1 Moral Realism

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Stated in rough and ready fashion, moral realism is the view that there are objective moral facts. Moral realists believe, then, that in addition to ordinary "descriptive facts" such as *that it is presently raining in Seattle*, there are moral facts such as *that torturing someone simply for fun is wrong*. Some philosophers find moral realism so plausible that they claim to be unable to furnish positive arguments in its favor. Who in their right mind, after all, would deny that torturing merely for fun is wrong? According to these philosophers, the best realists can do is to reiterate how plausible their position is and explain why none of the arguments against it works. Other philosophers, by contrast, are not so impressed by the appearance that there are moral facts; they find moral realism positively exotic. For what type of thing, these philosophers wonder, would a moral fact be and where could we find it? If these philosophers are right, there are plenty of reasons to believe that moral facts would be very strange were they to exist. Among other things, were such facts to exist, then there would be "demands floating around in the world waiting to be perceived by moral agents."[1] And that would be very strange. Moral facts would be so strange, these philosophers argue, that we should try hard to find alternatives to admitting them into our best metaethical theories.

When viewed in this light, it can be difficult to see how to move the debate between realists and their rivals forward; the debate looks like little more than a clash of different philosophical temperaments. Realists appear to be impressed by the commonsensical appearances, while their rivals are not (or they believe that realists have misdescribed these appearances). Still, small steps forward are better than none. At the very least, it is natural to hope that each side in this debate can find common ground to frame their disagreement and better articulate the most powerful considerations for their view. My aim in this essay is to take a few small steps forward by outlining a case for moral realism. In presenting this case, my aim is not to present individual arguments for moral realism. Rather, it is to explore a general *strategy* used to argue for the view, which includes various claims about how we ought to understand the debate between realists and their rivals.

But we cannot rush into these matters headlong. To have the case for realism before us, we need first to understand better what moral realists believe. So, I shall set for myself two tasks. The first is to present a version of generic moral realism, which is acceptable to most who identify themselves as realists. The second is to present what I will call the realist's master strategy. While this strategy is rarely explicitly articulated by realists, it is, I believe, one that realists often presuppose when arguing for their view.

Generic Moral Realism

Our overarching project is to consider the case for moral realism. This project, however, runs the risk of not getting off the ground, for philosophers lump a huge variety of views under the heading of moral realism—views that disagree with one another in important ways.[2] I see little hope of bringing order to this state of affairs. So, I shall resort to identifying three core commitments that those who call themselves realists ordinarily accept. Any position that accepts these core commitments is a version of what I shall call *generic moral realism*. The case I will present for moral realism, then, is one for generic moral realism.

The first claim embraced by moral realists concerns the nature of moral thought and discourse. It says:

> Ordinary moral thought and discourse, by and large, purport to represent moral reality.[3]

The guiding idea behind this claim is that ordinary moral thought and discourse are like mathematical, theological, and external world thought and discourse. They purport to represent or be about a distinct subject matter. In the case of mathematics, that subject matter includes numbers. In the case of theological discourse, it includes God. In the case of morality, its target subject matter includes such things as the wrongness of actions and the goodness of agents.

To get a better idea of what realists believe about moral thought and discourse, consider a paradigmatic moral sentence such as "Oliver North's lying to Congress is wrong." According to realists, in the ordinary case, by uttering this sentence, an agent says (or predicates) of North's action that it is wrong. On the assumption that moral discourse expresses moral thoughts, it follows that moral thought and discourse are not a species of make-believe. To say that North's behavior is wrong is not to pretend to believe that what North did is wrong. Nor, for that matter, is it simply to express an attitude of disgust or disapprobation toward North. Of course by claiming that ordinary moral thought and discourse are not simply expressions of attitudes of disgust or disapprobation, realists needn't deny that they are typically accompanied by the expressions of such attitudes. Indeed, some realists have claimed exactly this.[4]

The claim that ordinary moral thought and discourse purport to represent moral reality is, however, compatible with none of it being such that it actually succeeds in doing so. It is, then, compatible with moral thought and discourse being massively mistaken. So, to the first claim about the function of moral thought and discourse, moral realists add this second claim:

> Some ordinary moral thought and discourse actually represent moral reality.

It is this second claim that distinguishes realists from error theorists, who believe that moral thought and discourse purport to represent moral reality but fail to do so.[5] If we understand truth in terms of accurate representation, the difference between realists and error theorists is (roughly) this: error theorists hold that the contents of moral thought and discourse are untrue. Realists, by contrast, do not.

If, however, ordinary moral thought and discourse sometime succeed in representing moral reality, it follows that there is a moral reality to represent. Moral realists often talk of this reality as a realm of moral facts. According to this approach, the sentence "Oliver North's lying to congress is wrong" accurately represents moral reality just in case it is a fact *that North's lying to congress is wrong*. Talk of there being moral facts raises questions in the minds of some philosophers. For our purposes, however, we needn't worry about the best way to characterize their nature. We can think of moral facts as those things that are the object of moral knowledge (if any such knowledge there be). As such, they might be things having moral properties, moral states of affairs that obtain, or true moral propositions. In any event, once we identify moral reality with a realm of moral facts, we can see that realists are committed to this third thesis:

> Moral facts exist.

This last claim lies at the heart of moral realism, as realism about morality is fundamentally a claim about what there is. It is also the most controversial of the realists' claims. By this I mean not simply that it is the claim about which moral antirealists are most suspicious. I also mean that the issue of how to understand it is the subject of deep disagreements among realists themselves, for realists disagree about how we should think of such facts.

On this occasion, I won't bother to dive into the controversies that divide realist views from one another. I shall simply note that they tend to cluster around two main issues. The first is whether moral facts are mind-independent in the sense that they are not imparted to the world in virtue of our having (or being such that we would, under ideal conditions, have) attitudes of various sorts—such as valuing—toward aspects of nonmoral reality. Traditionally, realists have rejected the claim that moral facts are mind-dependent in this sense, claiming that some acts are wrong regardless of the attitudes we have (or would, in ideal conditions have) toward them. But more recently some philosophers have defended views according to which moral facts are mind-dependent in a robust sense, claiming that some of these views are versions of moral realism.[6] As I have formulated it, generic moral realism is compatible with such response-dependent accounts of moral facts (although, in a moment, we shall see that not all positions which view moral facts as mind-dependent in this way count as versions of moral realism).

The second issue about which realists disagree is whether moral facts are "natural" or whether they belong to a sui generis nonnatural realm. This debate between moral naturalists and nonnaturalists has proven difficult to resolve, mostly because there are no accepted criteria for what renders a fact natural or nonnatural. The intuitive idea, however, is that natural facts are those which form the subject matter of the natural sciences, while nonnatural facts are those which do not. As their name indicates, moral naturalists believe that moral facts are natural. Hence, they have been eager to defend the claim that moral facts play naturalistically respectable explanatory roles, such as causally explaining nonmoral facts in the world. They have also tended to defend the claim that moral reasons behave like other naturalistically acceptable reasons, such as prudential reasons, in this sense: whether or not a moral fact, such as the fact that North acted wrongly, provides a reason to act depends on the desires we have (or would have if we deliberated correctly). Moral reasons, according to these naturalists, are Humean or internal.[7]

Nonnaturalists, for their part, have rejected the naturalist approach. While not suspicious of science or the claim that moral facts are realized in ordinary natural facts, they are wary of the idea that science can shed much light on the nature of morality. Suppose, for example, we were to discover that we are genetically disposed to aggressive behavior. According to nonnaturalists, this would not as such make a moral difference. For we are rational agents who can step back from our desires and inclinations, asking whether we should act upon them. If so, the discoveries of the empirical sciences have moral significance, say nonnaturalists, primarily by way of becoming input for ethical deliberation.[8] Moreover, nonnaturalists typically claim, we shouldn't expect moral facts to causally explain anything. Rather, if nonnaturalists are correct, moral facts are the sorts of thing that *justify* or *favor* various types of responses on our part—where these are not causal but irreducibly normative relations. Finally, nonnaturalists have tended to believe that some moral reasons apply to agents regardless of the desires they might happen to have (or would have if they deliberated correctly). They are not Humean but categorical or external reasons.[9]

As I say, I won't try to resolve the issues that divide naturalists from nonnaturalists on this occasion. I shall simply assume that generic moral realism is neutral with regard to them, being compatible with both moral naturalism and nonnaturalism. It will be remembered, however, that when I initially presented what moral realists believe, I claimed that they hold not simply that moral facts exist, but also that they are objective. So far, I have said little about what this qualification means. Let me close this section by saying something about it.

According to moral realists, moral thought and discourse purport to represent a distinctively moral realm. The predicative component of moral beliefs purports to be about not such things as numbers or trees, but the wrongness of actions and the goodness of agents. If this is right, not anything could count as a moral fact (anymore than anything could count as a number or a tree). For there are conceptual constraints on what could count as a moral fact. What might these constraints be? We can get a feel for their nature by considering stock moral truisms, such as the following:

It is wrong to lie simply because one doesn't feel like telling the truth.

It is wrong to slander another simply because it makes one feel better.

It is wrong to torture someone simply because she has inconvenienced you.

Stock moral truisms such as these indicate that moral properties such as *being wrong* are intimately connected with actions that undercut human well-being or express deep disrespect toward fellow human beings. Torture, for example, is an activity that, in a particularly egregious way, tends to destroy its victim. Slander is an activity that tends not only to rupture harmonious human relations, but also to express profound disrespect for its object. By contrast, moral properties such as *being right* are intimately connected with actions that tend to foster human well-being or express adequate respect toward others. Treating others with fairness and decency is, for example, morally right. For treating others in this way tends to promote the well-being of others, treating them as objects that deserve our respect.[10]

There are subtleties about how to understand the connections between well-being and moral properties that needn't concern us here. More important for present purposes is to note that realists tend to hold that a constraint on a good metaethical theory is that it vindicates truisms such as those listed above. The claims that express them must come out neither untrue nor merely contingently true. If this is right, we now have a way (although certainly not the only way) to understand the realists' claim that moral facts are objective. Moral facts are objective in the sense that the stock moral truisms provide objective constraints on what could count as a moral fact.

This point has theoretical importance. For, if it is right, not every view which claims that there are moral facts is a realist position. Consider, for example, a subjectivist view which says that actions are right for an agent simply because she approves of it. Subjectivism fails to comport with the stock moral truisms, as an agent could approve of just about anything and, hence, just about anything could be right, including torturing for mere pleasure. It follows that subjectivism is not a realist view. Or consider a relativist view according to which right actions for a particular group are those that are approved by that group. Relativism also fails to comport with the stock moral truisms, for groups could approve of just about anything and, hence, just about anything could be right, including recreational torture on a selective basis. Relativism no more than subjectivism is, then, a version of moral realism. So, while generic moral realism is a fairly capacious position, it is not so liberal as to imply that any view which claims that there are moral facts is thereby a version of moral realism.

The Core Moral Data

To this point, our attention has been on preliminary matters. Our project has been to identify, well enough for present purposes, the type of view that realists have wished to defend. Our next task is to present what I earlier called the realist's master strategy. By presenting this strategy, the hope is to provide an alternative to two tendencies that dominate contemporary metaethical discussion.

The first tendency is to discuss various metaethical issues piecemeal, treating certain types of considerations as if they decisively support one or another metaethical view. In recent defenses of expressivism, for example, philosophers such as Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard maintain that "expressivism has to be correct" because it alone offers us a satisfactory account of the intimate connection between moral judgments and moral motivation. The assumption seems to be that as long as expressivism nicely explains this particular set of data and its rivals do not, then this is enough to make it the view to beat.[11] The second rather different tendency is for philosophers to assume that theirs is the default position with little or no argument. This tendency is particularly pronounced among realists. Those sympathetic with realism often assume that as long as they can defend their position from objections, little more needs to be said in favor of it, as theirs is the default metaethical position.[12]

Both of these approaches strike me as mistaken. In the first place, we should not lose sight of the fact that philosophy is inherently a comparative enterprise. This means that, if a view fares particularly well or poorly along a given dimension of theory evaluation, this is typically not enough to vindicate or discredit it. We ordinarily need to assess theories along multiple dimensions. Moreover, we need to be not only as articulate as possible about the criteria we use to assess a particular theory, but also to have in mind the data that our theories should accommodate. Such matters, of course, are subject to debate; realists and antirealists often disagree about that which a good metaethical position should explain. But it is worth noting that the issues that metaethical theories are designed to address are not primarily philosophers' inventions. They are ordinarily rooted in lived moral experience. Let us, then, begin with the data that realists maintain that any good metaethical theory should accommodate.

Consider a situation of the following sort:

> A colleague of yours has just given birth to a child. To ease the burden on your colleague and her family, other colleagues have assembled a group of people to provide meals for them. You have signed up to provide a meal on a particular date. Several weeks pass and you receive a phone call to the effect that you are supposed to provide a meal for your colleague this evening. You, however, have forgotten all about this. In fact, you have made plans to see a show with your spouse this evening, which would provide some much desired time together. Upon hearing that you are expected to provide a meal this evening, you race through some practical reasoning. Your colleague and her family, you reckon, probably won't go hungry tonight if you don't provide a meal; no doubt they have food in the freezer they could use. That, you further speculate, might make it permissible to provide a meal some other night, when doing so would be more convenient. But after running through a number of such scenarios, it strikes you that, while there are alibis available, you should cancel your plans and prepare a meal for your colleague and her family. Given that you have made a previous commitment to provide a meal, this is what the situation demands. And so you judge this is what you ought to do.

Scenarios such as this, I trust, will seem familiar to us all. Realists maintain that it is worth paying close attention to their characteristics.

In the first place, your experience has phenomenological dimensions of which to take note.[13] According to the description offered, you experience the situation at hand as *calling for* or *demanding* a certain type of response. This demand, moreover, is experienced as not emanating from you but from elements of the situation itself, in particular, from the fact that you have committed yourself to provide a meal. The demand in question, moreover, feels very different from the demands of appetite, as in the case in which you smell freshly baked cookies and find them "calling your name." Furthermore, it feels very different from a flight of imagination in which you resolve to pretend to treat your environment in a certain way, treating it as if it demands a certain response. To use some philosophical jargon, your experience has moral presentational content, which is different from that of the cases just described.

In the second place, when you step back and assess your situation, you are capable of reasoning about it. Most importantly, this reasoning is such that, when engaging in it, you realize that not any old response to your situation will do. There appears to be a correct way to respond to your situation and, thus, that you can make a mistake about what you should do. In this regard, your experience feels rather different from a case in which you and a friend are comparing the merits of opera. While you appreciate the technical prowess required to perform it well, we can imagine the genre totally fails to move you. While both of you disagree about the merits of opera, you also agree that it would be a stretch to say that one of you has the correct response; you acknowledge that both of you might simply be "wired" to appreciate different things.

At any rate, in the moral case, it is in virtue of there being a response that seems correct that you find yourself "coming down" on a verdict about how the world is: it demands a certain type of response on your part. This verdict, moreover, has the tell-tale marks of being a genuine belief. It appears to be about what the situation demands and is thus a way of categorizing the world. The content of such a judgment, furthermore, is such that it can enter into further inferences and various sorts of logical constructions such as conditional statements. Moreover, it can be said to be true and the object of knowledge in what seem to be perfectly straightforward uses of these terms. In these respects, your judgment is very different from mental states that are not beliefs, such as those that merely express a question or disgust. Questions cannot be the antecedents or consequents of conditional statements. Expressions of disgust such as "Damn!" cannot be true or false.

Finally, if we take yet another step away from the experience itself, we can consider the modal profile of its content. Imagine, for example, someone were to play devil's advocate with you, querying: Why should you bother preparing food for your colleague? Why not lie and wash your hands of the situation? Or, for that matter, instead of delivering freshly cooked food, why not send a slanderous letter? Or, more drastically still, why not prepare to torture your colleague because of the inconvenience she's caused you? In response, you could appeal to what we earlier called stock moral truisms, such as the following:

> It is wrong to lie simply because one doesn't feel like telling the truth.
>
> It is wrong to slander another simply because it makes one feel better.
>
> It is wrong to torture another simply because she has inconvenienced you.

We saw earlier that, according to realists, principles such as these appear to be truisms or obvious necessary truths which anyone who is competent with their constitutive concepts can know. Indeed, they function like what Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* called "framework propositions" and what Thomas Reid called

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"principles of common sense." If someone were to deny them, this would be evidence that that person lacked competence with moral concepts, was not of sound mind, was joking, deeply confused, in the grip of a badly mistaken theory, or the like.[14] That is why, according to realists, we do not find any appreciable disagreement about their truth among competent moral agents. Only the deranged and those pressing the limits of philosophical inquiry call them into question.

In any event, it is because the stock moral truisms have this sort of modal status that certain types of response to the questions raised above seem wrongheaded. Someone, let's imagine, raises the question about why you shouldn't torture your colleague because of the inconvenience she's caused you. On the face of things, it would be totally inappropriate to draw comparisons with etiquette, answering "Well, that's just the way we do things around here. There's really no deep difference between moral principles prohibiting torture and principles of etiquette such as 'Always place a fork to the left of a plate.'" Moreover, on the face of things, it would be similarly inappropriate to say that the property *being wrong* is like *being esteemed* since whether an action is wrong is fixed entirely by the affective attitudes we happen to have toward that action. If the stock moral truisms are to be believed, this could not be so. Even if our attitudes toward torture were to change and we were to discover that many of us relish the experience, this would make no difference with respect to its wrongness. The stock moral truisms, according to what we said earlier, set the limits as to what could count as a moral fact.

The phenomenology of moral experience, the conviction that the conclusions of practical reasoning can be mistaken, the doxastic character of moral judgments, and the modal profile of moral principles: these, according to realists, are among the most important data that a good metaethical theory should take into consideration. For ease of reference, let us refer to them as the *core moral data*. Having identified the core moral data, we must now turn our attention to the more difficult issue of what to make of them. How, then, should a metaethical theory assess the core moral data?

Evaluating the Core Moral Data

According to the realist's master strategy, the core data should be assessed according to three criteria. Let us call them the Reidian, explanatory, and simplicity criteria respectively.

What I shall call the *Reidian criterion* is a natural extension of the approach taken toward theory evaluation by the eighteenth-century Scots philosopher Thomas Reid.[15] A good way to understand the Reidian approach is to begin with the notion of a *doxastic practice* ("doxa" = Greek for belief). For present purposes, think of a doxastic practice as a type of social practice into which we are inducted—often as small children—that yields a certain range of outputs. The activities that constitute such a practice typically include: being introduced to concepts of a certain range and instructed in their proper employment; deploying these concepts to form judgments of certain kinds and engaging in methods of evaluating them; and, being introduced to various methods of attention and inquiry and instructed in their proper employment. The outputs of a practice are the judgments formed as a result of engaging in those activities just described.

A good example of a doxastic practice is the perceptual practice. At a young age, most of us are inducted into this practice by being introduced to concepts such as "being a tree" and being instructed in their proper employment. Along the way, we develop other skills, such as being able to discriminate some types of trees from others. As a result, we form perceptual judgments of various sorts, which are the output of this practice.

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Of course the perceptual doxastic practice is only one among many such practices into which we are inducted. Among others, there is the memorial practice (the practice of forming and evaluating memory judgments) and the introspective practice (the practice of forming and evaluating introspective judgments). Of special interest for our purposes is that doxastic practice which I shall call the *moral practice*. Like the perceptual practice, the moral practice is best thought of as being comprised of various activities that yield a variety of doxastic outputs. These activities include being introduced to moral concepts, such as "being wrong," and instructed in their proper employment; deploying these concepts to form moral judgments; and, being introduced to practices of attention and inquiry into moral matters and instructed in their proper employment. In the ordinary case, engaging in these activities yields a variety of moral judgments that concern the moral status of various acts, character traits, and policies.

The Reidian criterion offers us a method for assessing doxastic practices such as the moral practice. It tells us that if a given doxastic practice is socially well-established over time, deeply entrenched (in the limit case being unavoidable for all practical purposes), endowed with sophisticated methods of evaluation of its outputs, and such that its outputs are not massively and systematically inconsistent with each other and those of other doxastic practices in good working order, then (all else being equal) we should maintain that that practice is reliable. There is a strong presumption in favor of believing that it yields a preponderance of judgments that are true.

I shall say more about what favors accepting the Reidian criterion as a mode of theory evaluation in a moment. For now, let us turn to the second criterion of theory assessment, what I called the *explanatory criterion*. The explanatory criterion tells us that a theory should be explanatorily adequate in the following ways.

In the first place, a theory should endeavor to accommodate the full range of core data, not ignoring crucial elements that need to be explained. Second, it should offer us a satisfactory explanation of the data in this sense: it should endeavor to account for the actual data and not some other phenomenon, which might be closely related; there should be no switching the subject. And, third, for any range of data that we wish to accommodate in a given theory, an adequate theory must have the resources to explain this data in such a way that it fits well with our best account of what the world is like (or explain why this data needs no explanation) at least as well as or better than rival theories.

It is worth elaborating on this last point. The explanatory criterion, it will be noted, does not say that, for a given range of data that deserves to be explained, a good theory must actually furnish an explanation of it. For that would be too strong a claim. After all, until fairly recently, we did not have much of an understanding of how perception works. However, the fact that we lacked this understanding did not count significantly against the assumption that there is a world that is accurately represented by our perceptual judgments. So, to be plausible, the explanatory criterion must be understood to say that a theory that endeavors to explain a given range of data must, in principle, be able to furnish an explanation of that data which fits well enough with our best account of what the world is like (or satisfactorily explain why no such explanation is necessary) at least as well as or better than rival theories. If this is right, a theory that endeavors to explain some range of data should avoid positing entities which are such that, given our best understanding of the world, we would have powerful reason to believe that that theory could not satisfactorily account for that data.

To illustrate, consider the problem of free will. Many claim to experience a significant range of their actions as being free. That is, they experience these actions as being not coerced or the inevitable result of the past. Rather, they experience these actions as being up to them; they could have chosen to perform or not perform them. Many philosophers admit that this is how things seem to many of us. Some also claim that the so-called compatibilist views, which understand freedom to be compatible with determinism, fail to explain the actual data; they, in effect, switch the subject using the term "freedom" to refer to something else. These same philosophers argue, however, that we could not be free in any robust sense, for this would be incompatible with our best understanding of the laws of nature and the workings of the brain.[16] Cases such as this help us to recognize that, for any range of data that we wish to accommodate in a given theory, a theory might lack the resources to explain them in such a way that fits well with our best account of what the world is like. Although the outputs of a doxastic practice in good working order may, at the outset of inquiry, deserve the benefit of the doubt, this status can be defeated by considerations such as these.

As one might imagine, there are questions about the explanatory criterion which a fuller treatment of it would have to address, such as what it is for a view to be able, in principle, to explain a given range of data. On this occasion, I shall have to rush past such matters, heading instead for the third criterion for theory evaluation, which I referred to earlier as the *simplicity criterion.*

According to the simplicity criterion, a theory that endeavors to explain a range of data should be parsimonious. Or more accurately put, since theory evaluation is an inherently comparative exercise, it should be at least as or more parsimonious than rival theories, other things being equal. And what is it for a theory to be more parsimonious than rival theories? There is no easy answer to this question. For our purposes, I propose the following answer. Suppose we think of a theory as a conjunction of propositions, many of which carry existential commitments, such as the commitment to certain types of entities and entities of those types. Given this understanding of what a theory is, we can say that (roughly speaking) theory A is more parsimonious than theory B regarding some subject matter if and only if A includes fewer conjuncts (which are themselves not probabilistically supported by some other conjuncts of the theory) than B.

Most philosophers have thought that, all else being equal, we should prefer simpler theories. The present formulation of what it is for a theory to be parsimonious gives us some idea why. The reason why we should prefer simpler theories is that the more one's theory says, the more likely it is that it will say something false. This much we can explain by appeal to the probability calculus. For, all else being equal, every new conjunct one adds to a theory drives down its prior probability (which is roughly, the probability of that theory independent of the data that we endeavor to explain).[17]

This account of the simplicity criterion raises delicate questions that I am going to have to ignore on this occasion. There is, however, one matter that needs to be addressed, which is this: if what I have said so far is correct, we should evaluate metaethical theories according to the Reidian, explanatory, and simplicity criteria. One might wonder, however, whether these three criteria deserve to be weighted equally. To this question, realists tend to answer "no." The Reidian criterion, according to realists, enjoys priority of a certain type. We can see this by comparing it to the simplicity criterion.

Consider a radically solipsist position, such as that introduced by Descartes at the beginning of his *Meditations.* According to this view, there exists exactly one person and his mental states and events. Suppose, for illustration's sake, we were to embrace this position because it is more parsimonious than the alternatives. Rather than posit an external world inhabited by an untold number of types of entities and entities of those types, it posits only one substance: the agent himself and his various modifications. Cartesian solipsism, we can agree, is more parsimonious than commonsense realism about the external world. A full and accurate statement of it would include far fewer propositions than commonsense realism.

And yet solipsism is a crazy position. It cannot be, then, that we should weight the simplicity criterion more heavily than the Reidian one. For if we did, then we would have decent reasons to embrace positions such as Cartesian solipsism, which we do not. Nor, for that matter, should we weight the Reidian and simplicity criteria equally. For this suggests that, at the outset of inquiry, we should hold that commonsense realism and Cartesian solipsism are roughly on par, all else being equal. But, at the outset of inquiry, we should not believe this. To the contrary, commonsense realism is the default position, the position to beat.

If this is right, the simplicity criterion has a theoretical role to play in the assessment of theories. But the role it should play is something like that of a tiebreaker. If two theories do roughly an equally good job of explaining core data, which are the outputs of a doxastic practice in good working order, then we should prefer the simpler one, all else being equal.[18]

Let me now return to a point I raised earlier, which concerns the reasons why we should employ the Reidian criterion as a mode of theory evaluation. The way in which the Cartesian solipsist employs the simplicity criterion, we have seen, yields bizarre results. This, I have claimed, indicates what the proper theoretical role of the simplicity criterion is. But the fact that Cartesian solipsism is a crazy position is not the primary problem with it. Rather—and this is a point that Reid himself pressed—the primary problem is that the Cartesian solipsist works with a double standard.

To see this, let us suppose that in order to engage in theory evaluation we must take some sources of evidence as reliable, such as the deliverances of reason. In addition to trusting reason, the solipsist also takes the reports of introspection to be reliable. That is why he takes himself to exist, to have a nature of a certain kind, and to experience sense data of various sorts. But the solipsist disregards other basic sources of evidence, such as that provided by perception. Perception, the solipsist says, offers us a radically mistaken account of what the world is like. It is difficult, however, to see why the solipsist says this. Both our introspective and perceptual judgments are the outputs of doxastic practices that have a very similar profile: they are well-established over time, deeply entrenched (indeed, practically inescapable), have sophisticated methods of evaluation, and yield outputs that, while not infallibly accurate, are not massively inconsistent. The primary problem with the solipsist view, then, is not that it is a crazy view, but that it is infected by arbitrary partiality.

If this is right, realists tend to take the Reidian criterion seriously not because they are intent on defending common sense at nearly all costs. Rather, they do so for the following two reasons. First, in order to engage in theory evaluation, we must trust the outputs of some well-established doxastic practices. A failure to do so would result in the inability to engage in theory evaluation at all. Second, good theories cannot operate with a double standard. They cannot arbitrarily take the outputs of some doxastic practices in good working order seriously, such as the deliverances of reason and introspection, while discounting others in good working order, such as the deliverances of perception. This does not, I should add, imply that doxastic practices cannot be reliable to different degrees. They can. It would, however, be a mistake to infer that, given two doxastic practices in good working order, we should dismiss the outputs of one if they do not enjoy the same impressive epistemic status as the other. If, for example, the perceptual practice has a particularly impressive standing, this would not give us reason to dismiss the memorial practice because it is, on the whole, somewhat less reliable.

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The Realist's Master Strategy

In the last two sections, we explored the issues of what data a metaethical theory should accommodate and how it should do so. Having done this, we are now in a position to state the realist's master strategy.

The strategy instructs us to start with the core moral data. With this data in hand, we then evaluate a particular metaethical theory by determining how well it accommodates this data vis-à-vis its rivals according to the Reidian, explanatory, and simplicity criteria. According to realists, their view scores extremely well according to the Reidian criterion. When evaluated along this dimension of theory assessment, realists claim that their view fares better than any of its rivals—in some cases, significantly better. Moreover, realists add, their position does well enough according to both the explanatory and simplicity criteria. In some cases, realists claim, it actually fares better than its rivals; in other cases, it fares at least (or nearly) as well. On the whole, realists conclude, their view emerges as the strongest overall metaethical position—at least at the outset of theory evaluation.[19]

Let us now explore this strategy in more detail, beginning with the realists' claims about how their view fares according to the Reidian criterion. We've seen that, according to the realists, any decent metaethical view must take the core moral data seriously, neither ignoring nor explaining the data away. Recall that this data includes the phenomenology of moral experience, the character of moral reasoning, the nature of moral judgment, and the modal profile of the contents of moral judgments—moral judgments, we saw earlier, being the outputs of the moral practice.

What are the credentials of the moral practice? Well, this practice is well-established over time. Moral thinking is not a recent development in the history of humankind. Moreover, it is deeply entrenched. In fact, moral thinking is so deeply entrenched that, for all practical purposes, it is inescapable; try as we might, most of us cannot avoid forming moral judgments. This point is typically recognized by antirealists. No prominent antirealist position suggests that if we were to find their arguments successful, we should try to stop making moral judgments. Most of us just couldn't do it even if we tried.[20] Furthermore, we also have fairly sophisticated methods for evaluating moral judgments. Of course these methods are not the same as those used to evaluate the outputs of other doxastic practices. Unlike the objects of perceptual judgments, we cannot touch moral facts. And unlike the outputs of memory, we cannot grasp them by introspection. Still, we can evaluate, modify, and correct our moral judgments in various ways.

In the first place, we can do so by consulting the behavior of moral exemplars, who are widely acknowledged as deserving emulation. By considering and emulating their lives, we can ascertain concrete ways in which traits such as being loving and fair are expressed. In so doing, we can identify ways in which our practices of moral judgment can be improved. In some cases, we might see that we need to develop better habits of attention, paying closer attention to aspects of situations that are often overlooked. In other cases, we might recognize that we need to develop better habits of assessment, such as stepping back from controversial or explosive situations to gain increased critical distance. In this regard, evaluating moral behavior is rather like evaluating a good musical or athletic performance: to assess it, we look toward those who do it well.

In addition, we can engage in what J. S. Mill called "experiments in living," thereby discerning whether certain patterns of conduct are inimical to the well-being of others or subtly disrespectful.[21] For example, we might take it upon ourselves to live among a historically persecuted group to discern whether certain social policies, which are designed to help them, actually tend to erode the self-respect of those affected.

We can, third, systemize our moral judgments by bringing them into (wide) reflective equilibrium, ascertaining how well they cohere with other moral and nonmoral judgments. In this case, we often have to bring concrete moral experience into equilibrium with abstract moral principles that we endorse by engaging in thought experiments and abstract moral reasoning.

Fourth, we can exercise our capacity to discern whether our moral judgments imply absurd or repugnant conclusions. For example, just as we can evaluate Cartesian solipsism by noting its deeply counterintuitive consequences, we can also assess a moral position by drawing out its repugnant implications, such as the consequence that it provides reason to believe that we ought to engage in such activities as harvesting organs from innocent and healthy people.

The moral practice, then, includes various strategies that agents can employ to determine whether moral judgments are well-formed. Realists emphasize, finally, that a significant range of these judgments—such as those that express the stock moral truisms and their direct implications—are not subject to massive and systemic disagreement. To the contrary, one finds almost no disagreement about whether they are true among competent participants in the moral practice. Of course realists recognize that there is substantial disagreement about other moral matters, such as whether it is permissible to eat animals or to perform elective abortions. And they recognize that moral theorists disagree about what makes actions wrong. But, realists claim, the sort of convergence we find about the stock moral truisms and their direct implications blocks the charge that the disagreement regarding first-order moral matters is sufficiently widespread and recalcitrant that it calls into question the reliability of the moral practice.

For suppose we were to compare the moral practice to paradigmatically unreliable doxastic practices such as extrasensory perception (ESP), aura reading, and sooth-saying. The differences between these practices and the moral practice would be manifest. Practices such as ESP, after all, have very poor track records. We know that over time, for example, they yield massively inconsistent outputs. There is, furthermore, no analogue in these practices to the stock moral truisms—apparently necessary truths such that, were a person to deny them, we would worry about her mental well-being. If this is right, realists claim, the amount of first-order moral disagreement that we actually encounter is not nearly sufficient to give us reason to believe that the moral practice is similar in the relevant respects to paradigmatically unreliable doxastic practices such as ESP.

Some critics of realism concede that first-order moral disagreement is not itself sufficient to throw doubt on the reliability of the moral practice. But, they maintain, deeply entrenched disagreement among moral theorists about what renders actions right or wrong is (at least when it is combined with the actual amount of first-order disagreement).[22] Realists reply to this charge by noting that disagreement among moral theorists is the wrong sort of thing to drive an argument for antirealism.[23] Consider the following comparison: most of us agree that there are ordinary living material things such as plants and animals. Those familiar with contemporary metaphysics know, however, that there is widespread disagreement among its practitioners about what (if anything) accounts for the fact that a given range of matter composes a plant or an animal. It would be a mistake, realists claim, to conclude that disagreement of this sort provides much evidence for believing there are no plants and animals.

In sum, realists claim that their view rates very highly according to the Reidian criterion, since their view implies that we ought (all else being equal) to take the outputs of the moral practice as being reliably formed. But many philosophers worry that, even if this were true, realism fares poorly according to the explanatory and simplicity criteria. In response, realists maintain that, while their view may not rate quite as well according to these criteria as some antirealist views, it nevertheless rates well enough. The only way to make this case, however, is actually to compare realism with some of its main rivals. So, in what remains, let us compare one prominent moral antirealist view with generic moral realism.

A Rival View: The Error Theory

The antirealist position that I would like to consider is the error theory of morality, which is defended by philosophers such as J. L. Mackie and Richard Joyce.[24] According to the error theory:

> Ordinary moral thought and discourse purport, by and large, to represent moral facts. But they fail to do so, as there are none. In this respect, ordinary moral thought and discourse are deeply and systematically mistaken.

Realists maintain that the error theory should be rejected.

The primary reason is that the error theory fares very poorly according to the Reidian criterion. The problem is not simply that, according to the error theory, our moral experience systematically misleads, presenting our environment in such a way that there are moral facts when there are none. It is also that error theorists reject propositions that look like obvious necessary truths. For consider, once again, stock moral truisms, such as:

> It is wrong to lie simply because one doesn't feel like telling the truth.
>
> It is wrong to slander another simply because it makes one feel better.
>
> It is wrong to torture another simply because she has inconvenienced you.

Error theorists maintain that propositions such as these are untrue: they are either false or rest on false presuppositions (and, hence, are neither true nor false). On the plausible assumption that a reliably formed belief must be the deliverance of a reliable belief-forming faculty or method, error theorists are committed to the further claim that none of our moral beliefs is reliably formed. Error theorists, then, are radical moral skeptics. The Reidian criterion, however, implies that skepticism such as this should be rejected, all else being equal. More precisely, it implies that, at the outset of theory evaluation, we have strong pro tanto reason to hold that beliefs which express the stock moral truisms (and their direct applications) are reliable, as they are the output of a doxastic practice in good working order. However, under the present interpretation, error theorists reject this claim regarding the reliability of our moral beliefs. They maintain that, at the outset of theory evaluation, beliefs that express the stock moral truisms enjoy no greater theoretical standing than beliefs that reject them. Accordingly, their view fails the Reidian criterion.[25]

Let us dig into the error theory more deeply. Thoroughgoing moral skepticism is a radical position, as it implies that beliefs that look obviously true are not. It is natural to wonder why error theorists accept it. In the most prominent recent defense of the error theory, Richard Joyce relies almost exclusively on one argument, which we can call:

The categoricity argument

(1) Necessarily, if there are moral facts, then there are categorical reasons—reasons to act that apply to an agent regardless of whether acting in that way satisfies his desires.
(2) There are no categorical reasons.
(3) So, there are no moral facts.

There is something wrong with the typesetting here. The beginning of these sentences should align. But they don't.

For our purposes, we needn't enter into the issue as to why Joyce believes we should accept (2). Suffice it to say that realists have vigorously contended that the arguments offered for (2) are defective. Russ Shafer-Landau, for example, has maintained that Joyce's argument simply presupposes a Humean or internalist view of reasons, which many realists reject.[26] More interesting for our purposes is the justification Joyce offers for (1). Joyce claims that we should accept (1) because it is a deeply entrenched feature of ordinary moral experience, a conceptual truth. Nothing, Joyce says, could count as a moral system which denied (1).[27]

The most interesting feature of Joyce's rationale for (1), for our purposes, is that it takes the appearances of ordinary moral thought and discourse very seriously. When arguing for (1), Joyce asks us to pay close attention to our actual practices of praising, blaming, and holding others accountable. He claims that, when we do so, we can see that we presuppose that moral reasons are categorical. And yet, when it comes to other well-entrenched features of moral experience, such as that there are stock moral truisms, these are taken to be illusory. The stock truisms, however, look like conceptual truths in the sense in which Joyce is interested: nothing could be a moral system that rejected them.

There are, then, these two apparent conceptual truths:

(A) Necessarily, if there are moral facts, then there are categorical reasons.

And:

(B) It is wrong to torture someone simply for fun.

Joyce offers an argument—The Categoricity Argument—that takes (A) as a premise and concludes that (B) is untrue. Realists maintain that, in so doing, Joyce's position is infected by arbitrary partiality. For it is difficult to see why, if we take the appearances of ordinary moral thought and discourse seriously, we shouldn't proceed in the reverse direction. If we are prepared to follow Joyce and maintain that there are no categorical reasons, then why not offer an argument that takes (B) as a premise and conclude that (A) is false? Since both (A) and (B) are apparent conceptual truths in the sense in which Joyce is interested, it is difficult to see why we should take one of these claims as our starting point rather than the other.

The brief against the error theory so far rests on two claims: first, the view fails the Reidian criterion and, second, it operates with a double standard. In principle, error theorists can reply to this last charge. They might claim that there are principled reasons to reject (B) rather than (A). One reason is that doing so yields a simpler metaethical theory, which makes no commitments to the existence of moral facts. Another reason is that doing so implies that the error theory better satisfies the explanatory criterion. For, by rejecting (B), the error theory can account for the core moral data without taking on the difficult explanatory burdens that realists must. If so, error theorists might claim, it remains an open question whether their view ought to be preferred, on the whole.

replies

three

Let us consider each reply, beginning with the error theorist's appeal to the simplicity criterion. If the realist's master strategy is correct, the appeal to simplicity in this context is not persuasive for at least two reasons.

First, it is not apparent that the error theory is significantly simpler than realism. We have seen that error theorists such as Mackie and Joyce embrace:

(2) There are no categorical reasons.

But in so doing they do not deny that there are any reasons. To the contrary, they maintain that:

> There are Humean reasons—reasons to act that apply to an agent because acting in that way would satisfy her desires. Among such reasons are prudential reasons.

Realists, however, can agree with both these claims. For, recall, realists who are moral naturalists tend to believe that:

> All practical reasons, including moral ones, are Humean.

Realists of a naturalistic persuasion, then, can maintain that there is no appreciable sense in which their view is less simple than the error theory.

To this last claim, error theorists have a retort. Even if realists commit themselves only to the existence of Humean reasons, it might be said, their view is not as simple as the error theory. After all, naturalistic realists maintain that there is a category of Humean reasons that error theorists reject, namely, the moral reasons. Accepting one less subspecies of Humean reasons, error theorists might point out, implies that their view is simpler than naturalistic realism.

Realists are likely to consider this last claim as possibly true but innocuous. For, when assessing whether the error theory offers us a simpler account of the core moral data than realism, it is important to recognize the following pair of points.

In the first place, whether error theory offers us a simpler account of the core moral data than realism will depend on whether the error theory can proffer a streamlined explanation of such things as why there appear to be core moral truisms. Error theorists might offer explanations for these things. But there is no guarantee that these explanations will be particularly simple; they may involve error theorists making extensive (and controversial) theoretical commitments. And, so, there is no guarantee that the error theory will offer a simpler explanation of the core data than realism. In the second place, by claiming that Humean moral reasons exist, realists have not thereby introduced into our ontology a type of entity of which error theorists are suspicious. To say it again, error theorists such as Mackie and Joyce already admit the existence of Humean reasons. At most, then, realists countenance the existence of a subspecies of such reasons that error theorists do not. If this is right, there *might* be a sense in which error theory offers us a moderately simpler account of the core data than realism. But it is difficult to see how such a modest advantage in simplicity could give us reason to reject (B) rather than (A).[28]

e stock

I have offered one argument for believing the error theory is not appreciably simpler than realism (canvassing along the way how error theorists might reply to it). I turn now to the second reason to believe that an appeal to simplicity will not help the error theory. According to realists, a good metaethical theory should endeavor to accommodate the full range of core moral data, which include the outputs of the moral practice. Among the core data, however, are beliefs with the following content:

> It is wrong to torture someone simply for fun.

If realists are right, it is not the case that it merely appears that a belief with this content is true, although, given all we reasonably believe, the appearances mislead. Rather, the situation is that, since this belief is the output of a doxastic practice in good working order, we should (all else being equal) take it to be reliably formed. It is innocent until proven guilty.

We saw earlier, however, that a theory gains no credibility if, at the outset of inquiry, it rejects core data of this sort simply in the name of parsimony. Recall Cartesian solipsism once again. The Cartesian solipsist does little to recommend her view by rejecting beliefs such as:

> There are trees, rabbits, and rocks, which are part of a mind-independent external world,

because doing so yields a more parsimonious theory. For appeals to theoretical parsimony, if what we said earlier is correct, play a limited role, which is roughly this: for any range of core data, which is the output of a doxastic practice in good working order, we should prefer the theory that accommodates this data in the more parsimonious way.

Arguably, however, the Cartesian solipsist fails to accommodate the core data. For, in her view, at the outset of theorizing, beliefs such as:

> There are trees, rabbits, and rocks, which are part of a mind-independent external world,

deserve no more credibility than their denial. Similarly, according to realists, error theorists fail to accommodate the core moral data. For, in their view, at the outset of theorizing, beliefs such as:

> It is wrong to torture someone simply for fun,

also deserve no more credibility than their denial. According to realists, by contrast, beliefs such as this deserve the benefit of the doubt. By failing to accord them this status at the outset of theory evaluation, realists maintain that error theorists do not even "get into the explanatory game." For they do not purport to explain what, according to realists, needs to be explained, which, to say it again, is this: that beliefs such as that mentioned above appear to be obviously true and that these appearances deserve to be trusted, all else being equal. If this is right, error theorists cannot legitimately claim that, in virtue of being parsimonious, their view enjoys a theoretical advantage over realism.

We have considered two reasons for believing that an appeal to parsimony is of little help to the error theorist. According to the first, error theory is not appreciably simpler than realism, at least of the naturalistic variety. According to the second, we should prefer the more parsimonious theory only when it actually explains the core data, which the error theory does not. Still, we might reject (B) because doing so better satisfies the explanatory criterion. In this case, error theorists might claim that their view fares better than realism not because realists ignore the core moral data or switch the question. Rather, it is because realism lacks the resources, in principle, to account for the core moral data, such as how beliefs which express the stock moral truisms could be reliably formed.

This last claim would, however, be difficult to defend. Given that we appear able to form reliable beliefs about necessary truths of many sorts, we would need strong reasons to believe it. If realists are right, these reasons have not been forthcoming. Mackie, for example, presents only a bare sketch as to why moral realists could not account for how our moral beliefs are reliably formed. Joyce, by contrast, does not argue for this claim directly. Rather, he devotes nearly all his energies to arguing that realists are committed to (A), which he contends is indefensible. From this he concludes that, since there are no moral facts, moral beliefs which express the stock moral truisms could not be reliably formed.[29]

On this occasion, I wish not to enter into the controversy as to whether there are categorical reasons. Instead, let me note that, when assessing the error theorist's appeal to the explanatory criterion, it is important to keep in mind the dialectic between error theorists and realists. Realists, recall, maintain that error theorists such as Joyce appear to operate with a double standard. According to realists, error theorists take the appearances very seriously by accepting:

(A) Necessarily, if there are moral facts, then there are categorical reasons;

but take equally plausible claims such as:

(B) It is wrong to torture someone simply for fun,

to be illusory. If realists are right, it is not easy to see why those committed to rejecting the existence of categorical reasons should argue from (A) to the rejection of (B) rather than the reverse. In principle, error theorists, we have seen, can reply to this charge. They might claim that there are good reasons to reject (B) rather than (A), since doing so better satisfies the explanatory criterion. But note that error theorists cannot reject (B) on the strength of The Categoricity Argument itself, maintaining that it establishes that realists cannot satisfy the explanatory criterion. For, in the present dialectic, The Categoricity Argument is precisely what realists call into question, charging that the case for its first premise is flawed because it employs a double standard. If this is right, error theorists need to furnish new reasons to believe that claims such as (B) could not be true. These reasons may be forthcoming. But realists will naturally suspect that they will be vulnerable to the sorts of considerations already pressed against the error theory.

Let me summarize: realists contend that the error theory fares poorly according to the Reidian criterion. This is, admittedly, compatible with the error theory being such that it accommodates the core moral data better than realism, on the whole. However, realists contend that, at this point, neither appeals to the simplicity nor the explanatory criterion are sufficient to establish this. Accordingly, realists conclude that their view should be preferred to the error theory, at least at the outset of theory evaluation.

Conclusion

The question we have been pursuing is how to frame and conduct the debate between moral realists and their rivals. Realists, I have claimed, have a strategy they wish to employ. According to this master strategy, we begin by isolating the core moral data that any decent metaethical theory should accommodate. We then evaluate how well a given metaethical view accommodates this data according to the Reidian, explanatory, and simplicity criteria. In our discussion, we put this strategy to work, comparing realism to the error theory. We saw that realists believe that this strategy yields the conclusion that we should prefer their view to the error theory, all else being equal. It is worth emphasizing that this verdict does not imply that realism is true. Nor does it imply that realism is the best position on the whole. If correct, it implies only that realism accommodates the core moral data better than some of its main rivals and, thus, should be preferred to them, all else being equal.

Of necessity our discussion has been programmatic in several respects. In the first place, there are other prominent versions of antirealism, such as expressivism, which we ignored. For all that we said, such views may compare more favorably to realism than the error theory. Second, we bracketed any detailed exploration of positive arguments for and against realism and the available replies to these arguments, focusing instead on a type of strategy that realists employ. As I have just indicated, however, these arguments may be very important, as they may drive up the price tag of a given metaethical view substantially, giving us good reason to reject it. Finally, when presenting the realist's strategy, we glossed over all sorts of subtleties and controversial issues that a more nearly adequate discussion would have to discuss, such as potential problems with formulating and weighting the Reidian, explanatory, and simplicity criteria.

These are not trivial limitations. Still, there are advantages to stepping back from the nitty-gritty give and take of metaethical discussion to consider larger methodological issues. In this case, doing so will have allowed us to see more clearly why realists believe what they do and where their view is most open to challenge.[30]

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foundationally justified; he held that they would be justified because within the larger coherent system arguments would be developed for the reliability of these cognitively beliefs. But the important point for my purposes is that he recognized that there would be spontaneous beliefs and that they would play a crucial role in determining the coherent system of empirical beliefs that one accepts. I think that any plausible version of coherentism will share this feature.

30 Many thanks to Christian Miller for helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

Moral Realism

1 Nagel (1986) is a philosopher who belongs to the first group; Mackie (1977) is one who belongs to the second. The quotation comes from Joyce (2006), 174. He is quoting W. D. Casebeer.

2 Miller (2009a) offers an overview of what different philosophers say on the matter.

3 Here and elsewhere, I use the term "represent" as a success term. To represent is to accurately represent. I should also note that throughout this essay I attribute to realists positions of various sorts. Unless the context indicates otherwise, these attributions are probably best read as being implicitly normative: the positions in question are those that, in my judgment, realists should accept.

4 See, for example, Boisvert (2008), Copp (2001) and (2009), Hare (2003), and Tressan (2006).

5 It also distinguishes realism from certain versions of expressivism, such as that defended by Blackburn (1999) and Gibbard (2003), which hold that there are moral facts but that there is no interesting sense in which moral thought and discourse represent them. Cuneo (2007) and (2008) explore these views in more detail. See also note 11.

6 See Smith (1994), Ch. 5 and Jackson (1998), Ch. 6, for example. Under a natural interpretation, Smith claims that moral reasons are determined by what an idealized version of oneself would want oneself to want.

7 Copp (1995), Boyd (1988), Brink (1989), Jackson (1998), Railton (1986), and Sturgeon (1988) defend moral naturalism. To be clear, naturalists do not claim that whether it is wrong for an agent to perform an action depends on her desires. Rather, they claim that whether the wrongness of an action favors certain kinds of responses on our part depends on the desires that we have (or would have if we deliberated correctly).

8 FitzPatrick (2008), 173.

9 Enoch (2007) and (forthcoming), FitzPatrick (2008) and (2010), Huemer (2005), Oddie (2005), Parfit (forthcoming), and Shafer-Landau (2003) defend moral nonnaturalism.
2011 According to the characterization offered above, supernaturalist views such as those defended by Adams (1999), Miller (2009b), and Zagzebski (2004) would also count as versions of nonnaturalism.

10 I have stated the stock moral truisms in such a way that they do not have any qualifications attached to them. One might believe, however, that most of them should be understood to have implicit ceteris paribus riders attached to them, since there might be extraordinary circumstances in which, say, lying simply because one doesn't feel like telling the truth is okay. Under this interpretation, most of the stock truisms are ceteris paribus norms, which, if true, are necessarily so. Understanding the truisms in this way is compatible with the overarching argument I wish to make.

11 See Blackburn (1998) and Gibbard (2003), Introduction. The quotation comes from Blackburn (1998), 70. Roughly put, metaethical expressivism is the position that

moral judgments express not moral propositional content that purports to represent moral reality, but nonrepresentational states such as attitudes of approbation or disapprobation.

12 Loeb (2007) develops this challenge. It was reading Loeb's essay that impressed upon me the importance of thinking about methodological issues in metaethics. Much of
2011a what I say here (and in Cuneo (forthcoming b) and (forthcoming c)) is an attempt to 2011b
address the challenges he raises to realism in his essay.

13 The classic text here is Mandelbaum (1955). Horgan and Timmons (2007) and (2008) explore the issue of moral experience with subtlety. Horgan and Timmons, I should add, defend expressivism, arguing that it can accommodate the relevant data. In this sense, I am borrowing the terms of the debate from those who defend moral antirealism.

14 See Wittgenstein (1969) and Reid (2002). Wolterstorff (2001), Ch. IX explores the similarities between their views.

15 See Reid (2002). Those familiar with Alston (1991) and (1992) will recognize my debt to Alston's appropriation of Reid, although my gloss on the notion of a doxastic prac- 2011b
tice differs from Alston's. Cuneo (forthcoming b) and (forthcoming c) explore Reid's
own formulation of the Reidian criterion as applied to metaethics. 2011a

16 See, for example, Pereboom (2001).

17 For helpful discussions, see Swinburne (1997) and Layman (2007).

18 "What about the explanatory criterion?" you may wonder. Does the Reidian criterion deserve to be weighted more heavily than it? In principle, realists could say different things on this matter.

19 There is, then, a sense in which realists hold that their view is the one to beat, the default position. But it is important not to freight this claim with too much significance. For when realists claim that theirs is the default position, this is probably best understood to mean simply that their view does a better job than rival views accommodating the core moral data.

20 One problem is that moral evaluations seem intimately intertwined with other sorts of evaluations, such as epistemic and prudential ones. For discussion, see Cuneo (2007), Ch. 2.

21 See Mill (1978).

22 See, for example, the discussion of Leiter (2010) at: http://onthehuman.org/2010/03/moral-skepticism-and-moral-disagreement-developing-an-argument-from-nietzsche/. 2011

23 An implication of Parfit (forthcoming) is that critics of realism exaggerate the degree of disagreement among moral theorists. Moral theorists, according to Parfit, have actually tended to converge on important issues in normative ethics.

24 See Mackie (1977) and Joyce (2001) and (2006). Olson (2010) defends the view as well. See also the chapter dedicated to constructivism and error theory in this volume.

25 There is a different way to interpret the error theory, according to which error theorists claim that their view *satisfies* the Reidian criterion. According to this interpretation, error theorists agree that, at the outset of theorizing, we should take beliefs that express the stock moral truisms as reliably formed, all else being equal. They simply contend that the presumption in favor of their reliability is defeated, since we have powerful reasons to believe that realism fares rather poorly according to the explanatory and simplicity criteria. In my judgment, this is not what error theorists such as Mackie and Joyce claim. While these philosophers agree that the core moral data in some sense support realism, they do not say that we should, at the outset of theorizing, take the moral practice to be reliable. However that may be, much of what I say about the error theory in the text should apply (with some fairly minor modifications), *mutatis mutandis* to a version of the error theory which claims that it satisfies the Reidian criterion.

26 See Shafer-Landau (2004) and (2009). In Cuneo (2007) Ch. 7, I argue that Joyce's argument works with an inadequate account of explanation.

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27 See Joyce (2001), 43, 177.

28 I develop this response at more length in Cuneo (forthcoming a). Among other things, I assess Joyce's charge that moral naturalists do not defend anything worth calling a moral system, arguing that this is incorrect. A worry that one might raise is that the strategy under consideration is not available to realists who believe that moral reasons are categorical. Strictly speaking, this may be correct. But realists who believe that moral reasons are categorical can still maintain that the error theorist's methodology is arbitrarily partial. They might say that since there is no more reason to reject premise (1) of The Categoricity Argument rather than the stock moral truisms, we should reject the argument's second premise.

29 This is true of Joyce (2001), at least. That said, Street (2006) and Joyce (2006) do argue for the claim that moral beliefs are not reliably formed, although Street is not an error theorist. For responses, see Copp (2008), Enoch (2010), FitzPatrick (2009), Parfit (forthcoming), and Wielenberg (2010).

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the stock moral
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30 Tyler Doggett, Steve Layman, Don Loeb, Christian Miller, Russ Shafer-Landau, Andrew Reisner, Sarah Stroud, Christine Tappolet, and an audience at the University of Montreal offered helpful feedback on an earlier version of this essay. They have my thanks.

Ethical Expressivism

1 This family includes the early "emotivist" theories of Ayer (1936/1946) and Stevenson (1937, 1944), the later "quasi-realist" theories of Blackburn (1984, 1993, 1998), Gibbard (1990, 2003), and Timmons (1999), Horgan and Timmons (2006) as well as a recent "ecumenical expressivist" theory under development by Ridge (2006, 2007a, unpublished) and a nondescriptive semantics for ethical terms sketched in some detail (but not endorsed) by Schroeder (2008a). There are also strong family resemblances between these theories and the "prescriptivism" of Hare (1952), as well as some aspects of the pragmatist-inspired "inferentialism" of Sellars (1968, ch. 7).

2 There are also at least two other families of philosophical theories going under the moniker "expressivism" which are not versions of expressivism as it is usually conceived in metaethics. First is the expressivist account of avowals inspired by Wittgenstein (1953, 89), which highlights the expressivist role of avowals to explain the asymmetry between statements of one's own present mental states (e.g., "I am sad") and third-personal statements about the mental states of others (e.g., "Johnny is sad"). See McGeer (1996) and Bar-On (2004) more subtle contemporary developments of this expressivist idea; and see Chrisman (2009) for comparison to metaethical expressivism. The second is a view in the philosophy of logic inspired by the early work of Frege (1879). The thought is that logical symbols like "¬" and "⊠" help us to express commitments that we can otherwise only manifest in practice. See Brandom (1994, 2000) and Chrisman (2010) for more discussion.

3 Note that this is different from what Schroeder (2008a, 18, 56–60; 2010, 70–6) calls the "basic expressivist maneuver." This is to argue that ethical and descriptive language are on a par in expressing mental states, which purports to get them off the hook of explaining *how* sentences express mental states, since it is an explanatory burden that everyone faces. Schroeder argues that this maneuver is mistaken.

4 This theory is prominent but also controversial. See Miller (2008a) for an extensive critique and references to other critics.