Material Reality as the Basis for Morality

Description

This is a continuation of *Are You Minding What Matters?* (see the [previous post](#)):

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Material Reality as the Basis for Morality

As you can see, the popular theories fail to provide a sound basis for morality. If we want a guide for making moral decisions, we have to look elsewhere. In Lesson One, we learned that materialism is true and that material reality is thus the standard by which we can measure the truth of any statement. Morality based on material reality, or truth-based morality, holds that morality is not an exception to this rule. We can evaluate the truth of moral statements in the same way that we evaluate the truth of other statements.

Any time we evaluate whether a statement is true, we engage in reasoning that can be represented in an argument-like structure. And by "argument" here, I'm not talking about heated disagreement or dispute. I'm just talking about providing reasons for a certain conclusion. We need to take a couple of minutes to make sure we understand "argumentation" since it will help us in seeing how morality relates to material reality. If this seems a little technical at first, hang in there; this is knowledge worth learning.

Any idea we are evaluating can be stated as a conclusion of an argument, and any proposed reason in favor of that conclusion can be stated as premises. This is what we did in Lesson One with our argument for materialism. Here it is again:

Premise 1: Either immateriality exists, or materialism is true.
Premise 2: Immateriality does not exist.
Conclusion: Therefore, materialism is true.

With any argument, there are two aspects that need to be considered: its structure and its content. The structure of an argument consists of the relationships each component has to the other components. When the structure is such that the conclusion is completely derivable from the premises, it is called a valid argument. I'll show you what I mean. With the above argument, the premises take the structure:

Premise 1: Either A or B
Premise 2: Not A
Conclusion: Therefore, __

What should the conclusion be? If the answer didn't immediately jump out to you, please take a moment to reread the above argument and it should become pretty obvious pretty quickly. The answer is "Therefore, B." Notice how you are able to determine what the conclusion has to be based solely on the information provided in the premises. That is what it means for an argument to

be "valid." And when we have a valid argument structure, it means we are reasoning correctly from our premises to our conclusion.

The second element, as I mentioned, is the content. This is where one has to consider whether each premise is true. Sticking with our example, is it true that "either immateriality exists or materialism is true"? As we saw in Lesson One, that is indeed true since the existence of immateriality is genuinely dichotomous with materialism. And for premise 2, is it true that "immateriality does not exist"? Again, as we saw in Lesson One, "immateriality does not exist" is necessarily a true statement since the very notion of immateriality is the notion of nonexistence, and thus, to say that it exists would be an inherent contradiction. When all the premises of a valid argument are true, it is called a sound argument. Since a sound argument has true premises and correct reasoning from the premises to a conclusion, the conclusion is unavoidably true.

If someone makes a statement that is not true, you can know for certain that somewhere in their reasoning process they have either used an invalid reasoning structure, or they have used a premise that is not true (or both). To know whether an argument is valid, one simply has to determine whether the structure of the argument allows you to derive the conclusion based solely on the premises. And to know whether it is sound, one has to additionally consider whether the premises are true by seeing whether they match material reality. This is done by considering potential evidence and reasoning about that evidence (ideally, with valid reasoning). And what is evidence? Evidence is any aspect of material reality that is exclusively concordant with a certain idea over any competing idea. Take, for example, the fact that wherever one might stand on the earth, the point of the sky directly overhead has the appearance of the top of a dome. This fact is exclusively concordant with the idea that the earth is a spheroid. No competing idea regarding the shape of the earth matches this fact of material reality, and thus, this fact is evidence for the idea of a spheroid earth. (If the earth were flat, for example, the closer one would get to the edge of the earth, the further away the center of the sky-dome would appear.)

Every time we evaluate whether an idea is true, what we engage in is a process that involves both reasoning (represented by the structure of an argument and expressed in terms of validity) and material evidence (represented by the content of the premises of an argument and expressed in terms of truth). The reason both aspects are involved is that, when we are evaluating what is true, we are engaging the intersection between some portion of the material world and our mental model of that portion of the world.

This intersection between the external world and our thinking about the world is at play whether we are evaluating descriptive statements about how the world is or whether we are evaluating prescriptive moral statements and the actions based upon them. Thus, argument and evidence are just as relevant for morality as for any other subject.

To have warrant for considering a moral statement to be true, the reasoning by which we support that moral statement needs to have a valid structure and the content of the premises needs to be true – the premises need to match material reality. Whenever someone makes a moral statement that is not true, it is guaranteed that somewhere in their reasoning process there is an invalid structure to their argument, or they have at least one untrue premise (or both).

When it comes to the basis for considering an action to be moral or immoral, it comes down to whether the action is based on a true or false idea. For example, the action of stealing a car is, in a very direct and immediate sense, based on an idea in the mind of the car thief that goes something like this: "I should steal this car." And they may support this idea through any number of

justifications which can be represented as premises in an argument for the conclusion "I should steal this car." If stealing the car is immoral (and it is), then somewhere in the reasoning process in favor of the statement "I should steal this car," there will be an invalid structure to the argumentation or an untrue premise (or both). For a positive example, consider the action of getting vaccinated against COVID-19. This action is pretty directly based on an idea that can be represented by the statement, "I should get vaccinated." If getting vaccinated is moral (and it is), then one should be able to support the proposition "I should get vaccinated" with arguments that are valid in their structure and true in their premises (and thus sound).

Taking materialism to heart shows us that morality must have its basis in material reality. If everything just said hasn't been enough to convince you, consider this argument:

Premise 1: The truth of every claim is determined by whether it corresponds to material reality.
Premise 2: "Every claim" includes "every moral claim."
Conclusion: Therefore, the truth of every moral claim is determined by whether it corresponds to material reality.

This shows that the reach of materialism extends even to morality. And as we have seen, this extends from ideas related to moral issues to moral actions themselves since every time we choose to commit an action, that choice is an action of our mind – a thought process wherein we are considering ideas and making choices based on those ideas. The actions we choose to carry out are based on ideas that can be represented as prescriptive statements, the truth of which can be evaluated just like any other statement. The terms "moral" and "immoral" are thus parallel to "true" and "false." When a *statement* matches material reality, it is true; when it doesn't match material reality, it is false. When an *action* is based on an idea that matches material reality, it is "moral;" when it is based on an idea that doesn't match material reality, it is "immoral." And whether we are evaluating a descriptive statement or evaluating an action via the prescriptive statement upon which it is based, we can do so by careful and sound reasoning with material evidence.