

## Comments on Miles Tucker's "A Quiet Moral Ontology"

### I. Miles Tucker's Quiet Moral Ontology, in Brief

The challenge: It is often alleged that the realist has implausible metaphysical commitments. Parfit and Scanlon, in reply, downplay the metaphysical weight of their commitments.

**Miles' Strategy for Replying:** Instead of saying moral properties exist, but not "in some ontological" [read: metaphysically heavyweight] sense, just acknowledge that moral properties do not exist.

Note: On this form of realism, there are no moral *facts*, either. How does this work??

#### Step 1: True Moral Predication Without Moral Properties

Moral claims, attributing moral predicates (like 'good' or 'right'), can be true even while the predicate does not refer to any property.

Appeal to Quine's quantifier account of ontological commitment:

The ontology to which an (interpreted) theory is committed comprises all and only the objects over which the [first order] bound variables of the theory have to be construed as ranging in order that the statements affirmed in the theory be true. (qtd. on p. 4)

The truth of 'Sally's act is right' commits us to the existence of Sally's act.

But it does not commit us to the existence of Rightness.

Reject as literally *false* claims like: 'There is such a property as rightness.' (p. 4)

#### Step 2: What Makes Moral Claims True?

First, there are ***pure moral principles***, which "specify necessary and sufficient conditions for right action and tell us what makes right actions right" (p. 6).

*Stipulative Example*

Act Utilitarianism: An act is right if and only if (and because) it maximizes hedonic utility. (p. 6)

These principles are objective, necessarily true, and *brute*. Nothing further makes them true. (pp. 6, 8)

Second, what makes ***impure moral claims*** like 'Sally's act is right' true?

We thus say 'Sally's act is right' is made true by the fact that Sally's act maximizes utility. And this is so because act utilitarianism is true. (p. 7)

So on Miles' view, impure moral claims are made true by contingent descriptive facts in combination with pure moral principles.

## II. A Potential Objection: No Less ‘Strange’ Without the Properties

- **Grant for the sake of argument:** True moral sentences that include moral *predicates* do not require ontological commitment to the existence of moral *properties*.  
Example: “Sally’s act is right.” (moral predicate “right”)  
This claim is true, but rightness *does not exist*. (Sally’s act does exist.)

### Where does this leave us in the meta-ethical debate between moral realists and antirealists??

My worry is that we may just be shifting the metaphysical ‘strangeness’ of moral realism to another spot in the rug.

Isn’t Miles still committed to moral principles that are *brute*, *objective*, and *necessarily true*?  
On his view, these principles stand in truth-making relations to impure moral claims and possibly even to themselves.<sup>1</sup> For what it’s worth, brute, objective, normative necessities seem pretty strange to me!

How might Miles reply?

**Potential Reply 1:** Yes, the brute, objective, necessarily true moral principles exist, even if normative properties don’t exist, which had been our focus.

**Me in Reply:** Is this so much better? If there is supposed to be something unsettling about mind-independent normative properties existing in the world, are mind-independent normative necessary truths existing in this world (and every other!) any better? (If there’s genuinely *nothing* problematic about *either one*, then that requires separate argument. Miles had assumed we do want to eliminate the existence of moral properties.)

**Potential Reply 2:** The brute, objective, necessarily true moral principles invoked by this form of moral realism don’t actually *exist* on this view and so aren’t problematic. (I suspect this is Miles’ preference?)

This would have to come at a cost. Claims like, e.g.

‘There are objective moral principles.’ and

‘This principle helps to explain why Sally’s act is right.’

would seemingly(?) have to be rejected as literally false (just like ‘Rightness exists’ on Miles’ strategy). But this seems comparatively less intuitive and so costlier for the realist.

**Me in Reply:** Even if that’s ok, I’m not yet convinced that denying the *existence* of moral principles as part of a “robustly realist” view is really any less metaphysically “queer” in the original, broad spirit of Mackie’s (1977) influential arguments...

Why? Miles would have to say that there are plenty of contingent facts about the world, but no moral facts, and that contingently true impure moral claims are made true partly by contingent facts and partly by things that don’t exist. This seems metaphysically strange to me in the sense that it raises more questions than it answers, for instance about the nature of truth-making and about why only non-moral facts exist.

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<sup>1</sup> Miles characterizes “brute” as meaning “there is no further thing makes them true” (p. 8). In a later section, he expresses an openness to the possibility that moral principles, as necessary truths, make themselves true (p. 11).

### III. Thoughts on Where We Go from Here

One thing I especially like about Miles' paper is that encourages us, in meta-ethical debates over objections to moral realism, to move away from the often-used metaphor of the ontological "weight" of normative *properties*. I say this because many of us are happy to commit ourselves to the existence of plenty of other things (when *warranted...*), so I don't think talk of the metaphysical weight of normative properties does enough on its own to isolate the alleged problem with moral realism.

I think a better argument in the vicinity would emphasize the strangeness of the realist's *brute, objective* moral principles. (How could things like these help to make moral claims true while there is no further explanation for their own truth? Is this really *more* plausible than Subjectivism or Moral Relativism?)

I think an *even better* objection to realism is purely epistemological: Why, exactly, are we justified in thinking that there are any such things as brute moral principles? And that we know what they are?

Yet purely epistemological challenges are admittedly beyond the scope of Miles' paper. If this session inspires us to redirect our attention to a variety of *other* objections to realism, then I think that's a great success for Miles' work!