Handout for "Realism, Meta-semantics, and Risk"
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1 Preliminaries

Epistemological arguments against (normative) Realism:

- Harman (1986): moral facts do not causally explain why we form moral judgments.

- Street (2006): it is compatible with a naturalistic evolutionary process that we make moral judgments according to any of a wide variety of mutually incompatible moral systems.

- Mackie (1977): moral properties are massively different in kind from any other property we know about.

Meta-semantic Risk:

> You are told by a usually highly reliable testifier that Sparky won the horse race. You have no other information about the race in question. In fact Sparky did win the race in question, and was easily the best horse in the race, and so in no danger of losing. The testifier is telling the truth.

> But what neither you nor the testifier knows is that the rest of the horse racing community thought that 'Sparky' is not a fitting name for the winner of such a prestigious race. There was some debate about whether they should change the horses name. In light of this uncertainty, they agreed to the following course of action: a coin would be flipped. If the coin landed 'heads' everyone would agree to continue calling the winning horse 'Sparky'. But if the coin landed tails, they would unanimously refrain from calling the winner 'Sparky'. Instead they would use this as the sole name for the last-place horse.

2 Realism and Risk

Moderate semantic stability: Many possible communities use normative language (the practical 'ought') differently than we do. But they are still talking about the same thing.

- Explanation from *reference magnetism:* normative properties are highly elite, and hence are easy to refer to. (Dunaway & McPherson (2016))

- Some possible communities use 'ought' differently and (i) their use is sufficiently different from us, and (ii) there is a pretty elite property, distinct from obligation, that better fits their use.

Anti-risk conditions on knowledge (or justification): A belief is not knowledge if it could easily have been false. (Williamson (2000))

- *Bad companions:* false beliefs in nearby worlds that make a true belief fail to be knowledge (refinements needed!: similar beliefs, similar token causal processes).

3   The Argument from Risk

1 'Ought' is moderately semantically stable.

2 If 'ought' is moderately semantically stable, then one could easily be in a world where 'ought' doesn't refer to obligation.

3 If one could easily be in a world where 'ought' doesn't refer to obligation, then one could easily have a false normative belief.

4 If one could easily have had a false normative belief, then one's actual normative beliefs have bad companions, and are not knowledge.

Terminology:

Stable world: A world where 'ought' refers to obligation (the reference of 'ought' has not shifted).

Shifty world: A world where 'ought' refers to something besides obligation.

4   Advantages

- Normative beliefs in shifty worlds are false.

- Beliefs in shifty worlds meet the similarity condition for bad companionship.

- Also will meet be the products of sufficiently similar token causal processes, as needed for bad companionship.

5   Qualifications

- *Alternative guises:* Ways of having beliefs about obligation that do not rely on the reference of the public language term 'ought'. (Premise **3**)

- *Safe worlds:* Stable worlds which are such that every nearby world is also a stable world. (I.e., worlds for which, if one is in one, one is not at risk of being in a shifty world.) (Premise **2**)

- *Higher-order normative knowledge:* one knows that one knows that one ought to ϕ only if the belief that one knows that one ought to ϕ is true in every nearby world.

- *Margins for error:* Beliefs that have built-in margins for error: e.g., the belief that this handout is printed on paper between 6 and 16 inches tall. (Premise **4**)

References

Dunaway, B. & McPherson, T. (2016), 'Reference Magnetism as a Solution to the Normative Twin Earth Problem', *Ergo* .

Harman, G. (1986), 'Moral Explanations of Natural Facts–Can Moral Claims Be Tested against Moral Reality?', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* pp. 57–68.

Mackie, J. (1977), *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin.

Street, S. (2006), 'A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value', *Philosophical Studies* **127**(1), 109–166.

Williamson, T. (2000), *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Oxford University Press.