The Argument from Normativity to Supernature

Part 2: Moral Normativity

So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people
and to distinguish between right and wrong.
1 Kings 3:9

Can you imagine it being bad for your health to avoid lying altogether? In the 1997 movie, *Liar, Liar*, Jim Carey's character is magically prevented from telling any falsehoods, with the result that his life temporarily becomes more stressful. Might researchers find that rigorous truth-telling increases risk of depression, anxiety, heart-disease and stroke? I should be clear that by telling the truth I do not mean simply blurting out thoughts impulsively. Further, I will head off quibbles about telling falsehoods to protect others from serious harm by limiting this discussion to self-interested lying, that is, shading the truth to to burnish one's image, evade responsibility for misdeeds and lapses in judgment, or otherwise procure some advantage for oneself. Nearly all of us think that self-interested lying is wrong, but could it also be a stress-reliever and coping mechanism?

I didn't ask whether it is *likely* that truth-telling is bad for health (I seriously doubt that it is), but whether it is *imaginable.* Of course, it is. It can be imagined that a certain level of lying along with a certain level of truth-telling moderates psychological stress and keeps the gears of society turning as smoothly as they do. A certain amount of lying, in other words, can be imagined to be adaptive for the human organism. But would it being adaptive make it less wrong morally? And if rigorous honesty had some adaptive drawbacks, would that make it less morally right?

Even if we had evidence that a certain level of self-interested lying served an adaptive function, I doubt that in our personal lives we would feel that it was any less wrong. This exercise shows that we can distinguish between the beliefs that (1) honesty is morally right and (2) honesty has adaptive value for human communities. The distinction is significant because the only naturalistic, evolutionary explanation for our moral convictions is that they are adaptive. The evolutionary account leaves us with a mystery. If nature can't tell wrong behavior from behavior that is maladaptive, and if our thinking processes are part of nature, how is it that we can tell the difference?

Set aside for a moment the imaginary situation I started with. Suppose instead that honesty pays nothing but dividends for human communities and that lying is only but a detriment. In that case we might be tempted to say that self-interested lying—along with cruelty, cheating, and other unethical behaviors—is wrong for the very reason that it is maladaptive for human society. But why, exactly, is it morally praiseworthy to contribute to human society and morally blameworthy to impede it? One answer is, "just because it is," which is to say that it is self-evident that promoting human welfare (or the welfare of all of earth's species, for that matter) is morally right and that undermining it is wrong.

The claim that human welfare is the standard of morality is not, however, naturalistic.[1] That certain

behaviors are maladaptive for the human species can be confirmed from observation. But we cannot confirm from observation that because those behaviors are maladaptive they are morally wrong. It is no more scientific to say that the welfare of the human species is self-evidently the reason that lying is wrong than to say simply that it is self-evident that lying is wrong. Either way we arrive at some value or standard that we cannot evaluate scientifically.

Another naturalistic explanation of morality is that we are expressing instinctive aversions and attractions, conditioned by evolution, when we judge behaviors as morally right or wrong. Consider that if the leaves of a plant taste bitter to us we tend to spit them out and pronounce them "bad." Our instinctive aversion to bitter tasting substances promotes our survival by steering us away from some toxic plants. Perhaps our thinking that certain behaviors are morally wrong falls into the same category. We experience a dislike for those behaviors corresponding to the dislike of the bitter-tasting leaves, and for the same reason, namely, that a degree of avoidance of them is adaptive.

Identifying moral judgments with instinctive aversions clashes with our ability to tell one from the other. A person can intensely dislike listening to atonal music, eating brussel sprouts, or watching golf on television without concluding that these activities are in the slightest degree unethical. Further, we refrain from making moral judgments about animal behaviors to the extent that we see them resulting from "blind instinct." Recall the text I quoted my introduction about the inner light that shines in human beings from outside nature (John 1:9). The light of conscience and rationality is what relieves the blindness of instinct alone.

To a large extent we cannot choose our natural desires. We cannot decide not to feel hunger when we are hungry, though we can decide whether or not to act upon it. With enough effort we can suppress some natural desires. But if a rational person could not choose to desire to do right as opposed to wrong, there would be no moral responsibility for any action. That the desire to act rightly is capable of being chosen by rational beings is enough to raise doubt, not about whether the desire is real, but whether it is natural.

A variation on the naturalistic theory of moral judgments says that our intuition that they differ from instinctive reactions is simply mistaken. However, the proposition that human beings tend to mistake certain aversions for moral judgments cannot itself be confirmed from observation. To confirm it, we would need a naturalistic definition of "moral judgments" that the theory declines to provide. For example, to confirm the proposition that humans sometimes mistake king snakes for coral snakes, we must have a naturalistic definition of both to work with.

A mistake can extend to unreal objects only in cases where the object incorrectly combines real attributes. As another example, the proposition that humans once mistook rhinoceros for unicorns is potentially confirmable because "unicorn" is a patchwork. For someone to believe there are unicorns is for them to believe, mistakenly, that there are animals that are horselike (a real attribute) that also have a horn on their heads (a real attribute). Imaginary substances proposed by archaic science, such as phlogiston and luminiferous ether, subtly but erroneously combined genuine properties. Moral judgments do not incorrectly combine real attributes, therefore we cannot naturalize them as mistakes or illusions.

Some secularists argue that since humans disagree about moral judgments and, further, since these disagreements cannot be resolved, there are no moral truths. This objection overlooks that most people agree about what is right and wrong most of the time. Areas of disagreement tend to be volatile, but that doesn't rule out objective answers to moral questions. Scientific questions, too, can be fraught with

emotion and linger unsettled for periods of time. It is fair to say that we cannot resolve moral questions with the methods of science, but that merely demonstrates that the moral reality lies outside the physical processes that science gives us access to. We cannot exclude the possibility of settling moral questions through discussion, reflection, and revelation.

What exactly we have established? Does morality tell us anything about God? Specifically, how could God be the authority for moral judgments without himself being subject to those judgments? These are questions that I will revisit before this series of essays is finished, but it would be premature to consider them now. Our concern here is to answer the basic question of whether nature as revealed by science embraces all of reality. Our moral sense gives us reason to believe it does not.

Before I go on, I should draw a distinction between moral norms and the normativity of morality. "Stealing is wrong" and "murder is wrong" are examples of moral norms, the Ten Commandments being the most famous examples. According to the New Testament, many of these separate norms have in common that they enjoin us to treat others lovingly (Rom 13:9-10). They share an even more fundamental property by invoking moral rightness versus wrongness. We can say that they are all of the same species in that respect. To capture what it is that unites moral norms I propose the following statement:

There are morally right as opposed to morally wrong ways to think and behave.

I refer to this statement as the Metanorm of Morality. It does not claim that all human thoughts and actions can be labeled right or wrong, but it entails that at least some of them qualify for a moral description. The Metanorm of Morality is not a hypothesis in the scientific sense. Even secularists who resist portions of my reasoning will likely concede that it cannot be confirmed from observation, much less by experiment. At the same time, most of us will have trouble denying it in the face of our shared conviction that so far as we are able we ought to do the right thing.

1   The British philosopher G. E. Moore famously raised problems with the evolutionary explanation of moral judgments in his book, *Principia Ethica* (1903), the text of which can be found online at http://fair-use.org/g-e-moore/principia-ethica/.