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David O. Brink

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Introduction

This book examines the foundations of ethics; it investigates a complex network of issues in the metaphysics of ethics, moral epistemology, moral psychology, and substantive moral theory. This agenda includes both what is usually called second-order issues and first-order issues about morality. It is worth pausing over this division within my agenda, since some attention to it should throw light upon the nature and scope of my project.

However difficult it is to state criteria for marking this distinction between first- and second-order levels of inquiry in ethics, it is an important distinction about whose application there is often a surprising amount of agreement. Second-order, or metaethical, issues are issues about, rather than within, morality and typically take the form of metaphysical, epistemological, semantic, or psychological issues about morality and our moral claims. In what sense, if any, is morality objective? Are there such things as moral facts or truths? Can we justify moral judgments? In what sense, if any, do moral considerations guide conduct? Is it irrational to be indifferent to moral considerations? If there are moral facts, how are they related to the natural features of agents, policies, and actions that those moral facts concern? These questions raise second-order issues and are my primary focus.

First-order, or normative, issues, by contrast, are issues within morality about what sorts of things are morally important (e.g., right and wrong). It is useful to mark a further distinction within normative ethics between issues of moral theory or principle and particular, substantive moral issues. Although this distinction is primarily between levels or degrees of abstraction among normative issues, it is an important distinction. Issues of moral theory or principle concern the theoretical structure of morality. How are goodness and rightness related? In what way should a moral theory be impartial among people? Does impartiality require us to maximize aggregate welfare, or would maximizing aggregate welfare

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ignore important distributional considerations? What ideal of the person should we accept, and how does this decision affect the nature of the moral principles we adopt? Substantive moral questions, on the other hand, raise more specific moral issues. Is abortion ever justified and, if so, under what conditions? Should the death penalty be imposed as punishment for certain crimes? Should Vera keep the truth from Malcolm in order to spare him anguish? This book also examines issues of moral theory or principle, although it does not directly address substantive moral questions.

Since my project examines the foundations of ethics and conceives of them as including both first- and second-order inquiries, it is somewhat old-fashioned in scope. As those familiar with the history of ethical theory in this century will realize, the scope of my project somewhat resembles that of work at the beginning of this century, such as Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* (7th ed., 1907), G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) and *Ethics* (1912), and W. D. Ross's *The Right and the Good* (1930). Each of these works is concerned with both a variety of metaethical issues and issues of normative ethics (which in Sidgwick's and Ross's works includes substantive moral issues as well as moral theory). Although my discussion of the foundations of ethics does not range as widely as that of, say, Sidgwick or Ross, it resembles their work in scope more closely than it does much of the work within the noncognitivist tradition that followed such writers. The noncognitivists, by and large, viewed the foundations of ethics and the province of the moral philosopher more narrowly, as restricted to certain metaethical concerns. Happily, this trend is now changing; some of the most interesting recent work on the foundations of ethics (e.g., Harman 1977; Mackie 1977; Williams 1985; Nagel 1986) eschews this narrow scope. My views about the foundations of ethics differ from these most recent views more in content than in scope, although the differences are no less important for that reason, and here too my views may seem in some respects somewhat old-fashioned.

It may help to recall briefly some of this history, even if the recollection is rather crude and hackneyed. Moral philosophy during the first thirty years of this century was dominated by a position known as *intuitionism*. Intuitionists such as Sidgwick, Moore, Broad, and Ross, as I have noted, conceived of the foundations of ethics broadly, as including a wide range of metaethical and normative issues. Al-

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though the intuitionists differed quite a bit over normative issues, they displayed remarkable agreement on metaethical issues. In particular, most intuitionists accepted three metaethical claims: a realist or cognitivist commitment to the existence of moral facts and moral truths whose existence and nature are independent of our moral thinking, a foundationalist epistemology according to which our moral knowledge is based ultimately on self-evident moral truths, and a radically nonreductive metaphysics of moral facts and properties, known as nonnaturalism, according to which moral facts and properties are metaphysically independent of, for example, natural facts and properties and so are *sui generis*.

In part under the influence of then dominant metaphysical, epistemological, and semantic assumptions, moral philosophy in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s became highly critical of intuitionism and assumed an antirealist, *noncognitivist* form. I have in mind primarily the work of C. L. Stevenson (1944, 1963), A. J. Ayer (1946), R. M. Hare (1952, 1963a), and Patrick Nowell-Smith (1957). The noncognitivists found the metaphysical and epistemological commitments of intuitionism obscure and offered what they regarded as less extravagant metaphysical and epistemological claims. The various forms of noncognitivism asserted that moral claims and moral discourse could be seen, on analysis, to be fundamentally noncognitive in character. On this view, moral claims do not really make assertions of fact but, rather, express the moral agent's or appraiser's attitudes. Consequently, moral claims can be neither true nor false, there can be no moral facts or true moral claims, and moral knowledge is not possible. Not surprisingly, this trend in ethical theory drew a sharp line between metaethical and normative claims. Metaethical issues – in particular, “conceptual or logical analysis of fundamental moral concepts” – are cognitive issues, whereas normative issues are not. This sharp conceptual distinction between first- and second-order moral claims underwrote a sharp division of philosophical labor. Ethics or moral philosophy came for a while to be conceived of as including only metaethics; because normative ethics was fundamentally noncognitive, it was not the appropriate concern of the philosopher or something to which she could be expected to make any distinctive contribution.

Partly as a result of the dominance of this kind of noncognitivism, moral philosophy came to many, I think, to seem a fairly sterile and boring intellectual place. Perhaps for this reason, and

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because of the pressing nature of substantive normative issues connected with social and political movements in the United States, philosophers began to return to first-order moral issues in the 1960s and 1970s. The resulting work in normative ethics has seemed to many to bear the marks of intellectual progress and to show that philosophers do have a distinctive contribution to make to these problems. Indeed, concern with normative ethics, including both moral theory and substantive moral problems, has dominated moral philosophy for the last two decades. With some exceptions and until quite recently, moral philosophers have not worried much about traditional metaethical concerns. They have seemed to assume, what the noncognitivist legacy claimed, that first- and second-order moral issues are independent of each other in a way that allows a person to pursue normative issues without worrying about metaethical ones. And many of those philosophers who have begun to address metaethical issues recently (e.g., Blackburn 1971, 1985; Harman 1977; Mackie 1977; Williams 1985) have embraced metaethical conclusions similar in important ways to those of noncognitivism. But, of course, it was precisely noncognitivism and its sharp distinction between levels of moral inquiry that led the turn away from normative ethics. It is puzzling, therefore, that there has not been a greater concern among these philosophers to reexamine the noncognitivist metaethical claims and the connections, if any, between metaethics and normative ethics.

Just such a reexamination is one of the main aims of this book. It is my view that the main features of the noncognitivist legacy are fundamentally flawed. The traditional noncognitivists, I shall argue, failed to see the issues that concerned them against the appropriate metaphysical and epistemological backdrops; either they failed to see the issues as continuous with general metaphysical and epistemological issues, or they relied on inappropriate (even if then dominant) metaphysical and epistemological assumptions. We should see traditional metaethical issues as continuous with general metaphysical and epistemological issues, and we now have better developed and more plausible metaphysical and epistemological principles to apply to our understanding of ethics. Applying this method to traditional metaethical issues, I shall argue, will support various metaethical theses; in particular, it will vindicate a form of cognitivism and objectivity about ethics that I call *moral realism*. Moral realism is at odds not only with traditional forms of

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noncognitivism but also with much of the most recent work that has been done on these metaethical issues.

As I noted, the noncognitivists thought first- and second-order moral issues are completely independent of each other and, in particular, believed that whether one makes moral judgments and which moral judgments one makes are matters independent of the metaethical views one holds (see Hare 1957: 39–41, Mackie 1977: 16, Blackburn 1985: 11). My defense of moral realism will draw this independence into question. Although it is both possible and important to distinguish between metaethics and normative ethics, they are not completely independent. Metaethical claims can and do affect the moral theories and substantive moral judgments one is entitled to accept, or so I shall argue. It is in part because metaethics and normative ethics, especially moral theory, are interdependent in various ways that a study of the foundations of ethics should not be confined to metaethics but should include normative ethics, especially moral theory, as well.

1. OBJECTIVITY

In my view, the foundations of ethics include many topics in metaethics (including metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, and moral psychology) and issues of moral theory or principle. One traditional issue at the foundations of ethics concerns its objectivity. As a matter of philosophical and historical fact, issues about objectivity in ethics raise a number of these other issues of metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, and moral psychology. Because I want to discuss these issues and their bearing on our views about the objectivity of ethics, it may be helpful, before I sketch my views about the foundations of ethics, to distinguish in an introductory way some different views about the objectivity of ethics.

Most people writing about objectivity in ethics have (rightly, I think) focused on an important *comparative* issue: Is ethics or can it be objective in the way that other disciplines, such as the natural and social sciences, are, can be, or seem to be? This way of stating the comparative issue latent in the issue about objectivity in ethics may seem to raise as many issues as it sets aside (e.g., “What is to count as a natural or social science?” and “Are natural and social sciences equally objective disciplines?”). But let’s try to table these questions, at least for the moment. The commonsense view of the

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natural sciences (e.g., physics, chemistry, biology) and of the social sciences (e.g., psychology, history, economics) is that these disciplines study real objects and events whose existence and nature are largely independent of our theorizing about them, that they exhibit progress and convergence over time, and that they contain some at least approximate knowledge. This conception of objectivity is usually thought to be a realist view. Is this commonsense view of the natural and social sciences correct or reasonable, and if so, can such a view reasonably be maintained about ethics?

Although there are four possible general positions on this comparative issue, there seem to be only three worth serious consideration that can be found in the literature. Many traditional and contemporary metaethical views can be classified (if only crudely) in one of these three ways. (These metaethical positions will be explained and examined more fully in Chapter 2.)

1. Realism about science and antirealism about ethics: The commonsense view about the objectivity of the sciences is roughly right; ethics is not (and cannot be) objective in this way. There is a *special* problem about realism or objectivity in ethics. Traditional nihilists, noncognitivists (e.g., emotivists and prescriptivists), moral skeptics, and relativists can be viewed as holding this position on our comparative issue.

2. Realism about science and ethics: The commonsense view about the objectivity of the sciences is roughly right; ethics is or can be objective in much the same way. Although many traditional cognitivists found important disanalogies and discontinuities between ethics and the sciences, most of them, including the intuitionists (e.g., Richard Price, Thomas Reid, Sidgwick, Moore, Ross, Broad, and H. A. Prichard), believed that ethics does or can possess these marks of objectivity.

3. The third view is harder to label: Some will regard it as global subjectivism or antirealism, others as a sophisticated realism about both ethics and science. The idea is that, although ethics cannot fit the commonsense view of scientific objectivity, this establishes nothing interesting about the objectivity of ethics, since science itself does not satisfy the commonsense view of scientific objectivity. The commonsense view of scientific objectivity is naive; once we understand the objectivity obtainable in the sciences, we can see that ethics is or can be every bit as objective as the sciences. Although it is natural for sympathizers with view (1) or (2) to regard

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(3) as global subjectivism or antirealism, proponents of (3) often regard their position as realist or objectivist. Presumably, they think it makes sense to call a position about the status of ethics or science antirealist only if there is some discipline whose status is more realistic or objective than that of ethics or science. Since they think that more realistic views are naive and that nothing actually possesses that kind of objectivity, they regard their views about ethics and science as realistic.

2. THE ELEMENTS

My own view or set of views about the foundations of ethics is best regarded as a version of (2). The main elements of my view are these: moral realism, an externalist moral psychology, a coherentist moral epistemology, a nonreductive form of ethical naturalism, and an objective conception of utilitarianism.

Moral realism is a thesis about the metaphysical status of moral claims. Realism about the external world asks us to take the claims of the natural sciences and commonsense physical theory literally, as claims that purport to describe more or less accurately a world whose existence and nature are independent of our theorizing about it. Realists about the external world who are not skeptics hold related epistemological and semantic claims; they think that the claims of the natural sciences and commonsense physical theory not only purport to describe but often succeed in describing such a world. Thus, scientific terms refer to real features of the world, and the sciences provide us with successively more and more accurate knowledge of the world.

In a similar way, moral realism asks us to take moral claims literally, as claims that purport to describe the moral properties of people, actions, and institutions – properties that obtain independently of our moral theorizing. Moral realism is roughly the view that there are moral facts and true moral claims whose existence and nature are independent of our beliefs about what is right and wrong. A moral realist who is not a skeptic holds related epistemological and semantic claims. The moral realist thinks that our moral claims not only purport to but often do state facts and refer to real properties, and that we can and do have at least some true moral beliefs and moral knowledge.

Although various sorts of considerations support moral realism,

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its intuitive appeal derives, I think, from the way it explains the point and nature of moral inquiry. In moral argument and deliberation, it seems, we are trying to *discover* what sorts of things are valuable, praiseworthy, or obligatory. We *recognize* moral requirements, and if we are sensitive to moral requirements, they *constrain* our will and our conduct. We think people can be morally *mistaken* and some people are morally more *perceptive* than others.

Whatever the intellectual aspects of moral inquiry, morality is also fundamentally practical. Moral deliberation aims at deciding what to do, and moral advice aims at influencing the conduct of others. We expect moral considerations to motivate people to act in certain ways or at least to provide them with reason to act in those ways. It is sometimes thought difficult for a realist to explain the practical character of morality. How can moral considerations influence conduct in the appropriate way if, as the realist seems to claim, they merely state facts?

This might be a problem for the realist if one had to represent the connections between morality and motivation and morality and rationality as internal, conceptual connections, since, it seems, purely cognitive states and objects can be motivationally inert. Moral antirealists, such as noncognitivists, are committed to this sort of internalist moral psychology. An externalist moral psychology, however, claims that whether moral considerations motivate or provide reason for action depends on factors external to the concept of morality, such as the content of morality, a substantive theory of reasons for action, and facts about the world, such as an agent's interests or desires. An externalist moral psychology not only allows the realist to avoid this objection, it is, I argue, preferable to its internalist rival on independent grounds. If so, then the fact that the realist can be an externalist but the traditional antirealist cannot is evidence for moral realism.

Suppose we accept moral realism. How could we have moral knowledge or justify our moral beliefs? Traditional moral realists (e.g., Price, Reid, Sidgwick, Moore, Broad, and Ross) were intuitionists; in particular, they combined moral realism with a kind of foundationalist epistemology. But intuitionism has seemed to many a mysterious and, hence, suspicious view. How could any moral claim be self-evident? Surely there is no special faculty of moral perception. Although I do not think that intuitionism deserves all of the scorn it has received, I do think that any kind of foundationalist

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epistemology faces general problems that force us to defend a coherence theory of justification. A coherentist moral epistemology claims that a moral belief is justified insofar as it coheres in the appropriate way with other beliefs, both moral and nonmoral, that we hold or might hold.

But this sort of coherentist epistemology may not seem to sit very well with a realist understanding of ethics. Doesn't a coherentist epistemology require the rejection of realism? How can the coherence of a moral belief with other moral beliefs we hold be evidence of its objective truth? Although such worries about a coherentist moral epistemology are understandable, they can be answered. Coherence of the appropriate kind among our beliefs can be evidence of their objective truth.

But what are these moral facts like? And how are they related to the more familiar natural features of actions, policies, and personalities that such moral facts are supposed to concern? By itself, realism implies little about the nature of moral facts or their relation to other kinds of facts. But moral realism is most plausible, I think, if we accept a naturalistic view of these matters. According to the ethical naturalist, moral facts and properties *are* natural (i.e., natural and social scientific) facts and properties. Does this mean that we can deduce moral claims from natural claims, or that we can define moral terms in natural terms? If so, ethical naturalism seems committed to violating "Hume's law" that no 'ought' can be derived from an 'is'.

But ethical naturalism need not be understood in this reductive way. A nonreductive form of ethical naturalism claims that moral facts and properties are constituted by, and so supervene upon (or vary in a lawlike way with), natural and social scientific facts and properties even if moral terms are not definable by natural terms. Moreover, this sort of nonreductive ethical naturalism parallels the sort of nonreductive naturalism that we accept (or should accept) about a number of other, nonmoral disciplines in the natural and social sciences.

These metaethical views require the truth of no one moral theory; the metaphysical and epistemological commitments that I defend could be met by a wide variety of substantive moral theories. However, I do present, discuss, and defend a teleological moral theory (i.e., a theory that makes the proper moral assessment of such things as actions, motives, and policies a function of the value those things

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bring about). This teleological theory can be regarded as a species of utilitarianism because it takes the good to be human (or sentient) welfare or happiness. This utilitarian theory is different from more familiar kinds of utilitarianism, though, because it incorporates a different view of happiness or welfare. Traditional forms of utilitarianism (e.g., hedonistic utilitarianism or desire-satisfaction utilitarianism) rely on subjective theories of value, according to which human happiness or welfare consists in, or depends importantly on, contingent psychological facts about an agent, such as what he desires or takes pleasure in. By contrast, objective theories of value construe happiness or welfare in largely nonsubjective terms; they claim that a valuable life consists in the possession of certain character traits, the development and exercise of certain capacities, and the possession of certain relationships to others and the world, and that the value of these things is independent of the pleasure they produce or of their being the object of desire. Despite their apparent appeal, subjective theories of value are, I argue, much less plausible than objective theories. Here, utilitarianism stands to learn something from the Greeks and from the British idealists. The form of utilitarianism that I favor incorporates one such objective theory of value.

This utilitarian theory is worth examining for two reasons. First, my defense of moral realism requires fairly abstract metaphysical and epistemological claims. By examining this utilitarian theory's implications for various metaethical issues, I can illustrate the kinds of specific metaphysical and epistemological commitments that substantive moral theories bring. Second, this utilitarian theory is a plausible as well as a possible account of morality. A coherentist epistemology creates a presumption in favor of moral theories that are unified in the way this utilitarian theory is. Moreover, standard objections to utilitarianism fail to undermine this theory, either because they depend on construing utilitarianism as a model of moral reasoning or because they depend on construing welfare as subjective versions of utilitarianism construe it. If we construe utilitarianism as providing a standard of rightness, rather than a decision procedure, and we provide an objective construal of the nature of welfare, we can respond persuasively to standard objections to utilitarianism. In particular, this objective version of utilitarianism promises to accommodate our beliefs about value, about the nature and extent of our obligations to others, and about rights and justice, and it violates neither personal integrity nor the separateness of