

The Illusion of the Illusion of Moral Decline

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(Biguenet, 2017)

1. Introduction

Adam Mastroianni and Daniel Gilbert in their paper, “The Illusion of Moral Decline,” seek to question the widely held view that morality is declining (Mastroianni and Gilbert, 2023). The view that morality is declining has been held by people in at least 60 nations across the planet, and for at least 70 years. Individuals believe that the cause of this decline in morality is due to two factors, proposition (P₁): (1) the decline in morality as people age, and (2) the decrease in mortality of successive generations. However, contrary to this, Mastroianni and Gilbert (henceforth “M&G”) present empirical evidence (survey data) for the proposition (P₂): that people’s reports of the morality of their contemporaries have in fact *not decreased* over time. From this, they conclude that the common perception of moral decline is an illusion, or simply mistaken. We argue here that M&G’s argument, while supported by a detailed statistical analysis, is fundamentally flawed, since even granted the truth of the premise that people’s reports of the morality of their contemporaries have not decreased over time (P₂), it does not follow that (P₁) is inconsistent with this, or false. Hence the core argument of the paper is logically invalid.

2. The Proposition that Morality is Declining

M&G characterise morality very broadly as people’s treatment of each other. In an internet reflection on his *Nature* paper, M says that the same results would be reached if instead of morality they used terms such as “kindness,” “honesty,” and “respect”

(Mastroianni, 2023). M&G examined many data bases for surveys that examined people's perceptions of whether or not morality had declined over time. They found that 84 percent of those morality surveys had found that respondents believed that morality had declined. The belief that morality had declined was held by people throughout their entire lives, by young and old and across the political spectrum, from liberals to conservatives.

However, M&G argue against this common belief of the majority of people. One argument against the idea that morality has declined, is that at least in terms of violence in life, as Steven Pinker has claimed, modern life is not subjected to "constant battles," as might characterise the distant past, especially prehistory (Pinker, 2011). It can be agreed as well, that in this sense, moral ideals, such as respect for human life, are more common today than 3,000 + years ago. But the debate M says is based upon modernity, mainly within people's life times, and is more concerned with issues such as people not treating others with respect, rather than whether or not murder and terrorism rates are increasing. Of relevance then are questions that survey companies have been asking for decades such as, "Were you treated with respect today?" and "Have you helped a stranger this week?" If morality is declining, M&G contend, then people's reports of their perception of current morality should also have declined.

However, based upon 107 surveys that were delivered to 4,483,136 people from 1965 to 2020, it was found that that reports by people of their contemporaries, showed that morality was stable over this time. This is not due to any change in the meanings of key words over that time, since many surveys measured unambiguous moral behaviour, such as whether one had been assaulted or robbed. As well, it is possible that over this time there was no perception of a decline in morality because things had hit rock bottom anyway, but that is not in accordance with the survey evidence. Hence, M&G conclude that the almost universal belief that morality has declined, because individuals became less moral over time, and that there was a replacement of more moral people by less moral people, is a mistaken belief, an illusion. But, does this follow, even if we accept the truth of propositions (P₁) and (P₂)?

3. Refutation and Conclusion

One obvious response to M&G's argument, not considered by them, is that they have not shown that the thesis of the decline of morality is an illusion. Rather, what has been shown is that *prima facie*, people hold inconsistent beliefs. This is a more reasonable conclusion to draw from their data, since the mere demonstration that reports of the morality of contemporaries have not declined over time, proposition (P₂), does not in itself logically show that the belief that morality is declining over time is false. Indeed, their own data shows that it is in fact true. M&G reach their conclusion only by implicitly accepting that people cannot hold inconsistent beliefs. While it

would be a lengthy tangent to show that this is indeed conceivable, work in the field of paraconsistent logic is based on this very assumption, where the logical and semantical paradoxes are taken to be both true and false (Priest, 2006). If a respectable field of mathematical logic can accept the idea that inconsistent beliefs can be rationally held, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that ordinary people may also hold inconsistent beliefs, based upon different evidence; logical “schizophrenia.” So, on this basis, M&G’s thesis that the perception of the decline of morality is an illusion, can be rejected.

Further, even if it were the case that (P₁) and (P₂), could not both be true, there is no independent reason for rejecting (P₁) on the basis of an inconsistency with (P₂), rather than (P₂); this is an unproven assumption made by M&G.

However, we contend that propositions (P₁) and (P₂) can be consistently held. To prove the consistency of statements by means of model theory involves showing that the statements can be both true. Trivially, M&G’s paper does just that, since evidence is given for both (P₁) and (P₂), only they make the assumption that (P₁) is false, which we have shown is not justified without an independent argument, which is not given.

Now for a thought experiment. Let us consider contemporary America, and suppose that we Australians live there in a nice city that’s exactly like quiet Adelaide. In surveys, we would report that there has been no real decline in the morality of our contemporaries, based upon people in our lives. Things have gone on day-to-day, no assaults, no robberies, things are pretty ordinary, really. Quality of life is high, one of the better cities of the world. Lucky us.

Yet, we as long-distance Americans still hold that morality is declining, and not just that, but that American society is in a powder keg situation. This belief is not based on personal perceptions, for our lives are uneventful, but on surveys once more, that indicate that troubled times are ahead. In 2018, Rasmussen reported that 31 percent of US voters thought that the US would experience a civil war in the next five years, and 11 percent believed that it was very likely (Rasmussen Reports, 2018). By August 2022, research by YouGov and the *Economist* found that over two-fifths of Americans believed that civil war was “somewhat likely” in the next decade (Pengelly, 2022). A cross-sectional nationwide US survey in May-June 2022 of 8,620 respondents found that 50.1 percent of people agreed that “in the next few years, there will be a civil war in the United States,” and 6,708 respondents considered violence to be justified to achieve political objectives, including 7.1 percent willing to kill a person (Ortega, 2023).

Such statistics are sufficient, we contend, to make any morally decent person feel morally depressed, and feel dread about the moral future, for there are many

scenarios that could spark such a civil war, that we need not discuss here. But, at a minimum, one could feel, as we do, that there is a decline in morality, for such results do even exist. But such results exist. Hence, there is a decline in morality, at least in America. If civil war occurs, this decline would be undeniable, as the death toll rises. Yet, in our thought experiment, we could still report that the morality of our immediate contemporaries, in day-to-day life, has not decreased, provided none of us are involved in any “kinetics,” and our city remained untouched by violence. Therefore, propositions (P₁) and (P₂) are consistent, and thus M&G do not prove their thesis, even given the truth of the empirical evidence of their paper. Hence, M&G have not proven their thesis.

4. Afterword (In A Different Tone)

We imagine that a kindly reviewer, who does not exist, and is a purely imaginary Meinongian entity, and as well, is not associated with the noble journal in which the article we criticized was published, in any way (so no risqué inferences or guesses of any identification on the basis of the following solemn comments; it is just a waking philosopher’s nightmare), has objected (we imagine) to our essay, on the grounds that ... well ... it is not clear what the grounds are. The objection in the non-existent email that we therefore didn’t receive, would have been bound by confidentiality (and backed by the law), so it couldn’t be quoted or identified in any way, even if it did exist; but if it had existed, it would have been made in an ungrammatical sentence that delivered the money shot. So it would have left us scratching our heads; even more intensely than usual.

What the reviewer would have seemed to be getting at, the fortune teller at the local shopping center told us after pocketing the \$20 from our welfare payment, is that we philosophers are in the big STEM league now discussing this super-cool paper, which has lots of stunning, sexy statistics, so merely pointing out supposed deductive logical errors in the paper does not cut the mustard, or as they say in the big STEM league, get over the bar.

“You guys think you have shown that people are simply holding inconsistent beliefs, but you need to get *direct evidence* of this, rather than pointing out that it is a logical deduction from the paper (even if it is), presumably by your own intense surveys in supermarkets, fed into some computer package like R, SPSS, anything. Even ChatGPT would do better than you morons have done; we want quantitative analyses ... live for them! Then, when you have some real cool data, get back to us; and we will recommend rejection of your paper on other grounds (does not meet undefined criteria. etc); we are busy people and don’t have time for your logic-chopping BS.

As well, although you quote surveys indicating that the US might erupt into civil war, which we all agree is terrible, where is your data/surveys/statistics, that such beliefs indicate that moral decline has occurred? And even if civil war did level the US into a smouldering ruin, leaving corpses piled 200 high on every street, does that really show that moral decline has occurred? Scientific evidence, please!”

Yep, that got us, shot us down in mid-flight; the imaginary top gun(s) would have said that we have been barking up the wrong gum tree, so dear readers, please disregard everything above, including this very sentence!

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