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An Examination of Morality in a Naturalistic Universe

Abstract

Naturalism is the view that our death marks a final and irreversible extinction. We are born into this world, we live our lives, and we ultimately perish from existence. This being the case, many naturalists urge people to live as fulfilling lives as possible. If this life is the only life people have, whatever constitutes the fullest or best way to live should be the way a person lives. However, what exactly constitutes a fulfilling life by the naturalist is not entirely agreed upon. Some naturalists claim that having individual happiness is what constitutes a fulfilling life, while others claim that being moral and serving others constitutes a fulfilling life. In a third view, our individual happiness is actually found in being moral and serving others, thus being moral ultimately constitutes a fulfilling life. If this life is the only one we have before eternal extinction, which one of these three views of a fulfilling life is correct? This project examines two naturalists who assert that being moral constitutes the most fulfilling life, and one who asserts that objective morality does exist.

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Introduction

Naturalism is commonly associated with atheism because, like atheism, it asserts that God does not exist. The naturalist Erik J. Wielenberg¹ would not disagree, for naturalism is “the claim that no supernatural entities exist, nor have such entities existed in the past, nor will they in the future” (2). However, naturalism is about more than just the non-existence of God. As Wielenberg further elaborates, a naturalist universe also has “no afterlife, and no immortal soul.” We are born into this world, we live our lives, and we ultimately die. Death marks an extinction that is both final and irreversible. This being the case, many naturalists urge people to live as fulfilling lives as possible. If this life is the only life people have, whatever constitutes the fullest or best way to live should be the way a person lives. Kai Nielsen² says that “we all want a life in which sometimes we can enjoy ourselves and in which we can attain our fair share of some of the simple pleasures that we all desire” (21). This seems reasonable enough to the typical person. It is in our self-interest to pursue things that give us happiness in life, and why shouldn't we if this is the only life we have?

While some naturalists stop at this “self-interest” concept of fulfilment, others, namely objective moralists, broaden it. On the objectivist's view, objective morals exist that govern what is right and wrong, much in the same way Newtonian laws govern how gravity works. A fulfilling life involves both adhering to an objective moral law, while at the same time pursuing personal happiness. This moral side of fulfilment is meant to exist in conjunction with personal happiness, but actually poses a dilemma for the objectivist naturalist, like Erik Wielenberg. What happens when acting morally conflicts with fulfilling personal happiness? It would seem that certain situations in life require us to make a sacrifice of one to promote the other, which then prompts the question, which should we sacrifice? In this paper, I will examine this conflict using

three naturalists; two objectivists, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong³ and Erik J. Wielenberg, and one non-objectivist, Michael Ruse⁴. When completed, I will show how each objective naturalist fails to effectively deal with this problem, and how submitting to objective morality in a naturalist universe ultimately concedes absurdity. It is important to establish that the issue here is not between theists and naturalists. This paper is merely an analysis of a dilemma that naturalists themselves face. I will therefore make no mention of God or spirituality as an issue.

I

Sinnott-Armstrong believes morality is harm-based, meaning that an action is right or wrong depending on whether “it harms the victim for no adequate reason” (Sinnott-Armstrong 57). Given that Sinnott-Armstrong believes morality “concerns harms to other people,” it follows that he has some conception of harm (54). Harms include such things as death, pain, and disability, where disability “includes loss of freedom and maybe also false beliefs insofar as false beliefs make people unable to achieve goals” (59). These harms, among other examples, are bad. A disabled person might believe water is only found in the desert, when in reality it is not. Such a person would never be able to quench his thirst, not because of a lack of effort, but because of misplaced effort altogether. Most people agree this hypothetical situation would be bad if it were true. In a similar fashion, the physical and emotional pain that one feels from rape is bad and most people would agree it is bad. It is important to understand that Sinnott-Armstrong is not concerned with *why* harms are bad, but merely that they are. The fact that “so many smart people agree after thorough reflection” that harms are bad is enough to make his point (59). To inquire into how or why harms are bad is therefore not needed. As Sinnott-Armstrong says “it is enough for my argument that these harms are bad, even if it is not clear what makes them bad or what it means to call them bad” (60).

Harms, then, simply are bad. If this is the case it follows from the same reasoning that certain things are good. For example, most people agree that benefits are good, where benefits include such things as happiness, life and ability. The happiness I get from seeing my mother on the holidays, most people would agree, is good. In the same way, being alive, when considered on its own, is good. While very specific on harms, Sinnott-Armstrong fails to straightforwardly clarify what are benefits, for he spends his time discussing everything in terms of what is bad. He does, however, *imply* what is a benefit. In talking about a person who gets away with being immoral, he says “even if they get away with it, they usually won’t be happier, or much happier, than if they had made more modest gains honestly” (114). This statement, disregarding what it says about getting away with being immoral for the moment, implicitly affirms that happiness is good. Sinnott-Armstrong does not say the man being immoral should not be concerned with happiness. Rather, he asserts the man would get more or at least the same amount if he had been moral. Happiness, which we will consider a benefit, therefore is important to Sinnott-Armstrong, and is good. Furthermore, no justification is needed to explain why benefits are good. Just as Sinnott-Armstrong does not need to explain why harms are bad, it is not necessary for him to explain why benefits are good; they just are.

What I have established thus far is that Sinnott-Armstrong believes that we live in a universe where harms exist and are bad and benefits exist and are good. From these ideas of harms and benefits, we can put together a notion of well-being, happiness, or self-interest. If harms are bad and benefits are good, it naturally follows that one has a reason to avoid harms and pursue benefits for oneself. It is not in one’s self-interest to seek “pain when that pain would not bring any benefits”, just as it is in one’s self-interest to seek pleasure, which makes up one’s

happiness (60). The reason is simple; pain is just bad and happiness is just good. No further justification is needed.

While it seems clear that Sinnott-Armstrong believes there is a relationship between lack of harm and well-being, the nature of that relationship is not clear. Considering Sinnott-Armstrong spends much of his time discussing harm, he might phrase the well-being of a person in relation to how much harm they are experiencing. This could mean either that the absence of harm is a necessary condition of well-being, or that the absence of harm is just a part of well-being. Sinnott-Armstrong does not seem to favor one alternative over the other, but his view that harm is bad means he, at the very least, would conclude the absence of harm has something to do with the well-being of a person. So the strong pain someone experiences during an injury is, disregarding any consequences of that pain, not adding to that person's well-being. While this version of well-being excludes notions of good, it still at the very least establishes a notion of well-being, even if only in terms of harm.

Goodness and badness, however, are not moral and immoral forms of value, respectively. They are non-moral values. It is the actions that cause or prevent harm (which is bad) that exhibit moral value under Sinnott-Armstrong's view. "Morality enters the story when harm is caused not (or not only) to oneself but to other people. Causing pain, disability, or death to others for no adequate reason is immoral" (62). Morality therefore deals not with individual well-being, but with the well-being of others. Using the example of rape, he writes that "rape is wrong because it harms the victim for no adequate reason" (57). While what he means by an "adequate reason" is not made entirely clear, the point being made is that harm caused to another person for a reason which does not prevent some other greater harm or cause another good is immoral. Under this

view of morality, harm caused to another person is not necessarily immoral, as in cases where “death can end pain,” or “pain and disability can build character” (59).

Given that Sinnott-Armstrong affirms the need to promote the well-being of others, one must naturally ask how this relates to self-interest. In other words, if being happy is in one’s self-interest (and what reasonable person would deny this), then how does being moral relate to being happy in one’s own case? In one respect, he says that “despite popular rumors, it is normally in our interest to be moral” (114). However, even he admits that “harming others is sometimes in some people’s [the agent’s] best interest, even considering probable costs” (114). This being said, he concedes that our self-interest is sometimes just trumped by the need to prevent or not cause harm to others. Using the example of rape once again, he writes:

What reason have I not to rape? My main reason is not that my act will hurt me. It is that rape hurts the victim- the person who is raped. That reason is enough to show that it is not irrational for me to refrain from rape, even if I wanted to rape, and even if rape were in my own self-interest (117).

At this point it is relevant to remember that Sinnott-Armstrong believes in a universe where death is final, and that means permanent extinction. In this same universe, harm is bad and benefits are good and thus we, as individuals, have reason to avoid what is harmful and pursue what is good for ourselves. However, Sinnott-Armstrong also believes we have reason to be moral in that we should prevent or not do harm to others, even when this conflicts with our own self-interest. My question is this; why is it any more rational to be moral than pursue my self-interest if this life is the only one we have?

As far as I can tell, Sinnott-Armstrong does not address this question. He merely asserts that moral action, even when it prevents me from being as happy as I might be or makes me unhappy, is more rational to perform than self-interested action. One could argue that being immoral actually is never in our self-interest, even though it appears to be in some cases. As stated before, Sinnott-Armstrong tries this. Using the example of the person who gets away with being immoral, he says “even if they (the immoral person) get away with it, they usually won’t be happier, or much happier, than if they had made more modest gains honestly” (114). Notice his use of the adverb “usually”, which indicates the existence of exceptional cases. It simply is not the case that being moral is *always* in one’s self-interest. He must therefore go back to the view that morality just trumps self-interest. However, “when one is cognizant that this is the only life one has to live (death is the absolute end of one’s existence) and, therefore, the only life in which one will have the opportunity to experience the intrinsic goodness of pleasure/happiness, why not chooses one’s own happiness over performing the morally right action?”⁵. In a naturalistic universe, one’s self-interest does not necessarily ultimately harmonize with what is required of one morally. While it may be the case that morality is objective, our self-interest, which is equally objective, is not guaranteed in a naturalistic universe if we are moral. Thus, I find it no more rational to pursue moral interest over self-interest under Sinnott-Armstrong’s view.

Erik Wielenberg, like Sinnott-Armstrong, is an objectivist naturalist who stresses the fact that “meaning and morality exist independently... of God” (Wielenberg 151). While Sinnott-Armstrong stresses harm and its prevention as the basis for morality, Wielenberg uses the notion of a meaningful life and its promotion as the basis for morality. Specifically, he advocates two types of meaning; internal and external. A person’s life has internal meaning when he “engages in worthwhile activity that brings... pleasure” (15) and external meaning when he “bring[s] goodness into the universe” (14). As I will show, Wielenberg ultimately walks into the same problem as Sinnott-Armstrong in regards to the conflict between morality and self-interest, albeit in terms of internal and external meaning.

But let us first consider internal meaning, for which worthwhile activity is necessary. Wielenberg defines a worthwhile activity as any activity that “accomplishes some meaningful goal” (15), and goes on to list some examples. These include such things as “falling in love, engaging in intellectually stimulating activity, being creative in various ways, experiencing pleasure of various kinds, and teaching” (34). While I do not believe experiencing pleasure is an activity, the fact that he labels experiencing pleasure as an “intrinsically good activity” indicates he believes that pleasure is intrinsically good (34). Furthermore, he indicates the intrinsic goodness of pleasure on two other occasions. The first, he writes that “being virtuous is the best way to attain wealth, power, and pleasure” (74) and the second, that “being a genuinely moral person remains the best bet for securing happiness” (77). Disregarding what these quotes say about being virtuous for the moment, they show how important happiness and pleasure (which makes up our happiness) are to Wielenberg. If he considered pleasure unimportant, why would he frame it as something that should be attained and secured? The answer is simple; Wielenberg considers pleasure intrinsically good. Given this and the fact that internal meaning is found from

worthwhile activity and pleasure, it makes sense to conclude that experiencing pleasure is necessary for satisfying the conditions of an internally meaningful life.

Given that Wielenberg believes pleasure is intrinsically good, it naturally follows that he also has some notion of bad, which includes pain. Using the same reasoning as with pleasure which is good, it follows that pain is just bad, disregarding all the possible consequences of that pain. From the fact that pain is bad and pleasure is good, Wielenberg establishes a notion of well-being or self-interest. The internally meaningful life consists of “decreasing the amount of evil” in one’s own life (31). Decreasing the amount of badness and increasing the amount of goodness in one’s life increases well-being, and is in one’s self-interest. From what I can gather, this notion of self-interest is what ultimately constitutes internal meaning in one’s individual life. To experience the intrinsic good of pleasure and to not experience pain is in one’s self-interest and constitutes one’s well-being, thus constituting one’s life as internally meaningful.

External meaning on the other hand, deals not with one’s individual well-being, but with the well-being of others. The externally meaningful life, as described by Wielenberg, is one where “the universe is better than it would have been had the life [of the agent] not been lived” (14), and where better in this case is “increasing the amount of intrinsic goodness in the universe (or decreasing the amount of evil)” for others (31). This statement reinforces two understandings of Wielenberg’s view; he has a notion of good and bad (or evil), and that the well-being of a person is determined by increasing goodness and decreasing badness in one’s life. Internal meaning, as stated previously, requires fulfilling well-being or self-interest for the individual, while external meaning requires doing this for other people. Sinnott-Armstrong would consider this promotion of well-being in others as the moral good, to which Wielenberg would agree. The externally meaningful life therefore has to do with the moral good of promoting internal meaning

for those other than the agent; increasing others' pleasure which is good, and decreasing others' pain which is bad.

However, given these two notions of meaning, one must ask how each soundly coexists with the other in a naturalistic universe. In some circumstances it would seem that internal meaning would conflict with external meaning, in that in order to have one, a person must sacrifice the other. Wielenberg does not shy away from this dilemma:

It is possible for a life to have internal meaning yet lack external meaning... [and] at least initially, it appears that it is also possible for a life to have external meaning but lack internal meaning. Such a life (that lacks internal meaning but has external meaning) might be lived by someone who sacrifices his own happiness for the sake of others (15).

Simply put, Wielenberg is saying that it is possible for someone to only serve self-interest and yet not serve the moral good. Furthermore, it is also possible to serve the moral good to the point of sacrificing self-interest. To illustrate his point, consider the hypothetical situation where "it is only through personal ruin that I can save the human race" (96). I would lose all internal meaning in bringing "about my own personal ruin", yet promote external meaning by saving the entire human population (96). This hypothetical situation is clearly not one that happens too often. I believe an everyday situation could also suffice to demonstrate the problem. However, such a situation still clearly portrays the dilemma before us; certain situations force one to choose either moral good or self-interest. The question then becomes, which should one choose? Which choice is more rational to make?

To this question, Wielenberg's answer is clear; moral good is more rational to promote than self-interest when the two conflict. He writes that "the virtuous person recognizes a class of reasons distinct from those of self-interest: The reasons of morality. That person recognizes, moreover, that reasons of the second kind trump those of the first kind" (79). But do they? Is it so clear that moral reasons trump those of self-interest in the framework of a naturalistic universe, which is the one Wielenberg believes we live in? Keep in mind the implications of a naturalist worldview; death entails permanent extinction. When we die, we rot, and there is nothing further for the individual once this happens. This being the case, I find it difficult to accept that acting morally is *more* rational than serving self-interest. Why should one not experience the intrinsic good of pleasure for oneself if death is permanent and final? This is not to say there is no reason to be moral or that being moral is less rational than serving self-interest. It merely seems that promoting the moral good is no more rational than serving self-interest under the naturalist worldview.

I think Wielenberg does understand this problem, which is why he often says that "being a genuinely moral person remains the best bet for securing happiness" (77). While it may be possible that "morality and self-interest can conflict... this is rarely if ever the case" (95). Even conceding the point that morality and self-interest *rarely* conflict, the fact remains that they do not always perfectly coexist with one another. In a coherent universe, this would not be the case. It should not ultimately be in one's self-interest to act immorally, just as it should be in one's self-interest to serve the moral good. Simply put, moral good and self-interest should converge at some point and continue to exist harmoniously if the universe is ultimately coherent or meaningful. However, given that Wielenberg confirms objective morality in a naturalistic universe, this is once again not that case. He even admits "that the universe must be absurd in

some respect,” (94). Wielenberg assumes that his view of the universe is correct here, but even he must accept the absurdity of that view.

III

I must agree with Wielenberg’s admission here; the existence of objective morality in a naturalist universe makes for an absurd universe. There are moments in life, however few, when pursuit of self-interest does not promote the moral good, and vice-versa. A naturalist universe provides no overriding reason that deems moral good more rational to promote than self-interest. It may seem that one *ought* to be moral, but when one realizes that this life is all there is before permanent death, it seems no less rational to pursue self-interest even when it conflicts with moral good. For example, Mother Theresa lived a moral life of service to those less fortunate than her, while Joseph Stalin lived a life devoid of moral action that was focused on maintaining political power at the cost of millions of lives. On this naturalistic view, Mother Theresa’s life was no more rational than Joseph Stalin’s. In light of this, Wielenberg ultimately concludes “the idea that the universe cannot be absurd [has no] plausibility” (94). While it may be absurd, this is just the way things are. In other words, absurdity is a fact of the universe that is unavoidable.

It is on this point that fellow naturalist, Michael Ruse, departs from Wielenberg and Sinnott-Armstrong. Let us remember that the absurdity the objectivist faces is in the fact that objective morality exists in a naturalistic universe where self-interested actions bring me pleasure, which is good and constitutes my happiness. Standing alone, either one of these facts poses no problem to the naturalist. It is only because they exist together in a universe that includes permanent extinction that the naturalistic universe is absurd. Thus, if one eliminates one of these facts, the absurdity is resolved. This is the approach Ruse takes. On morality, he states

“there are no ultimate foundations, just a biological illusion of objectivity” (23), and that “considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, it is illusory” (20). Objective morality is therefore nothing but an illusion in our brains, according to Ruse. Because of this, whether or not morality is true makes no difference to the adaptive value of believing in morality. In the case of Ruse, as an evolutionist and naturalist, the only reason morality evolved in humans is because it helped our ancestors survive in some way. It does not matter if murder is objectively wrong, it only needs to have reproductive benefit. For example, suppose for some reason believing that the moon was made of cheese had some adaptive value to the human species. Natural selection would select for those humans who believed this because it helped them survive. Whether or not the moon is actually made of cheese makes no difference; its adaptive value is what matters. Given this, morality is not some absolute claim that one *ought* to follow, or even rationally should follow in all cases. The “minimum point for accepting a moral dictate has to be its inherent appeal or plausibility to the individual” (18). While Sinnott-Armstrong and Wielenberg assert that moral good simply trumps self-interest, here Ruse says the complete opposite. If a moral action is not in one’s self-interest, it has no dictating power.

I can imagine that Wielenberg and Sinnott-Armstrong would respond that this view of the universe is as equally absurd as theirs. A lack of objective moral laws seems ridiculous to the typical person. However, Ruse has the upper hand as a fellow naturalist. By affirming naturalism, Sinnott-Armstrong and Wielenberg admit that death marks permanent extinction. However, they admit more than just this. Humankind is the product of microscopic interactions of atoms colliding with one another for eons of time. Much in the same way that a hand came about only for survival and reproductive reasons, so it is with any functions of the brain. “The position of the modern evolutionist [or naturalist], therefore, is that humans have an awareness of

morality- a sense of right and wrong and feelings of obligation to be thus governed- because such an awareness is of biological worth. Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth” (15). Once again, the belief, in this case morality, does not have to be true in order to have reproductive or survival merit. If this is true, how do Wielenberg and Sinnott-Armstrong pull objective morality out of this mere adaptation that helped our ancestors survive? Ruse would say that both objectivists are stuck in an illusion. Morality feels objective, because it has to in order to have reproductive and survival value. But that’s all it is. As Ruse nicely puts it, “morality is like an insurance scheme. You throw your policy into the general pool and then can draw on it as needed” (16). Given this, it seems more rational to accept Ruse’s naturalist view. The non-objectivist eliminates the absurdity created by the objectivist and secondly, better explains what morality is in the framework of a naturalist universe; something that helped our ancestors survive.

References

I examined one work from each of three philosophers in detail, and then used two quotes from another two. I put a number next to each philosopher’s name to reference the work I used, and then, when quoted in this essay, I put a page number in parenthesis after the quote.

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