



DISCUSSION NOTE

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Cosmic Coincidence and Intuitive Non-Naturalism

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RECENTLY, MATTHEW BEDKE (2009) offered an intriguing argument against Intuitive Non-Naturalism in ethics (INN). INN is the conjunction of Ethical Non-Naturalism and Ethical Intuitionism. Ethical Non-Naturalism is the view that ethical facts or properties are non-natural, i.e., non-physical. Ethical Intuitionism is the view that intuition can provide non-inferential, *prima facie* justification for ethical beliefs. Against INN, Bedke argues that intuitive justification for belief in non-natural ethical facts is subject to a defeater: the “defeater from cosmic coincidence.”

Though not a proponent of INN myself, I think Bedke’s argument faces an important difficulty. Bedke takes seemings or beliefs to be subject to defeat if they satisfy certain criteria. He proposes two in particular. Satisfying these criteria is insufficient for defeat, however. Many inductively justified beliefs, for example, satisfy the criteria, yet this does not seem sufficient to generate a defeater against them. Two of Bedke’s premises happen to be such beliefs. I begin by discussing Bedke’s argument and his proposed criteria. I then show that inductively justified beliefs and related seemings satisfy the criteria. I conclude that satisfying the criteria is insufficient to generate a defeater and that the sufficiency of such criteria would, in any case, render Bedke’s argument self-defeating.

Assuming Ethical Non-Naturalism for the sake of argument, Bedke argues that intuitive justification for belief in non-natural ethical facts is subject to defeat. Here is a slightly modified version of his argument (p. 190).¹

- 1) Suppose Ethical Non-Naturalism is true, i.e., that ethical facts or properties are non-physical.
- 2) The physical world is causally closed, so physical events and states are fully physically caused.
- 3) Ethical intuitions are physical events or states.²
- 4) So, ethical intuitions are fully physically caused. (2,3)
- 5) So, ethical facts or properties do not causally affect ethical intuitions. (1,4)
- 6) If ethical facts or properties do not causally affect ethical intuitions, it would take a cosmic coincidence for ethical intuitions to accurately track ethical facts and properties.
- 7) So, it would take a cosmic coincidence for ethical intuitions to accurately track ethical facts and properties. (5,6)
- 8) If it would take a cosmic coincidence for ethical intuitions to accurately track ethical facts and properties, there is a defeater for these intuitions: the defeater from cosmic coincidence.
- 9) So, on the hypothesis that Ethical Non-Naturalism is true, there is a defeater for our ethical intuitions. (7,8)³

¹ All page references are to Bedke 2009.

² Bedke’s argument seems compatible with epiphenomenalism, so an alternative to premise 3 is: Ethical intuitions are physical events or states, or they are epiphenomenal events or states.

According to premise 4, ethical intuitions have fully physical causal histories. Because non-natural ethical facts do not figure in these histories, Bedke claims, it is conceptually possible to have the same history – and so the same intuitions – with different sets of non-natural ethical facts.⁴ Given this, Bedke argues, it would be cosmically coincidental if the non-natural ethical facts just happened to fortuitously line up with these intuitions. Once we realize this, he claims, any justification our intuitions might have given us for belief in non-natural ethical facts will be defeated.

To illustrate, Bedke discusses two non-ethical examples: the case of Andy and the case of Bea (pp. 197-98). On the basis on intuition, Andy believes that each person has a non-natural spirit animal whose species supervenes on the person's character. Bea believes, also on the basis of intuition, that a goblin war rages all around her, though the goblins and their weapons are made up entirely of non-natural stuff. Andy's intuition can be completely explained in terms of sociological and psychological facts. Likewise, Bea's intuition can be completely explained by the fact that she has a brain tumor, the likes of which have similarly affected others. If Andy and Bea realize that their intuitions can be so explained, Bedke claims, any intuitive justification they may have had for their related beliefs will be defeated. Even if their intuitions are accurate, this accuracy will be highly coincidental. Most of the conceptual possibilities are inconsistent with their intuitions and they could have had the same intuitions even if the non-natural facts were different.

These examples illustrate the criteria satisfaction of which Bedke takes to be sufficient to generate the defeater against intuitions, and more generally against any seeming or belief. Cosmic coincidence requires two ingredients on his view (p. 202). First, a full explanation of the seemings or beliefs is needed, one that does not appeal to the facts that are the subject of the seemings or beliefs. Second, most of the conceptual possibilities must be inconsistent with the accuracy of the seemings or beliefs. Hence, Bedke claims, the defeater does not defeat all seemings and beliefs. Perceptual seemings and beliefs are not generally subject to the defeater, for example. This is because no good explanation for our perceptual seemings and beliefs has been established that does not appeal to the generally perceived facts.

Whether Bedke is right that perception is not subject to the defeater depends on what it takes to satisfy the first criterion – specifically, what it takes for a full explanation of the required sort to be established. Something more must be required beyond the mere coherence of such a story. Otherwise, practically any seeming or belief would be defeated. Presumably, establishing such an explanation requires sufficiently strong seemings – either contrary

³ Thanks to an anonymous referee for proposing some of the changes made to the argument.

⁴ Bedke talks in terms of both conceptual and epistemic possibility without distinguishing the two (e.g., pp. 196-99). I will just put things in terms of conceptual possibility.

perceptions or contrary seemings of a different sort (e.g., intuitions or the recognition of the soundness of certain arguments). This is apparently what is supposed to generate the defeater against intuitive justification for belief in non-natural ethical facts. Presumably, Bedke thinks that an increasingly compelling body of evidence suggests that such intuitions and beliefs can be completely explained in terms of natural physical phenomena.

Perception does not seem to be in the same boat, then. There does not seem to be compelling evidence for an explanation of the sort required to generate the defeater against it. But there does seem to be an important class of seemings and beliefs that are in the same boat, namely many inductive ones. This would be bad enough. If it is true, though, at least some of the seemings and beliefs Bedke needs to establish a defeating explanation against non-naturalistic ethical intuitions and beliefs are themselves subject to defeat. I will elaborate.

Consider inductively acquired beliefs, in particular inductively acquired beliefs about the future. Take the belief that the sun will rise tomorrow and follow its familiar arc across the sky. Why believe this? Putting it simply and generally, it seems to us that the world operates in an orderly, regular, uniform fashion. We think we are justified in taking the past as a guide to the future.

But, to continue putting things simply, we believe as we do and things seem to us as they do because of the past behavior of the world and certain facts about our psychology. Our beliefs and seemings are arguably fully explained by these facts. No facts about the future factor into this explanation. So Bedke's first criterion is satisfied. As for the second, it is conceptually possible for the future behavior of the world to differ from its past behavior in many ways. There are innumerable many conceptual possibilities regarding the future behavior of the world, most of which are inconsistent with the beliefs and seemings at issue. For example, the sun might rise tomorrow and follow its familiar arc. Then again, it might not rise. Or it might rise and then bounce along the horizon. And so on. The second criterion is also satisfied. Hence, if satisfying these criteria is sufficient to generate a defeater, there is a defeater for these beliefs and their related seemings. I take this to show that Bedke's criteria are insufficient for defeat. At least some of these beliefs remain justified and at least some of the seemings are capable of conferring justification even if we realize that they satisfy these criteria.

Not everyone may be so quick to accept this conclusion, though. One might instead conclude that these beliefs and seemings are subject to defeat because they satisfy these criteria. Whatever merit this position might have, adopting it cannot save Bedke's argument. This is because taking this line undermines our justification for belief in premises 2 and 3. This becomes clear once one realizes that beliefs about the future are not special. The same considerations outlined in the last two paragraphs would, suitably modified, speak against beliefs justified by inductive inference from observed to unobserved cases. Belief in premises 2 and 3 are like this. We take observed cases

(e.g., cases where we have succeeded in giving complete physical explanations of physical phenomena or where we have demonstrated that certain phenomena are physical) as an indication of what unobserved cases are like (e.g., cases where we have not yet succeeded in giving such explanations of physical phenomena or where we have yet to demonstrate that certain phenomena are physical).

Consider the set of phenomena ϕ for which we have given complete physical explanations and the set of phenomena λ that we have successfully shown to be physical. One's belief B that similar explanations and demonstrations are available for similar phenomena can be completely explained by our having done so for the members of ϕ and λ and by the assumption of worldly uniformity and regularity. It is conceptually possible, however, that such explanations and demonstrations are unavailable for some of the remaining phenomena. Perhaps B is true, and such explanations and demonstrations are available. Then again, such explanations and demonstrations may be available for none of these phenomena or only for some of them. There are an innumerable number of conceptually possible worlds where we believe B for the same reasons, but where B is false. Again, both of Bedke's criteria are satisfied. Hence, if satisfying these criteria is sufficient for defeat, justification for belief in premises 2 and 3 is subject to defeat because the truth of these beliefs would require a cosmic coincidence.

So, to sum up: Either satisfaction of Bedke's criteria is sufficient to generate a defeater or it is not. If it is, then Bedke's argument is self-defeating since belief in premises 2 and 3 satisfy these criteria. If satisfying the criteria is insufficient for defeat, however, then proponents of INN can insist that no reason has been given to accept premise 6. No doubt, many critics will want to go further and also reject premises 2 and 3. Perhaps there are reasons to doubt these premises, but I cannot explore the issue here.⁵

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References

Bedke, M. (2009). "Intuitive Non-Naturalism Meets Cosmic Coincidence," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 90: 188-209.

⁵ Thanks to Matt Bedke for helpful correspondence. Thanks also to an anonymous referee for helpful comments that improved the paper at several points.