

Realism, Moral

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Introduction

Moral realists maintain (1) that in making moral judgments – for instance, that cruelty is wrong or generosity required or justice a virtue – people are purporting to report moral facts (and not just expressing their tastes or preferences) and (2) that there are such facts to report, so that some such claims are actually true and the world is, really, in those cases as claimed.

In taking this stand, moral realists see themselves as capturing and defending common sense. Indeed, it is fair to say that many, and perhaps most, people think moral realism is obviously the correct position, even as they recognize that people regularly disagree deeply about just what the moral facts are (*see* *PROPERTIES, MORAL; TRUTH IN ETHICS*).

Yet there are substantial reasons for suspecting that, in fact, common sense and common conviction are misguided or, alternatively, misunderstood by moral realists. In particular, there are reasons to suspect both that if moral claims do purport to report moral facts they fail, because there are no such facts (as error theorists argue) (*see* *ERROR THEORY*) and that moral claims do not actually purport to report facts at all but rather express attitudes or commitments (as non-cognitivists argue) (*see* *NON-COGNITIVISM; EMOTIVISM*).

The Error Theory

According to error theorists, though our moral judgments purport to report moral facts they all fail, because there are no such facts to report.

A frequent theme in their arguments is that a clear-eyed appreciation of what gets valorized as “moral,” and of why it is given this status, reveals non-moral (and often dark) forces. What people count as “moral” is a reflection not of their being on the track of independent and important moral facts, but of their being influenced by non-moral facts (popular opinion, social pressures, conventional practice, emotional responses, etc.) that would, it seems, cause the moral beliefs even in the absence of moral facts.

Yet, if we don't need to appeal to moral properties in order to explain our moral thought, talk, and practice, nor our actions and reactions to the world in which we find ourselves, it seems reasonable (the error theorists argue) to suppose there are no such properties (Harman 1977; Mackie 1977; Joyce 2001). At the very least, it seems we could have no evidence of them since they seem to have no impact on our experiences.

Moreover, error theorists point out, to hold that there are moral properties (whether we appeal to them in the explanations or not) comes with significant burdens (*see* PROPERTIES, MORAL). Most notably, we need to explain what moral properties are and how they are supposed to be related to the other, non-problematic, properties that we do rely on to explain what happens in the world. What is it for something to be good or bad, right or wrong? What additional property are we ascribing to a cruel action when we judge it to be wrong? And how is the wrongness related to the cruelty? What is the connection between an action being cruel and it being bad or wrong? They are not just the same thing, since things other than cruelty are bad and wrong. (And, perhaps, even cruelty may not always be wrong, if indeed there are cases in which one needs to “be cruel to be kind.”) Finally, if there are moral properties, we also need to need to explain how we might come to know about them. How do we learn which things are good or right and which not?

Depending on what one supposes moral properties would have to be, were they to exist, these costs can seem unbearable. So, for instance, many error theorists argue that in claiming that some act is morally wrong we are supposing not merely (1) that it has a distinctive kind of property but (2) that the property in question is, in some important way, authoritative for us, (3) giving everyone decisive reason (and some argue even motivation) to act accordingly (no matter what their interests or concerns). This is, they maintain, a set of suppositions we have powerful reason to reject. Error theorists differ among themselves as to just what the suppositions are and why they are untenable. Yet whatever the specifics, error theorists all argue that our best understanding of the world leaves no room for the properties our moral judgments presuppose. Only magical thinking, they maintain, can lead one to hold that there really are such properties (*see* QUEERNESS, ARGUMENT FROM).

There is an attractive response here that many moral realists have given. They acknowledge the burden of explaining what moral properties might be and how they are related to other properties. But, these realists maintain, the properties are more easily accommodated than the error theorists recognize. The error theorists, these realists hold, either misunderstand the presuppositions of moral judgment or the grounds we have for thinking the presuppositions are satisfied.

Naturalism

Taking this line, many moral realists hold that moral properties are properly identified with (what seem to be other) properties that have earned their place thanks to their role in our explanations of what happens in the world. (Because properties that play such a role are commonly characterized as “natural” properties, realists who defend views of this sort are often thought of as advancing versions of naturalism; *see* NATURALISM, ETHICAL).

For instance, many have suggested that the property of being valuable should be identified with one of the following – apparently unproblematic and seemingly natural – properties: *being pleasant*, or *being the object of a preference*, or *being the object of a preference that would survive in the face of full information*, or *being such*

that it would be approved of by an impartial spectator (Mill 2001; Perry 1926; Firth 1952; Railton 1986; see IDEAL OBSERVER THEORIES; RESPONSE-DEPENDENT THEORIES). On any such proposal the question of how the moral property is related to other, non-problematic, properties is answered easily. To take the first as an example, if it is correct, being valuable is just one and the same thing as being pleasant and is related to various other properties (e.g., as cause or effect) exactly as pleasure is. Similar stories go for the other proposals mentioned, as well as for many others that have been offered. Such proposals can travel with plausible accounts of what it is for there to be a reason for someone to do something, holding (for instance) that a person has reason to do something to the degree that doing it is valuable (so to the degree that it is pleasant, or preferred, etc.).

Along the same lines, people have proposed accounts of what it is for something to be morally right that identify rightness with some property that is apparently not problematic. So, for instance, some have identified rightness with *being the best of the available options*, or with *being in accord with rules everyone has reason to support*. As long as these are combined with accounts of value and reason that do not themselves introduce problematic properties, they avoid the metaphysical extravagances error theorists see threatening. Moreover, these proposals have more than a hope of tying their account of rightness to reasons everyone has in ways that sustain the idea that moral properties, unlike non-moral properties, are by their nature tied to what all people have reason to do, or refrain from doing.

Needless to say, the variety of proposals reflects the fact that there is serious disagreement about which account is most plausible. And anyone who embraces one of these accounts needs to offer evidence for it over its competitors. But the shared strategy is to resist the error theorist's claim that a commitment to moral properties is indefensible by arguing that a proper understanding of moral properties shows that they involve no commitments over and above those that error theorists take on.

The "Open Question Argument" and Nonnaturalism

Yet there is an important and extremely influential argument for thinking no such identification of moral properties with natural properties can be right. The argument received its canonical expression in G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903). Moore argued that for whatever proposed identification the naturalistic moral realist might offer one could always intelligibly ask, without belying one's understanding of the concepts involved, whether something that admittedly has the natural property in question is actually good or right. Thus, for instance, in response to the suggestion that value just is pleasure, one can admit that something is pleasant and yet still intelligibly ask whether it is good. The same holds, Moore maintained, for any other proposed identification of a natural property with a moral property. His conclusion was that all such identifications were instances of what he called the "naturalistic fallacy" (see OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT; NONNATURALISM, ETHICAL).

Moore concluded that in thinking of things as good we were ascribing to them a unique property that is distinct from the many other properties such things have (including all those that naturalistic moral realists might propose as being goodness). He went on to hold that while things have this property thanks to their having various natural properties, the property of goodness is not itself a natural property. With this in mind, Moore maintained that we know what goodness is much as we know what it is for something to be yellow: by being exposed, in the right way, to things that have the property.

Moore's "open question argument" (as it came to be called) has had a tremendous impact on discussions of moral realism. Many have thought that it established that moral properties are nonnatural properties that, while tied in various interesting ways to natural properties, need to be recognized as importantly distinct. Morality is like mathematics, many think, in being relevant to the natural world but, in an important sense, not of it.

However, many others (moral realists and anti-realists alike) have seen nonnaturalism as a *reductio* of any view that is committed to it.

More Naturalism

Thus some moral realists, concerned to avoid nonnaturalism, and impressed by developments in the philosophy of language, argue that Moore's nonnaturalist conclusion rests on a mistaken understanding of what the open question argument shows. Specifically, they maintain that, while the argument shows that our moral *concepts* are different from our non-moral *concepts*, it does not show that the corresponding *properties* are different (Sturgeon 1985; Brink 1989; Boyd 1988). This point is standardly made by finding two different concepts that, despite their difference, refer to one and the same person, thing, or property; thus, for instance, our concept of the morning star is different than our concept of the evening star, although they refer (we've discovered) to one and the same celestial body, and while our concept of water is different from our concept of H₂O, being water is (we've discovered) the same as being H₂O. In these cases, one might intelligibly ask of what is admittedly the morning star (or water) whether it is the evening star (or H₂O) without belying competence with the concepts. That the concepts co-refer is a significant discovery, not something one knows simply by understanding the concepts involved. Similarly, people argue, although our moral concepts differ from our non-moral concepts, the concepts might well refer to one and the same property, albeit under different guises. Whether they do is a substantive question not settled by understanding the concepts involved. If this is right, then the difference shown by Moore's argument offers no reason, on its own, for thinking that moral properties are nonnatural, even if it shows that moral concepts are different from non-moral concepts. This leaves intact the idea that in judging something good or bad, right or wrong, one is purporting to report facts, but does so without supposing those judgments commit us to properties we do not already have reason to acknowledge.

Disagreement

Even if Moore's open question argument is *compatible* with moral properties being natural properties, that compatibility lends no support to the idea that there are moral properties. And error theorists often maintain that the nature of moral disagreement provides independent grounds for doubting there are moral properties at all, natural or otherwise (*see* DISAGREEMENT, MORAL).

Of course, the mere fact of disagreement about some set of properties does not show that they do not exist. Often, disagreements can be well explained by people having and responding to different evidence, by their being inattentive or biased, or by their being irrational in some relevant way. In all these cases, the fact that people disagree seems to provide no grounds whatsoever for doubting the existence of what the disagreements concern. That people have disagreed about the shape of the Earth, the causes of illness, and the effects of economic policies, provides no reason at all for thinking they were not disagreeing about something real.

But the situation seems to be different, error theorists argue, when it comes to morality. For these disagreements appear to be *in principle* irresolvable, in that even fully rational people, in possession of all the same considerations, can perfectly rationally come to different conclusions. Of course their different conclusions will be explicable by appeal to the difference in weight they give to the considerations. However, this difference, while it helps to explain the disagreement, is also a reflection of it and cannot be used, without begging the question, in support of one position against the other.

Things get tricky here once it is noticed that scientific disagreements, no less than moral disagreements, seem to be such that rational people, in possession of all the relevant considerations, can perfectly rationally come to different conclusions. In science no less than in ethics, which considerations one weighs, in which ways, makes a tremendous difference to the conclusions one rationally reaches, and yet the differences in weights and ways are often at the heart of the disagreement and not defensible independently of other aspects of what is disputed (Kuhn 1962). So it seems that in matters scientific, if part of what people are disagreeing about is what considerations count, or how heavily they count, the disputes will also be in principle irresolvable.

Relativism

One response to radical, irresolvable disagreement is to embrace relativism (*see* RELATIVISM, MORAL). Just as there is no way to settle a disagreement about whether something is delicious without identifying whose tastes are at issue, or whether driving at some particular speed is illegal without identifying the legal system, so too, relativists argue, there is no way to settle whether some action is immoral without identifying which principles are being assumed. On this line of thought, there is no more of a fact of the matter about whether something is immoral *sans phrase* than there is about whether something is delicious in the abstract, without

specification of whose tastes are at issue. What facts there are emerge only once certain, potentially variable, parameters are set.

Yet once the relevant parameters are set, once the standards are identified, or the person whose tastes are relevant is specified, there are (this sort of relativism holds) facts about what is morally required and about what is delicious, respectively. It is just that the facts being one way or another depends on – that is, is relative to – which principles or whose tastes are in play. When it comes to morality, various suggestions have been made as to what determines which principles are relevant. According to some the relevant principles are those in force in the judge's community, while according to others they are the principles in force in the community of the person being judged. But others hold that the relevant principles are not settled by what is in force in some community but are instead, say, a function of someone's individual commitments, or the commitments one would have under certain (perhaps ideal) circumstances (Dreier 1990).

In any case, to the extent that people fail to recognize the relative nature of what they are discussing they will take different conclusions that are due to different reference frames not as the mere differences they are but as disagreements. And, then, if they continue without getting clear about how their discussion is shaped by their taking different standards as given, they will mistakenly think they are facing an irresolvable disagreement (Harman 1975; Williams 1974).

Moral relativism shows up as a version of moral realism when its advocates hold that the facts that moral judgments purport to report are relative in the way they say (Copp 1995; Wong 2006). In this case, the apparently irresolvable nature of moral disagreements is explained as a reflection of people's failure to appreciate the relative nature of what they are judging. But this usually goes with holding that, once the relativism is appreciated, real disagreements (as opposed to mere differences) are often in principle resolvable by investigating the implications of the relevant principles.

Often, though, relativism comes on the scene as part of an anti-realist package, finding its motivation from the idea that the sort of facts that moral beliefs purport to report simply are not there to be found. In this case, relativism is offered as a substitute for what we were talking about, a substitute that avoids the (purportedly) indefensible commitments of common sense moral thought. On this sort of view, our judgments to the effect that some things are morally right and others morally wrong are not true. But we have on offer something different that we might mean by right and wrong which, if we did mean it, would not only allow us to talk about something real (e.g., which actions conform to certain principles and which do not) but might also play an important part in helping us guide action and coordinate behavior in ways that are mutually advantageous (Mackie 1977).

Explanation

To go back to a point made earlier, though, many think the key difference between moral disagreements and scientific disagreements is that the former, but not the latter, seem to be fully explicable by appeal to social pressures, acculturation,

superstition, and human psychology. They argue that there is no need for, and no real plausibility to, the idea that in forming our moral opinions we are responding (more or less successfully) to a realm of moral properties. The truth (or not) of our judgments seems to matter not at all when it comes to explaining why we make them (Harman 1977; *see* EXPLANATIONS, MORAL). This is in sharp contrast, error theorists insist, with scientific disagreements in which the truth (or not) of our scientific judgments do play an important role in explaining why we make the judgments we do. A full explanation of why we believe something is, say, made of wood will make reference to it being wooden (which explains it looking and feeling a certain way, which in turn explains, along with various background experiences and beliefs, our believing that it is made of wood). Presumably, if it had not been made of wood, it would not have looked and felt in the way it did and, consequently, we would not have formed the belief we did. In contrast, people argue, a full explanation of why we believe something is, say, wrong, need make no reference to it actually being wrong in order to explain our believing it is; it is enough for it to have the non-moral features that we happen to *think* make it wrong. Even if there is no such thing as wrongness, given our background experiences and beliefs, we would have still thought it was wrong.

Moral realists standardly offer two responses to this line of argument.

The first is to argue that the truth of our moral judgments does play a role in explaining our making them. This is an especially appealing, and easy, reply for those who identify moral properties with natural properties that clearly enjoy explanatory credentials. For on such accounts, as long as we are, in the right way, sensitive to these explanatory properties – to something being pleasant, or being the object of an informed desire, or whatever else might be on offer – our judging something good will often be explicable by (in part) the judgment being true (Sturgeon 1985; Railton 1986; Boyd 1988).

But even if we have in hand no particular identification (e.g., of goodness with some natural property), someone might well find herself in a position to hold that her moral judgments respond to her evidence in ways that support thinking she would not be making them if they were not true. So, for instance, if she thinks justice demands equal pay for equal work, she will be in a position reasonably to think she believes the salary she receives is unjust only because it is unjust, as long as she has reason to think that she would change her belief on discovering that she is being paid comparably to others doing the same work. Of course, that she is in such a position is compatible with her being wrong either about what justice requires or about her own sensitivity to the relevant evidence. Maybe justice does not require equal pay for equal work, or maybe she would think her salary unjust no matter what. What matters here, though, is that she may well have reasonable grounds for thinking her judgments are explained by their truth. And we may well too. Needless to say, attention could be shifted to her belief that justice requires equal pay for equal work. But here too she (and we) may be in a position to think she believes that only because it is true – that if justice did not require equal pay for equal work she would not believe it. (Whether this is reasonable depends in part on what would have to be

different for justice not to require what she believes it does.) Of course, any attempt to figure out whether someone's beliefs are appropriately sensitive to their truth will play out against a view of what the facts are, of how things would have to be different if those facts were different, and of how sensitive the person in question is to such changes. This is as true when we are asking about someone's non-moral beliefs as about her moral beliefs. In all such cases our judgments of them will reflect our own beliefs about the topic at issue.

The second realist response is to argue that the focus on explaining what people believe or what actually happens in the world is misplaced when it comes to understanding our moral beliefs. The point of moral thought is not to explain what *does* occur but, they argue, to figure out what *should* occur. In order to understand moral properties and moral facts we need to focus on their justificatory, as opposed to their explanatory, role. A reasonable commitment to the existence of moral facts emerges, they think, from the attempt to make sense of when, and why, people and institutions, and whatever else might be morally significant, are morally good (or not), or legitimate (or not), or justified (or not) because of, acting, reacting, and being the way they are.

Explanation is, in a sense, still at issue, but what is to be explained is something other than what happens to occur. Specifically, the idea is that we need to appeal to moral facts to explain the distinction between something merely *seeming* to be, say, morally good or right, or justified, and it actually *being* so.

Of course the error theorist is happy to treat this distinction as illusory. Yet many moral realists are loath to abandon it. Indeed, many hold that the distinction is too important to do without and too well explained by supposing that there are moral facts to reject.

Often, this line of argument flows from the recognition that we need to sustain such a distinction in other (non-moral) evaluative contexts. So, for instance, if we shift from morality to rationality, those who hold that certain actions, policies, or practices are rational (or irrational) and others not will need to fund the idea that there is a difference between merely seeming to be rational (or irrational) and actually being so. Or if we shift to evaluating arguments, theories, and conclusions – to wondering if a theory is good, an argument legitimate, or a conclusion justified – those who hold that some actually are and others not, are similarly committed to defending the idea that there is a difference between them seeming good, legitimate, or justified, and their actually being so. Thus, when the error theorist defends her theory, offers her arguments, and concludes that there are no moral facts, she is supposing that it makes sense to think of her theory, arguments, and conclusion as in fact good, legitimate, and justified, respectively. In all these cases, defending the idea that some such claims are true and others not will raise issues directly analogous to those raised by the moral realist's positions concerning moral claims (Sayre-McCord 1988; Cuneo 2007; Enoch 2011).

Many think that in the non-moral contexts of practical and theoretical rationality the issues can be easily addressed, holding (for instance) that an action actually being rational is just a matter of it being likely to satisfy a person's preferences and an

argument actually being legitimate is just a matter of it having true premises and being logically valid. Of course there is room to challenge these specific proposals. One might hold that if a person's preferences are uninformed or in other ways misguided, acting to satisfy them will not be rational; or one might hold that the legitimacy of an argument depends as well on not begging the question and relying on premises one has reason to think are true. But one might well reject that challenge and hold firm to the original proposals.

Whichever view one takes, if we can make sense of the distinction between *seeming* and *being* rational or legitimate (or good or justified), we may well have many of the tools we need to vindicate the same distinction when it comes to moral goodness, legitimacy, and justification (Sayre-McCord 1988). No doubt non-moral rationality, goodness, legitimacy, and justification differ, in important respects, from their moral counterparts. Crucially, though, they seem to share the claim to normative authority that marks moral claims as problematic. If, in the non-moral case, sense can be made of this authority, then similar sense, on the same model, may well work for the moral case. This is, of course, just a promissory note, not an argument on its own, since there may remain some distinctive feature of moral judgments, or of the properties that would need to be present for such judgments to be true, that is problematic. The challenge to the error theorist is to say what that distinctive feature is, and to do so in a way that does not undermine her then defending her theory as good, her arguments as legitimate, and her conclusion as justified. And the suspicion is that if she leaves in place the evaluative distinctions among arguments, theories, and conclusions, a moral realist will have a model for sustaining the parallel (moral) distinctions among people, actions, and institutions. The moral realist's hope is that any successful defense of such facts will carry over to a defense of the kind of facts presupposed by moral judgment.

Non-Cognitivism

So far, the discussion has proceeded on the assumption that moral judgments ascribe properties, and purport to report facts. The questions have been (1) just what properties are being ascribed (and so, what putative facts are people committed to in making moral judgments)? and (2), in light of our answer to (1), is a commitment to such properties and the corresponding facts reasonable? In answer to (2), the error theorists claim that such a commitment is unreasonable, that we have reason to think that judgments that carry such a commitment all fail to be true. Moral realists, in contrast, maintain that it is reasonable, that we have reason to think that some judgments that carry such a commitment are true. Often, the debate turns on different understandings of the commitments of moral judgments, with realists granting that *if* moral judgments committed us to the sort of peculiar properties error theorists identify, they would never be true, but arguing that the error theorists misunderstand the nature of the properties at issue. Other times, however, error theorists and realists agree on the nature of the properties, but differ about whether we have reason to think anything or anyone has them.

However these disagreements play out, error theorists and moral realists alike presuppose the view that, in making moral judgments, we are ascribing properties and purporting to report facts. (This position is standardly called “cognitivism” to capture the idea that the judgments in question are attempts to secure knowledge of what the world is like; *see* COGNITIVISM.) They just differ as to whether, given what we know about the world, we have any reason to think such judgments could be true.

Yet many think this shared presupposition is misguided. In particular, non-cognitivists reject the idea that our evaluative judgments, moral or otherwise, are in the business of ascribing properties and purporting to report facts. Non-cognitivists agree that many judgments – those whose role is to describe the world – involve just that. When such judgments describe the world accurately, when they ascribe properties to things that have them, and so when the facts are as the judgments purport them to be, these judgments have played their role successfully and are true. Evaluative judgments, they argue, play an importantly different role. Their role is not primarily to report some fact but rather to express an attitude, guide action, or in some other way contribute to a practical project. Understanding this is crucial, they hold, for seeing why the error theorists and the moral realists are both misguided in their attempt to figure out what moral properties are and so what the world would have to be like for there to be moral facts (*see* PRESCRIPTIVISM).

Non-cognitivists have offered a variety of accounts concerning the role of evaluative judgments. Some hold that they express (as opposed to report) our approvals and disapprovals or likes and dislikes; others hold that the key difference is not in what they express (approvals or beliefs) but in what we are doing in making them: say, prescribing (in the cases of evaluative judgments) as opposed to describing (in the case of non-evaluative judgments). Still others hold that the important difference is that the role of evaluative judgments is to guide and influence, not convey information. Whatever the differences, non-cognitivists share the view that moral (and other evaluative) judgments do not purport to report moral (or evaluative) facts, so they presuppose no special problematic properties, and they are not properly seen as true or false in light of whether the moral (or evaluative) facts are as they purport (Ayer 1936; Stevenson 1937; Hare 1952).

Whatever the details, non-cognitivism has a number of advantages. For instance, if non-cognitivism is right, then in making evaluative judgments we avoid any commitment whatsoever to distinctively moral properties and so any commitment to the kind of properties error theorists have maintained are strange and problematic. At the same time, however, it can account for the ever-openness of the questions raised in Moore’s open question argument. After all, settling the facts does not settle what attitude one will take toward those facts nor what one might prescribe in the face of those facts. So two people can agree as to the facts and yet come to think in dramatically different ways about the value of those facts or about what to do in light of them. Thus, in granting that something is pleasant, nothing follows directly concerning whether one will approve of it. Of course one might well approve of it, but, if one does not, that does nothing to suggest one fails to understand what it is for something to be a pleasure. For much the same reason, non-cognitivists can also

explain easily the irresolvable nature of moral disputes. If, as they hold, a moral disagreement is a matter of having different attitudes toward one and the same thing, then resolving the disagreement is a matter of coming to share attitudes, not of finding evidence that one's view is true. Consequently, it is not, in the end, a rational process, but an affective one that is sensitive to all the considerations and influences (rational and irrational alike) that shape our attitudes.

Along with rejecting the idea that our moral judgments involve ascribing distinctive properties, non-cognitivism steers clear of all the burdens moral realists face of explaining how the properties in question might be related to other (non-moral) properties – how does the cruelty of an action make it wrong? – as well as those connected with accounting for how we might learn of the properties (and of their connections to the non-moral properties on which they presumably depend). These are among the most pressing burdens that error theorists advance against moral realists as grounds for abandoning the idea that anything ever has the properties in question. Yet, because non-cognitivism holds that people are not ascribing properties in the first place, they dismiss as misguided the idea that these issues even arise.

Internalism

In addition to the advantages mentioned above, non-cognitivism has a unique, and many think uniquely plausible, account of the practical impact of moral judgments. On everyone's view, cognitivist and non-cognitivist alike, the thought that something is morally right has more or less direct implications for what one thinks one should do. But, according to many, it also has a motivational implication, such that one does not count as sincerely judging a course of action morally right unless one has some motivation to do it (*see* INTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL). Moral judgment's intimate connection to motivation is regularly offered as marking a sharp contrast with non-evaluative judgments (none of which seem to have such a direct tie to motivation). If there is this contrast, non-cognitivists are well placed to explain it. A sincere judgment that something is right, on their account, expresses a positive attitude toward acting accordingly, and as long as the attitude in question is a motivating one, the connection between sincere judgment and motivation is immediately explained. In contrast, if (as cognitivists hold) sincerely judging that something is morally right is a matter of believing it has a certain property (rightness), it is unclear how such a judgment could have a direct implication for the motives of the person in question. In general, believing that something has a certain property is, in itself, motivationally neutral. So how is it that believing it has the specific property of being morally right works to ensure the presence of certain motivations?

Needless to say, not everyone grants that sincere moral judgments have the connection to motivation that this line of argument supposes. So, for instance, many think that the motivational impact of moral judgments depends on other aspects of the person's psychology, perhaps on her having a concern for others, or on having a desire to do what is right, or on some other motivationally significant trait that (when present) combines with the sincere judgment to produce motivation (Brink

1989; Smith 1994). If that is right, then this other aspect of one's psychology will explain such motivation as there is, and will also explain why in some cases someone might sincerely make a moral judgment and yet not have the corresponding motivation: they lack the additional concern that makes for the motivational impact of the judgment. Others grant the connection, but hold that the connection between sincere moral judgment and motivation is in some way forged by what it takes to be competent with the moral (McDowell 1981).

Even if one rejects the idea that moral judgment is always, if sincere, motivationally loaded, one might hold, as some cognitivists do, that there is nonetheless a crucial connection between what is morally right (whether one judges it to be or not) and human motivation. Many, for instance, suppose that "ought" implies "can," so that an action can be morally required only if the agent who is required to perform it *can* (see OUGHT IMPLIES CAN). And if a person can perform an action only if she can have a motivation to do it, the truth of the judgment that someone morally ought to do something will require that she is able to be motivated to act accordingly. Alternatively, some see morality as a system of principles that solve a certain kind of practical problem that can be solved only if people subject to the principles are able to conform to them. Just which principles are the actual principles of morality, and so which actions are in fact morally required or forbidden, will (on this view) depend on what people are capable of motivationally. But however this kind of connection ends up being developed, it regularly ends up not being distinctively non-cognitivist (and, indeed, it often takes the shape of a cognitivist account of what has to be the case in order for a moral judgment to be true; for example, there has to be the possibility of being motivated to do what the judgment says is required).

While non-cognitivism, in its various versions, has a number of significant advantages, it faces obstacles that many see as insuperable.

Perhaps the most deeply felt worries are raised by the apparently subjectivist nature of the non-cognitivism (see SUBJECTIVISM, ETHICAL). Of course, since on their view moral judgments do not purport to report moral facts, nor do they involve ascribing moral properties to any thing, they are not committed to holding that moral facts are subjective. Yet their approach to understanding moral judgment – by looking at the non-cognitive attitudes they express or how they are being used, rather than the (putative) content of the judgments – nonetheless has the aura of a subjectivist view. In particular, by emphasizing what people are feeling or doing in making moral judgments, rather than on what would have to be the case for the judgments to be true, non-cognitivism strikes many as even more subjective than descriptive subjectivism, which at least holds that, when it comes to morality, there is a fact of the matter.

On many people's view, this aspect of non-cognitivism means that it misses something crucial about what we are doing in making moral judgments. Even if, as may well be true, people's moral judgments regularly reflect and even express their non-cognitive subjective states, there is a difference to be accounted for (they claim) between someone judging something morally right and it being so. So any account that rejects the idea that such judgments could possibly be true is leaving out this

crucial difference. (Needless to say, this sense of a crucial difference is at the heart of cognitivism and comes with all the accompanying burdens involved in trying to figure out what it would take for the judgments to be true.)

Other worries as well are connected to non-cognitivism's failure to do justice to, and respect, the aspects of moral thought and talk that recommend cognitivism. In particular, it clashes not just with our thinking of such judgments as being true or false, but as their being responsible to evidence, as being subject to standards of reasoning, and as being not merely a reflection of our attitudes but as being about an aspect of the world that sets a standard for those attitudes. The very feature of non-cognitivism that allows it to dodge the burden of accounting for moral properties and our knowledge of them, suggests it cannot satisfactorily explain why those burdens seem inescapable to anyone who thinks that murder is wrong, justice a virtue, and benevolence good.

Quasi-Realism

Impressed with these worries, but committed to the metaphysically modest commitments of non-cognitivism, quasi-realists argue that the non-cognitivist explanatory strategy need not reject as misguided the idea that moral judgments can be true or false, involve purporting to report facts, are responsible to evidence and subject to standards of reasoning, nor even that there are moral properties (*see* QUASI-REALISM; PROJECTIVISM). As quasi-realists see it, explaining these aspects of moral judgment is something that any plausible view must be able to do. But, they hold, an explanation can be offered without taking on the metaphysical and epistemological burdens the error theorists highlight. In effect, the quasi-realists set out to vindicate talking like a moral realist without bearing the burden of being one (Gibbard 1990; Blackburn 1993).

Two main strategies are, then, employed. On the one hand, quasi-realists hold that having judged, say, that some act is morally wrong, no additional commitments come with holding that it is true that the act is morally wrong, nor in holding that it is a fact that the act is wrong, nor even that the act has the property of being wrong. In all these cases, the alternatives are all just different, albeit sometimes oblique, ways of expressing the attitude that was expressed by the original judgment. And since making that original judgment is a matter of having some non-cognitive attitude that introduces no ontological commitment on its own, the talk of truth, facts, and properties leaves the burden light, even as it is completely appropriate. On the other hand, quasi-realists hold that judgments concerning what counts as evidence, whether someone is meeting the appropriate standards of reasoning, and even that though one thinks something is wrong, one might be mistaken, are all themselves to be given a non-cognitivist reading. Thus, at least roughly (with various nuances suppressed) in saying some consideration is evidence for a particular moral view, we are expressing approval of having it weigh in favor of adopting the corresponding attitude; in saying that a conclusion follows from certain premises, we are expressing approval of reaching the conclusion if one accepts the premise; and in acknowledging that we

might be mistaken in making some judgment we are expressing approval of being open to changing it.

Combining these two strategies the quasi-realist hopes to explain and, in an important sense, vindicate as perfectly reasonable, thinking and talking as moral realists hold that we do. But, in the process, the explanation and vindication are advanced as ways to avoid the indefensible excesses of the realist position.

This quasi-realist project will succeed in offering an alternative to realism, of course, only if, along with its vindication of the realist-sounding thought and talk, a contrast remains between what a realist interpretation would require and what a quasi-realist provides (Dreier 2004). Otherwise, the quasi-realist's vindication will be of realism.

One way to draw the contrast is to distinguish between judgments that are (as one might put it) *really* true, that report what are *actually* facts, and that involve *genuine* properties, on the one hand, and those that merely allow, cheaply, talk of truth, facts, and properties. But if we have such a distinction in hand, many think that moral judgments, when it comes to their pretensions, involve commitments to the former, so that the quasi-realist's talk of truth, facts, and properties will provide only a pale shadow of what vindication would require.

Another way to draw the distinction, one that embraces "minimalism" about truth, facts, and properties across the board, and so avoids offering two stories of each, goes back to some of the claims about explanation described above. On this approach, the contrast is drawn by appeal to the "direction" of explanation offered for the truths, facts, and properties. The idea is that some judgments cannot be fully explained without appealing to what makes them true, or to the facts they report, or to the properties they ascribe, whereas other judgments are such that their truth, the facts they report, and the properties they ascribe, are all explained by what we are doing in making the judgments. For the first, the "direction" of explanation flows from the truths, facts, and properties, to the making of the judgments, while for the second, things are reversed. And the suggestion is that judgments of the first kind are properly given a realist interpretation while judgments of the second kind are not. But if the contrast is drawn in this way there are concerns about whether the "direction" of explanation metaphor can be made precise and plausible, and about whether, if it can, the result is a view that is again too subjectivist in its implications to count as having vindicated the realist-seeming commitments of moral thought and talk.

The quasi-realists are, of course, not the only people who hope to give an account of, and in some sense vindicate, moral thought and talk, without taking on extraordinary metaphysical and epistemological commitments. Despite their many differences, naturalist moral realists all share this ambition. Their main challenge is to do so while capturing well what is distinctive about moral thought and talk.

Constructivism

Constructivism has sometimes been offered as an account of moral judgments, and what makes them true (or not), that meets the twin ambitions of avoiding metaphysical and epistemological extravagance while accommodating what is distinctive

about morality (see CONSTRUCTIVISM, MORAL). The underlying idea is that what we ought to do, what is right or just, and so on, is in some sense, a function of what we could, under the appropriate circumstances, rationally choose, accept, or agree to. Many constructivists see morality as having a deeply social nature, as being tied to what all people who are subject to morality's demands could, in recognition of the existence of others, rationally accept.

But, in the first instance, the problems that morality solves might start as individual problems, framed by each person finding herself asking not "What will I do?" but "What should I do?" in circumstances where she sees what she will end up doing as being settled by how she answers that question. So, for instance, it may be that what a person ought to do is what she would be rationally justified in doing, where her being rationally justified in doing it turns on her being able to justify it to others (Scanlon 1998). Or it might be that the standards that settle what she should do are constitutive of being the kind of agent who can raise the crucial question in the first place, and so are shared by all such agents, but are not essentially social (Rawls 1980; Korsgaard 2008).

Just how these views relate to moral realism is controversial. In many cases, the constructivist account plays out against a background rejection of the idea that there are moral facts independent of rational agents (Gauthier 1986; Street 2008). If realism requires that the facts at issue be independent in this way, then in these cases constructivism is not a realist position. Yet constructivism is standardly offered not as a pale substitute for what our normal moral judgments presuppose, but as an articulation of what those judgments are about and so what makes them true (when they are). This sort of defense rejects the idea of wholly independent moral facts, but not by rejecting the idea of moral facts and moral properties. And if the moral facts and properties it defends are those that moral judgments purport to report, the result will be a realist position.

Realist or not, constructivism offers an account of morality that aims to explain the distinctive nature of moral thought and talk by emphasizing its essential ties to the practical problems agents face and, often, by those standards being bound up in distinctive ways with practical deliberation. At the same time, many hold that constructivism's account of moral principles as tied to human choice or agreement allows it to avoid the sort of metaphysical extravagances and epistemological puzzles that would come with seeing moral properties as free-floating features of the world that, though they set the standard for our judgments, exist entirely independently of them. Whether the metaphysical and epistemological concerns are allayed, or just delayed, is a bit unclear. To the extent that the constructivist view on offer appeals to what people have *reason* to agree to, or to standards of *rational* deliberation, it will invite questions about the judgments concerning reasons or rational deliberation that it relies on. Are these evaluative judgments that purport to report facts? If so, then the anti-realist's worries re-emerge, this time concerning reasons and rationality. If not, then a different challenge comes to the fore: what is the constructivist doing in claiming of some standards that they are the ones people have reason to agree to, or would rationally accept, under the appropriate circumstances?

Conclusion

It is fair to say that there is no consensus on whether moral thought and talk, as we know it, can actually be vindicated. And there is no consensus either as to what a successful vindication would involve, were one in the offing. Yet there is little doubt that our views of morality play a crucial role in our lives. As a result, we are not even close to understanding ourselves until we have wrestled with, and come to a settled view of, the issues that define the debate concerning moral realism.

See also: COGNITIVISM; CONSTRUCTIVISM, MORAL; DISAGREEMENT, MORAL; EMOTIVISM; EPISTEMOLOGY, MORAL; ERROR THEORY; EXPLANATIONS, MORAL; FACT-VALUE DISTINCTION; IDEAL OBSERVER THEORIES; INTERNALISM, MOTIVATIONAL; NATURALISM, ETHICAL; NATURALISTIC FALLACY; NON-COGNITIVISM; NONNATURALISM, ETHICAL; OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT; OUGHT IMPLIES CAN; PRESCRIPTIVISM; PROJECTIVISM; PROPERTIES, MORAL; QUASI-REALISM; QUEERNESS, ARGUMENT FROM; RELATIVISM, MORAL; RESPONSE-DEPENDENT THEORIES; SUBJECTIVISM, ETHICAL; TRUTH IN ETHICS

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