

The Moral Realist Point of View

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About this Ebook

I wrote an ebook, [Is There A Meaning of Life?](#) that argues that there are intrinsic values—some things really are good or bad no matter what you like or desire. My view is a form of moral realism, which means that I believe that morality has to do with reality. Morality is not just social customs or laws. This ebook is a continuation. Whether you endorse moral realism or not, you might want to know how a moral realist thinks and how a moral realist can attempt to make sense of morality.

If you don't know anything about moral realism or intrinsic values, then this is probably not going to be very interesting. I recommend you read my other ebook first.

The essays within this ebook were originally posted on my website at <http://ethicalrealism.com/>. If you like this ebook, you might want to take a look. You can download more of my [free ebooks](#) there, or just take a look at what I have to say on various philosophical topics.

This ebook has not been officially published. It is in a rough draft stage.

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Preface

Moral realism and intrinsic values can seem irrelevant to our lives. They can seem too abstract to have any real meaning. We might worry that philosophers who talk about such things are losing contact with reality. However, all of these worries are misguided. Moral realism and intrinsic values are of the utmost importance. A world where moral realism is true would be quite different from a world where it is false.

Moral realism can indeed be difficult to fully appreciate *if we don't know how it applies to our lives*. I am always interested in relating philosophy to real life, and this book in particular can help broaden our understanding about moral realism because I will be discussing how we can understand moral realism as part of our overall worldview. I will answer questions, such as the following: If moral realism is true, what does that say about right and wrong? What does it say about making moral decisions? If moral realism is true, what does that say about reality itself?

If something has intrinsic value, then we should try to promote that value. Helping people could be a truly meaningful accomplishment, and we can understand how to help people by knowing what parts of us can have greater value. “Helping people” can include entertaining them, educating them, helping strengthen their minds, helping them learn more about reality, helping them get better jobs, or even helping them get food.

If nothing has intrinsic value, then nothing really matters; but we will still look out for our own interests. In that case morality is either a compromise between people to find rules to live by, a system of oppression created by the powerful members of society, or ideal rules to live by that perfectly rational people would agree to.

Part I: Introduction

What exactly is the moral realist point of view? How do they understand the various elements of morality? These are the questions I will answer here.

Chapter 1: Moral Realism & Elements of Morality

I have given a general outline of a [moral realist perspective](#), but there is much more to be said. We have many moral concepts that seem relevant for morality that I have not discussed sufficiently. We need to know how these concepts relate to intrinsic values (moral realism). I do not have a fully developed account of our moral vocabulary, but I can discuss my current thoughts on these concepts. I will discuss the following elements of morality:

1. Good & Bad
2. Oughts
3. Right & Wrong
4. Universality
5. Responsibility
6. Rationality
7. Virtue
8. Justice
9. Rights
10. Unconditionality
11. Ideals
12. Praise & Blame
13. Reward & Punishment
14. Guilt
15. Moral Rules
16. Equality

1. Good/Bad

Good and bad refer to positive and negative value. I have discussed the difference between intrinsic value, final ends, and instrumental value in my essay, "[What Does 'Meaning of Life' Mean?](#)" but I will introduce the main concepts once again:

Intrinsic value

The most relevant sort of value to moral realism is intrinsic value—The idea that something really matters. If something is intrinsically good, then (a) all things equal, it is justified to promote that value; (b) it is better for that thing to exist than not to; and (c) we ought to promote that value. For example, it is justified to give someone an aspirin who has a headache *because the pain is intrinsically bad* (unless there is a countervailing reason not to).

Intrinsic values relate to moral realism in the sense that they seem to constitute moral realism. Moral realism is the view that there are moral facts that are not entirely constituted by our attitudes and beliefs. We didn't just make up our values, and they aren't just part of our instincts. Intrinsic values are moral facts that are not constituted by our attitudes or beliefs.

Instrumental value

However, instrumental value (usefulness) is also relevant to moral realism. Once we know that we are justified to help people avoid pain because pain is intrinsically bad, we still need to know the most effective way to accomplish our goal. These values are known as instrumental values. (The best means to an end is considered instrumentally valuable.) It is instrumentally valuable to use aspirin to get rid of headaches, so taking aspirin has some moral significance.

Notice that there are morally irrelevant instrumental values *and* morally relevant instrumental values. It can be effective to use a gun to murder someone, so *using a gun to murder someone is what one should do in order to accomplish that goal*, but the goal is immoral. Instrumental values are only morally good when they lead to promoting intrinsic value.

2. Oughts

The idea that we "ought" to do something is known as "prescriptivity" or "normativity." For example, "All things equal, you ought not kill people" is an example of a normative or prescriptive statement. There are nonmoral and moral oughts. One ought to use a knife to cut bread, but that's just a nonmoral instrumental ought. You ought to use an aspirin to get rid of a headache could be somewhat morally relevant, so it could be considered to be a moral ought.

One simple understanding of "ought" and how it relates to intrinsic value is that (a) if we morally ought to do something, then we are justified to do it; (b) it is better for you to do it than not to do it (it leads to more positive intrinsic value); and (c) it makes sense to hope that it is done. You morally ought to give an aspirin to someone with a headache because it is justified, it is better to do it than not do it, and it makes sense to hope you do it.

Some people see moral (ought) judgments as propositional attitudes similar to John Searle's view of desire. Searle says that beliefs are "satisfied" (or "fulfilled") when the belief is made to match the world; and desires are "satisfied" when the world is made to match our desire. Ought judgments look a little bit like Searle's view of desire because we want the world to match our moral judgments. However, desires are personal and ought judgments are not as personal. We morally ought to do something (somewhat) irrespective of our desires. For example, I morally ought to give someone an aspirin who has a headache whether or not I desire that the person's pain is avoided. (Desires can be relevant to what we ought to do, but it is merely one consideration. Intrinsic values can exist, even if desires do not.)

Subjective & Objective Oughts

Also note that there is a potential subjective and objective version of "ought" judgments:

Subjective oughts: What you ought to do based on your personal knowledge and ability. For example, you subjectively ought to teach math if that is the most productive moral action you can think of taking.

Objective oughts: What you ought to do based on perfect knowledge and ability. For example, you ought to cure AIDS, save maximal lives, prevent the most pain, etc.

Although we can only deal with subjective oughts in day to day life, intrinsic values could be used to develop a sort of infinite ideal. We ought to save lives, prevent pain, cause pleasure, and so forth. These general moral rules could be improved upon indefinitely. There might never be a "best" objective point reached. You might think saving 100 lives is "best" until you find out that omniscience would have enabled you to save 1,000 lives or more.

Obligations

The word "ought" is often taken to be synonymous with "obligation," but we sometimes contrast "obligation" with "supererogatory" oughts, "advised" oughts, "unadvised" oughts, "permissible" behavior, and "impermissible" behavior:

Obligation: We are morally obligated to do something when (a) a great deal of intrinsic value is at risk and (b) no exceedingly difficult behavior is required. For example, we are obligated to save a drowning child when doing so will cost ourselves very little because a human life is at risk (assuming saving the child wouldn't be too difficult). Horrible things can happen if we don't take action. A human life could be lost.

Some people seem to think "moral obligations" are things required in order to be a good person (or avoid being a bad person). This is a different use of the term and it requires a far greater understanding of morality in order to make sense because it might be difficult or impossible to know what a "good person" is.

Advised: If you morally ought to do something without a great deal of intrinsic value at risk, then we might merely say that the behavior is advised or preferable (or encouraged). Giving someone an aspirin to help them alleviate a headache isn't a big deal, but it is advised.

Unadvised: If you morally ought not do something without a great deal of intrinsic value at risk. For example, pinching a friend.

Permissible: If an action is permissible, then we aren't morally forbidden from doing it. Permissible actions include unadvised, advised, and obligated actions.

Impermissible: Impermissible actions are "forbidden." They are also a form of obligation. An action is impermissible when a significant amount of intrinsic value would be lost (or when negative intrinsic value would be caused). For example, killing people is impermissible when it leads to a significant loss of value. (It might be permissible to kill someone when it is necessary to save hundreds of lives.)

Many people seem to think that actions are forbidden (or impermissible) when doing the action would make you a bad person, but this understanding requires a great deal of moral knowledge. We don't need to know what makes someone a bad person to know that killing people is generally impermissible (leads to a significant loss of value).

Supererogatory: Supererogatory action requires that (a) a significant amount of value is at risk and (b) exceedingly difficult actions are required. For example, to devote one's life to charity while demonstrating an ingenious amount of skill difficult to emulate, and while demonstrating an unusual amount of effort (that would be unreasonable to demand of others).

People tend to define supererogatory actions as being significantly above the call of duty. Such actions are heroic or saint-like, such as committing one's life to charity or sacrificing oneself to save lives. Note that some people use the word "supererogatory" in a less strict sense and what I call "advised" behavior could be considered to be supererogatory.

Many people might say that supererogatory action is also "not required" to be a good person, but this definition will require significant moral knowledge that we tend not to demand of an everyday use of the word.

When do we have an obligation?

I have said that an action is an obligation if a great deal of intrinsic value is at risk. I have also said that an action is an obligation if it doesn't require exceedingly difficult behavior. We might wonder where to draw the line. How exactly do we know if a great deal of intrinsic value is at risk, and how do we know for sure that the behavior is too difficult to be an obligation? My answer: We don't need to. Ordinary language allows us to say that headaches aren't significantly important but a human life is. Saving a baby drowning in a small pool of water could be

quite easy, but saving a child drowning in a raging river could be exceedingly difficult.

It is quite possible that anti-realists are correct that our use of the term "moral obligation" is based on convention and/or instinct. However, a moral realist does not need the words to mean anything precise. As long as intrinsic values are relevant to our everyday understanding of "moral obligation," that is enough to help us understand everyday moral behavior.

Why don't we need to define what a "good person" is?

I admit that people sometimes use the word "obligation" as a requirement to be a good person, but I deny that this definition is feasible because (a) it is too difficult to know what a good person is and (b) we don't know if our understanding of "good person" reflects anything "real." Anti-realists might be correct that our idea of a "good person" is based on nothing other than a shared convention and/or instinct.

Although our ordinary use of the word "obligation" does not require a rich understanding of the "good person," I do think we can talk about what it means to be a good person in an abstract sense that could be useful. A "good person" is one we view as worthy of emulation or worthy as a teacher. This practical understanding of a good person could be quite helpful for our personal moral growth even though it doesn't seem to be necessary for our understanding of moral obligations in general.

3. Right/Wrong

Right and wrong concerns appropriate behavior. Right and wrong refers to little more than obligations and impermissible behavior. It is right if it's obligated (or supererogatory) and wrong if it is impermissible.

There are also subjective and objective sorts of right and wrong to match the respective objective and subjective obligations (or supererogatory or impermissible behavior). John Stuart Mill said that it is right to "maximize happiness" and wrong not to. This would be an objective sort of ought. However, we might subjectively merely ought to do what we can to make people happy given a reasonable amount of effort. (We could cure AIDS, but that doesn't sound very realistic as a goal for every living person.)

4. Universality

There is an idea that morality is the same for everyone. How much it is the same will depend on our moral theory. Morality is universal if it is in some sense "true for everyone." Moral values can be universal if they are true for everyone. If pain is bad, that is true for everyone. Your pain is bad, even though I am not you. Moral oughts can be universal if intrinsic values exist because everyone can have a reason to give someone an aspirin to help alleviate a headache. In that case the person's pain really matters, so it is better for their pain to be avoided.

If intrinsic values don't exist, it isn't clear that morality should be universal. Values will depend on subjective preferences and we might have no reason to demand that my headache be taken seriously by others.

There are at least two very important kinds of universality when dealing with morality – (a) Commonality and (b) universal will.

(a) Commonality

What I call "commonality" is the view that everyone shares certain kinds of moral considerations. If murder is wrong for everyone, then we all have that moral obligation in common. Commonality is an important position for moral realists because there are objective moral facts that we all share in common. Pain is bad, so (all things equal) harming people is wrong. Commonality is a rejection of relativism, which is the view that everyone has different equally valid moral values (or the view that morality is only true by convention).

There might be various levels of commonality. For example, a parent can have specific moral obligations to his or her children. I see no way that this view could be justified through intrinsic values, so it might be based on a social contract, social convention, and/or instinct. A moral realist will, however, have reason to agree to such conventions when it is essential in order to make sure his or her child is taken care of. Children seem to have intrinsic value, so everyone has some interest in making sure that children are taken care of. That doesn't mean that everyone in society must care for children equally. Instead, we could develop a culture or civilization that distributes various responsibilities to encourage specialization and focus.

In order to clarify that commonality does not require exactly the same obligations for everyone, I will touch upon the fact that the situation appears relevant to morality (but doesn't force us to reject commonality). I find it plausible that morality depends on the situation, and part of the situation can be characteristics of the person involved. All things equal, killing people is wrong. This is a universal truth for all people.

The circumstances: Killing in self defense is *generally* taken to be understandable because the situation requires that we protect our own lives. It is often too risky or difficult to defend ourselves without endangering the lives others. Taking the circumstance into consideration does not invalidate the universality of a moral action because we could list all the circumstances into a moral rule, such as, "Don't kill someone unless it is necessary to save several lives."

The individual: Some people are also capable of defending themselves without endangering the lives of others. These people ought not kill others in self defense when doing so would not require an extraordinary level of difficulty. Taking the individual into account for morality does not invalidate universality because we can have a moral rule that says, "Try to help those you can best help, for example, those approximately close to you." We might all have a moral interest that starving people are fed from other countries or planets, but it might not be as effective to try to help them as to help people closer.

Another example of relevant individual characteristics can have to do with our skills. A good swimmer has a better reason to try to save a drowning child in a river than a poor swimmer. A person educated in medicine has a better reason to be a doctor than a person trained to be a carpenter.

(b) Universal will

What I call "universal will" is the view of Kant – Each person must personally accept that everyone adopt one's own moral rules or values. If I personally don't find it acceptable to be killed by others willie nillie, then I can't find it acceptable to murder people (for myself). In other words, the universal will position of morality claims that morality requires us to reject hypocrisy. I can't claim to have a different moral status than someone else "just because I'm me!"

Moral anti-realists, such as R. M. Hare, accept universal will, but he is a cultural

relativist. He thinks that cultures determine our values. He just thinks that each culture must reject moral hypocrisy. I can't morally think I am personally above the moral law "just because I'm me!" He admits that it is possible for the moral law to apply to different people in different ways. (e.g. Parents have a responsibility towards their babies, but babies don't have responsibilities towards their parents.) However, we can't demand that morality is different for oneself without an overriding reason to do so.

R. M. Hare seems to think universality is just part of our moral language, but a moral realist does not have to agree. We can refuse to be morally hypocritical because moral values are real. Pain really is bad. I am not personally exempt from the moral universe because the same moral universe exists for all people to share.

It isn't obvious that moral anti-realist must reject hypocrisy because morality must be a sort of "every man for himself" situation. This can be a sort of relativism in which what is right and wrong for each person is different. "Ethical egoism," the view that everyone should only try to make themselves happy, could also allow hypocrisy to some extent. It might be of no use to worry about if our actions are universally acceptable. An anti-realist might argue "Yes, I want to kill you because it's good for me, but I don't think you should kill me if it's good for you. I am the center of my own universe."

Common Confusions about Universality

Universality is often confused with unconditionality, simplicity, and objectivity:

Unconditionality: Unconditionality is the view that moral values and obligations are inescapable. We can't opt out of morality. A doctor can decide to stop being a good doctor by quitting, but we can't opt out of being a good person by opting out of morality.

Also, non-moral considerations can't override our moral obligations. The fact that I want to kill someone doesn't somehow allow me to do it. The fact that I love my daughter doesn't give me an excuse to rob a bank to pay for her college education.

Unconditionality isn't the same thing as universality because we could accept that morality is universal without accepting that it is inescapable. It might be that moral values are merely one consideration for my actions among many, and

moral considerations provide no greater demands than my own desires. However, unconditionality does seem to assume that morality is universal. If moral demands are so important, then there must be some common moral values that we should follow (without hypocrisy.) If morality is unconditional, then it is universal; but if morality is universal, then it might not be unconditional.

Simplicity: Many people confuse universality with simplicity. They deny that the individual or situation could be taken into consideration. They would want a simple rule, such as "Never kill people" instead of a more complicated rule, such as "Never kill people unless there are overriding reason to do so." However, both of these rules can apply equally to everyone and are therefore universal.

Objectivity: Some people confuse universality with objectivity. Morality is ontologically objective if it is part of reality. Morality is epistemologically objective if we can find a reliable method to find moral facts. It is logically possible for morality to be universal, but not objective. (Perhaps morality is nothing more than a convention of language and the convention requires it be universal.) It is also logically possible for morality to be objective but not universal. (Perhaps morality is real, but each person produces a separate moral reality.)

5. Responsibility

There are at least two totally different meanings to the word "responsibility." One, "responsibility" can refer to our obligations. We are responsible to care for our children insofar as we have obligations to care for our children. Two, "responsibility" can refer to our personal capacity for fulfilling our obligations. Insane people might be said to lack responsibility when they are unable to live up to their obligations, but very wise and virtuous people could be very responsible for being good at living up to their obligations.

Responsibility is relevant to moral realism insofar as moral realism is relevant to obligations. We demand that people live up to their moral obligations because "so much is at stake." We demand that people behave in a way that doesn't cause significant harm (produce something intrinsically bad, such as pain) when doing so doesn't require excessively difficult behavior.

6. Rationality

I have already discussed moral rationality quite a bit in my essay "[Beliefs can't Motivate](#)." Moral rationality determines when someone acts in a way that "makes sense." It seems perfectly rational to give someone an aspirin who has a headache because their pain matters (even if I don't care much about his or her pain).

Moral realism is relevant to moral rationality insofar as we understand behavior that promote intrinsically good things (such as pleasure) as being *justified*. Promoting intrinsic value seems to make sense, even if we don't have a personal compulsion to help others. To call someone irrational for *engaging in behavior that helps others when not having a desire to do so* is extremely counterintuitive. (We might wonder if such behavior is possible, *but that isn't to say that it's irrational if it is impossible.*)

It is possible that moral rationality is a product of convention or instinct. Perhaps we don't have any right to say someone is "morally irrational" for harming others. Even so, it seems useful in everyday life for us to discuss ethics in terms of moral rationality because of our interest in promoting intrinsic values. We want our lives to be meaningful. We want to do something that really matters. If intrinsic values exist, then we can live meaningful lives and do things that really matter.

It can be helpful to understand moral rationality by contrasting Hume and Kant's view of moral rationality.

Hume: Hume thought that moral rationality was little more than to behave in a way that satisfied our desires. (The only sort of value would then be instrumental value.)

Kant: Kant argued that moral rationality seems to require that we behave in ways irrespective to our personal desires. I'm not sure that Kant is entirely correct, but he does seem right that there are morally relevant facts that don't depend on our desires. If we can cause someone else pain, that seems to be morally relevant whether or not I personally care about that person's pain.

On the other hand, it might be impossible to even *consider* someone else's pain if we don't care about their pain at all. (Kant admitted that "motivation" is different from "desire." It is possible that we could be motivated through some sort of practical reason without any sort of biological drive involved.) If Kant is wrong,

we could admit that moral rationality requires us to care about other people to some extent, but we could also have some reason to further develop our empathy rather than neglect our care for others.

In this installment, I will discuss how the following moral concepts can relate to moral realism:

7. Virtue

In the most simple terms, to be virtuous is to be willing and able to do what is right. Virtuous people have to be good at making decisions, have the capacity to undergo difficult behavior, and willing to actually do what one believes to be good. Virtue relates to moral realism because it requires us to promote intrinsic value and to develop the skills necessary to promote intrinsic value.

Moral virtue was noted by Aristotle as being mostly unconscious. We seem to develop good habits through life experience. This can be correct. Moral realism does not require that we use abstract reasoning to make all our moral decisions, but abstract reasoning might be important for moral improvement now and then. I find that reflecting on my behavior allows me to prepare myself to correct my behavior given that I encounter a similar situation. I can think, "Next time I will behave differently" and this seems to help me actually behave differently by planning how to behave ahead of time.

8. Justice

Justice does not seem to be clearly defined, but some philosophers seem to think it concerns "the right" rather than "the good." This sense of right is purposely distanced from intrinsic value. It is possible that justice is a separate real domain from realism of the good (intrinsic values), but moral realism does not require us to see justice in this way.

I suggest that we use "justice" to mean (a) the virtue of a group or (b) the agreeableness of society by ideal agents who have all non-moral knowledge. Plato used "justice" using the first definition in the Republic and it is relevant to moral realism considering that a virtuous group will promote intrinsic values.

The second definition is similar to John Rawls's view of Justice (and justification

of justice through reflective equilibrium.) I believe that it is meant to be practical: Society (and individuals) need to make moral decisions despite uncertainty concerning moral truth. Governments seem incapable of making good moral decisions, but it might be a good idea to demand that governments make moral decisions based on the agreeableness of the decision to fully rational people.

9. Rights

Rights tell us our entitlements. Other people's rights restrict our behavior. Rights are little more than the opposite end of an obligation (or impermissible behavior). Rights tend to be simple, such as "the right to life." The right to life means "all things equal, people are not allowed to kill you."

Rights are relevant to moral realism for the same reason obligations are: All things equal, we should promote intrinsic goods and we shouldn't destroy intrinsic goods. We generally have the right to things of intrinsic value and we generally don't have the right to take away intrinsic value enjoyed by others.

10. Unconditionality

Morality is unconditional (or "categorical") because it is "overriding." Nothing can be more important than what we morally ought to do. You can't say that you have an overriding reason to kill someone because you feel like it. The fact that morality is unconditional has everything to do with intrinsic values. Nothing "really matters" except intrinsic values, so we can't have anything better to do than what morality requires.

11. Ideals

Ideals are often thought of as perfections. An ideal is "perfect." I think this is actually a confusion because perfection implies a best state, but there need not be any best state. Instead, ideals could be seen to be limitless.

There are abstract ideals and concrete ideals.

Abstract Ideals: An abstract ideal is a limitless ideal that seems to be implied by right action and intrinsic values. We should ultimately want to do the best thing possible, and that "best thing" is the ideal. We should want to help everyone attain knowledge, for example. However, we need not suppose any such "best thing." Instead, we can admit that an ideal could be limitless. We might be able to teach 100 people math only to find out that we could have taught 1,000 people math.

No one is willing or able to promote abstract ideals in an ultimate sense. That would be impossible considering how limitless they are. Only an omnipotent being could be demanded to promote such an ideal.

Concrete Ideals: Concrete ideals are personal goals to promote intrinsic values better than we have been. We often realize that our behavior could be improved upon and we decide how we can modify our behavior for the better. These goals are concrete because there is a specific way that we can behave involved. Concrete ideals allow us to improve upon ourselves with realistic goals. We can improve ourselves a little every day and never be done.

12. Praise & Blame

Praise & Blame is the means in which we make our moral judgments known to others. People are appropriately praised when we judge that they have acted beyond the call of duty, and they are appropriately blamed when they fail to live up to their obligations.

Praise and blame is often used to psychologically reward or punish people. (See below.) Some people also praise and blame to make it known that someone has been judged as evil or as "someone who deserves suffering." This kind of blame seems to be little more than an expression of resentment and the desire for revenge.

13. Reward & Punishment

Reward & Punishment are non-rational ways of trying to control people's behavior. Reward is a kind of bribe (supposedly) for good behavior and punishment is a form of coercion to (supposedly) keep people from doing bad

things. Some people also see punishment as a sort of revenge, which is little more than an expression of resentment.

Reward and punishment could be morally justified insofar as they promote intrinsic value. Punishment does something usually prohibited because it harms people, but punishment might be necessary to keep some people from harming others.

Punishment is believed to be justified for promoting intrinsic values in various ways. A prison sentence could be hoped to protect society from criminals, to reform and educate criminals, or to deter people from committing crimes.

14. Guilt

Guilt refers to (a) an emotion of regret, (b) the judgment that someone has failed to live up to their obligations, and (c) the cause of a wrong action.

The Emotion of Regret

For most people the realization of failing to live up to their obligations (and causing harm) leads to suffering in the form of guilt. This emotion makes sense as a form of coercion. We feel bad when we harm others, so we should try our best not to harm others in order to avoid suffering.

It might be possible to stop feeling guilt but to still be a good person. We might simply want to live meaningful lives. In that case we might prefer to stop feeling guilt. We might be able to find a way to achieve inner peace and stop being judgmental towards our own mistakes.

Failed Obligations

To be guilty in the sense of failing to perform obligations is merely to be blameworthy.

Some people think someone is "guilty" only when they are sinful or evil. To be blameworthy would then make it seem that such a person deserves to suffer, but a moral realist has little reason to agree to this view. To think that someone "deserves suffering" seems overly vindictive.

Wrongdoing

To perform a wrong action is to be the cause of that action. We say that person is guilty of that action, just like a person can be guilty of a crime in the court of law. This meaning of "guilt" has nothing to do with personal virtue because we might make an unintentional mistake and still be guilty of a wrong action. However, this might require that we accept "objective oughts" because a person who does what he or she believes to be best given the current information is not doing anything wrong from the subjective viewpoint.

15. Moral Rules

What is right or wrong can be extremely complex and dependent on the situation, but moral rules are general and simple, such as "don't kill people." These are merely a kind of "rules of thumb" and do not always reflect the indefinite complexity of right and wrong. However, moral rules are relevant to moral realism because they should tell us how to "generally" promote intrinsic values.

Some people use "moral rules" to merely refer to "right behavior." However, the two terms are separate in general conversation and I see no reason to equivocate the two.

16. Equality

Many people seem to find equality to be central to morality. It is true that right and wrong is the same for everyone, and the same moral rules should apply to everyone because morality is "universal." In this sense morality requires *equality before the moral law* because intrinsic values exist for everyone. Pain isn't bad when you feel it, but not bad when I feel it.

Some people seem to think everyone has "equal" worth or intrinsic value. This is not an essential position for moral realists, but it seems like an important rule of thumb. If one person is more important than another, then it might be very difficult to know that for sure.

Certainly moral realism would not require that all living beings have equal worth.

We seem to assume that some animals have more intrinsic value than others. Humans, elephants, and chimpanzees all seem to have more worth than goldfish, tarantulas, and lobsters.

Part II: Emergence

Chapter 2: What is Emergence?

Scientists want to find out what causes minds and morality even though these things seem clearly different from the rest of reality. Philosophers have thought of three main answers to explain their existence: One, they are non-natural. Two, they are reducible to physics (atoms and energy). Three, they are emergent phenomena. I will discuss each of these possibilities.

The Non-Natural Explanation

The non-natural explanation for phenomena is unpopular among philosophers because it seems too mysterious. If minds or morality has a non-natural origin, then where could they come from? Here are a couple of possibilities:

1. God created them.
2. They always existed.

God created them.

The view that God directly creates minds and morality is popular among laymen because it's a pretty simple sounding idea. God did it, end of story. However, this answer might give up too quickly. We don't want to say God directly created something that could be explained by the natural world. For example, people might have thought lightning was directly caused by God at one point in time, but this is clearly a poor explanation for the existence of lightning.

It might be that God created the entire universe. In that case lightning, minds, and morality would have been created by God indirectly, but we don't want to say that God is the best explanation for creating any of these things when some natural explanation could also be available.

They always existed.

It is possible that minds and morality have always existed as eternal parts of the universe. Philosophers sometimes argue that platonic forms are the best explanation for a phenomena, such as mathematics. However, it seems strange to say that minds or platonic forms are eternal parts of the universe.

The Reductionist Explanation

We often find out that objects come from other parts of the universe. Water is nothing but H₂O, for example. What we think of as water is actually H₂O. Some philosopher hope to find out that everything is reducible in this way. They want to find out that physics is the only real part of the universe and everything is reducible to physics. Most philosophers find this to be plausible for chemistry, but it isn't entirely clear that biology, psychology, or morality could be reduced in this way.

Are minds reducible to physics? In fact, it seems very strange to say that minds are nothing but some system of particles and energy. We experience our mind's existence as being unified in space and time. In order to have a thought, we have to exist for more than just a millisecond. In order to see a picture, each piece of visual data must be brought together as part of a larger visual field. We don't just see a dot of green. We see a large picture. We experience the world in a first person perspective. Such a perspective can't be found in a system of particles.

If our mind is reducible to physics, then it would seem to be a massive illusion. I could understand the idea that colors are an illusion. Maybe colors are just an illusion caused by a neurological reaction to the world. Perhaps our experience of water is also an illusion. We experience water as being "wet" and "liquid," but perhaps water is really just a bunch of particles floating about. But how could a mind be an illusion? No one could experience such an illusion, so it doesn't seem possible for the mind to be an illusion.

Is morality reducible to physics? It also seems strange to say that morality is nothing but particles and energy. If morality is reducible to physics, then our ordinary experience of morality is an illusion. For example, I experience that pain is *bad* when I feel it. But pain can't be an illusion because it's nothing but an experience. An illusion is a deceptive experience, but there's nothing deceptive

about pain. Pain is nothing but a bad feeling.

In conclusion, to say that minds or morality is reducible to physics is implausible. We don't experience these things as being reducible, and the reality of minds and morality is, in part, our actual experiences.

The Emergence Explanation

The idea of emergence is that certain physical states or systems lead to irreducible elements of reality. Those states or systems are greater than the sum of their parts. For example, it seems reasonable to think that our brains give us minds. Brains might be fully understood in terms of physics, but it gives rise to minds, which are not fully describable in terms of physics. We can't describe what pain feels like in terms of atoms moving about.

Morality also appears to be emergent. Once we get pain, then we also get something new--moral facts. Pain is "bad," so causing pain willy nilly is wrong. Certain physical and psychological facts give rise to moral facts. Once we can cause pain, moral facts exist. (There are other morally relevant facts other than pain, but I'm just giving an example.)

In order to understand emergence, we need to understand in what sense minds and morality seem to be "irreducible." I suggest that it could be irreducible in the following ways:

1. Irreducible level of description.
2. Irreducible from the causal origin.
3. Irreducible sort of causation.
4. Irreducible sort of substance.
5. Irreducible sort of property.

1. Irreducible level of description.

Almost all philosophers agree that the mental level of description is not reducible to a description of physics. However, it is possible that this is just a fact about our language or our understanding of the world. The mind might not be describable entirely in terms of physics even if the mental level of description is causally irrelevant. (Atoms and energy might be the only causal parts of the universe.)

I agree that there are different levels of description, but I think that minds and morality are more than just an irreducible level of description. They are causally irreducible in some sense. This position will be discussed in detail below.

2. Irreducible from the causal origin.

Minds are not identical to the physics found in the brain. It might be that minds are caused by the physics, but minds seem to be more than the sum of their parts. When we see other people we could wonder if they have a mind. If their behavior is based on nothing other than atoms and so forth, then we might suspect they don't have minds, just like we have no reason to think that computers or robots have minds when their behavior is entirely explainable in terms of the physics.

The same seems to be true of morality. We know pain is bad because of how it feels, so pain does not seem to be entirely describable in terms of physics. We want to avoid pain because of how it feels, not just because atoms are moving about.

3. Irreducible sort of causation.

The causation of minds and morality isn't entirely describable in terms of physics as we know it. Some new causal interactions seem to take place when minds or morality exist. Minds allow us to make decisions based on observation and morality allows us to make decisions based on the badness of pain.

Irreducible sort of substance.

Descartes suggested that minds and matter are two different substances. Each substance is mutually exclusive part of reality. Minds are eternal and have no location, but matter is transitory and has a location. This "substance dualism" requires us to accept that physics and minds are both totally unrelated, and are therefore irreducible to each other. If morality is an eternal realm (platonic forms), then morality would also seem to be a different substance from material reality.

Philosophers have pretty much unanimously rejected substance dualism because the mind and body interact, but substance dualism seems to make it impossible for them to interact. We see from light hitting our eyes, and we can raise our hand through an act of will. If mind and matter are totally different parts of reality, then they can't touch, so they can't interact.

There is a similar problem with platonic forms. It seems impossible to know what is good or bad when values consist of an eternal non-material part of reality.

4. Irreducible sort of property.

Some philosophers have suggested that reality can have different sorts of properties. The brain could have material properties (location, mass, etc.) but also have mental properties (perception, reason, etc.) It seems reasonable to think that pain has both mental and moral properties. Pain is a feeling, but there's also something bad about it. It could have a property of having [intrinsic disvalue](#), for example.

John Searle criticized property dualists for claiming that mental properties don't do anything. Saying something has both mental and physical properties doesn't seem very interesting if the property in question is causally irrelevant. However, I don't think that mental properties are causally irrelevant.

In conclusion, it is plausible that minds and morality are irreducible in the sense of having an irreducible level of description, a unique causal influence, and irreducible sorts of properties.

Conclusion

Philosophers are often eager to point out that minds and morality are "physical" phenomena. That means that minds and morality are causally tied to the rest of the universe, such as atoms and energy. However, minds and morality seem to be more than just the movement of atoms. If they are emergent features of reality, then they are more than the sum of their parts.

Some people think that the universe described by scientists is meaningless. They think that our mind can only be explained in terms of having a supernatural soul, and morality can only exist from God. However, emergence is one way to understand how our universe is meaningful, contains minds, and contains morality without any supernatural elements.

I have not fully argued that minds or morality are emergent elements of reality within this discussion, but I have defended such a position in the past. I have written the following essays related to emergence:

1. [An Argument for Moral Realism](#)
2. [Objections to Moral Realism Part 1: The Is/Ought Gap](#)
3. [Objections to Moral Realism Part 3: Argument from Queerness](#)

Chapter 3: John Searle's Philosophy of the Mind

Some philosophers believe that the mind is a real and separate domain of reality, and this view seems analogous to the belief that morality is a real and separate domain of reality. I will present an example of mental realism and compare it to moral realism. Part of the moral debate is centered around the analogy of moral realism with mental realism. In particular, I will describe John Searle's realist philosophy of the mind and relate it to moral realism. His philosophy of the mind will be taken from his books Mind and Rationality in Action. To be a mental realist is to accept that minds exist as an irreducible part of the world. I will do the following:

1. Define mental realism.
2. Describe Searle's account of mental causation.
3. Discuss the analogy between moral and mental realism.

1. What is Mental Realism?

Searle believes that consciousness is irreducible to non-consciousness.¹ You know what pain is because you have experienced it before. You can't define pain as brain activity because the description of the brain activity is insufficient to understand what pain is.² We know that other people have pain because they have similar biology to us and experience pain for similar reasons. (Touching fire, for example.)

Searle describes consciousness as an irreducible emergent feature. Non-mental facts of the universe (about brains) somehow cause consciousness. Searle rejects what he calls “materialism”³ (the view that only particles and energy really exists)

1 “But why can't we show that consciousness was an illusion like sunsets and thus do an eliminative reduction?

Eliminative reductions rest on the distinction between appearance and reality. But we cannot show that every existence of consciousness is an illusion like sunsets, because where consciousness is concerned the appearance is the reality” (Mind 83-84).

2 Perhaps we could discover that pain and certain brain activity is identical, but if so, then there is an entity that has both a mental and a non-mental description, and we shouldn't necessarily accept that the mental description is a mere illusion. Some people think that water is identical to H₂O in this sense. This identity theory seems to involve a sort of property dualism. Searle rejects property dualism because he doesn't know how it can avoid epiphenomealism—Why should we believe that the mental description (*how we experience* pain, for example), to have any causal impact.

3 “Materialism tries to say truly that the universe is entirely made up of physical particles that exist in fields of force and are organized into systems. But it ends up saying falsely that there are no ontologically irreducible mental phenomena”

and believes that mental realism is compatible with naturalism⁴ (the view that there is only one reality and everything is causally connected to particles and energy).

In order to be a mental realist, we hope to admit that mental phenomena actually does something. If the mental description of pain was irrelevant to our behavior, then the mental description would be causally inert. This is what Searle calls mental epiphenomenalism, which means that mental events qua mental don't do anything.⁵ Epiphenomenalism is against our experience of mental events. For example, *the way we experience pain* seems to be a good reason to try to avoid pain. It feels bad. However, if epiphenomenalism is true, then we don't actually try to avoid pain because of how it feels. We would merely avoid pain (when we do) because of our non-mental brain activity.

It is possible to be a mental realist and to be an epiphenomenalist, but this is not a very interesting position. Realists will want to be able to prove that something is real, irreducible, and can have a causal impact.

2. Mental Causation

How mental causation is possible is mysterious. Physicists see the world as being entirely determined and predictable in terms of atoms, energy, and physical laws, with an additional component of random events (through quantum physics). If mental causation is real, then somehow a part of the universe other than particles and energy is going to end up having an impact on particles and energy. Nonetheless, Searle attempts to understand how mental causation might be possible. Some philosophers think Searle is too optimistic about mental causation in part because he advocates libertarian free will, but I don't think Searle should have to advocate libertarian free will.⁶

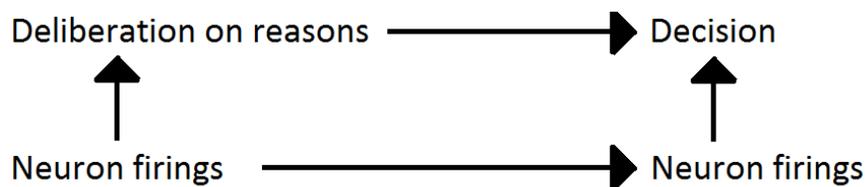
(Mind 88).

- 4 "As soon as we think that something really exists in the empirical world and we think we understand it even remotely, we call it 'physical.' As parts of the real world, consciousness, intentionality, and rationality are 'physical' phenomena, like anything else" (Rationality 270).
- 5 The view that mental states exist but are causally inert is called, 'epiphenomenalism.' On this view consciousness exists alright, but it is like the froth on the wave or the flash of sunlight reflected off the surface of the water. It is there but it does not really matter... But this is too counterintuitive. Every time I decide to raise my arm, it goes up. And it is not a random or statistical phenomenon. I do not say, 'Well, that' the thing about the old arm. Some days she goes up and some days she doesn't" (Mind 20-21).
- 6 Libertarian free will states that we have the power to choose one thing instead of another without anything causing our decision, and our decision is not made at random. As Searle argues, "[W]e experience our own normal voluntary actions in such a way that we sense alternate possibilities of action open to us, and we sense that the psychological antecedents of

Searle provides us with two hypotheses concerning mental causation. The first hypothesis is simply that there is no mental causation, and the second is that we have free will. I will also describe a third hypothesis: mental causation without free will.

Hypothesis 1: Epiphenomealism

He considers that we might experience that we have free will (and the psychological descriptions of our actions are causally effective), but the psychological description might make no difference. Hypothesis 1 states that our mental activity is caused by our brain state at every moment. He draws a diagram of it as the following:



The top area (deliberations and the decision) are the psychological level of description, and the bottom area (neuron firings) are part of the non-psychological level of description. Neuron firings cause the irreducible description of deliberations on reasons, and neuron firings later on cause the decision. However, the decision wasn't made because of reasons because reasons are part of an epiphenomenal mental event. More importantly, neuron firings (our brain state) at one moment cause our brain state some time later. Physical causes are all that matter.

Searle also argues that we experience our mental events (deliberations) as being insufficient to cause our decision. No problem. If hypothesis 1 is correct, it's just an illusion. Neuron firings (brain states) were all that mattered all along.⁷

This diagram is pretty much how any mental event could be represented. No matter what we experience within our first person perspective, it is caused by nothing other than brain states.

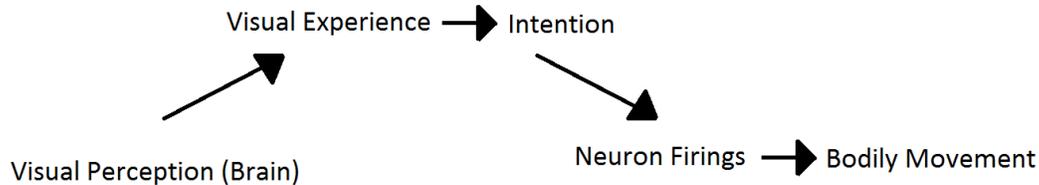
the action are not sufficient to fix the action" (*Rationality* 277).

⁷ "The indeterminacy at the psychological level is matched by a completely deterministic system at the neurobiological level" (*Rationality* 283).

Hypothesis 2: Libertarian Free Will

We experience that we have free will, and the psychological level of description is causally effective. Searle argues that his diagrams will no longer be of use, and our mind is a “system feature” of the brain.⁸

I propose the following diagram for hypothesis 2 in order to present mental causation at this level, even though it is probably an over-simplification:



This is a diagram of light hitting our eye and causing a brain state (e.g. of a baseball being thrown at us), which gives us a visual experience from the psychological level of description, which could partially cause us to react in a certain way (e.g. to try to catch the ball), which causes a brain state, and the brain state causes the bodily movement of catching the ball.

This diagram could also be used to show why we try to avoid pain. We touch fire, the brain state is affected by the fire, we experience pain from the brain state, the pain partially causes us to try to remove our hand from the fire, the intention to remove our hand causes a brain state, and the brain state causes our hand to be removed from the fire.

Notice that hypothesis 2 requires that the psychological level of description is *capable of causing particles to move in the brain*. However, Searle at one time admitted, “There are no gaps in the brain,” which is to say that everything is

⁸ “On the alternate view (hypothesis 2), the absence of causally sufficient conditions at the psychological level is matched by a parallel lack of causally sufficient conditions at the neurological level. But what could that possibly mean? What is the diagram supposed to look like on any such hypothesis? At this point it seems to me we have to examine critically the assumptions built into our diagrammatic representation with its metaphors of “bottom-up,” “top-down,” “levels of description,” etc. I think they are going to prove inadequate at this stage. The problem is this: the idea that consciousness is a higher-level or surface feature of the brain gives us a picture of consciousness as like the paint on the surface of the table. Then the question of top-down and bottom-up causation is one of reaching up or reaching down. All of that is wrong. Consciousness is no more on the surface of the brain than liquidity is on the surface of water. Rather the idea we are trying to express is that consciousness is a *system feature*. It is a feature of the whole system and is present—literally—at all of the relevant places of the system in the same way that the water in a glass is liquid throughout... But then the picture of different levels moving in parallel, which is represented in our diagram, is wrong. The whole system moves at once. (Rationality 286-287)

sufficiently caused in the brain (Mind 159).⁹ This is a big problem because Searle argues that we have free will. If our free will can move particles in indeterminate ways, then the non-psychological level of description will also be indeterminate. How does he try to solve this problem? By admitting that the non-psychological level of description might not have causally sufficient conditions because of quantum physics. “If we keep on going down to the quantum-mechanical level, then it may seem less surprising that we have an absence of causally sufficient conditions” (Rationality 288). Searle might imagine that the psychological level of description is only effective because it can effect the quantum-mechanical level. Searle uses vague terms to explain how mental causation can be possible when he says, “The right way to think of this is not so much “top-down” but as system causation. The system, as a system, is made up of the elements... the system as a conscious system can have effects on individual elements, neurons and synapses, even though the system is made up of them” (Rationality 289).

Hypothesis 3: Non-Libertarian Mental Causation

We could hypothesize the same thing as hypothesis 2 except without free will. Either we don't experience free will or our free will experience is an illusion. Either way, it seems possible to use reasons without free will. We could try to avoid pain because it feels bad, even if we don't have free will.

Hypothesis 3 might also require us to admit that particles in the brain will be moved by the psychological level of description. It might not move particles in a random way, but it might still move them in unexpected ways. Brain states will no longer be sufficient to cause other brain states when described in exclusively in a non-psychological way. However, this does not necessarily require us to admit that the quantum-mechanical level is involved in the process because there is nothing necessarily random about mental causation.

3. Analogy With Moral Realism

The main analogy with moral realism, is in at least three ways. One, moral realism also requires us to accept irreducible parts of the world. A moral realist would argue that the badness of pain is irreducible to non-moral reality. We can't understand badness by describing particles and so forth.

⁹ Determinism means “everything has causally sufficient conditions” and determined means “there was causally sufficient conditions.” Searle argues that the brain is determined.

Two, if moral realism is true, then we hope that it is causally effective. We hope that the badness of pain actually matters as we experience it by making a difference (helping us decide to avoid pain, for example).

Three, both moral realism and mental realism might require us to accept emergence. Morality and psychology are irreducible levels of description, but they seem to depend on particles (material reality) to exist.

If we can reasonably accept mental realism despite these metaphysical claims, then we might be able to reasonably accept moral realism as well.

Conclusion

I do not know that Searle's understanding of mental realism is the best theory at this time or that it is the best theory possible, but his theory is sensitive to our actual psychological experiences, and it seems to be a fairly reasonable theory to accept. There are probably other mental realist theories that would also be analogous to moral realism.

If Searle is right that we can reasonably accept an irreducible, causally effective, emergent part of reality, then it might be reasonable to accept moral realism. If moral realism is uniquely unacceptable because it isn't as reasonable as mental realism, then we need to know what makes moral realism unacceptable.

Part III: Worldviews

Chapter 4: Early Worldviews of Reality

We want to know how minds, the soul, and mathematics could be part of the world. Such parts of reality seem strange and could have “objectionable features.” Philosophers have tried to understand these elements since the beginning of philosophy itself and seemed to understand it as the problem of “being and becoming” or the unchanging and change. Some of the most extreme views of reality were proposed by Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Spinoza, which are all attempts to make sense of the world including the strange parts. Our current worldview is primarily based on Heraclitus and Democritus, who thought that reality was a constant flux of matter.

I will discuss the following:

1. Being and Becoming
2. The Differing Worldviews

1. Being and Becoming

Being (the Unchanging)

Not everything in reality seems to change all the time. For example,

1. “ $1+1=2$ ” seems to be an unchanging fact.
2. I am the same person that I was two seconds ago.
3. Murder has always been wrong.

Logic, mathematics, the mind, and morality all seem to have unchanging elements.

Becoming (the Changing)

Many things seem to change. For example,

1. People come into existence and die.
2. All material objects seem to disintegrate.
3. We have different thoughts and experiences at different moments in time.

Material reality seems to be constantly changing.

2. Worldviews

I will discuss my understanding of the different worldviews of reality proposed by Thales, Heraclitus, Democritus, Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, and Descartes:

Thales

[Thales](#) wanted to understand reality without any superstition or mythology. He wanted a deeper, more concrete understanding. Anything mysterious would fail to live up to his demands to make sense of the universe. He proposed that all of reality was from water. After all, we know water can be a solid, liquid, or gas. He thought that all of reality could be part of one sort of thing, which could help us make sense out of the world without any appeal to ghosts, gods, or mythology.

Heraclitus

[Heraclitus](#) built upon Thales's position, but he was concerned with problems of accepting “being.” He decided that the best way to make sense out of the world is to simply deny the existence of being. Everything is becoming. Everything is constantly changing. “No one can walk into the same river twice” because the river is always a different thing, and the person is always a different thing. The fact that we think we are the same person as we were two seconds ago is an illusion.

He said that everything comes from fire rather than water because “water” sounds more unchanging, but fire is clearly always changing.

Heraclitus denied that the universe is eternal. To accept that the universe is eternal seems to be to accept an unchanging fact. Instead, the universe comes into being and then goes out of existence. For anything to change is for

something to come into and out of existence.

It is unclear to me what Heraclitus disliked so much about “being,” but it does sound dualistic. If there is both change and the changeless, then there are two completely different elements of reality. By denying that being exists is to endorse a monistic view that there is only one sort of reality.

Democritus

[Democritus](#) proposed that everything changes except for atoms, small particles that make up reality. Atoms are eternal and unchanging, but they can move. Everything is nothing but the movement of these particles. He agreed with Heraclitus that much of our experiences are illusory because we don't experience everything as the movement of particles. For Democritus the main illusion we experience is that of *unity*—I might seem to be *one* person, but I am not really one thing after all. He introduced us to *reductionism*—the view that something is *nothing but* something else. For example, a human being is nothing but atoms moving and stuck together in a certain way.

Modern science has adopted Democritus's reductionism and many philosophers have continued to attempt to prove that many elements of reality are illusions because they are *nothing but* the activity of particles and energy. However, this tradition is one started by Heraclitus, and we now agree with Heraclitus that the universe is created and destroyed. No material particle is eternal after all.

Parmenides

[Parmenides](#) thought that change was a big problem, so he decided that there is only being. Becoming is an illusion for him. Nothing changes or moves. All of our experiences of the material world or ourselves involving change is an illusion. Additionally, Parmenides rejects disunity. Only one thing exists.

Parmenides could have been motivated by Heraclitus's view that the universe comes into existence. Such a view is unintuitive. It seems wrong that the universe could have come into existence. Nothing could “cause” such an event. If we reject Heraclitus's origin of the universe, then we might have to reject his entire worldview. If we reject Heraclitus's view, but share his interest in monism, then we could end up accepting the worldview of Parmenides.

Although his view is extremely strange to us now, it is similar to Hinduism and it could be based on it. Hindus believe that everything is God and our experience of disunity is an illusion.

Parmenides's worldview is currently taken to be absurd. We reject his view because it is mysterious and “disproven by experience.” By rejecting his worldview, we have to reject almost everything he says about reality. That leads us back to a view much like Heraclitus's, and we now seem to accept that the universe might have popped into existence.

Plato

[Plato](#) greatly agreed with Parmenides, but he thought that the material world and disunity both exist. The material world and disunity is *caused* by the eternal and unchanging realm (of the Forms or “the Good”), much like the universe of Parmenides. Plato has committed himself to a kind of dualism to accommodate both being and becoming, but he sides more with being than becoming.

Plato's dualism is one of the changing and unchanging, but he proposes that each element is somehow part of a separate realm involving different features. The forms are eternal, unchanging, abstract, and seemingly locationless. It is then impossible to understand how the forms could cause anything to happen to the material world. How could we know anything about the forms? They aren't something we can look at or experience with our senses.

I believe that Plato's worldview was greatly motivated by ethics. Many people rejected that morality could have any reality and decided that our moral rules were merely made up cultural customs. The view that morality is an illusion was compatible with the worldviews of Heraclitus, Democritus, and Parmenides. If morality is an illusion, then “nothing really matters.” We might as well hurt other people whenever it would benefit ourselves. If anything really matters and we shouldn't harm others to benefit ourselves, then we need to know how morality could be a real irreducible part of reality totally unlike the material world. Plato provided the first attempt to answer this question.

Philosophers have mostly rejected Plato, but there are still some supporters. Some philosophers agree that there are eternal unchanging elements of reality, such as mathematics, and something like the forms might be necessary to accommodate for such unchanging elements.

Aristotle

[Aristotle](#) shared Plato's interest in including both being and becoming, but disliked Plato's dualism. He adopted Plato's forms, but decided that the forms are part of material reality. Animals each have a “form” or “essence” that is part of them. Each dog is a dog because it has the doggy essence. Dogs have always existed and are unchanging.

Philosophers have rejected Aristotle's worldview. We don't think objects have an essence. Human beings are only human beings insofar as their DNA is sufficiently similar. The theory of essence does not accommodate for the fact that each species evolves. There were wolves, slightly more doglike wolves, dog-wolves, and then dogs. The dog-wolves are seen as “transitional,” neither wolves nor dogs. However, we could easily say that both dogs and wolves are transitional instead. All species are actually transitional.

Spinoza

[Spinoza](#) decided that there is only one reality and everything is unified, but one reality can have all sorts of properties. Everything is God, but God is manifested in people who have both mental and physical properties.

Although philosophers have rejected Spinoza's worldview, it has inspired many new worldviews, such as [property dualism](#) and emergence. Property dualists think that the entire world is physical, but some physical objects can have mental properties. (One object can have both mental and physical properties.)

[Emergence](#) theorists think that the mind is caused by a distribution and movement of particles. There can be parts of the physical world that are made up of particles, but other parts could be mental. Consciousness itself could be a physical part of reality, even though it is a different sort of physicality than we normally think of. Emergence theorists usually agree that most of reality lacks unity, but mental phenomena does seem to be a unified part of the world. Unity is a bit strange, but it can be caused by some sort of distribution and movement of particles.

Descartes

[Descartes](#) proposed that there is a physical substance and a mental substance. Each substance has totally different properties. The physical involves movement, change, location, mass, and extension. The mental involves thought and experience, but it is eternal and locationless.

Descartes's theory has been rejected by philosophers. The problem is that the mental and physical substances are entirely different and can't interact. When I want to raise my arm, how could my intention (a mental object) cause my arm (a physical object) to do anything? It would be impossible. The mind could never touch the physical or move it.

Conclusion

Most scientists and philosophers have adopted a worldview based on Heraclitus's monistic world of flux and Democritus's world of reductionism. This worldview is very compatible with science and it is something many non-philosophers even take for granted. The view has found “being” (the unchanging) and unity to be objectionable. Logic, mathematics, morality, the mind, and the soul are all found to have objectionable elements. Philosophers have often hoped to debunk these parts of reality and show them to be illusions. These parts of reality have features quite unlike the movement of particles and energy. For example, an obligation not to kill people does not seem to just be a configuration of particles and energy. The obligation is prescriptive and it seems to involve some sort of importance. Human life seems to really matter.

Additionally, the human mind seems to be unified, it seems to have an identity, and it seems to persist in time. Our visual experience is understood to be one event that must be grasped by a mind in order to make any sense. It doesn't seem to be several pixels of information processed as a disunity.

Finally, mathematics seems to be eternal despite the fact that we have no idea how we could know anything about an eternal part of reality.

Chapter 5: The Theological Worldview of Reality

I have [discussed many philosophical worldviews](#), but I left out my understanding of the religious philosophical worldview involving God's existence. I want to consider my understanding of the theological worldview here. The theological worldview (e.g. the Christian worldview) has philosophical implications mainly insofar as theologians have borrowed arguments from Parmenides and Plato. Religious philosophy has been rejected by most respectable contemporary philosophers, but there is some motivation behind the belief in God. In particular, people attracted to religious philosophy and the belief in God want to know more about the universe than other philosophers, even if it requires a great deal of speculation. Atheists often see such hypotheses as requiring "wild speculation."

I will talk about the following:

1. How religious philosophers have borrowed arguments from Parmenides and Plato.
2. The motivation of religious philosophy.
3. Objections to religious philosophy.

Parmenides and Plato

I have already discussed my understanding of the worldviews of Parmenides and Plato, but I will now discuss how I understand their views to be relevant to religious philosophy and the belief in God.

Parmenides

Parmenides believed that there is only one domain of reality and only one object of reality. It is unchanging and unmoving. The material world as we experience it is a massive illusion. I believe Parmenides thought the material world was impossible because it would require that we could get something for nothing. Even many scientists today agree that energy can't be created or destroyed. In other words, the material world would have to pop into existence and nothing could cause it to do so. This, he thought, would be impossible.

The pre-Socratic philosophers saw the material world as one that constantly

decays and disintegrates. The universe tends towards chaos, not order. If the material world is eternal, they would expect that it would eventually crumble apart and everyone would die. In fact, it would have done so a long time ago. This is actually much like what scientists now call [entropy](#). We currently believe that everything in the universe will eventually fall apart except for light. Even black holes will disintegrate.

The fact that the universe hasn't fallen apart is evidence that the material world isn't eternal. So, it might have popped into existence. But Parmenides thought this answer was absurd. He thought that there must be an eternal domain of reality and he thought there could only be one domain of reality. After all, two separate domains of reality probably couldn't interact. (If the mind is a separate domain of reality from the body, then how could I choose to raise my hand?) Parmenides decided that we should reject the material world entirely in favor of an eternal, unchanging, and completely unified reality.

We could provide the following argument in favor of the worldview of Parmenides:

1. There can only be one domain of reality.
2. The material world and the eternal are two separate domains of reality.
3. The eternal must exist because reality can't just pop into existence.
4. Therefore, the material world can't exist.

Plato

Plato decided that two domains of reality can exist. He agreed with Parmenides that an eternal realm exists ([the Forms](#)) and he also found it to be the most real and most important part of reality. Plato suggested that the material world comes in degrees closer to the eternal realm. We can perfect ourselves and become more perfect. Our souls would then be much more like the eternal than the material world as many people imagine it to be.

The problem of the material world popping into existence isn't a problem for Plato because the material world can somehow be created by the eternal realm.

We could provide an argument for Plato's worldview as the following:

1. The material world exists.
2. The material world can't pop into existence out of nothing.
3. Something must be eternal.
4. The material world can't be eternal.
5. If the material world exists, then it must have been created by an eternal realm.
6. Therefore, that which is eternal created the material world.

How does this relate to religion?

Many religious philosophers plagiarized Plato's philosophy with minor adjustments almost right after Christianity was created. They also believe in a material and an eternal realm and they believe that it helps them explain the beginning of the universe. They don't have to assume that the material world just pops into existence out of nothing.

The main difference between the worldview of religious philosophers and Plato is that religious philosophers believe that the eternal realm is God and Plato believes that the eternal realm is the forms.

The motivation of religious philosophy.

Religious philosophers tend to want to understand reality no matter how little we actually can know about the universe. We can't confirm the existence of an eternal realm or God, but they would still prefer to speculate about such things as long as it provides some possible answer rather than none.

Objections to religious philosophy.

How can the eternal and material realms interact?

If we agree with Plato that multiple domains of reality exist with totally different properties, then we are left with a huge problem. It is utterly mysterious how the two realms could interact. The eternal and unchanging realm couldn't possibly move anything or cause an event at any given moment because it is outside space and time. It doesn't move or change, so it can't push part of reality in any particular direction at any particular moment.

Who created God?

If we accept that “things need to be created,” then God must have also been created. Therefore, God is not a good explanation for where the material world came from because even God would have to be created in that view.

I don't find this argument fully satisfying because the whole point of an eternal realm is that it doesn't have to be created. Parmenides's answer that the universe is eternal is a fairly satisfying view because we can imagine that something wouldn't have to be created if it has always existed.

Of course, we could wonder if the material world could be eternal. It is true that entropy seems to prove that the material world can't be eternal, but that is only the material world as we experience it. There could be a more eternal part of the material world that we don't experience. This is speculative, but (a) it is no more speculative than to propose the existence of a separate eternal realm that we don't experience and (b) it doesn't require us to propose the existence of a separate domain of reality from material reality.

Why not the Forms?

It's not clear why Plato's worldview is supposed to be worse than the religious worldview. Why propose that God exists instead of just the Forms? Many religious philosophers seem to believe that God is the Forms *and more*. But we should prefer to only believe in the Forms rather than the Forms and something else. We should only believe that God exists if it is necessary.

Why can't material reality pop into existence?

Although most scientists believe that energy can't be created or destroyed, it is still possible that the universe popped into existence out of nothing. This might sound absurd, but we can't just rule out such a possibility because we don't like the sound of it.

Extraordinary beliefs require extraordinary evidence.

We shouldn't propose more to exist in reality than necessary. Most people don't believe aliens visit the planet Earth because we can explain UFO's as government experiments and so on. If we want others to believe in strange entities, then we

need a great deal of evidence to expect anyone to do so. Aliens visiting the Earth is scientifically possible, but unlikely. God existing on the other hand requires us to believe in something totally unlike the scientific worldview—an eternal, unchanging, unmoving, entity that can have thoughts. We can't expect anyone to accept such a hypothesis without a great deal of evidence.

Philosophers have argued that we simply don't have enough evidence to reliably believe in God at this time—It hasn't even been established that the belief in God explains any particular philosophical question better than some other hypothesis.

Conclusion

There might be some reason to accept the existence of God if we accept that any hypothesis is better than none, but even then it isn't clear. The main reason to believe in God is that an eternal realm is necessary for the existence of the material realm, but this is far from proven. The material world might have always existed, or it might have just popped into existence. Philosophers who want to know which of these “hypotheses” to accept will need to find out why one view is preferable to another.

Additionally, even if an eternal realm does exist, we don't know that it has anything to do with God. Plato's Forms or the unchanging world of Parmenides do not require us to accept the existence of gods.

Chapter 6: Emergence: A New Worldview of Reality

I believe in timeless elements of reality and irreducible elements of reality. Minds, morality, and mathematics seem to be beyond the reality as described in physics, but the view that only material reality exists is also very attractive. The solution that some philosophers have come up with is to combine the two. The only reality is physical and everything is connected to the reality as described by physics, but some elements of reality is more than the sum of their parts.

I will discuss the following:

1. Why materialism is attractive.
2. Why the alternatives are unattractive.
3. The challenge to materialism.
4. The new worldview of reality.

Materialism is attractive because it is based on our understanding of science and our instinctual assumptions of the world, and it poses only one domain of reality. It is quantifiable and can be represented geometrically. Posing one domain of reality is preferable as long as that one domain can fully account for our experiences. The alternatives to materialism are mysterious and difficult to model. Additionally, they usually require a strange domain of reality to account for experiences that might be equally explainable for a materialist.

The problem for materialism is that we have minds, morality, and mathematics, and these elements of reality don't seem to be anything like atoms or energy.

I will discuss the new worldview of reality insofar as it relates to minds, morality, and mathematics. I believe that minds and morality are both irreducible elements of reality. They are emergent phenomenon that arises from matter in motion combined with undiscovered laws of physics. Mathematics and logic are constraints on reality but nothing has to actually exist to make it so. $1+1=2$ is true whenever you can add two unities because it would be impossible for it to be any other way. Minds, morality, and mathematics are not *merely* human inventions or psychological tendencies of human beings. They could have a relation to human inventions and psychological tendencies, but they are also part of reality itself.

1. Why materialism is attractive.

Materialism is attractive for the following reasons:

1. It's based on our understanding of science.
2. It's based on our instinctual assumptions.
3. It only posits one domain of reality.

It's based on our understanding of science.

Scientists talk about electrons, atoms, and chemicals. The assumption is that these things exist outside of us and they really do exist as the scientists describe them. Even if a scientist is wrong about what electrons really are, we assume that something really exists that we currently call "electron" just like something really exists that we call "water." Only given time could we find out what an electron really is just like only with time could we find out that water is really H₂O.

The view that science tells us what really exists (even when unobservable) is called [scientific realism](#). Scientific anti-realists tend to only question the existence of unobservable phenomenon, such as electrons. When it comes to things we can observe, such as germs, they still usually agree that they exist. So, some scientific anti-realists do think it is possible that electrons really exist. They just don't want to say that electrons exist until they can be observed. (Once upon a time germs couldn't be observed, but now they can.)

It's based on our instinctual assumptions.

We seem to instinctively assume various things that involve a material world. For example, (a) there is a world that exists external to us and (b) objects that exist are extended.

It only posits one domain of reality.

If one domain of reality could explain a phenomenon just as well as two, then we would prefer the view that posits only one domain. If we can explain reality as we know it through one material world, then we should prefer that view to a view that requires us believe in other domains of reality. For example, if our world as we understand it can explain our experiences of UFOs (e.g. as government experiments), then it seems like a bad idea to posit the existence of aliens.

Why the alternatives are unattractive.

2. Why The alternatives to materialism are unattractive.

I will discuss the following alternatives to materialism:

1. Substance Dualism
2. Platonic Idealism
3. Subjective Idealism

Substance Dualism

Substance dualism says that there are two totally different kinds of reality. There is material and there are minds. So, the material world does exist, but dualism posits two domains of reality instead of one. One problem with dualism is that it can't explain how the mind and brain can interact. They are both so different that my will to raise my arm shouldn't be able to explain how my material arm actually lifted up.

Platonic Idealism

Platonic idealism is the view that the most real part of reality is an eternal realm (of the Forms). This realm is completely different than our experience of the material world. It is unchanging, creative, and outside space and time. The problem is that we have no idea how such a realm could interact with the material world or produce it, which is quite similar to the objection to dualism. Some contemporary philosophers seem to think that Plato's forms exist in addition to the material world. This sounds like a sort of dualism that posits two equally existing domains of reality.

Subjective Idealism

Subjective idealism says that only a world of minds exists and the material world is an illusion that only exists in a dream world. The view that some objects really do exist outside of us is something that everyone seems to believe, and the view that such a reality "doesn't really exist" seems to be in need of a great deal of explanation. For example, we could all be in a dream world, but then we want to hear the story about how such a dream world came about and how we all ended up in it. Additionally, if we are in a dream world, then we would want to know

why I can't change reality from thought alone. It seems like I have to pick up an object with my hand and I can't just move it by wanting it to be moved. I would expect that we could do that in a dream world.

Additionally, if we are in a dream world, then we want to know why we all have similar experiences. Why do we both see the same world and same objects? If we are just like ghosts, then I would expect that we couldn't really see, touch, taste, or smell anything. Perception seems to require some sort of causal connection, but no such connection exists in a dream world. One object wouldn't reflect light into two different people's eyes. Perhaps God could cause such shared experiences, but it isn't clear how that could happen either.

3. The challenge to materialism.

The challenge to materialism is that not all parts of reality, such as the mind, can be explained by it. As far as we can tell the mind is nothing like atoms and so on. I can know everything about the brain and never know anything about the mind. To fully know what seeing the color green is like requires us to actually see it.

Some materialists seem to think that the mind is an illusion, but there are at least two problems with this view. First, illusions are "deceptive experiences," but *deceptive experiences* seem to be *mental* in character. You need a person to have a mental experience of deception in order to experience an illusion. You could ask a person who has hallucinations, "What is it like for *you* to *experience* hallucinations?" We can't even understand what a hallucination is without understanding that a mind is involved because the point to a hallucination is that there is a *mental experience* that doesn't match the external world.

Second, it seems very important that the mind can actually do something. We think that we can make choices and use reasons to make better choices. For example, we experience pain and we don't like it. We would like to think that our experience of pain isn't in vain. Our *experience* of pain seems to help us decide to do one sort of thing instead of another. If the mind is an illusion and can't do anything, then the brain does everything for us. In that case you would choose to take your hand out of a fire because of brain activity rather than your experience of pain.

Some materialists agree that the mind exists, but they have to then accept that

material reality can be quite strange. Minds are part of material reality, so material reality can't be entirely understood in terms of the reality described in physics (moving particles and waves).

4. The new worldview of reality.

I have already discussed the new worldview of reality in quite a bit of detail, such as in my essay, "[What is Emergence?](#)" I will quickly discuss how the new worldview of reality relates to the following:

1. Minds
2. Morality
3. Mathematics

Minds

The view that minds exist and are not reducible to the reality described by physics is what I call "mental realism" and I have already talked about it quite a bit in my essay, "[Searle's Philosophy of the Mind.](#)" The main idea is that the mind is more than the sum of its parts. Some people think that the mind is *nothing but* some configuration of moving particles, but the mind is more than the sum of its parts.

I agree with mental realism and I agree with emergence theorists. They believe that the mind comes into existence because of the material world. There are probably some sort of laws of nature that make minds come into existence given the right material conditions. The mind is part of the material world, but it is a different and more strange sort of material reality.

Although I don't think emergence is incredibly popular among philosophers, many philosophers of science believe that emergence is pretty normal even in chemistry. You might want to take a look at Eric R. Scerri's "[Reduction and Emergence in Chemistry.](#)"

Morality

Morality is also an emergent phenomenon. Nothing is right or wrong, good or bad, until the right material (and mental) conditions arise. Minds might have real value, so the existence of minds might be sufficient for the existence of value and

morality. Additionally, we believe that pain is relevant to morality. Once an organism can experience pleasure and pain, there will be good and bad experiences. I have discussed the view that morality is emergent many times in the past.

Mathematics

I am not convinced that mathematics is emergent in the way that minds or morality are. I suspect that mathematics and logic are both restraints on reality itself. These facts are eternal in the sense that it would be impossible for anything else to be true about math or logic. $1+1=2$ because it would be impossible for anything else to be true. "Every object is identical with itself" because it would be impossible to be otherwise. Same goes for "a statement can't be true and false in the same sense, place, and time."

Additionally, we can say that facts of math and logic are eternal and unchanging in at least two ways. One what is impossible for reality seems to stay the same. Two, if there is a manifestation of logic or math, then it will do so in the only way possible. "If you ever get $1+1$, then you will get 2." If you ever get a true statement, then it won't be false "in the same sense, place, and time." I find mathematical facts to be timeless in a similar way as facts of dinosaurs are timeless. [William J. Wainwright](#) argues that there are facts about dinosaurs that are true (and timeless) despite the fact that dinosaurs no longer exist ("In Defense of Non-Natural, Non-Theistic Moral Realism".)

Conclusion

I find materialism to be attractive because it seems to make a lot of sense. Materialism attempts to answer questions that we are currently unable to answer, so it is highly speculative, but something like materialism plus emergence seems to be a very legitimate hypothesis (and possibly the best hypothesis at this moment in time). Such a worldview can explain reality as described by physics as well as minds, morality, and math. Philosophers can't always give us the answers we desire, but they know the positive and negative implications of each hypothesis and can try to figure out which hypothesis is the most plausible given our current information.

Part IV: Is Moral Realism Healthy or Beneficial?

Chapter 7: Is Moral Realism Dangerous? (What about Relativism?)

Moral realism states that there are true moral statements that aren't just a "matter of taste." Some people think that moral realism encourages us to be oppressive, intolerant, and vengeful. Anti-realism (e.g. relativism) is supposedly much more "open minded" and encourages us to be tolerant of others. I disagree. I agree that certain forms of moral realism could lead to egregious forms of intolerance, but not all forms of moral realism. Although uneducated moral realist views can lead to problems, these problems can be avoided with careful philosophical consideration. Additionally, anti-realism itself could help people rationalize horrific actions.

I will discuss the following:

1. Ways moral realism could be dangerous.
2. Ways anti-realism can be dangerous.

Ways moral realism could be dangerous.

Moral realism could be considered to be harmful to society or individuals in the following ways:

1. It rationalizes behavior that harms others.
2. Moral realism leads to guilt.
3. It encourages oppressive behavior.
4. It encourages us to be closed minded.

I will consider each of these.

1. It rationalizes behavior that harms others.

It can (a) encourage us to demonize our enemies and (b) help us rationalize the idea that some people deserve punishment. There is a view that people are wholly responsible for their actions and their choice to do evil makes them evil. Such people can be “dehumanized” or “demonized” and are viewed as something that needs to be destroyed.

People who do evil are not always seen as being evil. Instead, we might merely think that they “deserve” punishment. It wouldn’t be fair to let criminals “get away with” their crimes. We should punish them to “get revenge” or “get even.”

My Objection: I am a moral realist, but I see no reason to agree that evil exists. I also disagree that some people “deserve” punishment. Although it is horrible to harm others, that doesn’t mean that the person harming others is evil. We don’t fully understand why some people are serial killers, but it seems likely that they are insane, incompetent, immature, or ignorant.

2. Moral realism leads to guilt.

When we harm others, we have a sense that things would have been better if we did otherwise. We can “regret” our action. We might also have a sense that we “owe” something to those we harm. If we broke a friend’s TV set, then we feel an obligation to pay for it. However, guilt is often supposed to be more than these feelings. To feel guilt is to emotionally punish ourselves as though we deserve pain. This means that “guilt” for some people is based on the idea that people deserve punishment.

The negative emotions caused by guilt can help motivate us to do good, but it can also be debilitating. It can make us too depressed to be productive members of society.

My Objection: Although I am a moral realist, I am not convinced that “guilt” is an appropriate emotion when taking in the sense that you should punish yourself. It might be based on strange beliefs based on an idea of “evil.” We can reject “guilt” for the same reason that we can reject that some people deserve punishment. However, it can be quite appropriate to regret harming people. We shouldn’t reject moral realism just to become sociopaths who don’t care for others.

3. It encourages oppressive behavior.

Those who believe something is wrong tell others what to believe. They tell others not to have an abortion or to refrain from homosexual behavior.

Additionally, they want to control the behavior of others by making abortion illegal and to ban same-sex marriages. Such behavior seems to be oppressive. To tell others what to think about morality is oppressive, and it's oppressive to tell other people what to do.

Moral realism states that there are moral truths, so it could be true that abortion is wrong, and it can be true that homosexual behavior is immoral.

My Objection: The big problem is that arrogant people tell other people what to think about morality without any justification to back it up. If we know that abortion is wrong, then we will have to be able to persuade others through reason.

Moral realism doesn't tell us that whatever we personally believe about morality is known for certain. Just the opposite. When two people disagree about a moral truth, only one person is correct. We would have to assess the evidence to decide which person is more likely right. It might even be possible that neither person has anything near certainty. We might not really be sure about whether or not abortion is wrong.

I must admit that when we find out that something is wrong, then we have a good reason to tell others. It seems perfectly understandable to tell someone that torturing babies is wrong. "Forcing our opinion" on others isn't such a bad thing in that case. In fact, it doesn't even seem oppressive to make torturing babies illegal. I think we should do whatever we can to protect babies from being tortured.

4. It encourages us to be closed minded.

If we think we know right and wrong, then no one will be able to convince us otherwise. If we think homosexuality is immoral, then we will just think we are right no matter what anyone says.

My Objection: I see no reason to agree to this. Moral realism gives us no more reason to be closed minded about right and wrong than scientific realism gives a scientist a reason to be closed minded about which sort of string theory is true. A

scientist could think one sort of string theory is true, but obviously we need evidence to be sure.

It might be that some religious people who think whatever the bible says about morality is the absolute truth will be closed minded, but that is not a position that moral realist philosophers agree to.

Ways anti-realism can be dangerous.

Is anti-realism dangerous? I am not completely sure, but uneducated versions of anti-realism can obviously be dangerous. The main line of thought is, “Nothing really matters, so I can do whatever I want.” I will discuss two ways that unsophisticated forms of anti-realism can be harmful:

1. It can't tell us when tolerance is appropriate.
2. It doesn't give us a reason to be altruistic.

1. It can't tell us when tolerance is appropriate.

Anti-realism can't tell us when tolerance is appropriate. Why do anti-realists insist that banning gay marriage is oppressive, but banning baby torturing isn't? We shouldn't be tolerant of harmful behavior. That's all moral realists need to claim. If an anti-realist wants us to believe that we should be tolerant of people harming others, then they have to agree to something absurd.

Anti-realists could argue that appropriate uses of tolerance is (a) determined by each culture, and/or (b) our instincts, and/or (c) whatever ideal rational people would agree to.

If each culture determines when we should be tolerant, then we would have to agree that torturing babies is justifiable in certain cultures. If our instincts determine when we should be tolerant, then flawed instincts could allow horrific crimes. If ideal rational people determine when we should be tolerant, then an anti-realist will end up being just as intolerant as moral realists. Anti-realists will decide to stop people from torturing babies and tell others that torturing babies is wrong, just like moral realists.

Moreover, although anti-realists can try to tell us when we “ought” to be tolerant,

it isn't clear what this "ought" consists in. A moral realist can say that we ought not torture babies because "so much is at stake." Torturing babies brings about something that "really matters" (extreme pain). On the other hand an anti-realist can't make such a claim. We might be able to identify what we "ought" to do, but it doesn't "really matter."

2. It doesn't give us a reason to be altruistic.

If moral realism is true, then harming people is a terrible thing to do. It really matters. But if anti-realism is true, then harming people is just something many people don't like. If anti-realism is true, I will have a good reason to put my own interests above the interests of others. For an anti-realist, my pleasure and pain is very real to me despite the fact that they "don't really matter," and the pleasure and pain of others doesn't matter at all (unless they matter *to me*). If I could steal from others to benefit myself, then I might as well do so.

A common response is that it is part of human nature to care about other people, but this isn't very satisfying for two reasons. One, we could train ourselves to care less about other people. Two, we are often tempted to serve our own interests rather than the interests of others, and "caring for others" doesn't always stop us from making decisions that harm others. A CEO of a car company can make a decision to increase profits by refusing to make a car safer. Lives could be endangered because it would be less profitable to make the car safer. Such a CEO will either be compelled to make the car safer out of compassion for others, or she won't. Anti-realism seems to require that the story ends there, but moral realism could have more to say. For example:

- It might be possible for the CEO to make the right decision because other people's lives "really matter."
- It might be possible for the CEO to develop a stronger sort of compassion to others.

An anti-realist can insist that we develop our sense of compassion, but I see no reason why I would want to do so. Compassion and empathy are pretty painful. I don't want to feel bad when bad things happen to other people unless their lives "really matter."

Conclusion

Although some sort of unreasonable form of moral realism could lead to unjustifiable intolerance, revenge, and oppression, it is not clear that all sorts of moral realism would lead to these problems. Additionally, anti-realism could lead to some problems as well. I have not argued that anti-realism is more dangerous than moral realism. Any uneducated view of moral realism or anti-realism could lead to problems, but it isn't clear that an educated view of either position would lead to the same problems.

Chapter 8: Are Intrinsic Value Beliefs Unhealthy? A Nietzschean Argument

Some people could think that intrinsic values should be rejected because it will lead to a negative attitude. If we think that pain is bad, then it will just make our lives worse. I think that some Nietzscheans could come to this conclusion.

Nietzsche argued that we should embrace pain and suffering. However, I suspect that he doesn't reject that "pain is [intrinsically bad](#)" based on the argument I will present. Instead, he finds that pain is (1) only of superficial concern, (2) it brings us benefits, and (3) a healthy person would embrace pain. Of these issues, the third is Nietzsche's primary concern. He doesn't tell us "the truth" about reality. Instead, he tells us what he believes is healthy (or unhealthy). Although "embracing pain" might seem incompatible with the view that pain is intrinsically bad, I disagree. We can embrace pain when we experience it and still prefer to avoid pain when possible based on the belief that it's intrinsically bad. I will discuss each of these issues.

1. Pain is Superficial

Nietzsche has multiple passages where he discusses how he views pain to be superficial. For example, consider the following:

Pleasure and pain are accompanying factors, not causes; they are second-rate valuations derived from a dominating value,—they are one with the feeling "useful," "harmful," and therefore they are absolutely fugitive and relative. For in regard to all utility and harmfulness there are a hundred different ways of asking "what for?" ([Will to Power](#), Aphorism 702)

The main reason that pain is "second rate" is because the greatest pain is emotional, which is caused by certain "dominating" values. For example, the belief that a loved one died. We think that our loved ones are so very important, and their death is seen as "tragic." All of this produces a great deal of suffering. Such suffering is "fugitive and relative" to the higher value, and it "accompanies" our thoughts rather than the cause of them. (The thought that a loved one died accompanies our grief, and our grief does not cause our thought that a loved one died.)

If our greatest suffering is a psychological phenomenon based on our values, then our greatest suffering shouldn't be seen to be of greater importance than the values that produce them. The death of a loved one is what matters most, not that we feel grief about it. It would be absurd to say that our grief matters more than the fact that a loved one died. If grief mattered most, then the death of a loved one shouldn't matter enough to cause grief in the first place.

Notice that Nietzsche doesn't use this passage to reject pain's intrinsic disvalue. He doesn't say that our pain doesn't matter at all. He just says that it is "second rate."

What about physical pain? Couldn't we decide to walk around hot coals to avoid pain? I don't see why not. Pain could be superficial, but it can still be worthy of consideration. It is part of our cost-benefit analysis when we want to make decisions.

2. Pain Gives us Benefits

Nietzsche finds that pain can make us stronger and healthier in the long run. Consider the following passages:

What does not destroy me, makes me stronger. ("Maxims and Arrows," [Twilight of the Idols](#), Aphorism 8).

I assess a man by the quantum of power and abundance of his will: not by its enfeeblement and extinction; I regard a philosophy which teaches denial of the will as a teaching of defamation and slander—I assess the power of a will by how much resistance, pain, torture it endures and knows how to turn to its advantage; I do not account the evil and painful character of existence a reproach to it, but hope rather that it will one day be more evil and painful than hitherto— ([Will to Power](#), Aphorism 382)

To those human beings who are of any concern to me I wish suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities—I wish that they should not remain unfamiliar with profound self-contempt, the torture of self-mistrust, the wretchedness of the vanquished: I have no pity for them, because I wish them the only thing that can prove today whether one is worth anything or

not—that one endures. ([Will to Power](#), Aphorism 910)

It isn't entirely explained how suffering helps us become healthy, but it does seem impossible to know how to deal with suffering without having to experience it quite a bit. We can imagine that people who always gets what they want would end up as spoiled brats and wouldn't know how to function properly. Such people could become furious and suffer a great deal in the rare instances that they don't get what they want.

We are told that pain can do us a great deal of good. Certainly we evolved pain precisely because people who don't experience pain have a lower reproductive advantage. Pain tells us not to bite our tongue, touch fire, and so on. However, none of this proves that pain isn't intrinsically bad. There is something we don't like about pain. It hurts. It would be absurd to totally ignore pain. It should be part of our cost-benefit analysis. If we are willing to feel pain, then we need to know why. If we have a choice of (1) feeling intense pain with no benefit, or (2) feeling pain with a benefit, then it would make sense to choose the second option.

3. We Should Embrace Pain

I believe that Friedrich Nietzsche was primarily interested in pragmatic arguments. He is skeptical about knowing the “truth” about reality, so he would rather concentrate on learning how to be healthy. If we have no reason to favor one theory over another, then we have some reason to accept the healthier theory. We then have a question, “Is it unhealthy to believe that pain is intrinsically bad?” If so, that could count as a reason to disbelieve that pain is intrinsically bad.

Nietzsche believes that the healthy person will have a positive outlook. The healthier we are, the more positive our outlook will be. Perhaps we can try to be healthier by adopting a more positive outlook. This isn't entirely implausible given the fact that [stress is such a huge cause of health problems](#). Nietzsche's endorsement of a positive outlook is what he calls “amor fati” (love of fate). Consider the following passages:

My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is

mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but love it. (“Why I Am So Clever,” [Ecce Homo](#), Aphorism 10)

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. Amor fati: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer. ([The Gay Science](#), Aphorism 276)

Nietzsche thinks that the healthiest sort of person will have the most positive attitude. That means they would have to not only love everything that happens *for its own sake* including pain. To be optimistic enough to welcome pain because it brings us benefits isn't good enough. We should welcome pain even if it brings us no benefit. Why? It would be healthy to do so.

Amor fati could be taken to be a challenge to intrinsic value insofar as we think pain is intrinsically bad. To think pain is intrinsically bad might be too pessimistic for “amor fati.”

I will discuss the following two challenges to the view that amor fati and the view that pain is intrinsically bad are compatible:

1. We can't psychologically embrace pain if we believe that it's intrinsically bad.
2. If pain is bad, then the value of the world could be negated.

1. We can't psychologically embrace pain if we believe that it's intrinsically bad.

Is it possible to love pain even if we believe that it's intrinsically bad? If we can learn to embrace our pain at all, then I believe that the answer is yes. Nietzsche wants us to embrace all the horrors of the world. We have to be able to be fully aware of such horrors and then laugh. Our personal suffering is inescapable. Pain hurts. There's no way around that. If we can love intense pain (and whatever else is most horrible) despite preferring to avoid such things, then I don't see why we can't love our pain with an honest belief that our pain is intrinsically bad.

If I am correct, then we can “love something for its own sake” even if it is “bad just for existing.” Either we have to totally deny that various horrors are

“intrinsically bad” or we can accept them despite being intrinsically bad. There doesn’t seem to be a big difference between the two possibilities.

It is a mistake to think that *amor fati* requires us to abandon our preferences entirely. It might be that we should prefer not to touch fire because it would be stupid to do so. To touch fire doesn’t seem to “make us stronger” or healthier. Sometimes doing painful things really does hurt us rather than “make us stronger.” The fact that pain is intrinsically bad (but loved anyway) makes good sense out of our preference not to feel pain needlessly. If we touch fire on accident it won’t be seen as “bad,” but we would prefer not doing so when we have a choice.

If pain isn’t intrinsically bad, it would still be possible to prefer to avoid touching fire when we have a choice. We could love our life and the world as it exists in its entirety even if we touch fire on accident, but we might love our life in its entirety slightly more if we don’t touch fire on accident. However, this position is harder for me to understand. I’m not sure what it is about pain that would be seen as “less good” unless we either (1) dislike pain or (2) believe pain is intrinsically bad. Nietzsche’s endorsement of *amor fati* seems to make it a lot easier to understand pain as being intrinsically bad.

2. If pain is bad, then the value of the world could be negated.

One of the earlier quotations suggested that the world would be better not existing because of all of the pain involved. Even if that isn’t the case currently, we could imagine that it could be the case in the future. There are two different responses I imagine one could have to this possibility while still endorsing *amor fati*. One, we could admit that the world could be “intrinsically bad overall” but love it anyway. Two, we could convince ourselves that pain is “superficial” and could never matter enough to negate the value of the world. Perhaps human life is worth an astronomical amount more than our pain could ever be worth.

Conclusion

Nietzsche was interested in pain and the common preoccupation with how terrible pain is, but he doesn’t say that pain isn’t intrinsically bad. He just talks about the fact that pain is superficial, pain can bring us benefits, and pain should be welcomed insofar as it would be healthy to do so.

Although *amor fati* could be seen to be incompatible with the belief that pain is intrinsically bad, I believe they are both compatible. Additionally, *amor fati* would not be against all intrinsic value beliefs. It is certainly possible to love life and the world as a whole if such things are intrinsically good, for example.

I have concentrated on one argument Nietzsche could have provided against pain having intrinsic value and I have described why I don't find it to be convincing. However, it is possible that Nietzsche did reject intrinsic values and gave arguments against them other than the one I presented.

Chapter 9: A Stoic & Buddhist Arguments Against Intrinsic Values

Nietzsche, Stoics, and Buddhists all have similar potential reasons to reject [intrinsic values](#). Nietzsche wants to embrace all of life including pain, the Stoics believe that everything that happens is for the best, and Buddhism requires us to withhold judgment. I have discussed how [Nietzsche's amor fati](#) (life affirmation) could be seen to conflict with pain's intrinsic disvalue, and now I will discuss how some people could believe Stoicism and Buddhism conflict with pain's intrinsic disvalue. However, I do not agree that these perspectives are necessarily incompatible with intrinsic values.

Stoicism requires that we believe that everything happens for the best, but that would merely require us to accept that pain is a necessary evil. Bad things can happen to individuals for a greater good.

Buddhism requires that we withhold judgment in order to avoid suffering and the belief that "pain is intrinsically bad" can cause suffering. However, I don't think such a belief necessarily causes suffering. There might be a calm way to contemplate pain's intrinsic disvalue.

A Stoic Argument Against Intrinsic Value

The Stoic philosophers agree with Nietzsche that we should embrace all of our life including the parts we tend to dislike because they believe that "everything that happens is for the best." The Stoics believe that Divine Reason (God) makes sure that everything happens for the best, so we have nothing to worry about and nothing worth complaining about. This was mentioned by Marcus Aurelius when he said, "No one is going to stop you from living according to the reason of your own nature, and nothing will happen to you contrary to the reason of common Nature" ([Meditations](#), V, 58).

Additionally, the stoics believed that embracing reality including its *supposed faults* would lead us to happiness. "Do not seek for things to happen the way you want them to; rather, wish that what happens happen the way it happens; then you will be happy" (Epictetus, [Manuel](#), Chapter 8). The Stoics believed that our thoughts cause our joy and suffering. By having a positive attitude, we would

enjoy our life. By “rejecting reality” and thinking about injustice, we will make ourselves miserable.

We can compare and contrast Stoicism with Nietzschean *amor fati* in the following way:

1. Both Stoics and Nietzsche agree to embrace reality.
2. The Stoics think we should embrace reality because “everything that happens is for the best.”
3. Nietzsche wants to embrace reality despite its horrors and imperfections because it’s what a healthy person would do.

Why might a Stoic think that we should reject intrinsic values? First, the belief that something has intrinsic value gives us something to lose. We often think that something bad happens precisely because something intrinsically good was lost. For example, if we believe that our child is intrinsically good, then we will think that the loss of our child is terrible. The belief that something has intrinsic value seems to lead us to a rejection of reality and misery.

Second, the belief that something is intrinsically bad, such as pain, seems to be a rejection of pain. Whenever pain is experienced, we will think that something terrible has happened and make ourselves miserable.

My objection: I don’t deny that it’s possible for intrinsic value beliefs to involve a rejection of reality, and such a rejection could make us miserable. However, I don’t think that intrinsic value beliefs have to lead to this result. We could calmly contemplate the fact that we prefer our child not to die or the fact that we prefer not to feel pain. Human life and pain are worthy of consideration because they really do matter. However, it is possible to embrace death and pain as inevitable parts of the universe. God has determined every moment of reality and assured that everything will be for the best. Bad things might have to happen to some people for the “greater good,” just like we might be willing to kill one person to save the lives of hundreds.

Although intrinsic value and Stoicism are compatible, such a compatibility is not entirely satisfying for various reasons. For example, the view that bad things happen to people “for the greater good” seems to justify all of God’s decisions when (a) we don’t know for sure God exists and (b) we don’t know for sure that all of God’s decisions are really “for the best.”

There are three interesting alternatives to Ancient Stoicism that I know about:

1. Embrace a new kind of Stoicism that doesn't require God.
2. Nietzsche's amor fati – We should embrace reality, even if it is horrible.
3. Buddhism – We can suspend judgment regarding the horrors of life.

The first alternative is my [master's thesis](#). The second alternative was discussed in my recent essay, "[Are Intrinsic Value Beliefs Unhealthy? A Nietzschean Argument](#)." The third alternative is discussed next.

A Buddhist Argument Against Intrinsic Value

I am not a Buddhist scholar, but my understanding of Buddhism is the following:

1. Buddhists commit themselves to avoiding suffering.
2. Evaluative thoughts and beliefs (value judgments) can lead to suffering.
3. We can avoid suffering by refusing to have evaluative beliefs.
4. So, Buddhists should refuse to have evaluative thoughts and beliefs.

Buddhism can be compared and contrasted with Stoicism in the following way:

1. Both Buddhists and Stoics agree that evaluative thoughts and beliefs can cause suffering.
2. The Stoics think that embracing reality is appropriate considering God's divine plan of the universe, and "embracing reality" will lead to happiness. However, Buddhists don't think that happiness is *necessarily* based on an appropriate view of reality. Instead, most Buddhists decide to avoid suffering because such a decision seems perfectly rational from a personal everyday standpoint.
3. The Stoics and Buddhists both avoid suffering by suspending certain evaluative thoughts and beliefs.

Both Stoics and Buddhists would agree that when you lose your wallet, thoughts of injustice and revenge are inappropriate. We will end up making ourselves miserable and we could decide to hurt others. Stoics would say that we could "talk ourselves" out of such inappropriate thoughts by realizing that "everything happens for the best." In contrast, Buddhists would remind themselves that we

should avoid having thoughts of “injustice.” (Perhaps we should count to 10 to calm down.)

Why should we avoid having thoughts of injustice? Ultimately because such thoughts could make us miserable. However, it might also be claimed that we simply can’t *know* if injustice has really occurred. We can prefer for people not to steal from others, but we can’t say that it’s “bad” when it actually happens.

Why might a Buddhist think we should reject intrinsic values? Because intrinsic values appear to involve the sorts of “evaluative judgments” that can lead to misery and should be avoided for that very reason. The thought “my pain is bad!” would certainly seem to aggravate our state of mind.

My objection: My reply to the Stoic objection can be modified to be applied to the Buddhist argument. It seems possible to have evaluative judgments without making ourselves miserable. Such “evaluative judgments” are typically about our preferences, but it is quite possible for us to “prefer to avoid pain” precisely because it’s intrinsically bad. We don’t have to “reject pain” even if we know that it’s intrinsically bad. Instead, we can embrace reality through a Nietzschean attitude of *amor fati*.

Although Nietzsche believed that *amor fati* allows us to embrace all of the supposed horrors of reality, a Buddhist might believe that such an embrace would end our suffering entirely. If we have no negative evaluative thoughts or beliefs, then we will no longer be bothered by anything. Embracing reality (including the fact that pain is intrinsically bad) could destroy all potential causes of misery and cause us to be happy. Embracing horrors would destroy the horrors in the process. Who is right will depend on human psychology, which is beyond the scope of this discussion.

Conclusion

Nietzsche, the Stoics, and Buddhists all endorse a sort of *amor fati* attitude. They all encourage us to be life affirming, and such life affirmation could be seen to be incompatible with intrinsic value beliefs, such as the belief that pain is intrinsically bad. The Stoics require that we accept reality because everything happens for the best and Buddhists require that we accept reality because it’s necessary to be happy. However, intrinsic value beliefs are not necessarily incompatible with life

affirmation. We can embrace reality and the horrors of life, including pain while acknowledging that pain is intrinsically bad. We don't have to let pain make us miserable or cause us to "reject reality."