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Realism and Irrealism

1.1. INTRODUCTION

It is surely an understatement to say that most of the issues that are discussed within meta-ethics appear esoteric to nonphilosophers. Still, many can relate to the questions that, in my view, provide its core, namely those that concern the *objectivity* of ethics. Can our moral commitments be valid or true? If so, can they be valid in some sense independently of *us*, for example, of the contingent fact that we accept them?

Why care about these things? Many try to live by their moral views. Some even die (or kill) for them. Behind the interest in questions about the objectivity of ethics lies the nagging suspicion that unless there is room for some objectivity, the role of moral thinking in our lives is somehow inapt. What's the point of making sacrifices in order to abide by rules whose claims to objective authority are as unfounded as any others? What's the point of carefully weighing arguments for and against moral opinions if no truth is to be found?

Of course, it is not evident that the lack of objectivity in ethics (whatever that may mean, more specifically) really does motivate taking a more casual attitude towards it. But the potential significance of such questions in that context helps to explain why nonphilosophers may find them more important than other meta-ethical questions. It also provides a perspective from which the arguments that are discussed in this book can be seen. For the point of these arguments is precisely to show that there is no room for objectivity in ethics.

However, "objective" is a tricky term, and in order to assess the arguments, we need to clarify the *sense* in which the objectivity of ethics is supposed to be undermined. That is, we need to identify the *target* of the

arguments. As I mentioned in the Preface, I shall call the target “moral realism.” The purpose of this chapter is to define moral realism, in part by contrasting it with its competitors. This will lead me to pursue a more general discussion about the methodological status of meta-ethical theories, a discussion that will affect the conclusions reached in subsequent chapters.

1.2. A DISINTEGRATED PICTURE

Fifty or so years ago, it was easy to characterize the positions that dominated meta-ethics. On the one hand, we had “noncognitivists,” who denied that sentences such as “The death penalty should be abolished,” and “It is right to give to charity” are true or false. On their view, to embrace such a sentence is to have a “conative” attitude toward the thing being evaluated, rather than to accept some statement of fact about it.¹

On the other hand, we had “cognitivists” or “descriptivists”, who thought that ethical sentences do express statements of fact, and that they are true or false.² Of course, different cognitivists differed about the *contents* of the beliefs that ethical sentences are supposed to express, just as different non-cognitivists differed about the *conative* states they are supposed to express. Some cognitivists stressed that ethical sentences represent certain “natural” states of affairs, whereas others held that the properties ascribed by ethical sentences are “nonnatural.”³ Similarly, some noncognitivists thought that ethical sentences express certain sentiments or emotions, whereas others held that they rather express a kind of command.⁴

- 1 Alfred Ayer, Richard Hare, and, more recently, Allan Gibbard are prominent advocates of this view. See A. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1936 (Ch. 6); A. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990; and Hare, *The Language of Morals*. Nowadays, this view is usually labeled “expressivism.”
- 2 G. E. Moore and W. D. Ross are classical advocates of this view. See Moore’s *Ethics*. London: Oxford University Press, 1912 and Ross’s *The Right and the Good*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930. For some contemporary heirs, see R. Boyd, “How to Be a Moral Realist,” in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988, 181–228; D. O. Brink, *Moral Realism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989; F. Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998; and M. Smith, *The Moral Problem*.
- 3 “Nonnaturalism” is associated with G. E. Moore. Most contemporary cognitivists, such as Brink and Smith, regard themselves as naturalists. According to Smith, what distinguishes a “natural” property from “nonnatural” ones is that “it is of the kind that is the subject matter of a natural or social science” (*The Moral Problem*, 17).
- 4 Emotivism is usually attributed to Ayer and Stevenson. Richard Hare provides an example of a noncognitivist who is not an emotivist.

However, during the past decades, this picture has disintegrated, and it has become increasingly more difficult to discern where the opponents really differ. One step in this process was the emergence of John Mackie's "error theory." Mackie held that ethical sentences do indeed express beliefs, but, given a correct account of the contents of these beliefs, we have reason to suspect that they are all false.⁵ According to Mackie, to hold that an action is, say, right is to ascribe a property that is "objectively prescriptive"; that is, such that grasping that an action has it necessarily involves being motivated to perform the action. And such properties simply do not exist.⁶

Mackie's theory is not popular. Many think it awkward to say that there is something globally wrong with ethics, given its crucial role in people's lives. In particular, many think it strange to deny that some ways of pursuing moral thinking are better or more reliable than others; a denial they think follows from Mackie's theory.⁷ However, the emergence of Mackie's position carried an important lesson. It made clear that moral realism involves two components, and that a person can, accordingly, be an antirealist in two ways. We can either deny its "semantical" component (roughly, the view that moral convictions are beliefs), or its "ontological" component (the view that there are facts in virtue of which some such beliefs are true).

The emergence of Mackie's theory added a new position, but it didn't confuse the old picture. A more important step in the disintegration was the interest in so-called deflationary or minimal theories of truth.

Noncognitivism is often taken to deny that ethical sentences have truth-values. According to a "deflationary" view, however, to ascribe truth to a sentence is merely a way expressing one's agreement with it, and not (to use a phrase by Crispin Wright) "to ascribe a property of intrinsic metaphysical *gravitas*."⁸ This view seems to allow a noncognitivist to concede that sentences such as "The death penalty should be abolished" may be

5 This holds at least for all "positive" judgments; that is, judgments that actually ascribe some moral property.

6 See Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. New York: Penguin, 1977, Ch. 1. For an interesting recent elaboration of this type of approach, see Richard Joyce's *The Myth of Morality*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

7 For example, this is suggested by Crispin Wright. See his "Truth in Ethics," esp. 2f. See also Simon Blackburn's "Errors and the Phenomenology of Values," reprinted in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 149–165.

8 See Crispin Wright's "Truth in Ethics," 5. For a useful discussion of the deflationary view, see H. Field, "The Deflationary Conception of Truth," in G. MacDonald and C. Wright (eds.), *Fact, Science and Morality*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, 55–117.

true. For, given the deflationary view, to ascribe truth to this sentence is just to affirm it. And that is, obviously, something a noncognitivist can do.

On the basis of the present reasoning, many antirealists argue that ethical sentences are, after all, true or false. C. L. Stevenson, Jack Smart, and, more recently, Simon Blackburn and Wright himself, provide prominent examples.⁹ For example, Blackburn stresses that

[t]o think [. . .] that the anti-realist results show that there is no such thing as moral truth is quite wrong. To think there are no moral truths is to think that nothing should be morally endorsed, that is, to endorse the endorsement of nothing, and this attitude of indifference is one that it would be wrong to recommend, and silly to practice.¹⁰

Indeed, Blackburn holds that this strategy allows an antirealist to hold not only that ethical sentences may be true, but also that there are moral facts, that those facts exist independently of us, that we can obtain knowledge of them, and so forth. This is the idea underlying his “quasi-realism.”¹¹

What remains, then, of the antirealism of these writers? Stevenson stresses that the fact that a sentence can be true shows “nothing whatsoever about whether it expresses a belief or an attitude.”¹² Given this view, one may accept that ethical sentences have truth-values, but deny that they express beliefs, which is exactly what Stevenson does. Blackburn and Wright formulate themselves differently, but they pursue what is basically the same strategy. Thus, Blackburn insists that we may separate “truth [. . .] from ‘represents’ and its allies,” and argues that, insofar as ethical sentences express beliefs, these beliefs do not have “representational truth conditions thought of realistically.”¹³ Similarly, Wright suggests that, although the claim that ethical sentences are truth apt commits him to the view that they express beliefs, these beliefs are not “full-bloodedly representational.”¹⁴

9 See, for example, Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, 196; Stevenson, *Facts and Values*, 216; J.J.C. Smart, *Ethics, Persuasion and Truth*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, 97; and Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, 89.

10 “Moral Realism,” in J. Casey (ed.), *Morality and Moral Reasoning*. London: Methuen, 1971, 101–124.

11 *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 3–11. Roughly, “quasi-realism” is the project of explaining how an antirealist may legitimately talk about moral facts and knowledge.

12 *Facts and Values*, 216. Smart holds a similar view. See *Ethics, Persuasion and Truth*, 94–105.

13 See “Attitudes and Contents,” reprinted in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 182–197, 185. See also *Spreading the Word*, 167, in which he says that ethical sentences lack “genuine truth conditions.”

14 See, for example, his *Truth and Objectivity*, 91f and 162. See also “Realism: Pure and Simple?,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 2 (1994), 327–341, in which Wright says that the

In suggesting that some beliefs, unlike others, are “full-bloodedly representational,” Blackburn and Wright assume that beliefs may differ in the “way” or “sense” in which they may be true. Some represent, unlike others, “robust” facts. It may be questioned whether a clear sense could be attached to idea, and I shall return to that issue. But it also might be wondered why antirealists want to adopt the view that ethical sentences are truth apt in the first place.

One reason is that this enables them to account for certain “objectivist” features of ethical discourse. For example, it is commonly assumed that ethical sentences occur in logically valid inferences, and that they can be inconsistent with each other. It is also held that we should avoid such inconsistencies. If we assume that ethical sentences are truth apt, we may offer a straightforward account both of what it means to say that ethical sentences are inconsistent, and of why we should avoid accepting inconsistencies among our moral convictions. According to this account, a set of sentences is inconsistent if it is necessarily so that one of them is false, and we should avoid inconsistencies because we want to avoid error. If ethical sentences are not truth apt, however, our explanation of these things may have to be complicated.¹⁵

A similar attempt to occupy the ground of its rival can be discerned in the realist camp. It is commonly recognized that we have a (defeasible) tendency to act in accordance with our moral judgments. For example, if someone thinks it immoral to eat meat, we would be surprised (and not merely annoyed) if we were to find that he lacks a tendency to avoid meat. This correlation provides the point of departure of a traditional objection to moral realism. For the correlation is often taken to support *internalism*, and that position is often supposed to be difficult to reconcile with realism.

status he ascribes to ethical sentences is related to that which he ascribes to vague sentences (although it stems from a different source). Notice that Blackburn’s and Wright’s antirealisms differ substantially. Blackburn is an expressivist who regards himself as an heir of Ayer and Hare. For an account of Wright’s antirealism, see his “Truth in Ethics”.

- 15 I allude here to what is often called “the Frege-Geach problem.” See P. T. Geach, “Assertion,” *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), 449–465; and G. F. Scheuler, “Modus Ponens and Moral Realism,” *Ethics* 98 (1988), 492–500. That this provides the main reason to accept that ethical sentences are truth apt is stressed by Crispin Wright. See his “Truth in Ethics,” 3f. I shall not enter into the huge discussion about whether expressivists can account for the Frege-Geach considerations, as my aim in this essay is not to defend expressivism but to discuss realism, which is a stronger thesis than that which the Frege-Geach considerations are taken to support.

The reason is this. Internalism tells us that to judge that an action is right necessarily involves being motivated to perform it (the motivation is “internal” to the judgment).¹⁶ Realists hold that such judgments are best construed as a kind of belief. However, given a popular view about human psychology (that is commonly attributed to Hume), it holds for any belief that it is possible to have that belief and still not be motivated to perform any particular action (due to the absence of appropriate desires). Therefore, given the “Humean” view, internalism is difficult to reconcile with realism.¹⁷

Some realists respond to this argument by denying internalism (at least in the form considered here) and by trying to explain the correlation between evaluation and motivation in a way that is compatible with internalism being false (e.g., by assuming that we have an independently existing desire to do the right thing).¹⁸ Others question instead the psychological theory on which it relies. For example, John McDowell and David Wiggins think that some beliefs are necessarily motivating, which allows them to combine the claim that judging that giving to charity is right is to have a belief (cognitivism), with the doctrine that making the judgment necessarily involves a tendency to give to charity (internalism).¹⁹

What all of this shows is in any case that, just as there is in politics a rush toward the center, so is there a similar rush toward the center in meta-ethics. And, just as in politics, it may be difficult to see where the real frontiers lie. In my view, although some of the old ways of stating the debates might be misleading in view of new developments, substantial disagreements remain. The rest of this chapter is an attempt to pin them down.

16 For some discussions of internalism, see W. D. Falk, “‘Ought’ and ‘Motivation’,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 48 (1947–8), 492–510; W. Frankena, “Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy,” in A. Melden (ed.), *Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958, 40–81; Brink, *Moral Realism*; and Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 60–91.

17 To reconcile internalism with realism, without giving up the Humean view of psychology is, roughly, what Michael Smith labels “the moral problem.” See *The Moral Problem*, Ch. 1.

18 This view is labeled “externalist,” because, in this view, our motivation to act in accordance with our moral judgments is “external” to the judgments. David Brink and Richard Boyd are two advocates of this view. See Brink, *Moral Realism*, and Boyd, “How To Be a Moral Realist.”

19 See McDowell’s “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 52 (suppl.), 1978, 13–29; “Values and Secondary Qualities,” in T. Honderich (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, 110–129; and Wiggins’ “Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life,” in his *Needs, Values, Truth*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987, 87–138. See also J. Dancy, *Moral Reasons*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, Ch. 1. For an able defense of the Humean theory, see Smith, *The Moral Problem*, Ch. 4.

1.3. COGNITIVISM

To make a long story short, I shall conceive of moral realism as the conjunction of four claims: *cognitivism*, *antinihilism*, *absolutism* (antirelativism), and *objectivism*. I shall comment on these components in turn, but I shall especially focus on the first.

Cognitivism and its competitors are often stated in terms of the *words* or *sentences* we use for expressing our moral convictions. In my view, this is a dubious approach. But as the considerations that show why carry some important lessons, it is worth our while to spend some pages on it.

Cognitivism is usually taken to involve the following claim:

(1) Ethical sentences express beliefs.²⁰

(1) in turn is closely related to a number of other claims usually associated with cognitivism, such as the thesis that ethical sentences have truth conditions and are true or false, that they have “cognitive content,” that ethical terms such as “right,” “wrong,” etc., refer to “real properties,” and so on. These claims are sometimes supposed to follow from (1), and are sometimes supposed to imply (1).²¹

However, in my view, (1) does a bad job at capturing cognitivism, at least if we want to define the position in such a way that those who regard themselves as noncognitivists really deny it, and in a way that makes sense of the arguments around which the debate revolves. What is a sentence, and which sentences are ethical? A sentence is a (well-formed) sequence of words, characters or phonemes, and it is customary to distinguish ethical sentences from others by stressing that they contain words such as “obligatory,” “morally wrong,” and “unjust” (e.g., “It is morally wrong to X”).²² The problem is that, more or less regardless of what we mean by “express beliefs,” it is hard to see how anyone can deny (1).

This has in part to do with the fact that language is so context-sensitive. Roughly, to have a belief is to hold a certain proposition *p* to be true.²³ On one (admittedly vague) suggestion, to say that a sentence expresses the

20 Of course, it sounds wrong to say that sentences express something by themselves. Rather, it is *we* who express beliefs, by using sentences. This should be kept in mind in what follows.

21 For example, Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit think that (1) entails that ethical sentences have truth conditions. See their “A Problem for Expressivism,” *Analysis* 58 (1998), 239–251.

22 I use “ethical” and “moral” interchangeably throughout the book, although I often reserve “ethical” for linguistic expressions and “moral” for the kinds of commitments they are used to express.

23 The notion of a proposition is problematic in certain well-known ways. However, these problems have no bearing on the present context.

belief that p is to say that, by uttering the sentence, a speaker represents himself as having the belief that p .²⁴ That there are contexts in which terms such as “morally wrong” are used to express beliefs in this sense is clear enough. For example, consider the sentence “It is morally wrong for Mormons to have premarital sex,” and suppose that it is uttered as an answer to the following question: “What do Mormons think about sex and marriage?” In that context, the sentence should obviously be interpreted as conveying information about what Mormons *think* is right rather than as expressing a judgment about what *is* right (for Mormons). In other words, as Richard Hare and others have put it, ethical terms are sometimes used in an “inverted commas sense.”²⁵

One way to handle this familiar problem is to restrict (1) to certain contexts, namely, those that are “typically moral.” In that way, the fact that ethical sentences express beliefs in *other* contexts (e.g., when they are used in an inverted commas sense) is irrelevant. But a further problem is that, however we pick those contexts out, noncognitivists typically hold that ethical sentences express beliefs in them as well.

This holds most clearly for “thick” sentences, such as “Socrates was courageous” (which expresses straightforward beliefs about Socrates’ way of facing dangers).²⁶ But many noncognitivists stress that “thin” ethical terms, such as “right,” also might acquire the capacity to express beliefs, even in typically moral contexts. For example, Hare suggests that such terms may acquire that capacity “by reason of the constancy of the standards by which they are applied.”²⁷ In a similar vein, Stevenson writes that:

to say that a man is ‘good’ may be to suggest that he has such traits as honesty, humility [. . .], and so on. [. . .] Within communities with well-developed mores these varied suggestions become fixed, and people tend to define ‘good’ in a way that makes the word strictly designate what it formerly suggested.²⁸

In my view, in spite of these “concessions,” there is room for a distinctively noncognitivist position. This means, however, that cognitivism must be construed as stating something more than just (1).

24 That is, the utterance itself (provided that it is sincere) allows us to conclude that the speaker believes that p , even if we know nothing else about him than the fact that he speaks the language to which the sentence belongs.

25 See, for example, *The Language of Morals*, 124.

26 See, for example, Gibbard, *Wise Choices*, 113.

27 See *The Language of Morals*, 7, in which he suggests that “right” may acquire the capacity to refer to the property of maximizing utility in a society of convinced utilitarians.

28 *Facts and Values*, 169, my italics. See also 9, 16, and 221.

1.4. PRIMARY AND SECONDARY FUNCTIONS

But what? One option is to try to exploit a distinction between “primary” and “secondary” functions. For example, Hare concedes that ethical sentences may express beliefs. But he also stresses that this is just their “secondary” function. Their “primary” function is – he thinks – to express other (i.e., conative) attitudes.²⁹ Cognitivism, we may assume, makes the converse claim.

But what does this talk of “primary” and “secondary” functions amount to? In the present section, I shall pursue a certain suggestion. This suggestion is not meant to capture exactly what Hare meant with such phrases, but constitutes rather a proposal as to how cognitivism *should* be defined.

One set of questions about cognitivism concern its scope. Is it supposed to hold for all languages or idiolects, at all times? Or could cognitivism be true of some languages and false of others? For example, someone might argue that while cognitivism might have been true of, say, thirteenth-century Swedish, it is false of the Swedish of this secular age. In medieval Sweden, there were recognized moral authorities (the church and its priests), and a significant amount of consensus regarding when to count actions as right or wrong. Therefore, there were shared criteria in the light of which it made sense to say that someone was correct in case of a moral dispute, which in turn, it might be held, is enough to show that the issue over which they disagreed concerned a matter of fact, and that ascriptions of “right” were true or false. In this modern age, however, the consensus has withered and the authorities have fallen into disrepute, which rather invites an expressivist analysis.

I suppose that one *could* reason in this way. But I shall pursue another idea. It is interesting to note that although both thirteenth-century and contemporary Swedish contain an ethical vocabulary, the overlap is not complete. For example, the term “god-fearing” (or its counterpart in Swedish) was once an evaluative term, and was used to express a moral evaluation of a person, but is now seldom if ever used in that way. However, the slightly different vocabularies still have something in common, and something that sets them apart from other vocabularies; that is, something that “makes” them the ethical vocabularies of the idiolects in question. What they have in common, more specifically, is the fact that speakers relate to them in certain ways. For example, they have a special role in

²⁹ See, for example, *The Language of Morals*, 121–126. Simon Blackburn makes a similar suggestion in “Attitudes and Contents” (see 185).

planning and in practical decision making. Of course, which words it is that have this role in a language may change over time. This explains why a term (“god-fearing”) could be an ethical term at one stage even if lacks that status at another.

Now, on one suggestion, to say that it is the “primary function” of ethical sentences to express beliefs is to say that this is what they express in virtue of the facts that “make” them ethical. What they express in virtue of *other* facts are mere “secondary” functions. In my view, this suggestion is, though vague and in need of clarification, on the right track. Moreover, it helps to explain how noncognitivists can concede that ethical sentences express beliefs.

Which facts, then, “make” sentences ethical? Following Michael Smith, we may say that they fall into two classes. On the one hand, we may talk about the “practicality” of ethical discourse, which is manifested in the fact that people have a (defeasible) tendency to act in accordance with their verdicts on ethical sentences.³⁰ On the other hand, there is its “objectivity,” which is manifested in the fact that we develop arguments in support of our verdicts, that we try to avoid inconsistency among them, and that we acknowledge that we must be able to provide some response to the arguments submitted by our opponents, and so on.³¹

However, the considerations that “make” ethical sentences ethical do not include the kind of “constancy” Hare and Stevenson mention in connection with their observation that ethical terms may be used to express beliefs. For example, in the scenario sketched by Stevenson, ethical terms acquire the capacity to express beliefs because of the emergence of agreement about when to apply them. Thus, people have come to agree in thinking that a person is not properly called “good” unless he is honest. On some views on meaning, this is enough to show that the sentence “*a* is good” has acquired the capacity to express the belief that *a* is honest. However, such agreement is not included among the features of our use of ethical sentences that make them ethical. The reason is that, if it were to evaporate, this would not mean that the sentences would no longer be ethical. It would just mean that people’s moral views have changed.³² So, the existence of agreement concerning how to apply ethical terms shows at best that it is a *secondary* function of ethical sentences to express beliefs.

30 Notice that this feature should not be construed so as to presuppose internalism; that is, the view that to have a moral judgment *necessarily* involves motivation.

31 See *The Moral Problem*, Ch. 1.

32 Thus, even if all ethical terms, through the emergence of agreement, would “turn thick,” this would do nothing to vindicate cognitivism.