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Moral epistemology: the mathematics analogy.

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Like mathematics, ethics is a human pursuit and an academic study with a storied history. Also like mathematics, ethics seems to concern objects or properties which are not directly available to sense experience. We do not see (perfect) circles or numbers and we do not see the good or the just. The philosophical literature in each area is massive, but mostly separate; ethicists tend to work on ethical problems and philosophers of mathematics tend to focus on their questions.

Call realism in mathematics the claim that there are mathematical objects and properties like sets and primeness, and realism in ethics the claim that there are moral objects or properties like the good or viciousness. One view about the relation between the epistemic questions about mathematics and those about ethics, perhaps standard, is that the problems facing realism are easier to solve in mathematics than in ethics. At least mathematicians can invoke proof; ethicists have no such parallel method for establishing their claims. The Harman objection, the claim that moral principles are not parts of our best scientific theories, indicates an asymmetry between the two cases; at least we need mathematics in science.

In the paper under review the author argues, in contrast to this common view, that the problems facing mathematical realism are less tractable than the ones facing ethical realism. The presence of mathematics in scientific theories does not justify all mathematical beliefs, since many mathematical claims are never invoked in science, and may not justify any mathematical beliefs. And the Benacerraf-Field problem for mathematical realism [P. Benacerraf, *J. Philos.* **70** (1973), no. 19, 661–679; [MR0485124 \(58 #4979\)](#); H. H. Field, *Realism, mathematics and modality*, Blackwell, New York, 1989; [MR1085718 \(92b:03003\)](#)] lacks, he argues, a cognate in the moral domain, largely because while mathematics is about objects inaccessible to our senses, moral claims are mainly about ordinary objects. Ethical principles mainly refer to abstract properties, not abstract objects.

Clarke-Doane provides a good survey of a variety of parallel views in meta-ethics and the philosophy of mathematics and makes several excellent and innovative points about the connection between the two. His observations that *a priori* acquisition of mathematical beliefs is parallel to that of ethical beliefs, seeking reflective equilibrium in each case, are especially worth noting.

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