

Morality and Mathematics Book Review

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[penultimate draft, see Ethical Theory and Moral Practice Vol. 26 for published version]

In *Morality and Mathematics* Justin Clarke-Doane distinguishes contrasting forms of realism about domains like morality and mathematics ('bare bones realism' vs. 'objectivism') and discusses a range of attempts to formulate access (that accepting a realist theory of certain domains makes apparent human knowledge of these domains a mysterious coincidence).

Most interestingly (to me) he stakes out new ground in debates about the companions in innocence argument (that moral realist and mathematical access worries are 'on par') by advancing the following combination of views.

1. There is (or may be) a legitimate access worry concerning knowledge of both mathematical and moral realist facts, involving

“a challenge to explain the reliability of moral and mathematical beliefs, realistically construed (or to show that their truth is no coincidence)”
2. Our best hope of answering either these access worries would be to provide a 'pluralist' approach which combines
 - the metasemantic claim that people participating in certain (logically coherent) variants on our moral/mathematical practices would qualify as equally expressing truths (involving suitably different concepts)

- ‘anti-objectivism’ which Clarke Doane exemplifies with common attitudes that the parallel postulate isn’t true or false simpliciter, but only true in some geometrical axiom systems and false in others.

Clarke-Doane admits this notion is hard to define. But (given the characterization of access worries above) it’s tempting to identify it with the philosophical stance of *not taking our practices to be especially fitting in any way that would resurrect coincidence intuitions* (e.g., not taking our moral practices to specially fit facts about posthumous punishment and reward).

3. We plausibly **can** give such a pluralist response to **mathematical** access worries.
4. We **can’t** give such a pluralist response to access worries for traditional moral realism.

Readers of Clarke-Doane’s earlier work [2, 3] may initially be shocked by this rejection of the companions in innocence argument. Is he switching teams? Would he now agree that access worries motivate switching from traditional moral realism to some more deflationary metaethics (like Humean sentimentalism) which allows a parallel pluralist solution to mathematical and moral access worries [1]?

Sadly (or happily), the answer is no. Clarke-Doane keeps up the attack, merely shifting from questioning the legitimacy of access worries for traditional moral realism to questioning the possibility of escaping these worries via embracing some kind of metaethical deflationism along the above lines (truthvalue realism plus anti-objectivism). He raises two objections.

First, he attacks the very existence of moral (and all things considered ought) facts, via (something like) an argument from the following two points.

1. If ought facts exist, they must be capable of ‘telling us what to do’ in (approximately) the sense that non-akratic uncertainty about whether to do what one knows one ought to do is inconceivable.
2. However, such uncertainty is conceivable, because someone who knows that they ought to ϕ but ought* not to ϕ , could conceivably wonder whether to do what they ought or what they ought*.

[E]ven if we all things considered ought to kill the one to save the five, we all things considered ought* not (for some all things considered ought like notion, ought*). And now the practical question arises whether to do what we all things considered ought, or all things considered ought*, to do.

However, I think more defense of point 2 above would be welcome. For example, might we not deny it on the grounds that (something like) linguistic competence with ‘ought’ bars accepting that one ought to ϕ while (unconflict- edly, non-akratically) not intending to ϕ ¹? Admittedly, learning that certain alien moral-deliberation-like practices council against ϕ ing can make us reopen deliberation. But surely this is a case of *reconsidering whether ϕ is really what I ought to do*, not deciding whether to do what I ought to do or what I ought_{Cicero} to do.

Second, Clarke-Doane questions the viability of a pluralist response to moral access worries. He allows that one could (technically) answer access worries about knowledge of moral facts (if there were any moral facts) in this way. But he argues no such pluralist solution to access worries about our ability to settle *practical questions* is possible, because we can’t accept anti-objectivism about these questions.

¹Note here I’m appealing to facts about intentions, not to beliefs about reasons (or anything else). I take this to prevent the kind of response invoking reasons and reasons* considered in §6.6.

Practical questions are highly objective in the sense in which the Parallel Postulate question is not. We cannot resolve them by saying “killing the one would be good₁ but bad₂, and that is all there is to it” or “you take good₁ and I will take good₂.” In the practical realm, we have to take a stand.

But how is “tak[ing] a stand” on practical questions supposed to commit me to any form of objectivism about my practical choices (of a kind which could block a pluralist solution to access worries)? If we understand anti-objectivism in terms of coincidence avoidance (as suggested above), my worry amounts to the following question. Why would making a practical choice commit me to regarding this choice as ‘specially fitting’ in a way that would revive access worries?

Admittedly Clarke-Doane is quite right to say that one can’t *resolve* practical dilemmas just by saying, “I ought to ϕ but ought* not to ϕ , and that is all there is to it”². But why should the proponent of deflationary pluralist solutions to moral access be committed to thinking that one can?

Overall, *Morality and Mathematics* is a clever and valuable book, which covers much ground I’ve not had space to discuss. It should interest everyone working on access worries in metaethics, mathematics and beyond.

References

- [1] Sharon Berry. (Probably) Not companions in guilt. *Philosophical Studies*, 175(9):2285–2308, 2018.

²For example, if one accepts a linguistic competence constraint (as suggested above), competent acceptance of an ought claim requires already having (or currently forming a practical stance in favor of ϕ ing. So (barring cases of akresia) no one who accepted the initial ‘I ought to ϕ ’ could simultaneously regard whether to ϕ as an open question in need of settling.

- [2] Justin Clarke-Doane. Moral Epistemology: The Mathematics Analogy. *Nous*, 48(2):238–255, 2014.
- [3] Justin Clarke-Doane. What is the Benacerraf Problem? In Fabrice Pataut, editor, *New Perspectives on the Philosophy of Paul Benacerraf: Truth, Objects, Infinity*, pages 17–43. Springer, 2016.