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WHAT MORAL REALISM CAN LEARN FROM THE PHILOSOPHY OF TIME

1. INTRODUCTION

It sometimes happens that advances in one area of philosophy can be applied to a quite different area of philosophy, and that the result is an unexpected significant advance. I think that this is true of the philosophy of time and meta-ethics. Developments in the philosophy of time have led to a new understanding of the relation between semantics and metaphysics. Applying these insights to the field of meta-ethics, I will argue, can suggest a new position with respect to moral discourse and moral reality. This new position retains the advantages of theories like moral realism and naturalism, yet is immune to many of their difficulties.

2. THE TENSELESS THEORY OF TIME

The tenseless theory of time claims that there are no tensed facts. The old tenseless theory tried to prove this by showing that tensed expressions could be eliminated from natural language.¹ It claimed that any tensed sentence (a sentence locating an event or state of affairs somewhere in the past, present or future) could be translated, without loss of meaning, by a tenseless sentence (a sentence locating an event or state of affairs in the static B-series). It concluded that, since tensed expressions were not needed to completely describe reality, there is no feature of reality to which they refer. That is, if tense can be eliminated from language without any loss of meaning, that shows that there is, in reality, no distinction between past, present and future, and no flow of time. As it turned out, the old tenseless theory of time was wrong about the possibility of eliminating tense from natural language. It is not possible to translate tensed sentences into tenseless sentences without some loss of meaning.²

The tensed theory of time always denied that tensed expressions can be eliminated from natural language without some attendant loss of meaning.³ It concluded that, since tensed expressions *are* needed to give a complete description of reality, there *is* a feature of reality to which they uniquely refer. That is, there really is an objective distinction between past, present and future, and time really does flow.

The new tenseless theory of time accepts that tense cannot be eliminated from natural language, but denies that time itself is tensed.⁴ Tensed expressions, those that reflect the distinction between past, present and future, and the associated flow of time, merely express features of our representations of temporal reality, rather than

picking out features of temporal reality itself. Thus, according to the new tenseless theory, tense is a feature of language that picks out no feature of reality. If the new tenseless theory is right, it follows that tense is both irreducible (it cannot be eliminated from language without some loss of meaning) and non-referring (there is nothing in reality to which it refers).

The debate between the tensed and the old tenseless theories of time can be illustrated by considering the following argument:

Argument A

1. No tensed sentence can be translated by a tenseless sentence without some loss of meaning. (Premise)
2. Either tensed sentences are translatable by tenseless sentences without loss of meaning, or true tensed sentences reflect a tensed reality (i.e. are made true by tensed facts). (Premise)
3. Therefore, true tensed sentences are made true by tensed facts. (From 1 and 2)
4. Some tensed sentences are true. (Premise)
5. Therefore, there are tensed facts. (From 3 and 4)

According to the tensed theory this argument is both valid and sound. If some true sentence makes an irreducible reference to the pastness (say) of an event, that must be because there exists a fact about the pastness of that event which makes that sentence true. So argument A establishes the existence of tensed facts, facts about the pastness, presentness and futurity of events.

The old tenseless theory thought that argument A was valid, but unsound because premise 1 is false. Its proponents offered a variety of translation schemas, which purported to show how any tensed sentence could be replaced by some tenseless sentence without any loss of meaning. Their reasoning was that if tensed sentences are translatable by tenseless sentences, then they are not made true by tensed facts. Instead they are reducible to sentences that are made true by tenseless facts. So the only facts needed to account for everything that can be said by both tensed and tenseless sentences are tenseless facts. But these attempts failed, because premise 1 is true.

The new tenseless theory also takes argument A to be unsound, but it rejects premise 2. Tensed sentences are not translatable by tenseless sentences, but it's not the case that the only alternative to this is that they are made true by tensed facts. It is possible for there to be true tensed sentences that cannot be translated by tenseless sentences even if there are no tensed facts. A tensed sentence can be irreducible, in that no tenseless sentence can capture the entire meaning conveyed by it, while still being made true by a purely tenseless fact.

The implications of the new tenseless theory of time for the semantics and the metaphysics of tense are as follows. Metaphysically, temporal reality is constituted by the temporal relations of 'earlier than,' 'later than,' and 'simultaneous with.' Reality is temporally ordered according to these, and only these, relations. Any tensed sentence (one which appears to locate an event somewhere in the past,

present or future), if true, is made true by some tenseless fact (a fact about the temporal relations that obtain between events). For example, a token of the tensed sentence "It rained yesterday," if true, is made true by the tenseless fact that the token is produced one day later than a day on which it rained.

All tensed sentences, according to this theory, have tenseless truth conditions and truthmakers. Their truth conditions make no reference to tense, and their truthmakers include no facts about anything's pastness, presentness or futurity. It follows that there is no observer-independent feature of reality that corresponds to tense in language. But it does not follow from this that tense can be eliminated from language. Any tensed sentence has tenseless truth conditions, but it does not have the same meaning as the tenseless sentence that states its truth conditions.⁵ For example, a token, *u*, of the sentence "It rained yesterday" is true if and only if rain occurs one day earlier than the day on which *u* is produced. But "It rained yesterday" does not mean the same as "it rains one day earlier than *u*." So, no tensed sentence can be translated by a tenseless sentence. It follows that tense constitutes a significant and irreducible aspect of language and thought that has no ontological counterpart.

3. MORAL REALISM: ITS MOTIVATION AND TWO PROBLEMS

Moral realism is a theory about the status of moral discourse that has both semantic and metaphysical components. Its metaphysical component is that there are distinctively moral facts and moral properties. Its semantic component consists in cognitivism about moral judgements. Cognitivism is the doctrine that moral judgements express propositions that are capable of truth and falsity. According to moral realism, moral judgements are not only capable of truth and falsity, some of them are actually true.

The principal source of motivation for moral realism is the idea that there are correct answers to moral questions, and that when we argue with each other about the correct answer to a particular moral question, we are engaged in a genuine disagreement. If there are correct answers to moral questions, it seems to follow naturally that this is because the correct answers correspond to the way things are, independently of what anyone happens to think. This in turn suggests that there *is* a way things are morally, not just a multitude of moral opinions, and that we can be genuinely either correct or mistaken in our moral beliefs. Thus, the domain of moral discourse is treated by the realist in a way similar to ordinary, fact-stating discourse. If I ask "What is the population of New Zealand in 2000?" there is a correct answer to this question. I can discover that the correct answer to this question is that the population of New Zealand in 2000 is 3.8 million. The proposition that New Zealand's population in 2000 is 3.8 million is a true proposition that corresponds to the facts, independently of what anybody happens to think. Similarly, according to moral realists, if I ask "Is euthanasia ever morally permissible?" there is a correct answer to this question, and I can discover what it is. There is a fact of the matter about the moral permissibility of euthanasia that corresponds to the way things are independently of what anybody happens to think.

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