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Response to Huemer's Moral Realism

This essay critically examines Michael Huemer's argument for moral realism, particularly his claim that historical moral convergence toward liberal values is best explained by the existence of objective moral truths. However, by analyzing his epistemological framework and considering alternative explanations rooted in technological progress and globalization that are at least as plausible as Huemer's, this essay will argue that Huemer's account – which rests on the claim that it is the most plausible existing explanation for the historical trend towards liberalism – though persuasive, is not conclusive.

Huemer offers a comprehensive definition of moral realism: not only do objective moral truths exist, but we can know what they are. By contrast, anti-realists either deny their existence or concede that those truths may exist, but maintain that we could never know them. For Huemer, moral facts, like scientific or mathematical ones, are discovered, not invented.

The strongest objection to moral realism rests on the phenomenon of moral disagreement. While disagreement exists in science and mathematics, these fields enjoy far stronger consensus. Scientific breakthroughs and mathematical proofs often resolve debates decisively but this is not straightforwardly mirrored in moral debates. Disagreement is particularly striking when comparing moral norms across societies separated both geographically and temporally, where massive differences are common.

Huemer outlines four general debunking explanations anti-realists use to explain morality. First, the idea that moral values are mere expressions of emotions and desires – saying "murder is wrong" amounts to "I dislike murder." Second, the claim that morals are culturally determined, with no objective basis. This would explain why someone who grew up in a progressive household would find that gay marriage is perfectly acceptable while someone raised in a conservative environment would claim it is not. Third, the notion that moral beliefs evolved solely to promote survival. Evolution would favor moral norms that enhance reproductive fitness, ensuring their transmission. In this way, we think it is good to take care of our children not because it is objectively morally right to do so, but because it is evolutionarily advantageous. Fourth, a combination of these: morals as emotional reactions shaped by

both culture and evolution. By nature of being anti-realist, these debunking theories are consistent with the existence of moral disagreement (if moral facts are not objectively true, it would make sense for people to disagree about them).

However, Huemer argues that the observed global convergence toward liberalism – defined by three core principles: the moral equality of persons, respect for individual dignity, and opposition to gratuitous coercion and violence – is too extensive, rapid, and cross-cultural to be explained by the debunking arguments outlined above. He supports this claim with historical evidence – including the decline of war and murder rates, the abolition of slavery and torture, decreasing racism and sexism, greater acceptance of LGBTQ rights, the extension of suffrage to women, and the global spread of democratic institutions – and outlines why anti-realist accounts, evolutionary and cultural, do not adequately explain the phenomenon.

He begins by arguing against evolutionary accounts of morality which hold that the specific moral values societies (or individuals) hold are adaptations for survival. He uses the view that adultery is wrong as an example of this – selected for by evolution because it promoted reproductive fitness (presumably by reducing competition, improving child rearing, or increasing parental investment). In this way, one would explain the convergence towards liberalism by saying that liberalism is adaptively advantageous (perhaps because it enables peaceful cooperation more beneficial than war or conquest). However, Huemer objects that this would not account for the recency of liberal values and why they have only been developed over the past few thousand years as opposed to the two hundred thousand years of human existence. While he acknowledges that one may claim these values only recently became adaptive, Huemer maintains that liberalisation has still been too rapid to be accounted for in evolutionary terms. Explicit racism is now seen as socially unacceptable despite the fact that the Jim Crow laws were only abolished as recently as 1960 (when evolution usually takes hundreds of thousands or millions of years). Furthermore, it still remains unclear why liberal values against racism would have become more adaptive than racist ones, allowing non-racists to pass on their liberal genes to their offspring (akin to how evolutionary pressure usually works).

He also outlines an argument for cultural evolution in order to refute it. Huemer does not dispute that people in the West today are generally only liberal because of cultural influence, and acknowledges that they do not arrive at the conclusion that slavery is wrong because they reason their way to that truth, rather they are taught that it is wrong as part of their culture. This does not however give insight into why culture has evolved towards liberalism. While it is technically possible for culture to have evolved towards liberalism by coincidence, Huemer makes the argument that this would be deeply implausible. First, society has evolved towards liberalism on a myriad of different issues (those mentioned above) across the world, practically simultaneously. Huemer argues that even if it is possible to find alternative explanations for liberalization with regards to one specific issue – such as saying slavery became less economically advantageous as economies industrialized – it seems an improbable coincidence that at around the exact same time that slavery was becoming economically inefficient, other trends were also making women's suffrage more popular, and independently, other trends were making democracy advantageous, and so on. This is why Huemer is led to say that global convergence, explained by the existence of objective moral truths – akin to how cosmology or mathematics converges on truth – best explains this pattern.

His account rests upon five premises:

(A) Humans possess a capacity for a priori knowledge – that is, the ability to know certain truths through reason alone.

(B) As the rational intuitionist view holds, this capacity applies to moral knowledge as well. This is because certain moral truths (like "torture is wrong") seem immediately evident, akin to mathematical truths. Knowledge requires a certain reliable belief forming mechanism, meaning that there must be a reliable belief forming mechanism for a priori knowledge. Thus, there is a reliable belief forming mechanism for (a priori) moral knowledge.

(C) While moral belief formation is subject to non-rational influences – emotions, desires, cultural norms, and evolutionary pressures, these factors influence but do not strictly

determine moral beliefs. This is similar to how emotional biases like the gambler's fallacy can cloud objective reasoning in mathematical domains. That is to say (though many people may never overcome their biases), it is at least possible to overcome biases determined by emotions or desires through rational means.

(D) Cultural influences make it difficult for individuals to adopt radically different moral views from those of their society; moral change tends to happen incrementally.

(E) Individuals vary in their susceptibility to these non-rational influences. Some, due to intellectual capacity others due to independence; either way, certain people are better able to reason their way toward moral truths.

With these premises, Huemer explains the historical trend of moral liberalization. In the past, people's moral beliefs were heavily shaped by biases – emotional, cultural, and evolutionary. Liberalism emerges from rational reflection that corrects for these biases. For example, people tend to have a preference for the safety and wellbeing of their own children over the safety and wellbeing of other people. This would seem to be a bias which stems from evolutionary pressure – the evolutionary explanation being quite straightforward: looking out for the wellbeing of one's own children would presumably better their chance of survival and ensure that those genes are passed down. However, it is also fairly easy, using reason, to conclude that one's children should not enjoy a morally privileged position to the children of the other people around us. In this way, we see how reason can allow individuals to overcome bias in order to get closer to a morally correct view. In each generation, a few individuals manage to reason their way a bit closer to objective moral truth, though they remain partly constrained by their cultural context. Huemer cites John Locke as an example: though Locke advanced religious tolerance, he excluded atheists – a partial but significant step. Each successive generation builds on these steps, moving closer to liberal ideals. Because these moral leaders often held influence thanks to characteristics associated with their higher moral reasoning ability – whether as writers, philosophers, or politicians – their ideas facilitated social convergence toward liberal values. Other individuals in said society who may not have thought of these new ideas on their own can be persuaded by their logical

superiority and thus as these ideas become more mainstream, society progresses towards objective moral truth.

Huemer's argument is robust, and the claim that liberalism represents an objective moral truth provides a compelling explanation for the observed phenomenon of moral convergence. That said, there are significant objections moral anti-realists might raise against Huemer's argument. He faces a high burden of proof. In the closing lines of his paper, he claims to have offered the best available explanation of the evidence for moral convergence, meaning that any alternative account at least as plausible undermines his position. This essay will contend that, due to epistemological weaknesses in Huemer's framework and the availability of an alternative explanation for moral convergence through technological progress and globalization which is at least as compelling as Huemer's explanation, his argument is not conclusive.

A critical weakness in Huemer lies in his epistemological account of moral progress. He suggests that social change occurs when an enlightened few – those with access to superior moral reasoning – grasp moral truth and move society incrementally closer to it. While his example of John Locke is illustrative, this account oversimplifies how moral shifts often unfold. Many historical movements for justice have not been driven primarily by privileged intellectuals reasoning toward truth but by the collective action of the oppressed themselves. For example the civil rights movement in the United States was spearheaded by Black activists fighting for their own rights, not by detached philosophers or academics. The motivations behind such struggles were not abstract appeals to moral principles but visceral responses to injustice: people protested not because they had deduced their rights through reason, but because they were outraged by how they were treated. As is the nature of protests, the act of going out onto the streets en masse and demonstrating, chanting, being met with brutal state sanctioned violence and meeting that violence with overpowering bravery (as opposed to publishing papers on the rational, philosophical injustice of racial discrimination), these movements appealed less to rational argument than to moral conscience, empathy, and public exposure of cruelty. This suggests that social transformation

may owe more to lived experience, solidarity, and pragmatic demands for justice than to isolated, a priori reasoning.

While defenders of Huemer might object by claiming that activism and reasoning aren't mutually exclusive, the epistemic objection still holds. It is true that activists engage in reasoning, even if informal, and that experiences of oppression can prompt reflection that highlights moral truths. However, one could maintain that such reflections are only formed post-facto in response to a primarily emotional reaction as a way of explaining why one feels something is immoral as opposed to being the means by which one concludes that something is immoral, as Huemer's framework suggests. After the two world wars, the nations of the West had witnessed the horror of war, been overcome with emotions, and concluded that war was evil and should be avoided at almost any cost (or at least took a much more adverse view towards war than societies have for the majority of history). They may then have developed countless rational arguments for why war is to be avoided – needless suffering, destructive consequences, state sovereignty – but their minds were already made up when constructing these arguments. This is inconsistent with Huemer's characterization of liberal values as moral truths discovered through rational reflection. This does not necessarily prove that moral truths are not objective, however it does illustrate that if they are, they are not discovered in the same way as the other objective facts Huemer claims they are analogous to. One does not feel an emotional response to the fact that Cosine(180°) is equal to -1 and then find a mathematical proof to justify it. Thus the epistemological weakness of Huemer's argument would be that if morality is in fact objective truth, his argument does not address why it is not in fact discovered in the same way that other objective a priori truths are discovered.

Furthermore, this paper will demonstrate how, with limited assumptions about the human desire for fair treatment in conjunction with technological progress (and subsequently globalization), an alternative explanation for moral convergence which is at least as good as Huemer's is available.

This view rests on the assumption that the desire for fair treatment arises not from reasoned morality but from self-interest. This is not to say that equality is not objectively morally correct – it might

well be – but rather that, regardless of its objective status, oppressed people will always prefer not to be oppressed. As such, there is a constant pressure from oppressed classes to resist and reject oppression.

Scientific and technological progress has radically transformed the global landscape: it has extended lifespans, unlocked unprecedented levels of wealth, reduced mortality rates, and, importantly, transformed a once vast and disconnected planet into a small and interconnected world. As societies become more materially secure and interconnected, cooperation and the adoption of liberal norms may emerge not from truth-tracking but from pragmatic adaptation to a globalized world. Oppression becomes increasingly disadvantageous when resources are abundant – making the energy and effort required to sustain exploitation less worthwhile. The Industrial Revolution, by creating an economic incentive to move away from human labor, combined with relentless pushes from the oppressed, gradually rendered slavery no longer optimal. Global interconnections allow information and ideas to travel further and faster than ever before. Revolutions and decolonial movements inspired each other, creating a domino effect. It eventually became more convenient to trade with former colonies than to exploit them. Following World War II, the democratic United States found it advantageous to support the establishment of democracies in Europe than subjugate them or treat them unfairly.

These examples show how technological progress, coupled with the assumption that oppressed people prefer not to be oppressed, can account for moral convergence independently of the existence of objective moral facts. It is at least equally possible that convergence towards liberalism resulted from the fact that liberalism is simply the most convenient moral framework for people living in a technologically advanced world, and thus that moral convergence is just a result of scientific convergence rather than convergence onto objective moral truth.

One might object that this view implicitly relies on moral reasoning, arguing that the claim that oppressed people prefer not to be oppressed is itself an application of a priori reasoning derived from moral truth. Why do people resist oppression? Could it not be because they recognize oppression as objectively immoral? This objection highlights the similarity between the idea that oppressed people resist

oppression and Huemer's own liberal principles: the moral equality of persons and respect for individual dignity.

However, this rebuttal overstates the connection. The claim that oppressed people prefer not to be oppressed is much weaker than the broader tenets of liberalism. It is entirely plausible that even if an oppressed person did not frame their suffering as a violation of moral truth, they would still resist oppression simply because of the pain and harm it causes. A person subjected to chattel slavery – the most horrendous form of human subjugation – might reject their condition not because it violates moral principles, but simply because of the immense suffering it entails. This distinction encapsulates the broader critique of Huemer's argument. While it may be that resistance to oppression aligns with objective moral truth, it is at least equally plausible that it does not. Therefore, while moral convergence may emerge from independently existing moral facts, it is at least equally plausible that it emerges from pragmatic considerations, driven by technological progress, globalization, and abundance.

In conclusion, Huemer offers a good case for moral realism, proposing that the convergence of societies on liberal values reflects an objective moral truth. However, his reliance on a model of rational progression driven by an enlightened few, coupled with the persistence of alternative explanations, weakens his position. Technological advancement and globalization present at least equally plausible reasons for observed patterns of moral convergence, suggesting that these trends may arise from pragmatic and socio-economic factors rather than from the discovery of objective moral facts. While Huemer's argument advances the debate on moral realism, it remains vulnerable to competing explanations, leaving open the question of whether liberal moral convergence truly reflects moral reality.

Works cited:

Huemer, Michael. “A Liberal Realist Answer to Debunking Skeptics: The Empirical Case for Realism.” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 173, no. 7 (2016): 1983–2010. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43895543.