

ROBUST ETHICAL REALISM AND THE MORAL COINCIDENCE PROBLEM

Rafael Vogelmann

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte

Abstract: I present an objection to robust ethical realism, the view that there are mind-independent moral facts with normative import. I argue that if we combine robust ethical realism with a traditional conception of morality, according to which persons are especially relevant from a moral point of view, the result is that there is a remarkable coincidence between the content of normative facts and the kind of beings that actually exist. On the one hand, the normative facts single out persons as an especially relevant kind of being and, on the other hand, persons happen to exist. This match amounts to a coincidence because, according to robust ethical realism, normative facts cannot explain why there are persons and the fact that there are persons cannot explain why the normative facts are what they are. To the extent that commitment to unexplained coincidences counts against a view, robust ethical realism faces a problem. Although there are important similarities between this objection and other objections to normative realism that appeal to remarkable coincidences (such as Street's evolutionary debunking argument and Bedke's cosmic coincidence argument), I argue that the moral coincidence poses a different problem for robust ethical realism.

Keywords: Normative realism, moral realism, non-naturalism, persons, coincidence.

Resumo: Eu apresento uma objeção do realismo ético robusto – a tese de que há fatos morais independentes de nós e dotados de relevância normativa. Argumento que se combinamos o realismo ético robusto com uma concepção tradicional da moralidade, segundo a qual pessoas são especialmente importantes do ponto de vista moral, o resultado é uma coincidência extraordinária entre o conteúdo de fatos normativos e o tipo de ser que de fato existe. De um lado, os fatos normativos destacam pessoas como um tipo de ser especialmente importante e, por outro lado, acontece de pessoas existirem. Essa correspondência é uma coincidência porque, de acordo com o realismo ético robusto, fatos normativos não podem explicar porque há pessoas e o fato de que há pessoas não pode explicar porque os fatos normativos são o que são. Na medida em que compromisso com coincidências inexplicáveis conta contra uma tese, o realismo ético robusto enfrenta um problema. Embora existam semelhanças importantes entre essa objeção e outras objeções ao realismo normativo que também apelam a coincidências extraordinárias (como o argumento evolucionário de Street e o argumento da coincidência cósmica de Bedke), argumento que a coincidência moral representa um problema diferente para o realismo ético robusto.

Palavras-chave: Realismo normativo, realismo moral, não-naturalismo, pessoas, coincidência.

1. Introduction

In recent years, a number of philosophers have come to the defense of robust ethical realism, the view that there are moral facts that are independent of us and have normative import. Much of the work of those who have joined the ranks of ethical realism has been focused on responding to critics who claim that talk of moral facts runs into insurmountable metaphysical and epistemological problems. A lot of effort has been put into the task of showing that, contrary to Mackie's argument from queerness, there is room in our worldview for moral facts.¹ And, more recently, pressed by evolutionary debunking arguments, ethical realists have struggled to show that our capacity to know moral facts can be squared with what science has to tell us about the origins of our moral convictions in particular and about our process of moral belief acquisition in general.² The extent to which these responses in behalf of ethical realism are successful is, of course, debatable and it is not the goal of this paper to settle any of these issues. The goal here is rather to present a different objection that poses a problem to robust ethical realism even if we accept that there is no metaphysical or epistemological reason to deny the existence of *normative* facts.

I argue that if we combine robust ethical realism with a traditional conception of morality, according to which persons are especially relevant from a moral point of view, the result is that there is a remarkable coincidence between the content of normative facts and the kind of beings that actually exist. On the one hand, the normative facts single out persons as an especially relevant kind of being and, on the other hand, persons happen to exist. This match amounts to a coincidence because according to robust ethical realism normative facts cannot explain why there are persons and the fact that there are persons cannot explain why the normative facts are what they are. Commitment to unexplained coincidences counts against a view. So robust ethical realism faces a problem. I will call this the moral coincidence problem.

In the next section I define robust ethical realism more carefully and in section 3 I present the moral coincidence problem and distinguish it from similar objections to robust ethical realism, including evolutionary debunking arguments and Bedke's cosmic coincidence argument. In section 4, I consider

¹ The queerness objection to ethical realism was put forward originally by MACKIE (1991, Ch. 1). Replies by supporters of robust ethical realism can be found in PARFIT (2011b, Ch. 31), ENOCH (2011, Ch. 6) and SCANLON (2014, lecture 2).

² An evolutionary debunking argument against robust ethical realism was put forward by STREET (2006). Replies by supporters of robust ethical realism can be found in PARFIT (2011b, Ch. 32 and 33), ENOCH (2011, Ch. 7), SHAFER-LANDAU (2012), FITZPATRICK (2014a and 2014b).

some possible replies to the moral coincidence problem. Finally, in section 5, I discuss how other metaethical theories can explain away the coincidence.

2. Robust Ethical Realism

The argument I am going to present targets the ethical realist that is also a robust normative realist. Robust *normative* realism is the thesis that there are non-natural truths or facts concerning what we have reason to do that are mind-independent. These truths are mind-independent because they obtain independently of all our actual or hypothetical normative beliefs, attitudes or practices. And they are non-natural because they cannot be reduced to natural facts and, as such, are causally inert.

Robust *ethical* realism accepts the truth of robust normative realism and adds that there are mind-independent moral facts that are normative in a *reason-implying* sense. A fact is normative in this sense only if entails that someone has a reason to act in a particular way (PARFIT, 2011b, p. 267-8). According to robust ethical realism, if an agent S morally ought to do A, then there is a reason for S to do A (consisting either in the fact that S morally ought so to act, or in the considerations that ground that fact). Call this the thesis of *moral rationalism*.

Robust ethical realism as it was characterized in this section has been espoused by a number of philosophers such as Shafer-Landau (2003), FitzPatrick (2008), Parfit (2011a and 2011b), Enoch (2011, see specially Ch. 4) and Scanlon (2014). The objection to robust *ethical* realism that I am going to present in the next section is compatible with robust *normative* realism. If the objection is successful, it poses a problem to robust ethical realism that is pressing even to those who are willing to accept robust normative realism and believe that the metaphysical and epistemological challenges to that view can be coped with. If I am right, then Enoch's claim that once we have satisfactorily addressed metaphysical and epistemological objections to robust normative realism there should be no obstacle for us to accept robust ethical realism as well (ENOCH, 2011, p. 90) is false.

3. The Moral Coincidence Argument

According to robust ethical realism, moral facts are tied to corresponding irreducible, mind-independent normative facts about our reasons for action. If it turns out that we have no reason whatsoever to perform an action A, then the claim that we are morally required to perform A

cannot be true. That is, for robust ethical realism to be true, it is not enough that there are non-natural normative facts, they also need to mirror the content of morality.

What is the content of morality? What morality requires of us and what it forbids? According to some ethical realist, part of the answer is provided by our moral concepts themselves. Consider such statements as “genocide is morally abominable”, “it is morally wrong to torture another person” and “altruistic acts are, *ceteris paribus*, morally recommended”. It seems that if someone engaged in moral reasoning came to the conclusion that these claims were false and that diametrically opposed moral judgments were true, she would not have made a very surprising discovery. Rather, had she come to the conclusion that torture was morally acceptable and that altruistic acts are never morally recommended, that would prove only that she made a mistake in her reasoning or that she does not fully grasp the relevant moral concepts. If that is correct, the claims above are moral conceptual truths that establish boundaries to any moral system. They are what Shafer-Landau and Cuneo call moral fixed points (2014). If there are moral fixed points, a realist need not admit that every possible moral proposition is a viable candidate for moral truth because accepting certain moral propositions is a condition for one to count as a competent user of moral concepts (Shafer-Landau, 2012, p.11-12). As Shafer-Landau puts it:

(...) a set of rules that celebrated the intrinsic value of misery and cruelty, that incorporated nonderivative requirements to wantonly kill, rape, torture and betray innocents, could not qualify as a moral system. Those who might sincerely advertise such a system as a moral one would be making a conceptual error. (SHAFFER-LANDAU, 2012, p.16)

It should come as no surprise that these moral fixed points share certain thematic affinities: they are about how persons should be treated; they forbid, in all but exceptional circumstances, actions that impose suffering on other persons or that threaten their lives and they require or at least encourage actions that protect their lives and promote their well-being or, at any rate, reduce their pain and suffering. Given that prescriptions along these lines constraint the set of conceptually possible moral truths, any system of rules that qualifies as a moral system must be averse to the destruction of human life and to the suffering of persons and receptive to the protection of human life and the promotion of well-being. One could say that, as a conceptual matter, morality (the set of all moral facts) is *receptive to persons*: it ascribes value

to persons, to their lives, to their well-being and to their flourishing, shuns that which leads to their destruction, to their suffering and to their coarsening, and commands those that fall under its authority to behave accordingly.

This is in line with (although it does not entail) what I will call the *traditional view of morality*. According to this view, morality is centrally concerned with persons. Although things that are not persons may have moral value (we may be morally required to care for the well-being of non-rational animals or for the preservation of the environment, for instance), persons have a particular kind of value that sets them apart as worthy of special moral attention. That is not to say that we can, for instance, violate the well-being of non-rational animals in order to satisfy any trivial interests of persons. The view, for instance, that we should not eat meat even if we enjoy it is perfectly compatible with the traditional view, as long as that restriction does not get in the way of a healthy, active and enjoyable life. The point of the traditional view is simply that the lives and the flourishing of persons is a privileged object of moral attention.

In the Kantian tradition, this view is fleshed out in the claim that persons are endowed with dignity, a kind of supreme value that makes them the appropriate object of respect. Persons, according to this tradition, should only be treated as ends, whereas beings that are not persons (such as non-rational animals or to inanimate objects) can be treated as means (even though there may be other moral considerations that require that we care for them in a particular manner).

This view is also reflected in common sense moral judgments. For instance, we think that if a person is being attacked by a wild animal, we have a moral reason to intervene somehow (perhaps even killing the animal, if there is no other option). In contrast, we ordinarily think that if a wild animal is attacked by another wild animal, then we may have no reason to intervene. Indeed, many would think it immoral to kill an animal to protect its prey, for instance. These judgments reflect the view that the life of a person is more valuable than the life of a non-rational animal. The same is true of the judgment that the Holocaust is a far more terrible tragedy than the systematic slaughter of livestock that takes place every day (a judgment that is perfectly compatible with the view that we should not tolerate the latter).

We have good reason to believe that some ethical realists accept the traditional view. Parfit, for instance, claims that “if we had to choose between the survival either of human beings or of some kind of beetle, our survival would, I believe, be more important” (2011b, p. 443). Given that “things matter only if we have reasons to care about them” (2011b, p. 269), the claim

that our survival is more important entails that we have better reasons to care for our survival and, therefore, that our survival is more valuable. Presumably, Parfit would make the same choice if he had to choose between our survival and, say, the survival of a species of monkey. So, it seems fair to say that Parfit believes that the lives of persons are more valuable than the lives of non-rational animals.

In a similar vein, Scanlon holds that even though “the pain of nonhuman animals is something we have reason to prevent and relieve, and failing to respond to this reason is a moral fault” (1998, p. 182), our actions toward persons are governed by a further class of reasons. We have reason to treat people with respect, where treating persons with respect involves treating them “only in ways that would be allowed by principles that they could not reasonably reject insofar as they, too, were seeking principles of mutual governance which other rational creatures could not reasonably reject.” (SCANLON, 1998, p. 106). Every reason we have to care for the well-being of non-rational animals is also a reason to care for the well-being of persons. But there are further reasons that govern our interactions with other people and that do not apply to non-rational animals. Morality, according to Scanlon, singles out persons as deserving special moral consideration.

Let us assume for now that the traditional view is on the right track: while morality requires care for non-persons, it is centrally concerned with the treatment of persons. The next step in articulating our problem is to note that the existence of persons is a contingent fact.

Persons are sensible and highly intelligent animals, with a peculiar set of characteristics. First, they are endowed with practical rationality, meaning they can identify reasons for action and act for those reasons. They are also capable of moral knowledge, that is, capable of distinguishing right from wrong, virtue from vice. As rational and moral beings, they are morally responsible for their actions. Any being that satisfies this description is bound to be extremely complex. Not only must one such being have an impressive assortment of cognitive abilities (such as causal reasoning, the capacity to manipulate abstract concepts, the capacity to comprehend and operate with counterfactuals, a theory of mind, etc.), it must also have a particular psychological profile. For instance, if FitzPatrick, an ethical realist, is correct about what it takes for one to be capable of moral knowledge, then being a person may require the right kind of emotional potentialities as well as a certain degree of emotional plasticity (FITZPATRICK, 2014, p. 902-903).

Persons, then, are a highly complex kind of being. And, therefore, the existence of persons is highly contingent.³

Now, let us return to robust ethical realism. According to this view, reality has two dimensions: the normative dimension (constituted by normative facts)⁴ and the physical dimension (constituted by physical facts and all the other natural facts that supervene on the physical). These dimensions are independent and isolated. On the one hand, the normative dimension is not determined nor affected by anything that goes on in the physical dimension. In particular, because normative facts are mind-independent, our beliefs and attitudes do not determine the normative facts. On the other hand, the normative facts that constitute the normative dimension are causally inert. Because they are non-natural and, therefore, non-physical and because the physical world is causally closed, they cannot produce any effects on the physical world. In particular, normative facts cannot in any way shape the physical world so as to produce the kind of being they deem valuable.⁵ Robust ethical realism also postulates a connection between moral facts and normative facts. If the traditional view of morality is correct, robust realism entails that it is a normative fact that persons are especially valuable.

But now we can see that, despite being isolated from each other, there is a striking match between the two dimensions of reality. The normative dimension singles out a specific kind of being as particularly valuable (persons) and exactly that kind of being happens to exist in the physical world against all

³ Fine-tuning arguments aim to show that if the values of certain physical constants were different, life would be impossible. If the existence of life itself is contingent, then so is the existence of persons. See the discussion of fine-tuning in section 3.1. See also HUSSAIN (2019, p. 12-13).

⁴ Talk of normative reality may not be welcomed by some robust normative realists. Parfit, for instance, holds that there are mind-independent normative truths, but that these truths have no ontological implication, meaning that they need not be part of the spatio-temporal world nor part of some non-spatio-temporal part of reality (PARFIT, 2011b, p. 486). And Scanlon holds that the conditions for something to exist are "domain-specific" in the sense that there are no conditions of existence that apply across all domains of inquiry (SCANLON, 2014, p. 22-27). The conditions for physical entities, numbers and normative relations to exist are different and there is not a sense of "the world" in which physical entities, numbers and normative relations are all part of *the world* (SCANLON, 2014, p.24). Despite these metaphysical reservations, both Parfit and Scanlon are normative realists who hold that there are normative truths that are independent of us and that we may be able to discover. I will use "normative reality" or "the normative dimension of reality" to refer to the set of all these truths or facts. What are the ontological consequences of asserting that a certain normative statement is true, or if there are any, is irrelevant to my argument.

⁵ Some realists challenge the view that non-natural normative facts are causally inert. See, for instance, SHAFER-LANDAU (2012, p. 27). Even he would agree, however, that non-natural facts cannot be directly causally responsible for the existence of a certain kind of being. As he sees things "the only thing that we might need moral facts to causally explain are our beliefs about them" (SHAFER-LANDAU, 2012, p. 28).

odds. A match between two features of reality that cannot be explained is a coincidence. Robust ethical realists lack the resources to provide an explanation here, since they are committed to the mind-independence and causal impotence of normative facts. So robust ethical realism entails that a striking coincidence took place. It simply happens to be the case that exactly the kind of being that the normative dimension focus on exists. I will refer to this as the *moral coincidence problem*.⁶

The problem here can be highlighted if we compare robust ethical realism to an analogous view: robust aesthetic realism. This is the view that there are beauty facts that are irreducible, mind-independent and causally inert. Suppose that it is a fact that the most beautiful thing that could exist is a unicorn, with white fur, sparkly eyes and a rainbow tail. The existence of such an animal is, of course, a highly contingent matter. Given that beauty facts are causally inert, they could not contribute to emergence of unicorns in the physical world. If unicorns happened to exist, there would be an amazing and unexplained match between the aesthetic and physical dimensions of reality. We would have to admit that the physical world simply happened to produce exactly the kind of being that, according to the eternal rules of beauty, is as beautiful as can be. We would, therefore, be facing an unexplained striking coincidence. In the same way, given robust ethical realism, it is an unexplained striking coincidence that the physical world happened to produce the kind of being that the normative dimension of reality deems especially valuable.

The moral coincidence is a problem for robust ethical realism, not a refutation of the view. Brute and unexplained coincidences are not impossible. But the fact is that coincidences put pressure in us to look for an explanation. We should opt for the theory that, among other things, best explains what needs explaining. If robust ethical realism is committed to a coincidence it cannot explain, that counts against it. How serious the problem posed by the moral coincidence is turns on how remarkable the coincidence is and on the ability of rival theories to explain it away. I turn to these issues after discussing,

⁶ HUSSAIN (2019) presents a very similar objection. He argues that normative demands apply to persons in such a way that if persons did not exist, normative demands would have no application. Normative demands require persons, and only persons, to act in a particular way or to have a particular attitude. If there were no persons, these demands, even if they existed would have no application. They would just sit there, "silently and irrelevantly" (HUSSAIN, 2019, p.14). Given that persons happen to exist, there is a match between the normative dimension of reality and its natural dimensions. Hussain's argument is supposed to apply to robust normative realism as such, not only to robust ethical realism, and does not presuppose what I called the traditional view of morality. The problem I am presenting is different on both accounts. It poses a problem for robust ethical realism even if we are happy to admit that there are mind-independent normative facts, but only on the assumption that the traditional view of morality is on the right track.

in the next two sub-sections, the relation between the problem I just presented and other similar problems.

3.1. The Fine-tuning Problem as a Model for the Moral Coincidence Problem

The moral coincidence problem consists on the claim that robust ethical realism is committed to a surprising coincidence: it is a coincidence that exactly the kind of being that are of special normative significance happens to exist, when it could just as well fail to exist. The coincidence is that there is a fortuitous match between the normative and the physical dimensions of reality. Why is that a *surprising* coincidence?

Compare the moral coincidence problem with the fine-tuning problem in cosmology. Our description of the laws of nature that govern the universe include constants, such as the gravitational constant or the mass of the electron. The values of these constants cannot be derived from our current physical theories. Rather they must be measured. They are, in that sense, arbitrary and, it seems, they could be different. The actual value of the constants, however, appear to be fine-tuned to permit the existence of life. In the vast space of the possible values these constants could take, the range of life-permitting values is rather narrow.⁷ The constants in our universe happen to fall in that range. It could be a coincidence. But many feel that that coincidence would be so surprising that we have reason to prefer a hypothesis that explains it away. Fine-tuning has been thought to support the Design Hypothesis (according to which the universe was created by a designer that fine-tuned the constants for life) or the Multiverse Hypothesis (according to there are many universes, varying randomly in the values of the fundamental constants, so that is not unlikely that there would exist at least one life-permitting universe) over the hypothesis that ours is the only, uncreated, universe.

Why is the fact that the constants in our universe have life-permitting values a surprising coincidence (given the supposition that our universe was not designed and is the only one that exist)? The answer is that for all we know, and in light of these suppositions, the possibility-space corresponding to the vast range of values these constants could exhibit is very large, and the possibility-space corresponding to the life-permitting values is, in comparison, extremely narrow. There are many ways the universe could have been, and in

⁷ See LEWIS and BARNES (2016) for a review of the many ways in which subtle changes to the value of the constants would be catastrophic for life.

the overwhelming majority of them the physical constants are not life-permitting.

The same could be said of the moral coincidence problem. Why is it a surprising coincidence that the normative and the physical dimension of reality happen to align? Because the possibility-space corresponding to the many ways the universe could have been is very large, and the possibility-space corresponding to the possibilities in which there are persons (and so, in which the kind of being that is especially significant from the standpoint of normativity does exist) is, in comparison, very narrow. There are many ways the universe could have been, and in the overwhelming majority of them there is no match between the normative and the physical dimensions of reality (that is, the kind of being that according to robust realists is of special normative significance does not exist).

One way in which to understand the fine-tuning problem is this: given that the possibility-space corresponding to the life-permitting values is very narrow, we should ascribe a very low probability to the possibility that the value of the constants in our universe is life-permitting (assuming that our universe is uncreated). If an alternative hypothesis, such as the Design Hypothesis or the Multiverse Hypothesis, renders that possibility more probable, then we have reason to prefer it.

This proposal faces some serious problems. The ascription of low probability to the possibility that the values of the physical constants is life-permitting relies on the *Principle of Indifference*, according to which in the absence of any relevant evidence, agents should ascribe equal probability to all the possible outcomes under consideration. The problem is that the Principle of Indifference is widely rejected and, when we are dealing with an infinite range of possibilities (as is the case in the fine-tuning problem), it leads to troublesome results.⁸

I do not intend to address controversial issues in the philosophy probability here. I am content to hold that if there is a sense in which the fine-tuning of the fundamental physical constants to life-permitting values amounts to a striking coincidence, then robust ethical realism is committed to a striking coincidence in the same sense. I admit that if there is no fine-tuning problem, then the moral coincidence problem can also be dissolved. That, however, is enough of a problem for the robust realist. One can escape the moral coincidence problem by showing that there is no fine-tuning problem, but if

⁸ See KOPERSKI (2005) for a discussion the Normalization problem and Coarse-tuning problem. See COLLINS (2009) for a defense of a restricted form of the principle of indifference.

that is what it takes, then the challenge faced by the realist is serious enough to be called a *bona fide* problem.⁹

3.2. Similar Objections

I believe it will be helpful to distinguish the moral coincide problem from similar objections to normative realism that appeal to remarkable coincidences.

Consider first the evolutionary debunking argument put forward by Street (2006). She holds that according to a plausible scientific account of the origins of some of our central normative convictions they are the product of an evolutionary process that is insensible to normative truth (in such a way that it would produce the same normative convictions even if they were false) and that, therefore, it would be an incredible stroke of luck if these convictions happened to match the mind-independent normative truth.

This is not the place to discuss the merits of Street's argument. What I want to emphasize is that while both the evolutionary debunking argument and the moral coincidence problem claim that robust ethical realism postulates the occurrence of an amazing coincidence, the point in the robust ethical realists' worldview at which these coincidences come up is different in each case. According to the evolutionary debunking argument, to the extent that robust ethical realists hold that our normative convictions are not hopelessly off track, they must hold that there is an astonishing coincidence between the convictions that are produced by truth-insensitive evolutionary process and the normative truth – they simply happen to align. The match here is between our beliefs and the normative facts. In contrast, according to the moral coincidence problem, there is a match between the content of normative facts and the kind of beings that happen to exist, regardless of what our beliefs happen to be.

With this distinction in view, we can see that the standard reply to the evolutionary debunking argument fails to address the moral coincidence problem. The standard reply consists in denying the debunker's claim that evolutionary pressures had an extensive, thoroughgoing influence over our normative beliefs. Robust realists that take this path deny that debunkers have successfully shown that most of our normative beliefs, or even our most central normative beliefs, are the product of evolutionary pressures. They argue that while evolutionary pressures had some effect on our fund of normative beliefs, our current normative beliefs reflect the influence of forms of moral reflection that are guided by moral facts.

⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to these issues.

According to these philosophers, our current understanding of our evolutionary history is perfectly compatible with the view that evolution did not directly produced most of our normative beliefs but rather equipped us with the raw materials necessary for the development of a moral capacity that reliably tracks moral facts – in exactly the same way in which evolution did not directly equipped us with mathematical or modal beliefs, for example, but rather provided us with the raw materials necessary for the development of a capacity to get to know mathematical and modal facts.¹⁰

Suppose for the sake of argument that this reply is successful. If that was the case, we would be in a position to deny the debunker's claim that our normative beliefs are the product of a truth-insensitive process. Once we deny that claim, there is no longer any ground for the claim that it would take an incredible stroke of luck for our normative beliefs to align with the normative truth. The coincidence the debunking argument was supposed to bring to light fades away. However, the match between normative facts and the kind of beings that exist (to which the moral coincidence problem points) would remain unexplained. Nothing has changed in the worldview defended by robust realists. It is still a view according to which the kind of being that the normative dimension of reality singles out as especially valuable simply happens to exist. Successfully replying to the evolutionary debunking argument is not enough to do away with the moral coincidence problem.

The moral coincidence problem should also be distinguished from Bedke's cosmic coincidence argument. Much like the debunker, Bedke argues that given robust realism it would take an unlikely cosmic coincidence for our normative beliefs to align with the normative truth. His argument is roughly the following: our normative beliefs are part of the physical world; given the causal closure of the physical realm, our normative beliefs are fully physically caused; according to non-naturalism, normative facts are causally impotent and do not cause anything in the physical world; therefore, our normative beliefs would correspond to the normative truth only if there exists a cosmic coincidence between the causal order and non-causal facts (BEDKE, 2009, p. 190).

There are obvious similarities between the cosmic coincidence objection and the moral coincidence objection. According to former, it would take a massive coincidence for the physical world to produce in us beliefs that correspond to the normative truth. According to the latter, it would take a striking coincidence for the physical world to produce exactly the kind of

¹⁰ For replies to the evolutionary debunking argument along these lines see, for instance, PARFIT (2011, p. 520), SHAFER-LANDAU (2012), FITZPATRICK (2014a and 2014b) and CUNEO (2018).

being that has a distinctive moral value. But there are important differences as well. First, Bedke (as the evolutionary debunker) is pointing to a coincidence between our beliefs and normative truth. I am pointing to a coincidence between normative truth and the kind of being that happens to exist. Second, Bedke's cosmic coincidence argument makes no assumption about the content of the normative truth. The moral coincidence problem is grounded on an assumption about the content of the normative truth that is derived from the traditional view of morality. On account of these differences, some replies to Bedke's cosmic coincidence argument miss the target when it comes to the moral coincidence problem.

For instance, Shafer-Landau (2012, p. 29-30) replies that Bedke's argument proves too much: it shows that a miracle would be necessary for our modal or mathematical beliefs to be true (for these are also non-physical, mind-independent truths). Regardless of whether this reply is cogent or not, it fails to address the moral coincidence problem. The moral coincidence problem does not generalize to modal or numerical beliefs because modal and mathematical truths do not focus on or single out as particularly important one specific kind of being that could fail to exist. That is why I earlier emphasized that the moral coincidence problem applies only to robust *ethical* realism and not to robust *normative* realism as such. If one holds only that there are mind-independent, non-natural normative facts, without making the further assumption that these facts single out persons as particularly valuable, then the objection has no force.

Enoch offers a different reply to Bedke's argument. He agrees that if we are to avoid normative skepticism, we must accept that there is a correlation between our normative beliefs and normative truth. If robust ethical realism cannot explain this correlation, then it is committed to an objectionable coincidence. The problem, then, is to explain the correlation. It could easily be explained if we accepted either that normative truths are causally responsible for our normative beliefs or that our normative beliefs are responsible for the normative truths. Both options are unavailable to the realist who takes normative truths to be mind-independent and causally inert. The solution, Enoch holds, is to appeal to a third-factor to explain the correlation. Roughly, Enoch's proposed explanation is this: evolution pushes us in the direction of normative beliefs that are adaptive; the belief that our survival as well as the survival of our kin is good is adaptive; therefore, evolution pushes us in the direction of those beliefs; it is a normative fact that survival is indeed a good thing; the normative beliefs that evolutionary pressures tend to produce are, thus, approximately true; these beliefs may provide the starting point for

reasoning processes that will get us progressively closer to the normative truth; so it is not an accident that our normative beliefs happen to be approximately true (ENOCH, 2011, p. 165-175). If we add that the normative truth that survival is good is a necessary truth and that it is no accident that evolution “aims” at survival, then we have a good case for the claim that there is no striking coincidence here.

Again, this reply fails to address the moral coincidence problem. Even if Enoch is right in holding that given that persons exist there are evolutionary pressures that pushes their beliefs in the direction of normative truth, it still is an accident that persons happen to exist at all. There still is an unexplained match between the content of normative truth and the kind of beings there are.

4. Reducing the Coincidence

As noted above, how problematic the unexplained match between the normative and physical dimensions of reality is will depend on how massive one takes that coincidence to be. Can realists lessen the coincidence in any way?

Realists usually hold that normative facts are necessary. One may think that there can only be coincidences between contingent facts and, therefore, that the realist is off the hook. But that is not the case. Consider the evolutionary debunking argument discussed in the previous section. The realist cannot avoid it by simply claiming that normative facts are necessary. It would still be a coincidence if truth-insensitive evolutionary processes led to normative beliefs that correspond to necessary normative facts. The same goes for Bedke’s objection: it would be a coincidence if the physical world happened to be so organized as to produce beings with normative beliefs that correspond to necessary normative truths. And the same is true of the moral coincidence problem. Even if the normative truth is necessary, it would be a coincidence if the actual world happened to be one in which beings that are particularly valuable exist.

To be sure, if realists took normative truths to be contingent the problem would be deeper still. In that case robust ethical realism would be committed to the view that the actual world is one in which persons happen to have a peculiar kind of value and happen to exist, even though they could have failed to exist and could have failed to have a peculiar kind of value. What an astonishing coincidence! Taking one of the members of the pair to be necessary diminishes the coincidence, but does not make it negligible.

Realists could explain away the coincidence by showing that the normative facts that are about persons can be derived from other, more fundamental normative facts that do not highlight persons as a special moral category. Suppose, for instance, that the only fundamental, mind-independent normative truth is that anyone has reason to do whatever he or she would decide to do after deliberating in a procedurally correct manner in light of the relevant information – so that all reasons were internal in Williams’ sense (WILLIAMS, 1981). If normative truths corresponding to moral demands could be derived from this fundamental truth, realists could plausibly hold that the normative dimension of reality does not single out persons as particularly important and, therefore, that there is no coincidence.

One problem with this suggestion is that it is unlikely that normative truths corresponding to every moral demand could be derived from such an impoverished set of fundamental normative truths. In particular, it seems very likely that some people will not be motivated to act morally after engaging flawlessly in fully informed procedural deliberation.¹¹ If that proved to be the case, moral rationalism (one of the constituents of robust ethical realism) would be false. If this suggestion was the only way in which realists could react to the moral coincidence objection, it would have already succeeded in presenting a serious problem for robust realism. It would have shown that it is not possible to disentangle the defense of robust ethical realism from the task (which many take to hopeless) of deriving moral reasons from non-moral, purely procedural starting points.

Another problem with the Williams-inspired suggestion is that even if normative truths corresponding to every moral demand could be derived from such a humble starting point, this particular characterization of the normative reality would still be inimical to robust ethical realism. According to the suggestion under consideration, all normative truths, with the exception of the fundamental one, are mind-dependent. In particular, they depend on what our motivations would be in a hypothetical situation. Given that according to robust ethical realism moral facts are tied to corresponding normative truths,

¹¹ Some are more optimistic. According to Smith, for instance, the fact that historically we have advanced in the direction of moral agreement give us some reason to believe that we would all have moral desires in conditions of full rationality (SMITH, 1994, p.187). The kind of agreement to which Smith points, however, is more readily explained in terms of non-rational social and cultural influence than by the hypothesis that our modes of practical reflection are gradually approximating the standard of full rationality and that this is leading to a convergence in desire. See SOBEL (1999) and ENOCH (2007b) for a sustained criticism of Smith’s optimistic view.

that would make the moral demands that apply to us mind-dependent as well. But that is something robust ethical realists deny.¹²

Another option available to the realist is to simply reject the traditional view of morality and to hold that persons are not of particular moral importance. One could hold, for instance, that what matters morally are sentient beings, in particular their pain and pleasure. Persons are no more valuable than other sentient beings. That would reduce the coincidence (assuming that the emergence of sentient life is not as unlikely as the emergence of persons), but would not do away with it completely. There would still be a match between the kind of being the normative dimension of reality favors and the kind of being that exists. But maybe that coincidence would be tolerable.

As far as I can see, this path is open for the realist. Some realist may even see the argument of this paper as providing reasons to move away from the traditional view of morality towards a more encompassing, less speciesist view. Although the moral coincidence creates a problem even for this brand of realism, its main target is the combination of robust ethical realism with a traditional view of morality. Thus restricting the scope of the objection in no way renders it trivial. As noted in section 3, realists such as Parfit and Scanlon are committed to the traditional view and would consider its rejection a steep price to be paid in defense of ethical realism. At any rate, it should come as quite a surprise if commitment to robust ethical realism were to lead us to reject the view that persons are particularly important from a moral point of view.

5. Rival Theories Avoid the Problem

Even if we accept that robust ethical realism is committed to a remarkable coincidence, that will only be a problem to the extent that rival theories can explain the coincidence away.

The coincidence occurs because realism combines the view that there are moral and normative facts with the view that these facts are mind-independent. Any theory that denies the existence of normative and moral facts (such as error theories and some brands of non-cognitivism) avoid the problem. If there are no normative and moral facts, then there can be no coincidence between the content of these facts and the kind of beings that

¹² Indeed, this kind of subjectivism regarding our reasons is explicitly denied by many robust ethical realists. See SHAFER-LANDAU (2003, Ch. 7), FITZPATRICK (2008, p.180-1) and PARFIT (2011a, Ch. 3).

exist. Any theory that holds that normative and moral facts are mind-dependent, such as the form of metaethical constructivism defended by Street (2010), can also avoid the coincidence. If it really is a normative fact that persons matter, that is promptly explained by the fact that we care about persons. If we do not have the right kind of attitudes to enable that explanation, then it is not a normative fact that persons matter.

Ethical naturalists also have the resources to explain away the coincidence. According to ethical naturalism, there are moral facts and these facts are identical to some natural facts N. Some versions of ethical naturalism hold that moral facts have no normative implications. These views completely avoid the problem of moral coincidence because they sever the connection between moral and normative facts. That seems to be the case with Copp's view. According to Copp, the property of being morally wrong is identical to the natural property of being prohibited by the moral code the currency of which in a society S would best contribute to S's ability to meet its needs (COPP, 2001, p. 28). Settling the question of whether an action is wrong in this sense, however, does not settle the question of how one should act (COPP, 2007, p. 303-304). Moral considerations tell us how we should morally act, not how we should act *period*. In other words, morality is not normative in the reason-implying sense. And if moral facts are not tied to corresponding normative facts, then the moral coincidence problem does not arise.

Other versions of naturalism avoid the problem because they take normative facts to be mind-dependent. For instance, if one holds that what an agent has reason to do is that which will promote her own desires (see, for instance, SCHROEDER, 2007), then one has reduced normative facts to natural facts. According to this view, however, what we have reason to do is a function of what our attitudes are. And if normative facts are not mind-independent, then the moral coincidence problem does not arise.

Yet other versions of ethical naturalism appeal to a "rigidification" strategy. According to these views, which natural facts N moral facts are identical with is fixed by our use of moral terms, which is guided by our actual attitudes. Moral facts are mind-independent, however, in the sense that even if our attitudes were completely different, moral facts would still be identical to facts N because these are the facts which are picked out by our actual use of moral terms. This is Boyd's view (1995). The same strategy could, in principle, be applied to normative facts. Whether or not the resulting view would deserve to be called a form of robust realism is a controversial matter. The fact is, however, that the moral coincidence could be explained away by reference to the attitudes that fix the identity between normative and natural facts.

Finally, a version of ethical naturalism according to which moral facts are natural facts and have normative implications and normative facts are mind-independent and non-natural qualifies as a version of robust ethical realism and is vulnerable to the moral coincidence objection. Shifting to the view that mind-independent normative facts are causally efficacious could help, but only if the facts in question help explaining the emergence of persons. The problem is that the usual candidates for naturalistic reductions of normative facts are poorly fit for this task. Facts about what rational beings would desire or do in hypothetical circumstances, or about the relation of certain actions to the agent's individual good or to the needs of society, could very well contribute to the explanation of some of our beliefs, attitudes and practices, but they can hardly explain why persons exist.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that given a traditional view of morality, robust ethical realism is committed to an unexplained striking coincidence. If persons are of special moral importance and moral facts are tied to corresponding normative facts, then the normative dimension of reality singles out persons as a special kind of being. Since persons happen to exist there is a match between the content of the normative facts and the kind of beings there are. Given that normative facts are mind-independent and causally inert, there is no way to explain that match. So robust ethical realism is committed to striking coincidence.

This is a problem for that view. If rival theories can explain the coincidence away, they have an advantage over robust realism at this point. How serious that problem is will depend on how committed one is to the traditional view of morality and on how unlikely one takes the existence of persons to be. If one is happy to reject the view that persons are particularly important from a moral point of view or if one is prepared to hold that the existence of persons is not an unlikely accident, one can largely avoid the problem. Suffice to say that defending any of these options is quite a formidable task.

References

BEDKE, M. S. "Intuitive Non-Naturalism Meets Cosmic Coincidence". In: *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 90, 2009, p. 188-209.

- BOYD, R. "How to be a Moral Realist". In: SAYRE-MCCORD, G. (ed.). *Essays on Moral Realism*. Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 181-228.
- COLLINS, R. "The Teleological Argument: An Exploration of the Fine-Tuning of the Universe". In: CRAIG, W.L. & MORELAND, J.P. (eds). *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 202-281.
- COPP, D. "Realist-Expressivism: A Neglected Option for Moral Realism". In: *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 18 (2), 2001, p. 1-43.
- _____. *Morality in a Natural World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- CUNEO, T. "The Evolutionary Challenge to Knowing Moral Reasons". In: STAR, D. (ed). *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- ENOCH, D. "An Outline of an Argument for Robust Metanormative Realism". In: SHAFER-LANDAU (ed.). *Oxford Studies in Metaethics – Volume 2*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007a, p. 21-50.
- _____. "Rationality, Coherence, Convergence: a Critical Comment on Michael Smith's Ethics and the a Priori". In: *Philosophical Books*, 48(2), 2007b, p. 99-108.
- _____. *Taking Morality Seriously*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- FITZPATRICK, W. "Robust Ethical Realism, Non-Naturalism, and Normativity". In SHAFER-LANDAU (ed). *Oxford Studies in Metaethics - Volume 3*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 159-205.
- _____. "Debunking evolutionary debunking of ethical realism". In: *Philosophical Studies*, 172, 2014a, p. 883-904.
- _____. "Why There is No Darwinian Dilemma for Ethical Realism". In: BERGMANN, M. & JAIN, P. (eds). *Challenges to Moral and Religious Belief: Disagreement and Evolution*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014b, p. 237-255.
- HUSSAIN, N. J. Z. "The Ontic Cosmic Coincidence Problem for Non-Naturalism About Morality". In: SHAFER-LANDAU, R. (ed). *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Vol. 16*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- KOPERSKI, J. "Should We Care About Fine-Tuning?". In: *British Journal of the Philosophy of Science*, 56(2), 2005, p. 303-319.
- MACKIE, J. L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London: Penguin, 1991.
- SCANLON, T. M. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- _____. *Being Realistic about Reasons*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

- SCHROEDER, M. *Slaves of the Passions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- SHAFER-LANDAU, R. *Moral Realism: A Defense*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- _____. “Evolutionary Debunking, Moral Realism and Moral Knowledge”. In: *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 7, 2012.
- SMITH, M. *The Moral Problem*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.
- SOBEL, D. “Do the desires of rational agents converge?”. In: *Analysis*, 59(3), 1999, p. 137-147.
- STREET, S. “A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value”. In: *Philosophical Studies*, 127, 2006, p. 109-166.
- _____. “Reply to Copp: Naturalism, normativity, and the varieties of realism worth worrying about”. In: *Philosophical Issues*, 18, 2008, p. 207-228.
- PARFIT, D. *On What Matters – Volume 1*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011a.
- _____. *On What Matters – Volume 2*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011b.
- WILLIAMS, B. “Internal and External Reasons”. In: WILLIAMS, B. *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p.101-113.

Email: rafael.vog@gmail.com

Recebido: 09/2021

Aprovado: 06/2022