

Chapter Two (November 2011)

Doubts about Morality

Tao is hidden by partial understanding. The meaning of words is hidden by flowery rhetoric. This is what causes the dissention between the Confucians and the Mohists. What one says is wrong, the other says is right; and what one says is right, the other says is wrong. If the one is right while the other is wrong, and the other is right while the one is wrong, then the best thing to do is to look beyond right and wrong.

Chuang Tzu, *Inner Chapters*

The suspiciously unresolvable nature of moral disputes, their ritualistic character, and the astonishing array of incompatible moral stances to be found, should make us think twice about morality. If opposing moral claims and theories can be defended by those who know how to argue, and if evenly matched opponents need never concede defeat, then it is hard to see a distinction between reason and rhetoric. Maybe the real point of arguing about morality has nothing to do with finding the truth, and everything to do with getting our way and defending our decisions. This is a disturbing possibility, and people react to it in different ways. Some moralists harden their positions and sharpen their skills in order to fortify and defend their positions. They may look for ways to deny the data, or to minimize its impact. Perhaps, they suggest, the widespread moral disagreement is more apparent than real, or, if real, perhaps it is only superficial.

Others, unable to ignore the vast diversity in moral belief, embrace relativism, or, despairing of ever finding the truth, become skeptics. Moralists often treat relativism and skepticism as threats to morality but, as we are about to see, neither relativism nor skepticism need be hostile to morality. However, there are more extreme challenges to morality that may, when understood, incline us to listen more carefully to Chuang Tzu's advice to "look beyond right and wrong."

1. The Retreat to Relativism. People really do disagree about what is right and wrong, about values, duties, virtues, and rights. We all begin by believing what we are taught, and in different places and times we are taught different things. Circumstances change, and what at one time or place is considered a virtue or a duty, at another time or place is seen as a vice or a moral offence. Everyone knows this. Anthropologists travel to remote lands, or study their neighbors, to learn about their differing values and moralities. Someone who studies, describes, and compares different packages of moral rules and values can be called a **descriptive moral relativist**. Even those of us who have not traveled to distant lands would almost certainly agree with the descriptive relativist's belief that moral disagreement is a pervasive and interesting fact of life. Descriptive relativists may have their own opinions about the morality or immorality of the rules and values they describe, but when they are wearing their descriptive relativist hats they keep these opinions to themselves.

Naïve Moral Relativism. The comparative study of conflicting values and moral principles can be fascinating and even a bit unnerving. Humans are capable of believing almost anything, and so are researchers in the field. One reaction to the overwhelming diversity of opinions about morality is a good-natured tolerance based on

the idea that while our own moral views are correct, so are the views of those who embrace different demands and values. A descriptive moral relativist says that societies and individuals often disagree about what is right and wrong, but the person we can call a **naïve moral relativist** generously allows that both parties to a moral disagreement could be right. When George says that it is always wrong to lie and Martha says that lying is sometimes the morally right thing to do, the friendly naïve moral relativist will reassure them that they are both correct.

Naïve moral relativism may appeal to moralists who have grown tired of defending their own versions of morality, and who hope to buy tolerance with tolerance. It is also likely to appeal to those whose values are at odds with the prevailing morality. Moralists who are too polite to tell others what they really think may cover some moral disapproval with insincere expressions of tolerant relativism. But the naïve moral relativist appears to wink at *the* fundamental rule of speech and thought: “Avoid contradictions!” It is true that we sometimes appear to violate this rule in order to communicate something that is not contradictory, as when we answer the question “Is it raining?” by saying, “Well, it is and it isn’t” (by which the speaker might mean that it comes and goes, or that it is misting). But if we are speaking straightforwardly, a contradiction presents our audience with a version of a world that can neither be nor be understood. So when the naïve moral relativist says that both George and Martha’s judgments about lying are true, any competent attending philosopher will want to ask how this is possible. That philosopher would be right to ask, but naïve moral relativists are called “naïve” because they never even get to this question. It is, however, a

question that anyone who wants to develop a non-naïve form of moral relativism has to take seriously.

One attempted explanation simply fiddles with the word ‘true’. If you think it is morally wrong to eat meat and I do not, I might try to avoid an argument by conceding that your claim is “true for you.” This remark may or may not satisfy you, but the only kind of thing I could sensibly mean by saying that something is “true for you” is that you *believe* that it is true, or that from your point of view it *appears* true. But beliefs and appearances are often literally mistaken, and truths are not true “for a person.” Saying that your belief is true for you but not for me is a misleading, and possibly a condescending, way of rejecting what you believe. It is like saying: “Well you may believe that. I don’t, but I’m not going to call you on it.”

Subjective Moral Relativism. Someone we can call the **subjective moral relativist** has another way to explain how two people can both be correct when one of them says that something is a moral obligation and the other denies this. The work is done with the aid of a subjective “definition” of the relevant moral notion. A subjective definition is a definition that enables us to identify a moral or value judgment with a statement about the beliefs, principles, interests, desires, or attitudes of one or several “subjects,” real or imagined. For example, the following definitions are subjective definitions:

(a) X is good. = I like X.

(b) X is bad. = I don’t like X.

If you and I adopt them, then when I say that X is good I will be saying that I like it, and when you say that X is bad you will be saying that you don’t like it. Both of our claims

can be true. X is both good and bad. Other cleverly chosen definitions can allow us to take both sides of the controversy over the death penalty. If we embrace the following pair of definitions (where 'D' stands for "applying the death penalty") we will be able to say, without self-contradiction, that D is both a moral obligation and morally wrong:

(c) D is a moral obligation. = D is demanded by the rules of some society.

(d) D is morally wrong. = D is prohibited by the rules of some society.

The pair of definitions dissolves the contradiction.

Of course we need to think twice (at least!) about trying to escape from naïve moral relativism by resorting to subjective definitions if those definitions are either inaccurate reports or unappetizing recommendations—as our four examples definitely are. Even if we could somehow allow (c) and (d) to guide our thoughts and our speech, which is not likely, we would still not be able to say that two conflicting moral judgments can be true at the same time. If the claim that there is a moral obligation to apply the death penalty really meant that it is demanded somewhere, and the claim that it is morally wrong to do so really meant that it is prohibited somewhere, then when we say that applying the death penalty is a moral obligation, or that it is morally wrong, we would not be making *moral* judgments at all. The definitions turn what appear to be conflicting moral judgments into straightforward, and quite compatible (though misleadingly stated) factual claims about what different societies demand and prohibit. Thanks to the definitions, both the moralism and the disagreement disappear.

From the time of Socrates, philosophers have had a love/hate relationship with definitions. Socrates loved asking for definitions, but he was rarely satisfied with the answers he got from his victims. There are others who think that definitions, whether

they come from the tops of our heads or the depths of our dictionaries, are worse than useless. In reality, definitions are useful when a word is rare or technical, or when we are speaking with someone new to the language. But when our disagreements are about how to live or act, then starting with definitions of words like 'right', 'wrong,' 'good', 'bad', 'intentional', 'justifiable', 'real', 'free', or any of the other notorious sources of philosophical confusion, is almost guaranteed to lead to distracting arguments about words, meaning, definitions, and language itself. There are innumerable uses of the word 'good', but any learnable definition will leave most of them out. Our mastery of the conventions that govern the uses of our value-words can only be revealed by our competent performance under fire.

Perhaps these simple subjective definitions are never taken seriously but only used by philosophers to simplify matters beyond all recognition, and perhaps it is charitable even to look at them as starting points for a serious discussion. Some philosophers, however, have done a bit better. Gilbert Harman, for example, has developed a form of subjective moral relativism that he applies to what he calls "inner judgments." Inner judgments are judgments "such as the judgment that *someone ought not to have acted in a certain way* or the judgment that *it was right or wrong of him to have done so.*" He says that these judgments are "relational," in the sense that:

if S says that A (morally) ought to do D, S implies that A has reasons to do D and S endorses those reasons (Harman [1], 193).

Harman does not frame this as a definition, but as an account of what is implied and done by someone who says something. It is an account that has, as Harman admits, some unusual consequences. It does not allow us to make certain criticisms of

cannibals or Nazis, who do not share our moral principles. To say that cannibals *ought* to refrain from eating people and Nazi's from killing Jews would be to imply that they have reasons to refrain from doing these things, and we may know that they do not. Harman even says that it is "a misuse of language" to say that it is morally wrong for hardened criminals to steal and kill. "Since they do not share our conventions, they have no reasons to refrain from stealing from us or killing us" (Harman [2], 113). There are, of course, other things we might say about Nazis, cannibals, and criminals—they are cruel and blinded by hatred, hunger, greed, or ignorance—but Harman is not addressing these claims. He is only talking about "inner judgments," judgments using 'ought', 'ought not,' 'right', and 'wrong', judgments that are essential to most, if not all, forms of moralism.

Harman admits that anyone who goes along with his relativistic interpretation of moral obligation will have to "think again" about morality. It has traditionally been assumed that "basic moral demands are demands on everyone," but, he claims, if moral relativism is true, this assumption is false. In that case,

the ordinary notion of morality is based on a false presupposition and we find ourselves in the position of those who thought morality was the law of God and then began to suspect there was no God. Relativism implies that morality as we ordinarily understand it is a delusion, a vain and chimerical notion (Harman [3], 113).

This certainly threatens morality if morality essentially involves the idea that basic moral demands are demands on everyone. But Harman thinks we can abandon this idea and still have "a reasonable substitute for" and "a good approximation to" morality. We can

just start using our moral language with an explicit awareness of its relativist implications, acknowledging that there are “various moralities, each involving different basic moral demands . . . which certain people accept or have reasons to accept . . .” (Harman [3], 113). We *could* do this, but it is very likely that we won’t. When morality matters to people, it is the objective kind, not some toothless human construction. A person might be impressed by an emphatic “Stealing is morally wrong,” but not so much if that remark is widely understood along the lines of “The morality we accept lists stealing among the things we blame people for doing and call *morally wrong*.” As usual, that sort of explanation has explained the moral character of the utterance out of existence, and opened the way for the thief to reply: “That is an interesting bit of anthropology, but what is it to me?”

According to Harman’s moral relativism, “different people are subject to different basic moral demands depending on the social customs, practices, conventions, values, and principles that they accept.” (Harman [4], 35). For the relativist then, moral principles are “binding only on those who share them or whose principles give them reasons to accept them” (Harman [2], 90). This limited and local bondage may be only kind of bondage a moralist could really defend. It does offer some of what morality is supposed to provide. The bondage can be felt as real, and in practice the relativistic qualifications are conveniently ignored or forgotten in the heat of controversy.

The question is whether this Balkanization of obligation is enough for the serious moralist. The answer is: “Probably not.” What good is morality if we are not allowed to bring its considerable (even if imaginary) authority down on those who have no reason not to kill us and steal from us? These are the very people moralists want to convert by

giving them reasons to refrain from killing and stealing from us. Moralists who want to blame and punish thieves and killers will be more comfortable doing so if they can believe that their targets are violating some objective moral requirements, not just our individual wishes to remain free from loss and harm. Mackie defended retaining our erroneous moral beliefs by saying that when people believe in an objective truth about what is right and wrong it is easier to support and rationalize legal decisions and sanctions. He thought that if we could not anchor our use of force in some claim to a legitimate, objective, and moral ground, that use of force and the useful practices it supports could be more easily challenged (*Hume's Moral Theory*, 1980, p. 154). As we shall see, this is not obvious. It may turn out to be easier to cause others to care than it is to cause them to believe that they have a moral obligation to act as if they cared.

Subjective moral relativism can be seen as either supporting or threatening morality. It threatens morality by offering to replace it with something different, but it supports a (watered-down) substitute for morality by retaining moral language and a limited or local form of bondage, thus providing a relative kind of objectivity. It may be most accurate to say that subjective versions of moral relativism undermine morality while striving to preserve its appearance and to exploit its power. To the extent that these subjectivists are aware of what they are doing, we can classify them as well-intentioned amoralists who are either mistaken about what morality *is*, or recommending that we turn it into something it *is not*.

Situational Moral Relativism. Unlike the subjective moral relativist, who may have defined morality out of existence without admitting it, the **situational moral relativist** is not even an apparent threat to morality. Situational moral relativism

contradicts only those few moralists (often referred to as “moral absolutists”) who believe that some things are right or wrong *no matter what the circumstances*. Of course there will always be a few absolutists who claim that lying, or killing, or eating the dead, is *always* morally wrong, but everyone else knows that nothing is that simple. Situational moral relativists may say that it is wrong to lie, but they will add that it is not *always* wrong because sometimes there are good moral reasons for lying. What if our lie could save a life, or thousands of lives, or the planet? What the *situational* moral relativist is saying, then, is that there is a truth about what we morally ought to do, and that this truth depends on the circumstances of the actual situation we are in. This is not a challenge to morality because it is, in fact, the most natural and popular form of morality.

2. Moral Skepticism. Another reaction to the wide variety of incompatible moral beliefs, and the inconclusiveness of discussions about them, is **moral skepticism**—the belief that there is no way to tell which of the many moral theories are true and which false. Sextus Empiricus (c. 160 – 210 AD), the best known of the ancient skeptics, divided philosophers into three groups: The **Dogmatists** claim to have discovered the truth; the **Academicians** (so called because they taught in The Academy, a school begun by Plato) claim that the truth can’t be discovered; and the **Pyrrhonists** (named after Pyrrho of Elis) try not to commit themselves even to that negative claim. Sextus explained how a skeptic arrives at Pyrrhonism:

For the Sceptic, having set out to philosophize with the object of passing judgment on the sense impressions and ascertaining which of them are true and which false so as to attain quietude thereby, found

himself involved in contradictions of equal weight, and being unable to decide between them suspended judgment; and as he was then in suspense there followed, as it happened, the state of quietude in matters of opinion (I, 26).

The word translated as 'quietude' is *ataraxia*, which can also be translated as 'peace of mind' or 'tranquility'. To maintain this perfect balance between one side and the other, Sextus amassed a collection of skeptical arguments and observations that could be used to undermine any dogmatic claim about which of our beliefs are true and which false. These "tropes" emphasize how the condition of our sense organs and the peculiarities of our points of view and circumstances undermine our attempts to find out how things "really are." By resorting to his tropes, Sextus was able to "suspend judgment." He claimed that this suspension is what resulted in his quietude, and he applied this discovery to the idea of objective value. He said that

the person who entertains the opinion that anything is by nature good or bad is continually disturbed. When he lacks those things which seem to him to be good, he believes he is being pursued, as if by the Furies, by those things which are by nature bad, and pursues what he believes to be the good things. But when he has acquired them, he encounters further perturbations. This is because his elation at the acquisition is unreasonable and immoderate, and also because in his fear of a reversal all his exertions go to prevent the loss of the things which to him seem good (Sextus Empiricus, 41).

Note that Sextus only argued that believing that things are “by nature good or bad” is a guaranteed source of suffering. He did not argue, and as a skeptic he could not claim, that things are in fact free of any positive or negative value.

In his book, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, John Mackie called his belief that there are no objective values “moral skepticism,” but this is misleading. He was not *skeptical* about objective values—he was sure there are none. A skeptic would not be so certain. “Academic” skeptics claim that we cannot know whether there are objective values; but a Pyrronist like Sextus just leaves the question of whether things are “by nature good or bad” unanswered (and, if possible, unasked). Since he did not claim to know that moral judgments cannot be true, Sextus had to allow that the moralist, who claims that some things really are good or bad by nature, might be right. A skeptic, says the Pyrrhonist, is a seeker.

It appears that moral skepticism, like situational moral relativism, is compatible with the existence of objective values and obligations. Skeptical and relativist beliefs flourish in an environment characterized by inconclusive moral disputation, but neither the relativist nor the skeptic denies morality—one says that it is relative and the other claims not to know, or says nothing.

3. Moral Realism and Moral Anti-Realism. We have just seen that moral skeptics find themselves unable to determine “what things are by nature good and bad,” but we can add that they are not even able to determine whether anything at all is ever good or bad by nature. That is, they are unable to take a stand on the dispute between **moral realism**, and **moral anti-realism**. The moral realist thinks that there are moral facts and that moral properties are “real” and independent of what anyone thinks or

feels. The moral anti-realist believes that there are no moral facts and that the moral properties we talk about are human constructions, products of evolution and imagination. While the reality of human constructions cannot be denied, it is a reality that we create, not one we discover. The moral realist, on the other hand, believes that moral facts and properties, like gravity and the weather, exist and do their work independently of anything we think or want.

Nietzsche urged moral philosophers to “place themselves beyond good and evil.” He said that this demand “follows from an insight first formulated by me: *that there are no moral facts whatever*” (Nietzsche [3], 65). We can thank Nietzsche for giving us an explicit formulation of this important metaphysical claim, but not for helping us to understand what the existence or non-existence of moral facts amounts to. What is the difference between a world with moral facts and a world without them? What are moral facts supposed to be, and where?

For more than a hundred years philosophers have routinely offered an answer to these questions made famous by the British philosopher G. E. Moore, who certainly believed in moral facts. In *Principia Ethica*, published in 1903, he said that the word ‘good’, like the word ‘yellow’, is the name of a simple and indefinable property. It is a simple fact that some things are yellow, and Moore held it to be an equally simple fact that some things are good. The difference is that yellow (yellowness) is a “natural” property while good (goodness) is a “non-natural” one. We get a moral fact when something has a moral property (goodness or badness) just as we get a natural fact when something has a natural property (yellowness or roundness). We detect natural properties with our senses, but we “intuit” the non-natural ones. Hence the name given

to theories that incorporate this unexplained way of acquiring moral knowledge—**moral intuitionism**.

Moral philosophers who could not bring themselves to agree with either Nietzsche or Moore settled for a compromise that has come to be called **moral naturalism**. Moral naturalists reject Nietzsche's claim that there are no moral facts, but they part company with Moore and the intuitionists by claiming that the moral facts they believe in *are* natural facts. This is what is going on in Harman's version of subjective moral relativism mentioned above. He claimed that there are no "absolute facts of right or wrong," but there are "relative facts about what is right or wrong with respect to one or another set of conventions." Moral facts exist but only as "relational facts about reasons" (Harman [2], 132). The moral fact that Albert ought to do something turns out to be no different from the natural fact that Albert has certain reasons to do that thing. The natural fact and the moral fact are one and the same. What should bother moral realists about this identification is that it completely undermines their *moral* realism by "reducing" a moral fact to something that is not a moral fact.

Moral anti-realists, who have managed to avoid being enticed by moral naturalism, have two ways to criticize moral realism. First, they can say that the notion of a moral fact doesn't even make sense because it is impossible to know or to say what a moral fact could be. This is the kind of attack initiated by the emotivists, who insisted that moral (as well as religious and metaphysical) language is "nonsense." A. J. Ayer was famous, even notorious, for his claim that our "exhortations to moral virtue are not propositions at all, but ejaculations or commands which are designed to provoke the reader to action of a certain sort." (Ayer, 103) Even today, many of the critics of

moral realism hold a view descended from Ayer's emotivism and the more refined non-cognitivism of C. L. Stevenson. (See his 1944 publication, *Ethics and Language*.)

The second way moral anti-realists can criticize moral realism is to say that the notion of a moral fact makes enough sense for us to be able to say that there are no such things. Our "exhortations to moral virtue," they say, either are, or presuppose, false statements about what is objectively good, bad, right, or wrong. This second form of moral anti-realism is often characterized as an "error theory." John Mackie is its best known defender.

4. Non-Cognitivism. According to **non-cognitivism** (also called emotivism, expressivism, and non-descriptivism) it is a mistake to see moral judgments as statements about the way the world is. Some non-cognitivists say that moral judgments are expressions of emotions or attitudes, and others identify them with some other kind of non-descriptive speech-act, like commending, or commanding, or inviting, or forbidding. They all insist that moral judgments, not being statements, are not the right kind of thing to be called true or false.

Non-cognitivism is a theory about the meaning or use of moral language, so it will never take us all the way to moral anti-realism, which is a metaphysical thesis about what there is and what there isn't. Nevertheless, there is every reason to think that a non-cognitivist will be a moral anti-realist. It would be just too strange to believe in moral facts that we could never state or formulate in meaningful words. How would we even know what it is that we were believing in?

Non-cognitivism was based on the realization that a moral conflict is a clash of wills, and non-cognitivists characterized moral disagreement as "disagreement in

attitude” rather than “disagreement in belief.” They held that moral disputes will not be resolved by finding moral facts, but by finding out how to resolve our clashing desires and inconsistent goals.

The non-cognitivists were (and still are) right to emphasize the close connection between morality and our desires and emotions. Saying that something is good is one way to express a positive feeling about it, and we often do this to influence the ways others feel and act. But it is also *saying* that the item in question is good, and that is what the non-cognitivist is always in danger of neglecting. Even if nothing in the world is either good or bad, that doesn't mean that someone who says that something is good or bad isn't saying something. Moral disagreements may involve practical disagreements about how to act and what to choose, but they are built on, and nourished by, disagreements about what is good and bad and right and wrong.

5. The Moral Error Theory. I began by referring to the belief that there are no objective moral facts or values as “amoralism,” but near the end of Chapter One I noted that the term ‘amoralist’ has been adopted by quite a few moral philosophers to refer to someone who believes in moral facts and values, but is unmoved by that belief. Such a person will agree that it is morally wrong to torture innocents, but will then add: “And what is that to me?” I promised to adopt a less controversial label, so henceforth I shall drop the term ‘amoralism’ and refer to the belief that there are no moral facts, properties, or values as moral anti-realism. I have, in fact, begun doing this above in Section Three. Non-cognitivism is one type of moral anti-realism and, if we set aside the moral naturalists, the other is the moral error theory. A moral error theorist says that

the moral realists' claim, or assumption, or presupposition that there are "objectively prescriptive" moral properties or facts is a mistake.

'Objective prescriptivity' is a phrase introduced by Mackie to refer to the special characteristic of moral judgments he planned to discuss. An **objective** claim is a claim about the way the world is, one that is made true or false by "objective facts." An objective fact is a fact just waiting to be discovered. If it is objectively true that killing is wrong, then even if the whole world loved killing, it would still be a genuine, existing moral fact that killing is wrong.

To say that a claim is **prescriptive** is to say that it is a claim *on* us, not a claim *about* us, or about anything. A prescription prescribes—it tells us what to do, not what is true. It can be put in the form of an imperative ("Get rid of capital punishment!") and offered as advice, a suggestion, or an order. By contrast, "Capital punishment is morally wrong" is not framed as a prescription, but as a straightforward statement of (a moral) fact—like "Capital punishment has been illegal in Michigan since 1846." If I say: "Get rid of capital punishment," this is *my* prescription, *my* personal plea, *my* demand for an end to capital punishment. But if I say "Capital punishment is morally wrong," I state what I represent myself to believe about capital punishment, namely that there is some independent demand for its end, a prescription (or perhaps a proscription) issued not just by me, or by any person or set of persons, but by Reason, or Nature, or God, or some other objective source.

We tend to see morality as having authority over us. We think of its prescriptions, the things it tells us to do and not to do, as **objective** requirements, not as guidelines that we invent or imagine or agree on, and not as demands that we can

ignore without going wrong in some way. Mackie is not alone in identifying this cluster of puzzling notions as central to morality. Kant said that reason “commands what ought to happen” (Kant [3], 20), and the British moral philosopher Philippa Foot, commenting on Kant’s idea, identified inescapability as the mark of the commands of morality. “People talk,” she said, “about the ‘binding force’ of morality, but it is not clear what this means if not that we feel ourselves unable to escape” (Foot [2] 162). Another moral philosopher, Bernard Williams, also saw inescapability as a fundamental feature of moral obligation. He said that this inescapability means that there is no opting out of morality, and he identified this idea with Kant’s claim that morality is “categorical” (Williams [2], 177-178).

It is clear why moralists claim that the judgments of morality are inescapable, but it is not so clear what that claim means. Foot explored several ways of expressing the “fugitive thought” that morality binds us, that there are things we *must* do, or *have to* do. But she found nothing standing behind the words, and concluded that there may not be such a form of bondage, and that our belief and our feeling that there is results from education and training. “Perhaps,” she reluctantly suggested, “it makes no sense to say that we ‘have to’ submit to the moral law, or that morality is ‘inescapable’ in some special way” (Foot [2], 163).

Even though the nature of this ‘moral bondage’ remains unclear, and even though we have no clue as to the source of an “objective demand” (*pace* the theist, who will be considered in the next chapter), the thought that we are inescapably bound is an indispensable part of the common understanding of the institution of morality. Mackie, argued that the failures of the naturalist and the non-cognitivist analyses of moral

language arise from the fact that both neglect to explain the “apparent authority” of ethics—naturalists by excluding “the categorically imperative aspect” (the prescriptivity), and non-cognitivists by excluding “the claim to objective validity or truth” (Mackie [1], 33). If moral judgments were **objective without being prescriptive**, they would make no demands and require nothing from us. They would merely inform us that our action has a property of “wrongness,” or that it merits the term ‘wrong’. In that case, learning that something is wrong would be like learning what time it is—its relevance would depend on our commitments. If, on the other hand, moral judgments were **prescriptive without being objective**, they would be “mere” commands or demands. Even if they are strongly stated, without that claim to objectivity, they would amount to no more (and no less) than demands from others, most of whom are complete strangers.

Moral error theorists believe that ordinary users of moral language assume that their moral judgments are “objective,” and they also believe that this assumption is embedded in our language and our practice. Those who use moral language may not comprehend everything that the assumption involves, or how peculiar it is, but this does not prevent them from making it, and, as Mackie insisted, from being wrong every time they do. But he conceded that since his error theory does go against widely held beliefs it needs “very solid support.” He aimed to supply this support with two arguments he called the “argument from relativity” and “the argument from queerness.”

The Argument from Relativity. Mackie introduced this argument by drawing our attention to “the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community.” But he immediately added

that “it is not the mere presence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of morality” (p. 36). Disagreement is found in science and at the ordinary factual level, but this doesn’t lead us to doubt the objectivity of scientific or everyday discourse. We can find as much moral disagreement and agreement as we want, both within and among cultures, and Mackie’s argument from relativity says: “The actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values” (Mackie [1], 37). We agree about morality and have strong moral “intuitions” because we have learned our lessons; and we disagree because we haven’t all learned the same lessons, because our interests often conflict, and because we tend to see and believe what we have been taught to see and believe.

The argument is an instance of what is called an argument to the best explanation. We start with a collection of facts about those “actual variations in the moral codes,” and with facts about the language, experience, beliefs, and behavior of moralists, and then look for a version of reality that explains all that without appealing to anything that we do not already understand, or at least to anything that we have no hope of ever understanding. Any explanation we can come up with will never be certain or final, it will just be best we can do at the time, and very often it will be good enough for our needs and purposes. This is a style of reasoning that is familiar to the scientist, the detective, the historian, and, Mackie adds in his brief discussion of it in his *The Miracle of Theism*, “there is every reason to believe that this kind of thinking has been and is intelligible to reasonable people at all periods of history and in all cultures” (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982, p. 5).

Mackie made it clear that what *he* thought needed to be explained was how, if there are no objective values ‘people not only might have come to suppose that there are but also might persist firmly in that belief’ [1977: 49]. The moral objectivist’s explanation of both the supposition and the persistence involves the claim that there are objective, non-natural moral properties that we apprehend (visually, rationally, or intuitively). Error theorists think they can improve on this thin and mysterious account of the source of our moral beliefs. They build their explanations on what we have learned about our nature and our history, and on what we know about the influence that propaganda, human credulity, and positive and negative reinforcement can have on what we believe about morality.

Mackie’s critics have not been kind to this argument. They often start off on the wrong foot by treating it as an inference from actual (or irreconcilable) *disagreement* to the absence of moral objectivity. Russ Shafer-Landau devotes a chapter of his book, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* (London, Oxford, 2004) to the destruction of an argument he calls “the argument from disagreement,” and characterizes as saying that wide and deep moral disagreement among informed and intelligent parties provides “excellent evidence for skepticism.” But Mackie’s denial of moral objectivity is neither a deduction nor an induction from any amount of disagreement, as he made clear when he said that “it is not the mere occurrence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of values.”

Ironically there will probably always be disagreement about how much moral disagreement there really is. Some moralists even argue that there is already more agreement than disagreement, and insist that there might be even more if we could

calm our emotions and eliminate bias and factual errors. They may be right, but what makes this speculation irrelevant is the fact that moral anti-realism could be true even if everyone agreed about what is right and wrong; and moral realism could be true even if no one realized it. It is no wonder Mackie was unwilling to rest his case on an argument from *disagreement*.

Thomas Nagel, in *The View from Nowhere*, considers and responds to several arguments against “the objective reality of values,” one of which seems to be a version of the argument from relativity. But when he expresses surprise at the popularity of this argument, it is the argument from *disagreement* that he attacks. He remarks that “the fact that morality is socially inculcated and that there is radical disagreement about it across cultures, over time, and even within cultures at a time is a poor reason to conclude that values have no objective reality” (147 – 148). Indeed it is, but this is not relevant to Mackie’s argument from *relativity*, which, I repeat, is not an argument from moral disagreement to moral anti-realism. Do Mackie’s critics focus on this argument from *disagreement* because they have nothing to say about the argument from *relativity*?

Actually it is not so much moral disagreement or agreement itself that requires explaining. If two people disagree about the morality of abortion, what needs to be explained are two separate facts—the fact that the one has one set of opinions and attitudes about abortion, and the fact that the other has a different set. Anyone who can explain how they separately came to their different opinions will have explained their disagreement. Suppose one of them is a Catholic father of five and the other an atheist feminist. We already have a pretty good idea which one supports abortion rights, and

we can make some good guesses about the natural history of their respective stances. Is there any point at all in thinking that one of them has noticed some sound argument or some self-evident moral truth that the other has missed?

A different criticism of Mackie's argument from relativity turns up in Michael Smith's *The Moral Problem* (pp. 200 – 201). Smith's strategy is to counter both this argument and the argument from queerness by giving an explanation of what it is to say that an act is right that opens the question of rightness to empirical investigation, offers a way for moral judgments to be true, and eliminates the possibility of moral relativism. According to Smith:

to say that an act of a certain sort in certain circumstances is right is . . . to say *inter alia* [among other things] that there is a normative reason to perform it. And this, in turn, is simply to say that fully rational creatures would desire that such an act be performed in such circumstances. . . . (p. 200).

If this is what we are saying this when we say that an act is right, then Smith thinks that we can reject Mackie's error theory because the moral judgment that some action is right will turn out to be true just in case "fully rational creatures would desire that such an act be performed in such circumstances." But this is *not* what we are saying when we say that an act is right. If there were such a thing as the rightness of an act, and if there were any "fully rational creatures," then maybe those creatures could tell when an act was right, and maybe they would desire that those acts be performed—we have no way to know. But to say *now* that some act is right is not to say that creatures of *any*

type do, or would, want it to be performed. In any case, the interesting question is “Why would they want it to be performed?” Because it is the right thing to do?

Definitions of ‘right’ are sometimes presented as accounts of what people actually mean, but it is also possible to offer them up for adoption. If we adopt Smith’s definition, we will eliminate the possibility that conflicting moral judgments could both be correct (if we can assume that fully informed and rational creatures would all come up with the same answer). But we are not likely to adopt that definition because most users of moral language are moral realists who would almost certainly resist any definition that turned moral judgments into verdicts about what some imaginary being might desire to happen.

Mackie’s argument from relativity is a philosophically respectable argument to the best explanation. But many of his critics have confounded it with something we have been calling the argument from *disagreement*, a pitiful argument that Mackie never used and explicitly rejected. After taking a few swipes at the argument from *disagreement*, these critics pretend that they have undermined the argument from *relativity*, and that it only remains to dispose of Mackie’s other argument, the argument from queerness. With both arguments out of commission, the way will be clear for them to subscribe to as much absolute value and as many binding obligations as they please. But the argument from relativity does not seem, so far, to have been successfully criticized, and that means that moral realism remains seriously endangered by it. What, then, of its companion argument and the attempts of moral realists to respond to it?

The Argument from Queerness. Mackie offers what he identifies as metaphysical and epistemological versions of this argument. According to the

metaphysical version, objective values don't exist, because if they did they would have to be "entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe." Nothing so different, so unrelated to everything we know and understand, so "queer," should be said to exist, so there are no objective values and morality is an invention.

The epistemological version of the argument dwells on the fact that we can't even imagine how we might detect these objective moral values, obligations, or rights. A "natural property" like yellow(ness) fits comfortably in a network of beliefs about the relation of color to light, prisms, paint, and photography. Objective values and moral obligations do not fit into any such system. We have no duty receptors or instruments to detect the presence of value. Mackie says that in order to "discover" moral properties we would need "some special faculty of moral perception or intuition utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else." (Mackie [1], 38)

By calling moral properties "non-natural," and positing a faculty of moral intuition, G. E. Moore bought into both the metaphysics and the epistemology being attacked by this argument. We will return to Moore and the plausibility of intuitionism later, but so far it appears that the proper conclusion of the argument from queerness is that moral properties, because of their incoherent attempt to combine objectivity and prescriptivity, their inaccessibility to investigation, and their discomfort with the laws of nature, are too "queer" to be taken seriously or to be used to explain anything.

Michael Smith, who we found trying to undermine the argument from relativity by defining 'right' in terms of what fully rational creatures would desire to be done, makes the same move in his reply to the argument from queerness. After giving his definition

of “rightness,” he asks if Mackie can “really lay a charge of strangeness against rightness, at least as that feature of acts has been analysed here” (Smith, p. 210). Well, Mackie’s argument from queerness is indeed nullified if rightness is defined as something that is not queer. But, as I have already urged, when we say that something is right we are not saying something about what some perfectly informed and perfectly rational creature would want to happen. In fact if that is what we were saying, or if Smith should manage to talk us into trying to mean that, then rightness would inherit a new queerness from the definitely queer notion of a perfectly rational being. Not only are there no such creatures, we are so far from that status that we can have no idea what such a being would want, if it wanted anything.

Mackie’s critics sometimes reply to his argument from queerness by saying that reality contains many strange things—quarks, black holes, and ourselves—so why not moral properties? This reply would be stronger if moral properties and facts were just rare and unusual properties and facts, but to think this is to ignore their special and distinctive feature. Unlike plain facts (*the fact that the cat is on the mat*), moral facts (*the fact that you ought to keep the cat off the mat*) prescribe. Mackie illustrates what he takes to be one aspect of moral facts by relating them to Plato’s Forms. Seeing the form of *Rightness*, he says, “will not merely tell men what to do, but will ensure that they do it, overruling any contrary inclinations” (p. 24). This “industrial strength” objective prescriptivity seems powerful enough to strip philosopher kings of their very freedom. “Platonic Rightness” would be a truly queer property, and perhaps Mackie was unwise to focus on it, but so would *any* property or feature of a thing that could, *by itself*, exert a causal influence on any person’s decision. C. L. Stevenson spoke of the “magnetic”

power of moral *language* to move or *incline* us toward an option being praised; but this comes through conditioning. What Mackie is objecting to is the idea that there are “moral properties” or “moral facts” that operate causally in the world. Desires and emotions lead to choices in ways we are now beginning to understand, and so do beliefs about goodness and rightness, but no respectable account of decision-making has found a further causal role for goodness and rightness themselves.

Searching for some way to capture the idea that moral properties and facts inhabit our world and exert a genuine influence on us, Ronald Dworkin describes a universe that

houses among its numerous particles of energy and matter, some special particles—morons—whose energy and momentum establish fields that at once constitute the morality or immorality, or virtue or vice, of particular human acts and institutions and also interact in some way with human nervous systems so as to make people aware of the morality or immorality of the virtue or vice (“Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe It,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* **25** (1996), pp. 87 – 139.

Morons, he adds, “surrounding a genuinely good end or a genuinely wrong act might have the power to suck people into an attraction or repel them into an inhibition.”

Dworkin is not tempted by this theory, but he notes that it would be one way to explain how moral properties motivate. Yet it is not something anyone takes seriously and it is “not essential to ordinary moral opinion or practice” (Dworkin, p. 112). Certainly not, but if we insist that morality is objective, and that moral facts motivate us, we need some

sketch of how the causality works. The “moral field theory” at least gives us a source for our metaphors of being “attracted by the Good” or “repelled by evil.”

While the much-debated power of moral facts to motivate is indeed peculiar, or perhaps incomprehensible, there is an even stranger feature of moral facts than this. If something is a moral duty, a moral obligation, then, in some sense of ‘must’ compatible with our not doing it, we *must* do it. In general terms, a duty is something we owe. In non-moral cases the nature of our obligation is usually easy to explain. Teachers have a contractual duty to meet their classes, letter-carriers a postal duty to deliver the mail, and police officers a sworn duty to protect and defend. But a *moral* duty, should there be such a thing, does not arise from a contract or agreement. A moral duty would still be a duty if the institutions were to disappear or to change in radical ways. If protecting the weak is a moral duty, people say, then we are just required to do it. It is this notion that Philippa Foot was commenting on when she referred to the “fugitive thought” that morality binds us, and suggested that the idea may make no sense. It may indeed make no sense to say that we cannot escape from the binding commands of morality, but people continue to say it, and to believe it. This feeling and the accompanying belief that we are bound by rules that are both objective and prescriptive make us sitting ducks for arguments from queerness.

The replies to Mackie’s two arguments that we have seen, have not been very impressive. But one thing that keeps moralists from giving up hope is the fact that if a poll were to be taken, a sizable majority would declare for moralism. Moral thinking is such a part of our daily life that someone who refused to make the standard moral pronouncements would be considered peculiar, if not dangerous. How could anyone

have the nerve to say that almost everyone else on the planet is wrong about something as important as morality? I will take a brief look at a version of this concern in the next section and then return to it in Chapter Six.

6. An Argument from Agreement? By denying that any moral judgments are true, error theorists go against widely held beliefs, and are open to an obvious objection. They will have to reject claims that vast numbers of people accept without a second thought. Gilbert Harman says that the position of the moral anti-realist (or, in his terminology, the “extreme nihilist”) is hard to accept because

it implies that there are no moral constraints—that everything is permitted. As Dostoevsky observes, it implies that there is nothing wrong with murdering your father. It also implies that slavery is not unjust and that Hitler’s extermination camps were not immoral. These are not easy conclusions to accept (Harman [2], 11).

He describes the “extreme nihilist” as “believing that nothing is ever right or wrong, just or unjust, good or bad,” that there are no “moral constraints,” and that “everything is permitted.” Moral anti-realists will, of course, be quite willing to say that there are no moral constraints, and in our world, which is replete with conventional rules and obligations, they will be able to say truthfully that much is forbidden and required—just not by rules of an objective morality.

Moral anti-realism is a set of beliefs about the claims and presuppositions of moralists, and has no necessary relation to the way moral anti-realists might feel about genocide, parricide, or slavery, or to what they do about them. A moral philosopher who says “Hitler’s extermination camps were not immoral” is probably trying to illustrate the

claim that no moral judgment, not even one about Hitler's extermination camps, has the sort of objective status most moralists want it to have. Sensible anti-realists will refrain from saying that Hitler's extermination camps were "not immoral," because those who hear them may take them to accept the institution of morality and to be giving acceptable marks to extermination camps. If we do not want to be mistaken for a moralist, we should avoid talking like one.

When we use moral language, or the language of any institution, we represent ourselves as believing what the use of that language implies. But we do not become moralists merely by using moral language. Genuine moralists (as opposed to moral anti-realists faking moralism) actually accept, or unthinkingly operate as if they accept, the traditional implications of their use of moral language. Most of these implications have already been mentioned. Moralists see moral principles and duties as binding and values as objective. They are the philosophers who, like Samuel Clarke, believe that some things "are in their own nature Good and Reasonable and Fit to be done" and that other things "are in their own nature absolutely Evil" (Clarke, 9). They are the contemporary moral realists who believe that "there are objective moral facts and . . . true moral propositions" (Brink, 111), or that "moral reflection and moral judgment are a matter of discovery, rather than of invention, projection, expression, or even self-discovery, because the good and the right are 'in the world'" (Zimmerman, 80).

Many ordinary people and moral philosophers assert and believe that there are objective moral facts, and many of them take their own moral principles seriously enough to require that others conform to them. But when we step back and reflect about this, we find serious questions to which there seem to be no satisfying answers.

Why should we modify our behavior to fit what some group takes to be objective moral demands? What is the nature of this morality, and what is the source of its authority? How can we be inescapably bound to act in specific ways? Who or what allows or forbids us to do what is said to be permissible or impermissible? Many, and perhaps even most, people resort to religion to answer these questions. They say that the authority of morality comes from God, and that if there were no god, there would be no morality. In Chapter Three, we will discuss the attempt to answer the impudent question of why we have a moral obligation to obey the commands of a god, and then, in Chapter Four, we will explore what secular moral philosophers have to say about the good and the right.