

“I suspect that there are two prototypes of philosophers who write about humans – I call them ‘celestialists’ and ‘terrestrialists’” - Nomy Arpaly

Overview

Arpaly’s celestial / terrestrial distinction as applied to (meta-)ethics:

Terrestrialists: naturalists, sentimentalists, pragmatists

Celestialists: robust realists, objectivists, rationalists

The difference is not just a matter of what they think is true, but of what they think would be sad or disappointing if it *were* true. So the difference is a matter of **value**.

Some celestialists even think that the truth of the terrestrial worldview would rob ethics of its significance or **legitimacy** altogether. This is what I want to argue against.

We should not be (very) disappointed if a terrestrial account is true. Once we distinguish what we *need* ethics to be from what we might *like* it to offer, we can see that terrestrialism gives us all we need.

What we do need

There are real worries that confront us when we consider ethical demands. We need to know that:

1. Ethics is not **arbitrary** - when we revise our views, there is a standard we can aspire to.
2. Ethics is not a mere tool of **control**.
3. There is a **value** to our values - when we make sacrifices, that is not mere fetishism.

Terrestrial ethics can offer *an* answer to these questions. Here is a sketch of a terrestrial theory:

Ethics is something humans invented, and continue to invent in order to solve the problems that we, as mutually sympathetic creatures, find in living together.

That shows that ethical claims are not merely arbitrary, and at least not *all* norms are mere tools of social control. It seems to indicate that there is some value to our values. But is this enough?

What we do not need #1

Some philosophers think that the goal of a metaethical theory is to address the **sceptic, knave** or **amoralist**. This can draw them to celestialism. Celestial theories can respond to the amoralist:

1. **Necessity:** It is in some sense necessary that they do what morality commands.
2. **Refutation:** The truth of ethics can be demonstrated in a way they must acknowledge.
3. **Reasons:** Bad people always have reasons to act better that are available to them.

But we should not *need* ethics to answer the amoralist or sceptic in order to see it as legitimate.

What we do not need #2

My vindication presupposes the value of sympathy and sociality, but does not ground this in anything deeper. Ethics is ultimately “just us”. Celestialists argue that they can offer a deeper justification.

1. **Robust Realism** - true ethical claims correspond to non-natural facts.
2. **Objectivism** - true ethical claims are those “seen” from the view from nowhere.
3. **Rationalism** - true ethical claims solve the problems that all rational beings would face.

To say that these constitute *better* justifications of ethics is itself a contentious normative claim.

Conclusion

There are things that celestialism offers us that may be missing on a terrestrial theory. We should learn to live without these things. We do not need them in order to see ethics as legitimate.