

Moral Realism and Ways of Life

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Abstract

This paper examines Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's claim that a person's commitment to a way of life is a relevant factor in deciding what it is true that the agent ought to do in a moral dilemma. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that his view shows that *extreme universal moral realism*, which claims that facts about the agent make no contribution to the truth of what an agent ought to do, is false. I use Sinnott-Armstrong's as a starting point to consider how a different kind of moral realism can account for the relevance of ways of life, and argue that they can be regarded as "realistic factors" in moral deliberation because they are grounded in morally permissible commitments which serve to shape the agent's perspective on his or her situation, rather than serving as additional reasons the agent weighs in his or her decision.

In *Moral Dilemmas*, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues that a person's commitment to a particular "way of life" is relevant in assessing the truth of a person's decision about what he or she ought to do when faced with a moral dilemma. He also claims that the plausibility of his view serves as an argument against a strong formulation of moral realism that he calls *extreme universal moral realism*. I want to consider his argument against this view in order to show what issues a more plausible form of moral realism must resolve. I will argue that commitments to

ways of life¹ can be regarded as “realistic factors” in moral deliberation when such commitments count as permissible ways of pursuing the (morally) good life. Because such commitments presuppose the reality of the values which shape them, they are not arbitrary and cannot be reduced to mere preference. Although this view does not eliminate the possibility that someone else with different commitments might – rightly – judge differently in a similar situation, it is not incompatible with moral realism. Permissible commitments derive “realistic” status from their responsiveness to pre-existing values and moral demands.

1. Fritz and Pedro

Sinnott-Armstrong summarizes his position as follows:

The basic idea of my argument is that realistic moral facts do not favour either alternative in a moral dilemma, but different agents can still personally favour different alternatives, and then their personal rankings or choices can determine what they morally ought to do. Since moral realists deny that any moral judgments depend on mental factors like moral beliefs or choices, extreme universal moral realism is false.²

Sinnott-Armstrong then offers a pair of cases: Fritz promised to complete a professional project by tomorrow, but is short on time and can only complete the project if he works on it today. However, today is his daughter’s birthday, and his family always goes sailing on her birthday. Although he made no explicit promise to go sailing, he is expected to come, and so Fritz has conflicting obligations to his colleagues and to his daughter. Neither alternative plainly trumps the other, and so Sinnott-Armstrong claims that Fritz’s case is, on an uncommitted interpretation of the reasons, a moral dilemma. In the second case, Pedro is in a situation relevantly similar to Fritz’s. Sinnott-Armstrong stipulates that despite the overall similarities of each case, “Fritz and

¹ In what follows, I will sometimes speak simply of *commitments* or of *ways of life*. There may be important ways in which these concepts should be distinguished, but for my purposes here, I will focus on what the share in common, which is that both refer to ways of prioritizing values such that particular values become integral to the moral identity and perspective of the agent.

² *Moral Dilemmas*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 200.

Pedro still *personally* rank the moral requirements differently.”³ Fritz ranks his obligation to his daughter higher than his professional promise, “because he chooses to be a family man committed to a family way of life.” Pedro, on the other hand, ranks his professional obligation higher than his familial obligation, “because he chooses to be a professional man whose priorities are to the professional way of life.” Sinnott-Armstrong insists that both agents consider the same moral factors involved in their situations – say, that promises ought to be kept, or that failing to meet their familial obligations would be a kind of betrayal. Sinnott-Armstrong calls such considerations realistic factors because they are relevant (and presumably true) considerations about the case regardless of how one personally ranks these considerations. He also stipulates that both Fritz and Pedro’s ways of life are morally permissible and that neither one commits any clear error in his personal ranking of the moral considerations. However, Fritz ultimately judges that he ought to go sailing with his daughter, and Pedro judges that he ought to complete his project.

In each agent’s case, one course of action is favored by personal rankings, or by a commitment to a particular way of life that fosters such rankings. If it is true that Fritz ought to go sailing and that Pedro ought to finish his project, the truth of each statement cannot be established by only the realistic factors of each situation, for some reference must be made to each agent’s personal commitments or rankings in order to explain why it is true in Fritz’s case that he ought to go sailing and true in Pedro’s case that he ought to finish the project. Thus, there is something different about each person’s case, but the difference – the variation in each agent’s personal rankings of the considerations – is not a realistic factor, according to Sinnott-Armstrong. On his account, personal rankings are not realistic factors because these rankings depend upon beliefs or choices made by each agent. According to extreme universal moral

³ Ibid., 201.

realism, the truth of a moral judgment does not depend upon the particular beliefs or choices of the agent. If there are reasons for allowing both that it is true that Fritz ought to go sailing and that Pedro ought to finish his project, and if these reasons make essential reference to non-realistic factors, then extreme universal moral realism is false.

To motivate the idea that there is some sense in which the judgments that Fritz ought to go sailing and that Pedro ought to finish his project are both true, Sinnott-Armstrong writes:

[S]uch ways of life *do* affect what agents ought to do in some moral dilemmas. If Fritz asked me what he ought to do, I would tell him that he ought to break his promise [to complete the professional project on time] in order to avoid hurting his daughter. Why? Because this choice fits best into his family way of life, and this way of life is both morally and rationally permissible, so to choose otherwise would show a lack of integrity on his part. Fritz's family way of life is rationally permissible, because his choice of it does not depend on any defect, such as error, ignorance or irrationality. Fritz's family way of life is also morally permissible, because he is not so committed that he would help his family if there were a realistically overriding moral requirement not to do so. Still, if he hurt his family when there was no realistically overriding moral reason to do so, he would violate his way of life and his integrity.⁴

We cannot perform every possible action that it would be good to perform or live every possible kind of life that it would be good to live. Once we have adopted a particular permissible way of life, it is reasonable – and perhaps a necessary part of what it is to be committed to that way of life – to allow our moral deliberations to be guided by our particular commitments (which is not to say that we are justified in becoming dogmatic). Importantly, Sinnott-Armstrong notes that “neither [Fritz nor Pedro] has to condemn the other's choice or way of life.”⁵ Each agent can allow that a different person with different commitments might reasonably arrive at a different judgment about what to do. But if this is the case, then at least some moral judgments are not realistically true, but only true *relative* to one's personal commitments, beliefs, or way of life.

Thus, extreme universal moral realism is false, and such cases provide a presumption in favor of

⁴ Ibid., 206.

⁵ Ibid. 201.

some form of moral relativism. The burden of proof is on the moral realist (extreme or otherwise) either to show that ways of life do not contribute to the truth of a moral judgment, or to show that some form of moral realism can account for the truth of these judgments.

I find much of Sinnott-Armstrong's argument compelling; however, I will argue below that the direct justificatory weight Sinnott-Armstrong puts on Fritz's commitment (or his integrity) in *his* assessment of Fritz's case differs in important ways from how the commitment figures in to *Fritz's* judgment. I will argue that the way in which a permissible commitment shapes the agent's judgment is compatible with moral realism.

2. The Shaping-Role of Commitments

Sinnott-Armstrong agrees with the extreme realist that commitments to a way of life are not realistic factors. However, Sinnott-Armstrong seems to assume that if ways of life are relevant (non-realistic) factors in moral judgment, they must figure in as *positive* moral reasons for preferring one course of action over the other. On his view, while these factors are legitimate moral considerations, they are not "realistic," because a commitment to a way of life essentially involves a choice or decision on the part of the agent to prefer particular goods or values over others, where this choice cannot be justified in a way that excludes all other rankings of values as equally permissible.

I think it is doubtful that commitments or ways of life, if they are to be relevant to making moral decisions, can be construed as additional *reasons* in favor of one course of action. A different way in which such factors could be relevant is by serving as background conditions which generate a determinate context (or perspective) for the evaluation of the realistic moral considerations that comprise a person's situation. For example, where it is indeterminate as to

which of two or more conflicting reasons has greater weight, commitments to particular ways of life may serve not as explicit additional reasons, but rather as a kind of filter which selects, assigns added weight to, or directs one's attention to reasons that would recommend actions that are in stricter accordance with that particular way of life. In this case, commitment to a way of life does not fall among the *agent's* reasons for action because such a commitment is what gives shape to the agent's particular way of viewing and evaluating the available reasons for action. That is, such commitments enable an agent to weigh the reasons in a particular (and permissible) way, and in virtue of serving this role cannot themselves be counted amongst the *agent's* reasons.

An agent might, however, be *aware* that her capacity for moral judgment and decision-making is influenced by her commitments.⁶ While such an awareness may contribute to the agent's understanding of *why* a particular course of action seems right or wrong to her, the explanatory value of an appeal to the agent's commitment to a way of life does not translate into justificatory power *for the agent herself*. If *all* an agent can appeal to in an attempt to justify her judgment is a commitment to a particular way of life, then the agent will actually have reason to doubt the legitimacy of her judgment (particularly, when this judgment is receiving criticism), because such an appeal would appear to be an instance of special pleading.⁷ Commitments can *structure* the way a particular agent assesses a situation in ways that are more determinate than a

⁶ It is important to distinguish between the claim that one's commitments *produce* reasons and that commitments *structure* the reasons there are. I am making the latter claim here. On my view, the prior claim would entail that there are no moral reasons (or moral values) prior to the adoption of a particular perspective or set of commitments, and thus count as an anti-realistic and relativistic position. The claim I want to advance acknowledges the reality of reasons and values but holds there is no *a priori* means for prioritizing them (all of the time), but that weightings of values and reasons from within particular ways of life (or commitments), can add a layer of determinacy which may be essential to the person's developing and striving toward a particular (permissible) moral ideal.

⁷ A similar phenomenon can be observed on late-night talk shows when celebrities attempt to excuse their bad behavior by reminding us that they are "human beings, like everyone else." (I recall a remark like this being made recently on the *Tonight Show*.) Such remarks may *explain* why celebrities make moral blunders (after all, they are human, like everyone else...), but they needn't compel anyone to withdraw criticism of the bad behavior, or of the people who engage in it.

“neutral” perspective, and thus courses of action which have equal value from the neutral perspective may seem unequal from the perspective of the committed agent. While this “added” value flows from the fact of commitment, a judgment based upon this additional value cannot be justified by *appeal* to the commitment, but must make reference to the values and considerations upon which this commitment is based, and which make the commitment a reasonable, permissible commitment to have.

3. Realism Without (a certain kind of) Justification

To show that commitments to ways of life can play this shaping-role, and do so in a way that is acceptable to a moral realist, I need to show that when a committed agent judges in accordance with her commitments, the commitment itself, while legitimately shaping the agent’s perspective on the situation, does not figure in to the agent’s *justification* for her judgment.

Sinnott-Armstrong seems to treat commitments as additional reasons, but this fails to make sense of how the agent deliberates about his situation. He says of Fritz that, “Fritz believes that his daughter’s pain is more important to him than his professional promise, because he chooses to be a family man committed to a family way of life.”⁸ What role does the *because* play here? On the interpretation that construes his choice of way of life as a positive moral reason for going sailing with his daughter, Fritz’s commitment to the family way of life would provide a reason for his belief that his daughter’s pain is more important than his professional responsibilities. But how can a commitment provide a reason for belief? It may provide motivation for, and hence, an explanation of why Fritz believes that his daughter’s pain is more important, but to explain the etiology of Fritz’s belief is not to justify it. Believing that his daughter’s pain is more important than a minor promise is simply part of what it is to be

⁸ *Moral Dilemmas*, 201.

committed to a family way of life; it is not that one *first* makes such a commitment and *then* sees that certain beliefs are mandated by this commitment. Rather, to be so committed just *is* to believe that the pain of one's daughter is more important than other kinds of moral responsibilities. That is, choosing to be a "family man" cannot be separated from believing what Fritz believes. If the commitment cannot be separated from the belief, then it cannot serve as a reason for Fritz's belief, or for the ranking of values which this belief expresses. His belief, then, is expressive of his commitment. Even if Fritz were to appeal to his commitment to this way of life, he would only be elucidating the *content* of his belief and his ranking of values, not justifying it. To see that such an appeal cannot amount to a justification of his ranking of values, we need only notice that Fritz's commitment to a particular way of life stands in need of justification, too. (If Fritz were attempting to justify some judgment by appealing to his commitment to an anti-Semitic way of life, we would notice more easily that commitments themselves cannot justify the beliefs that are constitutive of those very same commitments.)

Since ways of life cannot serve as positive (or additional) reasons that justify an agent's moral judgment in light of his or her particular ranking of values, if they play any positive role in moral deliberation, it is by serving as relevant background conditions which explain why an agent ranks the values (or, sees the situation) as he or she does. It might seem that what I said in the previous paragraph, if true, establishes that ways of life cannot be (realistically) relevant in this sense either, because there is no hard distinction to be made between one's commitment to a way of life and the beliefs that flow from that commitment. If a person's beliefs are not justified at the level at which they inform one's judgments, then they cannot be justified by appeal to the way of life of which the beliefs themselves are constitutive. If this were correct, then commitments to ways of life could not count as realistic factors because it appears that they

cannot be assessed in terms of truth. (At best, they would be part of a psychological explanation of why the agent judges as she does.)

Here, I think, is the false step. The view that commitments cannot count as realistic factors involves the claim that in order for commitments, or the beliefs that both flow from and are constitutive of them, to be realistic, they must admit of truth-assessment. But if Fritz and Pedro's respective ways of life are morally and rationally permissible, as stipulated by Sinnott-Armstrong, then there seems to be nothing else we could demand of their commitments in order to judge the commitments themselves as justified. Of course, this commits me to the claim that different agents may have different moral beliefs which are equally justified (since commitments are comprised of beliefs). Moral realism, it will be said, cannot say such things, since this seems to imply that the agent is justified in believing whatever she believes and in preferring whatever she prefers.

This is not, however, how things seem from the perspective of the agent who must decide what to do. Fritz, if he is morally serious, does not reason, "Since I am a family man, I must go sailing with my daughter." If he has anything to say about his decision, it will surely be something more of the sort, "My daughter's happiness just is more important to me than my promise to finish this project."⁹ For Fritz, this claim is *more* than a mere preference. It is, for him, a reason. If we try to appeal to something deeper which justifies it, we will not discover yet another reason. We will discover that Fritz is a dedicated family man, committed to a family way of life, and while this discovery *explains* why Fritz values his daughter's happiness more than the professional promise, it does not justify Fritz's distribution of weight to these goods. Given the

⁹ Joseph Raz makes a similar point in "The Truth in Particularism": "In such a case it is right for people to act as their moral character tells them to act. But their reason is not that that is what they are disposed to do, or that this is more consistent with their past decisions. It is that they can do no other" (in *Moral Particularism*, ed. Hooker and Little, (Oxford UP, 2000), 75). Raz's whole discussion in this section of his paper (pp. 70-77) expounds upon ideas introduced by Peter Winch in "The Universalizability of Moral Judgments," in *Ethics and Action* (1972).

moral permissibility of Fritz's way of life and the realistic value of his daughter's happiness, there is no need for further justification of his weightings or the kinds of reasons that flow from it. To echo Wittgenstein, Fritz asserts this reason – that his daughter's happiness is more important to him in this case – without (a certain kind of further) justification, but not without right.¹⁰ If he has a right to assert this reason (or, if he rightly asserts it), then we can equally say that he rightly concludes that the course of action that respects this reason is *truly* what he ought to do.¹¹

It is not simply Fritz's having this commitment which makes it a realistic factor in determining what he ought to do, but rather the fact that this kind of commitment is a genuine way of being responsibly responsive to moral values.¹² Because such a commitment permissibly structures the relevant values, its *validity* does not depend upon the particular agent who adopts it; however, whether a particular commitment is a *relevant* factor does depend upon what commitments the agent brings to the particular situation. None of this requires that we abandon a realist conception of morality (that judgments are made true by considerations that lie "outside us"), but if realism is to survive such considerations, it must be distanced from interpretations of morality as an impersonal decision-procedure, particularly the idea that morality can guide without reference to the commitments of the agent who must deliberate.^{13,14}

¹⁰ See *Philosophical Investigations*, §289 (and surrounding discussion).

¹¹ I assume, of course, that similar claims about Pedro's case can be made.

¹² Recall here that Sinnott-Armstrong allows that there are some realistic factors in his cases – that the generic considerations that produce a conflict (e.g. incompatible promises) count as moral considerations because they reflect real values that generate (conflicting) obligations.

¹³ I have presented similar ideas in "Moral Conflict and the Indeterminacy of Morality," *Southwest Philosophy Review* (forthcoming), and in various parts of my dissertation (draft available on request).

¹⁴ I want to thank Ed Minar for many helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.