

## Introduction

[computer file 3/24/96]

Theology and Absolute Ethics are two famous subjects  
which we have realized have no real objects.

– Frank Ramsey<sup>1</sup>

### THE PROJECT

For many years now, an interesting conflict has raged within contemporary philosophy. On one side of the conflict are “objectivist” moral and political philosophers, who believe in and accept the existence of distinctive (and irreducible) moral “values” – words that in this conflict have been used to cover a variety of normative notions fundamental to moral and political theories – for example, rights, duties, goods, and reasons for action. These philosophers maintain that moral judgments that involve values can be true or false, and that these moral facts cannot be reduced to the sort of facts recognized by scientific theories. In that sense, they believe there are value-laden, nonreducible moral judgments that are objective. On the other side of this debate are the “naturalists,” who insist that the world, as our best scientific theories portray it, does not and cannot contain values. Since values are the stuff of the theorizing of the moral objectivists, it follows from the naturalists’ position that there can be no uniquely moral facts. Hence they deny the possibility that there are value-laden, nonreducible moral judgments that are objective.

Many contemporary moral theorists, shaken by the naturalists’ challenge to the viability of their fields, have produced work that has

<sup>1</sup> See Frank Plumpton Ramsey (1931a), Epilogue (“There is Nothing to Discuss”) in Ramsey (1931, 291–2), quoted by Hilary Putnam (1990, 137).

### Introduction

been “dominated by a concern with the place of values in the natural world.”<sup>2</sup> These theories have ranged from those that have defended the idea that moral values are real<sup>3</sup> to those that have sought to redefine the subject-matter of ethics so that it can be “naturalized” and thereby rendered acceptable given the ontological demands of science.<sup>4</sup>

This book offers the beginnings of a defense of, among other things, moral objectivity. But rather than constructing positive arguments defending the possibility or actuality of nonreducible moral facts, I will be defending moral objectivism by attacking the naturalists’ position. In particular, I will attempt to show that the naturalists’ argument against the moral objectivists’ theory is self-defeating.

To see how this strategy will work, consider that there are four ways in which one might respond to the purported conflict between objective moral theories and the theories of science that the naturalists respect<sup>5</sup>:

1. One can believe that the commitments of science preclude acceptance of objectivist moral theory – and so much the worse for objectivist moral theory. Call this theory *moral anti-objectivism*. To be precise, it is the view that there are no irreducibly moral facts (facts that cannot be reduced to natural facts recognized by science) insofar as such irreducibly moral facts are not, and could not be, admissible by scientific criteria. Thus it is the denial of moral objectivism, as defined above, that insists that there are such irreducibly moral facts. There are a number of importantly different variants of this position: moral nihilists and skeptics (those who deny or doubt that there is any special domain of the moral, such as Quine), moral noncognitivists (who deny that there are irreducibly moral facts but explain morality as constituted by expressivistic assertions, such as Gibbard or Hare), and theorists who believe that “moral judgments can be analyzed into or reduced to factual statements of a sort clearly com-

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Harman (1984, 29).

<sup>3</sup> Such theories include those developed by “moral realists” – for example, Boyd (1988), Sturgeon (1984), Brink (1989).

<sup>4</sup> Such theories include those developed by Gibbard (1990), Blackburn (1984), Mackie (1977), and Gauthier (1986).

<sup>5</sup> My classifications are in certain respects comparable to those put forward by Brink (1989, 6). I am indebted to conversations with Mark Patterson about various possible classification schemes in this area.

### Introduction

patible with a scientific world view.”<sup>6</sup> This latter group includes moral relativists such as Bernard Williams, who argue that morality is defined by different sets of social conventions in different societies.<sup>7</sup> It also includes those who put forward what I call “Hobbesian” contractarian moral theories, such as Gauthier (1986) and Mackie (1977), who, inspired by Hobbes (1651), attempt to reduce moral facts to facts of (instrumental) reason.

2. One can believe that the commitments of science preclude acceptance of objectivist moral theory – and so much the worse for science. Call this theory *moral nonnaturalism*. It is the view that there are irreducibly moral facts, and that because such facts are not and cannot be admissible by scientific criteria, those criteria cannot be exclusively used to establish what count as facts in the world. In short, it is the view that ethical inquiry is discontinuous with scientific inquiry.<sup>8</sup> G. E. Moore is perhaps the most famous exponent of this view<sup>9</sup>; the work of philosophers such as Thomas Nagel, Alan Donagan, Stephen Darwall, and Alasdair MacIntyre also falls into this camp.

3. One can believe that the commitments of science do not preclude the acceptance of objectivist moral theory, because, in the end, morality is like science after all. That is, both are objective, so that they both establish facts, albeit different kinds of facts. Hence this position not only insists that there are moral facts, but also that these facts are not reducible to natural facts. Most often, theorists who propound this position advocate what is called *moral realism*. Although that term is slippery, it is generally used to denote realist positions that insist that even though moral facts are not reducible to natural facts, they are fully compatible with science. For example, Brink denies the reducibility of moral facts to natural facts, and maintains that “moral facts and properties are no more *sui generis* than are the facts and properties of other higher-order disciplines.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Harman has a distinctive, and not universally shared, conception of moral relativism. I will discuss it at length in Chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this view, see Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton (1992, 130–1).

<sup>9</sup> See Moore’s *Principia Ethica* 1903. Its nonnaturalism receives a nice discussion by Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton, *ibid.* See especially pp. 115–121.

<sup>10</sup> Brink (1989, 210).

### Introduction

Nicholas Sturgeon and John McDowell also put forward arguments of this type.

4. Finally, one can believe that the commitments of science do not preclude acceptance of objectivist moral theory, because, in the end, science is like morality – and not the other way around. In this view, science and morality are alike because even though morality has within it components that are not “scientifically admissible” given the traditionally understood criteria establishing scientific objectivity, on close examination the same components lurk in science too – albeit little recognized or admitted.<sup>11</sup> I call this position *sophisticated compatibilism*, and it can take two quite different forms. One form embraces a Feyerabendian view of science that disparages the pretense of objectivity in scientific discourse. And insofar as, in this view, scientific and moral discourse are basically similar, the view also dismisses the pretense of objectivity in moral discourse. I call this position *sophisticated anti-objectivism*. It has been advocated by, among others, Richard Rorty.<sup>12</sup> The second form insists that we can still see science as objective, but not in the traditional naive way, so that scientific objectivity is no different from the form of objectivity exemplified in the moral domain.<sup>13</sup> I call this position *sophisticated objectivism*.

In the last few years, most defenders of morality against the attacks of scientific skeptics have embraced some version of position 2 or 3 – that is, moral nonnaturalism or moral realism. But in this book, I shall advance a position on ethics and science that is motivated by position 4, and in particular, the sophisticated objectivist version of that position. Indeed, I shall go on to advance a thesis concerning normativity in general. Consider that moral objectivism is just an instance of a more general position that might be called *normative objectivism*, that holds that there are irreducibly normative facts. Moreover, each of the four positions just defined could be re-

<sup>11</sup> In this view, “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.” Brink (1989, 6)

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Richard Rorty (1980a, 1980b).

<sup>13</sup> To quote Brink, in this view, 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.” (1989, 6)

### *Introduction*

cast as positions about the relationship between science and *any* normative theory—that is, there are:

1. Skeptical positions on normativity, including normative anti-objectivism, normative nihilism, normative relativism, and normative noncognitivism.
2. Normative nonnaturalist positions.
3. Normative realist positions.
4. Various possible versions of normative sophisticated compatibilism.

I will argue along sophisticated objectivist lines that in the same way a commitment to science does not preclude, in and of itself, the acceptance of moral objectivism, it also does not preclude, in and of itself, the acceptance of other types of normative theory. Indeed, I will make the stronger claim that science itself requires, and is undergirded by, a commitment to normative objectivism, meaning that any science-based argument against moral objectivism is ultimately self-defeating.

Of course, the values – I shall call them “norms” – relied on by naturalists and moral theorists aren’t the same (although I shall also argue that there is much more overlap than the two groups have thought). Nonetheless, I hope to show that the naturalists’ position requires the existence of normative facts that while largely (but not entirely) different from the sort of normative facts recognized by moral theory, are not metaphysically different either in their nature or in their operation from moral facts. Both moral theorists and naturalists therefore embrace two different forms of normative objectivity.

This argument cannot, by itself, vindicate moral objectivity. Naturalists can always claim that *their* kind of norms are sound, whereas the moral objectivists’ norms are not. Few arguments defending the special soundness of the naturalists’ norms exist in the literature, because naturalists tend not to want to acknowledge their own normative commitments. But those who do generally argue that the norms that undergird their position – for example, the norms of epistemology, or reason, or science – are sound because they can be “naturalized,” whereas the norms of morality cannot.

I will discuss at length this argumentative move by the naturalists in order to show how it fails. As I shall explain, “naturalization” of

### *Introduction*

the norms of epistemology or science tends, almost exclusively, to rely on instrumental reason. This form of reason is assumed to be metaphysically benign, unproblematic in naturalist terms, and yet the justificatory tool for legitimating the norms that the naturalist needs for the rest of his theorizing. Yet I hope to expose the “metaphysically occult” nature of instrumental reason. Not only is this seemingly benign conception of reason far more complicated than its adherents have realized, but it is also constituted by a variety of norms itself. Hence, using this conception of reason as a tool to naturalize other norms is just using another normative tool that is at least as “unnatural” as the norms it is intended to naturalize. It therefore cannot serve as the Archimedean lever for the naturalization of other norms, nor is there any other level by which it can itself be naturalized.

I shall take great pains to discuss the components of a theory of instrumental reason in order to show how many normative issues such a theory must take a stand on, and how many variants of such a theory are possible, depending on what stands a theorist of instrumental reason decides to take. Moreover, I shall also argue that part of what is involved in specifying a conception of instrumental reason involves taking a stand – a very minimal stand, but a stand nonetheless – on the nature of the good of a rational agent. If I’m right, even the most hard-core instrumentalist on reason can only theorize about reason by doing, in a small way, some theorizing that has normally been construed as “noninstrumental.” The realization that a little of bit of ethics is required in order to develop a conception of reason on which a variety of sciences rely should, I hope, show both sides of the debate how much they have in common, not only in their acceptance of normative objectivity as an overarching thesis, but also in the kinds of norms they need for their theorizing.

Moreover, if I am right, naturalists are without any effective way of arguing that their normative commitments are any more defensible than the normative commitments of moral objectivists (simply claiming that naturalists’ norms are “obviously” correct, clearly won’t do, particularly in the face of controversy over what those norms are or how they should be specified). More importantly, naturalists are, at least thus far, without an effective way of defending their own form of normative objectivity. My arguments try to bring to the attention of philosophers an issue that has been insufficiently discussed – namely, how can we tell when a norm is sound? To

### *Introduction*

answer this question, we require what I call a “theory of normativity.” Such a theory tells us how to recognize which norms are sound and which aren’t, and it tells us what it means to say that a norm is sound. There exist some models of what a theory of normativity should look like. These models have generally been developed in moral philosophy because of the widespread recognition that moral norms have been under attack. For example, the idea of using “reflective equilibrium” to test normative conceptions is at least part of such a theory of normativity.<sup>14</sup> I hope to show that philosophers in many fields beside moral and political philosophy – for example, epistemologists, philosophers of science, and philosophers of language – need such a theory of normativity to defend their own normative commitments. Perhaps appreciating that all of us must develop ways of defending the norms on which our theorizing relies may help to break down barriers that presently divide different fields of philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

The final aim of this book is to persuade naturalists and moral objectivists to realize their kinship, and join forces in opposing what I take to be their real theoretical enemy – those radical normative skeptics – the sophisticated anti-objectivists, exemplified by many postmodernist thinkers – who reject the idea that there are any sound norms and who dismiss the idea that there is any universal and authoritative conception of reason that can be the foundation either for our attempts to understand the natural world or for our attempts to successfully structure the social one. It is the need for an effective philosophical answer to these thinkers that, as I shall now discuss, makes it imperative that naturalists and moral objectivists recognize their common commitment to normative objectivity and join forces to defend it.

There are a number of different kinds of theorists who fall into the category of radical normative skeptic, but in this book I am particularly interested in those who doubt or dismiss the authority of science. For example, many postmodernists argue that philosophical or scientific theories are merely expressions of culture (and of the

<sup>14</sup> The use of reflective equilibrium is familiar from Rawls’s (1971) *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls cites Goodman (1955, 65–68) as employing a similar principle in nonmoral domains.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it may even make hiring easier if it helps to make those divisions less important!



### Introduction

ambitions of certain groups powerful in that culture), and there are sociologists of science who interpret the development of scientific theories in an entirely nonnormative way.<sup>16</sup> No naturalist these days can be unaware of the way that the history of science lends itself to such deconstruction. The history of biology or psychology, for example, is replete with examples of self-serving theorizing by members of culturally dominant groups that “just happen” to show that women are mentally weaker than men, that blacks are inferior, that homosexuality is unnatural, and so forth.<sup>17</sup> Only with the empowerment of these nondominant groups within the academy has such theorizing (at least somewhat) abated. The opponents of normative objectivity will draw one kind of lesson from this history – that theories that purport to rely on various forms of objective normative authority, whether in science, social science, moral theory, or politics, are in reality theories that manifest the culture of that society, and by and large serve the interests of that society’s most powerful. Naturalists want to draw another lesson – that the theories in question are examples of *bad science*.

But if this is bad science, what is good science? On what does good science rely, such that we can trust it to give us something *sound* and such that we should take it to have authority over us?

The answer to these normatively charged questions generally given by philosophers is that good science is grounded in reason. But what is this reason? One of my purposes in spending so much time in this book explicating the conception of instrumental reason and discussing the extent to which science relies on it is to show naturalists how much their position depends on a normative conception of reason that cannot be naturalized, and whose authority is crucial if naturalists are going to be persuasive against their non-skeptical opponents.

Of course, moral objectivists have their own embarrassing history, which may be a major reason why there has been so much sympathy for the naturalists’ attacks. In a variety of times and cultures, people

<sup>16</sup> This was explicit in the so-called “Strong Program” in the sociology of science advocated by the Edinburgh school. See for example, David Bloor (1976). For critical discussions and further references, see J. R. Brown, ed. (1984).

<sup>17</sup> The essays and bibliography of Tuana (ed.) 1989 provide one source for such examples, especially of the influence on science of sexual stereotypes.



### *Introduction*

who have claimed to know what is good for us, what unseen entities we ought to believe in (or else), and what political ideologies we must accept have been dangerous to the cause of freedom, using their particular brands of “normative truth” to license abuse. The hope of many modern naturalists, beginning with Hobbes, has been to find a way of philosophizing that relies only on what might be called “minimalist” conceptions of reason, in ways that will not only be consistent with the commitments of science, but that will also help to provide theoretical tools to block the fanatical dogmatists’ attempts to impose their brands of truth on others, even while encouraging the creation of a peaceful and prosperous community life.

Today’s moral objectivists say just what the naturalists say in the face of their bad history – that these fanatics are guilty of *bad* moralizing, or *bad* religious theorizing, or *bad* political ideology. The point, say the objectivists, is not to dismiss all such theorizing, but to demand that it be done well.

So once again, in the face of an embarrassing history, we see philosophers making an appeal to some conception of an ideal practice – in this case, ideal practices of morality, religion, and politics. Leaving aside what the ideal of religious theorizing must be (for I suspect there is a multiplicity of answers depending on the nature of one’s faith), moral and political objectivists give roughly the same answer that the naturalists give to their skeptics to explain the foundations of good moral and political theorizing – that such theorizing must rest on reason. (And this is an answer that at least some religious thinkers will also give.<sup>18</sup>)

Indeed, any theorist interested in discovering ethical truth by relying on reason must advocate modes of thinking and believing that are very different from those used by a fanatic. For example, an objectivist must eschew dogmatism and bias, insist on open-mindedness, and welcome (in Socratic fashion) challenges to current theory. Reliance on reason to determine ethical truth should no more encourage prejudice and dogmatism than reliance on reason to determine mathematical truth – or so the moral objectivist will argue. Dogmatism is the refuge of those who lack rational arguments, not those who are committed to them. As J. S. Mill has argued, close-minded prejudice is antithetical to, rather than characteristic of, any

<sup>18</sup> The journal *Faith and Reason* is one source for the writings of such thinkers.

### *Introduction*

reason-reliant objectivist in any field of philosophy – and particularly in moral philosophy.<sup>19</sup>

So both naturalists and moral and political objectivists are heirs of the Enlightenment by virtue of their commitment to reason as the tool for understanding and shaping our world. In particular, they agree that reason must govern the construction and operation of science, moral theory, or politics if the theorizing in these fields is to be properly authoritative over our beliefs, practices, and sociopolitical structures. And they share many of the same norms of reason – in particular, those norms that constitute a theory of instrumental reason – since this form of reason is fundamental to the projects and interests of each field. By clarifying components of the conception of reason on which both science, and moral and political theory rely, I aim to show not only how norm-driven these disciplines are, but also how we might construct a defense of this conception of reason in the face of present-day anti-Enlightenment attacks on it.

Aside from their implications for the debate between naturalists and moral objectivists, the arguments in this book have a number of other implications.

First, insofar as they involve extensive discussions of practical reason, these arguments may interest rational-choice theorists and other theorists of reason, even those who are not interested in the debate between the naturalists and objectivist moral theorists. For instance, I discuss at length expected utility theory and other technical notions of reason used by economists and social scientists in Part III of the book. And in Part II, I examine at length the components of instrumental rationality.

Second, because this project involves discussing the normativity required by science, at various points I spend a fair bit of time analyzing the methodologies of science and the sense in which science can inform us about what counts as “natural.” I am particularly interested in portrayals of science that argue for its extensive reliance on instrumental reason, not only in its methodology, but also as a tool for justifying other values that scientists have thought it important to honor in their theorizing and experimentation. Hence, aspects of this book may be of interest to those who study the methodology

<sup>19</sup> See Mill (1859, 64). Christopher Hookway suggests the nondogmatical nature of the objectivist in his “Fallibilism and Objectivity: Science and Ethics” (1995). See especially p. 60.