

Moral Realism

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Introduction

People come, early and easily, to think in moral terms: to see many things as good or bad, to view various options as right or wrong, to think of particular distributions as fair or unfair, to consider certain people virtuous and others vicious.[1] What they think, when they are thinking in these terms, often has a large impact on their decisions and actions as well as on their responses to what others do. People forego attractive possibilities when they think pursuing them would be wrong, they push themselves to face death if they think it their duty, they go to trouble to raise their kids to be virtuous, and they pursue things they take to be valuable. At the same time they admire those who are courageous and condemn people they judge to be unjust. Moral thinking is a familiar and vital aspect of our lives. Yet when people ask themselves honestly what it is they are thinking, in thinking some acts are right and others wrong, that some things are good, others bad, that some character traits are virtues, other vices, it turns out to be extremely difficult to say. This raises a puzzle that is at the center of our understanding of our selves and of our understanding of morality. Moral realism represents one way in which this puzzle might be addressed.

There is little doubt that the capacity to think in moral terms is tied in interesting and important ways to our emotions and feelings. Indeed, there's reason to suspect that in some cases people count as good whatever they like and reject as bad what they don't, that they register anything that is disadvantageous to themselves as unfair and find no such objection to what brings them benefit. But these suspicions travel with a criticism: that people who use the terms in these ways don't (yet) fully understand what they are claiming in saying that something is good or bad, fair or not.

The criticism reflects the fact that in thinking morally we seem not merely to be expressing or reporting our emotions and feelings. Rather, so it seems, we are expressing beliefs about the world, about how it is and should be. Moreover, the beliefs we express -- again, so it seems -- are either true or false (depending on how things really are and should be) and when they are true, it is not simply because we think they are. Thus, if things are as they appear, in thinking morally we are committed to there being moral facts. And in making moral judgments we are making claims about what those facts are, claims that will be true or false depending on whether we get the facts right. That things *seem* this way is pretty uncontroversial.

Moral Realism

With these appearances in mind, we are in a good position to characterize moral realism: it is the view that, in these respects, things are really as they seem. Moral realists hold that there are moral facts, that it is in light of these

facts that peoples' moral judgments are true or false, and that the facts being what they are (and so the judgments being true, when they are) is not merely a reflection of our *thinking* the facts are one way or another. That is, moral facts are what they are even when we see them incorrectly or not at all.

Moral realists thus all share the view that there are moral facts in light of which our moral judgments prove to be true or false. Yet they needn't, and don't, all share any particular view about what those facts are, and they might well not be confident of any view at all. When it comes to moral matters, there is no less disagreement among realists than among people at large and no incompatibility between being a realist and thinking oneself not in a good position to know what the facts are.

Furthermore, being a realist is compatible with holding a truly radical view of the moral facts. As much as realism tries to conserve the appearances when it comes to accounting for the nature of moral thought and its commitment to moral facts, there is nothing morally conservative about its implications. One might well be a moral realist while holding that the vast majority of mankind has misunderstood the demands of justice or the nature of virtue. Indeed, according to moral realists, holding that justice or virtue have been misunderstood only makes sense if one thinks there is a fact of the matter about what justice and virtue are, a fact that others have failed to get right.

Finally, among realists there is serious disagreement even about what sort of thing a moral fact is. Thus some realists hold that moral facts are just a kind of natural fact, while others hold they are nonnatural or even supernatural. Some realists hold that moral facts are discoverable by empirical enquiry, while others see rational intuition or divine inspiration as essential to moral knowledge. Moreover, some realists believe that while there genuinely are moral facts, those facts are themselves dependent upon, and a reflection of, human nature or social practice. They thus combine a commitment to moral facts with a relativist or a contractarian or constructivist account of those facts.[2] Such views reject the idea that the moral facts exist independent of humans and their various capacities or practices. Yet, to the extent they are advanced as capturing accurately what the moral facts actually are, they are versions of moral realism. Needless to say, what one person might see as nicely accounting for the nature of moral facts, another might see as missing something essential or even as completely changing the subject.[3] Thus, what one person might embrace as a successful defense of moral realism, another might see as, at best, a view one would embrace once one had given up on the thought that there are genuine moral facts.

Moral Anti-realism

Anti-realists about morality reject the idea that there are moral facts and so reject the idea that, in the respects mentioned above, things really are as they seem. Some anti-realists acknowledge that when we think in moral terms we are committed to there being moral facts. Moral thought and practice, they hold,

presupposes and makes good sense only in light of there actually being moral facts. To this extent, they agree with moral realists. They go on to argue, however, that the presupposition is false, so our common moral practice is built on a mistake. Anti-realists of this persuasion are often characterized as “Error Theorists.” Their shared view is that moral thought and practice rests on an error and the error is to suppose that there are moral facts.[4]

Other anti-realists, however, reject as mistaken the idea that moral thought and practice presupposes there actually being moral facts. They reject the idea that in making moral judgments we are expressing beliefs that might be true or false in light of (putative) moral facts. Indeed, they argue, a proper understanding of moral thought and practice shows that no appeal need be made to moral facts and that moral judgments should not be seen as being true or false in the way that nonmoral judgments concerning genuine matters of fact are either true or false. They of course acknowledge that people do sometimes speak of moral facts and of their own or other peoples’ moral judgments being true or false. But such talk is misguided, they argue, if the appeal to moral facts and the truth of moral judgments is supposed to have any substantive implications when it comes to thinking about the real features of the world. Alternatively, it is trivial, they point out, if to say there are moral facts and that some moral judgments are true is simply another way of expressing one’s moral commitments with no further commitments whatsoever. Either way, the fact that people sometimes speak of moral facts and the truth of moral judgments should not be taken as evidence that we are committed, as moral realists claim, to there being genuine moral facts and moral truths.

This kind of anti-realism rests on drawing a contrast between, on the one hand, some areas of thought and talk (about, for instance, empirical matters concerning the external world) where facts are genuinely at issue and the judgments people make are literally, in light of those facts, either true or false and, on the other hand, moral thought and talk, where -- the anti-realists maintain -- facts are not genuinely at issue and so the judgments people make are not literally, in light of such facts, either true or false. Anti-realists of this persuasion are often called noncognitivists.[5] Their shared view is that moral thought and talk carries no “cognitive content” and so neither purports to report facts nor expresses a judgment that might be true because it gets the facts right.

While anti-realists all reject the idea that there are moral facts in light of which some moral judgments are literally true, they need not, for that reason, be critics of moral thought. Noncognitivists, for instance, can perfectly consistently reject the idea that in thinking something good we are, in the way realists hold, committed to the existence of moral facts, and yet themselves think that moral thought and talk is itself good.[6] And error theorists too, despite their view that moral thought is cognitive and carries commitments we have reason to think are false, can be in favor of perpetuating the practice – they can think of it as a useful fiction and can even consistently believe (as long as they are not error theorists about all evaluative judgments) that it is good.

Of course, many anti-realists are critics of moral thought. Some suggest that morality is nothing more than a myth introduced to keep people docile and easy to manage. Others see it as an extreme and dangerous version of our natural tendency to objectify our own tastes and force others to accommodate our wishes. And still others see moral thought as a vestige of outmoded and now indefensible ways of understanding our place in the world.

In any case, and by all accounts, moral realism is, at least initially, the default position. It fits most naturally with what we seem to be doing in making moral claims and it makes good sense of how we think through, argue about, and take stands concerning, moral issues.

Yet the burden can shift quickly. For while moral realists seem to have common practice on their side, they face a tremendous challenge: to make sense of what moral facts are, of how they relate to various other facts, of how we might learn about moral facts, and of why those facts matter to what we should do. If, as it seems, in making moral judgments we are claiming that things are a certain way, morally, what are we claiming? What makes it true that some act is wrong, another right, that one experience is genuinely valuable, another not? How does the nonmoral fact that some act was malicious (for instance) relate to it being morally? Finally, why do the facts (supposing there are some) that make moral claims true, set the standard for our behavior? A satisfying defense of moral realism seems to require answers to these questions.

Realists and anti-realists alike grant that some acts are malicious, others kind, that some are pleasant, others painful, that some accord with prevailing cultural standards, others conflict with such standards. None of this is in dispute. But are there, in addition to facts of this sort, facts about what is morally right or wrong, virtuous or vicious, good or bad? That is the issue that divides realists from anti-realists. And the job of defending realism requires giving a plausible account of the nature of moral facts. This, in turn, involves shouldering metaphysical, epistemic, and justificatory burdens. Specifically, moral realists need to offer an account of moral facts (i) that make sense of how those facts fit with other facts in the world, (ii) that shows them to be facts to which we might have some access, such that we might have evidence for our beliefs concerning them, and finally (iii) that reveals the facts as providing reasons to act or not act in various ways.

Re-identifying Moral Facts in Nonmoral Terms

Sensitive to the challenge, some moral realists have offered a range of different accounts that identify moral facts with facts that are taken to be less problematic. In *identifying* the moral facts with less problematic facts, they are holding not just that what is right or wrong depends in some way on these facts but that facts about what is right or wrong are those very facts.

Focusing just on the question of what it is for something to be good, for instance, some people have maintained that to be good is simply to be pleasant.

Others have held that what is good is whatever satisfies a desire or perhaps a desire we desire to have. And still others have argued that for something to be good is for it to be such that a fully informed person would approve of it.

Switching from what is good to what is right, people have maintained that what makes an act morally right is that it maximizes happiness when all are taken into account, or that an act is morally right -- for a person, in a particular culture -- if and because it conforms to standards that are embraced by most people in that person's culture.

Each of these views (as well as many others that have been defended) offers an account of the moral facts that leaves those facts no more problematic than the relatively mundane empirical facts with which they are being identified, and in effect reduced, by these accounts. If one or another such account is correct, then moral facts are, when it comes to metaphysics, easy to accommodate. Indeed, a major attraction of these accounts is their ability to take the metaphysical mystery out of morality and offer a clear-headed account of the nature of moral facts. At the same time, if such an account is correct, there would be no special difficulty in thinking that we might get evidence as to whether something is good or right. And, finally, each of the proposals has some claim to having given an account of moral facts that reveals why such facts provide people with reasons to act, or refrain from acting, in various ways.

At the turn of the twentieth century, accounts of morality that identified moral properties with empirically discoverable natural features of the world were quickly gaining adherents. While there was serious disagreement as to which features in particular were the right ones, more and more people came to think that moral thoughts and claims must be about, and true in light of, the sort of natural properties that were open to empirical investigation.

The main alternative to such a view was that moral properties should be identified not with empirical features of the world, but with facts about God. Assuming, as most defenders of latter view did, that God existed, identifying what was good with what pleased God, and what was right with what accorded with God's will, worked to ensure that a commitment to moral facts did not introduce any new mystery. Moral facts are, on this account, plain matters of fact about God – even if often highly controversial and difficult to establish.[7]

Whichever view one embraced, whether one identified moral facts with natural facts or with religious facts about God, the idea was that moral thought and talk was committed to properties, and facts, and truths, that could just as well be expressed in nonmoral terms. Whether this worked to make moral realism more plausible depended, of course, on one's views of the properties, facts, and truths, expressed in those nonmoral terms. Usually, though, the aim of those offering such accounts was both to clarify the nature of morality and to show that believing in moral facts did not require metaphysical or epistemological commitments beyond those one had already taken on board.

The Open Question Argument

Early in the twentieth century, all of these views, secular and non-secular alike, faced a challenge that many have thought devastating and that has, in any case, largely structured the debate about moral realism since. This challenge came in the form of G.E. Moore's (1903) incredibly influential Open Question Argument. Moore's aim, in deploying the argument, was to show that all attempts to identify moral properties with properties that might be described in nonmoral terms fail. The argument goes like this:

To the question "what is good?" -- where we are not asking what things are good but rather what is the property goodness -- there seem to be three and only three possible answers:

- (1) goodness is a complex property that can be broken down by analysis into its parts, in which case one can offer an illuminating definition of the property that works by identifying the various parts that combine to constitute goodness (in the same way that, for instance, one might define the property of being a bachelor as being a male human over a certain age who is unmarried) or
- (2) goodness is a simple property that itself cannot be broken down by analysis into parts, in which case the only accurate definitions are those that trade in synonyms and so shed no real light on the nature of the property. (There must be at least some simple properties, Moore argued, since they are needed as the building blocks out of which all more complex properties would have to be built) or
- (3) goodness is no property at all and the word 'good' is meaningless, in which case, of course, no definition can be offered.

Having set out these three possibilities, Moore first argued that goodness is not a complex and analyzable property, on the following grounds: Consider any proposed definition of 'good,' where the definition picks out some complex set of properties, *x* (satisfying a preference, say, or pleasing God, or whatever) and defines being good as being *x*, and so says, "*x* is good." (Here, the 'is' is the 'is of identity' rather than the 'is of attribution.')

In each case, the proposal is purporting to offer an illuminating definition of goodness that explains its nature by identifying its constituent parts.

The test of any such definition, Moore maintained, was whether those who genuinely understood the terms in which the definition was offered recognized as clear – indeed as trivially obvious – that the property being defined and the complex of properties offered as defining it, were one and the same. Consider, for instance, the question of whether some unmarried male human over 21 is a bachelor. Anyone who understands the question, it seems, knows right away

what the answer is, without having to investigate the world or collect additional evidence. In contrast, Moore thought, for any definition of goodness that identifies being good with some complex property of being *x*, there will remain a substantive question of whether or not something is good even if it is clearly *x*. And this fact shows, he held, that each such definition is inadequate. Take, for example, the proposal that goodness should be identified with (the complex property of) satisfying a preference – so that, according to this definition, being good and satisfying a preference are supposed to be one and the same thing. Were the definition correct, anyone who understands the relevant terms should recognize as trivially obvious that anything that satisfies a preference is (in virtue of that) good. But, in fact, it is a substantive question whether satisfying a sadist's preference for the suffering of others is good at all.

That this is a substantive question – an “open” question – shows, Moore maintained, that ‘satisfies a preference’ and ‘good’ differ in meaning (since thinking something satisfies a preference is not identical to thinking it good) and that they therefore refer to different properties. If they did have the same meaning and referred to the same properties, then asking whether something that satisfies a preference is good would not be an open question, in exactly the way asking whether bachelors are married is not substantive. Substitute whatever definition of ‘good’ you please into the original proposition ‘*x* is good,’ and the question will, Moore claimed, remain open.

If every proposed definition fails the test, Moore concluded, no definition that identifies goodness with a complex property is adequate. Thus, in claiming that something is good, we are claiming something different from what we are when claiming it satisfies a preference, or pleases God, or is approved of by the majority, etc.

Significantly, the very same considerations tell against various popular proposals that identify goodness with a simple natural property, such as pleasure. To ask whether something pleasant is actually good (think here of the pleasure a sadist might enjoy on hurting someone) is again to raise an open question – a question the answer to which is not settled merely by knowing the meaning of the terms in question. Other simple properties that might be expressed in nonmoral terms fare no better. Any attempt to define goodness in nonmoral terms -- either by identifying it with a complex property that might be analyzed into parts, or even with the sort of simple properties some have proposed will -- Moore concluded, fail.[8]

That leaves two possibilities. Either goodness is a simple, *sui generis*, property, that is distinct from all the properties various theories have privileged, or it is no property at all. Against this last possibility – that goodness is not a property and, therefore, ‘good’ is meaningless -- Moore pointed to the *intelligibility* of the various open questions. That it makes sense to ask whether what satisfies a preference is good, or whether some pleasure is good, shows

that all the terms involved are meaningful. Otherwise we would treat the question itself as nonsense. So that option is ruled out.

Goodness, therefore, must be a simple, *sui generis*, property, that should not be thought identical to any of the properties, simple or complex, that we might describe in nonmoral terms. To identify it with some such property leads inevitably, Moore thought, to serious confusion and corrupt arguments.

Moore acknowledged that all things that are good might share some other property – they might all be pleasant, for instance, or all such that if we were informed we would approve of them, or all compatible with God's will. Whether things are this way or not, he argued, is something that can be settled only by investigating cases. But even if all good things do share both the property of being good and some other property, the properties would, for all that, still be different. “[G]ood is good, and that is the end of the matter...if I am asked ‘How is good to be defined?’ my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it.” (Moore, 1903, p. 6)

Thinking that no illumination, and serious confusion, came from attempts to define, or even just give an account of, goodness, Moore turned his attention to trying to discover what things had the property of being good. He came to the conclusion that, while happiness is among those things that are good, so are truth, beauty, and knowledge. In fact, he argued that a great variety of things were good just as a great variety of things are yellow. Although no one of them, nor all of them taken together, should be identified with goodness, each of them had the property of being good. He then went on, in the process of defending utilitarianism, to argue that ‘right’, unlike ‘good’, *could* be analyzed. His view was that for an action to be right is for it to be such that it produces the greatest possible amount of goodness. Where he differed from the old style utilitarians, who embraced some version of naturalism, was in his view that goodness could not, in turn, be identified with any natural property.

Soon people applied the same line of reasoning to other moral concepts, arguing that rightness and courageousness, no less than goodness, were not definable. Rejecting Moore's view that in saying something is right we are saying that no alternative has better consequences, W.D. Ross (1930) pointed out that it was, apparently, an open question whether some option that admittedly had the best consequences (as, for instance, lying sometimes might) was nonetheless right. Considerations of this sort, marshaled against all attempts to define moral terms, led to the view that our moral theorizing needs to be carried on in its own terms, on its own terms, using introspection, intuition, and reflection.

Noncognitivism

The Open Question Argument convinced many people that moral properties should not be identified with natural properties. Yet many were troubled by the metaphysics of nonnatural properties put forward by Moore and Ross, and also

by the seemingly inevitable appeal to intuition as the basis of our knowledge of nonnatural properties. So people went back to Moore's original trilemma and argued that, despite appearances, moral terms were in fact (strictly speaking) meaningless. Moral thought and talk did have a purpose and people did know how to use it. But its purpose, these noncognitivists argued, was to express (rather than report) attitudes and to influence behavior, not to express beliefs or to report (putative) facts. When people claim that something is good, we can explain what they are doing, in perfectly naturalistic terms, without any commitment to moral properties (and moral facts) at all, and with no need to identify moral properties with natural properties in the way the Open Question Argument showed must be mistaken.

The challenge facing noncognitivism is to explain why it *seems* as if moral sentences *are* meaningful, as if in judging something good or right, bad or wrong, we are not merely expressing our attitudes but are expressing beliefs that might be true or false (depending on the facts). Why does moral discourse exhibit so thoroughly the behavior of meaningful, factual, discourse?

The simple answer – that it seems this way because it *is* meaningful, factual, discourse -- is not available to the noncognitivist. Less simple, but quite robust, answers are available, though. While the various answers differ in important ways, they mobilize a common strategy. That strategy is to appeal to some practical purpose moral thought and talk might have and argue that the purpose could be met, or met well, only if the practice of thinking through and expressing our attitudes had a structure that would make it look as if it were factual discourse that could be used to express beliefs and report (putative) facts.

Three features of moral discourse have stood out as especially needing some such explanation. One is that our moral views are commonly expressed by declarative sentences that appear to attribute properties to people and acts and situations and seem, as a result, to be genuinely evaluable as true or false. Another is that, in thinking morally, we seem to be constrained, appropriately, by the very same rules of inference that apply to factual discourse and seem to apply precisely because those rules are truth preserving. And the third is that our own views of our moral claims would have it that their claim on us, and their authority, is independent of our own attitudes.

Each of these three features of moral discourse is, at least initially, problematic for the noncognitivist, since the attitudes the noncognitivists see as expressed by our moral discourse (i) are not attitudes that involve ascribing moral properties to things and are not true or false, so (ii) whatever rules of inference do apply to these expressions do not apply because they are truth-preserving, and (iii) our moral attitudes appear to have no special authority and in any case are *not* independent of the attitudes of the person who holds them.

When it comes to these features of moral discourse, a cognitivist can rely on whatever explanations the noncognitivists are prepared to offer for the discourse they acknowledge to be uncontroversially factual. Exactly what these

explanations are, it is worth noting, is itself controversial. But the cognitivists hold that, whatever they are, there is no special problem in accounting for moral thought and talk. Whatever the right explanations are, when it comes to the uncontroversial discourses, work too for moral discourse. The noncognitivists' distinctive position – that moral discourse differs, in the relevant way, from factual discourse – means they need not only to explain the relevant features of factual discourse but to explain as well, in a way that preserves the difference upon which they insist, why moral discourse appears to be, but is not, the same.[9]

This is no small task. Regularly noncognitivists have found themselves either (i) successfully explaining why moral discourse resembles the uncontroversially factual discourse, but losing the contrast that defines their view, or (ii) successfully sustaining a contrast between moral discourse and uncontroversially factual discourse, but being unable to explain why the two are so much alike. That things regularly turn out this way does not, of course, show that they will inevitably, but it raises a caution against thinking that noncognitivism has an easy way of maintaining its position while explaining the phenomena that all grant.

To take one example, people have recently suggested that talk of truth should be given a “minimalist” reading, according to which to say of some claim that it is true is just a way of re-making the claim. If this is right, then moral claims, no less than any others, will be counted as true by anyone willing to make the claims in question. And anyone willing to say that Hitler was evil should be prepared as well to say that it is true that Hitler was evil. According to minimalism about truth, talk of truth brings no further commitments. This makes available to the anti-realists an easy explanation of why moral claims appear to be truth evaluable. But of course the anti-realist, assuming she holds some moral views (e.g. that Hitler was evil), cannot then characterize her distinctive view by saying that she denies that moral claims are true. She does not deny that (on this understanding of truth). A minimalist about truth who wants to reject realism about morality must then mark the contrast between her view, and a realist's view, in some other way. She might say that while moral claims are true, her anti-realism comes with her rejection of moral properties and moral facts. Yet the same sort of considerations that have been offered in favor of minimalism about truth seem as well to speak in favor of minimalism about properties and facts. And minimalism about properties and facts makes it easier than it otherwise would be for an anti-realist to explain why people talk of moral properties and moral facts. Yet each of these minimalisms brings in its wake the burden of finding some way, if not by appeal to notions of truth, or properties, or facts, to mark what it is that they are rejecting that the realist accepts.

Revisiting the Open Question Argument

For a long time, people assumed that the Open Question Argument showed that the only way to avoid the metaphysical and epistemological mysteries of nonnaturalism, without rejecting moral thought and practice as deeply misguided, was to embrace noncognitivism. And this provided the most powerful, though not the only, reason to find noncognitivism attractive.[10]

Yet the Open Question Argument, which appeared to force the choice, has relatively recently come under serious attack. Always, some have resisted the argument, maintaining that the apparent openness of the various questions was an illusion. According to them, thinking it was an open question whether, say, to be good is to be such as to satisfy a preference reflects a failure to understand fully the claims at issue. To insist otherwise, these people pointed out, is to beg the question.[11] In any case, appealing to the openness of various questions seemed less an argument than a reflection of a conclusion already reached. Suspicions were fueled too by dissatisfaction with noncognitivism and the sense that at its best it would leave moral discourse with none of the credibility it deserves.

But the most powerful grounds for rejecting the Open Question Argument came with the realization that two terms, say 'water' and 'H₂O', could refer to one and the same property, even though one would be asking a substantive question (that can be settled only by investigating the world) in asking whether H₂O is water. The realization that a proposed identity could both be true and yet fail the test of the Open Question Argument encouraged the hope that, after all, a naturalized metaphysics for moral properties could be defended. No longer did it seem that a successful defense was available only at the cost of embracing properties that were metaphysically and epistemically peculiar.

At the same time, even those temped by the prospect of identifying moral properties with some (perhaps very complex) set of natural properties, believe the Open Question Argument reveals something crucial about the distinctive nature of our moral thinking. If, for instance, being good is a matter of having a certain natural property, there is little question that someone might think of something that it has that natural property, and not think at all that it is good in any way. So while the Open Question Argument moved too quickly from (i) noticing that thinking some thing has some natural property is different in some way from thinking it good to (ii) the claim that the thoughts are therefore attributing distinct properties to the thing, the argument does properly highlight something distinctive about moral thinking. No defense of moral realism can be successful without giving an account of the distinctive nature of moral thought.

Internalism

When it comes to accounting for what thinking of something as good apart from merely thinking it has some natural property, people often appeal to the

apparently intimate, and unique, connection between sincere moral judgment and action.

Many have thought that the distinctive feature of moral judgment is its link specifically to motivation. To honestly think, of something, that it is good, they maintain, is *ipso facto* to have some motivation to promote, preserve, or pursue that thing. Conversely, to discover of someone that she is actually completely indifferent to what she claims is good, is to discover she does not really think it is good at all.[12]

The simplest and most plausible explanation of this connection between moral judgment and motivation (if there is such a connection), is that in making a genuine moral judgment we are expressing a motivational state. Assuming, as noncognitivists standardly do, that motivational states are distinct and different from beliefs, then in discovering that moral judgments express motivational states we are discovering that they express something other than beliefs. If they do not express beliefs, then they do not purport to report facts, and so cannot be true or false. In other words, motivational internalism (as this view is often called), when combined with the Humean view that motivational states (e.g. desire) and beliefs are distinct existences, implies noncognitivism and so anti-realism.[13]

Moral realists have responded to motivational internalism in two different ways. One is by denying the Humean thesis that motivational states and beliefs are always distinct existences. Indeed, some realists argue, moral judgments themselves serve as counter examples to the Humean thesis. Moral judgments, these realists maintain, express a distinctive subset of our beliefs: ones that do necessarily motivate. If so, then the motivational internalist's contention that sincere moral judgment necessarily carries some motivational implications is fully compatible with seeing those judgments as expressing beliefs that purport to report facts, and therefore are liable to being true or false.[14]

The other response realists offer to this argument is simply to deny motivational internalism, by arguing that sincere moral judgment does not always come with motivation. Sometimes, these realists argue, a person can genuinely judge that something is, say, right, and yet --perhaps because she is evil, or suffers depression, or is weak-willed -- be utterly unmotivated to take action. If this is possible, then motivational internalism is false: genuine moral judgment does not, after all, necessitate motivation. And this would mean the motivational internalist argument evaporates.

Rejecting motivational internalism is, of course, compatible with holding that there is a special connection between moral judgment and action. A common and plausible suggestion is that the crucial link between moral judgment and action is mediated not by motivation but by a conception of reason or rationality. After all, it seems that a person who fails to be motivated by what she judges to be good or right is thereby being irrational or (perhaps more weakly) is at least failing to respond to what she herself is committed to

seeing as something she has reason to do.[15] Reason internalism (as it is sometimes called) retains the idea that there is an intimate link between moral thought and action, but sees the link as forged by reason. This view has the resources to acknowledge that sometimes people fail to be motivated appropriately by their moral judgments while also being able to explain the distinctive connection between such judgments and actions.

The notions of rationality and reason in play here might well seem, in relevant respects, on a par with moral notions. If one doubts there are moral facts, in light of which our moral judgments might be true, one might well (on many of the same grounds) doubt that there are facts about reason, in light of which our judgments concerning reasons and rationality might be true. The Open Question Argument (whatever it might show) is, for instance, as applicable to proposed naturalistic definitions of reason and rationality as it is to proposed naturalistic definitions of value and rightness. So it is worth emphasizing that those who are defending reason internalism are not attempting to define moral judgments in natural terms (a project that would not be advanced by appeals to reason and rationality). Rather, assuming that the Open Question Argument leaves unsettled the issue of what sort of facts (natural or not) moral facts might be, it nonetheless appears to show that moral judgments differ in some important respect from many other (nonnormative) judgments. The challenge the Open Question Argument continues to pose, to anyone hoping to explain the nature of moral judgment, is to account for this difference. Realists and antirealists alike need to meet this challenge.

Motivational internalism offers one answer to the challenge: moral judgments (and perhaps other normative judgments, for instance those concerning rationality) are necessarily motivating, whereas the other judgments are not. Nonmoral judgments do, of course, often motivate, but their motivational impact depends on the presence of something else (a desire or preference or affective orientation) that is distinct and independent of the judgment.

Reason internalism offers another answer: moral judgments (and perhaps other normative judgments, for instance those concerning rationality) necessarily have implications concerning what people have reason to do, whereas other judgments do not. Nonmoral judgments do, of course, often have implications of this sort, but only in the company of moral (or other normative) judgments.[16] If reason claims are in the relevant respects on a par with moral judgments, then what follows is that judgments about rationality or reasons, no less than moral judgments, have implications concerning what people have reason to do or are committed to thinking they have reason to do.

Cognitivism

Whatever account one offers of the distinctive nature of moral (and perhaps other normative) judgments, another challenge awaits those who defend cognitivism: when one makes such judgments, what would or do constitute the

relevant moral (or other normative) facts, in light of which the judgments are true or false? Noncognitivists do not face this question, of course. Their burden is to explain why the question faced by cognitivists seems so appropriate. Error theorists and realists, though, do need an answer.

Error theorists, even as they disagree among themselves as to what the right answer is, all think those answers reveal that moral claims could be true only under circumstances that, they believe, do not, and perhaps could not, obtain. Some realists agree with one or another of these accounts of what would be required, but reject the view that the relevant circumstances do not obtain. In these cases, their disagreement with the error theorists then lies not in the account of what moral claims require in order to be true, but in their different views of what the world is like. Thus some error theorists and some realists might agree that the truth of moral claims would require objectively prescriptive facts, or categorical reasons, or nonnatural properties (to take three candidates) and then just disagree about whether such things exist. Alternatively, though, error theorists and realists might disagree on what moral claims presuppose, with (say) the error theorist maintaining they require objectively prescriptive facts, or categorical reasons, or nonnatural properties, and the realist disagreeing on each count even while agreeing that *if* moral claims did require such things, they would all be false. Thus some realists are realists precisely because they think that moral claims do not require the sort of facts that error theorists suppose they do.

Thus, if one is a cognitivist about moral claims, and so thinks that they purport to report facts and are, in light of whether the facts are as they purport, true or false, two considerations come into play in determining whether to be an error theorist or a realist. The first is: what would have to be the case for the claims to be true? The second is: is there reason to think things are (at least sometimes) that way? Error theorists, in light of their answer to the first, give a negative answer to the second. Realists, who give a positive answer to the second, are committed to an answer to the first that makes that view defensible.

Predictably, a good deal of the debate about moral realism turns on whether realists have an account of morality that shows that the truth of moral claims would not have implications that are literally incredible. A realist who denies that there are objectively prescriptive facts, or categorical reasons, or nonnatural properties (or whatever) is then committed to saying that such things are not actually required in order for our moral judgments to be true. Another realist, who grants that moral claims are true only in light of there being objectively prescriptive fact, or categorical reasons, or nonnatural properties (or whatever) is committed instead to defending the existence of such things. Either way, the burden of realism is to offer an account of moral judgments and the world in light of which it is reasonable to think that such judgments are sometimes actually true.

Explanation and Justification

Putting aside the putatively unpalatable metaphysical implications of our moral claims, moral realism faces an important challenge. As many would have it, we have positive reason to believe something only if supposing it true contributes in some way to explaining our experiences. If that is right, then we have positive reason to believe there are moral facts only if supposing there are makes such a contribution. Yet moral facts have seemed to many to contribute not at all to our best explanations of our experiences. We can, for instance, explain why people think stealing is wrong, why they approve of kindness, and why moral thinking takes hold in a society, all without having to appeal to any facts to the effect that stealing really is wrong, that there is actually something good about kindness, or that morality is genuinely important. All of these phenomena are fully explicable, it seems, by appeal to social and psychological forces, all of which have their effects independent of what the moral facts might be, were there any. But if that is true across the board, so that we need not appeal to moral facts to explain our experiences, then we have no reason to think there are such facts.[17]

It may be, of course, that we can explain what is wrong with some action (as opposed to explaining why someone thinks it wrong) only by appeal to moral principles. And these moral principles, in turn, may be explicable by still other principles. Thus we may need to suppose there are moral facts in order to explain the truth of various moral claims (e.g., that some action is wrong). Yet this is just a matter of one part of the system explaining other parts. If no part of the system serves to explain anything about how or why we experience the world as we do, it seems reasonable to think that -- even if there were moral facts -- we would have no grounds whatsoever for thinking our moral beliefs were in anyway sensitive to the facts being what they are. So we would, even supposing there are moral facts, never have grounds for thinking we got them right.

Against this line of argument, some moral realists have argued that moral facts do actually figure in our best explanations of our experience.[18] Just how moral facts do this, and why we should believe they do, has been controversial. Some defend the idea that moral facts explain our experience by, *contra* Moore, identifying such facts with certain natural facts that indisputably do play a role in explaining our experiences. Thus, for instance, if the best explanation of our use of the term 'value' is that we are, in using it, picking out what would satisfy an informed preference (a preference the having of which does not depend on any sort of ignorance), and if what does or does not satisfy such preferences makes a difference to how satisfied we are with certain outcomes, then a full explanation of our thought and talk of value would, after all, appeal to what turn out to be facts about value. Assuming that our moral terms are correctly understood as referring to natural properties that clearly explain our experiences, the argument against realism fails. But of course, that assumes a lot and many who are tempted by this argument are inclined to see all the proffered reductions

of the moral to the natural as ultimately leaving the moral out of the picture all together, protests to the contrary notwithstanding

One need not accept any particular reduction of moral properties to natural properties, though, to hold that moral facts might play an important role in explaining our experiences. And, if cognitivism is true, there is reason to think those who hold a moral view at all are committed to thinking that moral facts explain their own beliefs, so that if the facts were different they would think differently than they do. To hold otherwise, of one's own views, is to see them as insensitive to the truth they purport to capture. This commitment seems to come even if one has no view at all about whether the moral facts are natural facts or about how one's beliefs might be sensitive to the relevant moral facts.

At the same time, focusing on the role moral facts might play in explaining our experiences appears to misunderstand the primary role such facts are supposed to have --which is not to explain but to justify. The point of thinking about what is right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust, is not, it seems, to figure out what happened or why, but to figure out what should happen and why. Thus if we discovered of some putative moral facts that they were irrelevant to what was justified and what not, we would have grounds for rejecting them as *moral* facts, even if they figured in some of our best explanation of our experiences. So whether or not moral facts figure in our best explanations, they had better figure in our best justifications.

If this is right, it puts an important constraint on any defense of moral realism: it must offer an account of moral facts in light of which the facts being one way rather than another makes a difference to what people are justified in doing. Put another way, a successful defense of moral realism requires showing that the fact that something is right or wrong, good or bad, makes a difference to what people have reason to do.[19]

Realism's Project in Prospect

Whether moral realists can give an account of moral facts that reveals them to be metaphysically palatable, epistemically accessible, and also relevant to what we have reason to do, is of course wildly controversial.

At one extreme, some realists are so confident that there are moral facts, that no considerations to the contrary, no mysteries unsolved, no imaginable alternatives, could convince them otherwise. For them, whatever the metaphysical implications, and epistemic requirements, might prove to be, their acceptability is in effect established by their necessity. This view seems at least implicit in the attitudes of many who hold that there are moral facts and yet dismiss metaethical concerns as appropriately put aside or ignored.

At the other extreme, some antirealists are so confident that moral thought and talk is taste, and preference, and desire, made pretentious, that no considerations to the contrary, no mysteries unsolved, no imaginable alternatives, could convince them otherwise. For them, the bankrupt nature of

moral thought is so clear that no arguments to the contrary would seem anything other than testimony to the success of the fraud. This view seems at least implicit in the attitudes of many who disingenuously mobilize moral appeals with an eye solely to getting what they want.

In between these extremes, falls a variety of views, some realist, some antirealist. Among the most promising are those that take seriously the challenge of explaining how it is that people have developed the ability to think in recognizably moral terms. That people have this ability is clearly a contingent matter. After all, some people evidently lack the ability altogether, and everyone, at some point in their lives, had not yet developed the ability. There ought to be a good explanation of how and why this ability emerged, an explanation that will, presumably, shed a fair amount of light on the nature of what we are doing in exercising the ability.

The most illuminating versions of this project, I think, take on the challenge of explaining normative thought in general and do not limit themselves to an account of morality. The aim, in this case, is not simply to explain our ability to think of things as right or wrong, virtuous or vicious, moral or immoral, but also our ability to think of people (ourselves included) as having reasons to do or think things, and as being justified in our actions or our beliefs. Much (although not all) of what is distinctive and problematic about moral thought and talk is true as well of normative thought in general. As a result, any account of moral thought that begins by supposing people already have the capacity to make normative judgments will likely be burying in that supposition aspects of our moral thought that are better brought out and explained.

This project of explaining the emergence of our capacity to think in normative (and more specifically moral) terms, is one that anti-realists and realists alike can embrace.[21] Anti-realists about morality are, of course, committed to holding either (if they are noncognitivists) that the resulting explanation will show that in thinking morally we are not deploying concepts and not forming beliefs, but doing something else or (if they are error theorists) that the explanation will account for our capacity to deploy moral concepts and form moral beliefs, though we have no reason to think anything satisfies the concepts and so no reason to think the beliefs true.

The realist's ambition, in contrast, is to show that a full and adequate explanation of our capacity to think in normative terms, and more specifically in moral terms, underwrites the idea that we are deploying concepts and forming beliefs and that we have reason to think the concepts are sometimes satisfied and the beliefs sometimes true.[22]

The realists' most promising strategy for explaining our ability to think in normative (and more specifically moral) terms starts with the idea that people face the world, and each other, initially without normative concepts, indeed without concepts of any sort, even as they do possess a range of dispositions, abilities, reactions and attitudes, as well as capacities for reflection and

adjustment. In this way a realist can hope to show that the best general explanation of the emergence of concepts of whatever sort is an explanation that applies equally to the emergence of distinctively normative concepts. The main idea would be that the range of preconceptual dispositions, abilities, reactions, and attitudes people have, will, taken together, both make possible and motivate the emergence of various conventions – conventions the presence of which work to constitute various concepts (concepts of size, of shape, of pleasure, of pain) by introducing practices in light of which judgments concerning these things can be seen as correct or not. These concepts, whichever ones the various conventions have worked to constitute, are then available for people to deploy in their thinking.

In principle, at least, conventions might emerge that make it possible for people to think that some things are pleasant, others blue, some round, still others heavy, all without their having the capacity to think of themselves as having reasons to think as they do, nor the capacity to think of things as good or bad, right or wrong. In order to be credited with these various concepts they need to have the dispositions that make it reasonable to see them as appropriately sensitive to evidence that the concepts in play are satisfied. But those dispositions need not include the capacity to form beliefs concerning evidence, nor the capacity to form beliefs to the effect that they have reasons to think one thing or another. One might be sensitive to things about which one has no beliefs.

Perhaps as the conventions necessary for the emergence of concepts develop they simultaneously give rise to normative concepts (of reason or evidence or justification) and to nonnormative concepts (of size or shape or color or experience). Perhaps not. Either way, the realist's aim here will be to show that a general account of what is required for people to have concepts at all applies as well when it comes to explaining normative and specifically moral concepts. Needless to say, the various concepts will differ from one another in important ways: concepts of color differ from those of shape which differ from those of value and justification. Yet, whatever these differences, if the account we have to offer of our having any of these concepts applies as well to our having specifically normative concepts, the realist has grounds for rejecting noncognitivism.

Of course, to think that we deploy normative concepts and so can form normative beliefs, is not necessarily to think the concepts have an application or the beliefs are ever true. After all, there is some explanation of people's concept of Santa Claus, and so of their ability to believe in Santa Claus, even though there is no Santa Claus. So the realist needs to go on and offer grounds for thinking that the normative concepts that have emerged are such that, given the evidence we have, they are sometimes satisfied. That such an explanation is available is not guaranteed, unfortunately. One might think that the concepts would not have emerged if they had no application. But that hopeful thought underestimates the extent to which the conventions that work to constitute

concepts might be sensitive to pressures that would motivate the introduction of empty concepts.

Still, one of the striking and important features of our normative concepts is their liability to self-correction and adjustment. The concepts of reason, justification, and value that we deploy appear to be concepts that are appropriately adjusted and reconceived in light of the discovery that we have reason to think differently than we do. Shifts in our understanding of what is justified, or valuable, or just, regularly occur in light of the discovery that we are unable to justify our original views and those shifts do not themselves represent abandoning the concepts. Certainly, appropriate corrections might not always be available -- in which case the concepts would indeed emerge as having no application. However, normative concepts are designed to shift specifically in light of what we have reason to think. And this provides grounds for thinking that at least some normative concepts might well survive as being such that we have reason both (i) to use them in our thinking and (ii) to think of them that they are (sometimes) satisfied.

This is, of course, an optimism, and an inspecific optimism at that, since there is in it no antecedent commitment to just which normative concepts will prove sustainable in this way. Yet offering some reason to reject the optimism is, importantly, self-defeating, since it appeals itself to a normative concept that is, in this context, assumed to have application. One cannot intelligibly both think there is reason to reject a set of concepts and think that the (normative) concept of there being reason to do things has no application.

In any case, if we end up having reason to think that there are normative concepts and that at least some of them actually apply, various grounds for resisting moral realism disappear. In particular, a successful explanation of the emergence of normative concepts that works as well to reveal some of those concepts as actually satisfied, means that some sense must have been made of the metaphysical and epistemic, and justificatory commitments that come with making distinctively normative judgments. So, to the extent worries about moral concepts had to do with their normative nature, such worries must be misguided.

Thoughts that are specifically moral, though, may well introduce a range of particular commitments that go beyond what comes with normative thought in general. They may, for instance, travel with the idea that there are some ways of acting that all people have decisive reason to engage in, or refrain from, regardless of their interests and concerns.[23] If so, then an account of the normative notion of a reason that ties what people have reason to do to their interests or concerns, will pose a substantial threat to the idea that moral claims are ever actually true (since it will undermine the idea that anyone ever has reason to do anything except in light of their interests or concerns). Normative realists who want also to be moral realists need to show either that moral commitments do not carry this distinctive commitment or that a proper

understanding of what people might have reason to do is compatible with thinking there are some things people have reason to do, or refrain from doing, independent of their interests and concerns.

No part of the project I have described is easy. But, at the same time, I think there is no good argument, available ahead of time, for thinking it cannot succeed. In any case, some explanation of how and why we have acquired the ability to think in normative, and specifically in moral, terms, must be possible and will, inevitably, be illuminating. Moral realism's ultimate success depends, then, on showing (*contra* noncognitivist) that these abilities involve deploying moral concepts and forming moral beliefs, and then on showing (*contra* error theorists) that we sometimes have evidence that these beliefs are true and that we have reason to be concerned about the things of which they are true.

1. Throughout I will be focusing on *moral* terms, concepts, and thoughts; yet most of the issues that arise for these, and the various positions one might take concerning them, arise and are available with respect to other, normative yet non-moral, terms, concepts, and thoughts; (for instance, rational or justified terms, etc.).
2. How plausible relativism is, as a realist position, turns on how plausible it is to think it can play this vindicative role. Many people, though notably not most relativists, think that moral claims pretend to a kind of universality that is not compatible with relativism. Relativists, however, regularly (but not inevitably) see their view as accurately capturing the content of moral claims in a way that reveals them often to be true. See Harman (1975), Wong (1984), and Sayre-McCord (1991) for defenses of the idea that relativism is compatible with moral realism.
3. So, for instance, many theorists reject relativist proposals acknowledging that there are facts about, say, what acts are in accordance with norms that people in a community accept. They argue, though, that those are nonmoral facts about what people *think* is right or wrong and not -- what is importantly different -- moral facts about what *is* right or wrong.
4. Different error theorists offer different grounds for thinking there are no moral facts of the sort our moral thought presupposes. J. L. Mackie (1977), for instance, maintains that there could be such facts only if there were "objectively prescriptive" features of the world that worked effectively to motivate all who recognized those features. Others maintain that there would have to be categorical reasons that apply to people independent of their interests and desires, still others that there would have to be a God who takes an interest in human activities. In each case, the argument starts by identifying something that would putatively have to be the case for there to be moral facts and then moves on to showing that whatever is supposed to be required is absent.
5. Noncognitivists differ among themselves as to what people are doing, if not expressing beliefs, when they are thinking morally. Emotivists hold that they are expressing emotion (Ayer 1946, Stevenson 1937), prescriptivists hold that they are offering universal prescriptions (Hare 1952), and expressivists are inclined either to some other alternative noncognitive state or to some combination of these (Blackburn 1993, Gibbard 1990)
6. They can even endorse that part of the practice that involves talking of moral facts and moral claims being true or false. What they cannot consistently do is hold that talk of moral facts and of moral claims being true or false should be understood literally, in the way talk of empirical facts and of scientific claims being true or false, are to be understood. See

Simon Blackburn (1993) and Allan Gibbard (1990) for defenses of this sort of view.

7. Those who rejected the existence of God and yet accepted this view of what moral facts would consist in (were there any), declared that because God is dead (as they often put it) all is permissible (Dostoyevsky, 1879). If good and bad and right and wrong depended upon God's pleasure or will and there was no God, they reasoned, there was no good and bad, right or wrong, either.
8. It should be no surprise that Moore began *Principia Ethica* quoting Butler's observation that "Everything is what it is, and not another thing." Moore thought all attempts to define goodness involved thinking goodness was some other thing.
9. It is worth noting that the relevant way in which moral discourse differs need not be found in some difference in the explanation of these three features. It is open to a noncognitivist to hold that the three features, whether we are talking of moral discourse or factual discourse, are to be given the very same explanation across the board. For instance, a noncognitivist might hold that what explains the appropriateness of specific rules of inference, as they apply to factual discourse, is actually not that they preserve truth but that they have some other feature that they have when applied to moral discourse no less than factual discourse. Still, the noncognitivist is committed to saying there is an important difference and to doing so in a way that explains what appear to be telling ways in which they are the same. See Gibbard (2003).
10. See Ayer (1946).
11. See Frankena (1939).
12. See Stevenson (1937).
13. The *locus classicus* for this argument is David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739).
14. See McDowell (1978) and Platts (1979).
15. See Michael Smith (1994).
16. Hume's famous observation that no 'ought' can be derived (solely) from an 'is' reflects this point: nonnormative claims ('is' claims as Hume thought of them) imply nothing normative (nothing about what ought to be) without relying, at least implicitly, upon normative premises.
17. See Gilbert Harman (1977) and Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (1988).
18. See Sturgeon (1985) and Boyd (1988).

19. We are thus brought back to a version of reason internalism according to which moral facts are necessarily connected to what agents have reason to do.
20. David Hume's *Treatise* (1739) is an early and especially systematic attempt to pursue this project. See also Allan Gibbard (1990) and Christine Korsgaard (1996).
21. There is, it should be said, plenty of room to end up a realist about reasons, or justifications, or something else that is recognizably normative, and an anti-realist (most likely an error theorist) about morality. It is possible, but would be peculiar, for someone to be a realist about reasons and justification (and so embrace cognitivism about those judgments) and yet embrace noncognitivism about moral thought. The arguments for noncognitivism seem to apply equally to moral and to all other normative judgments, while the considerations that tell in favor of cognitivism with respect to nonmoral, yet normative, judgments carry over it seems to moral thoughts as well.
22. This is, of course, Kant's proposal as to what is distinctive of, and peculiar to, moral judgments. See Immanuel Kant (1785).

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