

Moral Fixed Points, Rationality and the ‘Why Be Moral?’ Question

It is part of philosophical lore that any moral theory will have to answer the perennial skeptical question ‘why be moral?’.¹ The question poses an especially acute challenge for moral theory because, even after we sketch a particular moral theory, it flatly asks: why care? Why bother to be moral and do the right thing? If a moral theory fails to address the question, then the theory is practically useless because the skeptical ‘why be moral?’ question saps its practical, normative significance. This is the case because we would fail to do the right thing, according to the dictates of any moral theory, if we care little about morality (and doing the right thing) and this would eventually culminate to moral paralysis. Thus, the challenge of the ‘why be moral?’ question threatens to rob moral theory of its normative significance.

In a recent paper, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) argued that there are moral conceptual truths that are substantive and non-vacuous in content, what they called ‘moral fixed points’, such as that ‘It is pro tanto wrong to humiliate others simply for pleasure’. Of course, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014:406-7) are sensitive to the ‘why be moral?’ challenge but punt a response for the moral fixed points proposal elsewhere. Understandably, they are more interested in developing the rudiments of their theory rather than giving detailed responses to every single objection that can be run against the theory.

Killoren (2016), however, has revisited the old ‘why be moral?’ question and developed ‘an argument from normative irrelevance’ against the moral fixed points proposal. He suggests that the moral fixed points give us no normative reason to care about morality (and the right thing to do) and, therefore, they are normatively irrelevant. He concedes that his argument is inconclusive, but thinks that when combined with other

¹ The question is virtually as old as philosophy itself. It is, arguably, found in some form or other in Plato’s *Republic*. For discussion of the problem, see Sinnott-Armstrong (2015). I will understand the ‘why be moral?’ question as one of asking for normative reasons for moral action, an understanding which is both prominent and consonant with Killoren’s (2016) concerns. In other words, what normative reasons do we have for being moral and doing the right thing? Shafer-Landau’s (2009) defense of categorical reasons implicates a realist response to the problem that coheres with the moral fixed points proposal. According to Shafer-Landau (2009), we have categorical normative reasons for moral action that, all other things equal, we cannot ignore without blame. So, we may suggest that, all other things equal, we have categorical normative reasons to be moral (and do the right thing) that we cannot ignore without blame. This normative principle might be a moral fixed point *itself*. The response developed here can be seen as an extension and deepening of the Shafer-Landau’s (2009) line of thought that coheres with the moral fixed points proposal.

arguments adduced by Ingram (2015) and Evers and Streumer (2016) against the moral fixed points proposal, they might defeat it.

In this paper, I focus on Killoren's (2016) 'argument from normative irrelevance' and offer a rejoinder that undermines its intuitive force. My aspiration is of wider interest. It is to use Killoren's interesting 'argument from normative irrelevance' as a foil for developing the rudiments of a response to the 'why be moral?' question on behalf of the moral fixed points proposal. The contention is that the moral fixed points proposal can offer an interesting answer to the perennial 'why be moral?' question and this further supports the theory.

The simple answer I offer to Killoren's 'Why care about moral fixed points?' question, at least as seen from the moral fixed points framework, which is not obviously false, is the deceptively simple 'because it is rational to do so'.² If there are moral and other normative fixed points (e.g. epistemic), it is rational to care about them and the normative reasons they offer. Failure to care about normative fixed points betrays a failure of rational agency, which we identify as (meta-)conceptual deficiency.³

References

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² It may again be asked 'Why be rational?', but the response would again be that the question betrays (meta-)conceptually deficiency about the concept 'rational' and its implications. It is a prima facie fixed point (indeed, a truism according to some, see Lord (forthcoming)) that 'Rationality is required of agency' and, hence, it follows that we ought to be rational.

³ See Kyriacou (2017) for the idea of meta-conceptual deficiency and Kyriacou (forthcoming) for the possibility of epistemic fixed points (e.g. the factivity condition).

Sinnott-Armstrong Walter. (2015). 'Practical Moral Skepticism'. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. URL=<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-moral/supplement.html>