Are There Moral Facts?

Birkbeck Philosophy Study Guide 2016
Are There Moral Facts?

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This Study Guide is written for students studying philosophy at AS-level. Authored by two leading researchers in the field, it is intended to provide a general introduction to current debates concerning the existence of moral facts. The Guide is also intended to support students planning to enter the Birkbeck Philosophy Prize Essay Competition, and includes advice on writing philosophy essays and suggestions of further reading.

For more information about the Essay Competition, as well as the special AS Philosophy Conference on the same theme, see our website:
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Fact and Opinion

The distinction between facts and mere opinions is commonplace. For instance, most people would put the judgments they make on the basis of their own immediate sensory experience (e.g. “There’s a desk in front of me”), as well as more general propositions established by science (e.g. “The Earth revolves around the Sun”), firmly in the fact column. By contrast, many other judgments seem more subjective, and so are commonly regarded as belonging in the opinion column. Most people would put here judgments about taste (e.g. “Rhubarb is delicious”), aesthetics or art (e.g. “Picasso is a better painter than Manet”), and also — more controversially — judgments about religion, politics, and morals. But does morality truly belong in the opinion column? Are there really no moral facts?

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<th>Fact</th>
<th>Opinion</th>
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<td>Perceptual judgements</td>
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<td>Established scientific claims</td>
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<td>Moral judgements?</td>
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What is a Fact?

To begin thinking about this question in earnest, we need first to attend carefully to its meaning. What does it mean to affirm (or deny) that there are moral facts?

One central aspect of the debate concerns the degree of objectivity that we can justifiably expect to find in ethical judgments. Suppose you meet someone who claims that the Earth is flat, to which you respond by saying: “No, you’re plainly wrong. It’s a fact that the Earth is round”.

What have you said by that? Well, on the most natural way of understanding it, what you’ve said is that “The Earth is round” is unassailably true — that its truth has now been established beyond any reasonable doubt. This in turn means that if anyone seriously disagrees with you, then either they’re deeply mistaken, or else they don’t understand what you’re saying. So, on this way of looking at things, to say that something is a fact is to say that its truth is rationally unassailable, meaning that anyone who denies it must do so out of ignorance or irrationality.

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Facts and Disagreement

Contrast this with a dispute over taste. Suppose you find rhubarb delicious, but your friend finds it utterly disgusting. Unless you are very opinionated about matters of taste, you aren't likely to respond to your friend in the same way that you would to a person who claims that the Earth is flat — i.e. by insisting that she's mistaken and that, as a matter of fact, rhubarb is delicious. This is not only to avoid confrontation. The reason is also more basic than that: in matters of taste (unlike matters of fact), it seems perfectly possible for two people to disagree without either of them being mistaken or otherwise irrational (indeed, this is the essence of the Latin phrase *de gustibus non est disputandum* — “there is no disputing about taste”). Let’s call instances like this — where two rational parties can disagree about a certain proposition without either of them being mistaken — cases of faultless disagreement.

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It seems, then, that one way to articulate the distinction between fact and opinion is by appealing to this notion of faultless disagreement. If you have stated a fact, then any disagreement cannot be faultless — anyone
who disagrees with you must be in some way ignorant, mistaken or otherwise irrational. On the other hand, if you have expressed a mere opinion, then disagreement can be faultless — someone could have a different view to yours without either of you being wrong.

**Faultless Moral Disagreement?**

So far so good, but if this is the difference between facts and opinions, then what about our moral judgements? At first you might be tempted to put these in the opinion column, on the grounds that they’re the kinds of things about which faultless disagreement is possible. And there are good reasons to think this: after all, we all know that there are lots of moral issues over which people disagree. These range from issues of life and death (think of abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, or the appropriate response to a refugee crisis) to more trivial matters (for instance, whether to tell someone a lie in order to spare their feelings). Given that many of the people disagreeing about such things are generally rational and well-informed, it may seem unlikely, not to mention unkind, to insist that some of them are just mistaken. Accepting that people can have faultless disagreements over moral issues might therefore seem like a more tolerant reaction to such disputes.
But consider what is really involved in this. To tolerate the fact that someone disagrees with you is one thing, but to think that they are also *faultless* is quite another — and such a conclusion may not always be warranted. In disputes of taste, such as that over the deliciousness of rhubarb, the reason it seems implausible to insist that one of the parties must be wrong is that the dispute itself concerns something that does not, in the end, boil down to a question of reason or rationality. Your finding rhubarb delicious, and your friend’s finding it disgusting, are not *reasoned* reactions, but just a matter of *how you feel* when you taste rhubarb. So a disagreement over who is rationally in the right doesn’t even get going here.

By contrast, our moral judgements don’t seem to be instinctive or emotional in quite the same way: although they may be based on how we feel, they don’t appear to us as being *only* a matter of how we feel. Rather, in moral disputes, such as that over the permissibility of abortion, there’s plenty of room to use your intellect. If your friend disagrees with you about abortion, you can reason with him by defining the relevant concepts (e.g. what is a person?), by offering evidence (e.g. when does a fetus become sentient?), by drawing distinctions (e.g. what sort of entity can have a right to life?), and generally by producing *reasons* to justify your view. By comparison, you can’t do much rational persuasion with regard
to taste: there aren’t many reasons that you can give in order to persuade your friend, beyond the obvious one that you find rhubarb delicious.

If all of this is right, then we may be starting to see why many people insist that morality must be put in the fact column. Given how much scope there is for rational argument, it can easily seem mysterious how two people, both of whom are using their intellect to give reasons for their moral judgments, could end up with contradictory beliefs, without either of them having made some mistake along the way.

Facts and the World

The appeal to faultless disagreement is not the only way of drawing the distinction between facts and opinions. In contemporary philosophy, the word “fact” is often used to refer to a state of affairs obtaining out there in reality. In turn, the phrase “state of affairs” is generally used to mean a situation in which an object exemplifies or possesses a property. To illustrate this: when I say that it’s a fact that my table is rectangular, philosophers interpret that as my saying that there’s a state of affairs that obtains in reality which consists of my table exemplifying or possessing the property of rectangularity.
So when someone asks whether there are moral facts out there, on this way of speaking the question is understood as a metaphysical one: are there any objects that possess moral properties? Or, slightly more metaphorically: are moral qualities part of the furniture of the world?

We know, of course, that the Universe contains atoms, electrons, various forms of energy, planets, galaxies, as well as more human-sized objects such as people, cats, trees, telephones, chairs, etc. In addition to these, does the world also contain moral values?

Here is one way of thinking about this issue. Suppose someone asked you to produce a complete inventory of all of the attributes or properties that you possess. You would no doubt start with the most obvious ones, listing physical characteristics such as “measures 6 ft. in height”, “weighs 13 stone”, “brown-eyed”, “dark-haired”, etc. Suppose you continued like this for a while, listing all the non-moral characteristics you could think of. But at some point, you will have to consider moral properties like “kind”, “honest”, “courageous”, “just”, “good”, etc. (and perhaps their opposites:

**What is a fact? (Theory 2)**

‘X is a fact’ =

X is a state of affairs obtaining out there in reality
“cruel”, “dishonest”, “cowardly”, “unjust”, “bad”, etc.). Would you have to list these attributes as well, in addition to all the non-moral ones that you have already added to your inventory, or would your description of yourself be complete without them?

It seems reasonable to say that a description of yourself that just ignored your moral properties would be incomplete. But if moral properties have to be included, then that makes it sound as though they are in a way just as real or objective as your non-moral properties. For instance, if being 6 ft. tall has repeatedly and reliably been established as being one of your attributes, then it seems to follow that it is a fact that you are 6 ft. tall. Similarly, if kindness has been repeatedly and reliably identified as one of your characteristics, then it seems we must conclude that it is a fact that you are kind.

On our present theory of what it is to be a fact, something is a fact if it describes a state of affairs that obtains in reality. States of affairs, recall, consist of objects possessing various properties. Putting these elements together, it seems to follow that it is a fact that you are kind if it really is
the case that you are kind — i.e. if kindness is one of your real properties. And since we seem to have established that moral attributes would have to figure in any complete description of an actual person, it seems to follow that moral attributes are also in this sense *real, objective* properties.

The preceding paragraph gives us the rough outline of a potential argument in favour of the claim that moral facts exist: they exist because no possible description of a person (or action, or situation) would be complete without them. This could be taken to establish that moral facts are part of the furniture of the world — the kinds of things that we would have to list on a complete inventory of the Universe. But the preceding argument is, of course, far from conclusive.

One way of rejecting it would be to point out that the mere fact that a certain property would figure in a person’s complete description does not entail that it is also one of that person’s *objective* properties. On this view, we have to distinguish between different kinds of properties that a complete description would contain.

Consider for instance the property “measures precisely 6 ft. in height”, compared to the property “is tall”. At first blush, they may seem to be
very similar attributes, given that they both refer essentially to a person’s height. However, there are also very important differences between them. There are clear, universal tests and measures on the basis of which we can ascertain, beyond any reasonable doubt, whether someone measures 6 ft. in height or not. Once that has been established, reasonable disagreement about the matter is precluded. Tallness, on the other hand, is different from mere height.

For one thing, there are no conclusive standards that we can use to establish objectively whether someone is tall. This is because judgments of tallness are contextual: one can be tall in one context of evaluation and not tall in another (for instance, someone who measures 6 ft. in height will count as tall relative to the average teenager but not tall relative to the average basketball player). Moreover, even if we fix upon one single context of evaluation, it seems as though judgments about whether someone is tall can still vary: some may say that a male who measures 6 ft. is tall relative to the average Westerner, while others may reasonably disagree. If so, it seems as though someone’s being tall, although a genuine attribute of that person in the sense that it would figure in his complete description, is not
also an *objective* property of the same kind as his measuring precisely 6 ft. in height. But, the argument would continue, only objective properties constitute *facts*: it can be a fact that someone measures 6 ft. in height, but it cannot be a fact that he is tall.

Furthermore, *moral* properties (e.g. “is kind”) appear to be more like “is tall” than like “measures 6 ft. in height”. So they are not the kinds of properties that could conclusively establish the existence of moral facts.

Finally, notice how on this view, what really matters in distinguishing properties that give rise to facts from those that do not is once again the issue of *objectivity* and *potential disagreement*. So it might be said that the second way of thinking about facts, in terms of states and affairs and properties, is really not all that different from the first, which appealed to the notion of faultless disagreement.

To sum up, we have looked at two ways in which we could understand the question of whether there might be moral facts. On the first understanding, the question is one about objectivity and permissible disagreement. On the second understanding, it is a question about the ultimate structure of reality. On both understandings, there are arguments for and against the view that there could be moral facts. We have also
seen that the two ways of interpreting the question are closely related, with questions about real properties ultimately turning into questions of objectivity and faultless disagreement.
ADVICE ON WRITING YOUR ESSAY

We’d like you to contribute to this ongoing debate by writing an essay on the question: “Are there moral facts?”. At the end of this document you will find a list of readings that we think will help guide you further in your thinking about this issue.

In approaching the essay, it’s useful to think of yourself as a contributor to an ongoing philosophical debate. As such, you should aim to achieve three things: (1) tell us how you understand the debate; (2) outline one of the main arguments in the debate; and (3) tell us what you think about that argument.

In approaching task 1, it may be useful to imagine yourself trying to explain the issue to a friend of yours who hasn’t studied philosophy before. How would you go about doing that? Well, for one thing it’s quite clear that you shouldn’t use a lot of complicated and unnecessary jargon, but should instead try to put your main points across as much as possible in plain, everyday language. Bear in mind that the purpose is not to impress your friend with your wonderful knowledge of language and philosophy, but to actually explain what’s really at stake in the debate over moral facts.
The same applies to task 2, which consists of outlining one of the main arguments in the debate. Again, when presenting the argument try to imagine yourself explaining it to someone who isn’t familiar with that particular argument. Lay out all the steps carefully, without taking any shortcuts.

In approaching task 3, it pays to think about what you’re doing as though you’re making a case in a court of law. Suppose you’re a lawyer in court, trying to make a case in front of a jury (which, in this case, consists of your readers). There are two possibilities: either you agree or you disagree with the view you’re discussing. If you agree with the view, then you’re like a defence lawyer trying to convince the jury of it. If you disagree with it, then you’re like the prosecution and your task is to build the strongest possible case against it. Either way, what you ultimately have to do is give good reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the view. Like a good lawyer, you should not rely on rhetoric, gut feelings or idle speculation, but rather on evidence and reasoning.
For more detailed advice on how to write a philosophy paper, the following two links are very useful:

- Peter Lipton, "Writing Philosophy", http://www.hps.cam.ac.uk/research/wp.html

FURTHER READING

Some of these readings are quite advanced, but you are encouraged to have a go at them. Although it is not necessary to have read this material in order to enter the essay competition, you may find them very useful in sharpening your ideas.


  This is a highly influential and classic text, in which Mackie argues that all moral claims are in error (his “Error Theory”), and that moral facts do not exist. If you google it, you will probably find a copy online.


  This is a critical discussion of the claim that morality is a useful fiction, with a focus on the issue of moral disagreement. It is available here: www.hallvardlillehammer.com/uploads/2/1/1/3/21136986/moral_error_theory.pdf


  This is a critical discussion of Mackie’s moral error theory. It is available here: www.hallvardlillehammer.com/uploads/2/1/1/3/21136986/hlratio13.pdf

This is a critical survey of the main versions of moral error theory and some of their closest competitors. It is available here: http://www.hallvardlillehammer.com/uploads/2/1/1/3/21136986/cet.pdf


This is a sympathetic interpretation and defence of Mackie’s arguments. It is available here: http://tinyurl.com/ol5jwsx


This is a book-length defence of the claim that morality is no more than a useful illusion. It can be bought from many online booksellers.