Normative ethics:
an armchair discipline?

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This paper discusses a challenge to normative ethics motivated by
experimental philosophy. Experimental philosophers object to the
perceived "armchair" or a priori nature of philosophy, claiming it
should rather be empirical or naturalistic. The paper investigates
the application of this claim to normative ethics. Dubbing the ap-
plication of the experimental philosophers' contention to norm-
ative ethics "the Armchair Claim," I distinguish descriptive and
normative versions of this challenge, and consider their merits as
comments on the method of normative ethics (descriptive ver-
sions), and as comments on how normative ethics should be
done (normative versions). Characterizing normative ethics as es-
sentially involving the use of the method of reflective equilibrium,
I show how the versions of the Armchair Claim that I distinguish
either misconstrue normative ethics, or are committed to meta-
ethical views that are controversial. To bring home the latter
point, I contrast two meta-ethical positions, and show how, on
one such view, naturalism, the descriptive version could be cor-
rect, whereas on another, intuitionism, it would be false. The nor-
mative version, in turn, is consistent with naturalism, but begs
the question against the intuitionist since she argues that norma-
tive ethics cannot be empirical. The upshot is that a conclusive as-
sessment of the Armchair Claim will have to await the resolution
of disputed issues in meta-ethics. However, normative ethicists
can get on with their work since reflective equilibrium is unaf-
fected by such debates.

Keywords: Armchair philosophy, metaphilosophy, methodology, ex-
perimental philosophy, intuitions, reflective equilibrium, ethics

Нормативная этика:
кабинетная дисциплина?

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Автор рассматривает вызовы, которые ставит перед норматив-
ной этикой экспериментальная философия. Эксперименталь-
ные философы не считают философию «кабинетной» (или
априористской) дисциплиной, заявляя, что она, напротив,
должна быть эмпирической или натуралистической. В статье
анализируется значение этого тезиса для нормативной этики.
Автор различает нормативную и дескриптивную версию тези-
са экспериментальных философов и рассматривает их в кон-
тексте тех преимуществ, которые он дает для анализа метода
нормативной этики (дескриптивная версия), а также для пони-
мания того, какой должна быть нормативная этика (норматив-
ная версия). Признавая, что нормативная этика основана
на применении метода рефлексивного равновесия, автор по-
казывает, что различные версии «кабинетного тезиса» либо
приводят к неверным истолкованиям нормативной этики,
либо основываются на противоречивых метаэтических уста-
новках. Автор противопоставляет две метаэтические позиции

и показывает, что натурализм (описательная версия) может быть правильным, в то время как интуиционизм (нормативная версия) может быть ложным. Нормативная версия, в свою очередь, согласуется с натурализмом, но заставляет усомниться в интуиционизме, так как последний предполагает, что нормативная этика не может быть эмпирической. Автор заключает, что окончательная оценка «кабинетного тезиса» может быть произведена только после того, как будут разрешены метаэтические споры. Тем не менее автор полагает, что сторонники нормативной этики могут продолжить свою работу, так как такие дебаты не затрагивают принцип рефлексивного равновесия.

Ключевые слова: кабинетная философия, метафилософия, методология, экспериментальная философия, интуиции, рефлексивное равновесие, этика

Introduction

As the idiom goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. The picture of the burning armchair on the banners of experimental philosophers is no exception. Presumably, however, a correct interpretation of the image would have to regard as fixed points that the armchair represents philosophy in some traditional sense, and that the flames represent the sentiment or belief that something is wrong with this way of doing philosophy. In particular, philosophy in the traditional sense is too preoccupied with reflection and theorizing from a detached and unengaged vantage point, as opposed to being concerned with the subject matter of interest, as it exists in the world. In short, it is held to be too a priori. This, I take it, is the core idea that the picture is conveying.

Assuming that this rough interpretation of the image is correct, I want to discuss how apt it is as a comment on normative ethics – the branch of philosophy that is concerned with endeavours such as discovering what to believe about moral issues, and defending substantive moral claims. "The Armchair Claim," as I shall call the belief or sentiment expressed by the image of the burning armchair, embodies both a descriptive and a normative component. The descriptive element involves a characterization of normative ethics, and the normative element involves a belief about how normative ethics ought to be done. I begin by taking a closer look at the traditional goals and methods of normative ethics in order to assess these versions of the Armchair Claim.

Moral Inquiry As Involving The Method Of Reflective Equilibrium

The goal of normative ethics is to figure out what to believe about moral issues, and defend substantive moral claims by offering reasons for accepting them. These reasons are, at least in part, themselves moral, or in some cases about the function, or purpose, of morality. So normative ethics seems different from empirical inquiry because it involves adducting normative, as opposed to descriptive, evidence, for normative, as opposed to descriptive, claims.

Discussions of the methodology of normative ethics often focus on the method of wide reflective equilibrium.[1] It appears that ethicists agree that this is the method actually employed in normative ethics, and that it is the right method to use.[2] In working towards a reflective equilibrium one's goal is to figure out what to believe about some moral issue, or perhaps even morality as such. One proceeds by pursuing overall coherence between one's particular moral judgments, moral principles, and relevant background knowledge of which one is aware. In doing so, one resolves conflicts between moral judgments, principles and background theories by rejection, or revision, based on what one believes most strongly, or what one takes oneself to have most reason to believe. The ultimate, though perhaps unachievable, goal is to achieve the best overall fit between the different sets of beliefs.

Reflective equilibrium is best viewed as a method whereby one discovers what one should believe about moral issues. Rawls (1999d) sometimes

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[1]   John Rawls first described what appears to be a version of the method of reflective equilibrium in his "Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics" (1999a [1951]), though without yet using that phrase to label it. Not until the publication of *A Theory of Justice* (1999d [1971]), some twenty years later, had he invented that by now familiar phrase, and the distinction between *narrow* and *wide* reflective equilibrium, equally familiar, was not explicitly introduced until the publication of "The Independency of Moral Theory" (1999b [1974]) a few years later. Norman Daniels (1979) discusses wide reflective equilibrium. In what follows, I use 'reflective equilibrium' to refer to wide reflective equilibrium.

[2]   T.M. Scanlon writes that reflective equilibrium "is the only defensible method: apparent alternatives to it are illusory." (2003: 149) Jeff McMahan writes, "[t]he most commonly endorsed method of moral inquiry among contemporary moral philosophers is the method described by John Rawls under the label 'reflective equilibrium'" (2000, p. 100), and that "[i]t seems to me that the method of reflective equilibrium, or a process very much like it, is the best or most fruitful method of moral inquiry" (2000, p. 102). Shelly Kagan says, "[t]he general approach to justification in ethics that I endorse is similar to the notion of 'reflective equilibrium' described by Rawls in A Theory of Justice." (1998, p. 306) Michael DePaul (1998) argues that proposed alternatives to reflective equilibrium reduce to this method, and that it would be irrational to follow any alternative procedure.

writes as if he takes the goal to be purely descriptive – in his case giving a characterization of "our" conception of justice. Francis Kamm (1993) adopts a version of reflective equilibrium, the "method of cases," which involves considering hypothetical cases with a view to formulating moral principles that account for one's moral intuitions about them.[3] She writes that,

> "[t]he idea here is that the responses come from and reveal some underlying psychologically real structure, a structure that was always (unconsciously) part of the thought processes of some people. Such people embody the reasoning and principles (which may be thought of as an internal program) that generate these responses. The point is to make the reasons and principles explicit." (1993, p. 8)

This suggests a purely descriptive account of the goal of the methodology.

However, as Scanlon has pointed out, this descriptive view of reflective equilibrium is secondary to a "deliberative" account of the method. According to the deliberative account, the aim is to figure out what to believe about some moral issue. These two conceivable goals are not mutually exclusive, however:

> "Even if our aims in deploying the method of reflective equilibrium are understood as descriptive, in order for the method to be carried out, someone – the person whose considered judgments are in question – must be trying to decide what to believe." [Scanlon, 2003, pp. 147–148]

Thus, the deliberative account is the primary one.

Reflective equilibrium should not, without further ado, be viewed as an account of justification. There are two main reasons for this.

First, although the method is essentially coherentist, a foundationalist about justification might also want to adopt it. Although she does not regard justification as consisting in coherence, she could adopt reflective equilibrium as a way of, say, discovering moral principles that can justify less general moral claims. The method itself is merely one whereby one arrives at sets of beliefs (particular moral beliefs, moral principles, and background theories) that cohere. Justification would consist in the fact that less general judgments can be deduced from more general moral principles, or perhaps a single fundamental one.

Second, this method, even if successfully carried through, is not guaranteed to yield justified moral beliefs, bar perhaps in a subjective sense.[4] Indeed, there are strong arguments against regarding reflective

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[3]   For discussion of Kamm's "method of cases," see [Daniels, 1998].

[4]   We might say that S is *subjectively* justified in believing that p just in case it is reasonable *for S* to believe that p, given the evidence S has available, and the credence (to S) of that evidence. And we might say that S is objectively justified in believing that p just in case S's belief that p is justified because the facts are evidence that p, and S's belief that p is formed because S recognizes this.

equilibrium as an account of justification.[5] For example, such a view would be vulnerable to charges of conservatism, and relativism.

The method is perhaps, in certain contexts, more plausible as a method for discovering justified moral claims, and the evidence for them. Notice that the objections against the method of reflective equilibrium seem to be motivated by the underlying epistemic principle that

(J) A person S is objectively justified in believing that p only if
   (i) there is no defeater of S's justification for believing that p of which S is, or ought to be, aware, or
   (ii) provided that there is a defeater of this kind, then S has available a "defeater of the defeater."

Thus, it is the fact that reflective equilibrium allows for the possibility that a person can proceed in ignorance of alternative views and their supporting reasons that render the method implausible as a method for arriving at justified moral beliefs.

Looking at some of the practices of professional normative ethicists however, it may be possible to adduce some reasons for thinking that reflective equilibrium, at least in this context, is more plausible as a method for discovering justified moral beliefs. One might argue that professional ethicists are more likely to be aware of, and take seriously, arguments against moral claims and positions that they hold to be correct. Moreover, they might work in a community with high standards when it comes to assessing evidence and arguments. And perhaps they devote a relatively large amount of time and energy to the study of the merits of positions and arguments put forth by other members of the community. And so on.

If this is correct, then perhaps it is less likely that there is a defeater that a member of this community isn't aware of, or that they ignore, or fail to respond to in a rational manner. Thus, it might be more likely that the reflective equilibrium of someone belonging to this community will yield a set of justified moral beliefs.

In any case, I'm not going to defend reflective equilibrium as a theory of justification. As I said, one can employ the method solely as a method for discovering what to believe. However, in what follows, I will assume that normative ethics, or moral inquiry, essentially involves the use of this method to a greater or a lesser extent.

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[5] Cf. [Hare, 1952, p. 40], [Brandt, 1979, pp. 21–22], [Cummins, 1998], and [Stitch, 1998].

Moral Inquiry – A Priori, Or A Posteriori?

One way of facilitating an assessment of the merits of the Armchair Claim, would be to consider how to characterize reflective equilibrium in terms of the distinction between the a priori and the a posteriori. Pursuing this strategy, it seems natural to ask how three components involved in the pursuit of a reflective equilibrium – the input, the process of reflection, and the output – should be viewed in light of this distinction.

The problem with this approach, as I hope to illustrate, is that to answer these questions, one has to enter into disputed issues in meta-ethics. The method of reflective equilibrium is supposed, as far as possible, to remain neutral on these issues. Perhaps one has to be committed to cognitivism in order for it to make sense to employ the methodology. Beyond that, adherents to different meta-ethical positions should be able to pursue reflective equilibria regardless of their views on the epistemological status of the input, process of deliberation, and output involved. Nonetheless, the Armchair Claim characterizes normative ethics in a way that might be accurate on some meta-ethical views, and inaccurate on others. It therefore cannot be evaluated without engaging with the arguments for and against these meta-ethical views. In what follows, I will illustrate this point mainly by discussing how two prominent meta-ethical positions, intuitionism and naturalism, view the input, process of deliberation, and output involved in reflective equilibrium.[6]

Regarding the input, part of the basis for deliberation are particular moral judgments. These could, on the one hand, be based in moral observations. There is, however, a debate concerning their status as empirical, based on a disagreement about what the best explanation of someone's making a moral observation is. According to Gilbert Harman (1977), the best explanation does not require us to refer to any moral fact. The fact that someone makes a moral observation, such as observing that "That's wrong" upon seeing some kids pour gasoline over a cat and ignite it, can be explained solely by making "assumptions about the psychology or moral sensibility of the person making the moral observation." [Harman, 1977, p. 6] Thus, since the best explanation does not essentially mention anything about moral facts, there's no need to postulate their existence to explain why the observation is made. If correct, this would make moral observations different from scientific observations, where we do need, according to Harman, to make reference to scientific facts to explain why an observation is made. Thus, Harman maintains, if someone sees a vapor trail in a cloud chamber and observes that "There goes a proton," this is

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[6] Since the epistemological status of the output is the same as the input (particular moral beliefs, moral principles, and background knowledge), I skip consideration of the output below.

evidence for the existence of a proton because, in this case, an explanation of her making that observation which mentions the proton is better than one that includes merely psychological or sociological facts. Thus, moral observations do not seem to be empirical in the relevant sense – they are not about mind-independent properties, since their predicate terms do not express such properties. If Harman is right, it seems moral methodology wouldn't be empirical in the right way even though it makes use of moral observations.[7]

Sturgeon (1988) believes that Harman's argument begs the question against moral the realist. This is not the place to discuss his argument. I'm merely making the point that there are issues in meta-ethics one will have to resolve before we can settle the issue of whether the fact that moral observations are used in moral theorizing renders it either a priori or a posteriori.

Another kind of input into reflective equilibrium are particular moral judgments. They might be constituted by, or ultimately derive from, intuitions elicited by considering hypothetical cases. This would make them prime candidates for being a priori. On the standard view, an a priori judgment is a judgment one can be justified in believing independently of experience, save for the experiences needed in order to understand the proposition the judgment expresses. Since we understand propositions by grasping concepts, this implies that we need to have the experiences necessary to acquire the concepts that correspond to the properties involved in the proposition. But no other experience is needed on the standard view.

Since a given moral intuition is elicited by considering a hypothetical thought-experiment, it is natural to classify it as a priori, given that none of the senses appear to be used in thinking about, or forming judgments on the basis of, thought-experiments.

An alternative view is that of the ethical naturalist Richard Boyd (1988), who holds that moral intuitions, just as scientific intuitions, are a kind of "trained judgment:"

> "Moral intuitions are simply one cognitive manifestation of our moral understanding, just as physical intuitions, say, are a cognitive manifestation of 'physicists' understanding of their subject matter. Moral intuitions, like physical intuitions, play a limited but legitimate role in empirical inquiry *precisely because* they are linked to theory *and* to observations in a generally reliable process of reflective equilibrium." [Boyd, 1988, p. 333]

Thus, just as a physicist's intuition about, say, whether a particular experimental setup will work, is based on her understanding of the relevant theories of physics, so a person's moral intuition is based on her understanding of moral theory. On Boyd's account therefore, moral intuitions are reliable indicators of the moral facts to the extent that the moral

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7   Huemer [2005, p. 84–87], argues that moral facts cannot be known by observation.

theory is approximately correct, just as the physicist's intuition is a reliable indicator provided her physical theory is. Since Boyd is a moral naturalist, his account of moral intuitions can be understood as one whereby intuitions, under favourable conditions perhaps, are indicators of what the empirical moral facts are.[8] The fact that the intuitive judgment itself might best be described as a priori is irrelevant to whether or not its content corresponds with the moral facts. That depends on whether the moral theory the intuitor holds is approximately correct.

Hence, with respect to the input represented by moral intuitions there are different views on how to characterize them. On the one hand, they seem to be a priori, but there are ways of conceiving of them so that their status as a priori is irrelevant because they might nonetheless represent allegedly empirical, moral facts.

Regarding the moral principles that also constitute part of the input, contemporary intuitionists believe that a sub-class of these principles are self-evident. Russ Shafer-Landau, for example, mentions principles such as "other things equal, it is wrong to take pleasure in another's pain, to taunt and threaten the vulnerable, to prosecute and punish those known to be innocent, and to sell another's secrets solely for personal gain." [2003, p. 248] By their being self-evident, intuitionists mean that one can be justified in believing a true proposition that expresses the principle just on the basis of understanding its content. So, if one believes the principle on the basis of that understanding, then one knows it.[9] This qualifies such principles as a priori, since, if one can be justified in believing them solely on the basis of understanding them, then no empirical evidence is needed to justify believing them.

Contemporary intuitionists, however, do not believe that such justification is indefeasible. One might, employing the method of reflective equilibrium, discover a defeater of one's justification for believing a seemingly self-evident moral principle.[10] Defeaters include empirical evidence regarding the cognitive processes that are causally responsible for the intuition.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2008), for example, argues that studies of *framing effects* show that the view that intuitive moral principles can be justified without independent confirmation is untenable. He believes that the studies establish that it is reasonable to assume that the intuitive principles adduced by intuitionists belong to a class of beliefs that are generated by an unreliable process. One can therefore not have justification for a moral principle without some independent confirmation that a belief in a particular moral principle is justified. In particular, this could involve

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[8] I am presupposing an *epistemological* conception of naturalism. Such a view is defended by [Copp, 2008].

[9] See [Audi, 2004, p. 48–49]. Cp. [Shafer-Landau, 2003, p. 248].

[10] See [Audi, 2004, p. 66–67].

a reason for believing that the particular intuition in question is not gener-ated by an unreliable process, i.e. that it doesn't belong to the class of be-liefs that are subject to framing effects. This would seem to undermine the intuitionist's claim that some moral principles are a priori justified, since merely understanding the content of the principle is insufficient for justification. One would also, Sinnott-Armstrong maintains, need to have assurance that the particular intuition in question isn't generated by an unreliable process. Since such assurance would have to come from an empirical source, one cannot be a priori justified in believing any moral principle.

The goal is not to settle this debate, merely to point out that the view that certain moral principles are a priori justified is controversial. William Tolhurst [2008, pp. 79–81] and Russ Shafer-Landau [2008, p. 90] argue that the evidence mentioned by Sinnott-Armstrong (2008) isn't substan-tial enough to undermine the reliability of intuition, because it doesn't show that their probability of being wrong is below the threshold of relia-bility.

I believe this brief discussion shows that there is disagreement in meta-ethics about whether any moral principle is justified a priori. It would therefore be premature to claim that moral inquiry is a priori due to its reliance on moral principles as input.

Most would agree however, that at least some of the background the-ories that serve as input are empirical. We have, for instance, already dis-cussed how studies of framing effects appear relevant to the reliability of intuitions. The debate between critics of moral intuitions, and intuitionists who believe that their contents can be self-evident, can be seen as evi-dence that empirical theories (about, say, the reliability of intuitions) are in fact taken into account in the pursuit of a reflective equilibrium by moral intuitionists. They would still deny, however, that moral inquiry is empirical.

Regarding the process of reflection itself, one's answer would de-pend in part on one's view of the nature of the input. Since intuitionists believe that moral properties are non-natural, they would not view moral theorizing as empirical, since moral properties aren't empirical. In addi-tion, because the process of deliberation itself is guided by constraints of rationality, and is thus normative, it would be natural to regard it as a pri-ori. Moreover, because intuitionists insist that some general moral princi-ples are a priori, intuitionism doesn't sit well with the view that moral in-quiry is empirical. Empirical disciplines such as science are typically thought not to involve a priori truths.[11]

Some naturalists, on the other hand, would tend to view the method as a kind of empirical inquiry. For first of all, they believe that mo-ral terms express empirical properties. Thus on this view, wrongness, for

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[11] See [Shafer-Landau, 2003, p. 61].

instance, is to be understood as a natural property because claims such as 'an act is wrong if and only if it has the *N*-property' are true, where *N* is a natural property.

Some naturalists have attempted to show how we might understand moral inquiry as akin to the paradigmatic kind of empirical inquiry, namely science.[12] Thus, apart from the already mentioned view, that moral intuitions are to be understood as analogous to scientific intuitions, reflective equilibrium in ethics is itself to be understood as analogous to scientific methodology. For, as in science, in ethics one theorizes based on the available data. Such theorizing may itself be non-empirical, but if so, such naturalists would argue, then so is the equivalent scientific one. For in formulating hypotheses in science one relies on theory-dependent background knowledge, as well as intuitions and customs. And in testing and defending them, one again uses background knowledge, as well as rules of inference such as induction, inference to the best explanation, statistical rules of inference, etc. Thus, such naturalists would regard the analogy between reflective equilibrium and scientific methodology as strong enough that the seemingly non-empirical nature of the process of deliberation in ethics, doesn't render ethics non-empirical. For in ethics, as in science, this process involves operating on empirical data, using various rules of inference. So, if, as most believe, scientific methodology is empirical despite this, so is the methodology of normative ethics.

The upshot, I believe, is that an interpretation of the Armchair Claim as a descriptive claim about the method of reflective equilibrium is problematic. The naturalist argues that moral inquiry is relevantly analogous to scientific inquiry, and that it's therefore empirical. Without any arguments that this view of moral judgments and of moral inquiry is inadequate, the Armchair Claim would therefore simply beg the question as to why we should think that moral inquiry isn't, as it is actually practiced, empirical.

Perhaps, then, the descriptive version of the Armchair Claim should be seen as being in agreement with the naturalist's view of moral inquiry. On this view, the burning armchair might be viewed as a comment on other accounts, such as that of the intuitionist, according to which moral inquiry is a priori. Of course, to determine which view is correct, we would need to look into the respective arguments of the intuitionist and the naturalist, amongst others. Merely stating that one is in agreement with a particular view, does not help us determine which view is more adequate as a characterization of moral inquiry.

These remarks also affect the normative version of the Armchair Claim. This position is going to have to address the debate between positions such as those of the intuitionist and the naturalist. As we have seen, the intuitionist views certain moral principles as a priori, and hence moral

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[12] See e.g. [Boyd, 1988].

theorizing, as a priori. The intuitionist could grant that empirical back-ground knowledge is relevant in moral inquiry, and thus that normative ethics should be empirically informed. Intuitionists would still deny that moral inquiry is empirical, because empirical disciplines such as science do not involve foundational a priori principles. So the intuitionist would reject the normative version of the Armchair Claim because it is based on a mistaken conception of moral judgments and of moral inquiry. Norma-tive ethics simply *cannot be* empirical. An empirical version of normative ethics would not be normative ethics.

The naturalist on the other hand would be happy to agree with the nor-mative version of the Armchair Claim based on her account of the nature of moral judgments and moral inquiry. So perhaps this normative version of the Armchair Claim is best viewed as recommending that we take up some-thing like this view. But should we? What if the intuitionist is right?

Further interpretations of the Armchair Claim

Perhaps, then, the Armchair Claim should be interpreted as the claim that moral methodology as characterized by reflective equilibrium, either cannot, or has in fact failed to accommodate findings from the empirical sciences in moral theorizing (descriptive claim), or that it ought to take such findings into account (normative claim).

The claim that reflective equilibrium cannot accommodate empirical findings, is, I believe, easily dismissed. Reflective equilibrium bids us to take into account relevant background knowledge, of which empirical findings are a subset. This also implies that there should be no opposition to the normative version, since ethicists appear to employ that very method.

Thus, we are left with the interpretation of the Armchair Claim which says that moral philosophers have in fact failed to take empirical findings into account in their theorizing. Although reflective equilibrium bids moral philosophers to take empirical findings from the sciences into account, it is still up to the individual moral philosopher to resolve a given conflict between such empirical findings and moral judgments, principles, or theories, based on what she finds most plausible. So per-haps there is a general tendency on the part of moral philosophers, to ei-ther resolve such conflicts in ways that are biased against empirical find-ings, or even to ignore empirical findings altogether. In other words, they have a tendency to violate something like principle (J), which I intro-duced in section 1.

This is of course itself an empirical claim about the actual behavior of moral philosophers, which, to my knowledge, hasn't been investigated, even by adherents to experimental philosophy. One would have thought

that someone dedicated to empirical methods would have bothered to do so, if one were actually advancing such a controversial claim. So perhaps this interpretation of the Armchair Claim isn't the most charitable, and should be set aside.

Apart from this formal reason to dismiss these interpretations of the Armchair Claim, we may bring a few examples from the practices of moral philosophers to bear.

Rawls (1999d) took one of the criteria for the success of his theory of justice to be its ability to sustain what he called a stable society. If Rawls' conception of justice – "justice as fairness" – failed to be stable, he believed, the participants in the "original position" wouldn't choose these principles to govern the basic structure of their society. Rawls therefore argues (1999d: ch. 8) for the claim that a society in which the basic structure is governed by justice as fairness will be stable, since children growing up in such a society would come to endorse these principles. To support this claim, he appeals to empirical principles of developmental psychology. Rawls later came to believe that he had been mistaken – briefly, because his argument relied on a substantive account of the good, and therefore wasn't consistent with "reasonable pluralism." He then went on to publish another book (*Political Liberalism*) in an effort to save his theory from the empirical implication that it wouldn't be capable of sustaining a stable society.

Horowich (1998), has argued that the intuitions taken to support the distinction between doing and allowing are best accounted for by a kind of covert reasoning posited by *prospect theory*. In a nutshell, the argument is that if intuitions that have been taken to support a central distinction in ethics are best explained by postulating a psychological theory about behavior, then that distinction should not be taken to be morally significant, since the mechanism itself does not seem to be. The responses given by Kamm (1998) and van Roojen (1999) can be seen as an attempt to reach a reflective equilibrium, taking into account the empirically founded worry raised by Horowich (1998), whilst nonetheless rejecting her conclusions.

Although these cases may be merely anecdotal, I believe that, in the absence of any empirical evidence to the contrary, the version of the Armchair Claim under consideration should be dismissed. Moral philosophers do not appear to ignore, or be biased against, empirical findings.

The final version of the Armchair Claim that I'm going to consider, interprets it as making the practical recommendation that moral philosophers themselves start engaging in empirical research of the kind experimental philosophers engage in.

Here we may distinguish between, on the one hand, moral philosophers who have no training in the methodologies of the social sciences, neuroscience, etc., and who due to constraints on resources (funds, time, etc.) would have difficulties learning and employing these methods,

and, on the other, the moral philosophers of the future, who might receive such training as a part of their education.

Whether either of these groups should learn to do experimental philosophy will of course depend on the actual, and projected, relevance and successes of employing these methodologies. A case can be made that, with respect to the first group, the best strategy is to engage in a division of labour – providing experimental philosophers with empirical hypotheses to test, and critiquing concrete methodologies and findings. With respect to the second group the case for this version of the Armchair Claim is made stronger by the relative absence of practical constraints. But clearly, it will have to be assessed based on the previous and projected success and relevance of experimental philosophy.

I suspect that some might find it hard to see experimental philosophy as a clear-cut success. Consider the widely discussed neuroimaging research by Joshua Greene and colleagues (Greene et al. (2004), Greene et al. (2001)) defending a dual process view of moral judgment, research which in turn has been used in arguments against deontology.[13] Aside from the confusion about what the hypothesis put forth by Greene and his colleagues actually is, here are ongoing discussions in the literature concerning whether these neurological findings are relevant to moral philosophy (Berker (2009)), whether they support the conclusions that Greene claims they do (Berker (2009), Bluhm (2014), Helion and Pizzaro (2014), Kahane (2014), Kumar and Campbell (2012) and Meyers (2014)) and whether the results can be replicated [Moore et al. (2008)]. So some might doubt the fruitfulness of experimental philosophy to normative ethics, despite the relevance of some of the movement's results.

Conclusion

Normative ethics, which I have argued involves the method of reflective equilibrium, cannot be characterized as either a priori or a posteriori, without engaging in longstanding debates in meta-ethics. Contrasting intuitionism and naturalism, we saw how there are disagreements regarding such issues as the nature of moral properties, and the epistemological status of moral observations, intuitions, and principles. There is also disagreement about the nature of the process of reflection involved in moral inquiry – should it be understood as analogous to scientific inquiry, and thus as an empirical mode of investigation, or is it a priori? The burning armchair, which suggests that normative ethics isn't empirical, or insufficiently so,

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[13]   See [Greene, 2008], and [Singer, 2005].

could either be an adequate comment on normative ethics or not, depending on how these debates in meta-ethics are best resolved.

Engaging in normative ethics, and hence pursuing a reflective equilibrium, does not, in and of itself, force one to take sides on these issues. It therefore seems wrong to indicate that the entire thing should be committed to the flames. There will be normative ethicists who take themselves to be doing essentially empirical work, and others who think ethics can't be empirical. Meanwhile, as the debates in meta-ethics continue, there are important and challenging moral problems that have to be addressed. So there is a need for normative ethics, whether it's an armchair discipline or not.

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