

Contemporary Metaethics Part 1

My Personal Notes

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Table of Contents

1. What is “Morality?”.....	5
What does “morality” mean?.....	6
Moral and nonmoral standards.....	9
2. The Debate Over Moral Realism.....	11
What is Moral realism?.....	11
Is moral realism true?.....	14
3. Meta-Ethical Theories.....	16
Moral naturalism.....	16
Moral intuitionism.....	17
Emotivism.....	17
Moral relativism.....	18
Error theory.....	19
4. Moral Reason.....	21
Uncontroversial moral truths.....	21
Analogies.....	22
Thought experiments.....	23
Theoretical virtues.....	24
5. History of Metaethics.....	26
1. Ancient Ethics.....	26
2. Modern Metaethics.....	30
Contemporary meta-ethics.....	32
Chapter 1: "Critique of Ethics and Theology" by A. J. Ayer.....	35
What kinds of argument does Ayer use to defend his theory of emotivism?.....	35
Critique.....	36
Chapter 2: “Ethical Consistency” by Bernard Williams.....	40
My Objections to Williams's Argument.....	41
Chapter 3: “Supervenience Revisited” by Simon Blackburn.....	44
Moral Supervenience is Analytically Necessary.....	45
Blackburn's Reply to an Objection.....	46
A Final Objection.....	48
Chapter 4: “Ethics, Mathematics, and Relativism” by Jonathan Lear.....	50
Cognitivist Moral Relativism.....	50
Non-Cognitivist Moral Relativism.....	51
My Objections.....	51
Chapter 5: “The Subjectivity of Values” by J. L. Mackie.....	53
Subjectivism.....	53
Whether or not objective values are real is a meaningless question.....	53
Noncognitivism.....	54
Categorical Imperatives.....	54
Mackie's arguments against objective values.....	54
My Objections to the Argument from Queerness.....	56
Chapter 6: “Ethics and Observation” by Gilbert Harman.....	58
Gilbert Harman's Argument.....	58
My Comment.....	59

Chapter 7: “Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life” by David Wiggins.....	60
Living a Meaningful Life.....	60
Intrinsic Value.....	61
My Objections.....	61
Chapter 8: “Values and Secondary Qualities” by John McDowell.....	63
My Response.....	64
Chapter 9: “How to be a Moral Realist” by Richard N Boyd.....	65
Boyd's Argument.....	65
We Should be Scientific Realists.....	66
Objections to Moral Realism.....	70
Boyd's Reply to the Objections.....	72
Homeostatic Consequentialism.....	74
Another Objection to Moral Naturalism.....	74
Chapter 10: “Moral Explanations” by Nicholas L Sturgeon.....	76
Background Information.....	76
Sturgeon's Argument.....	77
My Objection.....	79
Chapter 11: “Moral Theory and Explanatory Impotence” by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord.....	81
Observation and Moral Facts.....	81
Explanatory Impotence.....	82
My Objections.....	86
Chapter 12: “Moral Reality” by Mark Platts.....	87
What is intuitinism?.....	87
Objections to moral realism.....	88
My Objections.....	92

Preface

This ebook is a collection of my personal notes originally published at <http://ethicalrealism.wordpress.com/>. I spent a couple of hours to make it, which means I corrected some typos and added a little consistency to the formatting, but it isn't perfect. My opinions throughout are also inconsistent because I wrote the notes within a kind of stream of consciousness. I changed my opinion based on the readings.

I updated this book on 6/24/2011 and rewrote most of the introduction using my newer notes on the meaning and nature of meta-ethics.

If you are interested in Metaethics, I recommend reading Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics by David Brink. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is also a helpful resource at <http://plato.stanford.edu>. Here are some links to specific articles at the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

- [More on Metaethics](#)
- [More on Moral Realism](#)
- [More on Moral Anti-realism](#)
- [More on Moral Relativism](#)
- [More on Moral Cognitivism](#)
- [More on Intrinsic Value](#)
- [More about Plato](#)
- [More about Aristotle](#)
- [More about Epicurus](#)
- [More about Stoicism](#)
- [More on Ancient Ethical Theory](#)

Part 1: Introduction

This book focuses on meta-ethics, which is a type of *moral philosophy*. There are three major areas of moral philosophy:

1. **Meta-ethics** – Research concerning the nature of morality. It tries to answer question, such as: What does “good,” “right,” or “justice” mean? What makes something good or right? Is moral realism true? Is morality irreducible, cognitive, or overriding? Do intrinsic values exist?
2. **Normative theory** – How do we decide if something is right or wrong?
3. **Applied ethics** – Is x right or wrong? (e.g. Is capital punishment right or wrong?)

I will introduce the major concepts involved with meta-ethics and then proceed to discuss major philosophical publications that discuss meta-ethics.

In this first section I will discuss the nature of morality including what morality is about and the characteristics of morality. Ethics is the “philosophy of morality” and “meta-ethics” is the study of moral reality, moral knowledge, moral language, and moral psychology. It investigates the question, “What's moral philosophy all about?” And many other related question, such as theses:

1. What does 'good' and 'bad,' 'right' and 'wrong,' or 'justice' refer to?
2. Are any moral judgments true?
3. Are there moral facts?
4. Are any moral beliefs rational or justified?
5. Can we attain moral knowledge?
6. How do we know when a moral judgment is probably true or rationally justified?
7. Does anything have intrinsic value (value just for existing), or are all values based on our personal desires and interests?

In this section I will discuss:

1. The meaning of morality within ordinary language by illustrating the difference between moral and nonmoral standards.
2. The debate between moral realism and anti-realism.
3. Examples of meta-ethical theories.
4. Moral reason
5. The history of meta-ethics

1. What is “Morality?”

People discuss morality quite often and many of our actions are based on assumptions about morality. I will discuss the meaning of “morality” within ordinary language and illustrate the difference between morality and everything else by comparing moral and nonmoral standards.

What does “morality” mean?

Morality involves what we ought to do, right and wrong, good and bad, values, justice, and virtues. Morality is taken to be important, moral actions are often taken to merit praise and rewards, and immoral actions are often taken to merit blame and punishment.

What we ought to do

What we morally ought to do is what's morally preferable. It's morally preferable to give to certain charities and to refrain from hurting people who make us angry; so we morally ought to do these things.

Sometimes what we ought to do isn't seen as “optional.” Instead, we often think we have moral *duties* (obligations). It might not be a moral duty to give to any charities, but it seems likely that we often have a duty not to hurt people.

Nonetheless, what we ought to do doesn't just cover our obligations. It's possible to do something morally preferable that's not wrong. For example, we can act “above the call of duty.” Some actions are heroic, such as when we risk our life to run into a burning building to save a child. Some philosophers call actions that are above the call of duty “supererogatory” rather than “obligatory.”

Right and wrong

Something is morally right if it's morally permissible, and morally wrong if it's morally impermissible. For example, it's morally right to help people and give to certain charities, but morally wrong to kill people indiscriminately.

Good and bad

“Good” and “bad” refer to positive and negative value. Something is morally good if it helps people attain something of positive value, avoid something of negative value, or has a positive value that merits being a goal. For example, food is good because it is necessary to attain something of positive value because it helps us survive; and our survival could have positive value that merits being a goal. Something is morally bad if it makes it difficult to attain something of positive value, could lead to something of negative value, or has a negative value that merits avoidance. For example, starvation is bad because it could lead to suffering; and suffering could have negative value that warrants its avoidance.

Something has “instrumental moral value” if it is relevant to achieving *moral goals*. Food is instrumentally good because it helps us achieve our goal to survive; and starvation is instrumentally bad when we have a goal to avoid suffering, and starvation makes it more difficult for us to achieve this goal.

We take some of our goals to be *worthy* as “moral goals” *for their own sake* rather than being instrumental *for the sake of something else*. These goals could be taken to be worthy for having positive value (or help us avoid something of negative value)—what Aristotle calls “final ends” or what other philosophers call “intrinsic values.”

Imagine that someone asks you why you have a job and you say it's to make money. We can then ask why you want to make money and you can reply that it's to buy food. We can then ask why you want to buy food, and you can reply that it's to survive. At this point you might not have a reason to want to survive other than valuing your existence for its own sake. If not, then we will wonder if you are wasting your time with a job. All of our goals must be justified at some point by something taken to be *worthy* as a goal for its own sake, or it's not clear that any of our goals are really justified.

Final ends

Final ends are goals that we think are worthy. Pleasure, survival, and knowledge are possible examples of goods that should be taken to be promoted as final ends. Some final ends are also meant to help us avoid something of negative value, such as our goals to avoid pain and death. The goals of attaining these goods are “final ends.” It is possible that final ends are merely things we *desire* “for their own sake” but some final ends could be better and of greater importance than others. Aristotle thought that our “most final end” or “ultimate end” is happiness and no other good could override the importance of happiness.

Final ends seem relevant to right and wrong. It seems morally right to try to achieve our final ends because they are worthy. All things equal, it seems morally right to try to attain happiness and survive.

Intrinsic values

Intrinsic values are things of positive or negative value that have that value *just for existing*, and some philosophers think Aristotle's *truly worthy* final ends have intrinsic value. The main difference here is that final ends could merely be psychological—what we take to be worthy goals, but a goal has intrinsic value only if it really is worthy. Some people might have “final ends” but actually be wrong about what goals are worthy of being final ends.

We can desire intrinsic values “for their own sake,” many think it's *rational* to often try to attain things that are intrinsically good, and whatever is intrinsically good is good no matter who attains it. For example, if human life is intrinsically good, then survival is good for every person.

Intrinsic value plays the same role as final ends—we think it's often *morally right* to try to achieve goals that help people attain intrinsic goods and we *morally ought* to do so. However, intrinsic values can conflict. If pain is intrinsically bad, that doesn't mean we should never allow ourselves or others to experience pain because there might be intrinsic goods that can be attained as a result of our pain. For example, homework and learning is often painful, but the knowledge attained can help us live better lives and could even be intrinsically good for its own sake.

Justice

Justice refers to our interest in certain ethical issues such as equality, fairness, and merit. It is unjust to have slavery or to have different laws for different racial groups because people should be *equal* before the law, it's unfair, and racial groups don't *merit* unequal treatment before the law. It is just to punish all people who break the law equally rather than let certain people—such as the wealthy—break certain laws that other people aren't allowed to break. Additionally, it's unjust to punish the innocent and to find the innocent guilty in a court of law.

Virtues

Some people are better at being moral than others. It's important that we know the difference between right and wrong, attain the skills necessary to reach demanding moral goals, and find the motivation to do what is morally preferable. For example, courage is a virtue that involves knowledge of right and wrong, skills, and motivation. Courage requires us to endanger our personal well being when doing so is morally preferable, to have skills that make it possible to endanger our personal well being in many situations, and to have the motivation to be willing to endanger our well being when we ought to do so.

Praise and blame

We often think that moral behavior merits praise and immoral behavior merits blame. It often seems appropriate to tell people who have done good, such as saving lives, that we appreciate it and that what they are doing is good; and it often seems appropriate to tell people who have done something immoral that we don't appreciate it and that they did something morally wrong. Additionally, it generally seems appropriate to hold people *responsible* for their actions and let them know that their actions could have been different.

Reward and punishment

One way to hold people responsible for their actions is to reward and punish them for their behavior, and this often seems appropriate. We could give gifts or return favors to people who help us, and break our friendship or ignore those who do something immoral. For example, a company that scams people should be held responsible and punished by consumers who decide to no longer do business with that company.

Sometimes punishments could be severe and could seem immoral in any other context. For example, it might be morally justified to throw murderers in prison even though it would be an immoral example of kidnapping and imprisonment in many other contexts. We can't just throw anyone in prison that we want.

Moral and nonmoral standards

Not everything is morally right or wrong. Sometimes something is entirely nonmoral and irrelevant to morality—such as standing on your head or counting blades of grass. One way to clarify what “morality” refers to is to compare and contrast it to nonmoral things that are sometimes confused with it.

What we morally or nonmorally ought to do

We don't just talk about right and wrong, good or bad, or what we ought to do in moral contexts. This is because there is both moral and nonmoral instrumental value.

1. **Moral instrumental value** – We ought to do what is necessary to attain moral goals. For example, we morally ought to get a job and buy food to stay alive. It's morally right to get a job and buy food, and food has moral instrumental value insofar as it helps us attain our moral goal of survival.
2. **Nonmoral instrumental value** – Not all instrumental value helps us achieve moral goals. We can also have personal goals that have (almost) nothing to do with morality. For example, I might have a goal of standing on my head and taking gymnastics classes could be what I ought to do to achieve this goal. The right thing to do to be able to stand on your head is to take gymnastics classes, even though it has nothing to do with morality. Additionally, some instrumental values could even be immoral. For example, I might have a goal to murder someone and I could say I *ought* to use a gun if that's the best way to murder someone. That's not to say that I morally ought to murder anyone.

Etiquette

Etiquette tells us how to be polite and show respect within a culture. Etiquette tells us not to chew our food with our mouths open, to open doors for people, and not to interrupt people who are talking. Sometimes being rude and impolite can be morally wrong, but the fact that etiquette and morality sometimes overlap doesn't mean they are identical or that etiquette is always relevant to morality. First, etiquette tends not to be serious enough to be morally relevant. Burping in the US is considered rude, but it would be strange to say it's ever morally wrong. Second, it's often morally right to be rude. Many people think that questioning someone's moral qualifications and moral opinions is rude, but it's often the morally preferable thing to do because it's essential that we have the best moral opinions possible and sometimes it's a good idea to help people improve their moral opinions. The importance of helping people be moral can override the importance of showing the superficial signs of respect assigned within a culture. Such signs of respect are often arbitrary and can conflict with more important ways of showing respect—such as the respect we show people when we assume that people have a concern to morally improve themselves.

Law

The law tells us what we are or are not allowed to do, and breaking the law often leads to punishment. What's legal is often based on what's moral, but not always. For example, it's illegal *and* immoral to murder people. However, the fact that legality and morality can overlap doesn't mean they are identical. It was once illegal to free slaves, but that doesn't mean it was morally wrong; and it can be legal for a company to pollute or dump toxic waste, but that doesn't mean it's morally right to do so.

It's hard to pinpoint what morality is about, but we often discuss morality with ease anyway. There are many related ideas concerning morality, such as what we ought to do, right and wrong, and justice; but these ideas often have a nonmoral counterpart. This seems clear when we compare moral and nonmoral instrumental value. Moreover, etiquette and law are often confused with morality, but they are not identical to morality. What's polite or legal is often moral, but not always. What's bad etiquette or illegal can be moral as well.

2. The Debate Over Moral Realism

The question over *what morality refers to* has led to two groups of philosophers. One group describes itself as being “moral realists” and the other as “moral anti-realists.” Moral realists think that there's more to morality than anti-realists. In particular, the moral realists believe that there's at least one moral fact. I will describe these two groups then briefly describe why someone might accept or reject moral realism.

What is Moral realism?

There is no precise definition of moral realism that all philosophers agree to, but moral realists agree that anti-realists are giving incomplete meta-ethical theories because moral realists believe in at least one “moral fact.” Other than that moral realists tend to be optimistic about attaining moral knowledge, identifying true moral statements, and often believe in intrinsic values.

Moral facts

The difference between “truth” and “facts” is that statements are true, but facts are the (parts of) reality that at least sometimes make statements true (by corresponding to them). For example, when I say that I have a foot, what I say is true because there's a real foot in the world that's part of my body. However, not all facts are objects like feet. Examples of moral facts *could be* the following:

1. Pain is intrinsically bad.
2. We ought not cause pain without an overriding reason to do so.
3. It's rational to try to avoid causing unnecessary pain to people.
4. It's wrong to torture people without an overriding reason to do so.
5. Socrates was a good person.
6. Socrates had courage.

Facts can be any part of reality, such as objects, properties, relations between things, states of affairs, and events.

1. **Parts of reality** – We assume that things exist in space and time, but not everything is an object. For example, parts of reality can be thoughts or feelings, but thoughts and feelings aren't necessarily objects.
2. **Objects** – Objects are unities that are taken to exist apart from other unities. A foot can be taken to be an object unified and somewhat distinct from our other body parts even though it's technically unified with the rest of our body. It's not entirely clear if any object is truly unified in any meaningful sense because the universe is made up of fields and particles, but it's convenient to talk about objects and we often understand what people say who discuss them.

3. **Properties** – Properties are elements of things, such as length, color, strength, and courage. It's not clear that all properties are really the same kinds of things. Length is a comparison between things, color is how light reflects off of objects; strength is what a body can do; and courage is a relationship between morality, body, and mind that involves bodies doing what is morally praiseworthy because the mind is motivated to do so.
4. **Relations between things** – Objects and things are often interrelated and those relationships can be important to us. The fact that one object in conjunction with the laws of nature can cause something to happen is often very important. For example, we eat food to survive and this involves a complex interrelationship between our bodies, the food, and the laws of nature.
5. **States of affairs** – States of affairs are all the facts—the total reality—that's relevant to us when we make a truth claim. One reason we think we should eat food is because the states of affairs including our bodies and the food will undergo a causal process and lead to greater health and longevity.
6. **Events** – States of affairs exist in time and the reality that exists changes from one moment to the next. We often conveniently discuss “events” to pinpoint the parts of reality that change and interests us. For example, we can speak of the event of a gun being fired or the events that lead to high oil prices.

Are moral facts irreducible?

Moral facts of the moral realist variety can't be eliminated through reduction. We often find out that one thing is actually something else. We often *eliminate* the existence of something through a reduction. For example, we might say that human beings are *nothing but* particles and energy. We could then stop talking about human beings and just talk about certain configurations of particles and energy. Some people also suggest that the mind is *nothing but* the brain.

Some people have suggested that morality is *nothing but* cultural customs, preferences, or a social contract. This is a paradigmatic sort of moral anti-realism. Moral realists require that moral facts are *more than* just cultural customs, preferences, or a social contract.

However, some sorts of reduction are not eliminative. For example, some philosophers think that pain is *identical* to badness, but they don't think we can eliminate pain. They think that pain and badness are two different ways to see the same thing. This is much like how people claim that H₂O is identical to water, but they don't claim that “water doesn't really exist.”

Intrinsic value

One good candidate for being a “moral fact” that seems to explain other moral facts is “intrinsic value”—the idea that something could be good or bad just for existing. For example, it can be a fact that (some) pain is intrinsically bad. As a result we might also decide that the following are moral facts:

1. It's wrong to cause people pain indiscriminately.
2. It's appropriate for people to dislike pain and to desire to avoid pain.

3. It's appropriate to be angry at people who cause others pain indiscriminately.
4. It's appropriate to feel guilt, regret, or shame when we *wrongly* cause other people pain.
5. We ought to consider the pain our actions can cause people before deciding on a course of action.
6. It's courageous to be willing to undergo pain (e.g. jump in a burning building) to help many other people avoid pain (e.g. help them out of a burning building).

The relationship between these ideas and intrinsic value involves *instrumental* facts. It's a fact that a person ought to take a gymnastics class to learn to do cartwheels even though there is no object called “rightness” in the world. What makes it right is merely that it's a good *means to an end*—it's a good way for us to accomplish our goals. Similarly, there are better ways than others to promote intrinsic value (or to avoid intrinsically bad consequences).

Moral knowledge

Knowledge implies (at the very least) justified true belief. Moral knowledge of the most controversial kind for a moral realist will include the ability to have justified true beliefs concerning moral facts. Most moral realist philosophers think we can *know* at least one moral fact, and that's not surprising considering how strange it would be to insist that *there's at least one moral fact despite the fact that we can't know what it is*.

It's almost impossible to be absolutely certain when we have knowledge, but the requirement of having a “justified belief” isn't as difficult. The idea of “justification” is that some beliefs are more rational than others. Justified beliefs are sufficiently rational, and unjustified beliefs are irrational. Moral knowledge requires us to have rational moral beliefs, so moral realists agree that morality contains an element of rationality.

How could we have justified beliefs concerning morality? There are at least three ways:

1. *We can assume certain beliefs to be true and use those beliefs to create arguments.* – We might not need an argument for all our beliefs to be justified. We could assume that certain moral beliefs are true until they are proven false or problematic counter-evidence is attained. This is much like the scientific method that offers hypotheses and successful hypotheses are taken to be true until proven otherwise. However, we must have a way to have counter-evidence against our moral assumptions or it will be impossible to know which moral assumptions are better justified than others.
2. *Through observation.* – Many people think that we can observe moral facts just like scientific facts. It seems likely that we can observe various mental facts, such as our thoughts and feelings, and many people also think we can observe that our pleasure is (often) intrinsically good (good just for existing) and pain is (often) intrinsically bad (bad just for existing).
3. *Through self-evidence.* – Many people think certain facts are self-evident and sufficiently mature people can know they are true through contemplation. Many people agree that “2+2=4” could be known through self-evidence, and perhaps the belief that “torturing people *indiscriminately* is wrong” can also be known once a person understands what “torturing people indiscriminately” and “wrong” consist of.

Finally, many philosophers who believe in “moral knowledge” don't necessarily think we can perfectly model or describe moral facts, have perfectly accurate moral beliefs, or attain certainty. Our language doesn't necessarily correlate with reality perfectly and we generally use words that are convenient and easy to communicate rather than try to model reality perfectly. Scientists try very hard to model reality and have incredibly in-depth knowledge of reality as a result, but even scientists fail to *perfectly* model reality and their theories gain greater precision quite often. A theory is often taken by scientists to be false when a new one with greater precision is successfully tested. In other words knowledge might not quite require *true* beliefs insofar as the word “true” is often taken to refer to perfect precision, but such precision might rarely be possible. (It might be possible in logic and mathematics.)

Is moral realism true?

I will briefly discuss some reasons to accept or reject moral realism.

Why agree with moral realism? – There are at least two main reasons to agree with moral realism:

1. One, we tend to think we know a lot about morality, moral realism can help explain *how* we can know so much about morality, and moral realism might be needed to explain the actual “moral knowledge” we have. Many make this point by saying that moral realism is *intuitive* or is supported by *common sense*. For example, a moral realist can argue that it's rational to nurture our empathy to care more for others and that might make sense if other people (or their experiences) have intrinsic value, but it's not clear how it can make sense for an anti-realist.
2. Two, moral realists are convinced that anti-realism—the rejection of moral facts—couldn't possibly cover all that there is to morality. They think that anti-realists are missing something. For example, we might think we know that pain is intrinsically bad from personal experience, but facts about intrinsic value imply moral realism. Without intrinsic value it's not clear how any moral belief could be justified, and we regularly engage in moral debate about which moral beliefs are more justified.

Why reject moral realism?

Moral anti-realists often reject moral realism for at least two reasons:

1. First, they think that the moral facts that moral realists believe in are far-fetched and probably don't exist. They might not be convinced that such moral facts are supported by intuition or common sense or they might simply dismiss our intuitions and common sense. For example, some philosophers think that there is no evidence of moral facts, and such facts would be too strange to hypothesize about. Our intuition and common sense is often dismissed for being prejudice and unwarranted popular opinion, but almost all anti-

realists agree we do know quite a bit about morality, such as the fact that it often makes sense for us to argue about morality.

2. Second, they think that morality can be adequately explained without referring to moral facts. Anti-realists can admit that we make certain moral judgments, but they could explain why we make those judgments without appealing to moral facts. For example, they could argue that people agree that torturing people indiscriminately is wrong because we have empathy for each other and/or we implicitly agree to a social contract that will serve everyone's interests.

There are many different moral realist and anti-realist philosophers who all have somewhat different beliefs concerning the nature of morality. Nonetheless, the debate over moral realism highlights at least two main elements of the nature of morality—moral facts and moral knowledge. We want to know if moral statements can be true because of moral facts, if we can know those facts, if those facts ever refer to intrinsic value, and if any of our moral beliefs are rationally justified.

3. Meta-Ethical Theories

Meta-ethical theories are meant to explain moral psychology, moral reality, and moral reason. Moral psychology considers the actual moral judgments, moral interests, and moral motivation people experience. Moral reality refers to the nature behind true moral statements—what makes our statements true. Moral reason describes our moral knowledge and how we can decide which moral beliefs are best or “most likely true.” Moral realists believe that there are moral facts (moral elements of reality) and they are often optimistic about how well we can understand such facts, but moral anti-realists reject moral realism and don't think we need moral facts to understand morality. I will briefly discuss five meta-ethical theories, two of which are forms of moral realism and three that are forms of moral anti-realism: Moral naturalism and moral intuitionism are both forms of moral realism; noncognitivism, relativism, and error theory are forms of moral anti-realism. There are many forms of each of these theories, but I will concentrate on one version of each theory.

Moral naturalism

[Moral naturalism](#) states that moral facts are ordinary facts of the same physical reality described by scientists (biology, psychology, and physics), and we know about these facts through observation. Many naturalists think that we can observe moral facts because they are *identical* to other natural facts. For example, pain and intrinsic badness could be identical—two ways to see the same thing. Philosophers argue that scientists discovered that water and H₂O are identical and we can discover that pain and intrinsic badness are the same thing in a similar way.

Many philosophers think that morality supervenes on the natural world in the sense that moral facts depend on natural facts, so our observations about the natural world are relevant to morality. Two identical physical states of affairs will have identical moral implications. Two different situations of children torturing cats for fun will both be examples of something morally wrong because the natural facts are sufficiently analogous.

Many moral naturalists equate “natural” with “nonmoral,” but it's also possible that moral facts are a subclass of natural facts, just like most philosophers now think that psychological facts are natural facts rather than “over and above” natural facts. Many moral naturalists who agree that moral facts can be a subclass of natural facts think we can observe that pain is intrinsically bad just like we can observe our beliefs and desires. Pain is not necessarily identical to intrinsic badness because pain could have a *property* of being intrinsically bad instead.

Objections

1. **The open question argument.** – How do we know when two facts are identical? It's not obvious that pain and “intrinsic badness” are identical because they seem so different. The open question argument makes it clear that no matter what identity relation is offered, we can ask, “But are they identical?” For example, we can say intrinsic badness

and pain are identical, and I can feel pain and ask, “But is this pain intrinsically bad?” If no good answer is offered, then such questions imply that moral identity relations are hypotheses at best and have not been proven true.

2. **Moral observation is unreliable.** – Many people question our ability to observe moral facts. First, many such observations seem presumptuous, such as the observation that torturing a cat is wrong from seeing it occur. It might merely be our moral assumptions that are needed to explain such an observation. Additionally, moral observations are *subjective* because not everyone has the same moral observations.

Moral intuitionism

[Moral intuitionists](#) (also known as “moral non-naturalists”) think that observation is insufficient to explain all of our moral knowledge and at least some of our moral knowledge is based on intuition or contemplation that enables us to know self-evident facts. Once we fully understand a moral statement, that can be enough to know if it's true. For example, it might be self-evident that all pain is intrinsically bad to anyone who fully understands what “pain” and “intrinsically bad” refer to. This is much like our knowledge of mathematics and logic. We can know that “ $2+2=4$ ” just by understanding what the statement is saying.

Moral intuitionists don't necessarily think moral facts are natural because they don't think we can know all moral facts through observation of the natural world. They tend to disagree that moral facts are identical to natural facts.

Objections

1. **Intuition is unreliable.** – Many people have different intuitions and declare different moral beliefs to be “self-evident.” It's not obvious that we can resolve this disagreement or that intuition is anything other than prejudice.
2. **Non-natural facts are far fetched.** – Philosophers would prefer for all facts to be part of the natural world and it seems mysterious to say that some facts aren't. Additionally, it's not obvious that there are “non-natural moral facts” in the first place.

Emotivism

[Emotivism](#) is a form of “non-cognitivism” because it claims that moral judgments aren't ultimately meant to be true or false. Instead, moral judgments are expressions of our emotions and moral arguments are meant to change someone's emotional attitudes towards certain moral judgments. Not everything we say is true or false, such as “Wow!” or “Do your job!” Emotivists admit that moral judgments often sound like they are assertions, but that is deceptive. They are actually just emotional displays. Saying “Killing indiscriminately is wrong” is actually expressing something like, “Killing indiscriminately, boo!”

Emotivists don't believe in moral facts or true moral statements, but some emotivists do believe that we can have a conversation involving “fictional” moral ideas that we treat as true for practical purposes. Saying what's right or wrong might help us agree upon what laws to pass and what social contract would best satisfy our interests. Some people call this “fictionalism” or “constructivism.”

Objections

1. **Emotivism is counterintuitive.** – It seems highly counterintuitive to tell me that when I engage in arguments concerning morality that I was doing something totally different than I thought. Emotivism is very dismissive of our moral experiences and conscious intentions.
2. **Emotivism ignores rational moral arguments.** – If moral arguments were merely meant to change our emotions, then why do so many moral arguments seem rational? It's not obvious that an emotivist can fully explain why rational moral arguments are so important to so many people.

Moral relativism

[Moral relativism](#) is the view that moral statements can be true or false, but the truth of a moral statement depends on the moral tradition of the person uttering it. Why? Because morality is based on a culture, social contract, or constructed tradition. All moral statements are made within a tradition and the statements are true if they correspond to the tradition. One culture could say that lying is always wrong and another could say it's only wrong some times.

Moral relativists reduce morality to empirically verifiable customs and traditions that can be studied by anthropologists. If you want to know what's right or wrong, just study the culture you live in.

Moral relativists do not need to prove that all cultures disagree about morality because we could all find it most convenient to agree about certain things. For example, we all have an interest to have our life and property protected, so every culture agrees that stealing and killing willy nilly is wrong.

Objections

1. **Some cultures experience moral progress.** – For example, slavery was once considered to be perfectly moral in the US, but now we know it was wrong. If moral realism is true, then we can experience moral progress by discovering new moral facts and finding out that our previous moral beliefs were false. It's not obvious that moral relativists can explain how a culture can improve and correct their false moral beliefs because it's impossible for a culture to have false moral beliefs in the first place.
2. **Relativism fails to account for rational moral arguments.** – We often argue about what's true about morality, but it's not clear that such arguments could amount to more

than an appeal to popular opinion for a relativist. However, popular opinion can fail to account for moral truths because people are often wrong (such as when they thought slavery wasn't wrong) and because a culture couldn't have an opinion concerning every possible moral issue. There's new moral issues that crop up every day and the situations we find ourselves in are often very unique.

Error theory

[Error theory](#) states that all ordinary moral judgments are false. Both “murder is wrong” and “murder is not wrong” are false because nothing is morally wrong. “Moral wrongness” is non-existent just like unicorns and all statements about things being morally wrong are false for the same reason they are false about unicorns—to say, “Unicorns have four legs” and “unicorns have a tail” are both false because there are no unicorns.

(There might be statements about morality that are true, but we would have to be careful. For example, an error theorist could say it's true that “murder is wrong' is false.”)

Error theorists agree that when we speak about morality we often intend to say something true or false and refer to moral facts, but they think all moral concepts fail to refer to anything because there are no moral facts. There is no such thing as right or wrong, good or bad, virtue, or intrinsic value.

However, error theorists don't necessarily want to do away with morality or moral arguments. Error theorists agree that we could personally find it beneficial to agree to a social contract and it can be convenient for us to speak *as if* morality is real. This is basically the same position I mentioned earlier called “fictionalism” or “constructivism.” This is also true when we speak of unicorns. There's a sense that it's true that unicorns have four legs and a tail when we are speaking within the fictional framework where unicorns exist.

Objections

1. **Morality and self-interest aren't identical** – What's good for me isn't always right. What's in our self-interest and what's moral are often at odds. For example, a cautious and successful thief can steal to help themselves while hurting others, and doing so is wrong. However, the error-theorist argues that we only have a reason to be moral and accept morality when it's in our self-interest. This is contrary to the spirit of morality.
2. **Error theory requires us to reject uncontroversial moral truths** – Every meta-ethical theory I've discussed is sensitive to the fact that we can successfully make moral judgments without doing something wrong except the error theorist. It is uncontroversial that we can *appropriately* make moral judgments, such as the judgment that *killing people indiscriminately is wrong*. The error theorist requires us to admit that our understanding of morality is almost entirely wrong, but we think we do know quite a bit about morality. Given the choice between saying that “killing people indiscriminately is wrong” *is an appropriate moral judgment* and saying error theory is true, most people

will side with our uncontroversial moral judgments. We can argue that we more confident that certain moral judgments are appropriate than that error theory is true.

We make moral judgments in everyday life quite often. We tend to think such judgments can be true or false, but emotivism states otherwise. We tend to think that such judgments are at least sometimes true, but both emotivism and error theory state otherwise. We tend to think that our moral judgments can be appropriate, but error theory seems to imply otherwise. Nonetheless, even if our moral judgments can be true or appropriate, it's not obvious to everyone why. Each of these meta-ethical theories have a different answer concerning the reality that corresponds to morality, and they all face various objections that must be appropriately dealt with before we can commit to one of them. Additionally, [I've previously](#) given two arguments for and against moral realism that should also be dealt with.

4. Moral Reason

Not all moral beliefs are equal. Although some people might think it's impossible to argue about morality or have reasonable moral beliefs, philosophers almost always think we can. We should prefer moral beliefs that are reasonable to those that are unreasonable and those that are probably true rather than probably false. I will explain how we can come up with moral arguments in order to have the most reasonable moral beliefs possible. In particular, I will discuss the following elements of moral reason:

1. Uncontroversial moral truths
2. Analogies
3. Theoretical virtues
4. Thought experiments

Uncontroversial moral truths

There are many uncontroversial moral truths, such as the following:

1. Suffering is bad.
2. Happiness is good.
3. If it is wrong for someone to do something in a situation, then it is wrong for anyone to do it in an identical situation.
4. It always or almost always wrong to torture children.
5. It is often wrong to steal from people.

Such truths are sometimes called “moral truisms.” These truths are often taken for granted during moral reasoning. Such reasoning can be explicitly and clearly stated in the form of moral arguments, such as the following:

1. It is always or almost always wrong to torture children.
2. Whipping the neighbor's child would be a case of torturing a child.
3. I have no reason to think that whipping the neighbor's child would be the right thing to do.
4. Therefore, whipping the neighbor's child is probably wrong.

The above argument uses a moral truth (it is always or almost always wrong to torture children) and combines that with two other uncontroversial facts to lead us to a moral conclusion (whipping the neighbor's child is wrong).

Moral reasoning doesn't require that we prove absolutely everything. It would be absurd to think that everyone has to know why torturing children is always or almost always wrong. It's just obvious. We can use uncontroversial truths to lead us to moral conclusions. (Compare this to mathematical knowledge. I know that $2+2=4$ even though I don't know why it's true.)

However, it might be possible to learn about “why torturing children is always or almost always wrong” through other uncontroversial truths. For example:

1. We know that suffering is *bad* because we have experienced it.
2. All things equal, we know it is *wrong* to cause bad things to happen.
3. Therefore, all things equal, it's wrong to cause suffering.
4. Torture causes suffering.
5. Therefore, all things equal, torture is wrong.

The first two premises are ones I believe to be uncontroversial moral truths. If they are false, then it will be up to someone else to prove it. In the meantime it seems quite rational to agree with the above argument.

I don't want to suggest that there is never any reason to question uncontroversial truths, but being uncontroversial tends to be sufficient for justification. One way to justify an uncontroversial truth is by defending it from objections. If we have no reason to doubt an uncontroversial truth, then it makes good sense to believe it.

Analogies

Analogies help us draw general truths from less general cases. Analogies let us compare two things to find relevant similarities between the two. For example, kicking and punching people tend to be analogous actions insofar as they are used to hurt people. They are both often wrong for the same reason. Whenever it's wrong to hurt people, it will be wrong to kick or punch them in order to hurt them.

Using analogies we can justify new general moral truths by using other uncontroversial moral truths. We know that kicking people is usually wrong and we can figure out that punching people is usually wrong for the same reason. We can then use this comparison to discover a new general moral truth—hurting people is usually wrong. We can then use this general rule to realize that torture and other forms of violence are also usually wrong.

Morality for each person is analogous as morality for everyone else. We can consider that kicking people is generally wrong for *others* because it's bad when *I* get hurt. It's not then a big step to realize that *other* people are relevantly similar to *me*. It's bad when I get hurt, and it's bad when other people get hurt for the same reason. The disvalue of suffering is analogously similar for each person. But it's also usually wrong for me to cause others harm for the same reason it's usually wrong for others to hurt me—because harming others is usually wrong. Additionally, there can be exceptions to general moral rules, which apply analogously for each person. It is morally acceptable for me to harm others when necessary for self-preservation, and it is acceptable for others to harm me when necessary for self-preservation as well. Self-preservation seems to override the need to refrain from harming others in either case. We could speculate that the value of one person's life is greater than the value of another to avoid harm.

Thought experiments

Thought experiments are stories, scenarios, and other contemplations that could lead to insight about the universe. Moral thought experiments are meant to give us insight into morality. For example, imagine that a woman puts a loaded gun up to your head and asks you to give your wallet to her. It seems like the best thing to do in this situation is to give your wallet. It would be absurd to criticize someone for giving up their wallet in this way.

Another thought experiment was suggested by John Stewart Mill in [Utilitarianism](#). He argued that it's better to be person dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. He thought we would realize that being a person is more enjoyable than being a pig. Being a person gives us intellectual pleasures that are qualitatively better than animalistic pleasures that pigs enjoy. A little bit of intellectual pleasure seems to be superior to a great amount of animalistic pleasures (eating, sleeping, and having sex).¹

One thought experiment done more recently was by Peter Singer in his essay [The Drowning Pond and the Expanding Circle](#). He produces a thought experiment and then uses it to produce an analogy. He asks us to imagine that we can save a drowning child from a small pool of water at little cost to ourselves. Would we have an obligation to save the child or would it be morally acceptable to walk on by? The answer seems to be clear—we have an obligation to save the child. It would be wrong not to. Why? He suggests that *it's wrong to refuse to help people when doing so is at little cost to oneself*. Singer then argues that this is an analogous situation to giving charity. We can save lives through charity at very little cost to ourselves. (We might have to buy less DVDs, etc.) Therefore, we have an obligation to give to charity.

What exactly are thought experiments doing? We often say that they give us “intuitive support” for a belief. Intuitive support tends to be difficult to explicitly state in the form of arguments. Some intuitive support is considered to be from self-evidence, but some intuitive support could also be based on personal experience and observation. For example, we can compare intellectual pleasures to the pleasures enjoyed by pigs because we have actually experienced them. We can then compare how valuable each experience was. I wrote a great deal about intuition in my discussion, [Objections Against Moral Realism Part 2: Intuition is Unreliable](#).

Moral reasoning is much like other forms of reasoning. We can make use of uncontroversial truths, analogies, and compare theoretical virtues. We even observe some values, such as the value of pleasure and pain.

Moral reasoning is not only compatible with moral theorizing, but it is necessary to reason about morality to theorize in the first place. The moral reasoning discussed above could be used to

¹ I suspect that we would prefer to live a dissatisfied life as a person than as a satisfied pig because we think human existence itself is worth more than the pleasures that could be offered to a pig. This could give us reason to suspect that pleasure is not the only thing we value. Merely existing as a human being could have a great deal of value.

develop a moral theory. We also need to know something about morality before we can decide if a moral theory is plausible.

Some people have suggested that moral theories have failed us, so morality is probably a human invention. I don't agree that our moral theories have failed us, but that's irrelevant. Even if our theories have failed us, that wouldn't give us a good reason to be skeptical about morality or moral reasoning. Our moral knowledge never depended on moral theories. We know a lot about morality prior to having moral theories.

Theoretical virtues

I have discussed six [theoretical virtues](#) in the past, which help us determine when a hypothesis or belief is justified. (The virtues are: Self-evidence, logical consistency, observation, predictability, comprehensiveness, and simplicity.) The better a belief is supported by the six virtues, the more plausible the belief is.

First, some moral statements might be **self-evident**. Merely understanding the statement could be sufficient to justify the belief in it. For example, consider that “torturing children is always or almost always wrong.” Knowing that torture causes intense suffering, which is bad; that there is pretty much no good reason to cause intense suffering to a child; and that causing harm with no good reason is wrong seems sufficient to realize that “torturing children is always or almost always wrong” is true.

Second, we don't want our moral beliefs to contradict one another (we want them to be **logically consistent**). If we have a choice of rejecting an uncontroversial moral truth that we are certain is true (e.g. torture is usually wrong) and a controversial belief (e.g. whipping children is usually good), then we have reason to reject the controversial belief.

We might have a serious problem when two supposedly uncontroversial beliefs contradict one another, such as the belief that it's never right to hurt people and self-preservation is always right. In that case it might be necessary to hurt someone for self-preservation. The solution here is to realize that these moral rules seem to have exceptions. However, it might at times be impossible to be logically coherent. We shouldn't reject an uncontroversial moral truth “just because” it might contradict another moral truth. Sometimes observations also contradict our uncontroversial beliefs, but we simply can't reject our uncontroversial beliefs without a new set of uncontroversial beliefs to replace them. For example, Newton's theory of physics was contradicted by some observations, but scientists still believed it was true until Einstein provided scientists with a new scientific theory that was a clear improvement.

When we hold incoherent beliefs we have a reason to feel less certain about our beliefs, but that doesn't mean our beliefs should all be rejected.

Third, **observation** has relevant information for morality. We experience that pain is bad, and that experience is an observation that seems to support the hypothesis that all pain is bad.

Fourth, a hypothesis that has success at making risky **predictions** is more likely to be true. If I hypothesize that all pain is bad, then my predictions succeed until I observe that some pain isn't bad. Of course, interpreting these observations is difficult. I don't think masochism is an example of experiencing pain itself as good. Both pain and pleasure can be simultaneously experienced—and physical and emotional pain (or pleasure) are also two different aspects to our experiences. Masochism could be an experience of physical pain and emotional pleasure.

Fifth, the belief that all pain is bad is much more **comprehensive** than believing that the pain of touching fire is bad. If all pain is bad, then we could use that truth to help us do a great deal of moral reasoning as opposed to merely realizing that burning pain is bad.

Sixth, simple moral truths, such as “it's usually wrong to hurt people” give us more more plausible hypotheses than much more complex moral truths, such as, “it's usually wrong to torture people, to punch people, to kick people, to stab people, to steal from people, and to shoot people.” The simple moral truth can determine that all of these other actions are wrong and more. Additionally, the simple moral truth has less assumptions. We assume all of those actions are examples of hurting people, but we might find out that stealing isn't technically hurting people. It is safer to have less assumptions rather than more, and simple truths have less assumptions.

5. History of Metaethics

1. Ancient Ethics

In order to understand how exactly moral facts and values could be endorsed, it can be useful to consider how they have been justified throughout western history. Ancient philosophers in particular can be useful because they considered every possibility they could think of and we still revisit those same themes time and time again. (Do we need God to justify values? If so, how does it help do so?)

Western philosophy starting with Socrates was part of a revolt against moral antirealism. The "sophists" (lawyers, politicians, argument specialists) popularized the view that morality wasn't real. Every culture had different ethical beliefs, so why should we believe any of them? They concluded that we shouldn't believe any culture and that we have no choice but to find morality to be nothing more than a human invention. Socrates found antirealism to be false and tried his best to argue that we have good reason to try to find out what ethical statements are true. Socrates agreed that we shouldn't simply trust cultural ethical beliefs, and found a new source for ethical knowledge. Argument and dialectic could help us find ethical truths.

Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoic philosophers all followed in Socrates's footsteps by trying to argue about ethics in an attempt to find ethical knowledge.

Plato

Plato argued that ethical knowledge is possible by speculating about abstract entities (also called Forms or Ideas). These entities are more real than the world as we know it. They exist outside space and time, they do not change, and they are not made of matter or thoughts. The real world attempts to imitate these entities. The real world instances of justice are all imperfect imitations of the abstract entity of justice. All of the abstract entities combine into a superform known as "The Good."

Plato attempted to justify his theory of abstract entities as Socrates insisted, through argument and dialectic. If the theory could explain why "objections" shouldn't be taken seriously, then it could be seen as justified. If multiple theories are all justified in this way, then we might have a problem.

Contemporary philosophers still justify ethical arguments in just about the same way that Plato did, except they have found that there are always objections that cannot be satisfactorily met. Therefore, we tend to side with the theories that can best meet the challenges of serious objections. This is also how we justify theories of natural science (such as physics and chemistry). The objections to these theories are unexplained observations that are often called "anomalies" in order to imply that they are not serious objections because we hope to be able to defend the theory from the objection someday.

Plato also insisted that we are guided to find the truth when we argue because we can start to "remember" the abstract entities from a time before we were born. Before we are alive and after we are alive we come into contact with the abstract entities.

Aristotle

Aristotle partially justified ethics through psychology. Although we have ethical goals to promote certain goods, we can only find those goods to be truly important if they are not purely instrumental. Food, for example, is only something we value because it promotes some other good (such as health.) Health also is only valuable because it promotes some other good (such as longer life.) Aristotle argues that the only good that is not purely instrumental is "happiness." He called this the most "final end," which merely means that it is a goal that is used to justify other goals.

Aristotle has made a good point. If we want to find out what values are truly important (and part of moral reality), we have to make sure that we don't value it only for the sake of something else. (Some goals might be valued for the sake of itself and for something else.) Happiness seems like one of the goals that doesn't need to be valued for the sake of anything other than itself. It makes perfect sense to want to be happy just because it is a wonderful state of being.

Aristotle argues that happiness is of the primary importance and that virtue is the best way to achieve it. Virtue includes appropriate behavior involving courage, honesty, and moderation. If we find out that virtue does not lead to happiness, then Aristotle might be forced to admit that virtue isn't very important after all.

Epicurus

Epicurus justified ethics through a kind of phenomenology (study of introspection). Epicurus agreed with Democritus in that he believed that all of reality is derived from atoms. If all of reality is based on atoms, then how could there be moral values? They could somehow arise from atoms, like everything else. The mind, for example, could be said to arise from the brain. Epicurus found that moral values arise from our minds. Our experience of pleasure and pain seem sufficient enough evidence that they have intrinsic importance. It could be said that the mental states of pain have the property of intrinsic badness, and the mental states of pleasure have the property of intrinsic goodness.

Remember when you were a child and you hurt someone else, then you were told, "Think about what it is like to be Charlie," or "Think about what it would be like to be in his shoes." This seems to imply a metaphysical claim about the intrinsic importance of pain. You know that it is bad to feel pain because it feels bad to experience it. When you hurt someone else, you have given someone else that bad experience. If something has intrinsic value, then we have a good reason to promote that value and we will hopefully be motivated to do so. This seems true about pain. Thinking about the fact that we can cause pain to others gives us reason to want to avoid doing so. It also seems to motivate us to want to avoid doing so. (You were told to think about the feelings of others to help motivate your behavior in the future.)

The main criticisms to the ethical theory of Epicurus isn't that he was wrong that pleasure and pain have some kind of intrinsic importance, but that he had an overly simple or incomplete view of intrinsic values. Perhaps pleasure and pain have intrinsic importance, but they might still be relatively unimportant compared to something else of intrinsic importance, such as human life. Also, Epicurus's view was very sophisticated. The view of uneducated hedonists only caring about pleasure and pain like savages is a characterization of Epicurus's philosophy that has haunted our thinking for centuries.

Some criticisms that pleasure and pain lack intrinsic importance is actually about the fact that they aren't "universally valuable" in all situations. Some pleasure have been criticized for being inhumane, for example, but the pleasure itself isn't necessarily bad. Merely the consequences of the actions required for the pleasure to occur. Also, consider masochists who value pain. No one actually values pain. The masochist merely values the pleasure that can be involved with a painful experience. (A scary movie needs to be truly scary to be fully appreciated, and that is uncomfortable in some sense. But being scared can give us an adrenaline rush that gives us pleasure.)

Notice that Epicurus justified morality for a material world of atoms. The belief in materialism (everything is derived from matter) is precisely why many people have become moral skeptics. How can anything have real importance when everything is derived from matter? Epicurus gave a very plausible answer to this question. In fact, his answer has little relevance to whether the world is derived from matter or something else. Our experiences of pleasure and pain make it quite clear why we find them to have importance.

One might point out, "Just because you value your own pleasure and dislike your own pain, doesn't mean that it has real importance." In other words, many people seem to insist that anything based on mental experiences are merely "subjective" and couldn't be part of reality. This objection seems superficial because what is in the mind is just as real as what is not in the mind. The term "subjective" is associated with delusion and personal taste and the term "objective" is associated with the "real world," but these categories and associations might be merely biases.

Epicurus argued similarly to Aristotle that pleasure (which he equates with happiness) and a lack of pain (serenity) is best achieved through virtue. Just like Aristotle, he will be forced to abandon virtue if it is found to keep us from these goals rather than promote them.

As a final note on Epicurus, I have noticed that many atheists have a hard time justifying their view that morality is in some sense real. Even Christopher Hitchens, an adamant atheist who has mentioned Epicurus on occasion, has never used Epicurus's philosophy to justify his moral judgments. Instead, he has admitted that he isn't sure how to justify them.

Stoicism

Is God necessary for there to be real importance in the world? Many people believe this, but they probably don't know why. Stoicism is the main group of philosophers who popularized this view.

Stoicism justifies ethical truths partially through metaphysics: They attempt to argue that the best theory of the world is that it has a divine plan created by "Divine Reason," a pantheistic god, which gave us our instincts. Our instincts involve promoting human welfare, so that is what Divine Reason must have wanted us to do. Also, it is our duty to accept everything that happens as being part of the divine plan. Even horrific atrocities are part of the plan and are seen as necessary for some greater good. Therefore, we have no reason to ever be unhappy. As long as we accept and value reality as being part of the best possible state of affairs, we have good reason to be happy about it.

The Stoic philosophers argued that virtue (promoting the divine plan) was the only thing of worthwhile importance, so unlike Aristotle's and Epicurus's conclusions, no value could ever encourage us to stop promoting virtue. This is one aspect of the Stoic philosophy that I find to be particularly attractive. Aristotle's and Epicurus's view of virtue's importance appears much too contingent.

There is much more to Stoic philosophy than I have presented here and they will be able to meet many of our most important criticisms. For example, some people wonder how the Stoics can be motivated to do anything if the divine plan is inevitable anyway. The Stoics will be motivated to do the right thing whenever they know what it is, and this is precisely how the divine plan created us. Whenever we believe that a goal is good, we will want to promote that goal. The more certain we are that the goal is good, the more we will be motivated to action.

Notice that the Stoics do not have to fully describe moral reality. The understanding of reality being guided by a divine plan is enough to pragmatically decide to "live in accordance with nature" (our own nature and nature as a whole). This justification is "pragmatic" because we don't have proof that moral reality exists. Instead, we will just find that it will be most useful to agree to certain moral beliefs. In particular, the divine plan is the best plan anyone can come up with, so we have nothing better to do. It is possible for the Stoics to wonder if anything has real importance, and they might reply to this question with another pragmatic answer: We have a choice to live in accordance to the divine plan or resist it. If you resist it, you will be less happy and you will be combating whatever is important (if anything). If you promote the divine plan, then you will be happier and you will endorse whatever is important (if anything.)

If you believe in God, then Stoicism offers particularly relevant and sophisticated arguments involving our emotions, actions, and the justification for moral statements. There is no evil because God is too powerful to allow it. \ God's plan is the best plan we can hope for, so we have good reason to endorse all events. Once we truly understand and endorse this fact, we will be happy. Losing your wallet is not a reason to be unhappy because it is exactly what should happen. Also, we are given instincts to help guide us to the best action. (This is now a popular view for atheists who use evolution to justify ethics!) We are created and motivated according to God's plan. Additionally, any view of God not involving a divine plan or the usefulness of instincts (perhaps by saying that instincts are sinful) will provide less reason to believe that God somehow helps us justify moral judgments. A religious person could endorse Epicurus's ethics if Stoic ethics are rejected.)

I suppose many people just think, "If God exists and the 10 commandments were given by God, then the 10 commandments are true." That could be a way to pragmatically justify ethics, but it might be possible to give non-pragmatic justifications as well. Epicurus in particular gave a justification that aligns well with common sense.

2. Modern Metaethics

The "required reading list" for philosophy tends to start with the ancient Greeks, and then it skips to the modern period. Much of the best modern metaethical philosophy (between the 17th and early 20th centuries) involved moral skepticism. In particular, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and Frederich Nietzsche.

Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes has been described as a "conventionalist." We will say that something is "right" if it is agreed upon. In particular, he suggests that we should agree to laws that are enforced by the sovereign because without laws life will be "poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (*Leviathan*, VIII). Rather than provide proof that a life that is "poor, nasty, brutish, and short" lacks intrinsic value or promotes something of intrinsic disvalue, Hobbes assumes that we tend to have a personal interest in avoiding such a situation, so we can all agree to have laws without relying on metaethics. Hobbes metaethical position is precisely that we need not discuss whether or not anything of intrinsic importance really exists.

Many philosophers assume that Hobbes was a nihilist, and his philosophy is certainly consistent with nihilism (the idea that nothing has intrinsic importance). However, it is also consistent with agnosticism concerning moral reality.

David Hume

David Hume took metaethical skepticism a step further than Hobbes by questioning moral reality entirely. Hume was an empiricist, so the only evidence that he would consider relevant is empirical evidence (observation). He questions how it is possible that we can observe a fact and somehow infer from that observation what ought to be. (How do we derive an "ought" from an "is?")

In Hume's *On a Treatise of Human Nature*, he argues that our moral beliefs are derived from our sentiments, and then he argues that our sentiments are irrelevant to truth and falsity. In other words Hume agrees that we must psychologically agree to moral truths despite the fact that we actually have no evidence of any moral truths:

Now 'tis evident our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement; being original facts and realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, and actions. 'Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounc'd either true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason. (Book III, Part I, Section 1)

He says that we can have no moral truths even though our passions seem to relate to morality somehow because passions cannot be said to be true or false and passions do not refer to anything else. It should be noted that the Stoics would disagree with this statement because when we are angry, for example, we require a belief. "You unjustly killed a human being" is the kind of belief that would incite anger. Anger cannot be understood as a thoughtless feeling because that would just be a general state of anxiety. Our suffering also appears to require some thoughts. Bodily pain in and of itself can be ignored when we are appropriately hypnotized, and the most painful forms of suffering involve the belief that something terrible has happened. Finding out that a loved one has died, for example, can cause pain with no physical basis. The belief is certainly tied to the pain.

Hume admitted that as human beings who have experienced pleasure and pain, we have no choice but to agree to pleasure and pain as our "ultimate ends." Hume argues that we psychologically take pleasure and pain to be our ultimate ends in a similar way that Aristotle argues that happiness is our "final end," and it amounts to just about the same thing:

It appears evident that—the ultimate ends of human actions can never, in any case, be accounted for by reason, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties. Ask a man *why he uses exercise*; he will answer, *because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire, *why he desires health*, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason *why he hates pain*, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object. (*An Enquiry into the Principles of Morals*, appendix 1, V.)

It is important to note that Hume still won't think it is literally true that "pleasure is good" or "pain is bad." Why he can't make this leap is due to his empiricist convictions that introspection can't give us evidence for the truth and that objects of introspection are irrelevant to the truth. Although we might want to say, "The experience of pleasure is experienced as being intrinsically good," Hume will insist that there is nothing true or false about pleasure, and pleasure cannot refer to anything true.

Frederich Nietzsche

Frederich Nietzsche presented various arguments involving metaethical skepticism. He argued (1) that our ideas of actions fail to account for the indefinite complexity of the situation, (2) that language fails to account for the indefinite complexity of moral reality, (3) that language used to describe our psychological states is inadequate, (4) morality isn't universal.

Our ideas of actions can fail to account for the indefinite complexity of the situation because of the inadequacy of language. We think in simple terms, such as "killing, self-defense, and stealing" for actions involving indefinitely complicated situations. To consider the importance of the situation to action, consider that the action "cut a man open" might sound wrong, but given the situation of being a surgeon trying to help a patient, it is considered perfectly moral.

Nietzsche believes that every object and situation is unique, so words are hopelessly inadequate. We could use this line of thinking to agree that a virtuous person will know "the best course of action" based on the exact situation at hand, and we have no right to judge people unless we also understand the exact situation at hand.

The fact that language fails to account for the complexity of our mental states for the same reason that it fails to account for the situation—our mental states are just as complicated as physical states. We use terms like, "belief" and "desire" to understand motivation, but these terms are oversimplifications. We cannot judge proper mental actions (proper beliefs, desires, and emotions) just like we cannot judge the proper physical actions. We also tend to be very interested in knowing the person's intentions when we judge him or her morally. (Is the surgeon trying to help a patient, or is he trying to hurt someone?)

Nietzsche's skepticism does raise some good questions, and it raises serious worry that we can ever achieve a perfect understanding of moral truth. However, he does not argue that there are no moral facts independent of our beliefs. We might have no choice but to endlessly try to improve our understanding of moral facts. We might still be justified to have moral beliefs despite the fact that it will be inadequate to some extent.

Contemporary meta-ethics

The question is: Are there any moral facts? If we think so, then we are moral realists. (Also, what are the metaphysical implications? Does "moral reality" require Platonic forms? Are there intrinsic values?)

The sophists questioned the moral realism that ancient philosophers would argue for. Originally there was no philosophical basis for moral realism, but the ancient philosophers attempted to create such a theoretical basis. Then modern philosophers, such as David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche, questioned our basis for moral realism.

I recently decided that I wanted to know what contemporary philosophers have to say about moral realism, so I bought an anthology entitled *Essays on Moral Realism* edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord. I will examine each of these essays in the following chapters.

Contemporary philosophers continued to question moral realism and even attempted to create a basis for moral antirealism. The skepticism of the sophists was reinterpreted under the philosophical tradition and it peaked with the logical positivists, the most skeptical philosophers the world has ever seen. Contemporary philosophy has continued to be very skeptical of moral realism, but it has only recently become a tenable position. Moral realist positions are becoming just as plausible as the antirealist positions.

Essays on Moral Realism begins with the peak of moral skepticism in the first half, then continues with moral realist essays in the second half.

The book starts off with an essay by A. J. Ayer, a logical positivist. Logical positivists were concerned with the problem that philosophy often lacks evidence. Logical positivists were empiricists and would reject any evidence other than empirical evidence (observation). They also endorsed a "principle of verification," which meant that each statement is meaningless unless it can be "verified" (has empirical evidence.) Some logical positivists decided to only ask that a theory (or statement) be at least be disprovable. Any statement that isn't verifiable is "meaningless." Such meaningless statements will be noncognitive (they will have no truth value).

Right off the bat I can see that logical positivists should have a problem with ethics. It isn't clear that we "observe" ethical truths. The same goes for mathematics, logic, and metaphysics. If we don't "observe" logical truths, there can't be any.

Ethical Naturalism

Additionally, contemporary meta-ethics is greatly influenced by "naturalism," "naturalistic methodology," "naturalistic epistemology," and "naturalistic metaphysics." Naturalists believe that science is the most appropriate way to learn about the world and tend to be materialists, and they are the dominant philosophical community. Naturalism has its origins in empiricism and science: We wanted a way to learn about the world without prejudice and fantasy. Philosophy and religion tends to suffer from our psychological tendency to see the world in human psychological terms. There has to be a "reason" for everything to happen in the sense that there has to be a motive. The scientific process offered a way to avoid anthropomorphizing the world by reducing everything to thoughtless bits of matter. (We might start to worry when scientists offer us a non-anthropomorphic understanding of human beings and try to reduce us to thoughtless bits of matter.)

A commitment to naturalism caused most philosophers to reject [moral realism](#) because moral facts seem incompatible with a scientific perspective. Scientific questions concerning moral facts appeared insurmountable: How do we know about moral facts? How could we observe moral facts? How can you get prescriptive facts from descriptive facts? Can you derive ought from is?

Naturalists tend to have the following ways to explain metaethics:

1. Moral facts don't exist because they aren't compatible with science.
2. Ethics can become a branch of science. Moral facts can be discovered using the scientific process.

Antirealists tend to think moral facts are incompatible with science because they would require a supernatural moral reality similar to Platonic forms.

Some antirealists don't think ethics is meant to have moral facts because moral language is merely an emotional expression. Others agree that we intend to discuss moral truth, but there are no moral truths.

Essays on Moral Realism edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord didn't adequately discuss the fact that some antirealist philosophers do agree that there are moral truths, but they think moral truths can also be understood in nonmoral language. Moral facts are merely reducible to nonmoral facts. Moral facts might reduce to facts about pleasure or facts about a culture.

Antirealist philosophers tend to be reductionists. The most real thing is physics. Chemistry could be reduced to physics and could be dispensed with. The only reason that we study chemistry or psychology is because these parts of science are messy and we are currently unable to reduce them to physics. We have a pragmatic justification for studying these parts of reality because it is useful to do so given our current limitations.

Realists think that moral facts are an irreducible part of reality that has not yet become part of science, but it could become part of science. Realists are non-reductionists. They often argue that we currently are unable to reduce each branch of science to physics, and each branch of science might contain irreducible elements. Although physics might cause all parts of reality, it does not necessarily constitute each part of reality. For example, physics might cause us to have minds, but a mind can have elements that are not reducible, such as qualia.

Even if naturalism is false, the quest to transform ethics into a branch of science is a solid strategy. We know that science is reliable, so transforming ethics into a science would assure us that ethics can be reliable. This is not unlike the hope by early philosophers that we could transform philosophy into something like mathematics. Simply put, the more ethics is like science, the more reliable it probably is.

I started with the common assumption that ethics couldn't become a branch of science. The difficulties did appear to be insurmountable. However, the arguments within *Essays on Moral Realism* were quite promising. Not all naturalists are reductionists, and the epistemology of science is much more completed than one might think. The empiricism of science requires that we learn about the world through observation, but observation is theory-dependent. Observation using moral theory gives us moral facts.

Although there are relatively few non-naturalist philosophers, they could argue that moral facts are incompatible with science, but that is just a shortcoming of science because there are other methods of discovering facts other than science. This was not discussed in detail within *Essays on Moral Realism*.

Part 2: Reviews of Contemporary Metaethics

Chapter 1: "Critique of Ethics and Theology" by A. J. Ayer

The first contemporary essay that I will discuss is "Critique of Ethics and Theology" by A. J. Ayer.

A. J. Ayer provides us with the first noncognitive theory that is called "emotivism" (28-40) (Noncognitivists believe that moral statements have no truth value.) He suggests that everyday ethical judgments are not what we think. We think they are cognitive, but they are actually emotional expressions. To say, "murder is wrong," is actually something like saying, "murder!" in an angry voice. It shows an emotional dislike of murder.

Some people have described emotivism as the theory that moral judgments (stealing is wrong) say something like "Stealing, boo!" The word "boo" emphasizes the fact that we are merely expressing our emotion.

What kinds of argument does Ayer use to defend his theory of emotivism?

(1) We cannot replace our current moral language with a nonmoral language (29).

Some philosophers decided that we could dispense with moral language by replacing it with a nonmoral language. For example, utilitarians can claim that the word "good" means the same thing as "produces the most pleasure." To say, "Stealing is wrong" is merely to say that it produces suffering rather than pleasure. Ayer points out that this isn't how we currently use the word "good" and we currently don't have a way to replace moral language with nonmoral language. By rejecting this kind of reductionism (reducing moral statements to nonmoral statements), we have slightly more reason to accept noncognitivism. If every alternative to noncognitivism is rejected, then noncognitivism might be the most plausible metaethical theory.

(2) Moral absolutism is unverifiable (30).

We cannot verify if a moral statement is true or false. (How do we know that "stealing is wrong" is true?) Moral intuition is the traditional kind of evidence used for such truths, but this form of evidence is unreliable. (Different people have different moral intuitions.) By rejecting moral absolutism, we have slightly more reason to accept noncognitivism.

(3) Subjectivism does not describe our actual moral language (32).

According to a subjectivist, when we say, "Stealing is wrong," we are saying, "I disapprove of stealing." This is very similar to Ayer's theory, but it attempts to make it more literal. Although it

is true that moral language is a way of expressing feelings of approval and disapproval (or whatever moral emotion), we aren't literally telling someone how we feel.

Also, Ayer argues that we don't actually have to have the emotion in order to "evince it." When we make a moral judgment, we are showing an emotion, but we aren't stating a fact that we have the emotion.

By rejecting subjectivism, we have slightly more reason to accept noncognitivism.

(4) Moral argument is about nonmoral facts, not values or emotions (33).

We don't tell people what emotions or values to endorse, we only tell them what nonmoral facts to accept. For example, we can argue that something is unhealthy, but we can't argue that "health is good."

We might worry that emotivism ignores the fact that people argue about morality, but A. J. Ayer says that we don't argue about morality (values). We argue about nonmoral facts, even when we think we are arguing about morality.

Critique

There are many reasons to reject noncognitivism or Ayer's justifications for noncognitivism. A. J. Ayer eventually denounced logical positivism and noncognitivism, so his essay can only be taken with a grain of salt. (Check [youtube](#).)

It should be clear that Ayer doesn't argue that it is false that "we should drink five glasses of water a day." This kind of statement could merely be about our goals. If we have a goal, then in some sense we "ought" to do what we can to succeed in accomplishing the goal. In the same way, it might be true that you "ought to use a gun" when you have a goal of killing someone. This kind of "ought" has nothing to do with morality. (Admittedly, it isn't always clear when we are using a moral "ought" or not. "You ought to drink five glasses of water a day" is true nonmorally if you want to stay healthy, but it is a moral "ought" if you have a moral obligation to stay healthy.) For this reason, we shouldn't argue that the simple fact that we "ought" to do things is a counterexample to his theory.

(1) A. J. Ayer never argues against nihilism (the view that moral statements are cognitive, but are all false).

Although we might want to reject absolutism, that doesn't mean that moral statements don't refer to something like intrinsic values. "Stealing is wrong" can have something to do with intrinsic value like, "Stealing leads to intrinsic disvalue through suffering").

(2) Ayer's argument that "we don't argue about values" is false.

I know some people who argue about emotions quite often and make judgments, such as:

- You shouldn't get angry!
- You need to learn to control your anger.
- It's not good to feel negative emotions.

In particular, Buddhists, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Epicureans have quite a lot to say about emotions and which ones we should want. If arguing about which emotions are good is out of style, then that has something to do with contemporary morality rather than ethics throughout history.

Epicurus, Aristotle, and some utilitarians also have something to say about intrinsic values as well. (Should we agree that pleasure, pain, knowledge, virtue, human life, and/or happiness have intrinsic importance?)

(3) We don't say what Ayer thinks we say.

When I say, "Stealing is wrong," I am not just expressing an emotion. It is quite rude for Ayer to tell me that I am saying something completely different than what I intend to be saying and to trivialize it. Phenomenologically, Ayer is describing human behavior in the worst possible way. It is "contrary to experience."

Could noncognitivism be verified by natural science? This seems very unlikely considering the fact that our everyday experience of moral argument is nothing like what he describes. We really believe that our children have real importance and make the world a better place. A world without people would be a much less valuable world. It should not be surprising that our moral arguments will be based on these cognitive facts.

(4) Noncognitivism is unverifiable.

If we could find out that noncognitivism is unverifiable, then it would not be a tenable position for a logical positivist. However, noncognitivism is verifiable in principle. A logical positivist needs to know that a statement can be verified in principle, not whether or not a statement has actually been verified.

A. J. Ayer could have endorsed metaethical agnosticism. If we can't know anything about ethics, then why endorse any metaethical position? It does make sense that noncognitivism could be verified by natural science. We just find it unlikely. (Such verification in science would require evidence for the "principle of verification" itself, which was never provided.)

(5) Ayer misses the point.

Sometimes philosophers need to return to Earth and realize that what they have to say has significance to everyday human beings. When someone tells me that there are no moral facts, I will want them to explain the most "obvious" of moral facts, such as, "Pain is bad." When we experience pain it doesn't seem like a morally neutral category. We experience it as "bad" in a sense of intrinsic importance. If someone tells me that pain isn't "bad" then I wonder if that

person knows what the word means. If someone doesn't think it is bad, then that person shouldn't mind being tortured. Of course, Ayer would never allow us to torture him, but why? Does it seem bad, but it really isn't?

Is "pain" intrinsically important? When we say that something is "bad" we can mean something nonmoral: It disrupts our goals. Pain does disrupt our goal of "not feeling pain" but that is about it! Our ability to feel pain is actually a good thing to have. People without the ability to feel pain have a lot of problems. Instrumentally, pain seems good. However, only by feeling it do we know that it is bad.

Of course, pain often coincides with other goals. Our goal to not feel pain often coincides with our goal to avoid harm. If we feel pain, then we are often harmed. However, it doesn't coincide 100% of the time. It is possible to feel pain without attaining physical harm, and we still have good reason to want to avoid it. (Being pinched, for example.)

Also, the most painful experiences often have nothing to do with physical harm. Emotional suffering has a lot more to do with our belief that something bad has happened. A loss of a loved one, for example. But if we need to believe that something "bad" happened, then this seems to presuppose a belief in moral realism. We need to believe that it is true that something bad has happened.

Why people reject the fact that pain has intrinsic significance: Pain is "subjective." It is something we experience within the first person perspective and we contemplate it through introspection. We don't perceive pain from the outside world. Although we might say that something is pyramid shaped in the outside world through sensations, it wouldn't make sense to say that something is painful in the outside world. We don't think pain is a property of sharp objects. Many empiricists, such as Hume, will only allow perceptions of objects in an "outside world" to count as evidence. Since pain is something that we don't perceive as existing in an "outside world," we have no evidence of pain. (We don't "observe" pain, but we do experience it and we can examine it through introspection.) Therefore, pain is often taken to be a mere illusion or peculiar "hallucination" caused by our bodies and situation. The "badness" of pain will likewise be part of that illusion.

We will only reject the existence of pain or the "badness" of pain if (1) we reject personal experience as evidence, or (2) we have certain metaphysical commitments. If personal experience does not count as evidence, then it is predictable that we will end up with a materialistic metaphysics. We will disregard all thoughts and experience as being a kind of illusion.

The related metaphysical commitment: Each kind of evidence corresponds to a kind of reality. The evidence of pain (personal experience) is quite different than the evidence of a pyramid-shaped object (observation). Many people will then say that these two kinds of evidence are of two different kinds of substance. Observation is of the "outside world," but personal experience is about "mental stuff." Descartes took mental stuff to be an objectively existing part of reality, but many philosophers want to think of mental stuff as being some kind of illusion (just like Hume).

After reading the entire book on contemporary ethics, the ordinary concern about "pain being bad" was never mentioned. Isn't this one of the most basic forms of evidence that something can have intrinsic importance?

Chapter 2: "Ethical Consistency" by Bernard Williams

Bernard Williams discusses the problem with having conflicting obligations and a potential contradiction that might be accepted if we accept conflicting obligations. He argues that two things we ought to do can conflict because choosing to do one of them will not absolve us of the fact that we also ought to do the other. A closer look at the logic involved can reveal why no contradiction will be accepted. I will present three objections to his argument. The first questions whether or not obligations can conflict, the second admits that nonmoral "oughts" might conflict while moral ones don't, and the third questions whether or not we can reject that beliefs conflict but accept that "oughts" can conflict.

The problem is that sometimes we can't do both things that we ought to do. Perhaps we made a promise to someone to meet them at 5:00 pm and we ought to call the police to help catch a criminal at 4:50 pm. If you call the police, then you will have to help the police with an investigation that will make you miss your 5:00 meeting. In other words, we ought to call the police and we ought to get to the 5:00 meeting. But since it is impossible to do both of these things, we ought not do one of them. (We only ought to do what is possible.) We now have found a contradiction: We ought to do two different things, but we ought not to do both of those things. (A contradiction is found because something cannot be true and false at the same time in the same respect.)

Here is another way of forming this argument:

1. I ought to do A and B.
2. It is impossible to do A and B.
3. It can't be the case that I ought to do what is impossible.
4. So, it is false that I ought do A and B.
5. Therefore, a contradiction is found. I ought to do A and B, but it is false that I ought do A and B (53).

The question is, can it be true that we ought to do two different things, even if we cannot do both? If not, then how do we avoid the conflict?

Simply put, Williams agrees that it can be true that we ought to do two different things, even if it is impossible to do both. The discovery that two "oughts" (or obligations) conflict does not weaken either of them (46). Also, if we decide to live up to one obligation rather than another, it is a cause for regret. We can try to "make up" for the decision (47). In other words, Williams agrees that two obligations can conflict. Realizing that two "oughts" conflict does not allow us to absolve ourselves of one of them. If a person felt regret about acting on one "ought" rather than another, it certainly wouldn't prove that person to be morally inferior.

On the contrary to Williams's understanding, he discusses the fact that most philosophers do not agree that two "oughts" can conflict (49). They have said that we can choose one "ought" and be absolved of the other. "[T]hey eliminate from the scene the 'ought' that is not acted upon" (49).

Philosophers have adopted our belief that two conflicting beliefs cannot be true, so two "oughts" cannot be true. One belief (or "ought") must be rejected.

Williams argues that when we have conflicting "oughts" we might learn to avoid situations where we have conflicting "oughts" precisely because they both apply (50). Anyone who wants absolve everyone from having conflicting "oughts" will have to ignore the fact that we might learn a lesson to avoid these situations.

Williams argues that the problem with the apparent contradiction is that we cannot do actions to satisfy both of our "oughts," but we ought to do two different things taken in isolation. I ought to do A and B, but I ought not do both A and B at the same time. (i.e. I ought to call the police and separately I ought to get to the 5:00 meeting, but I ought not do both of these things at once. Or consider Williams's example: Tom ought to marry Susan and he ought to marry Joan, but he doesn't think he ought to marry both Susan and Joan) (54).

Williams concludes that although it is true that "if I do A, then I ought not do B" in the sense that I ought not do both A and B (56). However, I am not entirely absolved of doing B in this situation because it is my fault that I chose to do A in the first place.

Williams then considers an objection: When I need to make a decision whether to act on one "ought" or another, no one would say that I ought to do both. I will have to ultimately decide that I should do one rather than the other. It would seem that I have to be absolved of acting on one "ought" in order to decide to act on the other.

Williams replies to the objection that to decide to act on one "ought" is not an affirmation that it really is something that I ought to do (57). To decide to act on one "ought" does not involve a denial that one of the "ought" statements is false. It is a new moral judgment that I ought to act on one of my "oughts" rather than another.

To conclude, Williams resolves the problem of contradiction by arguing that it is false that you are absolved from doing something you ought to do just because it conflicts with something else you ought to do. It is true that I ought to do each A and B, but I ought not do both because that is impossible.

My Objections to Williams's Argument

Objection 1: Can "oughts" really conflict?

In order to have conflicting "oughts" we must first accept a pluralism of conflicting values. Aristotle and utilitarians found that happiness is the only value, so we can never have a conflicting "ought." The Stoics found virtue to be a value of uncompromising importance. If one action does the most good, then that is what we ought to do. If two actions do the same amount of good, then it is morally arbitrary.

In order to have conflicting "oughts," we must live by "moral rules." Even if we accept a pluralism of values, it isn't clear why two "oughts" will conflict. If we ought to do whatever does

the most amount of good, and two actions each do approximately the same amount of good, then why "ought" we to do each of them? One way might be to accept "moral rules." If we find general moral rules that we ought to live by, then certainly those rules could cause conflicts. "Thou shalt not steal" could potentially conflict with "thou shalt stay healthy." (Both of these commands are accepted by Kant.) Moral rules are suspicious because they are an abstract attempt to capture reality while ignoring the complexity of the situation. It might be true that insofar as property rights make people happy, we should not steal. However, what really matters in this case is what makes people happy, so we can find exceptions to the rule. Moral rules could be abstract rules of thumb, but the only moral rule could be something like "do the most good." (It might be a bit severe to require that everyone do the most good, but it could be a form of advice.)

Williams claims that it is consistent with a view of morality that a truly admirable person could feel regret about acting on one "ought" rather than the other, but we might still find that a truly admirable person wouldn't. Here a "truly admirable" person would be someone who fully understands ethics and has corresponding emotions to that understanding. However, we can reject regret if we find out that no "oughts" can conflict. (We can still "make up" to anyone harmed by the decision if that in itself will be "doing good," perhaps in the sense of making people feel better who believe they have been wronged.)

What about how Williams said that we can learn not to put ourselves in an avoidable situation in which we can't satisfy all of our "oughts." Anyone who doesn't believe in conflicting "oughts" could simply reply that we put ourselves in a situation where we couldn't do as much good. Next time we should put ourselves in a situation where more good deeds could be done.

Objection 2: Conflicting nonmoral "oughts"

It should be noted that the word "ought" is vague, and what Williams said might be true of two non-moral "oughts." It might be that giving myself obligations or goals could lead to conflicting nonmoral "oughts." I ought to keep my 5:00 appointment in the sense that it is a goal of mine, but it might lack moral importance. (Of course, there might be a slight importance involving the happiness of the person I have an appointment with, but this misses the point.)

Whether or not a killer ought to use a gun to kill someone can have a similar conflict of nonmoral "oughts." It might be that using a gun or using a knife could both be what the killer "ought" to do to kill someone and be equally effective at doing so, but the killer can't do both. This is merely the word "ought" being used in the instrumental sense rather than the moral sense.

Williams might be aware of the fact that there are nonmoral "oughts" of this kind, and he might agree that he is using the word "ought" in a loose enough way to discuss these kinds of nonmoral "oughts" in addition to moral "oughts." The point is that it might be possible for some philosophers to reject that moral "oughts" can conflict, but accept that nonmoral "oughts" can conflict as a trivial truth.

Objection 3: Aren't "oughts" a kind of belief?

This third objection is one that will fail to be a problem for Williams's argument. Williams argues that "oughts" are different from beliefs in the sense that we can have two conflicting "oughts" but we cannot have two conflicting beliefs. We don't want to allow ourselves to have conflicting beliefs because two conflicting beliefs can't possibly be true. (Some roses are red cannot be both true and false.) However, Williams argues that we can have two conflicting "oughts." It might be true that "I ought not to harm people" but it might also be possible that "I ought to protect myself from harm." In some situations it might be impossible to do both. Isn't "I ought to not harm people" something that is true or false? Isn't this a moral belief?

Williams could admit that "oughts" are moral beliefs, but remind us that the fact that two "oughts" can conflict will not lead to a contradiction in and of itself. Williams rejects that conflicting oughts could absolve me of the fact that "I ought not to harm people." The conflict is not about whether or not it is true that I have an "ought." Rather, the conflict is one in which I must choose which "ought" to satisfy, so there is no reason to think that it is false that "I ought not to harm people."

Chapter 3: "Supervenience Revisited" by Simon Blackburn

Simply put, moral supervenience is the view that a description of nonmoral facts (such as physical and mental facts) is enough to determine whether an action is good or bad. If this is true, then that fact in itself seems like a problem for morality because we want to think that morality is about something more than just physical and mental facts. Let's put that aside for a moment and take a look at the one of the important essays about moral supervenience:

According to many philosophers, moral supervenience is plausible. Simon Blackburn sees supervenience as a challenge to moral realism. In particular, he will discuss the fact that we ban "mixed worlds" and he argues that moral realists cannot explain this ban. (What does that mean? Read on to find out.)

Moral supervenience is simply the idea that there can be no moral difference between two situations without a nonmoral (natural) difference. A difference between moral facts require a change of nonmoral facts. However, there can be nonmoral differences and no moral differences.

If one action is right but another is wrong, then there must be some difference in the physical or mental facts. Cutting someone is (usually) wrong when you are trying to hurt them, but often right when you are doctor trying to help someone with surgery. We tend to explain that an action is wrong based on the intentions and effects of the action. Cutting someone is bad insofar as it harms someone, but it can be justified if it is intended to help someone. Being harmed tends to be based on physical damage, and suffering, which is mental phenomena. Intentions are mental phenomena. So, the facts we present in a moral judgment appear to be physical and mental rather than moral.

Moral supervenience is quite similar to "mental supervenience," which means that difference in mental states is only possible if there is a difference in physical states.

Although moral facts may seem to depend on physical facts, it is possible for two different physical facts to produce the same moral fact (60). (Two different actions could be "unjust" or "wrong." Also, consider mental supervenience: Two different brain states could produce the same mental state. Different parts of the brain light up when we think of the word "dog.")

Blackburn also mentions that there can be apparent exceptions to supervenience, where a nonmoral state exists, but the expected moral state does not (61-62). Whenever we find a counterexample to supervenience, Blackburn believes it is because of an intervening factor, which he calls a "releasing property" (62). In other words, the nonmoral facts that seem to determine the moral facts could not include the releasing properties.

What exactly is an example of an releasing property? The example I gave before might be a good example of this. Usually harming someone is wrong, like cutting someone with a knife. However, there might be intervening factors, such as the doctor's intention to help someone through surgery. The releasing property can easily be added to our description of nonmoral facts

in order to discover how moral facts supervene on physical facts. In this case intentions are found to be relevant to deciding if an action is right or wrong.

Blackburn's main challenge to the moral realist is: Why the ban on mixed worlds (64)? We can imagine a "possible world" in which different correlations of supervenience apply. In one world harming someone is bad, but in the other world it is good. A mixed world would say that either of these is possible in a third world: Sometimes it is wrong to harm someone, but sometimes it isn't. (Ignore the fact that releasing properties can give us apparent exceptions.) We have decided that these mixed worlds can't happen, but we need an explanation for why we have done so. Blackburn argues that anti-realists can explain the ban on mixed worlds better than realists.

Why we reject mixed worlds: To hold that someone is evil "for enjoying the misery of others" is saying something true for all "possible worlds" (65-66). We cannot accept that a world with such people could be considered anything but evil. If a possible world was identified where some people who enjoy the misery of others is considered evil, but others aren't, then we simply haven't identified the natural facts that determine the moral fact.

But what is a "possible world?" There are three possibilities that are considered. In what sense is supervenience necessary (65)? Is it necessary by logic (analytically), by physical laws, or metaphysically? If it is necessary by definition or logic, then we have a different kind of "possible world" than if supervenience is necessary by metaphysical constraints. Consider each of these:

1. **Analytically necessary:** An "analytically possible" world is any world of moral competence we can conceive of despite physical or metaphysical constraints. In other words, the world is "logically possible" (logically consistent). Blackburn also views analytically possible worlds as a kind of cultural relativism. A group of people who speak a language merely need to be competent in that language to realise if a word has a necessary meaning.
2. **Physically necessary:** It is physically impossible for certain natural facts to be true, but for the certain corresponding moral facts to be false. The physical laws cause the moral facts. A physically possible world is one that is constrained by our actual physical laws.
3. **Metaphysically necessary:** The very being of moral facts is dependent on the very being on certain natural facts. No "possible world" could have certain natural facts without having the moral facts. Here a "possible world" is any change in reality, such as different physical laws. So even with different physical laws, the natural facts will still guarantee the moral facts. It isn't the physical laws that cause the moral facts.

Moral Supervenience is Analytically Necessary

Consider if moral supervenience is definitionally necessary (logically necessary). In this case Blackburn suggests that we would understand morality by understanding moral practices to "choose, commend, rank, approve, forbid, things on the basis of their natural properties" (66). He believes that we can indeed understand morality in this way. If you fully understand how

competent users of moral language use the words (or behave appropriately), then you too can use the words appropriately (and act appropriately).

"[T]he explanation [that competence of moral practice] depends crucially upon the role of moralizing being to guide desires and choices amongst the natural features of the world. If, as a realist ought to say, its role is to describe further, moral aspects of reality, there is no explanation at all of why it is constitutive of competence as a moralist to obey the constraint" of moral supervenience (67).

In other words, if behaving how society deems to be appropriate can be understood through competence of moral supervenience, then it isn't clear why we should be moral realists.

It should be noted that somehow Blackburn thinks he has explained the ban on mixed analytically possible worlds through the fact that supervenience is based on competence of a moral practice, but it isn't clear how this fact can be used to explain the ban on mixed worlds. Perhaps a moral practice would be impractical to say that sometimes something is wrong and sometimes it isn't without any reason to say so. **What I think Blackburn would say: It is our moral practice in which we ban mixed worlds. A different moral practice might not ban mixed worlds.**

My Objection: If supervenience is analytically necessary, then I would expect that any consistent moral practice should be acceptable. I don't know why we should be restricted to accepting a "moral practice." Although we must accept a moral vocabulary, any set of coherent moral beliefs is "logically possible." In other words, "moral facts" simply won't exist and the notion of "competence" is irrelevant. Real moral competence would merely require logical consistency.

Blackburn's Reply to an Objection

One problem with saying that a moral realist can't account for our ban of mixed worlds is the fact that there might be supervenience in other areas of philosophy, which don't require us to be anti-realists. Blackburn considers why many of these areas of philosophy can involve supervenience without requiring anti-realism.

Example 1: Mental Supervenience

Many people believe that mental states are supervenient on brain states (68). Why do we reject that there can be mixed worlds involving mental supervenience? We believe that one brain state can give someone a headache in one world, but not give them a headache in another. However, there couldn't be a possible world in which the brain state would sometimes give a headache and sometimes wouldn't.

Is headaches that supervene on brain states analytically necessary? This is implausible because plenty of people have completely denied such a supervenience and such views were "perfectly coherent" (69).

Is it metaphysically necessary? If so, we can easily ban mixed worlds because we can just deny that it is possible to have one (69). However, he then considers an argument given by Donald Davidson that the supervenience of the mental on the physical is not lawlike (69-70). If supervenience isn't lawlike, then we might be living in a mixed world right now! Sometimes a brain state will give us a headache, and sometimes it won't. He responds to this problem by saying that if supervenience isn't lawlike, then it isn't supervenience after all. Additionally, such a view might end up being anti-realist by "convincing ourselves that the physical reality is at bottom the only one" (70). He finds this to be much like his view about moral supervenience, in which moral facts are really just natural ones. This view could be seen as a practical concern about "how we have to relate this particular vocabulary to the underlying reality" and "it is derived from constraints on the way in which we must react to a non-mental, physical world" (70).

My objection: Yes, we could "just deny that mixed worlds are possible," but could we justify that denial? If supervenience *by definition* requires us to have a lawlike relation, then it will always imply a ban on mixed worlds because a mixed world is precisely a non-lawlike relation: Sometimes the supervenience holds and sometimes it doesn't. However, if supervenience doesn't require a lawlike relation, then mixed worlds can only be banned with a justification. I can conceive a metaphysically possible world in which sometimes the mental supervenes on the physical and sometimes it doesn't. Why should I deny this possibility?

Note: I agree that if mental facts supervene on physical facts, then it isn't lawlike. We would like to think our mind can move our body. If the mind depends solely on our body, then the mind couldn't do anything. (It would be epiphenomenal.) It might be that the mind does supervene on the brain, but we have some reason to believe in mental causation as well. (No wonder Blackburn suggests that the physical reality might be the only real one.)

Example 2: "Natural kinds" supervene on the physical.

For example, some philosophers argue that being "water" supervenes on H₂O (71). Why would we ban mixed worlds in which sometimes water is H₂O and sometimes H₂O is something else.

Is the supervenience of water on H₂O analytically necessary? Do we only require their competence? Many people never found out that H₂O is water, but they still use the word appropriately. However, "analytically necessary" might involve some scientific competence (72). For example, we expect everyone to agree that competent people will believe that no two things can be "identical physically without also forming the same stuff" (73). In order to deal with analytically possible worlds we merely have to know who is competent, so **the supervenience of H₂O on water can be analytic.**

In other words water might only supervene on H₂O for some cultures, or if this is necessary for us to be coherent, which we believe is necessary for any culture that does know what H₂O is. We are then antirealists about this kind of supervenience. "Natural kinds" are merely a part of language and not part of the metaphysical reality. "Water" is not part of the "true reality."

Third Example: Color supervenes on refractive properties

Many philosophers believe that Color is supervenient on refractive properties of surfaces. We see objects as having colors based on the wavelength of light that reflects off of it.

Blackburn agrees that color supervenience isn't analytically necessary, or one "constitutive of competence with a colour vocabulary" (74). Such supervenience requires the knowledge of a specialist, so it has to be a kind of scientific fact. Therefore, the supervenience of color is based on physical necessity. So far it seems necessary for the physical world we live in to have the supervenience of colors. (We could find out we are wrong about this fact, but it is a conclusion that scientists currently agree with.)

Note: I don't understand why water's supervenience can be analytically true, but color's supervenience can't. Blackburn already admitted that some scientific knowledge can become mixed with analytical necessity. Additionally, it isn't clear to me how the "color realist" accepts supervenience in a way that can't be done by a moral realist. He says that the fact that color supervenes on refractive properties is plausibly physically necessary, (and therefore it is physically impossible for it to be otherwise based on current scientific observations) (74).

A Final Objection

Why overcomplicate the issue with our "ban on mixed worlds?" Because realists don't see supervenience as a problem in areas, such as "color's supervenience on refractive properties." The "ban on possible worlds" merely seems to mean that we want to say that the supervenience is always in effect. It can't be otherwise.

Blackburn tries to take a look at why realists accept supervenience in the philosophy of mind, in color, and in natural kinds. If we can be a realist about one of these things and simultaneously accept supervenience, then the moral realist could also accept supervenience. Most important: He seems to agree that a "color realist" can agree to supervenience. If this is so, why can't the moral realist also accept supervenience in the same way?

Why a moral realist bans mixed worlds: First of all, I don't think moral supervenience is true. If it is true, then it isn't "complete." There are moral facts that don't supervene on nonmoral facts.

Why moral supervenience seems to be false: Just like other anti-realists, Blackburn doesn't discuss the fact that pain feels bad. Of course morality partially supervenes on "nonmoral facts" because the mental state "pain" is considered to be "bad." In other words, some so-called "nonmoral facts" (mental or physical) might really be good or bad. What else would a moral fact look like? (The judgment "such and such is bad" will supervene on things like the mental state "pain.")

Perhaps there are some moral facts that don't supervene on the physical. The fact that "pain is bad," for example. What about this statement supervenes on the nonmoral? Or another example: We should do good things. (We know that because we experience pain and pleasure and so forth.)

I am sure moral realists could answer the problem of banning mixed worlds in other ways. For example, we might ban mixed moral worlds for the same reason that scientists do. If pain in and of itself is bad, then we will argue that is merely a fact about all pain that occurs. Badness will supervene on pain. Moral states can be caused by mental states, just like mental states can be caused by physical states. We don't need to justify the fact that pain is always bad (in some sense) any more than the fact that one refractive surface always gives a certain color in the right conditions. It seems true so far, so we assume that it is always true.

Chapter 4: "Ethics, Mathematics, and Relativism" by Jonathan Lear

Jonathan Lear presents challenges to two forms of moral relativism: Cognitivist and noncognitivist.

Cognitivist Moral Relativism

Lear sees a form of moral relativism as a possible sophisticated form of cognitivism. We can view moral facts as being part of a "way of life." In order to agree to a moral truth, one would have to be part of that "way of life" and those outside of the way of life have no reason to agree (78-79).

In trying to install a moral outlook, we will try to get a person to see situations in a certain way: we will appeal to his perceptions of salience, his sense of sympathy, his interests, and indeed to his sense of right and wrong. That we succeed cannot be a matter of his grasping a universal or a rule: it can consist in nothing more than that he comes to see the world the way we do" (79).

Although Lear imagines that moral relativism can be appealing to some people, he is not satisfied with it because "[t]he appeal of cognitivism lies... in the claim that our vocabulary of moral appraisal... can be used without qualification even after reflection on the nature of our moral practices" (80). He states that we become participants in a moral practice in a way that purports to be universal. We can't decide that our moral beliefs are false without a good reason to do so. When we say something is wrong, *we intend to say* that it is wrong for anyone in relevantly similar circumstances. **Therefore, cognitivism reinforces our moral language and their intentions in a way that noncognitivism can't.**

Lear then presents a second challenge to cognitivist moral relativism: How can moral relativism be a paradigm of truth, objectivity, and necessity? Wittgenstein, for example, introduced us to a form of mathematical relativism. But how can we be mathematical relativists by agreeing to the following?

1. $7 + 5 = 12$. To suppose that any other integer, say 13, is the sum of $7 + 5$ is a mistake.
2. It is only within the context of our being so minded that $7 + 5 = 12$. (82)

We can't believe (2) without weakening our believe in (1) because if we accept (2), then we should also be able to agree that **if everyone had a different way of life, then $7 + 5$ could equal something other than 12**. We are currently unable to make any sense out of this possibility (83). If mathematical relativism can't answer this question, then mathematical realism will fail to be a paradigm for truth, objectivity, and necessity. Not only that, but we could then suspect that moral relativism may very well fail to be a paradigm for truth, objectivity, and necessity as well. (No theory can be a paradigm for truth, objectivity, and necessity when it has a premise that undermines the meaning of these words, such as, "It is only in the context of a way of life that x is true, and x can be false within a different way of life.")

Non-Cognitivist Moral Relativism

Lear sees one alternative to cognitivist moral relativism to be noncognitivist moral relativism: Moral truth is theory-relative and no theory in particular is the "correct" one (90). We might want to say that all of the relevant theories are false, so moral facts can't really exist. One necessary characteristic of non-cognitivist relativism is that we will have to accept that alternative theories with different moral truths can't undermine our own moral theories (92). There simply is no fact of the matter.

Noncognitivist relativism *seems* false because we can't accept that "there is simply no fact of the matter." We cannot view moral truths of theories as being "merely true for that theory." Instead, we believe that it is either true or false (92). (This objection in many ways is merely a restatement of an objection to cognitivist moral relativism.)

A noncognitivist relativist might argue that we are only indoctrinated to treat moral truths as being cognitive, and we will find out that noncognitivist relativism is true nonetheless. However, **Lear believes that many people would not be able to function in society with this belief.** People in general can't believe that "there are no moral truths" but still "act as though there are." (If they do, then wouldn't they need a nonmoral motivation for doing so? In other words, morality itself wouldn't make a difference in our lives.)

Finally, Lear states that he would like to show that noncognitivism is not only flawed for psychological reasons, but he would also like to show that it is incoherent. However, he is not currently able to do so.

My Objections

Objection 1: Two forms of relativism?

Lear speaks of a "sophisticated cognitivism," which I believe to be a form of relativism. Then he speaks of a sophisticated relativistic noncognitivism. It isn't clear to me what makes one of these views relativistic, but not the other.

Additionally, I don't even see what makes one form of relativism "cognitive" and the other "noncognitive." I can read his essay as simply giving arguments against different forms of "relativism" irrespective of cognitivism.

Both of these theories appear relativist because they require us to (1) have groups of people who have different moral beliefs and (2) realize that "there simply isn't a fact of the matter." (Perhaps cognitivist relativists would argue that there "is a fact of the matter," but I don't know why they would come to that conclusion.)

In fact, I can easily see both forms of relativism to be cognitive. What he calls "sophisticated cognitivism" states that a moral fact is "true for a way of life" if it corresponds to that way of life, but the "moral fact" is really false. What he calls noncognitivist moral relativism could also be

seen to say that all "moral facts" are really false. Sure, "according to a theory" we will get moral facts, but the theory itself is false.

Lear defines one form of noncognitivism as stemming from two beliefs: "First, that moral judgments motivate actions; second, that no strictly cognitive belief about the world could alone motivate action: some noncognitive desire or volition must also be present." However, these two beliefs are entirely irrelevant to cognitivism. Whether or not morality can be effectively motivating is not at issue. What is at issue is whether or not my moral beliefs are either "true or false." A noncognitivist would say that it is not. If "there is no fact of the matter," then why not just say my belief that "murder is wrong" is false. (This is a cognitivist answer.)

Objection 2: Are moral facts universal?

Perhaps moral facts are universal in some sense, but there is a question about whether or not anyone is ever in "relevantly similar circumstances." If all circumstances are different, then we might be unable to unify them.

An alternative to basing morality on circumstances is to base it on intentions, and an attempt at moral virtue (being willing and able to do what is right). As long as we try to be good people in every way possible, it becomes absurd to say that we really did the "wrong thing." We might end up hurting people, but we still did everything in our power to avoid hurting people. Doing what you have every reason to believe is right really is right. Of course, if you have "every reason" to believe it is right, then you can justify why. Only the unforeseen can lead a good action to bad consequences. We can't be expected to know the unforeseen.

Objection 3: Proving noncognitivist relativism to be incoherent

I think it is asking too much to prove that any metaethical theory is "incoherent." Why can't we have many coherent ethical theories? Scientific theories tend to be coherent, but some are still false.

In other words, the real question is what metaethical theory is most plausible, or which has the best evidence. We have some reason to believe that morally relevant facts exist: Pain feels bad, and we understand other people's pain to be bad for the same reason that our own pain is bad. Isn't this a great deal of evidence that the noncognitivist denies? Isn't this already some reason to see it as implausible?

Chapter 5: "The Subjectivity of Values" by J. L. Mackie

This article by J. L. Mackie presents one of the most extreme views about moral realism: Ethical judgments are all false. This is known as [nihilism](#) or "error theory." In other words, ethical judgments about "goodness" are metaphysical (a claim about reality), but we are mistaken to think that our idea of "goodness" approximates reality. Even though Mackie's view is an extreme, I find it to be one of the most plausible anti-realist positions to have. (That isn't to say that I agree with it.)

The most important contribution in Mackie's essay is the Argument from Queerness. You can skip ahead to that argument if you like.

In "The Subjectivity of Values" Mackie first discusses relevant metaethical positions:

- Subjectivism
- The objectivity of values doesn't matter
- Noncognitivism
- Categorical imperatives

Subjectivism

Subjectivism is the view that moral judgments are reports of the speaker's own feelings or attitudes (97). This view is similar to Mackie's in that it claims that objective values don't exist, but Mackie does not *necessarily* agree that moral judgments are intended to be reports of our feelings. I think Mackie would agree that we often intend to state an objective fact about whether something is good or bad and this is what he is talking about.

Subjectivism is at its core a theory about the linguistic meaning of moral statements, but Mackie's theory is at its core a statement about metaphysics (reality.)

Whether or not objective values are real is a meaningless question

R.M. Hare argues that people will speak of the truth or falsity of moral judgments whether or not values are "objective," so one might conclude that this kind of question is meaningless (99). Mackie compares this to a kind metaphysical agnosticism: whether or not the world is made of material atoms or is an illusion is meaningless as long as everyone's experience and way of life stays the same. It is true that we might live life the same way whether or not our beliefs are true, but Mackie still wants to know which one of these theories is true (100).

It is the reality of objective values that can make moral judgments true, and it is the reality of an objective material world that can make our judgments true that concern the physical world.

Noncognitivism

Mackie discusses the [noncognitivist](#) position (evaluative judgments are not about truth or falsity). However, even the noncognitivist will agree that there are cognitive statements relevant to ethics. "For there are certain kinds of value statements which undoubtedly can be true or false, even if, in the sense I intend, there are no objective values" (102). There are many experts, such as art critics, who evaluate a subject given various agreed upon standards. "Given any determinate standards, it will be an objective issue, a matter of truth and falsehood, how well any particular specimen measures up to those standards" (102). Additionally, we will see it as unjust if someone wins a prize for the best piece of art in an art contest when that piece of art doesn't measure up to the objective standards as well as another.

Noncognitivists would agree that something can measure up to objective standards and be evaluated based on those standards. However, it is the standards themselves that would be seen as questionable. For a noncognitivist, there is no objective requirement for us to be just, but being just could relate to "what people generally desire" (103).

Mackie does not actually discuss whether or not noncognitivism is right. It is possible that it is right about much of our language, but it is irrelevant to metaethical discourse itself. When we discuss whether or not values are objective, we are certainly saying something cognitive. It is also quite possible that ethical discourse is often metaethical. Noncognitivists seem to deny that ethical discourse is often metaethical, but this is a sociological claim that would require a great deal of empirical evidence.

Categorical Imperatives

A categorical imperative is a rule that we ought follow whether or not we desire the outcome (103). For example, we ought not murder whether or not we desire it. In contrast, a hypothetical imperative is something we ought to do precisely to satisfy a desire (104). If we are hungry, we ought to eat. Mackie argues that the moral realist accepts something like a categorical imperative. The fact that we ought to do something in order to satisfy a desire is irrelevant to moral objective values. Eating is a merely instrumental value for satisfying a desire, and even noncognitivists accept that we "ought to eat if we don't want to be hungry." This statement isn't meant to be a moral one.

A categorical imperative is not necessarily an "absolute rule." Instead, all that Mackie is interested in is the fact that "moral rules" do not depend on our desires, and they do not merely state an instrumental "ought." An instrumental "ought" is a nonmoral "ought."

Mackie's arguments against objective values

Mackie offers us two arguments to justify the belief that all moral judgments are probably false: the argument from relativity and argument from queerness.

The argument from relativity

1. If objective values aren't the cause of our moral beliefs, then we have no reason to believe in moral values.
2. People disagree greatly about right and wrong in various cultures.
3. This in itself doesn't prove that objective values don't exist, but it makes the following claim more plausible: Objective values aren't the cause of our moral beliefs.
4. We have made the following claim more plausible: We have no reason to believe in moral values (109-110).

Additionally, it is plausible that our moral values are passed down through culture. Although some people are "moral reformers," their reformations generally point to the inconsistency within the cultural moral code. New values are not created unless it is justified within the pre-existing moral code (110).

Mackie considered an objection: Every society agrees to various general moral principles. (Perhaps that we should value happiness.) Mackie argues that moral principles cannot explain our moral behavior as well as some kind of an immediate emotional response, such as intuition or a moral sense (111). Mackie believes that such a response is "irrational" and in no way supports the existence of objective moral values.

The argument from queerness

1. Objective values are strange, "utterly different from anything else in the universe" (111).
2. Knowledge of objective values require "some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing anything else" (111).
3. If we cannot account of the strangeness of objective values and our knowledge of them (with empiricist assumptions), then they probably don't exist (112).
4. We can't account for the strangeness of objective values and our knowledge of them (with empiricist assumptions).
5. Therefore, objective values probably don't exist.

What are the ordinary methods of attaining knowledge? Sensory perception, introspection, framing and conforming of explanatory hypotheses, inferences, logical construction, and conceptual analysis (111).

Why are objective values strange? For one thing they are expected to provide us with [motivation](#). The knowledge of "goodness" makes us want to promote it. Hume already argued that "reason" can't provide us with motivation. "[We are a slave of the passions](#)." So if objective values can provide us with motivation, that is quite unlike anything other than a passion.

Mackie considers the following objection: It is not just objective values that are strange, but also mathematical entities and "our ideas of identity, diversity, solidity, inertia, substance," etc (111). What does this mean? I suggest that it might mean one of the following:

- Premise 1 and 2 are false. Objective values are not utterly different from other entities.

- We might simply not understand our faculty of knowledge very well.
- Empiricist assumptions are false. (We can have knowledge without use of our perceptions.)

Mackie agrees that the objection above is worth further research, and hopes that someday empiricists will be able to explain our knowledge of these ideas. However, Mackie also states that any number of these "ideas" could be added to his argument of queerness. Perhaps mathematical entities are also queer and don't exist.

Note: [Kurt Goedel](#) and contemporary philosophers, such as my professor Richard Tieszen, defend the existence mathematical abstract entities ([Platonic forms](#).) **It might be implausible that empiricists can explain our knowledge of mathematical truths and the fact that we have no choice but to accept mathematical truths as absolutes.** If mathematical truths are absolutes, then they do require a queer (non-empiricist) form of knowledge, and they might even give evidence for non-natural entities (Platonic forms.)

Rather than relying on "objective values" to explain our moral beliefs, Mackie believes that we can find some sort of psychological explanation. Perhaps we "internalize relevant demands" given to us by society" (115).

My Objections to the Argument from Queerness:

Objection 1: Mathematical truths constrain reality and our epistemology in such a way that a materialist worldview can't account for. Empiricism has failed to account for this fact, and might be incapable of accounting for this fact. Therefore, we can justifiably believe in mathematical entities and accept non-empiricist "methods of knowing things," such as intuition.

Objection 2: How do we know about objective value? How about our experience of pain? We experience it is "bad." This in itself is not a "passion" and it motivates us to want to avoid feeling pain. Once we find out that others can feel pain just like us, we realize that it is "objectively bad" and we don't want anyone to feel unnecessary pain.

Additionally, our experience of pain is a very important factor of our "motivation." The psychological fact of pain being motivational may have nothing to do with the actual existence of objective values, but I find the following statement to be plausible: the experience of the badness of pain is what makes it motivational. If pain isn't viewed as bad, then it won't be motivational.

We can try to justify the fact that pain isn't objectively bad because it's just something we feel as bad within our own "subjective experience," but this view requires us to accept that (a) subjective experience is an illusion and/or (b) subjective experience is an entirely different reality from "objective reality."

It is implausible that pain is an illusion since it is nothing other than an experience. An "illusion of pain" *is* real pain! An illusion is actually a misperception: To experience something as *x*, when it is really *y*. For example, to see a person in front of you when you are really hallucinating is to

wrongly identify a person in front of you. You never saw a person, you misidentified subjective states as being evidence of there being a person.

It is implausible that subjectivity isn't "real." Subjective experience is part of reality. If it isn't part of reality, then it is an illusion, but an illusion of subjective experience *is* subjective experience. To deny that subjective experience is real is to claim that we don't have minds. If we don't have minds, then we can't know anything. Then we can't know whether or not minds are real, for example. This is a self-defeating position.

It is implausible that subjective states are different realities. We simply have no evidence that there is more than one reality. It seems much more plausible that subjective states are *part of* one reality than that they are different realities.

Chapter 6: "Ethics and Observation" by Gilbert Harman

Harman examines whether or not we can "observe" moral facts in the sense that we can observe scientific facts (119). If so, we can treat ethics as a natural science. Harman's essay is related to a very important philosophical problem: Is the truth about moral facts relevant to our beliefs about moral facts? If our moral beliefs are unrelated to the truth about moral facts, then we have little reason to trust our moral beliefs.

Harman will argue that scientific observation can confirm or disconfirm scientific beliefs and theories, but moral observation can't be used to confirm or disconfirm our moral beliefs. Therefore, ethics can't become a natural science.

Gilbert Harman's Argument

Harman admits that observation is complicated by being "theory-laden" (120). In other words, observation requires beliefs. When we see an animal being tortured, we don't just hear sounds and see visual splashes. We see flesh and blood creatures with thoughts and feelings because we believe that we understand that the animal has a mind of its own and so forth.

However, Harman points out a dissimilarity between moral observation and scientific observation: Physical facts help explain what we observe, but moral facts don't help explain what we observe (121). When we observe physical objects, that physical object has a causal connection to what we observe. If someone trips on a rock, the rock had a causal impact. Moral facts do not have a causal impact.

He then argues further that the observations we make about physical objects partially justify our beliefs about physical objects because they have the expected causal impact. This, he argues, is not the case with moral observations, which do not help explain or confirm our moral beliefs (121-122). If you observe torturing an animal to be wrong, then your belief that it is wrong can help explain your observation. However, the observation did not confirm or disconfirm the belief, so your moral observation does not depend on the fact that torturing an animal is truly wrong. If "torturing animals is wrong" is a moral fact, it is not having a causal impact on our observations or beliefs.

Harman's argument can be summarized as the following:

1. Observation can confirm a theory if and only if the theory contains facts that can cause the world to be a certain way.
2. Beliefs about scientific facts are reliable because observation can confirm scientific theories.
3. Moral facts can't cause the world to be a certain way.
4. Therefore, observation can't confirm moral theories.
5. Therefore, beliefs about moral facts might not be reliable.

My Comment

I actually agree with Harman. We will never see ethics become a natural science. An empiricist who thinks observation is the only kind of evidence might have to reject ethics altogether.

However, I think there is another kind of evidence at work here.

Harman claims that our observation of something immoral occurring, such as an animal being tortured, could be based on a moral principle, such as "it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering" (123). The question is, "If we don't know that causing unnecessary suffering is wrong from observation alone, then how do we know it is wrong?" Again, I thought Epictetus already answered this question. We experience pain, suffering, depression, etc. and we know that these experiences are bad precisely because of what it is like to experience them. I call this kind of evidence phenomenological or introspective, but it is a pretty ordinary kind of personal experience.

Chapter 7: “Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life” by David Wiggins

David Wiggins wrote the first [moral realist](#) essay that I will discuss. In particular, Wiggins wants to know what it means to live a meaningful life and what kinds of things could have [intrinsic value](#).

Living a Meaningful Life

Although we might partly find meaning in our lives through our goals and interests alone, Wiggins finds this kind of meaning to be unsatisfying because it can attach to something faulty (i.e. self-defeating, incoherent, or superficial.) I offer the following examples of faulty goals:

1. We cannot find a satisfying kind of meaning in our lives by seeking pleasure when it leads us to too much pain because it is self-defeating. (Cigarette smoking, for example.)
2. We cannot find a satisfying kind of meaning in our lives by trying to make square circles because that would be incoherent.
3. We cannot find a satisfying kind of meaning in our lives by eating chocolate because that would be superficial.

Wiggins argues that in order to find anything to be meaningful in a satisfying way, we will have to accept the following:

1. We will have to allow ourselves an inner view perspective (in which human experience is taken seriously). The "outer view" restricts our discussion to physical facts devoid of mental content, but it is popular with many philosophers (135).
2. Meaningful goals can't be entirely derivative (useful to help accomplish some other goal). They must be "their own goals" (valuable in and of themselves.) (136)

Wiggins believes that the anti-realist will take an objective perspective devoid of human experience and see the world (and human life) as objectively meaningless (136). The anti-realist will realize that being goal oriented seems to help people "feel like their lives are meaningful," but all goals are "equally good" since there is no real meaning to be found. Instead, people who feel like their life is meaningful must have some kind of an emotional attachment to their goals for some psychological reason.

The anti-realist will find any goal to be equally meaningful whether or not it is entirely derivative. Wiggins gives an example of an entirely derivative goal, that seems to be a counterexample: Imagine a hog farmer who wants to breed hogs and make money to breed more hogs and make more money, to breed more hogs, ad infinitum (137). The reason that this circular goal is meaningless has to do with the fact that it is derivative. Only a goal that is good in and of itself can be seen as meaningful. However, we can only know what goal is meaningful through our subjectivity (the inner perspective).

Intrinsic Value

It is then that Wiggins criticizes the view that intrinsic value can only be found in our appetites, such as Bentham's view that pleasure and pain are the only things with intrinsic value (140). In order for Bentham to be correct, we must consider the inner perspective, but that perspective will reject Bentham's hedonism because there are other things we will find to have intrinsic value. Here is his argument:

1. Many experiences (involving pleasure) have intentional objects.
2. Many conscious states (of pleasure) exist because we strive for objects that are not intentional states.
3. It is of the essence that many conscious states (of pleasure) give the objects we strive for non-instrumental value.

For example, when a new child is born into the family, it gives us all a great reason to feel joy. This is because we believe that the child has intrinsic value. **So, the existence of some pleasures depend on our believe that something other than pleasure itself has intrinsic value.**

On the other side, we might experience pain and suffering when a loved one dies precisely because we believe that loved one had intrinsic value.

Wiggins then discusses the problem of having two perspectives (inner and outer.) The fact that there are two perspectives in and of itself does not cause a contradiction because each perspective can include or exclude aspects of the other (143). "Perspective is not a form of illusion, distortion, or delusion" (143).

My Objections

Objection 1: It isn't clear to me that there really is an inner and outer perspective. Simply saying that many philosophers and scientists have ignored or rejected personal experience and subjective states for being "anthropocentric" should be enough. I don't see how any perspective necessarily excludes subjective states or includes them, but some people have indeed tried to exclude them.

Objection 2: It isn't clear to me what objects of intentional states Wiggins believes could have intrinsic value. He gives no examples. I think human existence (or the existence of conscious beings) is a good example. (Wouldn't you want to exist as long as you aren't in too much pain? Some pain can be dealt with.) Consider the following other candidates:

- **Money:** Winning the lottery can give us pleasure. We love money because it gets people to do what we want, such as hand us a giant TV set. We don't/shouldn't love money for its own sake.
- **Love:** Being with loved ones gives us pleasure. We love those we believe have intrinsic value. When we love someone in particular it is either because that person in particular has intrinsic value, or because that person in particular makes us feel good. Therefore, love itself seems derivative.

- **Knowledge:** Gaining knowledge can give us pleasure. Although many say that it is healthy to value knowledge "for its own sake" (such as Richard Dawkins), it isn't clear that this can make sense. It is easy to see that we would want knowledge for self-improvement or empowerment, or because it gives us pleasure to contemplate knowledge, but it isn't clear how it could have intrinsic value.
- **Greater existence:** Becoming a better kind of being can give us pleasure. Don't different conscious beings have more value than others? Perhaps humans are more valuable than dogs. If so, it might also be possible to try to become a better kind of being.

Objection 3: Wiggins wants to conclude that the inner perspective will reject that pleasure and pain are the only things with intrinsic value, but it isn't entirely clear why. He argues that some of our experiences of pleasure are based on the "fact" that something other than pleasure itself has intrinsic value, but much more needs to be said to prove this claim. In fact, we might need to believe or assume that some things have intrinsic value other than pleasure itself in order for us to have various experiences, but this in no way supports the conclusion that *we have knowledge that things have intrinsic value other than pleasure and pain.*

I agree that we assume that human life has intrinsic value and this assumption will have an impact on our experiences (such as our experiences of pleasure or pain), but it might be false that human life has intrinsic value.

Chapter 8: “Values and Secondary Qualities” by John McDowell

John McDowell's article presents an argument that (intrinsic) values are real.

The distinction between [primary and secondary qualities](#) was made by John Locke. Primary qualities are objective and exist even if we don't perceive them, such as shape and mathematical relationships. Secondary qualities are qualities are subjective and depend on our perceptions, such as color and taste.

Some people believed that if moral values are secondary qualities, then it is subjective and could be considered to be illusory. If they are primary qualities, then they are objective and could concern reality independently of our illusions. McDowell argues that morality might be something like a secondary quality, but that doesn't make it an illusion. Moral values can actually be something like secondary qualities and real. However, McDowell also argues that moral values can be subjective, and subjective states can be real.

Primary and secondary qualities are related to our perceptions: When we observe an object, does our observation depend entirely on our sense organs or is the observation based on what the object is really like? Can we characterize an object as existing in a way that doesn't wholly depend on our perceptual experience? (Although the color red is produced by microscopic elements, that is not how we understand the color red when we experience it. The color red is wholly understood in terms of perceptual experience) (168).

McDowell admits that we don't know about ethical truths simply from perception, so it doesn't actually make sense to say that moral values are secondary qualities. (Ethics requires some intellectual activity.) This is why he only wants to say that ethics involves *something like* a secondary quality. If ethics requires something like a primary quality, then it will be something like a [Platonic form](#), which he finds to be absurd.

McDowell then argues that secondary qualities are not necessarily illusory because there is nothing misleading about them. Although the experience of the color red doesn't tell us about the microscopic elements required to have the experience, there is still nothing misleading about the experience. The only way to know what color the microscopic elements will/should produce is to take a look (168-169). The color red could still be understood to be real, even though the experience might not resemble what exists in the world independently of our experience. (The color red is simply our experience of it.) The only reason that secondary qualities should ever be considered to be illusory is if they somehow trick us into thinking that they are primary qualities--and really do appear to us as they actually exist.

It seems unlikely that we can even create an idea of a primary quality from our color experiences, so it doesn't seem that anything is misleading about them (169). The color red, for example, is simply our experience of red and doesn't fail to resemble an object that it somehow purports to resemble.

Simply put: Secondary qualities can be subjective, but still real. Secondary qualities are not necessarily deceptive, misleading, or illusory.

Then McDowell argues that values are similar to secondary qualities by defending secondary qualities from the claim that they are extraneous (174). It has been claimed that secondary qualities don't explain how things are in objective reality. It is true that secondary qualities tend not to explain how things are in the objective world, but probably because secondary qualities exist subjectively. Certainly subjective qualities tend not to be causally effective in the objective world, so we can't have scientific experiments to find out if the color red exists objectively. It would be incoherent to even try to use (certain) secondary qualities as an explanation for how the objective world works considering that we can't even give an account about what a secondary quality would be like if it was a primary quality.

It is true that values will also fail to explain objective reality and there is no causally effective objective moral reality that produces moral beliefs in us. However, circumstances we deem to be good or bad are said to "merit" such a response rather than to "cause" such a response (175). Saving a life tends to "merit" the response that we believe that a good action has occurred. Since value judgments are "merited," we somehow decide which value judgments are appropriate without actually perceiving moral facts.

It might be true that we could falsely say something is "tasty" (induces pleasure), but we recognize that what each person tastes as good is different. However, this is not so with values and moral beliefs. One person can be right and another wrong. We expect that our moral beliefs can be mistaken. Sometimes we are willing to change our moral beliefs.

My Response

Although this essay has contributed some important arguments, there is much more that needs to be said. One very important question is how we know about ethics. If we know it from perceiving primary qualities, then ethics is clearly real and objective. However, it is still unclear how we know about ethics. If we can't explain how we know about ethics, then it might as well be an unjustified religious tradition, instinct, or habit. We might believe in values when no values actually exist.

If we know about "good" and "bad" because we have good and bad experiences, then intrinsic values are entirely dependant on subjective states. For example, pain. We experience pain as bad, so it is a candidate for knowledge of intrinsic value.

Chapter 9: "How to be a Moral Realist" by Richard N Boyd

We need to know how we thought of moral ideas, like good and bad. If we just made it up, then we should be moral antirealists. If we discovered that things can really be good or bad, then we should be [moral realists](#).

If you think electrons are real, then you are a scientific realist. Entities theorized about science can be real despite the fact that we can't experience the entities with our five senses. There are very plausible philosophical arguments that we should be scientific realists. Richard Boyd argues that in order to understand a plausible account of moral realism, we should understand a plausible account of scientific realism.

This is for at least three reasons. One, the debate concerning moral realism is so similar to the scientific realism debate. Two, the objections to scientific realism fail, and the same objections are used against moral realism, which also fail for the same reasons. Three, there is a good reason for being scientific realists, and the same reason will indicate that we should be moral realists.

The payoff: Boyd is attempting to offer a huge systematic understanding about how we could be moral realists.

Boyd's essay can easily be understood to be an argument for moral realism, but he is actually just telling us how we could provide an argument for moral realism someday. He answers the question, "What would evidence of moral realism look like?" To make this clear he states,

What I want to do in this essay is to explore the ways in which recent developments in realist philosophy of science, together with related 'naturalistic' developments in epistemology and philosophy of language, can be employed in the articulation and defense of moral realism. It will not be my aim here to establish that moral realism is true. (182)

Although Boyd does not offer proof that moral realism is true, he does give some evidence of moral realism, and moral realism could be inferred to be plausible given the evidence that he presents. He admits that he hopes "to demonstrate... that moral realism can be shown to be a more attractive and plausible philosophical position if recent developments in realist philosophy of science are brought to bear in its defense" (183).

Boyd's Argument

Boyd defends an argument for moral realism that looks something like the following:

1. Scientific realism is probably true.
2. If scientific realism is probably true, then moral realism is probably true.
3. Therefore, moral realism is probably true.

Scientific realism states that science is a reliable procedure for obtaining approximate knowledge concerning phenomena independent of our theorizing (181). Electrons are real, even though we can't see them. We have approximately true beliefs about the world that science attempts to describe.

Moral realism will state that we can also attain approximate moral knowledge. Our moral beliefs are true and false, and we have relatively reliable methods to arrive at approximate moral truth, which is independent of our theorizing (182). This may or may not imply that moral entities exist.

Boyd will attempt to argue that we start off as scientific and moral realists, and we need good reason to reject realism. In other words, it is the antirealists who have the burden of proof. Instead of proving that moral realism is true, he will rely on (1) the arguments for scientific realism that others have provided, and (2) he will defend moral realism from objections. As long as there are no serious objections to moral realism, we should be moral realists.

Boyd relies on the arguments of others to justify his first premise, "scientific realism is probably true." The second premise, "if scientific realism is probably true, then moral realism is probably true," is where he has to make use of new arguments. Boyd argues that moral realism is relevantly like scientific realism, so if scientific realism is probably true, so is moral realism. He will argue that "moral beliefs and methods are much more like our current conception of scientific beliefs and methods (more 'objective', 'external', 'empirical', 'intersubjective', for example) than we now think" (184). Part of his argument that ethics is like science is a reflection on objections to moral realism and scientific realism. The same objections apply to both theories, and both theories can avoid the objections for the same reasons.

We Should be Scientific Realists

1. The primacy of reality

The first premise, "scientific realism is probably true" needs to be justified. Do electrons really exist? A skeptic could say that science hypothesizes unobservable entities for convenience. It is easier for us to think about entities than just look at mathematical formulas. What matters is merely a system for successful predictions. As long as science gives us the results we want, we are going to keep using it. It is irrelevant whether or not electrons exist as long as it helps scientists predict the behavior of molecules, chemicals, machines, and so forth.

Boyd argues that part of why philosophers have become scientific realists is because of the extraordinary role which theoretical considerations play in actual (and patently successful) scientific practice. To take the most striking example, scientists routinely modify or extend operational 'measurement' or 'detection' procedures for 'theoretical' magnitudes or entities on the basis of new theoretical developments. This sort of methodology is perfectly explicable on the realist assumption that the operational procedures in question really are procedures for the measurement or detection of unobservable entities and that the relevant theoretical developments reflect increasingly accurate knowledge of such

'theoretical' entities. Accounts of the revisability of operational procedures which are compatible with a non-realist position appear inadequate to explain the way in which theory-dependent revisions of 'measurement' and 'detection' procedures make a positive methodological contribution to the progress of science. (188)

To give a simpler example, we guessed that germs were the cause of illness in the middle east hundreds of years ago. This theory was helpful and therefore worth using because it encouraged people to wash their hands and keep clean. This theory was revived in the west fairly recently, and we eventually got the technology to observe germs. They were really there all along!

Boyd argues that the usefulness of unobservable entities for science is "inexplicable on a non-realist conception but easily explicable on the realist assumption that such considerations are a reflection of the growth of theoretical knowledge" (188). In other words, it makes more sense to say that the electron theory was helpful because the theory approximated the truth (electrons are real), than to say that electrons don't exist.

Note: Yes, to say that electrons don't exist is absurd. However, Boyd's argument is unsatisfying because an anti-realist will usually be agnostic. Sure, electrons might exist, but the anti-realist would rather not take sides.

Additionally, Boyd introduces the causal theory of knowledge. We know about the external world because it exists and has an effect on our senses (188-189). (I'm not sure how this form of empiricism has been improved. This sounds like little more than common sense and probably existed to some extent since the time of Democritus.)

2. Objective knowledge from theory-dependent methods

Science uses a theory-dependent methodology. We don't just make predictions then experiment to see if the predictions were right. Instead, we hypothesize about a general truth, and the predictions are based on that general truth. Without predictions, hypotheses, and general truths, experiments and observations become meaningless (or at least much less helpful). A critic might think that the theory-dependence of science would contribute to the fact that it is make-believe. A person makes up a theory, which we have no reason to believe is true. However, Boyd argues the opposite. Although no experiment or observation is theory-free, this contributes to the reliability of the experiment or observation (190).

Boyd points out that science has a dialectical character. We use a theory, but we also have a methodology for improving upon that theory (189). Our existing procedures for detecting electrons is approximately true, but it isn't perfect. However, through trial and error we have been improving our procedures for detecting electrons. "The approximate truth of current theories explains why our existing measurement procedures are (approximately) reliable" (189). Certainly it is true that a true theory would help us make predictions.

3. Naturalism and radical contingency in epistemology

Boyd argues that foundationalism, the view that some beliefs are epistemically privileged (a priori or self-warranting), is implausible. Nothing is self-evident. "For the crucial case of perceptual knowledge, there seem to be (in typical cases at least) neither premises (foundational or otherwise) nor inferences; instead, perceptual knowledge obtains when perceptual beliefs are produced by epistemically reliable mechanisms" (191). (Science is an epistemically reliable mechanism.)

Boyd concludes that our knowledge is reliable partly because of a "logically, epistemically, and historically contingent emergence of a relevantly approximately true tradition. It is not possible to understand the initial emergence of such a tradition as the consequence of some more abstractly conceived scientific or rational methodology which itself is theory-independent. There is no such methodology" (192). So, we are lucky to have a culture that gives us so much logical and scientific truth that we can continue to make progress.

Note: I am not convinced that mathematical and logical epistemology is as contingent as Boyd suggests. Could mathematicians play around with such large numbers of infinity just by making it all up? There seems to be some room for metaphysics in our mathematically constrained reality.

4. Scientific intuitions and trained judgment

Students of science are expected to learn to think like a scientist, which is to say that students must learn to have "scientific intuitions." These intuitions are based on the acceptance of the relevant scientific paradigms. "There is very good reason to believe that having good physical (or biological or psychological) intuitions is important to epistemically reliable scientific practice... scientists are almost never able to make fully explicit the considerations which play a role in their intuitive judgments" (192-193).

Perhaps scientists who know a great deal of scientific theory start to attain an overall unified view of science that involve many assumptions, and these assumptions are fairly reliable (coherent with the rest of science), so they are helpful when conducting experiments. Although assumptions can be clarified through philosophy, it is often difficult to pinpoint all of our assumptions. Perhaps we have so many assumptions working in the background that it would be too time-consuming to try to figure them all out anyway.

A skeptic might point out that intuitions in science sounds wishy-washy, and makes all of science suspect. However, Boyd argues that intuitive judgments in science have already proven themselves to be reliable. "Tacit or intuitive judgments in science are reliable because they are grounded in a theoretical tradition (itself partly tacit) which is, as a matter of contingent empirical fact, relevantly approximately true" (193).

Note: This defense of scientific intuition is not the strongest argument presented by Boyd. An anti-realist would not agree that we should accept the theoretical tradition as true. Perhaps Boyd expects us to already be scientific realists, and wants to point out that intuition is compatible with scientific realism.

5. Non-Humean conceptions of causation and reduction

Hume rejected causation and physical laws. They are convenient, but not necessarily true. Boyd argues that this rejection is based on an unjustified reliance to verificationism (193). (The view that something shouldn't be accepted as true unless we can prove its truth through the five senses.) It might be true that we can't verify that physical laws exist in the sense that we can't perceive them with our five senses, but we can't prove that electrons exist in that way either. If we are scientific realists and accept the existence of electrons, then we can find causation and physical laws to be real as well.

One other reason that causation and physical laws could be rejected is because of reductionism: the view that everything should be reduced to the true elements of reality. This is part of the materialist world-view. Everything is really atoms and energy. Hume thought that everything should be reduced to physics, so psychological and biological causation don't really exist, because they have not yet been reduced to the smallest atoms. However, Boyd believes that there is no need to reduce everything to physics (194). Boyd states that Hume's belief that physics is the true part of reality is without merit, so he expects that Humeans have the burden of proof at this point. If physics is the true part of reality, then we need a good justification to have that conclusion.

6. Natural definitions

Locke speculated that we need to understand reality in terms of its invisible factors. Boyd agrees, and thinks science does just that. (Electrons are an invisible factor of reality.) We can't use terminology in merely a conventional sense (the typical use of the word), but we must use terminology based on reality itself. Thus, such terminology will be revisable (194-195).

7. Reference and epistemic access

Since we can't define a scientific entity (object or law) based on convention, we need a way to define them in terms of their reality. This is possible if Kripke's causal theory of reference is approximately true (195).

What is Kripke's theory of reference? Terminology refers to the real entity that we point at. Our understanding of that entity is caused partly by the entity itself. You touch water and say, "Let's call this stuff water." Then as long as you continue to teach others the word "water" in a similar fashion, the word "water" will refer to part of reality. We can then study that part of reality, and find out that water is actually H₂O. Water will have a real impact on our beliefs about it, such as when we take a look at it under a microscope.

8. Homeostatic property-cluster definitions

Some definitions are pretty messy. This was made clear by Wittgenstein who mentioned that the word "game" refers to a single concept, but there is no list of ideas that are necessary or sufficient for something being a game. A game of poker or chess are games partly because they

require strategy. A game of war is a game, even though it is completely random. A game of tag is a game even though there is no winner or loser.

A skeptic would want to require that science avoids these messy (vague/imprecise) words and definitions, like the word "game;" however, Boyd argues that such imprecise "ordinary language" is quite compatible with science (196-197). These words use "homeostatic property-cluster definitions."

Note: Certainly almost all phenomena has to start with a homeostatic property-cluster definition. Although we found out that water is actually H₂O, so we no longer need a property-cluster definition, we had to use the word "water" before getting to this point. Water is clear, wet, boils at a certain temperature, etc. These properties were part of the definition. Not all properties were necessary. (Water is not always a liquid, for example.)

Of course, Boyd might want to argue that some scientific entities are always going to have property-cluster definitions.

Boyd argues that science makes use of vague terms, like "healthy" and "healthier than" (198). Boyd does not believe that we should strive to redefine "health" in a non-vague fashion. (I suspect that part of the problem is that health is seen as a good thing, and it sounds suspicious to tell everyone what health should mean without exception, when their goals could conflict.)

Boyd then mentions that biological species is a paradigm case for vague scientific terminology (198). No member of species need to fit into our understanding of the species entirely. In fact, we expect that the species might change so much over time that it might become a different species. It isn't always clear at what point we should say that the group of animals has become a different species. Although we define species in terms of the ability to produce offspring, there are transitional groups that might fit into either of two different species.

Consider the following thought experiment: Let's say that humans aren't the same species as apes. Let's say that humans could mate with ape-men, and ape-men could mate with apes. We would then be seen as being the same species as ape-men, and ape-men would be the same species as apes. However, we wouldn't want to say that we are the same species as apes. At this point there isn't a "correct" way to categorize each of these species. Ape men would say that humans, ape-men, and apes are all one species. Our point of view is that apes are not the same species as us.

Note: I think a skeptic would simply disregard "species" as referring to a real part of reality. Such words are indeed useful to science, but do not have to be accepted as real. I will continue this article with "Objections to Moral Realism."

Objections to Moral Realism

In order to show that [moral realism](#) can be appealing, Boyd must first show why moral realism isn't unappealing.

Right now moral antirealism is popular and there are many objections people give to moral realism in order to prove that realism is implausible. Boyd considers several objections and shows how the same kinds of objections could be used against scientific realism, but would fail. Boyd will argue that these objections fail against moral realism for the same reason that they would fail against scientific realism.

1. Moral intuitions and empirical observation

In science we have empirical observation, which is reliable, but ethics relies on "intuition," which is too spooky (184). We can see if a scientific theory is true because it has to conform to our observations. In the same way we test moral theories based on whether or not they confirm to our moral intuition. However, moral intuition could merely be a cultural prejudice or a set of baseless assumptions.

2. The role of "reflective equilibrium" in moral reasoning

Science requires that we accept all observational facts. However, moral reasoning often requires that we reject some of our moral intuitions in order to reduce the number our contradictory ethical beliefs. This is often necessary to achieve ethical coherence or "reflective equilibrium" (185). "Reflective equilibrium" is a coherence theory of justification. In other words, it is impossible for two contradictory ethical beliefs to be true, so one of those contradictory beliefs must be rejected (despite the fact that we have evidence that both are true). If ethics concerns facts independent of our theorizing, then we need a way to confirm which intuitions are true instead of requiring us to arbitrarily keep some moral assumptions and discard others.

3. Moral progress and cultural variability

Scientific progress is undeniable, but moral progress is dubious. Science requires objective observation that is irrelevant to culture, but ethical intuitions appear to be altered by culture. If ethics concerns a reality independent from its own theorizing, then we would expect that moral progress would be possible, and culture should not have such a strong influence over ethical claims (185).

4. Hard Cases

There are some ethical questions that appear to be unanswerable. If ethics concerns objective properties, then we should be able to answer all ethical questions. Scientific questions are sometimes "*temporarily* rather than permanently unanswerable" (186).

5. Naturalism and naturalistic definitions

"If goodness, for example, is a real property, then wouldn't it be a natural property? If not, then isn't moral realism committed to some unscientific and superstitious belief in the existence of non-natural properties?" If goodness would be a natural property, then isn't moral realism committed to the extremely implausible claim that moral terms like 'good' possess naturalistic

definitions (186)? Ethics seems to require some dubious moral entities, like [Platonic forms](#). Platonic forms are non-natural, but are generally believed to be implausible for that very reason.

6. Morality, motivation, and rationality

Scientific facts provide us reasons for action because of our desires, but moral facts are supposed to give us reasons for action independently to our desires. If you find out that science claims that drinking more water will be healthy and you already desire health, then you will desire to drink more water. Moral facts are supposed to motivate you whether or not you desire it. Your duty to protect children should motivate you to do so whether or not you desire the children's safety. But if moral facts are natural facts, like science provides, then it should motivate us in the same way (186).

7. The semantics of moral terms.

If ethics concerns objective facts, then we can all mean the same thing when we use moral terminology, like "good." But each person's moral terminology is unique (186-187). We might as well give up on the word "good" entirely because everyone means something else by it.

8. Verificationism and anti-realism in ethics.

We can reject both scientific realism and moral realism because they require us to accept unverifiable facts. Scientific entities can't be accepted when they are unobservable, and moral facts can't be accepted when they require us to accept unobservable facts.

Boyd's Reply to the Objections

1. Moral semantics and disagreement

The fact that people disagree about moral truths (or semantics) need not indicate that there aren't real moral facts that our beliefs refer to. Different people might disagree about scientific facts, but we still accept that there is something real that science refers to (199). Disagreement only indicates that someone is wrong. We can all be causally related to moral facts, just like scientific facts. We might not observe electrons directly, but we can observe a causal impact that electrons have. Therefore, we can refer to electrons based on its causal impact.

2. Moral intuitions

Scientists have unconscious beliefs that are generally approximately true, which are called "scientific intuitions." It is possible that we have moral intuitions in the same way (206). We might have a hard time verbalizing or even identifying moral intuitions, but they can be approximately true when they are based on a strong understanding of ethics in general.

3. Reflective equilibrium

Scientists also use "reflective equilibrium" in order to justify scientific facts (199-200). We will ideally hope to be able to eliminate all incoherent (contradictory) beliefs. A coherence theory of justification is used in science. Scientists use observations in order to justify their theories, but theories are also necessary in order to have observations in the first place. Observations without assumptions are meaningless. Observation is known to be "theory-laden" because it requires us to accept certain theories as assumptions.

Imagine observing a human being without any assumptions. You have no idea of solidity or an outside world. You see nothing but blotches. Only with the assumptions of solidity and an outside world (and our ability to see these things) can we observe a human being or a car.

Our beliefs of an outside world, solidity, and our ability to see these things are all confirmed by our observations. Our observations confirm our beliefs of an outside world, solidity, and our ability to see these things. This is a form of circular reasoning, but it is part of a coherence theory of justification.

A second challenge to reflective equilibrium: We can only reliably make use of scientific intuitions and scientific reflective equilibrium when we have approximately true scientific theories that cohere with causally relevant parts of reality. Do we have approximately true moral theories that must cohere with causally relevant parts of reality? If not, then for the same reason, we can't reliably make use of moral intuitions and moral reflective equilibrium (200).

If we do have causally relevant moral beliefs, then what justifies them in this causal way? Observation. What serves the role of observation in ethics?

Boyd's answer to the second challenge: Observation plays a causal role in ethical beliefs, just like scientific beliefs (206). Boyd believes that moral properties (good and bad) are ordinary natural (homeostatic cluster) properties. However, Boyd has a liberal concept of "observation" and thinks that introspection is a kind of observation. Also, Boyd believes that sympathy can play a role in our observations. (We are motivated to be moral because we sympathize with others and we dislike when others get hurt.)

4. Hard cases

We might have difficulty defining moral terms and finding moral facts because they refer to homeostatic cluster concepts (198). We can't give a simple definition to all concepts. For example, we can't simply say that the meaning of "bad" is "pain" because the word "bad" refers to five or six general requirements that need not all be present. Pain itself doesn't prove that something is bad. In order for pain to be bad, it must also be seen as unnecessary in some important regard. Things other than pain might also be bad, such as unnecessary loss of human life. This is no different than scientific concepts, such as "health," as Boyd already pointed out.

The fact that we can't give a simple definition to a concept leads us to difficulty when we scientifically or ethically make use of the concept.

5. Morality, motivation, and rationality

The naturalistic moral realist (Boyd, for example), must reject that "moral judgments necessarily provide reasons for action" (214). Sociopaths and aliens might not be motivated the way that other people are to do the right thing. (And therefore lack reason to do what is right, assuming a reason for action has to be motivational.)

The reason that motivation and moral facts seem to have an intimate connection is because "the natural property moral goodness is one such that for psychologically normal humans, the fact that one of two choices is morally preferable will in fact provide some reason [motivation] for preferring it" (215). When we find out a child is in danger, we want to help. That is the kind of people we are based on our psychology. It isn't a metaphysical property of the child's value that forces us to be motivated, it is just a psychological fact about some or most people.

Homeostatic Consequentialism

What could moral realism look like, according to Boyd? He suggests that a consequentialist might satisfy moral realism in the following way:

1. We will take certain goods as valuable, such as things that are required to satisfy human needs. (Satisfaction is intrinsically good) (203).
2. Human goods are homeostatically clustered. They can be mutually supporting when balanced properly.
3. Moral goodness is defined by this cluster of goods and the homeostatic mechanisms that unify them.
4. Ethics can help us realize and maximize our goods, so we have a concern for ethics. We want to strengthen and maintain moral homeostasis.

Another Objection to Moral Naturalism

Richard Boyd is a moral naturalist, which means that he thinks that ethics concerns the ordinary natural world. The "ordinary natural world" could refer to atoms and energy (what some view as the ultimate truth about reality), but some naturalists, like Boyd, believe that there might be irreducible parts of reality. Atoms and energy might not be "the truth about reality" after all. Psychological facts (thoughts and experiences) might be just as real as (other) physical facts.

To say that ethics is natural usually means that the ultimate truth about reality is nonmoral. We can derive moral facts from nonmoral facts. (It is possible to say that moral reality is natural but not reducible to nonmoral reality, but that is not a popular viewpoint.)

A pretty common objection to moral naturalism is that if moral naturalism is true, then we wouldn't need ethics anymore. What we know of as ethics could just be part of psychology and sociology, for example. Ethics would just be one more empirical science. This in and of itself might sound great, but morality seems to be something more than that. In particular, it seems to tell us what objectively matters. What is truly important. If we think it is important to save children from drowning, that is because the child's life really matters.

Boyd would probably say that we say something is important just because we are emotionally driven. To say that it is important to save a child from drowning would just mean that (a) it satisfies a need and (b) we will get very upset if the child drowns. But the question remains: Do we get upset when a child will drown because the child really is important, or do we just say that it is important because of our own personal emotional attachments?

Notice that the word "need" itself is very questionable here. A human "need" is something that makes us happy (we need something to be happy) or it's something we require in order to live (we need something to live). "Human needs" don't really exist. What exists is our interest in happiness and survival. The question still remains: Is happiness or survival important? If not, we are just psychologically interested in these things. Boyd suggests that a sociopath has the wrong psychology to have an interest in other people's survival and happiness, and that such a person would be "lacking" in some sense. This would be a "cognitive deficit." But it's only a cognitive deficit in the sense that we have already defined morality and importance based on promoting survival and happiness.

We could say that a person is morally wrong by definition because such a person wouldn't promote survival or happiness. However, their wrong doing isn't really important or evil in any sense. Their wrongdoing wouldn't imply that they deserve punishment or blame. Importance, and deserving punishment and reward are all tied to a belief that morality is about something more than just a part of psychology.

Another reason that it might be worth considering morality as nonnatural is because if morality is natural (reducible to the natural world), then there would be no difference between realism and antirealism. We would behave and study ethics the same way as if we were antirealists. An antirealist could easily have a psychological or sociological study of ethics. We can use psychology and sociology to answer the relevant questions whether or not we are moral realists: How do people behave concerning ethics? What do people believe is important? How could we maximize our happiness and survival?

Chapter 10: “Moral Explanations” by Nicholas L Sturgeon

In Ancient Times philosophers wanted philosophy to be as much like mathematics as possible. That would give us the highest form of knowledge. This task is now considered unrealistic. Instead, philosophers want philosophy to be as much like science as possible. Nicholas L Sturgeon provides an argument that ethics can be like science because moral facts can have causal power and can therefore be necessary facts in determining our observations.

Background Information

Nicholas L Sturgeon considers [Gilbert Harman's argument](#) that ethics cannot be like science because moral theories can't be tested against the world like scientific theories can. Therefore, moral theories can't explain why the world is how it is. Moral beliefs can help explain our observation (that torturing cats is wrong because causing unnecessary suffering is wrong), but moral facts don't help explain our belief. The fact that causing unnecessary suffering is wrong (suffering has an intrinsic disvalue) doesn't cause our observation, and it doesn't help explain our belief. Moral beliefs (and psychology in general) can explain our moral observations whether or not the beliefs are true. (Is Harman correct that we have no empirical evidence that causing unnecessary suffering is wrong? Ask yourself, why would anyone believe that causing unnecessary suffering is wrong?)

Harman's argument can be summarized as the following:

1. Observation can confirm a theory if and only if the theory contains facts that can cause the world to be a certain way.
2. Beliefs about scientific facts are reliable because observation can confirm scientific theories.
3. Moral facts can't cause the world to be a certain way.
4. Therefore, observation can't confirm moral theories.
5. Therefore, beliefs about moral facts might not be reliable.

Sturgeon will argue that premise three is incorrect because Moral facts can cause the world to be a certain way.

[Richard Boyd](#) argued that we take certain things to be valuable and we can use observation to figure out how to promote those goods. However, he didn't answer the question: How do we determine what has intrinsic (objective) value? Few people would ever question whether or not we can use observation to figure out how to become happy or promote survival, but is happiness or survival intrinsically good?

So, the real question that Surgeon should answer is: Can we find out what has intrinsic value (or moral truth) from observation? Do intrinsic values (or moral facts) somehow play a causal role and therefore help explain our observations?

Sturgeon's Argument

Sturgeon reminds us that scientific principles also lack explanatory power in the sense that "Newton's law of universal gravitation and Darwin's theory of evolution... are entirely devoid of empirical implications when considered in isolation" (231). In other words, scientific theories are [theory-laden](#). Observation is pretty meaningless without assumptions. Theory can be necessary to have an observation and the observation can confirm the theory at the same time.

Sturgeon gives an example of a scientific experiment that proves that our scientific assumptions are inconsistent with our observation: A freshman chemistry student who does not get the right results when testing gasses (232). Since we require that our theories are consistent with our observation, we have a choice: Either the theory of gasses is wrong, or the observation is wrong. We know not to trust the experiments of freshman chemistry students because of the countless mistakes that can be made, so we will decide that the observation is wrong.

In the same way moral theories can be tested. Consider the belief that Hitler was a morally admirable person alongside the widely accepted belief that encouraging the death of millions of people could only be done by someone morally vicious. We have the observation that Hitler encouraged the death of millions of people, so we have a choice: Either encouraging the death of millions is not morally atrocious or Hitler was not morally admirable. It seems clear in this case that we should reject the belief that Hitler is morally admirable (232). It seems that moral beliefs can be rejected when they are inconsistent with other moral beliefs and observations, just like scientific beliefs.

However, Harman argued that moral facts can't cause the world to be a certain way. Universal gravitation is a description of causal forces, so without these causal forces the world would be different and our experience of the world would be different. If moral facts were different, the world would still be the same and therefore our observations of the world would be the same. Therefore, moral beliefs can't explain anything about the world and ethics can't be scientific.

Although explanatory power might not be needed for ethics to be reliable (and for moral facts to exist), Sturgeon finds this possibility to be implausible because he accepts the [causal theory of knowledge](#). We know facts because the facts cause our belief in them. This is a very scientific theory of knowledge and could amount to saying, "All knowledge is scientific." (We can admit that if ethics is scientific, then it could be a reliable source of knowledge.)

Sturgeon accepts that ethics is scientific, so he rejects Harman's premise 3. Moral facts cause the world to be a certain way. His argument can be summarized as the following:

1. It is false that "moral facts don't cause the world to be a certain way."
2. Harman's argument requires that "moral facts don't cause the world to be a certain way."
3. Therefore, Harman's argument fails.
4. Therefore, moral theories could be confirmed by observation and a reliable source of knowledge.

Moral facts can cause the world to be a certain way: For example, Hitler's moral depravity (vicious moral character) caused his behavior of encouraging the death (murder) of millions of people (234).

Sturgeon admits that not all theories have to have a causal impact on our observation in order to be justified. Some theories are justified because they explain how something is reducible to other facts. We don't see colors because objects are colored and cause our observation of color. We see colors because they are reducible to certain physical and psychological facts (238). Therefore, moral facts might also be reducible to other facts in the same way. Even if colors or moral facts are reducible to other nonmoral facts, that doesn't mean we should dispense with color language or moral language.

[I]t is still the *apparent* explanatory role of color facts, or moral facts, that matters... We know of no precise reduction for facts of either sort. We believe even so that reduction is possible for color facts because even when we are able to explain color perception without saying that objects are colored, we will still *sometimes* refer to the actual colors of objects in explaining color perception (238).

Harman argues that moral facts aren't reducible to physical and psychological facts in this way because "[t]here does not ever seem to be, even in practice, any point to explaining someone's moral observations by appeal to what is actually right or wrong, just or unjust, good or bad" (239).

Sturgeon disagrees that we can dispense with moral facts in ordinary life, and he does not believe that moral facts can be reducible to physical and psychological facts. Although Harman argues that moral facts could be real even when reducible to physical and psychological facts, those facts could be *entirely* dispensed with. We do not have to refer to color language to discuss colors. If moral facts are reducible in this way, then we would not have to discuss moral language when discussing ethics. Sturgeon will argue that moral language and theory are indispensable.

This may seem strange because Sturgeon is a naturalist, and therefore he believes that everything is reducible to "natural facts." "As a philosophical naturalist, I take natural facts to be the only facts there are. If I am prepared to recognize moral facts, therefore, I must take them, too, to be natural facts..." (239). However, Sturgeon does not believe that we can ever dispense with moral facts. He doubts we can ever entirely reduce moral facts to physical and psychological facts. Perhaps moral facts are an irreducible kind of natural fact. This point was argued in Richard Boyd's "Materialism without Reductionism: Non-Humean Causation and the Evidence for Physicalism," in *The Physical Basis of Mind* (240). Some information about this can also be found [here](#).

Another Example of Moral Explanation

Suppose you see children igniting a cat on fire for fun. Is igniting a cat on fire for fun explained by moral theory? A moral theory will state that acts of sadistic cruelty are wrong. If the moral

theory doesn't explain our observation, then we would expect that the world would be exactly when moral facts are different. So now imagine that the act wasn't immoral. But we can't consider that what we observe (deliberate sadistic cruelty) isn't immoral! We could only consider this act to no longer be immoral if the world (and the act) were quite different. If the cat was ignited on fire on accident, for example (248). Therefore, it is impossible for the moral facts to be different and for the world to be the same. More examples can be found in [Simon Blackburn's Supervenience Revisited](#). It is well-accepted that physical and psychological facts seem to determine moral facts. (Many people think this is evidence in moral [anti-realism](#), which is the opposite of what Sturgeon wants. Anti-realists will take supervenience or the falsity of supervenience to be evidence of their anti-realism, which seems a little unfair.)

Sturgeon considers an objection to his argument: If all psychological facts and physical facts had been the same, then Hitler would have done exactly what he did. If all psychological facts and physical facts been the same, then the children would have still ignited the cat on fire (250). Therefore, nothing is added by mentioning moral facts.

Sturgeon's reply to the objection: We can't consider the moral facts to be different in these examples without also making the physical actions different. We believe that moral facts are partially dependent on physical and psychological facts, and because moral facts are dependent by other facts, we can't change moral facts without changing those other facts (251).

The objection asks too much. It would be like asking of us, imagine that a physicist sees a proton vapor trail using a machine. The proton explains the observation of a proton vapor trail. But now imagine that no proton was actually present, but all non-microscopic facts are the same (the machine still causes an observation of a proton vapor trail.) We will have the same observation, even though the microphysical facts are different (252). This is nonsense. We can't demand that all facts of one sort remain the same when facts of a very related kind be different. The microphysical world is related to the non-microphysical world, and moral facts are related to physical facts.

Or another example: Imagine that you observe someone ignite a cat on fire. Now imagine that the psychological facts are the same, but the physical facts are different. You still observe someone igniting a cat on fire, but this is not physically happening. No one is actually igniting a cat on fire, even though you see it happening. This is nonsense because physical and psychological facts are connected. You can't change what happens in the physical world without changing how we experience it. In the same way, Sturgeon would argue, we can't change physical facts without also changing moral facts. Asking us to observe an immoral act as no longer immoral with all the same physical and psychological facts is impossible for the same reason as we can't change the physical world without changing the psychological world.

My Objection

I agree that we use moral facts to help explain our observations in everyday life, but it hasn't been proven that moral facts have explanatory power. It still isn't clear that moral facts are causing anything to happen. It is possible that the opposite happens: Physical and psychological

facts might cause moral beliefs. Different physical and psychological facts will cause different beliefs.

Although Sturgeon is correct that moral reality might emerge from physical and psychological facts, and it might be causally relevant in the way he described (just like psychological facts depend on and cause physical facts), he needs a stronger argument to be convincing. Hitler's depraved character might be nothing but the character of his psychology (perhaps a sadistic sociopath). The fact that we disapprove of deliberate sadistic cruelty does not prove that it is morally wrong. Deliberate sadistic cruelty would exist whether or not it is morally right. Whether or not we have proof that deliberate sadistic cruelty is wrong is another question.

Does Sturgeon answer the question, "Can we find out what has intrinsic value (or moral truth) from observation?" The answer is, No. Sturgeon never tells us how exactly moral reality causes anything to happen. He discusses how things we believe to have moral significance can have a causal impact (e.g. cruelty), but he doesn't tell us why we would believe cruelty itself is wrong.

Chapter 11: “Moral Theory and Explanatory Impotence” by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord argues that we can confirm moral facts through observation, and that moral facts can be confirmed in a meaningful way. He admits that there is still some room for doubt. In order to justify moral facts, he takes a close look at epistemology in general. He suggests that theories must be able to explain our observations better than alternatives. In order to do this pragmatic considerations seem relevant, and if so, moral theories could be justified.

In the final section of Sayre-McCord's article, he suggests a strategy to argue that moral values exist: If we accept epistemological values, then we might be able to prove that we also have to accept moral values.

Observation and Moral Facts

The Is/Ought Gap

We start off with the widely accepted empiricist assumption that theories aren't acceptable unless they can be confirmed through observation. One reason we might suspect that moral facts have no implications to observation is because "'ought' can't be derived from 'is.'" This is known as the is/ought gap, and the argument that observation is irrelevant to moral facts could look like the following:

1. Moral facts can't be derived from non-moral facts.
2. We only observe nonmoral facts.
3. So, we can't derive moral facts from observation (257).

Sayre-McCord argues that this argument is too strong because we could also claim that there are no psychological facts in the same way:

1. Psychological facts can't be derived from non-psychological facts.
2. We only observe non-psychological facts.
3. So, we can't derive psychological facts from observation (258).

This problem could be called the is/thought gap. We don't observe thoughts, so they don't exist. We can't infer what someone is thinking from observing them. However, this is absurd. We do it all the time. Therefore, the is-ought gap can be rejected for the same reason.

Sayre-McCord argues that the problem is that we can't demand moral facts to be reduced to nonmoral facts by definition, just like we can't demand that psychological facts be reduced to non-psychological facts by definition (257). Moral facts and psychological facts can be real, even if they aren't reducible to some other natural kind of fact.

Unobservable Entities

Sayre-McCord agrees that we can't see various moral facts, such as an action or person's worth, dignity, or rightness, but this is no different than the unobservable entities postulated by scientific theories (258). Electrons, for example, are not directly observable. ([Richard N. Boyd](#) already suggested that the unobservable entities of ethics is no different than the unobservable entities of science, but he argues that these entities can have a causal effect on our observations that imply their existence.)

Verification through Observation

Sayre-McCord argues that there are moral observations in the sense that we can arrive at moral beliefs from perception (259). Defining "observation" as something like "true beliefs based on perception" would be too strong because we still want to figure out how accurate our moral observations are.

It seems theoretically possible to test and verify our moral theories through our moral observations. How exactly a scientific theory can be tested is notoriously complicated and requires us to make use of background assumptions (260). For example, we can start with the hypothesis that the action that produces suffering is bad with the assumption that punishing the innocent is bad. Then we can test whether causing suffering is wrong if punishing the innocent proves to cause suffering (260). (Since ethical tests tend to lead to immoral actions, we generally want to rely on personal experience and thought experiments.)

Explanatory Impotence

Sayre-McCord argues that many terrible theories are justified insofar as they are observed by people, but moral theory seems to be justified in a much stronger sense. "Disturbingly, just as moral theory survives any reasonable standard for testability, so too do phlogiston theory, astrology, and even occult theories positing the existence of witches. Like moral theories, each of these theories (when combined with appropriate background assumptions) generates testable consequences, and each makes cognitively packed claims about the world... Although testable, they fail the test." (261)

In other words moral realism might be a claim that we can observe and test, but we don't know that it's a legitimate from this simple fact. In order for a testable theory to be legitimate it must be appropriately explanatory. Astrology, on the other hand, is explanatory impotent (or inappropriately explanatory) (261). In order for a theory to be explanatory, we must believe it is true partially because it is true. However, our beliefs in moral facts seem justified for reasons other than their truth.

It seems we make the moral judgments we do because of the theories we happen to embrace, because of the society we live in, because of our individual temperaments, because of our feelings for others, but not because we have some special ability to detect moral facts, not because our moral judgments are accurate, and not because the moral theories we embrace are true. (262)

Sayre-McCord gives an example. Moral facts and scientific facts seem disanalogous. The reason scientists see a proton vapor trail is because they have a theory and background assumptions as well as the fact that the proton exists. The reason seeing cats set on fire by kids causes us to believe that the kids are doing something wrong is also due to our moral beliefs, but no part of moral reality needs to be referenced. Wrongness is not causing our belief (262).

The Causal Criterion

Sayre-McCord then discusses various forms of justification, and starts with the Causal Criterion. He argues that if a theory is going to be taken seriously, we need to know how we know its truth, and how we can refer to it. One theory of justification is that a theory is justified if we are caused to perceive facts because they are true:

The only entities and properties we are justified in believing in are those that we are justified in believing have a causal impact on our perceptual apparatus. (263)

This is related to the causal theory of reference. When we refer to something, such as H₂O, we are referring to something that people have been causally interacting with for quite some time. We can then examine it closely to learn more about it.

Morality, however, does not appear to be something that has a causal impact.

Sayre-McCord then reminds us that we can refer to reality by description when we don't have causal contact with that part of reality. Perhaps morality can be described, even if it has no causal impact (264). If we can refer to moral reality through a nonmoral description and we have evidence that our description refers to a part of reality, then moral realism could be justified.

The Explanatory Criterion

Not all justified theories are justified by the causal criterion. For example, our laws of science, and cause and effect are not justified from the causal criterion (266). These theories are justified because they explain our perception best:

A hypothesis should not be believed if the hypothesis plays no role in the best explanation we have of our making the observation that we do. (266)

For example, we observe objects falling every time we drop them because of the law of gravity.

Notice that the explanatory criterion is not a sufficient justification for any theory. It only gives us a reason to reject certain theories. Some theories might help explain our observations but still be terrible theories. (A theory about witches might be justified by the explanatory criterion.)

Moral realism appears to fail the explanatory criterion. It does not seem that moral facts help explain our moral beliefs (268). He quotes [Harman](#) as saying, "[Y]ou need to make assumptions about certain physical facts to explain the occurrence of observations that support a scientific

theory, but you do not seem to need to make assumptions about any moral facts to explain the occurrence of the so-called moral observations" (269).

Sayre-McCord argues that in order to be justified, moral facts will have to help explain our nonmoral observations (269).

Explanatory relevance and explanatory potency

We have a challenge: moral realism seems explanatorily irrelevant. He quotes [Sturgeon's](#) test of explanatory potency, "If a particular assumption is completely irrelevant to the explanation of a certain fact, then the fact would have obtained, and we could have explained it just as well, even if the assumption had been false" (270). Can we have a moral situation where we can understand all nonmoral facts without requiring any moral theory? If so, moral theory is non-explanatory in that situation.

Sturgeon argued that in order to understand children catching a cat on fire without being "wrong," we would have to change the situation in some nonmoral respect (270-271). Perhaps the children caught the cat on fire on accident. Had the moral facts been different, the nonmoral fact would also be different. In the same way, a scientist who perceives a proton vapor trail might no longer see that vapor trail had there been no proton. Had one physical fact been changed, then other physical facts would have changed.

The difference between Sturgeon and Harman is that Harman seems to assume that we can't rely on moral theory to tell us if our observations are reliable (272). Harman will argue that we only observe setting cats on fire as wrong because of an unjustified conviction that it's wrong to set cats on fire. Sturgeon finds our observations of setting cats on fire to be wrong as evidence that setting cats on fire is wrong.

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord then argues that Sturgeon left something important out. Instead of merely talking about explanatory irrelevance, we need to talk about explanatory impotence in the following way:

[A] particular assumption is explanatorily impotent with respect to a certain fact if the fact would have obtained and we could have explained it just as well even if the assumption had not been invoked in the explanation (as opposed to: "even if the assumption had been false"). (272).

We want to prove that our moral theories help our explanation of our observations. Even if our moral theories are relevant to our observations, they might not actually strengthen our explanation (272).

We can't be satisfied with explanatory relevance because terrible theories can be relevant. A theory about witches might be relevant to our observations (273). We might think a particular woman is a witch for having long hair. We would then have an observation of seeing a witch only if she didn't have long hair. Not observing a witch would require different non-witch facts. This is an unjustified theory despite being relevant to observation.

Supervenience and lenience

McCord now discusses his new interpretation of the explanatory criterion involving explanatory potency with regard to moral realism. Some beliefs might be explanatorily potent through reduction. The belief that water is H₂O seems to help explain a lot about water by reducing water to a molecule. Additionally, some beliefs might be explanatorily potent without reduction: When certain facts supervene upon others.

For example, we believe that roses are red despite the fact that we can explain our color experiences without invoking the redness of roses. Harman agrees that we might invoke the colors of objects "if only for the sake of simplicity" (275) You might say that it is a pragmatic justification. It makes life easier to be able to talk about the colors of objects rather than discussing wavelengths of light, brain activity, and so on. However, unlike colors of objects, Harman argues that moral beliefs are not justified in a pragmatic way.

Sayre-McCord argues that Harman is "patently false" to say that moral explanations are not useful in everyday life (275). It makes life quite easy to tell children that lying is wrong, or that bad moral character makes it difficult to make friends. "Mother Teresa's goodness won her a Nobel Prize; Solidarity is popular because of Poland's oppressive institutions; millions died in Russia as a result of Stalin's inhumanity" (275).

Finally, Sayre-McCord argues that this liberal understanding of the explanatory criterion that allows for pragmatic justifications can justify our moral beliefs (and any stricter interpretation will probably not). It is the pragmatic justification that allows us to justify our moral beliefs and nonmoral beliefs involving regularities and generalizations. We can explain why a particular square peg can go through a particular circular peg hole without a vague pragmatically justified answer, such as the microphysical structures of each object, but we need a pragmatically justified theory to explain why such a peg can go through several similar circular holes (276). "Certain regularities, such as honesty's engendering trust or justice's commanding allegiance, or kindness's encouraging friendship--are real regularities that are identifiable and explicable only by appeal to moral properties" (276).

Although we have found that a pragmatic form of justification can help justify moral beliefs, Sayre-McCord admits that these properties might be merely psychological and we have no reason to see any importance to them. "We will not yet have shown that there is any reason to care about the properties or that some of the properties are better than others" (276).

The Evaluation of explanations

In this final section, Sayre-McCord argues that our beliefs about justification indicate that evaluative facts exist (277). A theory is partially justified if it is the best available, and any way to rank some theories as better than another involve evaluative facts. For example, if "simplicity, generality, elegance, [and] predictive power" are virtues of theories, then they have some kind of value (277).

The assumption that any theory is "best" already makes use of an evaluative judgment. Therefore, if it is possible to find the best theory in a given situation, then some evaluative fact exists. On the other hand if it is not possible, we will be unable to reject moral theory (or any other theory) as false.

It might be that epistemological virtues and values are distinct from moral virtues and values, but the inescapable belief in evaluative facts might help us find a better understanding of moral facts. Sayre-McCord does not provide the argument that moral facts exist, but he does outline how such an argument can be made:

We might argue that higher level epistemological commitments are justified if they help justify lower level epistemological commitments (just like how evaluative judgments are required to accept the explanatory criterion) (279). In this way higher level epistemological values might indicate or imply lower level moral values. For example, the pragmatic justification of theories might imply some kind of pragmatic moral value. (What makes pragmatic justifications matter? Saving time, making people happier, etc.)

My Objections

I think Geoffrey Sayre-McCord has a lot of important points to make concerning epistemology and justification, but there are still a couple important questionable assumptions that I want to discuss.

Objection 1: We have direct access to moral facts

Sayre-McCord seems to agree too easily with the assumption that we have no access to moral facts. Isn't pain direct access to the fact that pain is bad?

Objection 2: His final argument is too esoteric

Philosophy is already considered to be esoteric by many people, but his suggestion of linking epistemological value with moral value is very strange and has nothing to do with everyday life. If moral realism is true, then it is hopefully because of everyday experiences people can relate to. Hopefully most people are moral realists before knowing anything about philosophy, and hopefully they already have good reason to be realists.

Relating epistemological value to moral value is completely alien to people in everyday life and seems to suggest that a philosopher has to prove moral realism is true only to other philosophers. What everyone else believes and experiences is irrelevant.

Chapter 12: “Moral Reality” by Mark Platts

Mark Platts is mostly concerned with defending [moral realism](#) from various objections, but he also endorses a specific form of moral realism, intuitionism, in order to make his defense of moral realism more specific. He makes it clear that he is interested in a form of moral realism in which moral facts are not reducible to nonmoral facts (283). He agrees that moral facts supervene (are dependent on) on nonmoral facts, but moral facts do not merely consist in the nonmoral facts (283). He lists three main aspects of intuitionism: First, intuitionism makes it clear that moral facts are not reducible to nonmoral facts. Two, intuitionism is compatible with a moral realist use of language. Three, intuitionism can admit that genuine moral dilemmas are possible.

Mark Platts then considers various challenges to moral realism. One, different people have different conceptions of goods, so there is probably nothing those conceptions refer to. Two, there's no way to determine who's moral beliefs are true, so probably no one's moral beliefs are true. Three, realism neglects moral discussion and reasoning. Four, realism neglects moral choice and responsibility. Five, supervenience leads to moral reductionism. Six, moral facts can't be reasons for action without referring to a person's desires.

What is intuitionism?

Intuitionism is moral realist theory that states that there are moral facts that are not reducible to nonmoral facts. It does not suggest that we have a special faculty of the mind to detect moral facts (285). We detect moral facts through observation.

Moral Facts are not reducible to nonmoral facts

If moral facts were reducible to nonmoral facts, then we could dispense with moral facts. We might even say, "We thought there were moral facts, but we found out that we were just talking about something else." Some utilitarians reduce moral facts to facts about pleasure, pain, desire-satisfaction, and so forth. Intuitionists don't.

Moral realist use of language

We tend to have a realist view of scientific and moral language. We often use sentences we expect to be true or false even if we aren't certain. We can speak about "the truth-conditions of moral sentences even if those truth-conditions are beyond his (present) recognitional abilities" (284).

Moral dilemmas are possible

Although moral facts refer indirectly to "the good," more specific virtues and values are more relevant to our moral judgments, such as "sincere,' 'loyal,' 'compassionate'" (285). These goods might be mutually reinforcing in many situations, but they might also be able to conflict. It might

not be possible to determine what course of action is "best" when each course of action promotes different goods.

Platts believes that moral dilemmas will allow us to embrace moral pluralism and reject the view of ethics as a decision procedure. "[T]here is certainly no reason to believe that there is one kind of decision-procedure, some one golden rule (Do the best!), that will determine, in any given state of affairs, what we should do. Pluralistic intuitionism, unlike utilitarianism, requires the abandonment of the false hope for such a procedure" (285).

Objections to moral realism

Different conceptions of goods

People have different criteria when using words, so they have different conceptions of concepts. People tend to think of water as a clear wet liquid, but others might think of water as a hard cold stone-like substance, and others might think of water as H₂O. All of these people have a different conception of one thing. In the same way people can have a different conception of a word like "courage." Some might understand courage as a fearlessness, but someone else might understand it to be acting despite fear.

The anti-realist can suggest that courage, unlike water, doesn't actually exist. Different groups of people have different conceptions of made up values and virtues. We might think two groups of people are discussing "courage," but they are actually just talking about similar virtues with different criteria. We have no reason to believe such a conception has any relation to reality because there would be no way for people with different moral conceptions to resolve moral disputes and come to an agreement.

Even if we can *roughly* translate the terms he uses in morally describing his action, that translation cannot be a good one, our grasp upon the relevant concept must be lacking, if we cannot see how that characterization makes that action even *prima facie* morally desirable, let alone morally praiseworthy *tout court*. But there is no way of resolving such moral 'disputes', no way of ensuring that we can first be led to see things as the Sicilian sees them (or that he be led to see them as we see them), and no way of then deciding, *externally* from any such system of moral perception, which is the correct one. (286)

Platts is not convinced by this objection for five reasons. One, differences in moral judgments does not necessarily imply the falsity of moral realism, just like differences in scientific judgments doesn't imply the falsity of scientific realism (287). People's moral beliefs can be false.

Two, our false beliefs can sometimes be corrected. "Given reflection upon our own experiences and psychological characteristics, we can come to see the error of our moral views; we can come to change our moral views in an intelligibly nonarbitrary manner" (287).

Three, a moral realist would expect differences in moral beliefs and conceptions, just like scientific beliefs and conceptions. We can learn that water is H₂O. We can find out that some of

our moral conceptions are inadequate. Science tries to use a limited language and understanding of physical reality to understand something that is indefinitely complex. In a similar way, we grapple with ethics because it relates to something indefinitely complex (287).

Four, the fact that people have different moral conceptions does not mean that they have different moral concepts. People might try to detect instances of a moral concept in different ways, but that doesn't mean they are talking about different concepts. (We might differ in how we decide what counts as generous, for example.) If people completely misunderstand what the word "generous" means, then we are pretty good at figuring out that they aren't talking about the concept of generosity. We might not yet know how far off someone's conception of generosity must be in order to be thinking about a concept other than generosity, but it is quite possible for us to have somewhat different conceptions of generosity while talking about the same concept (288).

Five, the fact that some people lack moral concepts that we have doesn't indicate antirealism about ethics any more than the fact that some people lack scientific concepts (e.g. electrons) indicates scientific antirealism (288). (That there is no such thing as electrons.)

There is no way to determine who's moral beliefs are true

This is basically the old idea, "Who's to say?" Every culture has different moral conceptions and we have no way of understanding them. Even if we did, we would have no way of knowing which conception is true (or the most accurate) (288).

Platts finds this objection to be unconvincing and assures us that we can try to bring someone's attention to the part of reality that we are dealing with. If someone doesn't know the difference between red and pink, we would try to show them things of each color until they notice a difference.

People often have a hard time noticing the gray areas of things, and morality is no different. The fact that someone doesn't notice the subtle difference between courage and fearlessness doesn't convince us that there is no ambiguity to be seen. "[T]here are many ways in which we might attempt to draw somebody's *attention* to that ambiguity" (289).

Some people's moral conceptions might be radically different or entirely absent. In this case it would be like teaching someone what color is rather than the difference between pink and red. How is color different from anything else? If someone didn't know what color was, we wouldn't decide there's no such thing. We would try to bring their attention to what they have been overlooking. In a similar way, we could try to bring their attention to what courage is and how it differs from everything else, as well as any other moral concept.

The procedure for understanding another's moral view is that of leaving oneself open to his efforts to draw our attention to the (distinctive) features he claims to detect, perhaps by his engaging us in the practices he engages in. Usually, we shall come to see the difference as non-radical, as a difference of conceptions, not of concepts; but if that difference is radical--if we just cannot *see* what he is

talking *about*--then the tentative conclusion is that he is in radical error--or that we are. (289)

Platts does not discuss what happens if we learn new moral conceptions that we lacked. I think we can do this quite often, and it often does involve subtle differences. For example, most of us understand the difference between supererogatory (above the call of duty), obligatory, and morally neutral actions, but there is no word for the opposite of supererogatory: Something that is wrong, but not forbidden. It's not exactly beyond the call of duty to refrain from being obnoxious or rude. It's not exactly forbidden to be obnoxious or rude. Still, this moral category could be useful and it could reflect a part of reality that we generally ignore due to it currently lacking a place in our language.

Realism neglects moral discussion and reasoning

Antirealists might argue that for an intuitionist, "you either see it or you don't" (290). On the contrary, Platts argues that discussion can be necessary to draw people's attention to the situation at hand and to the subtleties of the moral aspects involved. Also, we might need to consider the various irrelevant attitudes that might cloud our judgment.

Realism neglects moral choice and responsibility

The objection amounts to saying that realism can't account for the desirability of multiple moral perspectives because only one person can be right.

Platts replies by arguing that everyone should believe whatever is true about ethics, just like in science, but we generally have a very imperfect understanding of reality. It can be beneficial to have competing perspectives and theories in ethics, just like in science. It is often the case that no one view has yet been established as being true, and that is a good reason to construct various hypotheses (290).

Platts admits that he doesn't understand how a moral realist avoids responsibility. Anyone who asserts something is true and tries to persuade others that it is true, that person will have to live with the consequences. This is true about science and ethics alike (291).

Supervenience leads to moral reductionism

Any difference in moral facts requires a difference in nonmoral facts. If nonmoral facts are the same, then moral facts are the same. If moral facts depend on nonmoral facts, then we can simply reduce moral facts to nonmoral facts.

Platts gives two replies to this worry. One, moral concepts must be applied to the nonmoral facts in order to determine the moral facts involved. (Helping others in a fearful situation can be found to involve courage when we understand the concept of courage and the values it can promote.) We are able to give reasons for our moral judgments based on our understanding of moral concepts and theories, which are not nonmoral facts (292).

Two, we are sometimes able to reduce moral reality to a set of rules in which moral reality could be reduced to nonmoral reality, but this is just out of laziness. These rules neglect the indefinite complexity of the situation.

In ordinary moral life, the problem is not that of squaring our present judgments with our previous judgments, but that of *attending* to the full, unobvious moral complexity of the present case... determining our moral judgment about a particular case by means of some rule seizing upon non-moral aspects of that case will simply mean that we neglect the full complexity of that particular case. (292-293)

Actually, Platts admits that we can also understand moral rules to be indispensable "rules of thumb" to help us make decisions (293). It can be too difficult to attend to the full complexity of the situation.

Moral facts can't be reasons for action without referring to a person's desires.

We expect moral facts to be reasons for actions, and our actions are often said to show the sincerity of our moral beliefs, but the antirealist will argue that moral realism can't account for the fact that nothing can be a reason for action unless it involves our desires. So, being hungry is a reason to eat because it involves your desire for food. Ethics must then be something personal and it can't be universalized. "Whether a moral 'description' of a case is 'true' or not depends upon the desires of the person considering it" (293).

Platts suggests that we often do something because we find it desirable, even if we don't desire it. He admits that someone might again object to this response by saying, "But if you find it desirable, then it is desired!" However, he argues that this is "phenomenologically false... or utterly vacuous" (294). We don't feel the desire mentioned, so the word "desire" here might just be referring to a "mental-catch-all" (294). Whatever we are motivated to do, by definition, we might say we have desire for.

Platts then considers a related objection involving Anscombe's analysis of beliefs and desires. Beliefs are meant to be the same as the facts of the world. False beliefs should be changed. Desires ask us to change the facts of the world. Unsatisfied desires do not ask to be changed. Given this analysis, morality does not fit into the belief area because we want our moral beliefs to guide our actions to change the facts in the world. "If thinking something desirable is to be a reason for doing it, then that notion cannot, contrary to the realist's view, be assimilated to pure factual beliefs. Such an assimilation divorces moral judgments from reasons for action (294).

Mark Platts offers various replies to this objection, but he admits that they aren't conclusive. One, some factual beliefs indirectly also express "other mental attitudes of a less cognitive kind, of moral *sentiments*" (295). However, moral sentiments do not determine the truth of moral facts. Platts admits that this answer is unsatisfying because it implies that the realist has an obligation to describe how moral sentiments come about and how they are tied to moral beliefs.

Two, the realist can demand an argument that justifies the fact that reasons for action must be desires rather than beliefs. (Can be used to motivate us to change the world, but they shouldn't be changed when they fail to describe reality.) Perhaps moral reasons are facts that also motivate action, so Anscombe's analysis might be wrong about there only being beliefs and desires. Moral beliefs might be a different category that has elements of both.

Our understanding of moral sincerity supports the view that belief and desire are not easily separable when concerning ethics. A person who acts on their moral beliefs because of the beliefs are acting sincerely. Such people are sincere because they are motivated by the moral belief and because such a motivation implies that they think the moral belief is *true* (296). Additionally, in order to show sincerity with a moral belief, we must act in accordance with that belief. This kind of moral belief can be one about reality, so the belief is only approximately true if it approximates reality. At the same time it is important that the belief is partly the cause of the person's action or their action would not show sincerity (an attitude towards a moral fact) (296-297).

An example of moral sincerity might be when people save a child's life because they think the child's life is valuable. They are motivated to save the child's life because they believe that it is true that the child's life has value.

(Platts admits that a person can be quite sincere about a moral belief and still not act in accordance with their moral belief, which is often attributed to "weakness of will") (297-298).

My Objections

Why call it intuitionism?

First, I don't know why he calls it "intuitionism." There seems to be no intuition involved.

How do we identify intrinsic values?

Second, Mark Platts neglects the issue of identifying intrinsic values. He speaks of goods like any virtue would do, but virtues are generally not taken to be intrinsically valuable. Courage can be indispensable in accomplishing goals, but it is generally not taken to be a goal worthy for its own sake. He says that our goods might conflict, which sounds like he believes them to have intrinsic value. When we want to promote one intrinsic value, it might be at the detriment of another.

Platts says,

Wittgenstein says that we only call a picture 'beautiful' when we cannot be bothered to think of anything more specific (or interesting) to say about it. The same is true of calling something 'good'. The interesting, basic terms of moral description are things like: 'sincere', 'loyal', 'compassionate', and so on... The version of intuitionism I want to consider does admit of [moral] dilemmas by being *pluralistic*. For this version, there are *many* distinct ethical properties whose

occurrence can be detected--sincerity, loyalty, honesty, and so on--and there is no reason *a priori* to assume that they cannot conflict. (285)

Here he is implying that there are more than one kind of good, such as sincerity. All of the goods mentioned are virtues. But it isn't clear that any of the virtues are meant to be intrinsically valuable. If they aren't, then there might be no interesting moral conflict because nothing really matters. If they are intrinsically valuable, then how do we know that? How can we identify intrinsic value? He says that we can do so through observation, but it isn't clear how that can happen. Examples would be helpful.

Why do we need to desire what is moral?

Third, I don't quite understand the reason versus desire debate involving motivation. I do suspect that we are always motivated to do what is right if we do it, and I don't find Platts's argument convincing. He says that this is just seeing desire as a mental catch-all. Maybe desire is a mental catch-all, but not necessarily by definition. We might have evidence that we are always motivated to do whatever we end up doing.

As far as I can tell we don't need to be motivated to do what is good. If something has intrinsic value, whether or not we desire it is irrelevant. Perhaps we could find out that we have no reason to do whatever promotes that which has intrinsic value. This seems false considering what "intrinsic value" means, but we probably have different ideas about what "reason for action" means. We might have a kind of objective idea of reason for action and a subjective one. The objective meaning of "reason for action" could include promoting intrinsic value because it is in some sense "good" to do so. Promoting intrinsic values imply that there are certain goals worth accomplishing for everyone. The subjective idea of reason for action sounds like it relates to little more than desire-satisfaction. We have a reason to try to accomplish our personal goals.

Objective and subjective reasons might relate to different meanings of the word "ought" or "should." You "should" use a gun to shoot someone you want to kill in the sense that it is an effective way to accomplish that goal, but we also have a moral reason to refrain from doing so. We "shouldn't" use a gun to shoot someone in the sense that human life has intrinsic value. Accomplishing personal goals is a kind of subjective reason for action and promoting intrinsic value is a kind of objective reason for action.

I admit that both objective and subjective reasons for actions are worthy of consideration. It might be that objective reasons for action make no difference. It is possible that we are never motivated to promote intrinsic value. How can this dilemma be solved? We might simply desire to promote intrinsic value. Anyone who desires to promote intrinsic value could be a fully moral person, and those who don't desire to satisfy intrinsic value can't be fully moral. It might be that there is a psychological prerequisite to being a moral person. That isn't too surprising to me. Children, the insane, and other primates all seem incapable of being moral in the sense that mature adults can be moral.

Works Cited

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