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THE MANY MORAL REALISMS[1]

1. Introduction

Recognizing the startling resurgence in realism, Don Philahue (of "The Don Philahue Show") invited a member of Realists Anonymous to bare his soul on television. After a brief introduction documenting the spread of realism, Philahue turned to his guest:

DP: What kinds of realism were you into, Hilary?

H: The whole bag, Don. I was a realist about logical terms, abstract entities, theoretical postulates -- you name it.

DP: And causality, what about causality?

H: That too, Don. (Audience gasps.)

DP: I'm going to press you here, Hilary. Did you at any time accept moral realism?

H: (staring at feet): Yes.

DP: What effect did all this realism have on your life?

H: I would spend hours aimlessly wandering the streets, kicking large stones and shouting "I refute you thus!" It's embarrassing to recall.

DP: There was worse, wasn't there Hilary?

H: I can't deny it, Don. (Audience gasps.) Instead of going to work I would sit at home fondling ashtrays and reading voraciously about converging scientific theories. I kept a copy of 'Hitler: A Study in Tyranny' hidden in the icebox, and when no-one was around I would take it out and chant "The Nazis were bad. The Nazis were *really* bad."[2]

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Realists and anti-realists alike can, of course, say that the Nazis were bad and even that the Nazis were *really* bad. What distinguishes realists from anti-realists about morals has disappointingly little to do with the particular moral claims each willingly endorses. In fact, moral anti-realists expend a great deal

1. What follows is a slightly revised version of my "The Many Moral Realisms," Spindel Conference: Moral Realism, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986), Supplement, pp. 1-22.

2. This dialogue finds its source at the end of Philip Gasper's pen. I am grateful for his permission to use it.

of energy trying to show that their views about the *status* of moral claims are perfectly compatible with saying all the same things any decent, wholesome, respectable person would.[3] In a similar way, what distinguishes realists from anti-realists about science has little to do with there being some difference in the particular scientific claims each willingly endorses. So, too, with the difference between realists and anti-realists about mathematics, or about causality, or about the external world. Indeed, the plausibility of anti-realism, in any of these areas, depends largely on preserving our normal ways of speaking even while challenging the natural (though perhaps naive) realistic interpretation of what is being said.

In spite of the anti-realists' conciliatory attitude towards much of what we say, the debate between realists and anti-realists is deep and important. It affects our ontology, epistemology, and semantics. And, in ethics, it makes a significant difference to our understanding of what (if anything) is valuable, to our account of moral disagreement, and to the importance we place on moral reflection. It may even make a difference to our happiness, if we desire things because of the value we take them to have and not *vice versa*.[4]

The realism/anti-realism debate in ethics has been around ever since people began thinking critically about their moral convictions. The problem has always been to make sense of these convictions in a way that does justice to morality's apparent importance without engaging in outrageous metaphysical flights of fancy. Some have thought it can't be done; they've held that the apparent importance of morality is mere appearance. Others have thought it can be done;

3. Simon Blackburn, for instance, takes the major challenge facing anti-realism to be that of showing that our normal (apparently realistic) way of speaking about morals is neither 'fraudulent' nor 'diseased', even though it is to be given an anti-realist construal. See Spreading the Word, (Oxford University Press, 1984), especially pp. 189-223 and "Supervenience Revisited," Exercises in Analysis, Ian Hacking (ed.) (Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 47-67, reprinted in this volume. See also C.L. Stevenson's "Retrospective Comments" in Facts and Values (Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 186-232, and "Ethical Fallibility" in Richard DeGeorge (ed.), Ethics and Society (Doubleday, 1966), pp. 197-217.

4. David Wiggins argues that we can see our lives as meaningful only if we attach a value to our ends that transcends the mere fact that we have adopted them. ("Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," *Proceedings of the British Academy* (Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 331-378, reprinted in this volume.) In a similar vein, Mark Platts maintains that "desires frequently require an appropriate belief about the independent desirability of the object of desire." Where the belief is absent so too is the desire and thus the satisfaction that might have come from getting what is desired. So rejecting moral realism "can be the end for a reflective being like us by being the beginning of a life that is empty, brutish, and long." ("Morality and the End of Desire" in Reference, Truth and Reality (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), Mark Platts (ed.), p. 80.) And Robert Bellah et. al. suggest that accepting moral realism may be essential if we are to enjoy the psychological benefits of commitment. See Habits of the Heart (University of California Press, 1985). See Nicholas Sturgeon's "What Difference Does It Make Whether Moral Realism Is True?", Spindel Conference: Moral Realism, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986), Supplement, pp. 115-141, for a discussion of what is at stake in the moral realism debate.

they've held that whatever metaphysics is necessary is neither outrageous nor fanciful.

The debate came into especially sharp focus with the beginning of this century, when G.E. Moore identified what he called the "Naturalistic Fallacy." All at once, it seemed as if the metaphysically most attractive theories of morality, those that reconciled morality with naturalism, turned on committing the fallacy. According to Moore, one commits this fallacy by trying to define moral terms that are simple and unanalyzable. A clear example of the fallacy, he argues, is the hedonists's proposal that the goodness of an action consists simply in its pleasantness. Although many good things are pleasant, and many (perhaps even all) pleasant things are good, he maintains it is a mistake to think goodness and pleasantness are one and the same property. To see why, consider that it makes perfect sense both to say of some action that it is pleasant and to ask whether it is also good. That the question makes sense, and is not immediately answered by noticing that the action is pleasant, shows (Moore argues) that "x is pleasant" can't mean the same thing as "x is good". Moreover, the fact that the question makes sense (the fact that it remains an 'open question') shows as well, he thinks, that 'good' does have a meaning:

> ...whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question "Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?" can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant. And if he will try this experiment with each suggested definition in succession, he may become expert enough to recognise that in every case he has before his mind a unique object, with regard to the connection of which with any other object, a distinct question may be asked. Every one does in fact understand the question "Is this good?". When he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be, were he asked "Is this pleasant, or desired, or approved?" It has a distinct meaning for him, even though he may not recognise in what respect it is distinct.[5]

Thus Moore concludes that to say of something that it is good is to attribute to it a simple, unanalyzable, property, a property wholly distinct from other properties of everyday experience. And he holds that the simple property referred to by 'good' is not the object of sensory experience at all. "It is not *goodness*," he says, "but only the things or qualities which are good, which can exist in time -- can have duration and cease to exist -- can be objects of *perception*."[6] Goodness itself cannot be perceived, yet it nonetheless can be, and is, a property of those things we do perceive.[7]

The resulting view treats moral properties as real, but also as simple, nonnatural, and seemingly mysterious. And because moral properties are taken to be nonnatural, and as not discoverable by normal empirical investigation, this account falls back on 'moral intuition' (which is no less mysterious) to explain how it is we come to know about morality. No other view, Moore argues, can avoid committing the Naturalistic Fallacy, if it is to respect our sense that we do mean something when we call one action good, another bad, or one person virtuous, another vicious, or one practice right, another wrong. Convinced by Moore's arguments, many people have accepted the mystery and some have even strived to make it appear commonsensical.[8]

In reaction, and in the name of removing mystery, others have questioned the idea that our moral claims are meaningful in the way Moore supposes. We might steer clear of the Naturalistic Fallacy and avoid a commitment to strange nonnatural properties, they point out, by rejecting the assumption that in calling something good we are describing it. By distinguishing descriptive language from prescriptive language -- the language of fact from that of value -- we can acknowledge that no proposed definition of moral terms by descriptive ones will be adequate, and still deny that prescriptive language involves attributing any properties whatsoever (let alone peculiar nonnatural ones) to actions, people, or practices. On this theory, to say of something that it is good is (roughly) to recommend it, and to show one's approval of it, but not to report any fact about it.[9] It thus neatly eliminates the need to introduce nonnatural properties into our ontology, but it does so by abandoning the notion of moral facts.

Many have found this theory just as unsatisfying as Moore's. For it seems that by doing without the notion of moral facts, the theory robs morality of its

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5. Principia Ethica (Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 16-17. Despite its name, the fallacy Moore is concerned with is not limited to mistakenly identifying moral properties with natural properties. The same fallacy is committed, he argues, when any simple, unanalyzable property is identified with some other, even if the properties involved are both natural (p. 13) or both nonnatural (p. 125).

6. Principia Ethica, *ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

7. For a discussion of Moore's argument see, for instance, W.K. Frankena's "The Naturalistic Fallacy," *Mind* 48 (1939), pp. 464-477; D.H. Munro's Empiricism and Ethics (Cambridge University Press, 1967); W.D. Falk's "FAct, Value, and Nonnatural Predication" in Ought, Reasons and Morality (Cornell University Press, 1986); and A.N. Prior's Logic and the Basis of Ethics (Oxford University Press, 1949).

8. The same general view of moral properties, and our knowledge of them, was advanced in 1757 by Richard Price in A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals, D.D. Raphael (ed.) (Oxford University Press, 1948) and in 1788 by Thomas Reid in Essays on the Active Powers of Man, R.E. Beanblossom and K. Lehrer (eds.) (Hackett, 1983). For more recent examples, see Prichard's Moral Obligation (Oxford University Press, 1949); Ross's The Right and the Good (Oxford University Press, 1930) and The Foundation of Ethics (Oxford University Press, 1939); and A.C. Ewing's Ethics (English Universities Press, 1953).

9. Classic examples of this view can be found in A.J. Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic (Dover, 1952), C.L. Stevenson's Ethics and Language (Yale University Press, 1944) and R.M. Hare's The Language of Morals (Oxford University Press, 1952).

claim to importance and renders unintelligible the idea that we might make fundamental moral mistakes. At the same time, the theory has trouble giving a compelling account of the phenomenology of moral experience, both because it construes morality as a reflection of our attitudes rather than a standard for them, and because it denies that, when it comes to morals, there is some fact of the matter.[10] Yet whether there is some alternative that can salvage moral facts without introducing Moorean metaphysical excesses (if indeed they are excesses) remains unclear -- according to some moral realists, there is; according to other moral realists (the Mooreans) and all anti-realists, there is not.

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The main purpose of this paper is to establish coordinates for locating various versions of moral realism that have been proposed (both Moorean and otherwise) and for distinguishing these positions from anti-realism.

To sort out the many moral realisms from the equally plentiful anti-realisms, what's needed is some 'conceptual cartography' -- a mapping out of the moral realism debate. In constructing such a map, I assume that, to be adequate, a map of the moral realism debate must do at least three things: first, since there is a *debate* about moral realism, the map should leave each side with defensible territory (neither realism nor anti-realism ought to be trivially true); second, since the debate is about *moral* realism, the map should locate positions that are recognizably positions people have taken about morality; and third, since the debate is about moral *realism*, the map should extend in some natural way to other debates about realism.

The map I offer is, I believe, one that works not just for the moral realism debate, but also for all other debates concerning realism. Moved from realist debate to realist debate, the same map will serve to demarcate in each the issues that separate realists from anti-realists. Unlike most maps, which elaborately detail one area but are useless in the next, this map serves as a guide to realism wherever it occurs.

Flexible as the map is, it bends always to accommodate a fixed view of the nature of realism. In every case, what marks off some particular terrain as the realist's remains the same; over and over, it is the view that some of the disputed claims literally construed are literally true. Wherever it is found, I'll argue, realism involves embracing just two theses: (1) the claims in question, when literally construed, are literally true or false (cognitivism), and (2) some are

[10]. See, just as examples, Kurt Baier's The Moral Point of View (Cornell University Press, 1958); Carl Wellman's "Emotivism and Ethical Objectivity," *American Philosophical Quarterly* V (1968), pp. 90-99; J.O. Urmson's The Emotive Theory of Ethics (Oxford University Press, 1968); Philippa Foot's "Moral Beliefs," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1958-1959), reprinted in this volume; Sabina Lovibond's Realism and Imagination in Ethics (University of Minnesota Press, 1983); and David Wiggins's "Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life," *op. cit.*.

literally true. Nothing more. (Of course, a great deal is built into these two theses).

Correspondingly, there are two ways to be an anti-realist: embrace a non-cognitivist analysis of the claims in question, or hold that the claims of the disputed class, despite their being truth-valued, are none of them true (say, because they all share a false presupposition).

This characterization of realism differs in significant ways from many common definitions. For instance, some characterizations of realism give pride of place to objectivity, others to independence from the mental, and still others treat realism as a semantic thesis about the nature of truth and its transcendence of our recognitional capacities. Some even combine several of these elements. Thus, according to Michael Dummett, realism is "...the belief that statements of the disputed class possess an objective truth-value, independently of our means of knowing it: they are true or false in virtue of a reality existing independently of us."[11] Yet, in the account I offer, there is no mention of objectivity or existence, no mention of recognition transcendence or independence, nor any mention of reference, bivalence, or correspondence. And this is a virtue. Independence from the mental may be a plausible requirement for realism when we're talking about macrophysical objects but not when it comes to realism in psychology (psychological facts won't be independent of the mental)[12]; bivalence might go hand-in-hand with realism in mathematics, but realism in other areas seems perfectly compatible with acknowledging that some of our predicates are vague and have indeterminate extensions; and existence may be crucial to realism about scientific entities (since claims concerning such entities are true only if the entities exist) but not to realism about scientific laws (that make no existence claims).

By abstracting from these (often contentious) notions, the account I offer is in a position to explain why they are so often central to the realist's position *even though none of them is always central*. The governing idea is that independence, bivalence, existence, etc., come into play when, *but only when*, they are relevant to whether the disputed claims, literally construed, are literally true.

[11]. Truth and Other Enigmas (Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 146. In a later article Dummett says that realism is the view that "...statements in the given class relate to some reality that exists independently of our knowledge of it, in such a way that reality renders each statement in the class determinately true or false, again independently of whether we know, or are even able to discover, its truth-value." ("Realism," *Synthese* 52 (1982), pp. 55-112, p. 55.).

[12]. Similarly, requiring epistemic independence is implausible once we grant (i) the possibility of a realist position according to which a necessary condition for being in pain is knowing (or at least believing) one is, or (ii) the possibility of a realist position in ethics according to which one can't have moral obligations of which one is incapable of knowing. Elliott Sober explores the problems facing all attempts to build independence into the general characterization of realism in "Realism and Independence," *Nous* 16 (1982), pp. 369-385.

The notions of 'literal construal' and 'literal truth' will obviously carry a lot of weight in this account of realism. Significantly, though, most realism debates are not especially sensitive to how these notions are understood. As long as we're working with theories of meaning and truth that allow the distinctions between cognitive and non-cognitive discourse, and between claims that are literally true and those that aren't, all the positions relevant to the realism debate in ethics can be reproduced.[13] It doesn't much matter which particular theory of meaning and which particular theory of truth is being relied on.[14] What our choice of semantic theories will influence is our understanding of what it is to say that some of the disputed claims, literally construed, are literally true. The choice won't settle whether any of the claims actually are true. This insensitivity to the differences between various semantic theories reflects the fact that, for the most part, realism is a matter of metaphysics, not semantics.

To defend this general account of realism, it will help to have the map of the moral realism debate set out. This is best done by surveying the positions one might take concerning the status of moral claims.

2. Realism, Instrumentalism, and Idealism

Depending on the domain in question, one or the other of two time-honored contrasts has dominated talk of realism. One is the contrast between realism and *instrumentalism*; the other is the contrast between realism and *idealism*. Which contrast is relied on in characterizing realism will, of course, significantly color what is counted as moral realism.

When realism (moral or otherwise) is contrasted with instrumentalism the central issue is whether the claims of the disputed class should be interpreted as having truth-values. In other words, the issue is whether the claims should be given a cognitivist interpretation. When realism is contrasted with idealism, however, the issue is not whether the claims have truth-values. Realists and idealists agree that they do. Instead, the issue is whether minds (or their contents) figure expressly in the truth-conditions for the claims in question.

[13]. If these distinctions aren't preserved, then there will be no way to generate any special problem about moral realism. In any case, theories of meaning and truth that don't preserve these distinction in one way or another don't have much credibility as accounts of meaning and truth.

[14]. For instance, the positions available to the anti-realist remain virtually unaffected if we accept a Dummett-style verificationist theory of meaning. An anti-realist will hold either that moral claims are not verifiable and so are meaningless, or that moral claims are verifiable but that none of them are verified. In other words, an anti-realist will defend either non-cognitivism or an error theory. In the same way, the boundaries set by the map of realism debates are unaffected by whether we give an account of literal truth in terms of correspondence or in terms of warranted assertibility. An important constraint, though, is that the semantics offered must be *seamless*; whichever theories of meaning and truth are offered for the disputed claims must be extended as well to apply to all claims. Thus, one won't have defended realism in ethics by showing moral claims to be meaningful and true in a sense, if they are not meaningful and true in the same sense that other, noncontroversial, claims are.

Realists (in this sense) hold that they don't, while idealists hold that these claims are literally true or false, but that they have whatever truth-value they do in virtue of someone or other's mind: your's, mine, or God's.

Clearly the realism/idealism debate presupposes a cognitivist interpretation of the disputed claims. For if we accept instrumentalism, and so non-cognitivism, about claims involving unobservable entities, or moral properties, or scientific laws, then no worry arises as to the nature of their truth-conditions -- they haven't any.[15]

Those who are instrumentalists, whether about scientific claims concerning unobservable entities or moral claims about what actions are right, hold that such claims are not literally true or false but are instead merely useful devices for controlling either our own experiences or others' behavior. A standard instrumentalist view of scientific theories, for example, makes them out to be uninterpreted formal systems (cognitive "black boxes") constructed to control and predict the observable world, not to describe an unobservable one. So viewed, scientific theories are not thought of in terms of truth but in terms of empirical adequacy, conceptual utility, practical fruitfulness, and formal elegance.

Along the same lines, 'moral instrumentalists' argue that in using moral language we don't ascribe moral properties to people, actions, or institutions. As Ayer puts it,

> The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. Thus if I say to someone, "You acted wrongly in stealing that money," I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, "You stole that money." In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it.[16]

Our aim, moral instrumentalists say, is not to describe the world, but to change it.[17] And moral language is especially well suited to this job, they point out, because people have been conditioned to use and respond to moral utterances as commands and exhortations. The point of making moral claims, Stevenson argues, "...is not to indicate facts but to *create an influence*. Instead of merely describing people's interests they *change* or *intensify* them. They

[15]. Conversely, if instrumentalism is rejected, we face the challenge of figuring out what the truth-conditions are for the disputed claims. And this is often problematic. Indeed, much of the motivation for embracing instrumentalism lies in thinking that if the disputed claims were meaningful they would have to be about very peculiar things.

[16]. A.J.Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

[17]. Not surprisingly, moral instrumentalism goes hand in hand with scientific instrumentalism, and both found strong support in the verificationism of logical positivism. See my "Logical Positivism and the Demise of 'Moral Science'," in The Heritage of Logical Positivism, edited by Nicholas Rescher (University of Pittsburgh Philosophy of Science Series, 1985), pp. 83-92.

recommend an interest in an object, rather than state that the interest already exists."[18]

Moral instrumentalists come in several stripes, the differences among them turning on the particular account each offers of how moral language works. Emotivists, for instance, hold that moral language comes by its usefulness thanks to its expressing the emotions, tastes, feelings, and other affective states of the speaker. Moral language, they maintain, is "used to express feeling about certain objects, but not to make any assertion about them."[19] Prescriptivists are also moral instrumentalists. However, they reject as too tight the link the emotivists assume to hold between moral language and emotions. They argue that moral claims are useful not because they express emotions, but because they serve as universalizable commands that a certain course of action be taken by anyone (including the speaker) under the circumstances.[20] Whichever particular account is offered, all moral instrumentalists emphasize the practical uses of moral language and think it is a mistake to treat moral claims as assertions about the world that might be literally true or false.[21]

Moral realists, like moral instrumentalists, recognize moral language as a useful instrument for controlling the world around us. What distinguishes the realist is, at least in part, the conviction that this use depends for its effectiveness on moral language expressing moral beliefs. Moral language exerts its influence, realists argue, because people can hold moral beliefs (and not just have moral reactions), and we can alter other people's attitudes and behavior through discussion and moral argument only because people's moral beliefs can change their moral reactions. In explaining how moral attitudes affect inference and argument, action and interaction, we'll find ourselves appealing not just to moral reactions but also to moral beliefs (that, in turn, are expressed by moral language).[22]

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[18]. C.L. Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms," Facts and Values, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

[19]. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

[20]. R.M. Hare's The Language of Morals, *op. cit.*, is a classic articulation of prescriptivism. It is worth emphasizing that prescriptivists don't hold that moral claims are devoid of all cognitive content. Indeed their account of how moral claims work requires that the claims have some content. It is just that, according to prescriptivists, the content they have is like the content of commands -- it suits them for prescribing, not for describing.

[21]. Some instrumentalists are prepared to allow the propriety of saying things like "It's true that gratuitous cruelty is wrong." But then they emphasize that 'true' in this context plays a role significantly different from the role it plays in the context of cognitive discourse. While they grant that moral claims may be 'true' in some sense, they deny that they may be 'literally true.'

[22]. Moral instrumentalists, particularly emotivists, can easily explain the intimate connection between first-person moral judgments and action. If moral language simply reflects the emotions, feelings, etc. of the speaker, it is not surprising that people are moved to pursue what they call good and to avoid what they call bad. Moral instrumentalism doesn't fare so well, though, when it comes to explaining other aspects of how moral language works. Specifically,

Moreover, realists point out, moral language exhibits all the tell-tale signs of cognitive discourse: we seem to hold moral beliefs, have moral disagreements, seek evidence for our opinions; we act as if there were something to discover, as if we could be mistaken, as if there is a fact of the matter; and we even talk of moral claims being true or false, and of people knowing the better (even while doing the worse).[23] Indeed, moral claims are apparently indistinguishable in logical form and within inferential contexts from claims that are recognized as cognitive.[24] These characteristics of moral discourse are not merely flukes of the language, they reflect the phenomenology of moral experience -- it's a phenomenology that represents obligation as a constraint on, and value as giving direction to, our actions independently of what we might happen to desire. All told, realists argue, cognitivism offers the best psychological and linguistic account of moral language.

Of course none of these considerations is conclusive. It's open to moral instrumentalists to explain away these practices and convictions as misleading indicators of cognitive content. But then they must offer some principled way of drawing the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive discourse, and they must show that moral claims fall on the non-cognitive side of the distinction.[25] In doing so, the moral instrumentalists, not the moral realists, will be the ones denying appearances in the name of a deeper reality.

3. Error and Success Theories

Anti-realists might simply grant that moral claims are cognitively packed.[26] Realism, after all, does not find salvation simply in the discovery that the disputed claims purport to report facts -- that is compatible with their failing miserably. To get realism, the disputed claims must not only have truth-values,

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it has difficulty giving a plausible explanation of the interpersonal impact of moral discussion and argument.

[23]. See Jonathan Harrison's Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong (George Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 258. The presence of similar tell-tale signs has played a significant role in undermining the instrumentalist's non-cognitive account of the theoretical discourse of science.

[24]. P. T. Geach rejects as inadequate all expressive theories of meaning on the grounds that they can't account for the fact that "a proposition may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted, and yet be recognizably the same proposition" (p. 449). See "Assertion," *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), pp. 449-465.

[25]. John McDowell suggests that there is no such principle distinction available that will serve the moral instrumentalists' purpose. See "Non-cognitivism and Rule-Following" in Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), Steven Holtzman and Christopher Leich (eds.), pp. 141-162.

[26]. Simon Blackburn argues that 'quasi-realism' can accommodate all the appearances, and even explain the legitimacy of our practice, without indulging in what he takes to be realist excesses. In addition to Spreading the Word, *op. cit.*, see "Rule-Following and Moral Realism" in Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule, op. cit., pp. 163-187; and "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value" in Morality and Objectivity (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), Ted Honderich (ed.), pp. 1-22.

some of them must have the truth-value true. Thus it is not enough to say, as Putnam does, that

> A realist (with respect to a given theory or discourse) holds that (1) the sentences of that theory are true or false; and (2) that what makes them true or false is something external -- that is to say, it is not (in general) our sense data, actual or potential, or the structure of our minds, or our language, etc.[27]

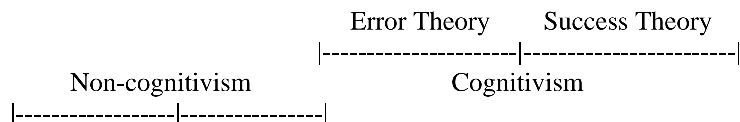
An anti-realist can perfectly well acknowledge that the disputed claims have a truth-value, and even that these truth-values depend on something external, while going on to say that none of the claims true.[28] An anti-realist might, in other words, advance an error theory.

To take account of this possibility the realism/instrumentalism dichotomy must be replaced with two distinctions:

(1) First is the distinction between non-cognitivism and cognitivism.

(2) Second is the distinction, within cognitivism, between error theories (that maintain that none of the disputed claims are true)[29] and success theories (that hold that some of the claims literally construed are literally true).

Together, these two distinctions suggest the following (partial) map of the positions one might take concerning the claims in question:



Error theorists and success theorists share the view that the disputed claims should be given a cognitivist interpretation. That is, they agree that the claims are about putative facts. What they disagree on is whether the claims live up to their pretensions.

Combining cognitivism with anti-realism in the way error theories do is neither new nor unusual. Early defenders of the error theory in ethics include Hume (on some plausible interpretations) and Spinoza, who argues that good

[27]. "What is Mathematical Truth?" Mathematics, Matter and Method, second edition (Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 69-70. See also Dummett's characterizations of realism on page 146 of Truth and Other Enigmas, *op. cit.*, and on page 55 of "Realism," *op. cit.*.

[28]. Mackie emphasizes this point in "Anti-Realisms" in Logic and Knowledge (Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 225-245.

[29]. Depending on their views of presupposition, some error theorists will hold that all the disputed claims are false while others will simply hold that none of them are true.

and evil "are nothing but modes in which the imagination is affected in different ways, and, nevertheless, they are regarded by the ignorant as being specially attributes of things...".[30] Similarly, in the philosophy of psychology eliminative materialists combine the two, maintaining that our attributions of mental states, though meaningful, are all mistaken.[31] Constructive empiricists in the philosophy of science take a similar line about all claims concerning unobservable entities, arguing that while such claims may have truth-values, we have no good reason for thinking of any of them that they have the truth-value true.[32] Likewise, the corner-stone of Atheism is not the view that talk of God's existence, His will, or His Kingdom, is meaningless, but instead the view that such claims are all quite literally false. Each of these anti-realist positions moves from a cognitivist interpretation of the disputed claims to arguments against thinking any of the claims true (and so ultimately to an error theory). What all error theorists recognize is that granting cognitivism to a disputed discourse doesn't by itself secure legitimacy for its claims.

Error theories (wherever they show up) typically involve more than just the view that none of the disputed claims are true. Since such theories almost always go against 'common sense' by denying assumptions built into the disputed language, their acceptability depends on having some account of why people have gone wrong. Needless to say, the explanations offered, and their plausibility, will vary as the error being explained varies. In ethics, the source of the error is often traced partly to our projecting reactions onto the world ("gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment," as Hume puts it[33]), and partly to the workings of effective socialization. The plausibility of social/psychological explanations of moral

[30]. Benedict Spinoza, Ethics (Haffner Press, 1949), Part I, Appendix, p. 77. W.D. Ross considers an error theory as an alternative to his own, and then rejects it on the grounds that suspecting reason to have made such an egregious error "is in principle to distrust its power of ever knowing reality." The Right and the Good, op. cit., p. 82.

[31]. Paul Churchland argues, for instance, that "our common-sense conception of psychological phenomena constitutes a radically false theory, a theory so fundamentally defective that both the principles and the ontology of that theory will eventually be displaced..." in "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981), pp. 67-90. See also Stephen Stich's From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science (Bradford Books, 1983).

[32]. Bas van Fraassen, The Scientific Image (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 11. Constructive empiricism serves a bit uneasily as an example of an error theory because it reserves judgment about the falsity of claims about unobservable entities (saying only that such claims are completely unjustified). It's more like agnosticism than atheism. See Nancy Cartwright's How The Laws Of Physics Lie (Oxford University Press, 1983) for a clear example of an error theory concerning the laws of physics (which is combined with a success theory concerning the unobservable entities postulated by physics).

[33]. An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (Hackett, 1983), p. 88. Hume offers a similar explanation of our view that a necessary connection holds between events in the world when he attributes it to our projecting the "customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant." An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (Hackett, 1977), p. 52.

opinion has itself played a crucial role in making the error theory attractive. The plausibility of these explanations suggests that the error is a natural one, and the more natural the error seems the more our conviction that no error has been will dissolve. So even if moral claims purport to report facts (as cognitivists maintain), moral realists face the serious challenge of showing that moral discourse doesn't simply embody a large scale and systematic (albeit, natural) error. Many think the challenge can't be met.

J.L. Mackie, for instance, willingly acknowledges that moral claims pass any reasonable test for cognitive content.[34] But he then relies on his cognitivist analysis of moral claims to discredit them and motivate an error theory: "...the denial of objective values will have to be put forward ...as an 'error theory', a theory that although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false."[35] Mackie offers three arguments for thinking our moral claims are all false.

First, he points to the diversity of moral opinion, arguing that in the face of such radical disagreement it is implausible to think of people's moral judgments as responses to objective moral truths. The problem, though, isn't simply that people disagree on moral questions. Disagreement is perfectly compatible with there being a fact of the matter. The problem is that "the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values."[36]

Second, Mackie maintains that the motivational force and practical relevance of moral judgments undermines the plausibility of believing in moral facts. Moral beliefs, he argues, necessarily motivate and moral facts (if there were such) would have to be necessarily action-guiding. "Plato's Forms," he suggests, "give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be. The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it."[37] Yet if objective values

[34]. "If second order ethics were confined, then, to linguistic and conceptual analysis, it ought to conclude that moral values at least are objective; that they are so is part of what our ordinary moral statements mean; the traditional moral concepts of the ordinary man as well as of the main line of western philosophers are concepts of objective value." Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

[35]. Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong, *op. cit.*, p. 35. "The assertion that there are objective values or intrinsically prescriptive entities or features of some kind, which ordinary moral judgments presuppose, is, I hold, not meaningless but false" (p. 40). See also Francis Snare's "The Empirical Bases of Moral Scepticism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984), pp. 215-225.

[36]. Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

[37]. Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong, *op. cit.*, p. 40. Whether Mackie is right about what ordinary

have to be like this, allowing the existence of moral facts would require embracing a fantastic ontology and positing mysterious powers of moral perception. The best course, Mackie argues, is to deny the existence of objective values, especially since we can explain the motivational force of moral judgments without recourse to any corresponding (and mysterious) facts that necessarily motivate.

Third, Mackie raises worries about the connection that is supposed to hold between moral properties and natural properties.[38] If there are moral properties, it seems they must have two characteristics: they must be supervenient upon natural properties (so that setting the natural facts sets the moral ones) and they must be such that the truth of a moral proposition is not entailed by the truth of any naturalistic, or set of naturalistic, propositions (since moral terms cannot be definitionally reduced to naturalistic terms). But these two characteristics, taken together, apparently generate insuperable difficulties: if it is a logical possibility that a thing could have had all the natural properties it has and still not have had the moral properties, why is it not possible for two things with exactly the same natural properties to have different moral properties? The realist must answer this question by appeal to some special connection between moral facts and natural facts and must rely on an extraordinary epistemology in explaining how it is we discover the connection. In contrast, an anti-realist can explain the apparent supervenience of moral properties on natural properties by rejecting moral properties altogether and substituting an account of how we form our moral beliefs as a response to the natural features of the world with which we interact.[39]

A common strategy runs through all three of these arguments. The strategy is to highlight the ontological and epistemological price of postulating moral facts and to show that we needn't incur these costs. The upshot of the arguments is that we don't need moral facts to explain moral judgments nor to explain anything else; moral facts, if there were any, would be explanatorily impotent. So we do better not to believe in them. By eschewing the moral facts presupposed by moral discourse, we get a better overall account of the world, a

moral judgments presuppose is of course crucial to evaluating his attack on moral realism. For my part, I seriously doubt that Plato's Forms give an accurate picture of what objective values would have to be according to a realist. See David Brink's "Externalist Moral Realism," Spindel Conference: Moral Realism, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986), Supplement, pp. 23-41.

[38]. The same problem is pressed with great care by Simon Blackburn in "Moral Realism" in Morality and Moral Reasoning (Methuen, 1971), J. Casey et. al. (eds.), pp. 101-124, in Spreading the Word, *op. cit.*, and in "Supervenience Revisited," *op. cit.*.

[39]. For a discussion of these arguments see William Tolhurst's "Supervenience, Externalism, and Moral Knowledge," Spindel Conference: Moral Realism, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986), Supplement, pp. 43-55; and James Klagge's "An Alleged Difficulty Concerning Moral Properties" *Mind* 93 (1984), pp. 370-380.

less extravagant ontology, and a neater epistemology.[40]

Of course these metaphysical and epistemological worries are not new with Mackie. (Although in earlier incarnations they've usually been advanced as grounds for non-cognitivism rather than for an error theory.) In one form or another they go back at least to Hume. And ever since Moore offered the Open Question Argument against (definitional) naturalism, philosophers have by and large assumed that moral realism faces insurmountable ontological and epistemological difficulties. Indeed, the common (mistaken) assumption is that the only realist positions available in ethics are those that embrace supernatural properties and special powers of moral intuition.[41]

Significantly, error theorists don't just embrace cognitivism as a gallant concession to a limping foe; the particular metaphysical and epistemological misgivings they advance turn crucially on particular views about what the world would have to be like for moral claims to be true. (In Mackie's case, he thinks the truth of moral claims presupposes the existence of 'objectively prescriptive' facts -- of non-natural facts that supervene upon natural facts and that, when recognized, necessarily compel action regardless of the agent's affective states.) If error theorists are wrong about what ordinary moral judgments presuppose, then their arguments against moral realism will miss their mark. Moreover, if they rejected cognitivism they'd have no grounds for holding that moral claims carry any presuppositions whatever, let alone the ones they identify and attack.

4. Objectivism, Intersubjectivism, and Subjectivism

If we suppose that cognitivism offers the best account of the claims in question, then regardless of whether we are defending an error or a success

40. This general strategy has been forcefully defended by Gilbert Harman in The Nature of Morality (Oxford University Press, 1977), selections of which are reprinted in this volume, and "Moral Explanations of Natural Facts," Spindel Conference: Moral Realism, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986), Supplement, pp. 57-68. For criticisms of both the success and the legitimacy of this strategy see my "Moral Theory and Explanatory Impotence," Midwest Studies XII (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming), reprinted in this volume; Warren Quinn's "Truth and Explanation in Ethics," *Ethics* (1986), pp. 524-544; William Lycan's "Moral Facts and Moral Knowledge," Spindel Conference: Moral Realism, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986), Supplement, pp. 79-94; Nicholas Sturgeon's "Moral Explanations," in Morality, Reason and Truth (Rowman and Allanheld, 1984), D. Copp and D. Zimmerman (eds.), pp. 49-78, reprinted in this volume, and "Harman on Moral Explanations of Natural Facts," Spindel Conference: Moral Realism, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986), Supplement, pp. 69-78.

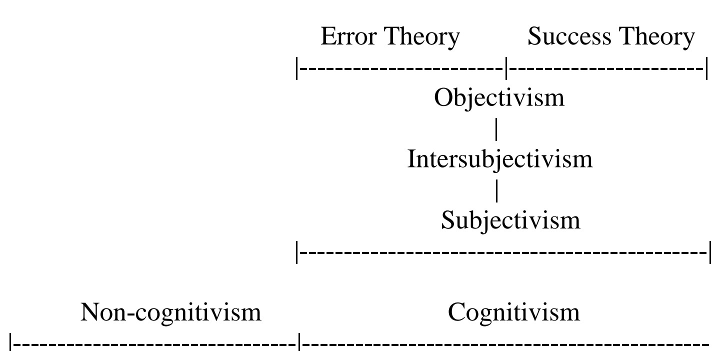
41. Recent arguments against this assumption can be found in Richard Boyd's "How to Be a Moral Realist" in this volume; in Peter Railton's "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* (1986), pp. 163-207; in David Brink's "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1984), pp. 111-125; in Nicholas Sturgeon's "Moral Explanations," *op. cit.*; in William Lycan's "Moral Facts and Moral Knowledge," *op. cit.*; in John Post's The Faces of Existence (Cornell University Press, 1986); and in my "Coherence and Models for Moral Theorizing," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (1985) pp. 179-190, and "Moral Theory and Explanatory Impotence," *op. cit.*.

theory, the question arises: What are the truth-conditions for the claims? Error theorists no less than success theorists are committed to giving some answer since the issue between them turns on whether the appropriate truth-conditions are ever satisfied. While both error theorists and success theorists must give an account of the truth-conditions for the disputed claims, they might not agree, of course, as to how the disputed claims should be construed. Often, in fact, a major part of their disagreement centers on just what counts as the proper literal construal, so on what would have to be the case for the claims to be true. Even so, each must give some account in order to go on to argue for either an error or a success theory.

It is in worrying about the truth-conditions for the disputed claims that the issues surrounding idealism come into play. Idealists disagree with their opponents not about whether the disputed claims literally construed can be literally true, but about whether the proper literal construal makes the truth of those claims depend on a mind or minds. As with the realism/instrumentalism distinction, however, the realism/idealism dichotomy is insufficiently rich. In its place we need to substitute a three-part distinction among (what I'll call) objectivism, intersubjectivism, and subjectivism.

What separates objectivist, intersubjectivist, and subjectivist accounts of the disputed claims is whether and how people figure in the truth-conditions for the claims. Truth-conditions are 'subjectivist' (as I use the term) if they make essential reference to an individual; 'intersubjectivist' if they make essential reference to the capacities, conventions, or practices, of groups of people; and 'objectivist' if they need make no reference at all to people, their capacities, practices, or their conventions.

Each of these views constitutes a position one might take regarding the nature of the relevant truth-conditions for some cognitively interpreted claims. So we can locate objectivism, intersubjectivism, and subjectivism, on the cognitivist side of the map, as positions available to both error and success theorists:



For many claims (e.g. about personal value, or about pain, or beliefs, or mental states in general), the most plausible positions are those that make the truth of such claims dependent on mind (and so have subjectivist truth-conditions). For other claims (e.g. about the permissibility of some move in a game, or the legality of some action) the most plausible positions are those that make the truth of such claims turn on social practices or conventions (and so have intersubjectivist truth-conditions). For still other claims (e.g. about the existence of electrons, or other solar systems, or mountains) the most plausible positions are those that make their truth independent of people's thoughts, practices, and conventions (and so have objective truth-conditions).

Each of these positions, whether subjectivist, intersubjectivist, or objectivist, is quite clearly a *realist* position as long as it is combined with the view that some of the relevant truth-conditions are actually satisfied (i.e. that some of the relevant claims are true).

For instance, a perfectly respectable and unquestionably realist position in philosophy of psychology is that the truth-conditions for reports of pain make explicit reference to an individual's mental state, and that sometimes those truth-conditions are satisfied (i.e., that people do sometimes feel pain). No general account of realism that rules out subjectivism, so no account that requires 'independence from the mental,' will be acceptable. As R.B. Perry emphatically points out:

> There is not the slightest ground for imputing to realism the grotesque notion that there are no such things as acts or states of mind, or that such things cannot be known... Because he [the realist] seeks to avoid a philosophical psycho-mania, there is no reason to accuse him of psycho-phobia.[42]

In the same way, a perfectly respectable realist position in philosophy of law is that the truth-conditions for legal assertions make essential reference to the

[42]. General Theory of Value (Harvard University Press, 1926), p. 139.

conventions and practices of particular societies, and that sometimes those conditions are satisfied.[43] Of course, this isn't the only realist position. One who offers objectivist truth-conditions for legal claims (as natural law theorists do), and who thinks the claims are sometimes true, will also be a realist about the law. Yet in the case of legal claims, the most plausible account of what we're saying when we claim that some behavior is illegal is that it's forbidden by the laws in force in the relevant society. Anything stronger seems to build into legal claims more than is intended.

These views, in the philosophy of psychology and the philosophy of law, are no less realist than is the view, in the philosophy of science, that the truth-conditions for claims concerning theoretical entities make no reference to people or their practices and conventions and that those truth-conditions are sometimes satisfied. ***Realism is not solely the prerogative of objectivists.***

At one time or another, subjectivism, intersubjectivism, and objectivism have each been advanced as providing the right account of the truth-conditions for moral claims. Any one of these positions, if it can successfully be defended as giving the proper account of moral claims literally construed, will constitute a realist position, as long as it is combined with a success theory. The variety of positions available within subjectivism, intersubjectivism, and objectivism, and the differences among the three, will become clearer with a few examples.

Subjectivism. Moral subjectivists who accept cognitivism hold that the truth of moral claims depends on the subjective states of individuals. They maintain that moral claims are, in a perfectly straight-forward sense, either true or false -- it is just that their truth or falsity is mind-dependent; whether something is good or bad (or right or wrong) depends on someone's attitude towards it.[44] This sort of subjectivism, which rejects all varieties of non-cognitivism, including those that treat moral claims as reflections of an individual's subjective states, is a view about the truth-conditions of moral claims.

According to one version of moral subjectivism, judgments of value make sense only relative to the desires, preferences, and goals of the judger, so that the claim that 'x is good' should be treated as elliptical for 'x is good-for-me'; and this claim in turn is true or false depending on the desires, preferences, and goals of the person doing the judging. Hobbes endorses this view, arguing

> ...these words of good, evil, and contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that uses them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common rule of good and

[43]. Ronald Dworkin defends this sort of realist position in the philosophy of law. See Taking Rights Seriously (Harvard University Press, 1977).

[44]. "Apart from ourselves, and our human bias," Santayana argues,"we can see in such a mechanical world no element of value whatever. In removing consciousness, we have removed the possibility of worth." (The Sense of Beauty (Scribner, 1899), pp. 17-19.)

evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves...[45]

More recently, essentially the same subjectivist theory has found support in theories of rationality that tie the value something has for someone to that person's preferences.[46]

Alternatively, a subjectivist about value might hold that judgments of value are not relative to *judgers*, even though their truth is dependent on the subjective states of individuals. Such a subjectivist might say value claims are about what would satisfy someone's (but not necessarily the judger's) desires, preferences, or goals. R.B. Perry explicitly defends this account when he maintains that "a thing -- any thing -- has value, or is valuable, in the original and generic sense when it is the object of an interest -- any interest."[47] In the same spirit, a preference satisfaction utilitarian will say that value depends on preferences, and so long as a thing satisfies someone's preferences (it doesn't matter whose), it is to that extent good.[48]

Or again, a subjectivist about value might hold that judgments of value are not relative to judgers but are still true, when they are true, only because of the desires, preferences, or goals of some particular person (rather than anyone). For instance, according to Ideal Observer theories, whether something has value (or at least whether something is right) depends on whether it would be approved of by some observer ideally constituted and situated.[49]

Importantly, subjectivism about value gives perfect sense to there being a fact of the matter (you might even say 'an objective fact of the matter') about what is good or valuable, and to that fact being reportable by any number of

45. Leviathan, Part I, Chapter 6, (Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), p. 53. Spinoza defends a similar view, arguing that "we neither strive for, wish, seek, nor desire anything because we think it to be good, but, on the contrary, we adjudge a thing good because we strive for, wish, seek, or desire it." Ethics, *op. cit.*, Part III, Prop. IX, Note, pp. 136-137.

46. David Gauthier defends a preference based subjective theory of value in Morals By Agreement (Oxford University Press, 1986), Chapter 2. See also Richard Brandt's A Theory of the Good and The Right (Oxford University Press, 1979).

47. R.B. Perry, Realms of Value (Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 2-3.

48. Of course, preference satisfaction utilitarians might combine subjectivism about value with objectivism about the right; they might hold that the utilitarian principle itself (that an action is right if and only if it maximizes preference satisfaction) is true independently of what anyone may happen to think, or feel, or want. Mill seems to defend a view along these lines. John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism (Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), see especially "Chapter IV: Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility is Susceptible."

49. See Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments, D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (eds.) (Oxford University Press, 1976) and Roderick Firth's "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12 (1952), pp. 317-345. Resisting idealization (in his characteristic way), Hobbes defends a version of subjectivism along these lines arguing that, *after a society has been established*, claims concerning what is good report the commands of the Leviathan or the Leviathan's appointed surrogates. (Leviathan, *op. cit.*, Part I, Chapter 6, p. 53.)

people. The (cognitivist) subjectivists's position is not that value judgments are 'true-for-someone' and not literally true. Instead their view is that value judgments are literally true, when true, but only because of the subjective states of someone (e.g. the desires, preferences, and goals of the relevant person).[50]

Of course, on the subjectivist view that treats 'x is good' as elliptical for 'x is good-for-me,' two people will not be reporting the same thing when each utters 'x is good'; rather, they will each be making claims about x's relation to their own desires, preferences, and goals. But (contrary to common criticisms of subjectivism) this doesn't mean the two can't report the same facts, or that they can't disagree; it just means that to do either they will have to introduce some other locution, e.g. 'x is good-for-you'. Even so, one of the many strong arguments against such a subjectivist account of moral judgments is that two people can agree (it seems) on the moral value of something, each saying simply that it is good (or bad), regardless of their respective desires, preferences, and goals. And this suggests that this version of subjectivism is implausible as an account of what we're saying when making moral claims. Thus while this subjectivist account is realist in virtue of holding that some value claims literally construed are literally true, the implausibility of its proposed literal construal may nonetheless make it implausible as a realist position.

Intersubjectivism. Just as subjectivism is a position one might take concerning the truth-conditions of moral claims, so too is intersubjectivism. By spelling out the truth-conditions of moral claims in terms of the conventions or practices of groups of people, intersubjectivism grants (with subjectivism) that people figure in the truth-conditions, but it holds (with objectivism) that the truth of moral claims doesn't turn on facts about particular individuals.

Straight-forward conventionalism is one version of intersubjectivism in ethics. It treats moral claims as being about (and not merely reflecting) the conventions and practices actually in force in the relevant society. This sort of view has figured prominently in defenses of cultural relativism. Ruth Benedict, for instance, defends an intersubjectivist account along these lines, maintaining that

> Morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits. Mankind has always preferred to say, "It is morally good," rather than "It is habitual,"...but

50. Although the most common versions of subjectivism make the truth of moral claims depend on the *affective* states of an individual, not all do. For example, H.A. Prichard maintains that our having an obligation depends "on some fact about ourselves." Yet the fact about ourselves on which the obligatoriness of some act depends is not our having some affective state, but "our having certain thoughts about the situation." The relevant thoughts, according to Prichard, are our thoughts about the consequences of the action in question. (H.A. Prichard, Moral Obligation, *op. cit.*, p. 37.)

historically the two phrases are synonymous.[51]

Benedict's particular version of conventionalism runs into several problems as an account of the literal meaning of moral claims. It has trouble explaining how we can intelligibly raise moral objections to the habits approved by our society. And it suggests a peculiar view of how we are to go about discovering what is good; it recommends sociological investigation as decisive. Yet Benedict's conventionalism is not the only one available.

There are various ways of altering intersubjectivism so as to get a more plausible account of moral language.[52] One way is to reject the view that moral claims are directly about the conventions of a society and to maintain instead merely that they are the product of convention. With this in mind, one might argue that the correctness of a moral principle (and so the truth of moral claims) depends on its falling within the best coherent justificatory theory available (in principle) for the practices, conventions, and principles we happen to embrace. This view recognizes a standard against which particular practices and actions are to be measured, so it acknowledges the intelligibility of saying that there are immoral conventions and morally unacceptable practices. At the same time, however, it treats this standard as itself reflecting the institutions and practices of the moral community in question.[53]

Another way to improve on 'Benedictine' conventionalism is to abstract from actual practices and people, and treat the truth of moral claims as being determined in some way by the hypothetical conventions or practices of hypothetical people. Moving away from the actual practices and conventions of real people allows sense to be made of moral criticism of these actual practices and conventions and shows why simple sociological investigation isn't sufficient for settling moral questions. Many contractarian views of morality take advantage of these benefits of abstraction by holding that the truth of moral claims turn on what appropriately idealized agents would agree to under certain specified conditions. Of course, different contractarian theories identify different conditions as relevant for determining the principles of morality; but they share the view that the appropriate truth-conditions for moral claims are intersubjectivist.[54]

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51. "Anthropology and the Abnormal," *The Journal of General Psychology* 10 (1934), pp. 59-82, p. 73. For another version of straight forward conventionalism, see Edvard Westermarck's Ethical Relativity (Humanities Press, 1932).

52. More sophisticated versions of conventionalism are defended in Gilbert Harman's "Moral Relativism Defended," *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975), pp. 3-22; and Kurt Baier's The Moral Point of View, *op. cit.*.

53. See my "Coherence and Models for Moral Theorizing," *op. cit.*.

54. See, for instance, John Rawls' A Theory of Justice (Harvard University Press, 1971); David Gauthier's Morals By Agreement, *op. cit.*; Stephen Darwall's Impartial Reason (Cornell University Press, 1985).

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Objectivism. Like subjectivism and intersubjectivism, objectivism is a view about what the truth-conditions are for moral claims as literally construed. The differences among the three lies in what each takes to be the proper literal construal. Objectivists hold that the appropriate truth-conditions make no reference to anyone's subjective states nor to the capacities, conventions, or practices of any group of people.[55] Underlying objectivism is the sense, well-articulated by Ross, that "it is surely a strange reversal of the natural order of thought to say that our admiring an action either is, or is what necessitates, its being good. We think of its goodness as what we admire in it, and as something it would have even if no one admired it, something that it has in itself."[56]

In this spirit, Moore advances an objectivist theory of value when he argues that it is better that a beautiful world should exist rather than an ugly one even if no "human being ever has or ever, by any possibility, *can*, live in either, can ever see and enjoy the beauty of one or hate the foulness of the other."[57] The value of beauty, he holds, is independent of both the subjective states of individuals and the practices and conventions of groups of individuals. Elsewhere Moore does argue that the value of "personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful"[58] far outshines the value of beauty taken alone. This may seem to bollix up the distinction between subjective and objective accounts of the truth-conditions for moral claims, since 'personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful' are valuable subjective states, but it doesn't. What puts Moore squarely in the objectivist's camp is that he holds that the *value* of these subjective states, like the value of the beautiful (but unpopulated) world, is independent of the subjective states of individuals as well as of the practices of groups of people.

Objectivism in ethics has suffered from the mistaken assumption that objectivists must hold that moral properties are non-natural and that nothing informative can be said about the truth-conditions of moral claims. For this reason, it is worth emphasizing several things about the relations among objectivism, non-naturalism, and various ways in which the truth-conditions for moral claims might be specified.

Both Ross and Moore argue that moral terms refer to non-natural properties. So each, in giving the truth-conditions of moral claims, will resist specifying the truth-conditions of, say, 'Murder is wrong,' in anything but moral terms. And Ross, unlike Moore, will even resist (when giving the semantics of English in

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55. Of course, even objectivists will grant that some of our duties (for instance, the duty to give money to the local soup kitchen) will turn on the subjective states or the practices of individuals. However, these will all be derivative duties (according to the objectivist) that have their grounding in something independent of subjective and social factors.

56. W.D. Ross, The Right and the Good, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

57. G.E. Moore, Principia Ethica, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

58. Principia Ethica, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

English) anything more than:

(T) 'Murder is wrong' is true if and only if murder is wrong.

The difference between Moore and Ross in this respect turns on Ross's thinking 'wrong' is altogether unanalyzable whereas Moore thinks the truth-conditions of claims containing 'right' and 'wrong' can informatively be spelled out in terms of 'good' and 'bad'. Since Moore believes 'good' and 'bad' are unanalyzable, though, he will follow Ross, when it comes to claims like 'pain is bad,' in offering only a disquotational specification of truth-conditions.[59]

Three things, in particular, bear notice. First, a disquotational specification of truth-conditions such as the one Ross would offer for 'Murder is wrong' is not trivial, despite appearances. It uses English to report a contingent yet important fact about the relation between the English language and the world. If some language other than English were used to report the same fact, even the appearance of triviality would disappear.[60]

Second, objectivists needn't always rely on, nor are they the only ones who might rely on, a disquotational specification of truth-conditions. What form the truth-conditions take depends on the resources of the meta-language being used. In cases where we use a language in giving the semantics for that same language, we'll find that the truth-conditions have no more than a disquotational specification whenever the language contains only one way to report the relevant fact about the world. This specificational poverty might plague us regardless of whether the truth-conditions being offered are objectivist, intersubjectivist, or subjectivist. On the other hand, given a sufficiently rich meta-language, objectivists (and not just intersubjectivists and subjectivists) might be able to offer more than merely disquotational specifications of truth-conditions.

Third, refusing to give truth-conditions in non-moral terms for moral claims, as Moore and Ross do, is not an essential feature of objectivism; nor does it commit one to non-naturalism. Objectivists of a naturalist bent might well

[59]. Relying on a disquotational specification of truth-conditions, in this way, is not tantamount to holding a disquotational theory of truth. The first is simply the form the specification of truth-conditions will sometimes take when the meta-language includes the object language. The latter is a theory about the function of 'is true' in the English language (according to which, to say of some quoted sentence that it is true is to say nothing over and above what could be said by disquoting and using the sentence itself). While giving disquotationally specified truth-conditions is compatible with the disquotational theory of truth, it is also compatible with correspondence theories of truth and others. The core idea of the disquotational theory of truth can be found in F.P. Ramsey, "Facts and Propositions," in The Foundations of Mathematics (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931). For a sophisticated version of the theory see Dorothy Grover, Joseph Camp, Jr., and Nuel Belnap, Jr., "The Prosentential Theory of Truth" *Philosophical Studies* 27 (1975), pp. 73-125.

[60]. See the introduction to Truth and Meaning (Oxford University Press, 1976), Gareth Evans and John McDowell (eds.), pp. x-xi.

identify moral properties with (perhaps very complex) physical properties, and then, with the identification in hand, use the natural predicates when giving the truth-conditions for moral claims.[61] The only difficulty facing such a naturalized objectivism in ethics is finding plausible candidates for the identification. The major attraction of subjectivism and intersubjectivism to naturalists is that the most plausible candidates for an identification seem to involve reference either to the desires, preferences, and goals of individuals or to the practices and conventions of groups of individuals. In any case, even confirmed naturalists (whether they are objectivists, intersubjectivists, or subjectivists) can, alternatively, maintain that moral facts are not identifiable in non-moral terminology; even if moral facts are just natural facts, we may not have a non-moral vocabulary suited to reporting those facts.[62]

5. Conclusion

Subjectivism, intersubjectivism, and objectivism are each positions one might take about what the truth-conditions are for some disputed claims. So each might be proposed in support of realism in some domain or other. Yet they clearly aren't all equally plausible in each domain. While subjectivism is a plausible realist position in the philosophy of psychology, and intersubjectivism is a plausible realist position in the philosophy of law, both subjectivism and intersubjectivism are usually anti-realist positions in ethics. One of the advantages of my account of realism is that it explains why. The reason is that most versions of subjectivism and intersubjectivism give radically implausible accounts of the truth-conditions for moral claims as *literally construed*.

No simple subjectivist or intersubjectivist interpretation of the claim that 'X is wrong' does justice to the meaning of moral language (although more sophisticated versions might). And unless a proposal can be defended as offering the right truth-conditions for moral claims literally construed, it can form no part of a defense of moral realism. Realism requires that the moral claims, literally construed, be literally true. So when faced with an implausible account of the truth-conditions for moral claims, the charitable interpretation of the proposal is that it rests on the view that moral claims, as literally construed, should be jettisoned in favor of some new language. Such a proposal, if it is to be taken seriously, will have to find its motivation in a prior acceptance of anti-realism for moral claims as literally construed.

I've maintained that the heart of realism, no matter what the domain, lies in defending a success theory against both non-cognitivism and error theories.

[61]. Richard Boyd defends this sort of objective naturalism in "How To Be A Moral Realist," *op. cit.*, as does Nicholas Sturgeon in "Moral Explanations," *op. cit.*, and Peter Railton in "Moral Realism," *op. cit.*.

[62]. It is worth noting as well that the realist, even the objectivist realist, isn't committed to introducing any extra *entities* as long as the supposition that there are moral *properties* is all that is needed to account for the truth of the claims that are held to be true.

Such a defense requires two things: (1) showing that the disputed claims, when *literally construed*, have a truth value and (2) showing that the disputed claims, when so construed, are sometimes *literally true*. If this is right, then moral realism is defensible if, but only if, there is some plausible account of the truth-conditions of moral claims that captures their literal meaning and that makes sense of some of them being literally true. It won't be enough, of course, to propose just any old account for the truth-conditions of moral claims; if the account offered doesn't capture what we mean when we make moral claims, then it will be no help in defending *moral* realism. Non-literal construals will be irrelevant. It also won't be enough to defend the view that some moral claims when literally construed, are 'true in a sense'; if the defense doesn't show that the claims are literally true, then it will be no help in defending moral *realism*. Non-literal truth will be insufficient. Yet, if the account does capture what we mean, and does make it reasonable to believe some of our moral claims are literally true, then moral realism will have found all the defense it needs.[63]

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