

Four Faces of Moral Realism

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ABSTRACT: This essay explains for a general philosophical audience the central issues and strategies in the contemporary moral realism debate. It critically surveys the contribution of some recent scholarship, representing expressivist and pragmatist nondescriptivism (Mark Timmons, Hilary Putnam), subjectivist and nonsubjectivist naturalism (Michael Smith, Paul Bloomfield, Philippa Foot), nonnaturalism (Russ Shafer-Landau, T. M. Scanlon) and error theory (Richard Joyce). Four different faces of ‘moral realism’ are distinguished: semantic, ontological, metaphysical, and normative. The debate is presented as taking shape under dialectical pressure from the demands of (i) capturing the moral appearances and (ii) reconciling morality with our understanding of the mind and world.

KEYWORDS: Moral realism, metaethics, expressivism, naturalism and nonnaturalism, error theory.

The contemporary debate over ‘moral realism’, a century after it was launched by G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica*, is a tangled and bewildering web.¹ This is largely due to dramatic differences in what philosophers assume it is about. This essay distinguishes and explains the central issues and strategies for a general philosophical audience, through a critical survey of some recent contributions to the literature. A pivotal problem is the lack of consensus over what ‘realism’ should mean in the context of ethics; we shall see that the variety of metaethical claims labeled ‘realist’ cannot be collectively characterized any less vaguely than as holding that ‘morality’, in some form, has some kind or other of independence from people’s attitudes or practices.² We look in vain for a reference for ‘morality’ and a kind of attitude-independence common throughout the debate. Furthermore, there is no uniform separation between a concern for *morality* proper and for the evaluative or normative more generally. Much of what is said here about ‘moral’ realism can be understood to apply more generally throughout the normative realm.

¹ This article focuses on the following books and articles, which are among the most recent representatives of their positions: Paul Bloomfield, *Moral Reality* (2001); Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (2001); Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (2001); Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology* (2004); T. M. Scanlon, ‘Metaphysics and Morals’ (2003), and his *What We Owe to Each Other* (1998); Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (2003); Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (1994); Mark Timmons, *Morality Without Foundations* (1999). I am grateful to Paul Bloomfield, David Copp, Terence Cuneo, Tyler Doggett, Chris Heathwood, Aaron James, Malcolm Murray, Russ Shafer-Landau, Rob Shaver, Mark Timmons, Kadri Vihvelin, Gideon Yaffe, some anonymous referees, and the editors of *Philosophy Compass* for their helpful comments.

² Presumably moral entities, properties, and facts could not be altogether independent of agent’s attitudes, as morality is centrally concerned with such attitudes. However, even this characterization of moral realism may be too narrow; some views claim to be antirealist on the basis of holding that morality lacks independence from *moral enquiry*, or from *conventions*. In this paper I treat these, rather artificially, as special cases of ‘attitude’ dependence.

One face of the debate focuses on ‘morality’ in the form of moral *claims*, and is addressed to the question of whether these have truth-values (of a kind that are attitude-independent, in a sense to be explained). The weakest, *semantic* kind of moral realism that affirms this is denied by *expressivism*, the strongest kind of antirealism, represented here by Mark Timmons. ‘Moral realism’ has been influentially defined as holding merely that some moral claims are true in this sense (Sayre-McCord 1988: 5), but this neglects the other important dimensions of the debate.³ Another face is *ontological*, addressing whether moral claims describe and are made true by some moral *facts* involving moral *entities* (e.g. reasons, obligations), *relations* (e.g. justification) or *properties* (e.g. goodness, rightness, virtue). In rejecting this kind of realism, expressivism is joined by metaethical *pragmatism*, represented here by Hilary Putnam.⁴ Other philosophers accept that moral claims describe moral facts, entities, relations and properties, but raise *metaphysical* questions about the attitude-independence of these. Metaphysical kinds of moral realism, which hold that there are moral facts involving moral entities, relations and properties that do not consist in what anyone’s attitudes are or would be under any conditions, are rejected also by *subjectivists* like Michael Smith.

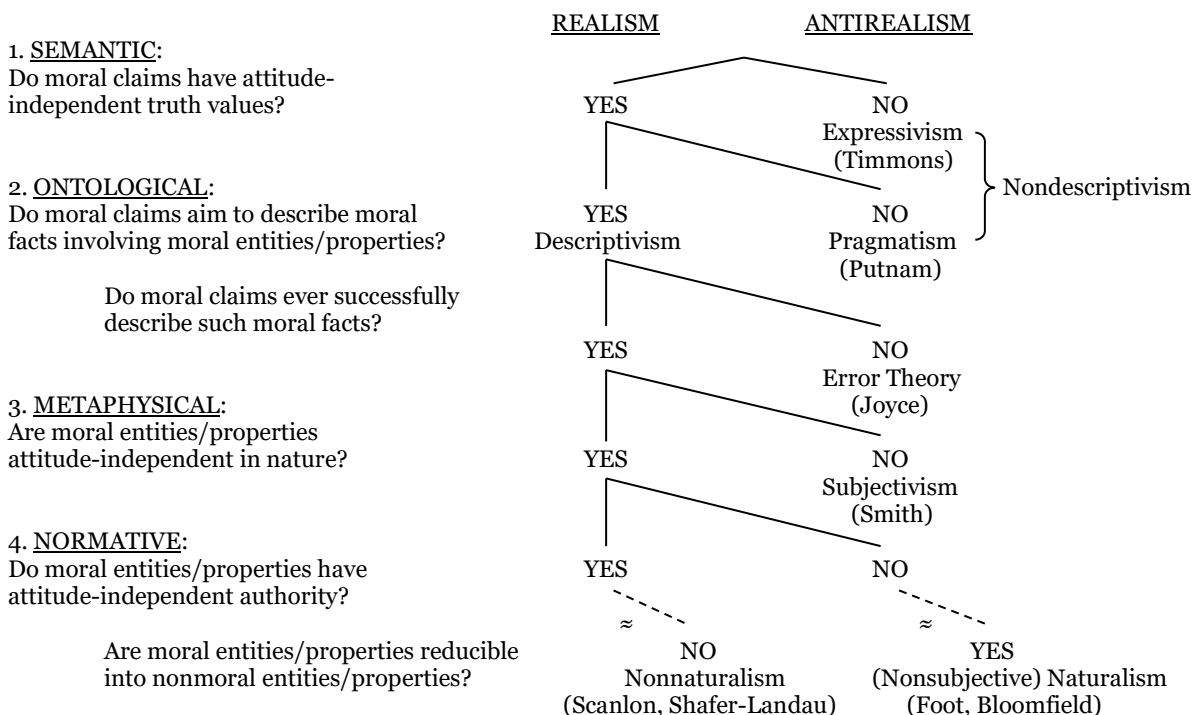
Less obviously but no less importantly, a final thread of the debate addresses the normative authority of morality. *Normative* kinds of moral realism hold that morality is authoritative for agents independently of their desires and other motivational attitudes. Although often overlooked, this issue plays an important role in the obscure debate between ‘naturalistic’ and ‘nonnaturalistic’ metaphysical versions of moral realism (the former represented by Paul Bloomfield and Philippa Foot, the latter by Russ Shafer-Landau and T. M.

³ Sayre-McCord proposes to capture these other dimensions as relevant to the moral realism debate insofar as they factor into moral truth conditions. But metaphysical and normative antirealists need not deny that some moral claims are true.

⁴ Putnam holds a nondescriptivist view about the use of thin moral terms like ‘good,’ ‘right,’ ‘ought’ etc., but holds that some ‘ethical judgments’ – those involving ‘thick’ terms like ‘cruel’ – are descriptive (2004: 73-4). Most nondescriptivists would not consider these to be ethical judgments in the same sense.

Scanlon⁵) and is crucial to the claim of *error theory*, pressed by Richard Joyce, that morality is built on false presuppositions.

The following diagram shows the different faces of moral realism, the theoretical positions just described and their representatives, and the relationships between them:⁶



I explore these kinds of moral realism by working from the weakest to the strongest, addressing each as a potential place at which to demur; what is the case for and what is the case against it? Dialectical pressure here comes from the two poles of *internal* and *external accommodation*.⁷ The challenge of internal accommodation is to do justice to the moral appearances, and is thought to push towards realism(s). The challenge of external accommodation is to find a comfortable fit for morality in our general, empirically informed

⁵ Labelling Scanlon, a celebrated ‘moral constructivist,’ a metaphysical moral realist, may draw protest. While he identifies a subset of morality (‘what we owe to each other’) constructively as a matter of what can be justified to others on grounds that they could not reasonably reject, he is not a constructivist all the way down; normative requirements are ultimately grounded in nonnatural facts.

⁶ The dotted lines indicate a close but inexact correlation, which is particularly imprecise in the case of the two naturalists named. Like most, this diagram disguises some important relationships. For example, it doesn’t show that error theory agrees with nonnaturalism that *if* there are any moral facts, then normative realism must be true about them, and it doesn’t show that Smith-style subjectivism is also a form of naturalism.

⁷ I adopt this terminology from Timmons. See also Cuneo 2007.

understanding of the mind and world, and is thought to push towards antirealism(s); objections to moral realism(s) have congealed into accusations of ‘queerness’ on three dimensions: metaphysical, epistemological, and practical.

1. *Expressivist & Pragmatist Nondescriptivism*

The most modest face of moral realism is a semantic thesis. Its objects are moral *claims* (whether judgements, utterances, beliefs, or propositions), of which it holds that they or their contents have objective truth values. These truth values are ‘objective’ in that they are independent of the attitudes that anyone takes towards the moral claims. The strongest form of moral antirealism involves the rejection of this weakest form of realism, and is found in the *expressivist* tradition of which Mark Timmons’ ‘assertoric nondescriptivism’ is a recent example.⁸ (A metaethical theory is not generally considered ‘realist’ unless it claims additionally that at least some positive moral claims are *true*. I postpone discussion of antirealist views that hold that all positive moral claims are objectively *false*). According to Timmons, moral claims are ‘evaluative’ rather than ‘descriptive’, which is to say that they express attitudes that aim at the world’s conforming to their content rather than at their own conformity with the world. These attitudes are members of the family of *conative* attitudes, like desires and preferences, but differ in claiming an overriding prerogative, demanding acquiescence both from one’s own mere desires and from others’ similarly demanding attitudes.

Expressivists therefore also reject the *ontological* face of moral realism (or ‘descriptivism’). This form of realism takes as its objects the truth-makers of moral claims, holding that they include moral properties such as value (e.g. the *goodness* of charity) and moral entities such as practical reasons and obligations (e.g. *reasons* not to tell lies, *obligations* to keep promises). It is important to distinguish semantic from ontological issues here, because a few philosophers such as Hilary Putnam and Christine Korsgaard accept, against expressivism, that

⁸ Timmons shares his view with Terence Horgan, but the monograph surveyed here is authored by Timmons alone. Other significant recent expressivist works include Gibbard 2003 and Blackburn 1998.

moral claims have objective, attitude-independent truth values, but deny that this is because of the existence of any ontological moral realm. These philosophers emphasize the practical nature of ethics as an enquiry directed at what to *do*, rather than a theoretical enquiry directed towards what *is the case*. On this *pragmatist* view, moral claims are true not in virtue of there being moral facts involving moral entities like reasons or properties like value, but because there are correct processes for solving practical problems. Consider, for example, how a person is the ‘winner’ in a game of musical chairs because she is the last player sitting when the game has been played properly, but it is not the case that the game is played properly because the last player sitting is the winner. Analogously, Putnam and Korsgaard claim that a moral claim is ‘true’ because it is (or concurs with) the result of the correctly executed process, and not vice versa.⁹

Expressivists and pragmatists concede that they must overcome the challenge of internal accommodation of moral discourse’s ‘objective pretensions’. The semantic antirealist owes an explanation for the apparent truth-aptness of moral claims. We evaluate them as ‘true’ and ‘false’, put them in truth-functional contexts of negation, conjunction, etc., we draw inferences from them, and we talk about moral ‘belief’ and ‘knowledge’. The ontological antirealist likewise has to explain away the appearance that moral claims make reference to properties of value and presuppose that there are such *things* as practical reasons and obligations.

Timmons is representative of contemporary antirealists in denying that our moral discourse and practice support realism. He resists realism’s monopoly on the language of truth and fact by means of a contextualist semantics and a minimalist theory of moral truth. We find the meaning of our concepts by attending to the platitudes governing them; ‘truth’ means simply *correct assertibility* (1999: 116), which is determined partly by the semantic norms (the rules for

⁹ Korsgaard names this strategy *procedural* realism, contrasting it with *substantive* realism (1996: 35-7.) For another pragmatist view, see Pihlström 2005. It is important to distinguish pragmatism, as an ontologically antirealist position, from the ontologically realist position often called ‘constructivism,’ according to which moral claims report *facts* about the results of processes of enquiry. See for example James (forthcoming) and Street (forthcoming). There is some question whether Korsgaard is properly read as a constructivist or as a pragmatist. Hussein and Shah (2006) read her as a pragmatist, and question whether she has a coherent metaethical alternative to ontological realism.

proper usage) for the relevant language domain. Timmons claims, following Putnam, that the semantic norms for moral language do not require correspondence to any ‘objects in the world.’ Semantic and ontological moral realisms project the semantic and ontological commitments of truth-talk from other contexts into moral contexts, where they are not appropriate. If someone is warranted in making a moral claim, then they have sufficient warrant for evaluating that claim as ‘true’; we have a right to talk of moral truth. An extension of this minimalist strategy to our talk of ‘belief’, ‘knowledge’, ‘fact’, and ‘assertion’ gives us the right to talk of moral beliefs, knowledge, facts, and assertions.

These antirealist strategies must accomplish a difficult balancing act. To succeed in the project of internal accommodation (capture the moral appearances), they must co-opt characteristically realist ways of talking about morality. If they fly too close to realism, semantic and ontological antirealism collapse into the positions they reject.¹⁰ But to any degree they depart from realism, they arguably remain vulnerable to the charge that they haven’t accommodated all of morality’s objective pretensions. Here Putnam appears more willing to reject realist turns of speech (pragmatist moral truth involves no appeal to moral properties, entities, or facts) and is therefore immediately open to internal accommodation challenges, while Timmons seeks to deflect such challenges by extending his contextualist strategy to claim a right for antirealists to talk about moral properties, entities, and facts without realist commitments.

If the distinctness of semantic moral antirealism is to be maintained, there must be some way of distinguishing the antirealist’s minimal truth, facts, properties, beliefs, and assertions from the realists’ TRUTH, FACTS, PROPERTIES, BELIEFS, and ASSERTIONS. Timmons favours the label ‘nondescriptivism,’ holding that when used in moral contexts these concepts do

¹⁰ On this concern see especially Dreier 2004. Semantic moral antirealism today faces an identity crisis: dispute over what it should be called reflects confusion over what distinguishes it from the realism it rejects. ‘Noncognitivism’ is spurned because antirealists insist on the right to call moral stances ‘beliefs.’ ‘Expressivism’ (signifying the claim that moral language has the primary semantic function of expressing conative attitudes) currently has favour, but there are also realist forms of expressivism (e.g. Copp 2001). Joyce claims that this form of antirealism is distinguished by the claim that moral utterances are nonassertoric (2001: 8) – but Timmons holds that (some) moral utterances are ‘genuine, full-fledged’ assertions (1999: 129).

not involve or entail *description* of any *object* in the *world*. Yet some moral utterances (e.g. ‘John is a bad man’) do appear to be descriptions, and we do ordinarily talk of value, reasons, virtues, and obligations as if there were such entities and properties, so the realist can here object that antirealism fails to accommodate morality’s objective pretensions. Timmons’ terminological choices, however, seem arbitrary. His contextualist semantics allow us to offer antirealist interpretations of ‘description,’ ‘object,’ and ‘world’ continuous with the other terms with objective pretensions (we might say that to ‘describe’ is simply to predicate a ‘property’ of an ‘object.’) How then is semantic moral antirealism distinguished from realism? What is signified by the difference in notational case?

Timmons’ adoption of truth- and fact-talk does not make him a semantic or ontological moral realist, because his conception of moral truth and fact is antirealist. He holds that from a morally (attitudinally) ‘detached’ perspective, moral claims are neither true nor false, and there are no moral facts (1999: 151-3). We correctly speak of moral truth only from within one of many incompatible morally ‘engaged’ perspectives, and hence a moral claim such as *Capital punishment is wrong* may be in his terminology ‘semantically appropriate’ (compatible with the semantic norms *and* objective world) when made by me, but semantically inappropriate when made by you, because I have the requisite evaluative attitude and you do not (1999: 146). It is tempting to describe this claim as relativist, but this is a charge Timmons rejects, acknowledging that morality’s objective pretensions include the nonrelativity of moral truth. He avoids relativism by maintaining that ascriptions of truth to moral claims function disquotationally as morally engaged endorsements of those claims. We can therefore judge as ‘true’ only those moral claims that comport with our own moral engagements; others must be judged as ‘false,’ even if they are compatible with everything dictated by the semantic norms of moral language and the objective world.

Insofar as Timmons’ and Putnam’s views remain antirealist their successful internal accommodation of morality’s objective pretensions can be challenged. Proponents of rival

positions insist that ordinary practice is committed to moral TRUTH that exists even from a morally detached perspective, and moral FACTS that come to us straight from the WORLD. Particular attention has been directed towards the semantic antirealists' ability to accommodate the appearance that moral claims stand in inferential relations with other (moral and nonmoral) claims. Expressivists have yet to substantiate their assurances that this can be done.¹¹ In any case, these antirealist maneuvers are at a significant disadvantage against semantic and ontological realism. Whereas realism can simply take logical relations and talk of truth, facts, properties, and descriptions in the moral domain to be continuous with those in other domains, according to our best semantic and metaphysical theories, antirealists must either distinguish distinct, moral equivalents for these, or defend radical revisions of our general theories. This burden is adequately motivated only by the antirealists' claim that descriptivist theories face an *external* accommodation problem that unlike their own is insurmountable. The case for nondescriptivism largely depends upon the case against ontological moral realism, to which we turn.

2. *Contours of Ontological Realism*

Ontological moral realists hold that our moral talk describes ('robust') moral facts, involving moral properties, relations or entities. Besides nondescriptivists, it is also opposed by *error theorists* like Richard Joyce who, following J. L. Mackie (1977), concede the ontological commitments of moral discourse but deny that there are any moral entities or instantiated moral properties, concluding that all positive moral claims are false. (Most error theorists, like Joyce and Mackie, do not extend this conclusion to normative claims more generally). By general consensus, ontological moral antirealism bears a heavy burden of proof. While nondescriptivists must explain away morality's 'objective pretensions,' the error theorist must

¹¹ There is a large and rapidly growing literature on this subject. Allan Gibbard (2003) offers a sophisticated model for a logic of attitudes, but see Mark Schroeder (forthcoming) for the most systematic exploration of the possibility. Although Schroeder shows that the expressivist program can be carried out, he concludes that the theoretical (external accommodation) costs are too great.

defend his rejection of our first-order moral convictions against a forceful objection wielded by Scanlon and Shafer-Landau, among others.¹² Since our first-order convictions carry decisive epistemic authority, a theory's rejection of them warrants only our rejection of the theory. The case against ontological moral realism is that despite any support it derives from the moral appearances, it faces an irremediable external accommodation problem. Joyce's attack takes the general form of a claim that moral discourse, like phlogiston and witch discourses, is *nonnegotiablely* committed to something that our best theories about the world tell us is false. Varieties of ontological realism are usefully explored and compared through the lens of this charge of problematic commitments, which can be separated into accusations of metaphysical, epistemological, and practical queerness.

Moral realism's perceived metaphysical queerness emerges from the question of what kinds of facts, entities, and properties could comprise moral reality. Antirealists charge that any moral facts, entities, or properties would have to be of a very strange kind, because of the characteristics that they would have to possess. One characteristic is *causal redundancy* (or *impotence*); it is sometimes claimed that we don't seem to need (or perhaps even are able) to invoke moral facts, entities, or properties in order to explain any event, which is seen by some as grounds for denying their existence.¹³ Another characteristic is *supervenience on the nonmoral*; every change or difference in moral characteristics requires a change or difference in nonmoral characteristics, so for every moral fact there is a complex of nonmoral facts which is sufficient for it. This dependence is difficult to explain, especially since unlike other supervenience claims (e.g. of the mental on the physical) it is held to be an *a priori* truth. This is seen as incompatible with our general metaphysical (and epistemological) theories, casting doubt on the existence of

¹² They here follow Dworkin 1996 and Nagel 1997. This argument is firmly in the tradition of G. E. Moore, the 'philosopher of common sense.'

¹³ There is a large literature on this. See especially Harman 1977 and Sturgeon 1985.

a distinct realm of moral reality.¹⁴ Ontological moral antirealism, by contrast, faces no such difficulties as it involves no positive metaphysical commitments.

The alleged epistemological queerness of ontological moral reality concerns the manner of our epistemic access to it. Given that moral properties like value and moral entities like reasons are not detectable by the known senses, and given their causal redundancy, how could we perceive them or even know that they exist? It is charged that ontological moral realism must embrace an occult faculty of intuition, the operation of which is quite inexplicable and indemonstrable (how could we detect something that doesn't *act* on anything?) and not countenanced by our general epistemological theories. Ontological moral antirealists face no such puzzles. Timmons holds, for example, that there are 'contextually basic' moral claims, such as that it is wrong to torture children for fun, which are correct in virtue of the semantic norms alone (i.e. effectively 'true' by definition) and hence intrinsically justified.

The practical queerness of moral reality is articulated in a variety of ways, but in general concerns how moral reality would have to bear on our motives and actions. Were there a moral reality, it is claimed, it would have a peculiarly close connection to motive and action, a connection that cannot be squared with our general theories of human motivation and agency. This charge bifurcates into concerns about motivation and concerns about normativity. Again, the motivational power of moral judgment seems unproblematic for antirealists like Timmons, for whom it is an essential element of the mental state itself, albeit subject to *ceteris paribus* conditions.

Ontological moral realism maintains a division into two camps, known as 'naturalism' and 'nonnaturalism'.¹⁵ The nature of this vexed distinction is in metaethics far from clear or determinate, and should not be assumed identical to similarly labelled distinctions found elsewhere in philosophy. Introduced into metaethics by Moore, he himself eventually confessed

¹⁴ See e.g. Blackburn 1985.

¹⁵ Note that 'naturalism' here is shorthand for 'naturalistic ontological moral realism'; antirealists are typically naturalistically disposed, but do not here qualify as 'naturalists'.

his treatment to have been ‘hopelessly confused.’ (1993: 13) Nonetheless it remains in use, and virtually every ontologically realist theory is identified by its advocates as a form of either ‘naturalism’ or ‘nonnaturalism’. The latter, although long considered an absurd Platonism, today enjoys a renaissance and boasts many and distinguished champions.¹⁶

One might suppose that here we could pass by the naturalism-nonnaturalism distinction. Both sides hold similarly ontologically realist stances. But a large part of philosophical dispute over ‘moral realism’ has been waged over this schism, which in section 3 I connect with the further crucial issue of normativity. In the present section I briefly consider how the distinction has been and should be drawn. I suggest that we salvage one thing from the debris, a metaphysical distinction, that is important for present purposes.¹⁷ Sections 3 and 4 then critically examine subjectivist and nonsubjectivist forms of naturalism, respectively, and nonnaturalism is addressed in Section 5.

Naturalism holds that moral properties (etc.) are ‘natural’ while nonnaturalism denies it. But what is meant here by ‘natural’? Moore’s final answer is now widely endorsed: the ‘natural’ is that which is an object of scientific enquiry. But what counts as ‘science’—might ethics itself?¹⁸ Various characterizations of the scientific or natural appear in the literature, to which moral properties are then contrasted by nonnaturalists or assimilated by naturalists. These include the features of spatiotemporal existence, causal efficaciousness (or ineliminability), and admitting of only empirical access.

Scornful dismissal of nonnaturalism as sheer absurdity sometimes stems from identifying it with the doctrine that moral reality consists in a substance that exists independently of the physical universe (ethical *supernaturalism*).¹⁹ But this is only a caricature

¹⁶ Besides Scanlon and Shafer-Landau, contemporary philosophers who defend nonnaturalism (although not all under that label) include Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, Jonathan Dancy, Joseph Raz, Jean Hampton, Philip Stratton-Lake, Colin McGinn, Terence Cuneo, David Enoch, Michael Huemer, and William Fitzpatrick.

¹⁷ See Cuneo’s essay (2007) in this volume for a rival but equally unorthodox interpretation.

¹⁸ Most conservatively (and not uncommonly in other areas of philosophy) science and the ‘natural’ is equated with physics and the physical. But Moore opts for ‘natural science including psychology’ (1993: 13), Scanlon, physics and psychology (2003: 8), and Shafer-Landau (2003: 59) and Smith (1994: 17), all natural and social sciences.

¹⁹ Ronald Dworkin’s parodic ‘morons’ or moral particles can be taken this way (1996).

of the nonnaturalism of Moore, Shafer-Landau and Scanlon, who disown such ‘drops of magic,’ and insist that the moral supervenes on the natural. Nonnaturalism need not endorse any form of *substance* dualism. A more plausible approach construes ‘science’ as essentially concerned with the causal explanation of events (e.g. Scanlon 2003: 8). Whether or not moral properties are ‘natural’ would then hinge on the debate over whether they figure (or figure ineliminably) in causal explanations. But this approach does not find wide favour. Shafer-Landau claims there are causally inert natural properties (2003: 58), and Bloomfield argues that biological properties like healthiness and being alive, which are uncontroversially ‘natural’ in this literature, don’t play an essential role in causal explanations (2001: 28). Shafer-Landau and many others²⁰ prefer to characterize the natural epistemologically; the essential characteristic of science is an *a posteriori* epistemology, hence naturalism holds that we can learn about the moral only empirically while nonnaturalism holds that at least some significant moral facts can be known *a priori* by some form of intuition.

I concede that the epistemological interpretation of the distinction corresponds to a broad difference between the two camps, and that it is supported by much said in reflective commentary by participants in the debate. But if we approach the distinction this way, we overlook what has historically been the most fundamental issue between self-identified naturalists and nonnaturalists, an issue that is crucial to the shape of the moral realism debate. Looking to the origin of the distinction, we find G. E. Moore as concerned to deny that ‘good’ was the name of a ‘supernatural’ or ‘metaphysical’ property as to deny that it named a ‘natural’ property, and thought any such identification equally guilty of the ‘naturalistic fallacy.’²¹ Moore’s stance on moral realism was therefore not characterized primarily by an epistemological thesis allowing for the moral *a priori*. Contemporary nonnaturalists like Shafer-Landau inherit this

²⁰ See also Soames 2003: 43; Gibbard 2003: 99; Sturgeon 2006. See also discussion in Cuneo 2007.

²¹ Although, he observed, he would not in those cases call the fallacy ‘naturalistic.’ This shows that Moore himself was operating with (at least one) conception of the ‘natural’ at odds with the distinction I am proposing. My claim is that ‘nonnaturalism’ is best defined by reference to the family of views historically defined as ‘nonnaturalist,’ and not by what the proponents of those views claimed to mean by the term ‘natural’ itself.

part of Moore's legacy. As we shall see, there is more to Shafer-Landau's rejection of 'naturalism' than his explicitly epistemological self-interpretation can explain.²²

Nonnaturalists make two distinctive claims (e.g. Shafer-Landau 2003: 66). They maintain (i) that moral terms or concepts cannot be analyzed into 'natural' terms or concepts (their semantic claim), and (ii) that moral properties or entities cannot be reduced to 'natural' properties or entities (their metaphysical claim).²³ We can actually sidestep the problem of defining 'natural'. Nonnaturalists do not endorse *any* attempts to analyze moral terms or reduce moral properties into other terms and properties (except sometimes other moral or normative terms and properties), even other candidates for nonnatural terms and properties. Mathematics, for example, qualifies as nonnatural on the officially favoured criteria, but nonnaturalists would reject analyses or reductions of the moral into the mathematical no less than they reject analyses and reductions of the moral into the psychological. The more significant nonnaturalist claim, therefore, is that moral or normative terms and properties are semantically and metaphysically *autonomous* or *sui-generis*. That is, they deny that moral terms and properties can be analyzed into purely nonmoral terms and reduced to complexes of nonmoral properties, respectively.²⁴ Shafer-Landau writes of a particular analysis, for example, that it 'is naturalistic in that the definition does not incorporate any evaluative terms.' (2003: 56) In this essay I therefore focus on nonnaturalism primarily as the doctrine of metaethical *autonomism*, and naturalism as the doctrine of metaethical *nonautonomism*.²⁵ So viewed, nonnaturalists' metaphysical claim is the fundamental one; they maintain the existence of irreducible moral properties with special features not otherwise found or reproducible in our universe. The difficulty for this

²² One reason to suspect this is that he provides as examples of the 'natural' some logically necessary properties (being self-identical and being such that everything is either red or it isn't [2003: 58]). He now disowns these as examples of the natural, but the question remains why he took them as such.

²³ Allan Gibbard (2003: 29-33) and Rob Shaver (in unpublished work) suggest nonnaturalism is best construed as making only the semantic and not the metaphysical claim, observing that the early nonnaturalists failed to distinguish between concepts and properties, meaning and reference (Gibbard claims to be amending Moore, Shaver to be interpreting him). But Moore, for example, is adamant that goodness is not identical with any natural *property*, and it is the metaphysical claim that seems more important to him and his successors; the semantic thesis, which nonnaturalists share with nonanalytic naturalists, is merely supposed to follow.

²⁴ See also Harman 1985.

²⁵ Plausibly the 'nonnaturalist' doctrine of metaphysical autonomy underlies the apriorist/intuitionist doctrine. To claim metaphysical autonomy is to deny that moral properties are identical to any properties or complex of properties that can be described in nonmoral language. If one accepts the further premise (denied by Sturgeon) that everything empirically observable can be described in nonmoral language, then autonomism will lead one to apriorism.

interpretation arises from ‘nonreductive naturalists’ like Nicholas Sturgeon (2006) and David Brink (1989), who maintain that moral properties are both irreducible *and* ‘natural’ (because empirical). In taking this position they side with the nonnaturalists against their opponents on the most fundamental issue dividing them, precipitating an identity crisis for the naturalism-nonnaturalism debate.

There are different forms of naturalism, according to the view taken of the analyticity of moral language into nonmoral language. *Analytic naturalism*, which holds that the meaning of moral terms can be captured by complexes of nonmoral terms, is the strategy Moore accuses of committing the ‘naturalistic fallacy.’ While Moore’s accusations of fallacy were mistaken, versions of his ‘open question’ argument have persuaded many philosophers that all such naturalistic analytic equivalences are false. For any proposed definition *D* of a moral term ‘*m*’, it is thought to remain a significant question whether things that are *D* are *m*, suggesting that ‘*m*’ means something different than *D*. Almost all contemporary writers disavow analytic naturalism and express confidence that its project is doomed to failure.²⁶ Moore’s objections to naturalism are most commonly resisted by distinguishing, as he failed to, between semantic and metaphysical equivalence. Different terms can have the same referent without having the same meaning. *Nonanalytic naturalism* holds that although moral terms are not synonymous with any nonmoral terms or descriptions, the properties predicated by moral terms are identical with certain natural properties, i.e. those whose intrinsic nature can be characterized in nonmoral terms. In any case, on the present interpretation naturalism maintains and nonnaturalism denies that moral reality can be reduced to reality describable in nonmoral terms.

3. *Subjective Naturalism*

Some philosophers grant semantic and ontological moral realism, i.e. that moral claims are descriptive and sometimes made true by facts involving moral entities or properties, but

²⁶ The few recent defences of analytic naturalism include Lewis 1989, Jackson 1998.

deny that these facts, entities, and properties are metaphysically independent of agents' attitudes. This requires us to distinguish a further, *metaphysical* face of moral realism. This realist thesis is rejected by (what I will call) *subjectivism*, which holds that moral claims describe and are made true by the attitudes of agents, real or ideal.²⁷ Subjectivist theories vary according to their accounts of the relevant attitudes, agents, and traits of those agents. The simplest and least plausible forms of subjectivism identify moral facts with facts about speakers' or agents' actual attitudes, whereas in Michael Smith's sophisticated version, moral and normative facts concern what a perfectly rational and fully informed version of each person would desire that their actual self do.²⁸

Subjectivism has relatively few external accommodation problems (in principle, at least; specific versions have their own problems). There are few difficulties concerning the nature and existence of facts about actual or hypothetical attitudes, or the nature of the cognitive faculties that might provide epistemic access to them. But like nondescriptivism it has difficulty accommodating certain (in this case metaphysical) objective pretensions of moral discourse. To see this, observe that subjectivist accounts are offered as analyses of moral claims, not as heuristics. Suppose we ask why we ought to accept the advice, conform with the desires, or emulate the example of the ideal agent. The most obvious answer would be that it is because the agent is ideal in respect of being ideally situated to recognize the moral facts. But this would entail that moral facts are metaphysically independent of ideal agents' attitudes. For the subjectivist, moral facts rather *consist* in facts about real or ideal agents.

Morality arguably has phenomenological pretensions to greater objectivity than this. When we make moral judgements it doesn't seem as if we're directly thinking about or describing the attitudes of idealized agents, even those of our fully rational selves.²⁹ Some

²⁷ A significant variant denies the *enquiry*-independence of moral facts, entities, and properties. Here 'constructivism' is a more appropriate label. See James (forthcoming) and Street (forthcoming).

²⁸ Smith 1994. Earlier subjectivists include Richard Brandt (1979) and Roderick Firth (1952).

²⁹ Initially Smith appears to acknowledge this, denying his account is a 'reductive analysis' or that it 'even entail[s] that evaluative thoughts are thoughts about our own hypothetical desires' (1992: 349), although he proceeds to claim that 'we have no grip on what is to count as a reason except in terms of what we would desire if we were rational' (1992: 352) and calls his account an 'explication'.

subjectivists have difficulties also with another form of objectivity that appears when we focus specifically on *moral* requirements. Morality purports to be universal, ascribing the same general requirements to everybody. But Smith bases each person's normative requirements on his or her own desires, subject only to rational enhancement (full information and coherence). Moral claims can be true, he maintains, provided that all rational persons would converge on a common set of desires with a distinctly moral content (1994: 173, 187-9). Richard Joyce, who largely accepts Smith's subjectivist approach as an account of normativity, reasonably objects that this claim on behalf of morality is implausible. Rational selves' desires are reached by correction from actual selves' desires, and these starting points are too diverse to support the required kind of convergence (2001: 89-94). Other forms of subjectivism, including ideal observer theories (e.g. Firth 1952) and intersubjectivist theories (which appeal to shared attitudes) can avoid this problem, but may be more vulnerable to normative challenges; *why* conform with the attitudes of any third party? (We discuss the normative authority of an agent's own idealized attitudes in section 5).

By contrast, metaphysical moral realism has the virtue of one kind of transparency. Rather than explaining the normativity of actions or states of affairs by appeal to the facts about or properties of agents or processes, we appeal merely to the normative properties of the actions or states of affairs themselves. Internal accommodation, and morality's objective pretensions, favour nonsubjectivist over subjectivist approaches. The case for subjectivism—like the case for nondescriptivism—largely rests upon skepticism about the possibility of successful external accommodation. Subjectivists deny the plausibility of attitude-independent moral facts, entities, and properties, and offer to free us from the need to locate any. We turn now to metaphysical moral realism.

After revision, he no longer denies that evaluative thoughts concern our hypothetical desires, and doesn't hesitate to call his account an 'analysis', interpreting practical deliberation accordingly (1994: 153-4).

4. *Nonsubjective Naturalism*

4.1. *Metaphysical & Epistemological Queerness*

There are many different kinds of nonsubjective naturalism, but here we focus on Philippa Foot's (2001) and Paul Bloomfield's (2001) recent neo-Aristotelian teleological theories,³⁰ which aim centrally at repelling charges of metaphysical queerness by locating properties and facts with respectable naturalistic credentials. 'Moral realism will be most cogent,' Bloomfield writes, 'if moral properties are no more ontologically suspect than other properties that we are all convinced exist.' (2001: 27) Selecting, like Foot, the moral goodness of persons (i.e. Virtue) as the primary object of moral discourse, he makes a case for realism on the basis of the real differences between the states of virtue and vice, and their independence from our cognitive capacities with regard to them. 'This is the lion's share of an argument for moral realism,' he claims, 'because it shows us that the facts that constitute who we are or what kinds of people we are...are deeply independent of what we may happen to think about them.' (2001: 14) Goodness, Bloomfield suggests, is to be understood by analogy to *physical health* as a property of a functional or teleological system. As health is the state which disposes the body successfully and efficiently to perform its natural functions, so moral goodness is the state of will or character³¹ that disposes humans to *flourish*, or accomplish the natural, biologically determined human purposes. It is troubling, however, that both Foot and Bloomfield are coy about what these purposes might be.

Bloomfield and Foot arguably locate metaphysically and epistemologically unobjectionable facts and properties to offer as candidates for moral reality. Bloomfield argues persuasively against the charges of metaphysical and epistemological queerness. There is nothing strange or unusual about natural properties that are not essential for causal explanation and that supervene on properties that are, or properties that are not directly perceptible. Such

³⁰ See also Casebeer 2003. Bloomfield views his own theory as more in the tradition of Plato (as the originator of the 'ergon argument') than of Aristotle.

³¹ As states of character are not metaphysically independent of agent's attitudes, the classification of this view as a form of metaphysical moral realism may be questioned. The point is that on the Foot-Bloomfield view, the moral goodness of any state of character does not depend on the attitudes of any agent, real or ideal, towards that state.

things are found in (and are even ineliminable from) every respectable science: biology cannot do without the properties of health and toxicity, or physics without entropy. To counter epistemological skepticism, he exploits the analogy with physical health by examining how doctors tend to illness by means of ‘a posteriori intuitions’, the skillful diagnosis of a complex natural condition through sensitivity to numerous subtle symptoms.

The problem for Foot’s and Bloomfield’s naturalistic realism is seen from the fact that few people if any in the moral realism debate suggest that none of our thick concepts pick out real facts and properties. Even the nondescriptivist and error theorist can grant that there are concrete differences between the states of character we deem virtuous and those we deem vicious. Here we encounter one of the key incommensurabilities in how the debate is conceived. Naturalists often focus on ‘thick’ concepts such as those of virtues (e.g. courage) and vices (e.g. cruelty), which are rich in nonmoral content. Nonnaturalists and metaphysical antirealists focus instead on ‘thin’ concepts like goodness, rightness, and practical reasons, which in their moral use seem to have purely moral content. Naturalism has a much harder time accommodating these thin concepts, which threatens its case for moral realism; thick concepts belong to morality only insofar as they entail goodness, rightness, practical reasons, etc.³²

Foot-Bloomfield naturalism addresses *goodness*, of course. But here we strike an important and mischievous ambiguity in the debate. ‘Goodness’ has both thin and thick senses; it can denote both the thin property of *being good*, and the substantive states (e.g. of character) possessing that property (i.e. ‘the Good’).³³ ‘Good’ is predicated of many very different states of character, and in Bloomfield’s view can even extend over mutually exclusive states in different persons. The property of goodness we seek is that shared by all these different states, which constitutes their *being good*. Naturalism’s opponents need not deny that the good states of character are natural, and naturally different from the bad states of character. They need only

³² This is not to claim controversially that thin moral concepts are conceptually *prior* to thick moral concepts. My point is merely that (e.g.) if an act could be *cruel* without this entailing that there is anything bad about it, or that agents have any reason not to do it, then *cruelty* cannot be an essentially moral concept.

³³ cf. Moore: “the good,” “That which is good,” must...be the substantive to which the adjective ‘good’ will apply.’ (1993: 61)

deny that what those states have in common, their respective goodness and badness, are natural properties.

While some naturalists go no further than this to defend moral realism, and therefore can be accused of missing the point, Foot's and Bloomfield's theories do furnish an account of thin moral reality. Corresponding to a predication of goodness there are, in addition to the virtuous states of character already observed, some relational properties and facts. Many naturalists fix the nature of moral reality by looking to relational properties such as being conducive to certain ends, or conforming with certain norms.³⁴ The substantive states identified as (thick) moral reality are the states that possess these properties. On the Foot-Bloomfield approach, the thin property of goodness seems to be the relational property of being conducive to our biologically determined human purposes. Relational theories successfully repel charges of metaphysical and epistemological queerness. There is nothing especially fishy about relational properties and facts, their causal inessentiality, their supervenience on the physical and nonrelational, or our epistemic access to them despite their nonperceptibility.

Naturalism's opponents again do not trouble themselves to argue against the existence of these properties and facts, and object rather that moral claims do not plausibly address them. According to a mild version of this objection, naturalism fails because all such reductions fail to track our actual moral claims.³⁵ It is, for example, difficult to reconcile our first-order moral views with Bloomfield's suggestion that moral goodness essentially involves personal flourishing. We can easily think of scenarios where morality seems to require us to act against our own interests. However, this objection cannot refute naturalism definitively. Even if no extant theory tracks our moral claims (and it may be argued that some do), naturalists may still expect or hope for future success. Antirealists and nonnaturalists reject naturalism on the basis of a more severe objection, that moral reality must meet certain nonnegotiable criteria that naturalism can in principle never satisfy, which naturalists overlook or ignore. This challenge

³⁴ Perry 1926, Ziff 1960, Harman 1977, Mackie 1977, Railton 1986, Dreier 1990, Copp 1995, Finlay 2004. See also Gibbard 1990.

³⁵ E.g. Fitzpatrick (forthcoming).

arises out of morality's supposed *practical* queerness. Naturalism's opponents generally concur that morality has an essential, intrinsically practical character that distinguishes it from nonmoral discourse and reality, which is only contingently and extrinsically practical. Shafer-Landau distinguishes nonnaturalism from naturalism, in part, as denying that moral facts are only 'as motivating and as normative...as ordinary facts' (2003: 55), Joyce points to intrinsic practicality as the 'nonnegotiable' feature of the moral reality invoked by moral talk that warrants an error theory, and Timmons and Gibbard hold it to be the feature that justifies rejecting all descriptivistic treatments of moral discourse. But what is this 'practicality'?

4.2 *Motivational Queerness*

Many metaethicists, including Timmons, Smith, and Joyce, maintain that there is an especially close connection between our moral judgements and motivation ('motivational internalism'). This yields an objection against metaphysical moral realism. If moral judgements have this special motivational connection, then it seems that moral properties and facts have a special motivating power, despite being metaphysically attitude-independent. Naturalism then may have a problem, as it seems that no part of attitude-independent reality describable in nonmoral terms has such 'magnetism' or 'snake-charming power.' Bloomfield acknowledges that on his naturalistic view 'the property of moral goodness is only capable of motivating us in the ways in which the property of physical healthiness is,' (2001: 155-6) and tofu, he observes, is not magnetic. Joyce, following Mackie, half-heartedly offers an argument from the 'nonmagnetism' of the natural world to an error theory, while nondescriptivists conclude from it rather that descriptivism is false. There are three crucial questions here: (i) What kind of motivational connection is this? (ii) Might moral reality and motivation be so connected? (iii) Is moral discourse really committed to there being such a connection?

Classically, antirealists such as Mackie and the early nondescriptivists maintained the connection was *necessary*; moral discourse is committed to the impossibility of genuinely

judging that one ought now to ϕ without having some degree of motivation toward ϕ -ing. It does seem implausible that attitude-independent facts could have this kind of power over us. But experience and imagination readily furnish instances of people holding moral judgements while lacking appropriate motivation. Familiar figures in the literature include the *amoralists* who care nothing for morality, the *depressed* who are temporarily unmoved, and the *perverse* who desire the bad and despise the good. It is implausible that these phenomena threaten the applicability of our moral concepts, and contemporary antirealists are more circumspect. Timmons, for example, qualifies the ‘essential’ motivational connection with *ceteris paribus* conditions. This is effectively to retreat to the claim of a *normal* connection; it is an assumption of our moral concepts that a person making a moral judgement is typically motivated accordingly. This weaker connection opens the door for some realist explanations that I shall not explore here.³⁶ But is our moral practice committed even to this? Antirealists (Timmons [1999: 59-69], Joyce [2001: 26-7])³⁷ offer variations on a *translation* argument designed to elicit this intuition; they claim that we would hesitate to translate words in an alien language by our moral words if their use is not typically accompanied by corresponding motivation.

Most contemporary metaphysical realists, naturalists and nonnaturalists alike, simply deny that even this weaker internalism is a commitment of moral discourse. Some, including Shafer-Landau, maintain that moral discourse is committed only to a weaker kind of connection still: that moral beliefs are *intrinsically* motivating, i.e. they are *capable* of motivating action on their own without contribution from any desire. This is compatible with failure of motivation, as the influence of moral facts can be cancelled, blocked, or opposed by other mental states. This Kantian claim is much more plausibly among morality’s commitments; is it also queer? Smith and Joyce argue that it is, from a Humean view of motivation according to which desire is always necessary and belief never sufficient. The now-standard response is that ‘desire’ is

³⁶ One is the response-dependence view of David Wiggins and John McDowell: moral properties are picked out by their dispositions to motivate normal humans under normal conditions. Another strategy is to appeal to semantic (Copp 2001, Dreier 1990) or conversational (Copp 1995, 2001, Finlay 2004, 2005) conventions connecting moral utterance with speakers’ motivational states.

³⁷ The original translation argument is in Hare 1952.

ambiguous between a substantive psychological state and the mere state of being motivated itself, and that it is only true in the second (trivial) sense that motivation entails having a desire. The interesting thesis, that all motivation is produced by a particular kind of conative psychological attitude, they reject as unsupported dogma.³⁸

Intrinsic motivating power is not, however, problematic for naturalism, and seems quite unexceptional. Observe that a fact's 'intrinsic' motivating power depends upon the psychological makeup of the agent. In order for a fact to motivate an agent to act, she must be psychologically disposed to act upon believing in the fact. Observe also that it is not the fact but the belief that has the causal power, as Shafer-Landau grants (2003: 178n). A moral fact unobserved has no motivational influence, and false moral beliefs motivate as much as true ones. All it means to say that moral facts are intrinsically motivating, therefore, is that some beings are disposed to be motivated by beliefs about them independently of having any other motivational attitudes; a contingent causal connection exists in certain creatures between beliefs with a certain content, and motivation towards certain actions. A naturalist like Foot is perfectly able and willing to concede this (2001: 22-3).

There is another plausible way to construe the motivational connection, which distinguishes the motivational influence of moral beliefs from those about any ordinary subject-matter: as a connection of *rational* necessity. Insofar as a person is rational, their moral beliefs entail corresponding motivation. But this reflects the fact, increasingly accepted in contemporary metaethics, that the intrinsic practicality of morality is normative rather than motivational in flavour. Joyce, for example, expresses skepticism about his own antirealist argument from motivational queerness, and interprets and develops Mackie's error theory rather along normative lines. The argument against metaphysical realism from motivational internalism turns out to be a red herring.

³⁸ See Finlay 2007 for an argument in defense of the thesis.

4.3 Normative Queerness

A fact is moral only if it supports some proposition about how things *ought* to be, or what someone *ought* to do (*ceteris paribus* and/or *prima facie*). A theory would only deserve to be considered a form of metaphysical moral realism, therefore, if it claims the existence of attitude-independent moral facts corresponding to moral ought-claims. Many naturalistic theories neglect to do this, but unless the naturalist is willing to claim implausibly that moral reality has no necessary connection with what persons ought to do, he must seek to account for ‘ought’ in natural (i.e. nonmoral) terms. This is widely thought impossible; the intuitive appeal of Moore’s ‘open question’ argument against analyses of ‘good’ is directly related to the appeal of ‘Hume’s Law’ that no proposition containing ‘ought’ is derivable from propositions that only state what ‘is’. This expressly forbids naturalistic semantic analyses of normative language, and the prospects for naturalistic reductions of normative facts and properties are considered similarly poor. Shafer-Landau writes, ‘[moral facts] introduce an element of normativity that cannot be captured in the records of the natural sciences. They tell us what we ought to do...there is no science that can tell us of such things.’ (2003: 4) But is ‘ought’ really so recalcitrant to naturalistic explanation?

Foot and Bloomfield, at least, do not shirk the challenge. ‘Ought’ is not an exclusively moral word. Bloomfield observes that ‘ought’ is modal, and as such the nonderivability of ‘ought’ from ‘is’ parallels and is no more significant than the nonderivability of ‘necessarily is’ from ‘is,’ and of necessary facts from contingent facts (2001: 131-2). ‘Oughts,’ he suggests, are a kind of function statement. They tell us what would be the case if something was to perform its job, and hence it is analytically trivial to say of anything that has a job that it ought to perform its job (2001: 135). ‘Ought’ is therefore definable in terms of *ends*, and if Foot and Bloomfield are right that morality is based on natural human ends, there are natural facts about how persons morally ought to act.³⁹

³⁹ See especially Thomson 2007.

While naturalism's opponents deny that the natural world furnishes the normativity presupposed by moral discourse, many (including Wittgenstein, Joyce, Mackie, and Shafer-Landau) also accept that there are nonmoral uses of 'ought,' such as 'institutional' oughts of etiquette and instrumental oughts, that pose no problems for naturalism. It is not 'ought' as such, but the special normative character of the moral 'ought' that presents this difficulty. Moral 'oughts' have a stronger form of normativity than those of (e.g.) etiquette, chess, or gardening; they are 'categorical'. This term covers two distinct features. (A) Inescapability: moral 'oughts,' unlike instrumental 'oughts,' apply to us regardless of what our desires or intentions might be. As Foot observed (1972), however, this fails to distinguish the moral 'ought' from that of etiquette. (B) Intrinsic reason-giving authority: Putatively, moral 'oughts' entail *practical reasons*. If any agent morally ought to ϕ , then she has a reason to ϕ . Two points are important to note here. First, in contemporary metaethics, practical reasons are commonly regarded as the basic truth-makers of moral 'ought' claims, and hence the fundamental components of moral reality. Second, the combination of inescapability with intrinsic reason-giving authority entails that moral 'oughts' involve practical reasons that are independent of agents' desires or intentions, unlike the weaker 'oughts' of etiquette or chess, which (it is said) provide reasons to the agents to whom they apply only contingent on their attitudes.

This brings us to the final, crucial face of the moral realism debate. Our focus has been on metaphysical questions (i.e. what exists?), but ethics is *practical* philosophy (concerned with what to do), so it can reasonably be objected that 'realism' in the ethical domain is properly concerned with practical questions about how to act. A *normative* face of moral realism holds that agents have reasons, or are subject to normative requirements, independently of their attitudes, especially desires. These normative objective pretensions of morality are significant to the metaphysical dispute between naturalists and nonnaturalists. An appeal of naturalism is the prospect of explaining the normative authority of morality, and many naturalists ('Humeans,' by virtue of Hume's view of the dominion of passion over reason), together with nondescriptivists,

believe there is promise in explanations that appeal to motivating attitudes like desire.

Normative realism repudiates this naturalistic project, and is the fundamental motivation for most nonnaturalists' rejections of naturalism. Many therefore find it inappropriate to describe as 'stark, raving moral realism,' as Peter Railton does (1986), a naturalistic theory according to which moral facts give agents normative reasons only contingently on their attitudes. (This is not a 'robust' moral realism, as the current fashion puts it). To do full justice to all the objective pretensions of morality it is thought that a metaethical theory must embrace the normative face of moral realism.

Naturalism's opponents thus charge (i) that our conception of the moral 'ought' commits us to accepting that agents have practical reasons that don't depend on their attitudes, and (ii) that the nature of these reasons cannot be explained in natural or nonmoral language. But can naturalists after all explain these normative objective pretensions? Arguably the existence of practical reasons is a simple conceptual consequence of ought-claims, so that every kind of 'ought' entails a practical reason of the same kind: moral 'oughts' entail moral reasons, prudential 'oughts' entail prudential reasons, and 'oughts' of etiquette entail reasons of etiquette. Joyce concedes the point, but distinguishes between reasons-talk licensed within certain institutions, and *real* reasons (2001: 40-1; see also Shafer-Landau 2003: 166-7). Nonnaturalists and error-theorists typically agree that real practical reasons have a special inescapable *rational* authority; it is constitutive of being rational that one recognizes their authority, which therefore cannot intelligibly be questioned. Moral discourse allegedly presupposes (iii) that moral reasons are real reasons, and cannot rationally be discounted ('moral rationalism'). The institutional reasons of etiquette and gladiatorial combat, on the other hand, we sometimes rationally ought to ignore. If naturalistic accounts of moral reasons bestow on them merely this weaker authority, they arguably fail to accommodate the normativity of moral reality. This provides the naturalist with two options: to deny (ii), pursuing internal

accommodation of rational authority in naturalistic terms, or to deny (iii), that moral reality would have to possess such authority.

Most naturalists reject (iii), abandoning any robust form of normative realism and thereby opening themselves to internal accommodation challenges. But Foot and Bloomfield concede that moral 'oughts' entail rational requirements. Bloomfield claims that there are facts about the ends we ought to have, and that therefore there are *required ends* (2001: 151). The ends definitive of morality are required of us, while those definitive of playing chess are optional. However, on Bloomfield's own naturalistic account of 'ought', being required to pursue moral ends M amounts to nothing more than there being some natural end of ours, N, that would be promoted by our pursuing M. We can ask whether this 'ought_N' itself has sufficient authority. Either N is some end other than M, in which case it needs to be shown that we are required to pursue N, and a vicious regress looms, or else N is simply M. In that case, Bloomfield's suggestion is merely that the special normative authority of the moral 'ought_M' derives from morality itself demanding that we pursue the ends of morality. This Munchhausean kind of authority seems to lack rational force, and could equally be provided by some arbitrary ends.⁴⁰

Foot deploys a strategy of defining rational requirement in terms of her naturalistic account of value. Practical rationality is understood by reference to the primary (naturalistic) notion of the good (2001: 11, 63). To query the authority of morality, or to ask for a *reason* for being morally good, is thus incoherent. It is to ask for a reason for acting rationally, which is 'to ask for a reason where reasons must apriori have come to an end.' (2001: 65) Foot thus suggests that the 'ought' in the skeptic's query is meaningless. However, it seems coherent, and sometimes even important, to question whether I have sufficient reason to perform my natural human functions well. This suggests that Foot's attempted internal accommodation of morality's

⁴⁰ Moral ends, Bloomfield objects, are given to us by our biological nature and hence are not arbitrary. This either means merely that normal members of our species have these ends, or that we cannot help but strive for these ends. If the former, it seems intelligible to question why we ought to conform with human biological normality. The latter involves abandoning normative moral realism, for it suggests that the normativity of morality does depend upon our (inescapable!) motivational attitudes.

authority should be rejected for the (external accommodation) reason that it is incompatible with our best theories of rationality.

Short of resorting to strategies like these, naturalists must deny that moral reasons have inescapable rational authority. They can still insist that moral facts entail *moral* oughts and reasons, while denying that these are always rationally demanding. But the nonnaturalist (with the error theorist) insists that morality's objective pretensions include a claim to rational authority, and hence that naturalism fails the internal accommodation challenge, offering a hollow substitute for moral reality. To show that moral claims could be true, Scanlon suggests, we must show that they 'have the authority claimed for them.' (2003: 9-10)

Nonnaturalists and metaphysical antirealists justify their rejection of naturalism primarily on these grounds. We may wonder whether their arguments establish that morality has objective pretensions of this normative kind. Shafer-Landau offers a representative argument, from *blame* (2003: 192-3).⁴¹

1. If there is no reason for an agent *A* to comply with the requirements of some standard *S*, then it is unfair or conceptually confused to blame ('evaluate' or condemn) *A* for her violation of the requirements of *S*;
2. It is not unfair or conceptually confused to blame *A* if she violates moral requirements, even if those requirements are independent of her attitudes;
3. Therefore there are reasons for *A* to comply with moral requirements, even if they are independent of her attitudes.

We must here enquire what it is to 'blame' *A* for violating the requirements of *S*, and the answer seems to be that it is to judge that *A* ought not to have violated those requirements. But if it is true that there are different flavours of 'ought,' it would follow that there are different flavours of blame. Relevantly, we might distinguish between moral and rational blame. If the argument addresses moral blame, premise 2 seems true, but the issue becomes which kind of reasons are

⁴¹ He also gives an argument from justification which is structurally identical. See also Smith 1994: 87-9.

in play. Clearly it is unfair or confused to judge that *A* failed to act as she *S*-ought if she had no *S*-reason to act. But so interpreted, the argument would establish only that moral requirements (*M*-ought) entail *moral* reasons (*M*-reasons). Is it also unfair or confused to judge that *A* failed to act as she morally ought (*M*-ought) if she had no rationally demanding reason (*R*-reason) to act? This can be coherently denied. On the other hand, if we interpret the argument rather as concerning *rational* blame, premise 2 is weakened. Arguably it is indeed unfair or confused to judge that *A* failed to act as she rationally ought (*R*-ought) on the grounds that she violated moral requirements (*M*-reasons).

Can naturalism's opponents then substantiate their claims that our moral practices evince a commitment to moral reasons being rationally demanding reasons, and moral criticism rational criticism? Joyce appeals to the 'non-evaporability' (2001: 35) of moral criticism; 'morality is not presented as something that may be legitimately ignored or begged off.' (2001: 100) Moral criticism or blame behaves in this regard like prudential criticism and not like evaluation by mere institutional codes. Even if gladiatorial codes dictate that Celadus ought not fling sand in his opponent's eyes, we say that what Celadus '*really*' ought to do, if it is necessary to save his life, is fling sand, and that he '*really*' ought not to abide by the gladiator's code (2001: 34-5). This non-evaporability of moral and prudential criticism, in Joyce's view, proves their claims to constitute rational criticism that cannot intelligibly be challenged. Naturalists might respond by explaining the non-evaporability of moral criticism as a product of the overriding importance of morality to the *critics*, rather than of rational authority over the agent; i.e. the reason why critics do not withdraw these claims is that compliance matters to them, as expressivists hold. (They can further resist moral rationalism, and the claim that internal accommodation requires normative moral realism, by observing that it seems quite coherent to question whether one really ought to do what one knows one morally ought to do.) Nonnaturalists reject these maneuvers as motivated by a misconceived skepticism about nonnatural moral facts.

5. *Nonnaturalism*

Nonnaturalists maintain that metaphysical moral reality cannot be explained in nonmoral or nonnormative language, and are usually motivated to this stance in part by normative moral realism, the claim that the authority of morality is attitude-independent, since they believe this normativity to be naturalistically inexplicable and hence *sui generis*. They hold that the moral appearances (morality's semantic, ontological, metaphysical, and normative objective pretensions) together lead irresistably to nonnaturalism, and that any rival theory inevitably denies some of these appearances. Error theorists like Joyce concur, but charge nonnaturalistic moral reality with unacceptable queerness: i.e. they claim that successful internal accommodation necessitates failure in external accommodation.

According to nonnaturalism, moral properties and facts are metaphysically attitude-independent, and inexplicable in nonnormative language. Moral reality therefore seems metaphysically mysterious. What kinds of properties and facts are these? How are they related to the nonmoral universe? Contemporary nonnaturalists employ at least three different strategies against metaphysical skepticism: (a) disowning metaphysical commitments; (b) claiming only naturalistic metaphysical commitments; and (c) holding metaphysical inexplicability to be unproblematic.

Leery of the infamy of Moore's 'nonnatural property of goodness', nonnaturalists sometimes suggest that their nonnaturalism involves no metaphysical claims at all.⁴² Postulating moral facts and properties doesn't require a commitment to there being some extra kinds of things in the universe, so there is nothing metaphysically queer about nonnaturalism. But this seems disingenuous and even incoherent. To say that 'there are' moral facts and properties just is to make a metaphysical claim, unless one adopts Timmons' and Putnam's nondescriptivist

⁴² e.g. Scanlon 2003: 9-11, Parfit *ms.* Moore himself denies that goodness is 'metaphysical,' but means by this to deny it is supernatural. The clearest example of this unstable position is found in Nagel 1986: 139-41, where he denies that normative talk concerns an 'aspect of the external world' or 'set of properties,' but goes on to call objective reasons a 'domain' of reality that we have to discover. Shafer-Landau's choice to label natural properties 'descriptive' in contrast to moral properties also seems suggestive, although he is actually only adopting Jackson's terminology (1998).

strategies. Nonnaturalism has to involve metaphysical commitments if it is to distinguish itself from semantic and ontological antirealism. It is puzzling why nonnaturalists would think this antimetaphysical stance is consistent, or why, given their realism, they would wish to avoid metaphysical claims. It may be that they are conflating mild, merely metaphysical commitments (to a domain of properties) with radical, supernaturalist commitments to other kinds of self-subsistent substance.

Scanlon and Shafer-Landau elsewhere maintain that their only metaphysical commitments are to naturalism. Consider first Shafer-Landau's 'nonreductive' strategy (2003: 72-8). Suppose 'M' is a moral term predicating the moral property M (e.g. being morally wrong), which is multiply realizable by the natural world. On Shafer-Landau's proposal, corresponding to the possible situation-types S_1 – S_n in which M is realized there will be a range of natural properties N_1 – N_n , such that for any particular situation p, the property M in S_p 'is exhaustively constituted by' N_p (e.g. being the intentional causing of pain). For example, moral wrongness might be exhaustively constituted by the intentional causing of pain in one kind of situation, but exhaustively constituted by unequal distribution of resources in another. Postulating property M, it is claimed, therefore involves no metaphysical commitments beyond those of naturalism; indeed, Shafer-Landau adopts the strategy from self-described naturalists like Brink (1989), justifying the 'nonnaturalist' tag by appeal to his official epistemological interpretation of the distinction (i.e. he claims we have apriori access to facts involving these properties.)⁴³

This nonnaturalist strategy faces a dilemma that turns on how we interpret the constitution claim. The claim is either (i) that in S_p , M is just identical with N_p (e.g. what it is for ϕ -ing to be wrong in S_p is its being the intentional causing of pain), or it is rather (ii) that in S_p , the realization of N_p is sufficient to make it the case that M is realized. The suggestion would

⁴³ It remains 'nonnaturalistic' in our metaphysical sense, however, since as I've argued, (a) Shafer-Landau is a nonnaturalist in this sense, and (b) 'nonreductive naturalism' is also nonnaturalistic in this sense, although Brink and Sturgeon are anomalous in not endorsing normative moral realism.

then be that when we have certain natural properties realized in certain situations, we also get (distinct) moral properties realized for free.

If the right interpretation is (i), we can now however define M naturalistically (Jackson 1998). M is the disjunctive property $[(N_1 \text{ in } S_1) \vee (N_2 \text{ in } S_2) \vee \dots \vee (N_n \text{ in } S_n)]$. Shafer-Landau clearly rejects this interpretation. He concedes that some complex natural property may be necessarily co-extensive with the moral property, but observes that necessary co-extension does not entail identity; triangularity is necessarily co-extensive with trilaterality, yet they are distinct properties (2003: 90-1). While the second interpretation is necessary to avoid naturalism as we are understanding it, it yields only the uncontroversial claim that moral properties supervene (or, what may be distinct, are resultant) on natural properties. It leaves unanswered the metaphysical question concerning the nature of the moral properties. Only the first, naturalist, interpretation is compatible with the claim that the strategy doesn't involve metaphysical commitments beyond those of naturalism.⁴⁴

Contemporary nonnaturalists often eschew Moore's nonnatural property of goodness as metaphysically queer, and focus instead on *practical reasons*, as Scanlon does.⁴⁵ This may seem advantageous, because what we cite as moral reasons are, metaphysically, ordinary natural facts (e.g. the reason you ought to ϕ is that you assured us you would.) Scanlon therefore observes that moral reasons are metaphysically unproblematic (1998: 56-7). But this does not escape the problem. Being a natural fact may be necessary, but it is certainly not sufficient for being a moral reason. What makes the fact *that gouty toes hurt when stomped on* a reason for me not to stomp on yours, and not a reason for me rather to stomp? Intermediary explanations may be available; Scanlon's view is that a fact like this is a moral reason because it involves something that we could not reasonably justify to others. But ultimately, Scanlon maintains, a natural fact

⁴⁴ It is also unclear how this strategy can fit with the alleged normative difference the nonnaturalist claims to exist between moral and nonmoral reality.

⁴⁵ Originally Nagel wrote that claims about reasons are to be reduced to claims about value (1970: 88), but later writes that claims about value are to be reduced to claims about reasons (1986: 144), in anticipation of Scanlon's 'buck-passing' account of value. There is no neat historical progression here, however: as Rob Shaver observed in correspondence, Henry Sidgwick and A. C. Ewing both opted for nonnaturalist theories of reasons.

is a practical reason just in case it '*counts in favor of*' some action (1998: 17, 2003: 11). This favouring relation is then the fundamental normative component of reality, and what qualifies Scanlon as a nonnaturalist is his denial that the relation can be further defined or explained. Nonnaturalists maintain that it is a brute, inexplicable fact that certain facts (and not others) count in favour of certain actions (and not others). But this relation is open to the same charges of queerness as Moore's property.

Neither Scanlon's nor Shafer-Landau's attempts to dodge nonnaturalistic metaphysical commitments appear promising, and the better nonnaturalist response to metaphysical skepticism is their more steadfast one; there are real, mind-independent, nonnatural moral properties, facts, or relations, and the charge of queerness is misguided. They are alleged to be queer because (e.g.) no explanation is forthcoming about what kind of properties, facts, or relations they are. But holding the plausibility of moral reality up to these explanatory criteria simply begs the question against nonnaturalism, as the thesis that moral reality cannot be explained in other terms or identified with some part of the natural world. These explanatory demands could only be met if nonnaturalism were false. Shafer-Landau sometimes seems to suggest that the mysteriousness of moral reality is intractable (2003: 55), but this seems injudicious. Talk of mystery indicates some undiscovered explanation, but nonnaturalism properly maintains that there is no explanation to discover. We know what moral facts are; they are *moral* facts, and skepticism about them is not a genuine option, because each of us is intimately acquainted with some moral facts or other. Nobody can seriously doubt that the pain caused by stomping on gouty toes is (*ceteris paribus*) a moral reason for not doing so.

Defense of nonnaturalistic metaphysics therefore grounds out in epistemic claims, and thereby invites skepticism about nonnaturalism's external accommodation of epistemological constraints. How could we be acquainted with moral properties and facts, given that they cannot be detected or investigated by empirical means? Scanlon and Shafer-Landau maintain that we know the most basic moral facts by a species of apriori intellectual intuition. Basic moral claims,

such as the claim that cruelty is wrong, are *self-evidently* true; they are such that understanding them can justify believing them. These apriori truths are substantive, synthetic moral propositions (Shafer-Landau holds that they are metaphysically but not logically necessary). But no account of how we have these intuitions or how they can deliver self-evident truths is forthcoming, and the possibility of the (logically) contingent and synthetic apriori remains a subject of reasonable skepticism. Smith observes that moral epistemology for the nonnaturalist ‘must remain a mystery’ (1994: 24).⁴⁶ The nonnaturalist rather seeks to reject the demand for explanation; if any beliefs are justified, some must be self-evident, and it is obvious that certain moral claims are self-evident (what experience could conceivably lead us to conclude that cruelty is not wrong?) Skepticism about these intuitions and their self-evidence is untenable, because their deliverances are so integral to common sense that no mere philosophical argument could be credible enough to cast doubt on them.

While normative considerations brought us to nonnaturalism, charges of normative queerness are also pressed against nonnatural moral facts and properties. Joyce rejects nonnaturalism and therefore moral realism on normative grounds; they alienate us from our normative reasons. Morality purports to have intrinsic, reason-giving (rational) authority that is independent of our attitudes. Joyce maintains that moral claims are systematically false because this kind of normative authority is spurious. Rational requirements are such that one cannot intelligibly respond to them with ‘So what? What’s that to me?’ For normative challenges to be blocked like this, reasons or requirements must engage with something in the agent, something he desires, values, or cares about—something *constitutive of his agency*. According to nonnaturalism, moral reality is both rationally demanding and independent of our motivational attitudes. But what reason could we have to comply with moral requirements if they fail to connect with anything we care about? Joyce, nondescriptivists and many naturalists together

⁴⁶ Saul Kripke is widely but controversially held to have proved the existence of some contingent apriori truths; however in these cases the epistemological mechanisms are clear.

charge that nonnaturalism cannot satisfactorily answer this question and therefore objectionably alienates us from our practical reasons.⁴⁷

The objection has wide appeal, but it is vulnerable. The nonnaturalist will grant that rationally demanding reasons must forestall intelligible challenge. But what is involved in blocking ‘So what?’ This challenge, Joyce claims, is equivalent to asking why I ought.⁴⁸ The nonnaturalist has a straightforward answer here. Scanlon writes,

Suppose a person believes that he has conclusive reason to do X at t. How can this fall short of what is required? What is lacking does not seem to be a reason. A person cannot coherently say ‘Yes, I see that C is a conclusive reason to do X, but what reason do I have to do it?’ (2003: 14)

Nonnatural moral reality does purport to engage with something constitutive of rational agency: practical reasons. A rational agent, by definition, is one who acts for practical reasons. Scanlon asks what else is lacking; in Joyce’s view it is some connection with an agent’s motives. ‘For what is “So what?” if not a request for ... a demonstration that the proposal ties in with her desiderative set?’ (2001: 82) But why think such a motivational connection is needed to block normative challenge? One answer would be that ‘So what?’ can only be blocked by motivation to comply. The simplest, Humean instrumentalist account of reasons is that A has a (rational) reason to ϕ just in case A has a desire the satisfaction of which would be—or A believes would be—served by A’s ϕ -ing. Normative authority derives from our desires. However we intelligibly can and often ought to question the normative authority of particular desires: ‘Yes, I desire to ϕ —but so what? Why ought I indulge this desire?’ The Humean strategy can be accused of illegitimately substituting motivation for normative belief. Joyce accepts that actual motivation is not necessary or sufficient to block normative challenges, and observes the common distinction between desiring and valuing: normative authority derives from the latter, not the former (2001: 69). He applies a version of Smith’s ‘non-Humean instrumentalism’: to value

⁴⁷ See particularly the engagement between Korsgaard and Nagel in Korsgaard 1996. Scanlon (2003) also takes up the nonnaturalist cause against Korsgaard.

⁴⁸ “Why ought I act as I ought to act?” can be understood in two different ways. It could be (1) a request for explanation of what makes it true that I ought to act, or (2) a normative challenge to normativity. The nonnaturalist’s reply to (1) is that at least some moral facts are brute and inexplicable, in which case the question has no answer, and his reply to (2) is that this question cannot coherently be asked.

acting in some way is to believe that my fully rational (reflective and epistemically successful) self would desire my actual self to act in that way, and I have a (rationally demanding) reason to ϕ just in case I value ϕ -ing.

It is this more tenuous connection with my desires, Joyce contends, that is needed to block normative challenge. We cannot intelligibly ask why we ought to care about the desires of our fully rational selves, because ‘just in asking the question one would be demonstrating one’s valuing of deliberation and truth.’ (2001: 83) But why should we take those *desires* to be normative?⁴⁹ Our actual selves often judge that we ought not to act on or have certain of our actual desires, and plausibly even after reflection on all the facts with faultless deliberation, we would continue to have such desires. It is hard to see why normative challenge, or saying ‘So what?’ to these desires would be blocked. The nonnaturalist can respond to the argument by insisting that what blocks normative challenge is and can only be *normative* belief, which need not entail motivation or even the capacity to be motivated. Joyce’s argument depends upon the claims (1) that an agent’s rationally demanding practical reasons must be capable of motivating her (2001: 108), and (2) that desires are always necessary and beliefs never sufficient for motivation (2001: 110), and hence that an agent’s rationally demanding practical reasons must be derived from her desires. But as we saw in section 3, these claims can be coherently denied. Arguably the connection between normative belief and motivation is merely contingent, and arguably normative beliefs can *cause* desires, and hence can be motivating without being derived from any of our motives.

On the nonnaturalists’ view, moral reality has ‘brute, inexplicable’ normativity, which cannot be explained in motivational or other natural terms. This inexplicability is twofold: we cannot explain what normativity is in nonnormative language, and neither can we explain why the fundamental normative truths hold (e.g. why the fact that pain hurts counts in favour of preventing it). Nonnaturalism denies that this inexplicability is problematic, and defends its

⁴⁹ It also seems possible to value some truth (e.g. concerning whether or not the agent ought to care about something) without valuing all truth (including those truths knowledge of which would cause the agent to have or lose certain desires.)

claim by looking for partners in guilt. Shafer-Landau suggests (2003: 209-11) that even the instrumentalist must indulge some brute normative facts, as it is equally inexplicable why facts about our (actual or hypothetical) desires would provide or constitute normative reasons.

We see therefore that nonnaturalism is characterized by a general insistence on unproblematic inexplicability, and a rejection of the legitimacy of further questioning of moral reality. Moral reasons and facts exist, we are directly acquainted with them, and they have normative authority over us. We cannot explain this, but neither can we seriously doubt it; internal accommodation of the moral appearances requires nothing less. A doctrine making such minimal claims is difficult to refute. It is not an explanation of moral reality so much as a denial of the possibility of explanation and of the legitimacy of even trying. But accordingly it concedes to metaethical naturalism an advantage: naturalism seeks an explanation of moral reality—its metaphysical nature, epistemic accessibility, motivational influence on us, and normative authority over us. A theory that can explain is preferable to a theory that cannot, all else being equal. Shafer-Landau writes that the main reason to reject naturalism is its ‘history of failed attempts’ (2003: 79): nonnaturalism banks on the continued futility of explanatory efforts, and claims that it is false that these metaethical questions *must* have answers. Perhaps so, but we are warranted in resisting it just in case we think that we perceive—however faintly—that these questions can be answered.

We have distinguished four progressively more brazen faces of moral realism, moving from semantic, through ontological, metaphysical, and eventually to normative attitude-independence. Realists of each stripe maintain that internal accommodation of morality’s objective pretensions press us to realism, while antirealists of each stripe hold that external accommodation problems require antirealist stances. The question is where on this voyage towards radically robust moral realism we should choose to disembark, if at all.

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