrong,” one is expressing a belief one takes to be true in virtue of a certain objective matter of fact. Now this fact is “objective” to the extent that it is independent of any particular standpoint, that is, independent of the speaker’s particular desires, attitudes, and beliefs. These facts will concern the way the world is and the way

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3 Ever since Mackie’s charge of queerness, moral realists have felt compelled, unfortunately, to follow his strong metaphysical reading of realism.
4 It is important to see that this is not a strong ontological claim. The kind of realism I propose is best described as a realism about truth which grants independent authority
human beings are. As Peter Railton states, the moral facts at issue “need be grounded in nothing more transcendental than facts about man and his environment, facts about what sorts of things matter to us, and how the ways we live affect these things.”5 Rather than examining the standard metaphysical or epistemological issues, I want to focus on a more practical, and what I take to be a prior, question regarding what is at stake in the acceptance or rejection of realism in ethics.

1.2 Why Commitment?

Our commitments to certain principles, persons, or ideals, or one’s solidarity to certain groups and communities, are widely thought to be an important part of our ordinary experience as individuals. The importance of commitment to our self-conceptions as moral agents seems to be shared by moral realists and antirealists alike: from writers such as Gabriel Marcel and Charles Taylor, to J. L. Mackie, Richard Rorty, and Allan Gibbard. Despite this agreement over the importance of commitment, there is sharp disagreement over what commitment requires. While Marcel and Taylor claim that commitments are ultimately grounded in universal and transcendent values,6 antirealists and noncognitivists clearly disagree. They assert, as J. L. Mackie does, that a person “could hold strong moral views . . . while believing that they were simply attitudes and policies with regard to conduct that he and other people held.”7 Some go on to suggest, like Richard Rorty, that one can fully accept that the grounds of one’s values are purely “subjective,” or even that all of one’s moral beliefs are false (since they fail to represent anything), and still remain committed to these values

Commitment, value, and moral realism

and beliefs, and be willing to act on them. Yet these assertions on the part of both realists and antirealists remain just that — assertions with little or no argument to support them.

If, however, by examining the structure of commitment and its requirements one were able to show that moral realism was the only metaethical position compatible with commitment and the only one capable of explaining its possibility, this would force its opponents either to concede the untenability of antirealism in ethics, or to relinquish the importance they place on commitment.

1.3 COMMITMENT AND ITS FEATURES

The term "commitment" is used in a variety of ways and contexts. The kind of commitment I am ultimately interested in examining, however, is the commitment one has to political causes, for example, or to moral principles, ideals, and even other persons.

Within this general category of commitment there is obviously a great deal of variation: from the very ordinary, like being committed to carrying out a certain plan, to the more complex such as a commit-

8 Rorty actually says: "a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance": R. Rorty, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 189 (henceforth, CIS). There are two ways of reading this: in the first case, one can admit a belief is caused by contingent historical circumstance and still assert it is true — true beliefs can have contingent origins; the second reading falls prey to the genetic fallacy and denies truth to any such belief. My criticism is directed toward the second stronger claim Rorty seems to be making that no truth attaches to these beliefs, that we recognize this, and still find them worth dying for.

Introduction

ment to becoming a doctor, or a commitment to moral and political ideals. The first kind of commitment, which might be thought of as a steadfast determination in the sense that one has settled upon one course of action and is determined to see it through, belongs to what I will call the “intention-like” commitments. The other type of commitment I shall label “substantive” commitments. It is to these two subgroups of commitments – the substantive and the intention-like – that the arguments and focus of the subsequent chapters will turn.¹⁰

Drawing on our own common-sense understanding of commitment, as well as some of the literature in psychology and philosophy, we can define three central features of commitment:

1. its stability over time and its capacity to be revised and reconsidered;¹¹
2. its action-guiding force;¹²
3. its relation to self-understanding and identity.¹³

I will argue that if one accepts this description of commitment and its roles, then one must also accept the theory that best explains how commitment functions the way it does. And if it turns out that the best explanation incorporates moral realism, then one must either accept moral realism (as a condition for the possibility of commitment), or reject commitment altogether.

¹⁰ I leave aside what one might call the promissory commitments, i.e., commitments which can be viewed as obligations.


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The challengers: Allan Gibbard and Richard Rorty

2.1 Introduction

The position I want to defend is (a) cognitivist since it takes moral beliefs to be part of our commitments and so views them as being more than mere expressions of sentiments or feelings, and (b) (moderately) realist since these beliefs purport to represent facts of the matter, and are viewed by the agent as doing so. Clearly, my position could be challenged in two ways: either by denying that commitments incorporate beliefs, and so by implication that moral judgments involve beliefs (since such commitments, I say, include judgments regarding what is right, valuable, or good) – the noncognitivist challenge; or by denying that commitments involve these kinds of beliefs since there are no moral facts for them to represent, i.e., not only are such beliefs unnecessary for commitment, but they lack any content – the challenge from antirealism. Allan Gibbard\(^1\) poses the first challenge with his noncognitivist theory of rationality and normative judgments, while Richard Rorty\(^2\) poses the second in his notion of “irony” which forms part of his more general neopragmatist (and what he calls “anti-representationalist”) position.

Although Gibbard and Rorty approach the question of moral realism from two radically different orientations – the former stays and operates within the standard philosophical categories and methods, while the latter seeks to overcome these – they share an assumption common to all noncognitivists and irrealists in ethics, namely, the separability of theory from practice. One has the impression that the theories they propose are only (potentially) successful at giving an alternative explanation of our moral practices on condition that these theories either do not become common knowledge or are

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\(^2\) Cf.
forgotten as they are developed. The problem they face, I suggest, is to explain and retain our ordinary moral experience in light of the theoretical principles they propose: to combine theory and practice by offering a complete explanation of what it is we do and how within the context of the theory and with a shared knowledge of it. There is the suspicion that the plausibility of their theories rests on what has variously been described as “theoretical akrasia,” “intellectual schizophrenia,” and “two-level thinking”; they allow and participate in, as Hilary Putnam says, “first-level” realist talk about, for example, the wrongness of slavery, but then deny “the objectivity of [their] own first-level talk when [they come] to comment philosophically on this talk” (Putnam, Realism, p. 147). Although the typical response of non-cognitivists and idealists to this “practical” inconsistency is to distinguish the logical from the psychological possibility of their position, invoking the former as the only constraint they need to respect, I want to see if the latter can be used as a limit to theory formation as well by more carefully examining the structure and dynamics of such psychological states as commitment. Such a test is not, in fact, so foreign to the discipline; both Allan Gibbard and Richard Rorty accept it as a real challenge to their positions. Rorty recognizes that one of the main objections to his theory is that “it is psychologically impossible to be a liberal ironist — to be someone for whom ‘cruelty is the worst thing we do’ and to have no metaphysical beliefs about what all human beings have in common” (CIS, p. 85), and goes on, unsuccessfully I argue, to dispel that worry. Allan

4 David McNaughton also notes a similar split. “Non-cognitivist,” he says, “invites us to stand outside our own evaluative commitments and recognize that, from this external standpoint, nothing is intrinsically valuable, for values are no part of the real world but are created or invented by us.” Yet, noncognitivists and idealists still claim to be able to make sense, and maintain the possibility, of commitments to moral ideals. D. McNaughton, Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics, (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. 12.
5 Compare this with Owen Flanagan’s thesis of minimal psychological realism in Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). The principle states: “Make sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal that the character, decision processing, and behavior prescribed are possible, or are perceived to be possible, for creatures like us” (p. 32).
Commitment, value, and moral realism

Gibbard spends considerable time trying to give a negative answer to the question of whether his theory of norm-expressivism does in fact miss something in ordinary normative talk (Gibbard, Wise Choices, p. 154). While this is a different question from the one regarding psychological possibility, Gibbard extends it in that direction by claiming that his noncognitivist theory, i.e., norm-expressivism, also adequately explains and describes our ordinary, normative practices.

In the sections that follow I shall examine some of the arguments of Rorty and Gibbard against moral realism and cognitivism using the following questions as a guide: (1) do they offer a psychologically plausible story (given the dynamic of certain mental states such as commitment)? and (2) do they miss something in ordinary normative talk and practice? The goal is both to underscore, once again, the centrality of the question of commitment in the debates on moral realism, and to locate the main points of contention regarding commitment in order to foreshadow the direction of the arguments in subsequent chapters.

Before beginning the main arguments of this chapter, I want first to turn to an actual example to help put in context the arguments that follow. This will, I expect, provide an intuitive test by which one can assess the plausibility of Rorty’s and Gibbard’s theories. The example is taken from the biography of Eugene Debs.

2.1.1 Eugene V. Debs

The son of French immigrants, Eugene V. Debs was born in Kansas in 1855. A bright student, he left school at the age of thirteen to help support his family, first working as a paint scraper and later as a railway worker, where he saw first hand the toll that late nineteenth-century industrial capitalism exacted from wage laborers, who worked in dangerous conditions, with no benefits, for wages well below what was needed to live. It was this early exposure to their hardships that served as a catalyst for his later embrace of socialism and activism on behalf of workers’ rights.

Debs’s legacy to the American labor movement is remarkable. He secured the right to organize and strike, seeing this as the only effective tool against the much more powerful corporations. He obtained safer working conditions, higher wages, and welfare benefits, and fought fiercely for a minimum wage. Debs also came to
The challengers: Allan Gibbard and Richard Rorty

the defense of women’s rights, supported the equal treatment of blacks, denounced the Ku Klux Klan, white supremacy, and the sexual exploitation of black women by white men, all at a time when having such views was not only highly unpopular, but also potentially life threatening. He was a man of great charisma – a highly motivating speaker who drew people by the tens of thousands to hear his simple messages of harmony, justice, and equality.

Eugene Debs, however, was also a man of his times and a product of his culture. He was known to criticize immigrant Italians as the “dagos [who] work for small pay, and live far more like a savage or a wild beast, than the Chinese.”[6] He could be “vain and egocentric,” and was often “impressed with his prominence”: traits which could at times cloud his judgment (Salvatore, Eugene V. Debs, p. 95). Though married, he spent little time with his wife and preferred the company of his mistress. In short, Eugene Debs was a very human hero: while progressive and clearly ahead of his times in some areas, he was obviously short-sighted in others. But, unlike other characters often used as examples of people of conviction and dedication, who made great sacrifices for a principle – Mother Theresa and Mahatma Gandhi are usually mentioned – Eugene Debs is accessible. Moreover, he was not a zealot who sought to realize some religious utopic ideal on earth. In fact, he had a powerful distaste for organized religion; whatever else his motivations were, they were not religious fervor.7 While he was no saint, he was certainly an extraordinary individual, but one who is within reach of the understanding of flawed, worldly, less-than-saintly readers. For this reason, the life of Eugene Debs provides useful material for the study of commitment.

I mentioned briefly above some of the contributions Debs made in the American labor movement and toward the recognition of the rights of women and blacks. It is important to note that these contributions were bought at a high personal cost, and with the threat of considerable personal risk. Indeed, it is through such risk that we can describe him as being committed to the principles he advocated.

Although initially critical of immigrant labor, he later came to see

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Commitment, value, and moral realism

the “hue and cry against the ‘foreign pauper immigrants’ . . . as the work of the same capitalists who enticed them to America in the first place” (Salvatore, Eugene V. Debs, p. 105), and wrote against immigrant restrictions and discrimination, saying that such disputes only divided labor’s ranks, to the benefit of business. As a result, he was “threatened with assassination, and accused of pro-Catholic sympathies” (ibid., p. 106). In an era of “mad, patriotic conformity” (ibid., p. 292) in which the “press . . . supported management and inflated public opinion against leaders of strikes . . . [and] anti-war speakers” (Brommel, Eugene V. Debs, p. 210), Debs remained undeterred in speaking out against America’s involvement in Cuba, the Philippines, and W.W.I, as well as organized labor’s treatment of immigrant workers. Even after the passage of the Espionage Act of 1917 which made speaking out against America’s war effort punishable by imprisonment, Debs continued to do so (Salvatore, Eugene V. Debs, p. 291).

The risks he and others faced, however, were more than loss of freedom, but also loss of life. Salvatore describes the range of risks individuals took for the right to organize and strike:

With a thoroughness [Debs] never anticipated, federal marshals corralled radicals of every nationality, faction, and ideological persuasion, and US district attorneys freely interpreted a vague Espionage Act, passed in 1917, to win indictments and convictions on charges of treason and antiwar activity. Not to be outdone, local patriots in the Arizona mining community of Bisbee . . . “captured” over 1200 IWW copper miners, the majority of whom were American-born citizens, loaded them into cattle cars with minimal provisions, and deported them into the New Mexico desert. In Butte, Montana, during the same summer of 1917, Frank Little, an antiwar IWW organizer, was dragged from his bed, tortured, and then lynched by local vigilantes . . . Closer to [Debs’s] home, the Vigo County Council for Defense caused the discharge of a Terre Haute schoolteacher for her Socialist party membership, attacked German-Americans on the streets of Debs’s “beloved little community,” and invaded private homes to commandeer and then burn publicly all German language books. In that community where “all were neighbors and all friends,” a Socialist coal miner was lynched for refusing to buy a Liberty Bond (ibid., p. 288).

Real people took on real risks. There should be no question of Debs’s commitment to his political causes. What we want to know is in what this commitment consisted.