Chapter Two

Doubts about Morality

> **Tao is hidden by partial understanding. The meaning of words is hidden by flowery rhetoric. This is what causes the dissention between the Confucians and the Mohists. What one says is wrong, the other says is right; and what one says is right, the other says is wrong. If the one is right while the other is wrong, and the other is right while the one is wrong, then the best thing to do is to look beyond right and wrong.**
>
> **Chuang Tzu, *Inner Chapters***

The suspiciously unresolvable nature of moral disputes, their ritualistic character, and the astonishing array of incompatible moral stances to be found, should make us think twice about morality. If opposing moral claims and theories can be defended by those who know how to argue, and if evenly matched opponents need never concede defeat, then it is hard to see a distinction between reason and rhetoric. Maybe the real point of arguing about morality has nothing to do with finding the truth, and everything to do with getting our way. This is a disturbing possibility, and people react to it in different ways. Some moralists harden their positions and sharpen their skills in order to fortify and defend their positions. They may look for ways to deny the data, or to minimize its impact. Perhaps, they suggest, the widespread moral disagreement is more apparent than real, or, if real, perhaps it is only superficial. Others, unable to ignore the vast

diversity in moral belief, embrace relativism, or, despairing of ever finding the truth, become skeptics. Moralists often treat relativism and skepticism as threats to morality but, as we are about to see, neither relativism nor skepticism need be hostile to morality. However, there are more extreme challenges to morality that may, when understood, incline us to listen more carefully to Chuang Tzu's advice to "look beyond right and wrong."

1. The Retreat to Relativism. People really do disagree about what is right and wrong, about values, duties, virtues, and rights. We all begin by believing what we are taught, and in different places and times we are taught different things. Circumstances change, and what at one time or place is considered a virtue or a duty, at another time or place is seen as a vice or a moral offence. Everyone knows this. Anthropologists travel to remote lands, or study their neighbors, to learn about their differing values and moralities. Someone who studies, describes, and compares different packages of moral rules and values can be called a **descriptive moral relativist**. Even those of us who have not traveled to distant lands would almost certainly agree with the minimal claim of the descriptive relativist: "moral disagreement is a pervasive, and interesting, fact of life." Descriptive relativists may have their own opinions about the morality or immorality of the rules and values they describe, but when they are operating as descriptive relativists they keep these opinions to themselves.

Naïve Moral Relativism. The comparative study of conflicting values and moral principles can be fascinating and even a bit unnerving. Humans are capable of believing almost anything, and so are researchers in the field. One reaction to the overwhelming diversity of opinions about morality is a good-natured tolerance based on

the idea that while our own moral views are correct, so are the views of those who embrace different demands and values. A ***moral relativist*** says that conflicting moral judgments may both be true, but the person we can call a ***naïve moral relativist*** stops right there and makes no attempt to understand, let alone explain, how this might be so.

Naïve moral relativism may appeal to moralists who have grown tired of defending their own versions of morality, and who hope to buy tolerance with tolerance. It is also likely to appeal to those whose values are at odds with the prevailing morality. Moral absolutists, too polite (or intimidated) to tell others what they really think, may cover some moral disapproval with insincere expressions of tolerant relativism. So there are reasons why someone might be inclined to *say* that utterly opposing moral positions can be equally correct, but is there any reason to think that this could really be true?

The naïve moral relativist appears to be violating a fundamental rule of speech and thought: “Don’t contradict yourself.” It is true that we sometimes violate this rule in order to communicate something that is not contradictory, as when we answer the question “Do you love me?” by saying, “Well, I do and I don’t.” But if we are speaking straightforwardly, a contradiction presents our audience with a version of a world that can neither be nor be understood. According to the naïve moral relativist, Albert’s claim that killing another human is always wrong, and Betty’s claim that sometimes is it morally permissible to kill another human can both be true. Philosophers are driven to distraction by this and similar claims. How, they ask, can two conflicting yet allegedly objective claims about anything both be true? They are right to ask, but naïve moral relativists are called “naïve” because they do not even get to this question. Anyone who

wants to develop a non-naïve form of moral relativism must find a way to explain how those two superficially contradictory moral judgments can both be true.

One "explanation" simply fiddles with the meaning of the word 'true'. If you think it is morally wrong to eat meat and I do not, I might try to avoid an argument by conceding that your claim is "true for you." This remark may or may not satisfy you, but the only thing I might sensibly mean by saying that something is "true for you" is that you *believe* that it is true, or that from your point of view it *appears* true. But beliefs and appearances are often mistaken, and truths are not true "for a person." We all live in the same world. Saying that your belief is true for you but not for me is a misleading, and possibly a condescending, way of rejecting what you believe. It is like saying: "Well you may believe that, but I don't."

Subjective Moral Relativism. The **subjective moral relativist** has another way to explain how two people can both be right when one of them says that something is a moral obligation and the other says that the same thing is morally wrong. The work is done with the aid of a subjective "definition" of the relevant moral notion. A subjective definition is a definition that identifies a moral claim with a statement about the beliefs, principles, needs, interests, or desires of one or several "subjects." Not all such definitions allow us to assert pairs of seemingly contradictory sentences, but many of them do. The following two definitions are subjective definitions that together appear to allow us to say that something that is a moral obligation is also morally wrong. 'D' stands for an action—like imposing the death penalty.

D is a moral obligation = D is required by the rules of some society.

D is morally wrong = D is forbidden by the rules of some society.

Someone who accepts both of these definitions, assuming for the moment that this is possible, will be able to say, without contradiction, that imposing the death penalty is a moral obligation (it is required somewhere) and also that it is morally wrong (it is forbidden elsewhere). The pair of definitions dissolves the contradiction.

Of course we need to think twice (at least!) about trying to escape from naïve moral relativism by providing a definition if that definition is either an inaccurate report or an unappetizing recommendation, as these two definitely would be. But for the moment I would just like you to notice that if we do somehow let these two definitions guide our thoughts and our speech, we will not really be entitled to claim that two conflicting *moral* judgments can be true at the same time. If the claim that the death penalty is a moral obligation really means that it is required somewhere, and the claim that it is morally wrong really means that it is forbidden somewhere, then when we say that the death penalty is a moral obligation, or that it is morally wrong, we are not making moral judgments at all. The definitions turn what appear to be conflicting moral judgments into straightforward, and quite compatible (though misleadingly stated) factual claims about what different societies require and forbid. Thanks to the definitions, the moralism, the relativism, and even the disagreement disappear.

From the time of Socrates, philosophers have had a love/hate relationship with definitions. Socrates loved asking for definitions, but he was rarely satisfied with the answers he got from his victims. There are others who think that definitions, whether they come from the tops of our heads or the depths of our dictionaries, are worse than useless. In reality, definitions are useful when a word is rare or technical, or when we are speaking with someone new to the language. But when we are discussing

questions about how to live or act, then starting with definitions of words like ‘right’, ‘wrong,’ ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘intentional’, ‘real’, ‘human’, ‘free’, or any of the other well-worn fonts of philosophical confusion, is likely to lead to distracting arguments about words, meaning, definitions, and language itself. There are innumerable uses of words like ‘good’ and any simple definition will leave most of them out. Our mastery of the conventions that govern the intricate and usually self-interested uses of our value-words can only be revealed by our competent performance under fire.

It is true that we can learn something about what someone thinks by studying the definitions he or she is willing to take seriously. We learn from their definitions that subjective moral relativists agree with amoralists in rejecting the belief in “objective values.” And we also learn that they hope to find some kind of substitute for value, one built on what we think or feel. This hope is manifested in their simple “provisional” definitions of moral concepts. Here, for example, are several traditional candidates (all monumentally implausible) for definitions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’. These definitions are all *subjective* because they define our target words in terms of mental states of subjects, but only some yield relativism.

(a) X is good	=	The majority of people like X.	(S and not R)
(b) X is bad	=	The majority of people dislike X.	(S and not R)
(c) X is good	=	I like X.	(S and R)
(d) X is bad	=	I dislike X.	(S and R)
(e) X is good	=	Someone has a desire for X.	(S and R)
(f) X is bad	=	Someone has an aversion to X.	(S and R)

The first two definitions, (a) and (b), are **subjective** definitions that result in a **non-relativistic** account of good and bad. If we accept both of them we will *not* be able to say that something is both good and bad. If more than half of the people like X (thereby making it good) then more than half of the people can't dislike X (thereby making it bad).

Definitions (c) and (d) are **subjective** definitions, and they result in **relativism** by allowing one person, Albert, to say "X is good," a different person, Boris, to say "X is bad," and both to be speaking the truth. But the sting is removed from this apparent contradiction because, given the definitions, Albert and Boris are not talking about X, but about themselves, about their likes and dislikes, and they can agree that Albert likes x and and that Boris doesn't.

Finally, (e) and (f) are, like (c) and (d), both **subjective** and **relativistic**. They allow the *same* person (Connie) to say, without inconsistency, that something is both good and bad. But of course, given the definitions, this means no more than that someone (Albert) desires that particular thing while someone else (Boris) wants to avoid it.

Perhaps these definitions are never taken seriously but only used by philosophers to simplify matters beyond all recognition, and perhaps it is charitable even to look at them as starting points for a serious discussion. Some philosophers have done a bit better. Gilbert Harman, for example, has developed a more complex and more interesting form of subjective moral relativism which he applies to what he calls "inner judgments." Inner judgments are judgments "such as the judgment that ***someone ought not to have acted in a certain way*** or the judgment that ***it was right***

or wrong of him to have done so." He says that these judgments are "relational," in the sense that if:

> S says that A (morally) ought to do D, S implies that A has reasons to do D and S endorses those reasons. (Harman [1], 193)

Notice that Harman does not frame this as a definition, but as an account of what is implied by someone who says something. If Sam says that Albert ought to delay, and Albert has no reason to delay, then Sam has misspoken. This account has, as Harman admits, some unusual consequences. If we buy it we will be unable to make certain criticisms of cannibals or Nazis who do not share "our" moral principles. To say that cannibals *ought* to refrain from eating people and Nazi's from killing Jews would be to imply that they have reasons to refrain from doing these things, and it is possible that they do not. Harman even says that it is "a misuse of language" to say that it is morally wrong for hardened criminals to steal and kill. "Since they do not share our conventions, they have no moral reasons to refrain from stealing from us or killing us." (Harman [2], 113) There are, of course, other critical things we might say about the Nazis—they were evil and cruel and blinded by hatred and ignorance—but Harman is not here addressing these claims. He is only talking about "inner judgments," judgments using 'ought', 'ought not,' 'right', and 'wrong', judgments that are essential to most forms of moralism.

Harman admits that those who go along with his relativistic interpretation of moral obligation will have to "think again" about morality. It has traditionally been assumed that "basic moral demands are demands on everyone," but, he claims, if moral relativism is true, this assumption is false. In that case,

> the ordinary notion of morality is based on a false presupposition and we find ourselves in the position of those who thought morality was the law of God and then began to suspect there was no God. Relativism implies that morality as we ordinarily understand it is a delusion, a vain and chimerical notion. (Harman [3], 113)

This certainly threatens morality if morality essentially involves the idea that basic moral demands are demands on everyone. But Harman thinks we can abandon this idea and still have "a reasonable substitute for" and "a good approximation to" morality. We can just start using our moral language with an explicit awareness of its relativist implications, acknowledging that there are "various moralities, each involving different basic moral demands . . . which certain people accept or have reasons to accept . . . ." (Harman [3], 113) Moral principles are "binding only on those who share them or whose principles give them reasons to accept them." (Harman [2], 90) This "local bondage" does give us some of what morality is supposed to provide. The bondage is real—in a sense—but it is also "internal" to some system or set of moral demands that we can reject without being irrational or factually mistaken. The question is whether this Balkanization of obligation is enough for the moralist. The answer is: "Probably not." What good is morality if we are not allowed to bring its considerable (even if imaginary) authority down upon those who have no reason not to kill us and steal from us?

Subjective moral relativism can be seen as either supporting or threatening morality. It threatens morality by offering to replace it with something different, but it supports a (watered-down) form of morality by retaining moral language and a limited or local form of bondage, thus providing a relative kind of objectivity. It may be most

accurate to say that subjective versions of moral relativism undermine morality while striving to preserve its appearance and to exploit its power. To the extent that these subjectivists are aware of what they are doing, we can classify them as duplicitous but possibly well-intentioned amoralists.

Situational Moral Relativism. Unlike the subjective moral relativist, who seems to have defined morality out of existence without admitting it, the **situational moral relativist** is not even an apparent threat to morality. Situational moral relativism contradicts only those few moralists who believe that some things are right or wrong *no matter what the circumstances*. Of course there will always be a few absolutists who claim that lying, or killing, or eating the dead, is *always* morally wrong—no matter what; but everyone else knows that nothing is that simple. Situational moral relativists may say that it is wrong to lie, but they will add that it is not *always* wrong because sometimes there are good moral reasons for lying. What if our lie could save a life, or thousands of lives, or the planet? What the *situational* moral relativist is saying, then, is that there is a truth about what we ought to do, and that this truth depends on the circumstances of the actual situation we are in. This is not a challenge to morality because it is, in fact, the most natural and popular form of morality. Almost everyone would agree that "we ought to do the right thing," and that "the right thing" depends on the circumstances.

2. Moral Skepticism. Another reaction to the wide variety of incompatible moral beliefs, and the inconclusiveness of discussions about them, is **moral skepticism**—the belief that there is no way to tell which of the many moral theories are true and which false. Sextus Empiricus (c. 160 – 210 AD), the best known of the ancient skeptics,

divided philosophers into three groups: The **Dogmatists** claim to have discovered the truth, the **Academicians** (so called because they taught in the school begun by Plato—the Academy) claim that the truth can't be discovered; and the **Pyrrhonists** (named after Pyrrho of Elis) try not to commit themselves even to that negative claim. Sextus explained how a skeptic arrives at Pyrrhonism:

> For the Sceptic, having set out to philosophize with the object of passing judgment on the sense impressions and ascertaining which of them are true and which false so as to attain quietude thereby, found himself involved in contradictions of equal weight, and being unable to decide between them suspended judgment; and as he was then in suspense there followed, as it happened, the state of quietude in matters of opinion. (I, 26)

The word translated as 'quietude' is *ataraxia*, which can also be translated "peace of mind" or "tranquility." To maintain this perfect balance between one side and the other, Sextus amassed a collection of skeptical arguments and observations that could be used to undermine any dogmatic claim about how things "really are." These "tropes" emphasize how the condition of our sense organs and the peculiarities of our points of view and circumstances undermine our attempts to find out how things "really are." By resorting to these skeptical arguments Sextus was able to "suspend judgment." He claimed that this suspension is what resulted in his quietude, and he applied this discovery to the idea of objective value. He said that

> the person who entertains the opinion that anything is by nature good or bad is continually disturbed. When he lacks those things

> which seem to him to be good, he believes he is being pursued, as if by the Furies, by those things which are by nature bad, and pursues what he believes to be the good things. But when he has acquired them, he encounters further perturbations. This is because his elation at the acquisition is unreasonable and immoderate, and also because in his fear of a reversal all his exertions go to prevent the loss of the things which to him seem good. (Sextus Empiricus, 41)

Note that Sextus only argued that believing that things are "by nature good or bad" is a guaranteed source of suffering. He did not argue, and as a skeptic could not claim, that things are in fact free of any inherent positive or negative value.

In his book, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, John Mackie calls his belief that there are no objective values "moral skepticism," but this is misleading. He is not *skeptical* about objective values—he is sure there are none. A skeptic would not be so certain. "Academic" skeptics claimed that we cannot know whether there are objective values; but a Pyrronhist like Sextus just leaves questions of whether things are "by nature good or bad" unanswered (and, if possible, unasked). Since he does not claim to know that moral judgments cannot be true, Sextus has to allow that the moral realist, who claims that some things really are good or bad by nature, might just be right. A skeptic, says the Pyrrhonist, is a seeker.

It appears that moral skepticism, like moral relativism, is compatible with the existence of objective values and obligations. Skeptical beliefs flourish in an environment filled with inconclusive moral disputation, but neither the relativist nor the

skeptic denies morality—one says that it is relative and the other claims not to know, or says nothing.

3. Moral Realism and Moral Anti-Realism. We have just seen that moral skeptics are unable to determine "what things are by nature good and bad," but we can add that they are not even able to determine whether anything at all is ever good or bad by nature. That is to say that they are unable to take a stand on the dispute between **moral realism**, and **moral anti-realism**. The moral realist thinks that moral properties are "real" and independent of our beliefs and emotions. The moral anti-realist believes that there are no moral facts and that the moral properties we talk about are human constructions. While the reality of human constructions cannot be denied, it is a reality that we create not one we discover. The moral realist, on the other hand, believes that moral facts and properties, like gravity and the weather, exist and exert their force independently of human action, will, desire, or decision.

Nietzsche urged moral philosophers to "place themselves beyond good and evil." He said that this demand "follows from an insight first formulated by me: *that there are no moral facts whatever*." (Nietzsche [3], 65) We can thank Nietzsche for giving us an explicit formulation of this important metaphysical claim, but not for helping us to understand what the existence or non-existence of moral facts amounts to. What is the difference between a world with moral facts and a world without them? What are moral facts supposed to be, and where?

For the last 100 years philosophers have routinely rolled out an answer to these questions made famous by the British philosopher G. E. Moore, who certainly believed in moral facts. In *Principia Ethica*, published in 1903, he said that the word 'good', like

the word ‘yellow’, is the name of a simple and indefinable property. It is a simple fact that some things are yellow, and Moore held it to be an equally simple fact that some things are good. The difference is that yellow (yellowness) is a “natural” property while good (goodness) is a “non-natural” one. We get a moral fact when something has a moral property (goodness or badness) just as we get a natural fact when something has a physical property (yellowness or roundness). We see the natural property with our eyes, but we “intuit” the non-natural one. Hence the name given to theories that incorporate this unexplained way of acquiring moral truths—**ethical intuitionism**.

Moral philosophers who could not bring themselves to agree with either Nietzsche or Moore settled for a compromise called **ethical naturalism**. Ethical naturalists reject Nietzsche’s claim that there are no moral facts, but they part company with Moore and the intuitionists by claiming that the moral facts they believe in *are* natural facts. This is what is going on in Harman’s version of subjective relativism mentioned above. While naturalists often achieve their identifications by using definitions, Harman does not rely on a definition, but on an account of what is implied by someone who says that “A morally ought to do D.” According to Harman there are no “absolute facts of right or wrong,” but there are “relative facts about what is right or wrong with respect to one or another set of conventions.” Moral facts exist but only as “relational facts about reasons.” (Harman [2], 132) The moral fact that Albert ought to delay turns out to be no different from the natural fact that Albert has certain reasons to delay. The natural fact and the moral fact are one and the same. What should bother moral realists about this identification is that it completely undermines their *moral* realism. The purported moral judgment that Albert ought to delay totally disappears,

and what we find in its place is some claim to the effect that Albert has certain reasons for delaying.

Moral anti-realists who have avoided being enticed by ethical naturalism have two ways to criticize moral realism. First, they can say that the notion of a moral fact doesn't even make sense because it is impossible to know or to say what a moral fact could be. This is the kind of attack initiated by the emotivists, who insisted that moral terms are meaningless, and moral language "nonsense." A. J. Ayer was famous, even notorious, for his claim that our "exhortations to moral virtue are not propositions at all, but ejaculations or commands which are designed to provoke the reader to action of a certain sort." (Ayer, 103) Even today, many of the critics of moral realism hold a view descended from Ayer's emotivism and the more refined non-cognitivism of C. L. Stevenson. (See *Ethics and Language*.)

The second way a moral anti-realist can criticize moral realism is to say that the notion of a moral fact makes enough sense for us to be able to say that there are no such things. Our "exhortations to moral virtue" either are statements, or presuppose statements, about what is objectively good, bad, right, or wrong. But since nothing *is* objectively good, bad, right, or wrong, each of these moral statements turns out to be false. This second form of moral anti-realism is often characterized as an "error theory." John Mackie is its best known defender.

4. Non-Cognitivism. According to **non-cognitivism** (also called emotivism, expressivism, and non-descriptivism) it is a mistake to see moral judgments as statements about the way the world is. Some non-cognitivists say that moral judgments are expressions of emotions or attitudes, and others identify them with some other kind

of non-descriptive speech-act, like commending, or commanding, or inviting, or encouraging. They all insist that moral judgments, not being statements, are not the right kind of thing to be called true or false.

Non-cognitivism is a theory about the meaning or use of moral language, so it will never take us all the way to moral anti-realism, which is a metaphysical thesis about what there is. Nevertheless, there is every reason to think that a non-cognitivist will be a moral anti-realist. It would be just too strange to believe in moral facts that we could never state or formulate in meaningful words. How would we even know what it was we were believing in?

Non-cognitivism was based on the realization that a moral conflict is a clash of wills, and non-cognitivists characterized moral disagreement as “disagreement in attitude” rather than “disagreement in belief.” They held that moral disputes will not be resolved by finding moral truths, but by finding out how to resolve our clashing desires and inconsistent goals. They were (and still are) right to emphasize the close connection between morality and our desires and emotions. When we make moral judgments we do express our attitudes and we usually do so in the hope that we will influence the attitudes and behavior of others. Saying that something is good is one way to express a positive feeling about it, and we often do this to influence the ways others feel and act. But it is also *saying* that it is good, and that is what the non-cognitivist is always in danger of neglecting. Even if nothing in the world is either good or bad, that doesn’t mean that someone who says that something is good or bad isn’t saying something. Moral disagreements may involve practical disagreements about

how to act and what to choose, but they are built on, and nourished by, disagreements about what is good and bad and right and wrong.

5. The Error Theory. I have been using the terms ‘amoralism’ and ‘moral anti-realism’ to refer to the rejection of the beliefs held by moral realists. But now we have two brands of moral anti-realism: non-cognitivism and the error theory, and if we continue to use ‘amoralism’ as a generic term, that important distinction will be obliterated. If, as I propose, we use the term ‘amoralism’ to refer just to the error theory, we will still be able to say that amoralism is to moralism as atheism is to theism. Theists and atheists allow that the claim that God exists is meaningful, but the theists think it is true, and the atheists think it is false. Similarly, it is because error theorists understand what the moral realist is saying that they are confident that it is false. Moral realists, they say, are wrong because they claim, or assume, or presuppose that there are “objectively prescriptive” moral properties or facts, when, in reality, there are no such properties and no such facts.

“Objective prescriptivity” is a term introduced by Mackie to refer to the special characteristic of moral judgments he planned to discuss. An **objective** claim is a claim about the way the world is, one that is made true or false by “objective facts,” not by what people think, unless that is what the claim is about. An objective fact is a fact sitting there waiting to be discovered. If it is objectively true that killing is wrong, then even if the whole world loved killing, it would still be true that killing is wrong.

To say that a claim is **prescriptive** is to say that it is a claim *on* us, not a claim *about* us, or about anything. A prescription prescribes—it tells us what to do, not what is true. It can be put in the form of an imperative (“Get rid of capital punishment!”) and

offered as advice, a suggestion, or an order. By contrast, "Capital punishment is morally wrong" is not framed as a prescription, but as a straightforward statement of a (moral) fact—like "Capital punishment has been illegal in Michigan since 1846." If I say: "Get rid of capital punishment," this is *my* prescription, *my* personal plea, *my* demand for an end to capital punishment. But if I say "Capital punishment is morally wrong," I state what I represent myself to believe about capital punishment, namely that there is some independent demand for its end, a prescription (or perhaps a proscription) issued not just by me, or by any person or set of persons, but by Reason, or Nature, or God, or some other objective source.

We tend to see morality as having authority over us. We think of its prescriptions, the things it tells us to do and not to do, as **objective** requirements, not as guidelines that we invent or imagine or agree on, and not as demands that we can ignore without going wrong in some way. Mackie is not alone in identifying this cluster of puzzling notions as central to morality. Kant said that reason "commands what ought to happen" (Kant [3], 20), and the British moral philosopher Philippa Foot, commenting on Kant's idea, identified inescapability as the mark of the commands of morality. "People talk," she said, "about the 'binding force' of morality, but it is not clear what this means if not that we feel ourselves unable to escape." (Foot [2], 162) Another moral philosopher, Bernard Williams, also saw inescapability as a fundamental feature of moral obligation. He said that this inescapability means that there is no opting out of morality, and he identified this idea with Kant's claim that morality is "categorical." (Williams [2], 177-178)

It is clear why moralists claim that the judgments of morality are inescapable, but it is not so clear what that claim means. Foot explores several ways of expressing the "fugitive thought" that morality binds us, that there are things we *must* do, or *have to* do. But she finds nothing standing behind the words, and concludes that there may not be such a form of bondage, and that our belief and our feeling that there is results from education and training. "Perhaps," she reluctantly suggests, "it makes no sense to say that we 'have to' submit to the moral law, or that morality is 'inescapable' in some special way." (Foot [2], 163)

Even though the meaning of 'moral bondage' remains unclear, and we have no clue as to the nature or source of an "objective demand," the thought that we are inescapably bound is an indispensable part of the institution of morality, as it is understood by those who participate in it. According to Mackie, the failures of the ethical naturalist and the non-cognitivist analyses of moral language arise from the fact that both fail to explain the "apparent authority" of ethics—naturalists by excluding "the categorically imperative aspect" (the prescriptivity), and non-cognitivists by excluding "the claim to objective validity or truth." (Mackie [1], 33) If moral judgments were **objective without being prescriptive**, they would make no demands and require nothing from us. They would merely inform us that our action has a property of "wrongness," or that it merits the term 'wrong'. In that case, learning that something is wrong would be like learning what time it is—its relevance would depend on our commitments. If moral judgments were **prescriptive without being objective**, they would be "mere" commands or demands. Even if they are strongly stated, without that

claim to objectivity, they would amount to no more (and no less) than demands from one or more people.

Error theorists claim that ordinary users of moral language assume that their moral judgments are “objective” and not “subjective” and that this assumption is embedded in our language and our practice. Those who use moral language may not comprehend everything that the assumption involves, or how peculiar it is, but this does not prevent them from making it, and, as Mackie insists, from being wrong every time they do. But he allows that since his error theory, does go against widely held beliefs it needs “very solid support.” This support was to come from his two well-known arguments—the “argument from relativity” and “the argument from queerness.”

The Argument from Relativity. Mackie introduced this argument by drawing our attention to “the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community.” But he immediately added that “it is not the mere presence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of morality.”(p. 36) Disagreement is found in science and at the ordinary factual level, but this doesn’t lead us to doubt the objectivity of scientific or everyday discourse. We can find as much moral disagreement and agreement as we want, both within and among cultures, and Mackie’s argument from relativity says: “The actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values.” (Mackie [1], 37) We agree about morality and have strong moral “intuitions” because we have learned our lessons; and we disagree

because we haven't all learned the same lessons, because our interests often conflict, and because we tend to see and believe what we have been taught to see and believe.

Moral philosophers have not been kind to Mackie's argument. The usual move has been to neglect the fact that it is an argument to the best explanation, and then to pretend that Mackie is simply arguing *from* disagreement *to* moral anti-realism. This seems to have been Russ Shafter-Landau's strategy when he spent some effort criticizing an argument he attributed to Mackie, called the argument from "disagreement," and formulated in the following way:

> Since there is widespread and deeply rooted disagreement about what is good and bad (or right and wrong), it is likely that there is no objective truth in morality.

In *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong* (named to highlight his opposition to Mackie's book, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*), Louis Pojman also addressed the argument from relativity. He nicely characterized it as saying that "that the best explanation for actual moral diversity is the absence of universal moral truths, rather than the distorted perceptions of objective principles." (p. 212) But when he turned to criticize the argument, his target seems to have been a rather lame version of an argument from *disagreement*. "The fact of cultural diversity," he said, "doesn't in and of itself constitute a very strong argument against an objective core morality." But again, we all know, and Mackie understood better than most, that disagreement doesn't show that there is no truth, and that agreement doesn't show that there is. Do Mackie's critics attack this argument from *disagreement* because they have nothing to say about the argument from *relativity*?

Thomas Nagel, in *The View from Nowhere*, considers and responds to several arguments against "the objective reality of values," one of which seems to be a version of the argument from relativity. But when he expresses surprise at the popularity of this argument, it is the argument from *disagreement* that he attacks. He remarks that "the fact that morality is socially inculcated and that there is radical disagreement about it across cultures, over time, and even within cultures at a time is a poor reason to conclude that values have no objective reality." (147 – 148) Indeed it is, but this is not relevant to Mackie's argument from *relativity*, which, I keep insisting, is not an argument from moral disagreement to moral anti-realism. Moral anti-realism could be true even if everyone agreed about what is right and wrong; and moral realism could be true even if no one realized it.

A different criticism of Mackie's argument from relativity turns up in Michael Smith's *The Moral Problem* (pp. 200 – 201). Smith's strategy is to counter both this argument and the argument from queerness by characterizing what it is to say that an act is right in a way that opens the question of rightness to empirical investigation, offers a way for moral judgments to be true, and eliminates the possibility of moral relativism. According to Smith:

> to say that an act of a certain sort in certain circumstances is right is . . . to say *inter alia* [among other things] that there is a normative reason to perform it. And this, in turn, is simply to say that fully rational creatures would desire that such an act be performed in such circumstances. . . . (p.200)

If this is what we are saying when we say that an act is right, then we may reject Mackie's error theory because a moral judgment that some action is right will be true just in case "fully rational creatures would desire that such an act be performed in such circumstances." But it is very likely that this is *not* what we are saying when we say that an act is right. If there were such a thing as the rightness of an act, and if there were any "fully rational creatures," then maybe those creatures could tell when an act was right, and maybe they would desire that those acts be performed—we have no way to know. But to say *now* that some act is right is not to say that creatures of *any* type do, or would, want it to be performed. In any case, the interesting question is "Why would they want it to be performed?"

Definitions of 'right' are sometimes presented as accounts of what people actually mean, but it is also possible to offer them up for adoption. If we adopt Smith's definition, we can eliminate the possibility that conflicting moral judgments could both be correct (since we can assume that fully informed and rational creatures would all come up with the same answer). But we are not likely to adopt that definition because most users of moral language are moral realists who would almost certainly resist any definition that turned moral judgments into verdicts about what some imaginary being might desire to happen.

Mackie's argument from relativity is a philosophically respectable argument to the best explanation. But his critics have confounded it with something we have been calling the argument from *disagreement*, a pitiful argument that Mackie never used and explicitly rejected. The critics, after taking a few swipes at the argument from disagreement, pretend that they have answered the argument from relativity, and that it

only remains to dispose of the argument from queerness. With both arguments out of commission, the way will be clear for them to subscribe to as much absolute value and as many binding obligations as they please. But the argument from relativity does not seem, so far, to have been successfully criticized, and that means that moral realism remains seriously endangered by it. What, then, of its companion argument and the attempts of moral realists to respond to it?

The Argument from Queerness. Mackie offers what he identifies as metaphysical and epistemological versions of this argument. According to the metaphysical version, objective values don't exist, because if they did they would have to be "entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe." Nothing so different, so unrelated to everything we know and understand, so "queer," should be said to exist, so there are no objective values and morality is an invention.

The epistemological version of the argument dwells on the fact that we can't even imagine how we might detect these objective moral values, obligations, or rights. A "natural property" like yellow(ness) fits comfortably in a network of beliefs about the relation of color to light, prisms, paint, and photography. Intrinsic values and objective moral obligations do not fit into any such system. We have no duty receptors or instruments to detect the presence of value. Mackie says that in order to "discover" moral properties we would need "some special faculty of moral perception or intuition utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else." (Mackie [1], 38)

By calling moral properties "non-natural," and positing a faculty of moral intuition, G. E. Moore bought into both the metaphysics and the epistemology being attacked by

this argument. We will return to Moore and the plausibility of intuitionism later, but so far it appears that the proper conclusion of the argument from queerness is that moral properties, because of their incoherent attempt to combine objectivity and prescriptivity, their inaccessibility to investigation, and their discomfort with the laws of nature, are too "queer" to be taken seriously or to be used to explain anything.

Michael Smith, who we found trying to undermine the argument from relativity by defining 'right' in terms of what fully rational creatures would desire to be done, makes the same move in his reply to the argument from queerness. After giving his definition of "rightness," he asks if Mackie can "really lay a charge of strangeness against rightness, at least as that feature of acts has been analysed here?" (Smith, p. 210) Well, Mackie's argument from queerness is indeed nullified if rightness is defined as something that is not queer. But, as I have already urged, when we say that something is right we are not saying something about what some perfectly rational creature would want to happen. In fact if that is what we were saying, or if Smith should manage to talk us into trying to mean that, then rightness would inherit a new queerness from the definitely queer notion of a perfectly rational being. Not only are there no such creatures, we are so far from that status that we can have no idea what such a being would want, if it wanted anything.

Mackie's critics sometimes reply to his argument from queerness by saying that reality contains many strange things—quarks, black holes, and ourselves—so why not moral properties? This reply would be stronger if moral properties and facts were just rare and unusual properties and facts, but to think this is to ignore their special and distinctive feature. Unlike plain facts (*the fact that the cat is on the mat*), moral facts

(*the fact that you ought to keep the cat off the mat*) prescribe. Mackie illustrates what he takes to be one aspect of moral facts by relating them to Plato's Forms. Seeing the form of *Rightness,* he says, "will not merely tell men what to do, but will ensure that they do it, overruling any contrary inclinations." (p. 24) This "industrial strength" objective prescriptivity seems powerful enough to strip philosopher kings of their very freedom. "Platonic Rightness" would be a truly queer property, and perhaps Mackie was unwise to focus on it, but so would *any* property or feature of a thing that could, by itself, exert a lesser force than Plato imagined. C. L. Stevenson spoke of the "magnetic" power of moral *language* to move or *incline* us toward an option being praised; but this comes through conditioning. What Mackie is objecting to is that there are "moral properties" or "moral facts" that operate causally in the world. Desires and emotions lead to choices, and so do beliefs, but no one has been able to explain the role that moral properties themselves play in the causes of our behavior.

Searching for some way to capture the idea that moral properties and facts inhabit our world and exert a genuine influence on us, Ronald Dworkin describes a universe that

> houses among its numerous particles of energy and matter, some special particles—morons—whose energy and momentum establish fields that at once constitute the morality or immorality, or virtue or vice, of particular human acts and institutions and also interact in some way with human nervous systems so as to make people aware of the morality or immorality of the virtue or vice. ("Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It,*" Philosophy and Public Affairs* **25** (1996), pp. 87 - 139

Morons, he adds, "surrounding a genuinely good end or a genuinely wrong act might have the power to suck people into an attraction or repel them into an inhibition." Dworkin is not tempted by this theory, but he notes that it would be one way to explain how moral properties motivate. Yet it is not something anyone takes seriously and it is "not essential to ordinary moral opinion or practice." (Dworkin, p. 112) Certainly not, but if we insist that morality is objective, and that moral facts motivate us, we need some sketch of how the causality works. The "moral field theory" at least gives us a source for our metaphors of being "attracted by the Good" or "repelled by evil."

While the much-debated power of moral facts to motivate is indeed peculiar, or perhaps incomprehensible, there is an even stranger feature of moral facts than this. If something is a moral duty, a moral obligation, then, in some sense of 'must' compatible with our not doing it, we *must* do it. In general terms, a duty is something we owe. In non-moral cases the nature of our obligation is usually easy to explain. Teachers have a contractual duty to meet their classes, letter-carriers a postal duty to deliver the mail, and police officers a sworn duty to protect and defend. But a *moral* duty, should there be such a thing, does not arise from a contract or agreement. A moral duty would still be a duty if the institutions were to disappear or to change in radical ways. If protecting the weak is a moral duty, people say, then we are just required to do it. It is this notion that Philippa Foot was commenting on when she referred to the "fugitive thought" that morality binds us, and suggested that the idea may make no sense. It may indeed make no sense to say that we cannot escape from the binding commands of morality, but people continue to say it, and to believe it. It is this feeling and this belief that we are bound by rules that are both objective and prescriptive that makes us sitting ducks

for arguments from queerness. (See my paper, “On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts,” in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, June, 1990.)

Replies to Mackie’s two arguments, at least the ones we have seen, have not been very impressive. But one thing that keeps moralists from giving up hope is the fact that if a poll were to be taken, a sizable majority would declare for moralism. Moral thinking is such a part of our daily life that someone who refused to make the standard moral pronouncements would be considered peculiar, if not dangerous. How could the amoralist have the nerve to say that almost everyone else on the planet is wrong about something as important as morality? I will take a brief look at a version of this concern in the next section and then return to it in Chapter Six.

6. An Argument from Agreement? By denying that anything is good or bad, moral anti-realists open themselves to attack. Their claims are so at odds with what most people believe, it is tempting to throw the weight of public opinion onto the scales. Even if the public has often been wrong, doesn’t the fact that most people believe something give it an initial (even if slight) probability? How, moral realists will ask, “can anyone deny that slavery, torture, and malice are bad, or that friendship, happiness, and freedom are good?” According to these moralists, moral anti-realism can not only be questioned, it can be rejected, because of its clash with what is ordinarily believed.

Gilbert Harman, for example, says that the position of the moral anti-realist (or, in his terminology, the “extreme nihilist”) is hard to accept because

> it implies that there are no moral constraints—that everything is permitted. As Dostoevsky observes, it implies that there is nothing wrong with murdering your father. It also implies that

> slavery is not unjust and that Hitler's extermination camps were not immoral. These are not easy conclusions to accept. (Harman [2], 11)

He describes the "extreme nihilist" as "believing that nothing is ever right or wrong, just or unjust, good or bad," that there are no "moral constraints," and that "everything is permitted." Moral anti-realists will, of course, say that there are no moral constraints (other than the ones we make up and pretend to have discovered). They are fully aware of conventional rules and obligations, and are usually willing to say that that much is forbidden and required—just not by rules of an objective morality.

Moral anti-realism is a set of beliefs about the claims and presuppositions of moralists, and has no necessary relation to the way moral anti-realists might feel about genocide, parricide, or slavery—or to what they do about them. A moral philosopher who says "Hitler's extermination camps were not immoral" is probably trying to illustrate the claim that no moral judgment, not even one about Hitler's extermination camps, has the sort of objective status most moralists want it to have. Sensible anti-realists will refrain from saying that Hitler's extermination camps were "not immoral," because those who hear them may take them to accept the institution of morality and to be giving not unfavorable marks to extermination camps. If we do not want to be mistaken for moralists, we must avoid moralist-sounding ways of expressing our beliefs and attitudes and making requests and demands.

When we use moral language, or the language of any institution, we represent ourselves as believing what the use of that language implies. But we do not become moralists merely by using moral language. Genuine moralists (as opposed to moral anti-realists faking moralism) actually accept, or unthinkingly operate as if they accept,

the traditional implications of their use of moral language. Most of these implications have already been mentioned. Moralists see moral principles and duties as binding and values as intrinsic. They are the philosophers who, like Samuel Clarke, believe that some things "are in their own nature Good and Reasonable and Fit to be done" and that other things "are in their own nature absolutely Evil." (Clarke, 9) They are the contemporary moral realists who believe that "there are objective moral facts and . . . true moral propositions" (Brink, 111), or that "moral reflection and moral judgment are a matter of discovery, rather than of invention, projection, expression, or even self-discovery, because the good and the right are 'in the world'." (Zimmerman, 80)

Many ordinary people and moral philosophers assert and believe that there are objective moral facts, and many of them take their own moral principles seriously enough to require that others conform to them. But when we step back and reflect about this, we find serious questions to which there seem to be no satisfying answers. Why should we modify our behavior to fit what some group takes to be objective moral demands? What is the nature of this morality, and what is the source of its authority? How can we be inescapably bound to act in specific ways? Who or what forbids us to do what is said to be impermissible? Many, and perhaps even most, people resort to religion to answer these questions. They say that the authority of morality comes from God, and that if there were no god, there would be no morality. But not every moralist thinks this way. There are also moralists who defend forms of secular morality. In Chapter Three, we will discuss the attempt to answer the impudent question of why we have a moral obligation to obey the commands of a god, and then, in Chapter Four, we will explore what secular moral philosophers have to say about the good and the right.