THE REGRESS ARGUMENT FOR MORAL SKEPTICISM

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Introduction

An important epistemological question about morality is whether we can be justified in believing any moral claim. In this paper, I will present and explain the regress argument for moral justification skepticism. Afterward, I will present one possible objection to the argument. I conclude at the end of this paper that the regress argument, while valid, is probably not sound and therefore does not successfully undermine moral justification.

The Infinite Regress Argument

The infinite regress argument is an argument for general skepticism, but Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has adapted the argument to morality and suggests that "If the problems raised by these arguments cannot be solved at least in morality, then we cannot be justified in believing any moral claims" (9). This argument contains a series of conditionals whose consequents comprise disjunctions. By applying the rules of disjunctive syllogism and *modus tollens*, the argument is intended to show that none of the ways in which a person can be justified in believing a moral claim works. Sinnott-Armstrong's clear and concise formulation of the infinite regress argument taken from his paper "Moral Skepticism and Justification" is as follows:

(1) If any person S is justified in believing any moral claim that p, then S must be justified either inferentially or noninferentially....
(2) No person S is ever noninferentially justified in believing any moral claim that p....
(3) If any person S is justified in believing any moral claim that p, then S must be justified inferentially....
(4) If any person S is inferentially justified in believing any moral claim that p, then S must be justified either by inference with some moral premises or by inference without any moral premises....
(5) No person S is ever justified in believing any moral claim that p by an inference without any moral premise....
(6) If any person S is justified in believing any moral claim that p, then S must be justified by an inference with some moral premise....
(7) No person S is ever justified in believing a moral claim that p by an inference with a moral premise unless S is also justified in believing that moral premise itself...
(8) If any person S is justified in believing any moral claim that p, then S must be justified by a chain of inferences that either goes on infinitely or includes p itself as an essential premise....
(9) No person S is ever justified in believing any moral claim that p by a chain of inferences that includes p as an essential premise....
(10) No person S is ever justified in believing any moral claim that p by a chain of inferences that goes on infinitely....
(11) No person is ever justified in believing any moral claim.... (9-14)

Premise 1) claims one can be justified inferentially or noninferentially. For our purposes in this paper, inferential justification simply means S has a justified (moral) belief that p, if i) S has some further beliefs q, r, etc., and ii) S has inferred p from q, r, etc. (Everitt and Fisher 60). Other conditions are necessary to complete a satisfactory conceptual analysis of inferential justification, but here it matters only that S does or could infer p from some other beliefs S has. In other words, S is inferentially justified in believing her moral claim that p if S can infer p from some other beliefs S has that imply p. A person S has a noninferentially justified moral belief that p, if and only if S is justified, but not inferentially, in believing that p (Sinnott-Armstrong 9). This simply means that S is directly justified: S does not infer her belief p from any other beliefs. Direct justification can come from "a nondoxastic perceptual or emotional state" (Sinnott-Armstrong 9), or the belief p might be self-evident and require no further justification. With this distinction between the two types of justification formulated, premise 1) seems to be true because either justification will require some inference or it will not. A person must be justified either inferentially or noninferentially in order to be justified in believing p, but the moral skeptic denies that either way of justification is plausible.

Premise 2) denies the possibility that any moral claims are directly justified. A moral claim requires some sort of reason behind it, if it is to be believed. For example, Jennifer believes it is morally wrong to lie, but she must have some reasons for believing this moral claim, or she is not justified in believing it. The justification for the belief does not come from the moral claim "Lying is morally wrong" itself because nothing about the terms in the claim provides justification for the belief. The claim cannot be defended in the same way that a claim about triangles having three sides can be. The term "lying" does not imply any moral wrongdoing: It means something along the lines of "deliberately stating a false proposition with the intention to deceive." However, it is not clear that an act of "deliberately stating a false proposition with the intention to deceive" can be judged morally wrong on the basis of this description. Someone can challenge Jennifer's belief that lying is morally wrong by producing potential counterexamples in which "deliberately stating a false proposition with the intention to deceive" is morally permissible or even obligatory (such as the classic example of lying to the Nazis about harboring Jews in one's home).[1] If there is nothing different or "special about this moral belief, then the same point applies to every moral belief" (Sinnott-Armstrong 10).

From premises 1) and 2) and the rule of disjunctive syllogism, the intermediate conclusion stated in premise 3) can be drawn. If noninferential justification fails, then if S is justified in believing p at all, S must be inferentially justified. As premise 4) states, the inference S makes from other beliefs to her moral belief p will either contain moral premises or it will not. The moral skeptic denies both options.

The moral skeptic holds that inferences from nonmoral premises to moral premises are never valid because they lack a "bridge principle" that connects nonmoral claims to moral ones. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord puts it this way: "Take whichever nonevaluative premises you like concerning how things are, were, or will be, and it seems (Hume

suggested) that no conclusion follows concerning how they ought to be, absent the aid of an evaluative premise" (150). For example, Sam claims "Ryan ought to refrain from that act of murder because it will bring unnecessary pain and suffering into the world." Sam cannot validly infer this "ought" claim from the "is" claims, or facts, about the circumstances without some sort of moral bridge principle that says something along the lines of "If an act A brings unnecessary pain and suffering into the world, then it is morally wrong." Underlying Sam's reasoning for believing his claim is a moral principle that says such acts are wrong, so premise 5) is true.

Given premises 3), 4), and 5), the intermediate conclusion stated in premise 6) can be inferred. Because moral conclusions cannot be drawn from nonmoral premises, they must be drawn from an argument with at least one moral premise. However, not all moral beliefs will serve as justificatory premises, because any moral premises in the inference justifying a moral claim p must also be justified, as premise 7) claims. For example, Luke believes it is morally offensive that Jennifer is his boss, and he infers this from his belief that it is morally objectionable for women to be in positions of authority over men. The only way Luke's belief about Jennifer is justified is if his belief about women in positions of authority is justified. Yet, the only way this claim is justified is if it is justified by another claim, and so on. Here, the infinite regress looms.

The moral skeptic claims that the sequence of justification can take only two forms, as stated in premise 8): "If any person S is justified in believing any moral claim that p, then S must be justified by a chain of inferences that either goes on infinitely or includes p itself as an essential premise." Of course, the skeptic has already denied that p might be justified by some self-evident claim that requires no further justification in premise 2). Because p may not be justified directly, p must be justified either by an infinite number of justified claims or by a circular set of beliefs.

The moral skeptic denies that justification can be circular in premise 9): "No person S is ever justified in believing any moral claim that p by a chain of inferences that includes p as an essential premise." If p is an essential premise in the argument trying to prove p as its conclusion, then that argument is circular. The premise provides no support for the conclusion because the conclusion is merely a restatement of the premise. This quite obviously does not provide adequate justification for a belief.

The moral skeptic also denies that a person S is ever justified in believing any moral claim that p by a chain of inferences that goes on infinitely [premise 10)]. It seems as though justification for some moral claim p could go on infinitely, but that we could never know if any such claims were justified. There seems to be a difference between the proposition p being infinitely justified and a person S being infinitely justified in believing p. It is plausible that p can be justified by an infinite chain of inferences, although S may never have infinite justification for believing p. This is because there is an obvious, practical limit on how far back one can go in a chain of justification. If one cannot see the entire chain of justification, then one can never *know* that one is justified in believing p. An unjustified claim in the chain beyond the reach of our knowledge would undermine the justification of the entire chain, "since no belief can be justified by

appeal to an unjustified belief" (Leite 397). So if one is concerned with a person S being justified, then it appears as though premise 10) is plausible.

From premises 1) through 10), the conclusion 11), "No person is ever justified in believing any moral claim." can be inferred. If no person is ever justified in believing any moral claim, then moral justification skepticism is true. This is a valid argument, but a number of different theorists attack premises 2), 5), 7), 9), and 10).[2]

The Contractarian Objection and Counter-objections

One possible way to justify moral claims is moral contractarianism, which is "the attempt to justify morality, or part of morality...by reference to agreement" (Morris 216). Christopher Morris formulates the view partially as follows:

> (1) There is a norm N which is justified and which, given the relevant facts, implies p.
> A norm N is justified if:
> (2) All bound by N have (sufficient) reason to endorse it....
> Condition 2 is true if:
> (2.1) N would be the object of a rational, nonmoral, hypothetical collective choice of all bound by N. (224-225)[3]

Conditions 1 and 2 are nonmoral, though they are not nonnormative (Morris 227), which is crucial to the account because it attempts to address how moral conclusions can be inferred validly from nonmoral premises. Moral contractarians hold, contrary to premise 5), "No person S is ever justified in believing any moral claim that p by an inference without any moral premise," that valid inferences can be made from nonmoral premises to a moral conclusion.

For example, suppose that there is some norm N that states "Do not kill unless you do so in self-defense or to protect innocent or deserving lives." Norm N, according to moral contractarians, implies the moral claim p "It is morally wrong for Claire to kill Paul," given the relevant facts that Claire is not acting in self-defense or to protect the lives of others but rather to collect Paul's life insurance. A collection of rational agents has chosen hypothetically to endorse N as a norm, so all those bound by N have a reason to accept it, namely that it has been chosen by rational agents. Thus, according to the contractarian account, the claim p "It is morally wrong for Claire to kill Paul" is justified.

Aside from the quagmire of problems posed by what condition 2.1) means, the skeptic will respond that a justified norm N along with the relevant facts does not imply the moral claim p.[4] In order to make a valid inference from N and the relevant facts to the moral claim p, a moral bridge principle that states "An act A is morally wrong if and only if it is forbidden by a justified norm N" is necessary. In the example above, the justified norm N about killing, along with the relevant fact that Claire is not acting in self defense or to protect the lives of others, does not imply that it is morally wrong for Claire to kill Paul.

Because N is a normative nonmoral claim justified by hypothetical, rational agreement, it implies that Claire should not kill Paul, but it does not imply that if she were to do so it would be morally wrong. One might ask why Claire should not kill Paul, and the response is that Claire would violate a norm justified by rational, hypothetical agreement. However, one might push the issue and ask why Claire should not violate the norm. A plausible response seems to be that to violate the norm would be morally wrong, but this claim—namely, the violation of justified norms is morally wrong—requires justification. A moral bridge principle is necessary to make the inferential jump from nonmoral premises to a moral conclusion, but this principle must also be justified. If a moral bridge principle is necessary to make the inference from N to p valid, then the contractarian account does not successfully undermine premise 5) because the inference includes a moral premise that also requires justification.

The contractarian might respond by refining the contractarian account slightly and attacking premise 2) of the infinite regress argument. A contractarian might admit that the skeptic is right in thinking that there are no valid inferences from nonmoral premises to a moral conclusion, in which case the contractarian account does not undermine premise 5). However, the contractarian can respond that the moral bridge principle, such as "An act A is morally wrong if and only if it is forbidden by a justified norm N," is analytically true, or true by virtue of the meanings of the terms in the claim. This poses an objection to premise 2) No person S is ever noninferentially justified in believing any moral claim that p.

If the moral bridge principle "An act A is morally wrong if and only if it is forbidden by a justified norm N" is analytically true, then the contractarian account poses a serious problem for the infinite regress argument. The contractarian account only requires the direct justification of one moral bridge principle, or a handful at most. This noninferentially justified bridge principle in conjunction with a set of justified norms could possibly justify moral claims.

However, what exactly is entailed by "rational, nonmoral, hypothetical collective choice" is widely disputed. The justification of moral claims on the contractarian account relies on an adequate formulation of the conditions of the contract, as Sinnott-Armstrong points out: "…anyone who wants to deny those moral beliefs can (with equal justification) deny those aspects of the background theories that are needed to yield those moral beliefs" (12). The moral justification skeptic will challenge the plausibility of the contract used to justify some moral claims in order to deny justification of those claims; however, if there is an acceptable contractarian theory, then moral contractarianism may provide justification for at least some moral beliefs.

Conclusion

The infinite regress argument for moral justification skepticism is valid, but it does not seem to be sound. One possible way to justify moral claims is the contractarian account of justification presented above. Other possible theories of moral justification include foundationalism, coherentism, or infinitism. Among the competing theories of epistemic

justification, it appears as though a better-developed version of one of them or a hybrid version that bears the strengths of some combination of these theories could adequately account for the justification of moral claims. While all of these theories of justification encounter some problems, they are larger problems in epistemology that may not have yet been answered satisfactorily. Developments in theories of justification will better equip epistemologists and moral theorists to challenge the regress problem for moral justification skepticism.[5]

NOTES

1. Kant argues that the claim "Lying is morally wrong" can be known *a priori* to be necessarily true. In his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant describes an intellectual principle of morality by which lying is necessarily wrong regardless of circumstances:

> The second *systema morale* is the intellectual one. On this, the philosopher judges that the principle of morality has a ground in the understanding, and can be apprehended completely *a priori*. For example: You are not to lie...if it rests on a principle that resides in the understanding, then the injunction is absolute: You are not to lie, whatever the circumstances may be. (27:254)

In all of his disparaging remarks on liars and lying, "Kant does not distinguish between lies, or different circumstances in which lies are told. All lies are uniformly and equally condemned" (Mahon 654). Mahon argues that Kant arrives at the perfect duty to others not to lie by means of the Universal Law and Humanity as an End in Itself formulations of the Categorical Imperative. Both of these formulations fail to generate a perfect duty to others not to lie. For example, the maxim "'When I believe that I am being lied to by another person I shall lie to the other person, in order to counteract the intended results of her lie', can be made into a universal law" (Mahon 675). According to Mahon, the idea is that liars only lie to people they think believe are being told the truth. A liar would not lie to a person who knew she was being deceived by the liar. It follows that a liar would consider the generalized version of the above maxim irrelevant to him because he would not believe his victim believes she is being deceived and would counteract with her own lie. Since the maxim can be universalized, it is ethically permissible to lie to liars, according to the Universal Law formulation of the Categorical Imperative. Mahon formulates other examples demonstrating that both formulations of the Categorical Imperative fail to demonstrate that lying is always wrong, and therefore concludes that there is no perfect duty to others not to lie (684). See Mahon's article for a full discussion of this issue.

2. Also see Sinnott-Armstrong's article for the main objections against each of these premises.

3. Morris provides a third condition as a requirement for moral internalism, but it is controversial. He admits that other contractarians may not accept it, and so for simplicity and clarity I have omitted it.

4. I will assume condition 2.1) is plausible and has been fulfilled.

5. I wrote this paper as an undergraduate student at New Mexico State University. I would like to thank the NMSU philosophy department faculty, particularly Professors Jean-Paul Vessel and Timothy Cleveland, for their invaluable assistance.

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