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The Ethics of Empty Worlds

Can one empty world be better than another? No, say ethical nominalists who believe that all bearers of value are concrete entities. No, say those who more cautiously assert that all bearers of value *depend* on concrete entities. No, say metaphysicians who think that there is at most one empty world.

I believe that leaves me as the only philosopher who answers yes.

My thesis is inspired by G. E. Moore's Principia Ethica. This book was immediately recognized as a great achievement by the professional philosophers of Moore's generation. His influence was wide. At the lush end of spectrum were members of the Bloomsbury group (Regan 1986). In addition to these Bohemian, mostly literary disciples, "Bloomsbury's prophet" inspired thinkers with formal interests. G. H. Hardy's defense of pure mathematics, A Mathematician's Apology, is a particularly austere legacy of Moore's ethics. The essay you are now reading on empty worlds is at Hardy's arid end of the spectrum.

Moore emphasized that there are many kinds of good things. He rejected Jeremy Bentham's claim that only pleasure is intrinsically good. He rejected Immanuel Kant's assertion that the only thing that is good in itself is a good will. Moore complained that ethicists erect ideals by emphasizing some good things at the expense of others. Moore's favorite premise for his ethical

pluralism was that it always makes sense to ask 'This is *F* but is it good?' (where *F* is a descriptive predicate).

Moore happily conceded that the greatest goods are human intercourse and aesthetic appreciation. The other goods pale in comparison. However, for theoretical purposes, Moore was careful to distinguish between something being of little value and it having no value at all.

I contend that these trace elements of goodness are present in worlds that are devoid of concrete things. If Moore had believed that there can be a variety of worlds bereft of things in space and time, he would have concluded that some empty worlds are better than other empty worlds.

1. Moore's method of reflective isolation

To test whether something is intrinsically good, Moore compares a universe that contains only that candidate with a similar universe that differs only in the absence of this putative intrinsic good (1902, 187). Given Moore's assumption that intrinsic goods are universally good (1902, 30), the isolation test will not produce a false negative result. An intrinsic good always makes a difference. The method of reflective isolation is also designed to forestall two sources of false positive results. The first threat is that the candidate is only good as a means. The second source of false positive results is revealed by the principle of organic unities: the goodness of the whole is not always reducible to the goodness of the parts. If we do not absolutely isolate the candidate, the goodness we detect may be the goodness of the whole

of which it is a part rather than the goodness of the thing in question.

In addition to applying the method of reflective isolation to particular candidates, Moore used it to test generalizations about candidates. Henry Sidgwick maintained that value resides only in conscious states. In Principia Ethica Moore (1902, 83-84) objected that this is too narrow:

Let us imagine one world exceedingly beautiful. Imagine it as beautiful as you can; put into it whatever on this earth you most admire--mountains, rivers, the sea; trees, and sunsets, stars and moon. Imagine these all combined in the most exquisite proportions, so that no one thing jars against another, but each contributes to increase the beauty of the whole. And then imagine the ugliest world you can possibly conceive. Imagine it simply one heap of filth, containing everything that is most disgusting to us, for whatever reason, and the whole, as far as may be without one redeeming feature. (1902, 83-84)

The only thing we may not add to either world is consciousness. Since it would be better for the uninhabited beautiful world to exist, Moore concludes that value must be possible without consciousness.

Moore is widely suspected of contaminating his uninhabited worlds with consciousness (Johnson 1973). The charge is that

Moore is illicitly supposing the worlds are being *observed*; how else could the aesthetic judgment be made?

This objection is vulnerable to a logical analogy with Wolfgang Goethe's claim that you cannot imagine your own death. If you imagine yourself being guillotined, Goethe will point out that you visualized the spectacle from a particular angle and in color, therefore you have really imagined witnessing the execution of someone who merely looks like you. Goethe's inference is mistaken. The mental imagery is irrelevant. The difference between imagining an event and imagining witnessing an event is at the level of what is *stipulated* to be the case.

Moore's two worlds are empty insofar as they are devoid of conscious beings. But there are still plenty of concrete entities: rivers, trees, the moon, etc. I am interested in empty worlds that are completely devoid of entities that have spatial or temporal positions. These worlds are what metaphysicians envisage when they ask 'Why is there something rather than nothing?'. You cannot satisfy them by citing Fermat's proof that there exists a divisor of Catalan's "prime number" $2^{2^3} - 1$. People want to know why there are chestnut trees, mountains and stars and galaxies. They want to know why there are thoughts and thinkers. (Thoughts lack spatial locations but still qualify as concrete entities because they have durations. Even an idealist who thinks material objects are impossible can still ask 'Why is there something rather than nothing?'.)

Moore has a second thought experiment that is compatible with the metaphysician's conception of an empty world. To refute

hedonism, Moore has us consider a cruel and lascivious man who takes pleasure in the suffering of others.

If we then consider what judgment we should pass upon a universe which consisted *solely* of minds thus occupied, without the smallest hope that there would ever exist in it the smallest consciousness of any object other than those proper to these passions, or any feeling directed to any such object, I think we cannot avoid the conclusion that the existence of such a universe would be a far worse evil than existence of none at all. (1902, 209)

Moore can be read as ranking an empty world higher than a world populated by sadists (even if each is harmlessly deluded about the suffering of others). There are other readings. Maybe the preferred world is only empty of consciousness. (When J. J. C. Smart [1973 25] ranks the sadistic world higher, he appears to be reading the question this way.) Perhaps there is an empty world but it merely has an absence of value. Or maybe the comparison is with there being no world at all.

In any case, Moore never ranks one empty world above another empty world. I suspect this is because Moore assumes that there is only one empty world.

This assumption is supported by logicians who model the empty world on the empty set. A set is defined in terms of its members so there can be only one empty set.

The assumption that there is at most one empty world proceeds to center stage in the statistical answer to 'Why is there is something rather than nothing?'. Peter van Inwagen (1996) reasons that since there is at most one empty world and infinitely many non-empty worlds, the probability of an empty world is as low as anything can be.

2. Laws of Nature

I first became persuaded that there is more than one empty world by reading John Carroll's Laws of Nature. In the course of arguing against David Hume's regularity theory of causation, he advanced thought experiments which distinguish empty worlds by means of the generalizations that govern them. Newton's first law of motion says an undisturbed object will continue in motion in a straight line. Aristotle's physics suggests that such an object will slow down and tend to travel in a circle. The Aristotelian empty world differs from the Newtonian empty world because different counterfactual statements are true of it.

If we can discriminate between empty worlds on the basis of which descriptive laws govern them, we can also discriminate between them on the basis of which normative laws govern them. Consider a universe in which the good are rewarded and the evil are punished. That universe is juster than ours and certainly juster than a topsy-turvy universe in which the good are punished and the evil are rewarded. Some worlds have better nomic structures than others.

The moral insensitivity of our world is an empirical discovery. There are possible worlds in which the correct moral theory *predicts* what will happen. Such worlds are depicted in old movies in which the good guys win, the bad guys lose, crime never pays, and virtue is always rewarded. Utopian literature portrays worlds that distribute goods equally among equals. A world so disposed is fairer than ours -- even if the disposition is never activated.

3. Space and Time

Empty worlds can also differ with respect to space and time. Immanuel Kant believed that space was unified (you can always travel from here to there). Anthony Quinton (1962) imagined a way of acquiring evidence there are two spaces. Some physicists believe they actually possess evidence of there being multiple spaces. Edwin Abbott's Flatland concerns a two-dimensional world. In the age of Victorian spiritualism, novelists imagined a fourth dimension in which special visitors could leave us subtle clues such as turning a left shoe into a right shoe. These mind-bending possibilities are taken seriously by chemists. They classify lefty crystals as having the same shape as righty crystals because the one can be changed into the other by movement through a fourth dimension.

As for time, Plato found change objectionable and so revealed a preference for a timeless world. (For a contemporary discussion of timeless worlds, see Sider (2001, 99-101)). Friedrich Nietzsche rebelled and celebrated change. He further hoped that

time has a cyclic structure, "the eternal return", in which any choice had to be relived over and over. Libertarians have a moral preference for an open future. Although it would be better if agents were around to take advantage of the opportunity to exercise free choice, the libertarian might prefer an empty world that afforded this opportunity over a world that foreclosed it.

What good is an opportunity if no one is around to exploit it? On an all or nothing model, there is no partial credit for getting close to a goal. But with some things, we grade incrementally: near misses outrank clear failures. Getting over the hump may be much more important than any antecedent increment but there is still some value to each increment (or at least to some increments).

The incremental model is attractive when explaining the goodness of dispositions. Actually producing a good thing is good. But so is a disposition to produce a good thing. (That is why we approve of virtue.) And so is a disposition to produce something with that disposition. (That is why we approve of a disposition to acquire virtues.) C. D. Broad introduced the term 'higher order disposition' to cover a nail's capacity to become magnetic (1933, 266-7). Moral appeals to potentiality can be analyzed in terms of higher order dispositions. Many believe that the zygote's *potential* to think and feel is a reason not to abort it (Stone 1994). This could be understood as an assignment of moral weight to modal proximity just as others assign weight to nearness in space and time.

The incremental model may also explain why unobserved beauty is good. Non-concrete things can be the bearers of beauty. Geometry is esteemed partly because of its aesthetic features. The same goes for things that manifest geometrical patterns such as a garden configured as golden rectangle. This suggests that empty worlds which vary in their spatial structure could vary in their symmetry, proportion, and elegance. As G. E. Moore noted in his two world thought experiment, it is better that a beautiful world exists than an ugly one -- even if there is no one to appreciate the beauty. Thus one lemma that leads to my ethical conclusion is aesthetic: some empty worlds are more beautiful than other empty worlds.

4. Contingent abstract entities

You and I are concrete entities. The set that contains the two of us is an abstract entity. It has no position in space in time. Since sets are defined in terms of their members and we are contingent entities, the set that contains us is also a contingent entity. Therefore, some abstract entities are contingent.

In addition to the contingent abstracta that depend on concrete entities, there are contingent abstracta that are independent. For instance, if space or time are abstract entities, then the previous section establishes the existence of contingent abstract entities. If they are not abstract entities, then consider the set comprised of a contingently existing unoccupied space. That set is a contingent abstract entity that exists in a world devoid of concrete entities.

Can empty worlds that only differ in their abstracta also differ in how good they are? Plato believed that the Form of the Good is itself good. He also characterized concrete things as mere shadows of an abstract realm. In this way, Plato plants the seed for a credo diametrically opposed to ethical nominalism: only abstract things are bearers intrinsic value.

Some abstract things are more beautiful than other abstract things. For instance, the Fibonacci sequence is more beautiful than the patternless sequence of numbers in the decimal expansion of pi. Since Moore thinks unobserved landscapes can make one world better than another, he should allow untemplated abstracta to make some empty worlds better than others.

Contingent abstracta give rise to other properties that we value. After surveying the expanse of good things, Robert Nozick concludes "Over this great range of things -- the arts, organic life and systems, scientific theories -- the dimension *degree of organic unity* seems to capture our notion of (degree of intrinsic) value." (1981, 418) He goes on to attribute almost of all differences in intrinsic value to variations in degrees of organic unity.

Gottfried Leibniz approved of variety. He reasoned that since our world is the best of all possible worlds, it must be packed with many different things: intermediate species, microscopic organisms, etc. Thus Leibniz should rank an empty world with heterogeneous abstracta over another empty world with less variety. Of course, the empty worlds are far from perfect.

But I am only claiming that two empty worlds can differ in how good they are.

Some Buddhists would disagree with Leibniz's preference for variety. For them, the emptier the better. Perhaps their best of all possible worlds is one that is maximally free of both abstracta and concreta.

If the dispute between Leibniz and the ascetic Buddhists reaches this stage, then it has gone far enough to put both parties in agreement that some empty worlds are better than others.

5. Can we rank empty worlds?

World judges have a long lineage. Commentary on the problem of evil has long taken the form of comparing the actual world to better worlds.

Some theists have reacted with skepticism about our ability to rank worlds. They point out that those who prefer a painless world over our own often neglect the instructiveness of pain. David Hume countered by imagining a world in which instruction was achieved merely by varying the level of pleasure. The theists probe for a subtler fallacy in Hume's worldmanship. Yet the theist must be careful lest his skepticism deprive us of any basis for improving the world.

Some worlds are too complicated to judge. Empty worlds should be less confusing. After all, thought experimenters gravitate toward empty worlds because of their simplicity. But even if you are skeptical about your ability to accurately rank

two worlds, you need not be skeptical about there being differences in how good they are. A boy in a luggage shop cannot tell *which* suitcases are better than others but he can tell that some suitcases are better than other suitcases.

Twentieth century commentary on future generations underscores our ability to rank worlds. Nearly everything people do affects which people get created. This includes acts that have bad consequences only after the present generation is long dead. Since the people who will complain of these bad effects owe their existence to their causes, they will have not been made worse off by the bad effects. Therefore, these dependent people are not harmed by that cause. So why should we refrain from practices that only yield bad consequences after the present generation is long dead? Derek Parfit's (1982) answer is that the wrong committed by long-term evil doers is *impersonal*. Although the bad consequences harm no one, the *world* would have been better without them. We are confident enough in these world appraisals to harm people on their basis. After all, we do punish people for unsafe disposal of waste even though the pollution will only leak out in two hundred years.

6. Metaphysical reservations

Some philosophers say it is a necessary truth that there are concrete entities. If, as Duns Scotus believed, there is a necessary being who is in space or time, then there are no empty worlds.

However, each concrete thing is such that it can be imagined not to exist. All concrete things seem to be contingent.

The weaker and subtler hypothesis is that it is necessary merely that there is at least one concrete entity. This is compatible with there being no necessary beings. There are metaphysical systems, such as combinatorialism, that have this implication (Armstrong 1989). However, the implication does not remove the air of magic. If any object can be subtracted from the universe, what prevents them from all being subtracted? (Baldwin 1996) Suppose we have whittled the universe down to one object. Why can't we remove the last object?

A final suggestion is that concrete entities have hegemony over *all* differentia for empty worlds: any universe that lacks concrete things has no laws of nature, no space, no time, and no contingent abstract entities. For instance, proponents of a relational theory space say that if you take away all the concrete objects you also take away space. Einstein's theory of relativity is often interpreted this way -- though some say Einstein is actually committed to absolute space (Earman 1989).

Physicists generally present their relationism as an empirical discovery about the actual universe, not a necessary truth about space. The kind of relationism required for the hegemony of concrete things would be very strong -- holding across all possible worlds. Further, this very strong thesis would have to be universalized across all the differentia I have mentioned and across all the differentia that might be mentioned by those more imaginative than me. Since such a strong hegemony thesis is implausible, evaluative diversity between empty worlds is plausible.

Loyalty to concrete things is natural because they are in the foreground of our evaluative judgments. We tend to overlook the contribution made by the background. I recall being surprised at what a mediocre photograph my wife had purchased. She replied that she had bought the picture for the sake of the *frame*.

My degree of ethical pluralism is not altogether congenial to Moore. When Moore wields his principle of organic unities, he overlooks interactions with laws, space, and contingent abstracta that do not depend on any concrete things. He thinks the only interference has a part-whole structure.

Moore had considerable sympathy with Plato and so was disposed to believe that the universe contained ethically significant abstract entities. Perhaps Moore did not attempt to apply the method of reflective isolation because he believed these abstract entities are necessary beings (and so not eliminable). But then Moore should have noted that the demands made by the method of reflective isolation can never be perfectly satisfied.

Of course, an imperfect method can still be a good method. Scientists cannot perfectly control for extraneous influences in their experiments, but this hardly vitiates their methodology. Nevertheless, Moore should then make greater efforts to control the influence of contingent, non-concrete things in his thought experiments. As far as ethical pluralism is concerned, Moore was righter than he imagined.

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