Do you find any of the arguments for cognitivism/moral realism convincing?

Cognitivism, also referred to as moral realism, is a belief held that morality is independent of human existence. Cognitivists will state that there are such things as moral facts which we can discover, rather than morals being subjective and developed individually. To them, each judgment is true or false, and this applies to any moral judgment. I believe that rationalism and naturalism can easily be dismissed as implausible, illogical and inhuman. Kant's cold, calculated approach to ethics is irony of the highest degree, whilst Hume, Mill and Aristotle's strict moral principles undermine our human fallacies at the foundation. They make too much of an attempt to define 'good' (which surely is indefinable, just as "red" or "four" cannot be defined, only represented). For this reason, I prefer G. E. Moore's theory of Consequentialist Intuitionism. His belief that morals are intuited seems a lot more human to us, but it still has a lot of shortfalls. Overall, cognitivism has many more weaknesses than strengths, as I shall discuss.

It is, first of all, important to define cognitivism and moral realism. The beliefs state that morality is not invented, but discovered through various means (depending on the theory). Morals are objective, and part of our world, not part of us as human beings. There are moral facts which we must adhere to, and all moral judgments can be true or false. There is always a 'right' or 'wrong.'

The first of the cognitivist theories is that of rationalism, and is most commonly associated with Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant. He states that "reason by itself and independently of all appearances commands what ought to happen" [1], i.e. we can perceive what is right or wrong purely through reason. He believes that every moral judgment should be made using our reason, and that it will always provide the 'right' course of action. This follows Kant's idea of a 'categorical imperative,' which is what we are required to do in a certain situation. This creates a kind of set Moral Law based on universalised maxims, which basically means that an action

can only be right if it can be universalised. This, according to Kant, leads to a perfect moral system. To his favour, the theory is very simple to understand, and in many ways it is logical, but from there on it raises more questions than it answers. First of all, how can morals possible be independent? If we are to know them a priori, then where does this knowledge come from? It is ludicrous to assume that this knowledge of the moral law appears from nowhere. Arthur Schopenhauer raised this point in his critique of Kant's moral theory: Kant attempted to give a foundation to Ethics independent of this will, and establish it without metaphysical hypotheses, and there was no longer any justification for taking as its basis the words " thou shalt," and " it is thy duty " (that is, the imperative form), without first deducing the truth thereof from some other source." [2] This very well asks this question. Another very large issue with Kant's theory is his intense focus on reason. I disagree strongly with this. How can moral decisions be made in a complete absence of emotion? Surely emotions and feelings form the basis of our judgments? Schopenhauer illustrates the impossibility of a "loveless doer of good, who is indifferent to the sufferings of other people" [2]. This seems like a very obvious fallacy, and I agree with it. It completely undermines the whole point of morality, for surely one can appreciate the absurdity of a "loveless doer of good." Where does this categorical duty arise from, if not emotion? Reason does not motivate man, it guides him. Emotions drive man to perform action, but Kant completely overlooks this, even though fellow rationalist David Hume (who Kant once claimed "awoke him from his dogmatism") makes this point: "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." [3] Overall, Kant's rationalism is a very weak theory (not unlike the bulk of his work, I daresay), and I completely disagree with every single part of it. How this theory is even being discussed in today's society, let alone in the 16th/17th Century leaves me in the dark. It is not even worth considering as a moral theory, and should be dismissed from consideration immediately.

The second theory is less specific, referring more to several similarly-aimed theories, rather than just one. These theories are John Stuart Mill's

Utilitarianism and Aristotle's Theory of Virtue in particular. Naturalism is a theory that focuses on 'good' as natural properties. This can be a multitude of things. John Stuart Mill said that "the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." [4] This means, in essence, that happiness is the ultimate good. Obviously, happiness is a natural principle, and therefore it makes Utilitarianism a naturalistic theory. Aristotle's virtue theory is somewhat different. It refers to set virtues that must be followed in order to reach the Highest Happiness, which is fulfillment of one's function as a human being. [5] This means that Aristotle's definition of 'good' is to fulfill the function of your soul, which involves living a virtuous life. In general, these theories seem quite sensible, as naturalistic properties are a logical place to start within morality. Unfortunately, there is one very major problem which G.E. Moore pointed out, and it is known as the Naturalistic Fallacy. This fallacy describes how one cannot possibly define 'good', just as you cannot define 'blue' or 'six'. They are purely concepts we assign to certain things, not objective definites. Moore said that "'Good' is one of those innumerable objects of thought which are themselves incapable of definition, because they are the ultimate terms by reference to which whatever is capable of definition must be defined." [6] Obviously the naturalistic theories attempt to make sense of 'good' by definition, and that is the most obvious problem with them. How can one possibly say that one thing in particular means 'good?' Surely it's a matter of opinion, and entirely subjective? And, as with other cognitivist theories, there is the problem of objective morality. Where does this 'happiness' and these 'virtues' come from? Are they not subjective human inventions, not discoveries? Overall, this is also a very weak theory, although it does have some stronger points than rationalism. However, I disagree with this theory as well; since it offers a strict approach to ethics and makes us define 'good', which I think defeats the whole object of morality.

The third and final theory is also, in my opinion, the strongest. G.E. Moore devised this theory as retaliation the naturalists. He draws inspiration from

their committing of the naturalistic fallacy and proposes a completely different cognitive theory. Moore, in his Principia Ethika [6], states that there is no need to define 'good' (see quote above). Our intuition reveals what is right or wrong without the need for a set 'good.' As an empiricist and a consequentialist, Moore believed that one could intuit, through experience, what the right decision would be in a moral judgment. Intuition would help us discover the objective morals and use them correctly. The right application was to find "friendship", according to Moore. W.D. Ross took an interesting approach and turned this on its head, defining it instead as a deontological theory. In his most famous work, The Right and the Good, he said that "the moral order...is just as much part of the fundamental nature of the universe (and...of any possible universe in which there are moral agents at all) as is the spatial or numerical structure expressed in the axioms of geometry or arithmetic." [7] Basically, he states that the morals are part of the universe itself, and that we don't need experience to interpret it, we need only our intuition, which will tell us them directly. Although this theory is a lot more human and obvious to us, and is the strongest of the three theories, it stills falls short, and is a fairly weak theory. Isn't Moore's suggestion of 'friendship' a thinly veiled attempt at definition of 'good', or at the very least a specific instruction? Not especially 'intuitive.' Also, where do we intuit these morals from? Sorely morality in general cannot be objective (which, granted, is a problem with cognitivism, not specifically intuitionism). Again, this is a weak theory, even though it prevails over the other two.

In the end, cognitivism as a whole is not especially useful as a guide as to where morals come from. I stated earlier that cognitivism has many more weaknesses than strengths, and I displayed that through my various condemnations of the theories individually, and also of cognitivism as a whole. Surely morality cannot be objective? Isn't the whole point of morals the fact that they are individual and developed subjectively? Surely there would be no moral disagreement if they in fact were objective, but that is obviously not the case. No, the answer lies in the direct counterpart of cognitivism, non-cognitivism. Morality is for certain subjective, as it is part of our human nature to form opinions based on

emotion and preference, not in principles which are apparently entwined in this world we live in. Cognitivism, as a whole, is completely useless in terms of moral analysis and I completely and utterly disagree with all it states.

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