

## Are there moral facts? By Chris Cowie

Humans are frequently confronted with decisions which beg the question of how they *ought* to act. These decisions are of the kind which we would classify as 'moral.' Quite frequently, people will disagree as regards the course of action they ought to take. In minor, everyday cases, this heterogeneous nature of opinions and results will be of little concern. That is to say, those involved will be neither particularly surprised to learn that others may have decided that they ought to have acted in a different way. It appears therefore that there is a broad acceptance that there may be a degree of diversity amongst people when it comes to choosing how to act.

Consider a more radical case though, one in which the decisions relating to how people ought to act are not so mundane. Perhaps it is a case in which all opinion seems to be aligned. For example, that a certain murder was 'wrong'. It is especially in these sorts of cases that we are inclined to feel ourselves justified in pronouncing an action as 'wrong' or 'bad', or whatever moral term we wish to apply. When we make this judgement though, it seems that we are appealing to some objective standard of morality. The claim, 'it is wrong' suggests that we are stating an indisputable truth – a fact. We must ask though, 'can our moral claims be grounded in fact', or more fundamentally, 'are there moral facts at all?'

It would seem, intuitively, to be the case that there must be moral facts. This is due to the sureness with which certain cases, such as that of murder, tend to provoke our judgement - the sureness of our own judgement and the general continuity with others. It is therefore rather discomfiting to find that there simply do not seem to be any of these moral facts. If there are, at least, we cannot prove their existence. It is worth trying to find out if this negative view is correct.

One of the standard lines of attack used to show moral facts do not exist is to demonstrate how they would compare to 'indisputable', scientific facts. The comparison is not intended to be flattering. An example of this is a simplified version of an argument by A.J. Ayer. It runs as follows:

Scientific facts can be verified by observation. Equally, scientific non-facts can be dismissed by observation. If that thing under observation is not verifiable (that is, it cannot be judged to be true or false) then it is not a scientific fact. Morals are not observationally verifiable. That is to say, by observing a 'good' action, we do not have our theory of 'good' confirmed or denied. Therefore, morals are not scientific facts.

This conclusion, that morals are not scientific facts, may not come across as entirely surprising. There is a hidden premise in the argument though in which Ayer argues that all our information concerning facts in the world *must* be empirically based. Where this is included, the conclusion is stronger than it seems. By drawing a distinction between moral and scientific facts, he is in effect drawing a distinction between knowable and unknowable facts. To accept his argument is to put morals in the bracket of the unknowable and thereby forbid yourself from talking meaningfully about them.

A somewhat similar line of argument is taken by Harman. He also argues for fundamental difference between fact and morals. It too is based on the link between scientific fact and observation. He shows that whereas observation allows scientific facts to be confirmed or denied in accordance with a theory, moral observation does not lend itself to the same test. To observe an action which may be regarded by the observer as 'good' does not, Harman argues, do anything to confirm or disaffirm that observer's theory of what 'goodness' is. This is fundamentally different from the empirical observation of a scientific style fact.

There seems an obvious conclusion to draw from the arguments of Ayer and Harman. It is that moral facts, if they should exist, do not share the same characteristics as what we may regard more normally as facts. Moral facts (if they should exist) and scientific facts then, do not appear to be of the same nature.

There are several possible points of departure from this position. Perhaps the rashest would be to dismiss the possibility of moral facts straightaway. It does not follow from a difference between scientific facts and their moral equivalents though, that moral facts simply do not exist (though this may indeed be the case). It would be neither a rational, nor a useful step.

The second possible departure point which it would be wise to open up involves a broader conception of our own epistemic nature than Ayer presupposes. Ayer sees our knowledge of facts as being rooted completely in sense experience. He (and much of the twentieth century philosophical tradition) would take the view that to use our language to describe anything but what is empirically knowable is to misuse it. They would argue that it produces non-sensical results. That is to say that though 'facts' may exist outside of the world as it is perceived by us, we can know nothing about them, nor should we attempt to. This idea of the senses providing the basis for all our knowledge is rather narrow in epistemic terms. In opposition to this, the wider philosophic tradition has tended to embrace a wider start point. It holds that a degree of a priori knowledge is possible alongside empirical knowledge. If this is indeed the case (a point which will not be taken up here), then it has implications for all non-empirical phenomena. Moral knowledge is one such.

A number of theorists, including figures as notable as Plato and Kant, have applied this a priori method to moral thought. What results from its use is essentially some form of a transcendental moral system. In this system, objective moral facts can exist and are just as deducible by one man as the next, provided he can reason. There are a number of problems with this. Firstly, the issue of the validity of such a priori reasoning arises. Secondly, the question poses itself: if such facts can be deduced, why does everyone not act on them? It cannot be doubted that not everyone holds the same moral beliefs. It seems strange then (though not impossible), that if such a transcendental moral system should exist, every man with the power of reason would not adhere to it.

The final departure point from Ayer and Harman's distinction between moral and scientific fact is quite the opposite of the transcendental argument. It takes the line that moral fact can be conceived of subjectively. That is to say, each individual may possess his own 'moral facts'. It is a view which may seem appealing today if translated into more everyday language – 'his morals are as right as mine are.'

Attractive though it may seem in some senses, this position is riddled with problems: As Bernard Williams points out, it is essentially a moral judgement in itself, though it purports to step outside of objective moral thought. To say that each individual can possess his own morals as facts is to admit a meaning for terms such as 'right' or 'wrong' in a way that can be publicly understood, yet in what is, in essence, a private language. A more obvious criticism than this (though still related) is that a subjectivist system would produce 'factual contradictions.' One individual may, for example, hold that  $p$  is 'right' whereas another may hold that  $not\ p$  is right. If this is the case, then the moral judgements with which we are dealing would not be 'facts' in any understandable sense of the word. (Interestingly, this seems to suggest that the Ayerian equation of 'fact' and 'scientific fact' is not so unreasonable. Our understanding of 'fact' appears to be senseless if we describe it outside of the scientific understanding in which both  $p$  and  $not\ p$  cannot simultaneously be the case. This point will be returned to later.)

If neither the extremes of subjective nor the objective conceptions of 'moral fact' seem to satisfy, it may be sensible to explore what space could possibly exist between them. This space is known as the 'intersubjective'. In this conception, 'moral facts' are conceived of as that which is agreed on by those to whom they apply – namely, people. In such a system, an agreed set of moral axioms, rules of inference, or imperatives would be used. These may, for example, state that killing is wrong, or that each individual has certain obligations to every other. These would, without requiring a priori knowledge, produce a system of consistent morals, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of both the objective and the subjective. Such a set of axioms, rules or imperatives may, for example, be plausibly chosen to correspond with common intuition, or with the aim of producing maximum happiness.

On the surface, this sounds all very well, but is, ultimately, indefensible as an understanding of 'moral facts'. Such a system would have the practical difficulty of producing a consistent set of moral results by the user: It is implausible that all those who used it would come to the same decisions on any individual case. This problem is well represented in the utilitarian dilemma of how to decide which course of action is most desirable to achieve 'happiness.' Even where the end-goal is agreed on as a maxim (as in the utilitarian case), the problem of exactly how best to achieve it is still irresolvable. This can result still result in the subjective difficulty of different people taking contradictory courses of action (such as  $p$  and  $not\ p$ ) even though the rule of the system in which they are operating is defined. Perhaps more damaging to the inter-subjective view is the issue of in what sense it produces anything we might call 'factual'. Even if it were the case that everyone were to agree to act in exactly the same way, would this make the rules they acted by 'facts'? Surely not. One cannot simply 'invent' facts.

It appears then that the basic possible ways in which 'factual morality' can be conceived have been exhausted without success. Of all the approaches, only transcendental morals seem to be in any way defensible. To say they are defensible though, is not to say they are probable, or indeed, understandable. Does this then, leave us with no more than the first departure point proposed – that there are no moral facts? Where facts are what we understand as 'scientific facts', it does seem to lead toward this conclusion. Fundamentally though, this position does not address the problem. It shows merely that morals are not compatible with our ideas of 'fact'. This

is not a criticism of how we define 'fact', nor is it a dismissal of the concept of 'morality'. Rather, it is an acceptance that the terms 'morality' and 'fact' (in the sense we are using them), and consequently the term 'moral fact', do not operate naturally together. This does not eliminate the *reality* of moral decisions with which we are faced. Instead, it calls us to deal with a complex moral world from which we cannot remove ourselves.