# *Introduction*

Our thoughts about our moral thinking are Janus-faced. On the one hand, we intuitively and pre-theoretically think as moral 'realists' – we take our moral convictions to be beliefs in just the way that our convictions about the weather are beliefs, and of course we take our convictions to be true. Indeed, we take some of them to be self-evidently true. On the other hand, we find ourselves facing intuitively significant challenges that can make moral realism seem problematic or even completely implausible. Ordinary reflection tells us that our moral convictions are different in nature from most other beliefs, such as our beliefs about the weather. Moral judgments are directly relevant to decisions and choices in a way that differs from the way that beliefs about the weather might be relevant to decisions and choices. Intuitively, moreover, a moral judgment speaks to what 'ought to be the case' rather than to what 'is the case.' We can introduce a term to talk about this. We can say that, unlike judgments about the likelihood of rainfall or the like, moral judgments are 'normative.'[1] Unfortunately, however, it can easily seem dubious that there could be something

I am grateful to Marina Oshana and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this introduction.

1 I do not know of a better word for the phenomenon at issue than "normativity." I want to avoid the term "prescriptivity" because it has been given a technical meaning in Hare 1952. I want to avoid the term "action-guiding" because the thesis that moral judgments are 'action-guiding' tends to be associated with the thesis, often called "judgment internalism," that there is an 'internal' connection between moral belief and appropriate motivation. I do not want to use a terminology that suggests that the normativity of moral judgment is simply a matter of the truth of judgment internalism. See below, in this introduction, and chapter 8. See also Copp 1995b.

in the world *as it is* that makes true a judgment about what *ought* to be the case. There is an obvious tension between these two sides to our thinking.

The chief philosophical challenge facing 'metaethical' theory – the theory of the nature and truth conditions of moral judgment – is to account for the normativity of moral judgment without abandoning or seriously compromising moral realism. There are, of course, two ways to attempt to avoid the challenge.

First, one might deny that there is such a thing as normativity, or one might abandon the goal of explaining normativity. I think, however, that it is beyond question that moral judgment is normative, although there is room for disagreement about what normativity comes to. Moreover, I think it is beyond question that moral philosophy must aim to explain the central features of moral thought and discourse. Hence I think that an adequate metaethical theory must explain what the normativity of moral judgment consists in. I call this the 'normativity constraint.' Theories that simply postulate primitive unexplained sui generis normative moral properties or that help themselves to an unexplained normative notion of reasonableness or rationality are not satisfying. They leave a mystery at the foundation of our moral thinking.

Second, one might abandon or compromise moral realism. 'Noncognitivism' takes moral conviction to be a kind of conative state rather than strictly speaking a state of belief, while 'nihilism' or the 'error theory' denies that any of our basic moral convictions are strictly speaking true. Moral realism is, however, the 'default view,' or so I will argue. Indeed, I believe that 'moral naturalism' is the default view – taking moral naturalism to be the combination of moral realism with naturalism.[2] To be more exact, moral naturalism is the position, roughly, and in part, that our moral beliefs ascribe moral characteristics to things, characteristics such as goodness and rightness, and that these characteristics are *natural* characteristics, relevantly similar to ordinary properties of things, such as meteorological or economic properties. Moral naturalism is not beyond question; a successful argument that it cannot accommodate the normativity of moral thought should lead us to abandon it. I will argue, however, that it is the default view.

2 Noncognitivism and the error theory can be counted as forms of naturalism in a broad sense since they are compatible with the view that all facts are natural facts.

My goal in this book is to develop and defend a kind of moral naturalism and to argue that it can explain the normativity of moral judgment without compromising moral realism. It can capture both sides of our intuitive view. I have presented such a theory before, in my book *Morality, Normativity, and Society*.[3] The chapters in the present volume build on the 'society-centered theory' that I proposed in that first book. My fundamental goal here, however, is to support the viability of moral naturalism.

The chief purpose of this introduction is to explain more fully the normativity constraint, as well as moral naturalism, and to introduce the society-centered theory. A second purpose is to explain how the issues discussed in individual chapters of the book are related to the defense of moral naturalism. In section 1, I explain the normativity constraint. In section 2, I explain why I believe that moral realism is the default view. In section 3, I explain why I believe that naturalism is also a default view. In section 4, I introduce the society-centered theory. Of course, there are many questions about it that I cannot address here. One important distinction that I need to explain is between the 'constructivist' version of the theory that I presented in my first book and the 'nonconstructivist' version that is at work in the present book. I believe that the nonconstructivist version is preferable. In section 5, I provide an overview of the book.

## 1. THE NORMATIVITY CONSTRAINT

The normativity constraint says that *an adequate metaethical theory must explain what the normativity of moral judgment consists in*.

Compare the propositions that I morally *ought* to give to famine relief, or that it would be *good* of me to do so, with the proposition that I *rarely* give to famine relief. The latter, nonmoral, claim is simply descriptive of an aspect of my behavior, but the moral claims are not merely descriptive. They are prescriptive or evaluative, and they are prescriptive or evaluative in virtue of what they say, or in virtue of their content. They are normative, and because of this, my belief that I ought to give to famine relief, or that it would be good of me to do so, has a direct and immediate relevance to decisions or choices I might make – a relevance of a kind that a belief that I rarely give to famine relief does not have. Moral beliefs in general have a

3 Copp 1995a.

characteristic kind of direct relevance to decisions or choices because the propositions that are their objects are normative.

From the perspective of a moral realist, as I will explain, the normative proposition that honesty is good differs from the nonnormative proposition that honesty is rare only in that they ascribe different properties. The difference between them must therefore lie in the nature of the properties involved. To explain the fact that the proposition that honesty is good is normative, while the proposition that honesty is rare is not, we must take it that the property of being good is normative, while the property of being rare is not normative. For similar reasons, we need to see other moral properties as normative. An adequate realist theory would need to explain what this normativity consists in.

Moral properties, if any exist, are necessarily normative; a property would not count as a moral property *unless* it were (in some way) normative. I call this idea 'normative internalism,' and if it is correct, it rules out a familiar kind of moral naturalism that has been proposed by a number of philosophers, including Richard Boyd, David Brink, Peter Railton, and Nicholas Sturgeon.[4] The position they share is commonly known as "Cornell moral realism" because of the influence of Cornell philosophers in defending it. According to Cornell realism, the normativity of a moral property is 'external' to it – it is not essential to it. It is a matter of how the property happens to be related to our motivational states. People typically are motivated to avoid wrongdoing, for instance, because of what wrongdoing involves in the treatment of people. But it is a contingent matter that people are motivated in this way, and so, on the Cornell position, it is a contingent matter that moral properties are normative. Moreover, it appears that the Cornell view would implausibly count sweetness as a normative property, since people are typically motivated to seek sweet things. I believe, then, that Cornell realism does not provide an adequate account of the normativity of moral properties. This failure undermines its defense of moral naturalism, for to show that a natural property could be a moral property, we need to show that a natural property could be normative, and to show this, we need an account of what its normativity would consist in.[5]

4 Boyd 1988; Brink 1989; Railton 1986; Sturgeon 1984.

5 I argued this point in Copp 1990. Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton accept my claim that in order to show that a property is a moral property, one must show that it is normative (1992, 128 n. 30). Alexander Miller claims, however, that my arguments merely show that Cornell realism is compatible with a kind of externalism according to which a person might believe that an action would be morally wrong and yet coherently deny that

Cornell realism leaves open the possibility of believing that one morally ought to do something without being motivated in the least to do it. I agree with Cornell realism about this. But the contrary view, which is standardly called "judgment internalism,"[6] is widely accepted. According to judgment internalism, it is a conceptual truth, and necessarily the case, that if a person judges he or she ought morally to do something, he or she is motivated to some degree to do it. It might seem that this doctrine accounts for the normativity of moral judgment. I believe, however, that judgment internalism is false.

There are familiar arguments against judgment internalism. It appears, for example, that people who are depressed might lack any motivation to do what they believe they morally ought to do, and people with unusual second-order beliefs about morality might also lack appropriate motivation. I once presented the following putative counter-example to judgment internalism, the case of Alice:[7]

> Alice was raised to believe . . . that our moral obligations are determined by the commands of God. She was also raised to believe that God is a vengeful ruler and that He wills us to take an eye for an eye. On the principle of an eye for an eye, Alice believes that capital punishment is obligatory in cases of murder, and she believes she has an obligation to support capital punishment. But she is deeply compassionate, and she is quite out of sympathy with what she takes to be God's vengefulness. Because of her compassion she is not motivated in the least to support capital punishment. She is in fact active in opposing it, even though she believes she is morally forbidden to do so.

This case does not seem to be ruled out on conceptual grounds. Or consider the case of Huckleberry Finn. Huck believes he is morally obligated to turn his friend Jim over to the authorities because Jim is an escaped slave. But Huck does not turn him in, and it seems coherent to suppose that Huck is not motivated in the least to do so.[8] Given these examples, and other examples that are similar in nature, I conclude that judgment internalism is false.

he or she has a reason not to do it (Miller 2003, 160–162). But this is not my objection. My objection is that Cornell realism fails to show the existence of any normative properties, and since moral properties are necessarily normative, it fails to show that there are any moral properties.

6 The terminology is from Darwall 1983, 54–55. Brink calls the position "belief internalism" (1989, 40). In chapter 8 of this book, I call it "motivational internalism."

7 Copp 1995b, 190–191.

8 Ibid., 204.

Moreover, for reasons I explain in chapter 8, I think that even if judgment internalism were true, the existence of a conceptual link between moral belief and motivation would not be adequate to account for the normativity of moral judgment. This is important since, I believe, people resist the counter-arguments to judgment internalism mainly because they do not see how they could otherwise account for the normativity of moral judgment. Indeed, I think there is a tendency to confuse judgment internalism with the different idea, which I believe to be true, that it is a necessary truth that moral belief is normative. My own view is that *normativity* is internal to moral judgment although *motivation* is external to it. If I am correct, we need a new strategy for explaining normativity.

A fully satisfying account of the normativity of moral judgment must explain the link between moral belief and decision. Moral belief has a characteristic kind of direct relevance to decisions, which needs to be explained, and morality may seem to have a kind of final authority over our decisions and actions, which would also need to be explained. I tackle these issues in chapters 8 through 10. In chapter 8, I systematically explore the difficulty of accounting for the normativity of morality, and I argue that a well-designed naturalistic theory can meet the challenge. In chapter 9, I argue that moral considerations do not have the automatic kind of 'overriding' authority over our decisions that people sometimes think they do. In chapter 10, I explain that moral beliefs that flow from our values do have an immediate and direct relevance to rational decision making.

The normativity constraint has powerful implications for moral theory. The constraint rules out, or at least deems to be inadequate, realist theories that fail to explain the normativity of moral properties. It implies that nonnaturalistic theories that postulate sui generis unexplained normative moral properties are inadequate. It also rules out versions of moral naturalism that fail to explain normativity.

## 2. THE DEFAULT VIEW: MORAL REALISM

When I say that moral realism is the 'default view,' I mean it is the view about moral judgment that one is naturally led to if one approaches the subject without prior theoretical commitments. I think it is natural to hold that our moral 'convictions' are *beliefs* in just the way that beliefs about the weather are beliefs – although, obviously, they have a different subject matter. Moreover, it is natural to think that at least some of our moral beliefs are true. And it is natural to think that our moral beliefs ascribe

moral 'properties'; for example, it is natural to think that the belief that lying is wrong represents lying as having a certain characteristic or as 'being a certain way.'[9]

As I explain briefly in chapters 5 and 8, we can usefully distinguish five doctrines that are included in the realist's position:[10]

(1) There are moral properties (and relations).[11] There is, for example, such a thing as wrongness.
(2) Some moral properties are instantiated. For example, some actions are wrong.
(3) Moral predicates are used to ascribe moral properties. When we call an action "wrong," we are ascribing to it the property wrongness.
(4) Moral assertions express moral beliefs. When we call an action "wrong," we are expressing the belief that the action is wrong.
(5) Moral properties, in being properties, have the metaphysical status that any other property has, whatever that status is.[12]

Given the complexity of this characterization, one might doubt that realism can be the default position. But the first four doctrines were implicit in my initial intuitive sketch, and the fifth doctrine is intended merely to express the idea that the moral characteristics of things are, quite simply, properties.

The reason we need this fifth doctrine, as I explain in chapter 5, is to distinguish moral realism from a kind of sophisticated noncognitivist antirealism that accepts 'deflationary' versions of the first four doctrines. I

9 Moral realism has been called "descriptivism," but this is not an apt label, for a realist should deny that moral claims are merely descriptive. Moral properties are normative, which means that moral propositions do not merely describe. They also evaluate, or proscribe, or the like. For instance, the proposition that torture is wrong 'describes' torture but also evaluates it.

10 I explain these doctrines in Copp 2006a, 6–8.

11 In what follows, I treat relations, such as the relation of being better than, as a kind of property.

12 That is, clause (5) says, clause (1) is to be interpreted such that the term "property," as it occurs there, ascribes the same metaphysical status to moral properties, such as *wrongness*, as it ascribes to a nonmoral property such as *redness* when it is predicated of such a property. Moral realism is compatible with any theory that acknowledges the existence of properties or 'characteristics', or 'ways that things are,' including nominalism. The moral realist says that moral properties have the metaphysical status that any other property has, *whatever* that is. Some philosophers would deny that there are any properties at all. But I take it that they do not mean to deny that red things have the 'characteristic' of being red. They mean to reject the standard philosophical theories about the nature of such characteristics. If they would agree that sentences such as "There is such a thing as redness" can be used to express truths, they may be in a position to accept moral realism. I am grateful to Thomas Hofweber and Michael Jubien for helpful discussions about the nature of properties.

have in mind Simon Blackburn's "quasi-realism," for example. Blackburn agrees that everyday moral discourse has a "realist surface."[13] He allows that there is no objection to our ordinary practice of speaking of ourselves as having true moral beliefs, nor to speaking of wrongness as a property. But he holds that a plausible metaphysics would not postulate moral properties and that it would deny that the states of mind that we call "moral beliefs" are cognitive states that 'represent' things as having moral properties. They are not beliefs, strictly speaking. The fifth doctrine distinguishes moral realism from Blackburn's view. It says in effect that an adequate metaphysics would give the same account of the status of moral properties as it gives of the metaphysical status of nonmoral properties such as meteorological properties. This leaves it open what this status might be.

The core idea of noncognitivism is that the state of mind expressed by a person in making a basic moral claim is not, properly speaking, a belief or any other kind of cognitive state but is, instead, a *conative* state or a *motivational* state, akin to a desire. A fully developed version of noncognitivism would need to say exactly what kind of state of mind is involved, but for convenience, we may say that it is an 'attitude.' Blackburn speaks of "stances."[14] Using this terminology, a noncognitivist might say that a person who 'thinks' that torture is wrong therein has an attitude of disapproval toward torture rather than a belief that 'represents' torture as being a certain way. This is difficult to accept. When, in thinking, I move from the thought that torture is widespread to the 'thought' that torture is morally appalling, there is a shift in the content of my thoughts, and perhaps also in the feelings that accompany them, but I do not notice a shift in their *nature*, from cognitive to conative. The one seems to be a thought just in the way that the other is a thought.[15]

The most familiar argument in favor of noncognitivism is an argument from judgment internalism. Noncognitivists typically take judgment internalism to support the proposition that moral judgments are motivational states, akin to desires and other conative states.[16] As I have said, however, I believe that judgment internalism is false.

It is important to recognize, nevertheless, that moral realism is compatible with the view that moral assertions express conative states of mind.

13 The phrase "realist surface" and the term "quasi-realism" are used in Blackburn 2006.
14 For an overview of the position, see ibid.
15 There are important technical objections to noncognitivism. For one thing, to account for the workings of moral language, noncognitivism is forced to add complexity to its semantics of a kind that would be avoided on a realist theory. See Copp 1995a, 15–19.
16 See Blackburn 2006, 149–150.

Moral realists hold that moral assertions express beliefs – cognitive states that have representational content – but they need not deny that moral assertions might also express conative states such as approval or disapproval. I explore this idea in chapter 5. There are various familiar pejorative and commendatory predicates that, in standard and literal usage, both ascribe properties and express attitudes. Frege called these predicates "colored."[17] Realist-expressivism is the view that moral predicates, such as "right," "wrong," "good," and "bad," are colored terms that, in standard and literal usage, are used both to ascribe a moral property and to express an appropriate attitude. If this is correct, I believe it can explain certain intuitions that lead people to think that a person who has a moral belief must have an appropriate corresponding conative attitude of some kind.

Noncognitivist expressivism is not the only alternative to moral realism. There is also the "error theory" of J. L. Mackie. According to the error theory there are no moral properties; moreover, because of this, all basic moral propositions are false.[18] Mackie's theory entails, for example, that it is false that lying is wrong.[19] Indeed, it follows from the error theory that nothing is morally wrong, not even torture. But this is very difficult to believe.

Mackie's most interesting argument for the error theory is the so-called argument from queerness, which turns, in effect, on the claim that no natural property could be normative, that a normative property would be metaphysically queer. This argument is important, but I believe it is unsuccessful. My answer to it is found in chapter 8.

There are problems, then, with both of the antirealist alternatives to moral realism. Given this, and given that moral realism is the default position, I focus on developing and articulating a realist position.

17 Frege 1984c, 161; 1984b, 185; 1984d, 357.

18 'Basic' moral propositions are, I stipulate, propositions that ascribe moral properties to things. The proposition that torture is wrong is basic. The proposition that either torture is wrong or torture is widespread is not basic, and nor is the proposition that it is not the case that torture is wrong. In Copp 1995a, I call basic moral propositions "paradigmatic."

19 Mackie 1977, ch. 1. There are problems in the interpretation of the theory. On certain views, if there is no property ascribed by "wrong," then sentences such as "Lying is wrong" would not even express propositions. On these theories, the error theory would commit Mackie to viewing such sentences as meaningless. However, Mackie himself takes the theory to imply that basic moral claims, such as that lying is wrong, are false, not that sentences such as "Lying is wrong" fail to express propositions and are meaningless. I assume that a plausible semantics would provide a way of understanding Mackie's theory that would avoid this problem. An alternative reading of the theory might take it to say that wrongness is a property that could not possibly be instantiated. This does not seem to have been Mackie's view, however.

## 3. THE DEFAULT VIEW: MORAL NATURALISM

Moral naturalism accepts the five doctrines that are characteristic of moral realism and adds the following:

(6) Moral properties are natural properties.

Although the meaning of this doctrine is controversial, the idea is that moral properties are 'natural' in the way that, say, the property of being irascible, the property of being a hurricane, and the property of being inflationary, are 'natural.' They are ordinary and unexceptional. Moral properties obviously differ in important ways from psychological, meteorological, and economic properties. Most importantly, they are normative. But the naturalist wants to say that at a fundamental epistemological and metaphysical level, their status is no different from the status of these other properties.

The naturalist's view is, I believe, the default view; it is the view that one would intuitively be led to if one approached the subject without prior theoretical commitments. I say this because, pre-philosophically, it seems obvious that one can run up against moral goodness and badness (and so on) in the natural world, just as one can run up against inflationary conditions or hurricanes. Pre-philosophically, it seems obvious that one can come face to face with the badness of people and with goodness in people, just as one can come face to face with a person's irascibility. Badness in a person's character, for instance, could lead him or her to do wrong. It could lead to cruelty. Goodness could lead a person to do right by others. In this way the moral properties of people can play a psychological role in shaping their actions.[20] For this reason and others it seems plausible that these properties are of a piece with psychological properties, such as the property of being irascible – that is, they are equally natural. Philosophical arguments might lead one to think that this is not so, but before we consider such arguments, I think the naturalist's position will seem difficult to deny.

To be sure, it is not clear how best to distinguish between natural and nonnatural properties. Intuitively, the natural world is the world around us, the world that we know about and are in contact with by means of the senses. In chapter 1, I propose that, for the purpose of explicating moral naturalism, we should take natural properties to be *empirical* properties. That is, a natural property is such that any substantive knowledge we

20 Sturgeon 1984.