Chapter Four

Reason and Experience: Secular Morality

> **Belief in God, or in many gods, prevented the free development of moral reasoning. Disbelief in God, openly admitted by a majority, is a very recent event, not yet completed. Because this event is so recent, Non-Religious Ethics is at a very early stage. We cannot yet predict whether, as in Mathematics, we will all reach agreement. Since we cannot know how Ethics will develop, it is not irrational to have high hopes.**
>
> **Derek Parfit**

If there is a problem with religious morality, and there is, then there may be even more of a problem with non-religious, or secular, morality. At least the religious moralist can point to a source for moral obligations, duties, and rights. The secular moralist, on the other hand, has to find some way, without the help of a divine law-giver, to explain the source of all those commands and requirements. Amoralists and religious moralists think that the secular moralist is doomed to fail at this task. But there are atheists who are not willing to give up morality, and theists who are not convinced that morality depends on the commands of God, so there is a demand for a secular morality.

1. Secular Moralists. After Descartes, Anglo-European philosophy was dominated by two movements, or camps, or ways of thinking—**rationalism** and **empiricism**. Although there are empiricist elements in rationalism and vice versa, we can see a real difference between two distinct approaches to our knowledge of the world. ***While the empiricists located the source of ideas and of knowledge in sense experience, the rationalists believed in innate ideas and in truths that could be known only by reason***.

A rationalist thinks that many things (God, infinity, and perfection, for example) can only be understood by reason. Plato, one of the first rationalists, belittled beliefs gained in our everyday transactions with the world because he thought that the senses are tuned in to an inferior reality, and subject to error at every turn. He said that true knowledge, knowledge of "The Real" and "The Good," is gained only by rational thought untainted by the second-rate input of experience. Empiricists, by contrast, believe that the only source of genuine knowledge about anything real is experience. Moralists who are rationalists say that reason can reveal the truth about what is good and right. Moralists who are empiricists claim that moral truth can be discovered by experience.

There are plenty of moralists who are empiricists, but since empiricists tend to be more skeptical than rationalists, many empiricists have been critics of moralist claims. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) sounded a wake-up call for both religious and secular moralists in England when he argued, with great power and wit, that humans are motivated solely by self-interest, and that in a state of nature, where there is no one to legislate and enforce laws, "the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have

there no place." (Hobbes, 108) He said that people call the things they like and desire "good" and the things they hate "evil," and that these words "are ever used with relation to the person that uses them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of objects themselves." (Hobbes, 53) Here, at the rebirth of secular reflection about morality, all the frightening "isms" are in place—egoism, subjectivism, relativism, and possibly even amoralism. Hobbes's reflections were so disturbing, and so contrary to what almost everyone believed, or wanted to believe, that the best philosophers of the age devoted themselves to contesting his claims about morality and human nature.

One reply to part of Hobbes' disquieting view of human nature came from an Anglican bishop, Joseph Butler (1692-1752), who convinced nearly everyone that there is a good argument against "psychological egoism," the idea that we are only motivated by self-interest. The bishop argued that if we did not desire something other than our own satisfaction, we would never know what we need to acquire in order to bring satisfaction on. For example, if we were not motivated by the desire for something other than our own pleasure, we would never manage to get pleasure because pleasure only arises when some specific desire, like the desire for food, or comfort, or respect, is satisfied.

This argument silenced some egoists, but of course not all of them. More importantly, it had nothing to say about the objectivity of value, which Hobbes had seriously challenged. What was needed was a demonstration that morality has a foundation that is neither divine nor purely conventional, and that its influence on us is

both necessary and sufficient to take us out of a state of nature. A step in this direction was taken by Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), who belonged to a group of moralists known as the "Cambridge Platonists." Like Plato, these philosophers believed that things in the physical world are reflections or imitations of universal patterns—Plato's famous "Forms." Unwilling to rest the objectivity of morality on commands, even those of God, Cudworth claimed that it is not "meer Will that Obligeth, but the Natures of Good and Evil, Just and Unjust, really existing in the World." (250) So this really wasn't a divine *command* theory. But since, unlike Plato, Cudworth believed that everything, including the world, the "Natures of Good and Evil," and the faculty of reason capable of discerning them, was created by God, we probably should not think of him as offering a *secular* morality.

Samuel Clarke (1675-1729), another moral rationalist, agreed with Cudworth that morality is independent of God's commands. Clarke realized, as many of the proponents of the divine command theory did not, that the obligation to obey the commands of God cannot be traced to God's command. God can't successfully command us to obey his commands unless he already has the right to command, or we have the duty to obey. Clarke left the divine command theory behind by claiming that morality is about a natural relation of **fitness**. Some things, he said, "are in their own nature Good and Reasonable and Fit to be done, such as keeping Faith, and performing equitable Compacts, and the like." Other things "are in their own nature absolutely Evil." (Clark, 9)

> 'Tis evidently more Fit, even before all positive Bargains and Compacts, that Men should deal one with another according to the known Rules of Justice and Equity, than that every Man for his own present Advantage, should without scruple disappoint the most reasonable and equitable Expectations of his Neighbours, and cheat and defraud, or spoil by violence, all others without restraint. (Clarke, 5)

He said that "these things are so notoriously plain and self-evident that nothing but the extremest stupidity of mind, corruption of manners, or perverseness of spirit, can possibly make any man entertain the least doubt concerning them." (Quoted by Mackie in HMT, p. 18) This blithe confidence and shameless dismissal of those who might disagree with him (not about treachery and violence, but about the objectivity of morality) reveal how firmly attached even the best thinkers can be to their belief in morality. To someone not impressed by the credentials of this moral relation of fitness, it may appear that Clarke simply declares the things he likes "evidently more fit" than their opposites. It would be hard to show that this impression is mistaken, and that is the problem with this sort of moral rationalism. Anyone can declare that some principle or collection of principles is reasonable or self-evident, and anyone who disagrees can say that they are not. Beyond that, there is little more to be said.

John Locke (1632–1704) is usually identified as the father of empiricism, but he was a rationalist when it came to morality. Hobbes said that in a state of nature nothing is right or wrong, and that morality in civil society is purely conventional. Locke disagreed, claiming that "The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which

obliges everyone." Reason, he says, "teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions." (Locke [2], 9) This is a lofty thought, but actually, nothing at all follows about how we ought to treat each other from the fact that we are equal and independent; and in any case, it is not clear what is meant by saying that we are all equal, or that we are all independent. To get morality going, Locke finally resorted to religion and to the idea that god owns his creation. As we noted in Chapter Three, he argued that since we are God's property, "made to last during his, not one another's pleasure," killing someone, or even committing suicide, is wrong because it is a violation of God's property rights.

2. Three Empiricist Attempts to Develop a Secular Morality. *Secular moral rationalists* say that moral truths are self-evident, or that reason can discover them, but they have not been able to explain or to defend these claims, and they have no good answer to the question of how there can be so much disagreement among intelligent and reasonable people. *Empiricists who are moralists* have not given up their belief in objective moral truth, so they too will owe us an explanation of what moral truths are, how we come to know them, and why, if moral truths are objective and available to everyone, there remains so much disagreement among people with no discernible cognitive defects.

The empiricist philosophers who wrote in England, Ireland, and Scotland in the 18th Century (Locke, Berkeley and Hume) were committed (in varying degrees) to what their senses told them, and skeptical (in varying degrees) about everything else.

Empiricist caution has led many to cast suspicious glances at the concepts basic to morality, and both non-cognitivism and the error theory have their roots in empiricism. But not all empiricists are moral anti-realists. There are (at least) three ways to embrace both empiricism and moral realism.

(1) First, we can insist that we do experience moral properties like fitness and intrinsic value, and that anyone who does not experience them just doesn't know how (or where) to look. This is the way of ***ethical intuitionism***. It can be seen as a form of empiricism because it speaks of apprehending, or sensing, or experiencing objective moral properties. As we saw in Chapter Two, Moore argued that we can intuit the presence of the simple, non-natural, indefinable property of "goodness." Intuitionism drifts away from empiricism, however, when it begins to speak, as Plato did, of an extra-sensory intuitive grasp of unchanging essences, or of "Goodness Itself."

(2) The second way an empiricist can be a moralist is to say that while we do not actually perceive moral properties like goodness and badness, we have a moral sense that is activated by those qualities. When exposed to badness, we feel moral indignation; when exposed to goodness, we feel moral approval. The moral emotions are evidence that we have been exposed to moral properties. The "part" of us doing the feeling was called the "moral sense," so this way of looking at the relation between experience and moral properties has been called a ***moral sense theory***. On this view we would not be wrong to say that there is an objective moral quality out there, but we would be mistaken if, like the intuitionists, we thought we could apprehend it directly. It

works on us in the way that radiation or gravity does—we know it is there by its effects on us.

(3) The intuitionist believes in moral properties and thinks that we are capable of apprehending them. The moral sense theorist believes in moral properties and thinks that although we do not apprehend them, our emotional reaction to them is evidence for their existence. The third way an empiricist can embrace moral realism is to adopt ***ethical naturalism***. Ethical naturalists say that we *can* apprehend moral properties, but add that moral properties are neither the peculiar "non-natural" properties of the intuitionists, nor the invisible items favored by the proponents of moral sense theories. Rather, they say, moral properties are identical with perfectly unobjectionable and empirically respectable "natural" properties. Recall from Chapter Two Harman's claim that moral facts are "relational facts about reasons" and Smith's attempt to help the moral realist avoid the argument from queerness by defining "rightness" in terms of what "fully rational creatures" would desire.

I have already complained about the way philosophers use definitions to get to say what they want to say. No one can deny that God exists if 'God' means 'Nature'. As reports of what words like 'good' and 'right' mean, or of what people mean by them, the definitions moralists come up with are usually bizarrely simple and obviously incorrect; and as recommendations they are optional and not likely to be considered seriously. Further, if we all come to adopt some naturalistic definition of 'good' or 'right' we will find that we have changed the subject from what we formerly called goodness or rightness to whatever natural property the definition introduces. Naturalists who retain

the objectivity of moral judgments by turning them into statements about what people think, feel, or want, end up losing the prescriptivity. If "A is wrong" becomes "Some selected people have a reason (or a desire) that A not be done," then the claim that A is wrong can be objectively true. But we cannot "save" morality by turning it into some toothless report of what some (or even all) people want or think. Without *objective* prescriptivity moral demands have no more bite than requests or suggestions, and without *prescriptivity* they are just bits of information.

We have noted various shortcomings in intuitionism and ethical naturalism, and later in this chapter we will note some more, so let us take this opportunity to consider what might be said to someone who is tempted by a moral sense theory. There is no doubt that people feel emotions like moral outrage, moral approval and disapproval, and moral guilt. But why explain these feelings as reactions to an undetectable moral property when we have a much better story to tell about their natural history, their biological and social bases, and the role they play in our lives? Our moral emotions can be understood to be the result of our natural and learned responses to *natural* properties.

When we see an act of cruelty, most of us will feel some disapproval, or disgust, or compassion for the target. But in the minds of the moralists these very useful feelings are accompanied by the thought that the act was "wrong," or "evil," or "bad." From the moment one of those words forms in our thoughts, we are looking at (that is, thinking about) the act in a new way—not just as something that has occurred, and not just as something that we dislike or would like to prevent, but as something that should

not be. As Mackie says, "we have some tendency to feel that the moral wrongness of a proposed act is an externally authoritative feature which tells us not to do this—which is part of what Clarke was getting at with his talk about necessary relations of fitness and unfitness. (Mackie [3], 34)

The question, of course, is what to make of our tendency to feel this way and to say these things to ourselves and others. Moral realists use these tendencies to put the burden of proof on the critic of morality. How, they ask, could so many people be wrong about their belief in moral objectivity? As it happens, this is the very question the empiricist critics of objective morality claim to have answered. If this objectivist inclination can be explained by instinct, education, and projection, then the fact that so many people feel objectively bound need not be seen as evidence for the claim that *anyone* is objectively bound. As we will see in the next section, Hume stands at the head of a long line of empiricists who have added to our understanding of our very natural and very human, but also very mistaken, tendency to embrace moral objectivity.

3. The Projection of Moral Sentiments—Hume and Mackie. David Hume (1711-1776) found himself in opposition to moral rationalists, moral intuitionists, and moral sense theorists, all of whom embraced some form of moral objectivity. In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, published a year after his death, he argued that morality arises from our feelings and is a product of convention, not nature. There he presented a catalogue of the virtues of his day—everything from benevolence and justice to cleanliness and chastity. His aim was not to justify his (and our) high

regard for these qualities, but to explain why we praise some traits as virtues and condemn others as vices. He asked whether moral distinctions are

> derived from Reason, or from Sentiment; whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense; whether, like all sound judgment of truth and falsehood, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being; or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species. (Hume [2], 170)

With some minor qualifications, we can say that Hume chose the second of each of the above alternatives. Our moral judgments are delivered by sentiment and feeling, not by reason and argument, and they are closer to judgments of taste than to judgments of fact.

When he said that morality cannot be derived from reason, Hume was using the word ‘reason’ broadly enough to make his claim into a denial of both rationalist and empiricist forms of moral objectivism. Reason, he claimed, draws conclusions, assigns causes, and predicts effects—it tells us what is the case and how it came to be the case. When we deliberate, reason lays the “circumstances and relations” before us, but then its work is done. Mere facts, (eg. today is Monday, John ate lunch, George told a lie) suggest no actions and generate no feelings until they are combined with some end, goal, plan, desire, preference, impulse, or aversion. It is not contrary to reason alone,

Hume provocatively said, "to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger" or to ruin myself in order to help a stranger.

If reason has no way to tell us how to choose among our alternatives and no way to determine which of our traits are virtues and which are vices, where do we get our moral opinions? Why do we approve of the traits we call virtues and disapprove of the ones we call vices? Hume's answer was that we approve of virtues because they are *useful* and *agreeable* to ourselves and others. We don't need to ask why we approve of things useful or agreeable to ourselves, but the question of why we approve of things that are useful and agreeable to others is more difficult. Hume answered it by appealing to a natural tendency to be happy at the thought of the happiness of others. Everything that contributes to the happiness of society, he said, "recommends itself directly to our approbation and good-will." (Hume [2], 219) Seeing or thinking about human happiness or misery "excites in our breast a sympathetic movement of pleasure or uneasiness." He called this sentiment "humanity," and described it as "some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for humankind; some particle of the dove kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and serpent." (Hume [2], 271)

Natural sympathy, humanity, and benevolence may help explain why we approve of the traits we call virtues, but why does almost everyone believe that this approval is not optional but demanded by the existence of objective moral facts? Hume would say that this widespread habit of thinking of virtues, values, and duties as objective and independent of our desires and conventions results from shared and strong feelings,

extensive conditioning, and the habit of projection. What he did say in a famous passage in Appendix I to the *Enquiry* is this:

> Thus the distinct boundaries and offices of reason and of taste are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: the latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: the other has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation (*An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix I, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1902)).

The new creation, of course, is the virtue or the vice, the duty or the "not-to-be-done-ness." But when we "paint" an object with colors borrowed from our sentiment, the object doesn't present us with a different visual appearance. Projection is frequently explained by relating it to the notion of "seeing as," but seeing some behavior as evil, or seeing a habit as a vice, is different from seeing a line-drawing as a duck, or an ink blot as an orgy. We neither see nor hallucinate objective moral properties—what would that be? Let's not be misled by the visual metaphor. We experience positive or negative feelings about things or events, we "project" those sentiments onto intrinsically neutral things or events, as all things and events are, and then we imagine that we have

somehow apprehended or intuited objective moral properties. We tend to believe that our experience of a moral property elicits a strong moral sentiment, but actually it is the sentiment and our habit of judging that give rise to our belief that we have experienced a moral property.

Mackie calls Hume's idea that we "create" rather than discover virtue and vice his "Objectification Theory." Hume's view, he says, is that

> we tend to project these sentiments onto the actions or characters that arouse them, or read some sort of image of these sentiments into them, so that we think of those actions and characters as possessing, objectively and intrinsically, certain distinctively moral features; but these features are fictitious. (*Hume's Moral Theory*, p. 71)

We "think of" the actions and characters as having "certain distinctively moral features," and we say this to ourselves and to others, using language designed to express that very idea. A moral realist does not look at a deadly stabbing and observe some badness, wrongness, or vice that the anti-realist misses. Both see the stabbing and both are almost certainly horrified, but the moral realist is in the habit of resorting to the moral language and beliefs that we acquired as children and that society continues to teach and enforce. There is pressure on everyone to use moral language because we want evidence that others share our values. This means that there is pressure to project, because projecting is not *seeing* evil in an act, it is sincerely *saying* (to others and/or to ourselves) that an act is evil.

Projection is a widespread occurrence, but the process is rarely transparent to the projector. Many factors contribute to our habit of projection. We have seen how Hume assigns us a natural sympathy that makes us uneasy at the sight of suffering. This generous feeling is named, enlisted, enforced, and encouraged by our parents and teachers, who are aided by the fact that we come to the world with an automatic and unquestioning credulity. Cave-babies who learned their lessons were the ones who survived and prospered. Our credulity, like our language-acquisition skills, may abate as we age and as credulity becomes dangerous. But long before we knew how to think for ourselves, we were shaped by lessons that exploit moral concepts, presume moral objectivity, and encourage the unbridled use of moral language.

Another of our inherited traits that amplifies our credulity and promotes projection is a tendency to defer to those who are in some way "above us." We learn to show respect and to yield precedence so early and so well that the entire arrangement seems natural. In our first few years we are disposed to believe, obey, and imitate, but eventually we revise some of our beliefs to match what we have learned for ourselves. This is part of growing up, but the process is often disturbing to the authorities and to those who have failed to keep pace with the "growth."

Not everyone thrives on independence and autonomy, so sometimes credulity and deference metastasize into mindless adulation and obedience, as they did with Mao, Hitler, the Kims in North Korea, and with most other cult leaders the world over. When the word of some alpha-plus male becomes law, his preferences can appear to his loyal and brain-washed subjects as unquestionable values. For someone under this

spell, an act of disrespect or disloyalty to the leader, to the system, or to some book or relic, can "appear" objectively atrocious, worthy of punishment or even death. Sometimes just thinking about things we have been taught to despise can make us physically ill or mentally guilty. This doesn't mean that the objectionable acts or the despised objects will literally look different to a brain-washed disciple or devotee (though it is easy to imagine that they might), it means that they will be conceptualized and spoken of as acts that it would be "objectively wrong" to perform and objects that are "unworthy" of our desire or attention.

Another characteristic that leads us to turn our strong feelings into moral beliefs is our tendency to feel outrage at inequities that leave us and those we care about at a disadvantage. We share this "inequity aversion" with other primates, and we manifest it when we whine about unfairness or speak in praise of justice. When we end up with less than we expect, we often feel that we have not been given our "fair share." When we project this feeling, we turn an unequal distribution into (what we judge to be) an "unjust" one.

These and many other factors conspire to convince us that the world contains moral facts and properties, and that we can recognize them. If there are no moral properties or facts and if moral judgments are all false, as the error theorist believes, then those moral philosophers who hope to pull the rabbit (a justified moral judgment) out of the hat will remain forever empty-handed. The fact that centuries of reflecting about this have produced no rabbits should suggest that it is time to acknowledge that no moral judgment is ever going to be as verified (or verifiable) as the simple statement

that there is a beer in the refrigerator. When (and if) we tell others that they have a moral obligation to do something, we now know that they are likely to ask why. When they do, we can always say *something*, but we will never be able to satisfy someone who knows how to argue and who has a different set of values, or none at all.

Not everyone has been this pessimistic about the possibility for "Non-Religious Erhics." There were many brilliant thinkers after Hume who tried (the error theorist will say vainly) to show that there really is a truth about how we should treat others, and that our morality is not a mere projection, invention, convention, or scam. The best known of those thinkers to set this task for himself was Immanuel Kant.

4. Immanuel Kant. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) rejected both Hume's idea that morality is rooted in feelings, and the moral objectivist's idea that moral truths are detected by intuition or a moral sense. Hume wanted to *explain* our moral feelings, but Kant favored *ignoring* our moral feelings because he believed that morality can have nothing to do with anything empirical. He was searching not for the subjective origin of moral feelings, but for the objective foundation of a moral law that commands all rational beings. His announced goal in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* is to arrive at "pure rational knowledge separated from everything empirical," knowledge that will yield "the principles of morality." He insisted that

> unless we want to deny to the concept of morality all truth and all reference to a possible object, we cannot but admit that the moral law is of such widespread significance that it must hold not merely for men but for all rational beings generally, and

> that it must be valid not merely under contingent conditions and with exceptions but must be absolutely necessary. Clearly, therefore, no experience can give occasion for inferring even the possibility of such apodeictic [necessary] laws. (Kant [3], 20)

The universality and necessity of the moral law will not be discovered by experience, which is confused by the facts and inclined to see a need for exceptions. From our limited human standpoint, we might observe that this or that lie is wrong, but no number of observations will warrant the claim that every lie is wrong, no matter what. Only a purely rational method divorced from all experience could arrive at the "pure rational knowledge" of a Moral Law capable of generating such a universal exceptionless (and ill-advised) rule. This fundamental Moral Law is not something we learn or discover; it is more like a template rational beings must place on every candidate for a moral judgment. To be a correct moral judgment, then, a maxim must not violate what Kant called **The Categorical Imperative**: *"I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law."* (Kant [3], 14)

There is, of course, a real question about what this supreme moral law is supposed to be and to do. If it is a test other maxims have to pass, then it only rules out specific maxims that do not satisfy it. Since this is less than we usually want from a Supreme Moral Law, Kant sometimes gives the impression that the Categorical Imperative yields more specific maxims. He says that reason commands "pure sincerity in friendship" (Kant [3], 20), and he tries to generate (by arguments that are widely

acknowledged to be less than cogent) prohibitions against suicide and lying promises, and injunctions to develop our talents and give aid to others. (Kant [3], 31)

"When it is said that you should not make a false promise," he claims, "the assumption is that the necessity of this avoidance is no mere advice for escaping some other evil, so that it might be said that you should not make a false promise lest you ruin your credit when the falsity comes to light." (Kant [3], 28) The command not to make a false promise does not depend on any bad effects of the false promise, and remains in force even if the effects would be positive. The command is categorical (no exceptions) and binding (no escape). Few philosophers have ever been convinced that Kant was able to show that reason has the power to provide us with universally binding moral principles, or that it has the authority to command anyone.

Discussion of this and of other formulations of Kant's "Supreme Principle" is likely to continue as long as morality is taken seriously. But the basic idea, captured in Kant's formulations, and in so many others like them, is to encourage us to take others into consideration. Kant's principle is often compared to the Golden Rule (Do unto others as you would have them do unto you), though the Confucian Silver Rule (as stated by one of Confucius' students: "What I do not want others to do to me, I do not want to do to them") seems closer to Kant's Law in its welcome negativity.

Almost every religion and system of morality will have some version of this notion. We are encouraged or commanded to consider the needs and interests of others and to help them. We would like to think that people do have that particle of the dove Hume relied on, but we can have a perfectly satisfactory world even if most of us

do not love our neighbors as ourselves, or even like them. It is useful to see ourselves as others see us, but it is equally useful to see others as they see themselves. The Golden Rule may be all we have when we know nothing about others, otherwise a better rule might to be "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them."

If the moral anti-realist is right, we are not morally required to follow any of these rules, or even to find out who our neighbors are, but if we want to get along in the world, it never hurts to pay attention to the situation of others, and to their beliefs, attitudes, and feelings. Life is complicated, too complicated for poor old Kant, who wanted some totally general set of rules because he knew that once we start thinking up exceptions, there is no end in sight. An absolute rule such as "Never lie" is memorable and neat, and it will save us from the messiness and the need to think about our actual situation or to learn about the people involved, but that is exactly what is wrong with it.

5. Intuitionism. Kant claimed that Hume's reflections awakened him from his "dogmatic slumbers," but plenty of other moralists had also read Hume, and some of them were no more willing than Kant to give up their belief in objectively binding moral judgments. **Richard Price** (1723-1791) answered Hume's skepticism with the claim that we have a "moral faculty" capable of discerning objective moral properties like right and wrong, which, he said, are "real characters of actions." Another early intuitionist, **Thomas Reid** (1710-1796), said that "all moral reasonings rest upon one or more first principles of morals, whose truth is immediately perceived without reasoning, by all men come to years of understanding." (Mackie [3], 19) The claim that we *perceive* these truths "without reasoning" suggests that Reid's intuitionism is of the empiricist variety.

He opposed subjectivism by emphasizing the way morality presents itself as objective. “That I ought not to steal, or to kill, or to bear false witness,” he said, “are propositions, of the truth of which I am as well convinced as of any proposition in Euclid.” (Mackie [3], 142) Mackie thinks that Reid is right about one thing. People who take morality seriously do experience it as if it were authoritative and beyond doubt. But, as we have seen, there are explanations for this moral conviction (and for the ensuing feeling of moral bondage) that make no use of moral properties. The fervent conviction and the sense of objectivity and bondage can be understood to result from our genetic make-up, the socialization process, projection, and the pressure of our needs and desires.

Moore’s intuitionism is similar to that of Price and Reid, but he directed his intuitions to goodness rather than rightness. Moore, you may recall, argued that goodness, like yellowness, is a simple indefinable property that is presented directly to the knower. The difference is that yellowness is a natural property, open to visual inspection (and the instruments of science), while goodness is a non-natural property, and is therefore not to be discerned in the way colors or sounds are. Because he believed that ‘good’ denotes a simple non-natural property, Moore directed his arguments against those who held that the word denotes a complex property or a simple natural one. He called “the supposition that ‘good’ can be defined by reference to a natural quality” naturalism, and he devised “the open question argument” to demolish all forms of naturalism, and more generally, to undermine every attempt to define ‘good’.

Let us temporarily suspend our suspicion of philosophers who spend too much time talking about definitions that are too simple to be serious, so that we can take a glance at this very famous controversy about definitions. Moore said that if the word 'good' means the same thing as the word 'pleasant', then this can only be because they denote the same property. In that case we ought to be able to replace any occurrence of one with the other without changing the meaning of the sentence. If 'procrastinate' means 'put things off', and it does, then when I say Bill is procrastinating, it is not really an open question whether or not he is putting things off. In a similar way, Moore argued that if, contrary to what he believed, the words 'good' and 'pleasant' mean the same thing, then they stand for, or "denote," the same property, in which case they ought to be freely interchangeable, and the question:

> **(a)** Is pleasure good?

should be no more open than the question:

> **(b)** Is pleasure pleasant?

But, he insisted, question **(a)** is open in a way that question **(b)** is not:

> Whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question 'Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?' can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant. (Moore, 16)

While the answer to question **(b)** is given as soon as the question is asked, this is not the case with question **(a)**. That is what it is for question **(a)** to be open. Now, since

question **(a)** is open, Moore concluded, ‘pleasant’ does not mean the same thing as ‘good’, and the naturalist’s definition of ‘good’ and, he boldly added, all other definitions of ‘good’, are mistaken.

In the last hundred years we have learned that Moore’s argument depends on assumptions about language, meaning, and definitions that are far more controversial than even he realized. There is no reason to think that every meaningful term denotes something, and there is so little clarity about what denoting is, that it is hard to discuss these matters without stumbling into a swamp of confusing and outdated philosophical terms and assumptions. Over the years, naturalists predictably found the argument unconvincing and those who rejected definitions of moral terms found the argument congenial, and used it themselves, even when they disagreed with Moore about almost everything else. Eventually the torch of the struggle against naturalism passed to the non-cognitivist, who adapted Moore’s argument by changing it from an argument about meaning to an argument about use. According to the non-cognitivist, no naturalistic definition can be correct because evaluative language has an expressive or imperative use that the naturalist’s moral judgments, having been reduced to empirical statements of fact, lack.

Moore did not reject all definitions, only those aimed at giving the meaning of the word ‘good’. In *Principia Ethica* he claimed that it was true by definition that it was right (or even obligatory) to produce goodness. He put it this way:

> What I wish first to point out is that ‘right’ does and can mean nothing but ‘cause of a good result,’ and is thus

> identical with 'useful'; whence it follows that the end always will justify the means, and that no action which is not justified by its results can be right. (Moore, 147)

This has the strange consequence of making utilitarianism true by definition, a procedure to which there are plenty of objections. Moore was not the first to try to make it true by definition that the end justifies the means, but he should have asked himself his own open question. "That is useful, but is it right?" seems to be the kind of question a sensible moralist would want to be open, but if we accept Moore's definition, it is not.

Moore said that the word 'good' denotes a simple, indefinable, "non-natural" property. This property cannot be discovered by the ordinary senses, nor can its presence be established by argument. It can only be noticed by a special kind of apprehension that he failed to explain, but called intuition. He compared the non-natural property of goodness with the natural property of yellowness, but, as we noted in Chapter Two, if goodness is a property, then it is a strange and unusual one, utterly different from the "naturalistic" properties we do understand. As we have seen, Mackie called this objection "the argument from queerness," and it shows up in G. J. Warnock's summary of his own objections to intuitionism:

> Now we have . . . seen that the theory [intuitionism] leaves it, at best, unclear how pieces of moral information are related to any other features of the world, and rather more than unclear how their truth can be established or confirmed. (Warnock, 15)

Moral anti-realists are likely to see this sort of attack on intuitionism as devastating, but intuitionism has always had supporters. Perhaps these criticisms have failed to undermine the belief that goodness and badness are objective knowable qualities because that belief is so deeply entrenched in our language and our conventional ways of talking and thinking. As Mackie said, “intuitionism merely makes unpalatably plain what other forms of objectivism wrap up.” (Mackie [1], 38)

The moral intuitionists H. A. Prichard and W. D. Ross were contemporaries of Moore, but where Moore believed that intuitions tell us what is good, they held that intuitions tell us what is right. In 1912 Prichard published an article called “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” His answer was that it does, and that the mistake on which it rests is “the mistake of supposing the possibility of proving what can only be apprehended directly by an act of moral thinking.” (16) He believed that some actions are obligatory, but he was certain that we do not come to appreciate our obligations by hearing an argument. He said that “our sense of the rightness of an act is not a conclusion from our appreciation of the goodness either of it or of anything else.” (9)

Prichard may be right about that, but the problems with his intuitionism are similar to those facing Moore. If goodness is a “queer property,” can rightness or obligatoriness be less so? Prichard said we “appreciate” our obligations, but how is this done? He said that if we become aware of the circumstances surrounding some action—the consequences, relevant behavior of those involved, intentions, contracts and agreements, etc., then at some point we will just see what we ought to do. We do not deduce that some act is our duty from our belief about its possible consequences,

we "appreciate the obligation immediately or directly." In such a case what is apprehended is a moral truth that is, like an axiom of geometry, self-evident.

While Prichard claimed that in each particular case we can "appreciate the obligation immediately," Ross, in his 1930 book, *The Right and the Good*, said that it is not the rightness of *particular* acts that we "apprehend," but rather the rightness of *kinds* of acts—for example, promise-keeping, paying debts, etc. He further differed from Prichard by introducing the concept of a "*prima facie* duty." To say that an action is a *prima facie* duty is to say that it is the kind of act that would be the right thing to do if other morally relevant factors did not intervene.

Ross listed several kinds of *prima facie* duties. **Duties of fidelity** rest "on a promise or what may fairly be called an implicit promise, such as the implicit undertaking not to tell lies, which seems to be implied in the act of entering into conversation." (Ross, 21) **Duties of reparation** arise when someone has done a "wrongful act." **Duties of gratitude** rest on previous acts of others. Other duties, he says, rest on the "fact or possibility of a distribution of pleasure or happiness . . . which is not in accordance with the merit of the persons concerned." (Ross, 21) Surprisingly, Ross says that in such a case we have **Duties of justice** "to upset or prevent such a distribution." However, the radical teeth of this *prima facie* duty are pulled because it is only a *prima facie* duty, and because it is not clear what is meant by 'merit'. Some duties rest on the fact that we can "improve our own condition in terms of virtue or intelligence," and some on the fact that we can improve the virtue, the intelligence, or even the pleasure of others. The former duties are **Duties of self-improvement**, the

latter are **Duties of beneficence**. Somewhat less demanding than duties to do good for others are duties not to do harm, **Duties of non-maleficence**.

Ross deviated from Prichard's position in another way. He rejected Prichard's idea that the "property" of rightness is *sui generis* (not related to or constructed from other things). According to Ross "whether an act is a duty proper or actual duty depends on all the morally significant kinds it is an instance of." Have I promised to tell a truth that will damage someone? Then what it would be right for me to do depends, in some way that Ross never specifies, on balancing the claims of the duties of fidelity and non-maleficence. Each case is unique and, Ross says, when I confront a conflict like this "what I have to do is to study the situation as fully as I can until I form the considered opinion (it is never more) that in the circumstances one of them is more incumbent than any other; then I am bound to think that to do this *prima facie* duty is my duty *sans phrase* [without qualification] in the situation." (Ross, 19)

Neither Ross nor Prichard avoids the problems that plague Moore's theory. All three fall victim to the argument from queerness, and while the intuitions of Ross and Prichard may correspond more closely to our actual moral beliefs and attitudes than the conclusions of the utilitarians, this may be because those intuitions are projections of our actual moral feelings and attitudes. After all, if our moral beliefs and attitudes were placed in us early, if some of them are even a function of our biology, then how could they seem other than obvious to us? The intuitionist takes this appearance of obviousness as a sign of objective truth, but, as we now know, there are other ways to explain it.

6. Making Moralism True by Definitions. As we noted in Chapter Two, the highly questionable strategy of offering definitions for moral notions lies behind subjective forms of moral relativism. We have just seen how Moore targeted those “naturalists” who offer definitions of ‘good’, and while it is hard to take Moore’s intuitionism seriously, it is not surprising that many find more value in his criticisms of those who define moral terms naturalistically (call them *naturalist definists*). Even divine command theorists may try to make it true by definition (of ‘ought’ or of ‘God’) that we ought to do as God commands, thus generating a kind of “supernaturalist definism.”

Subjective Definitions. Subjectivists base value and/or obligation on “subjective” mental states. They hold that nothing would have any value if there were no beings with desires, attitudes, or preferences. We get different forms of subjectivism depending on which beings we set up as the ones whose desires and preferences count. Harman’s explanation of what we are saying when we say that someone ought not to have acted in a certain way is a subjective account of some moralist language. Richard Taylor’s moral anti-realism comes out when he says that words like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ designate nothing “in the world,” but he trades it in for subjectivism when he adds that when humans desire things, those things “become” good. He says that “if we suppose the world to be exactly as it is, except that it contains not one living thing, it seems clear that nothing in it would be good and nothing bad.” (Taylor, 123) The anti-realist, of course, would say that even when we add the living beings, there is still nothing in it that is good or bad. We desire some things and dislike others, and because we have language, we call some things “good” and others “bad.” But it is at

best misleading to say that these things *become* good or bad because someone likes or dislikes them, or calls them good or bad.

Subjectivists who want to be moralists understand desires and feelings (or think they do), so they give us definitions that identify what we *ought* to do with what we *want* to do, or with what someone else does or would want us to do. At the same time, they continue to use the language of morality, complete with its assumption of objectivity. No wonder Moore made the motto of his book “Everything is what it is, and not another thing.” If “being good” is really being desired or favored by the appropriate party, then there is nothing more to being good than that, and that is just not enough.

Non-subjective Definitions. Definitions of moral terms may make use of subjective notions like interest and desire, but there are other possibilities. Some have said that ‘right’ can be defined in terms of a tendency to promote survival, or that ‘good’ means ‘natural’. Moore aimed his open question argument at all such definitions, and it still very useful to remind these definist moralist hopefuls if they think that it is always right to secure our survival, or that the best behavior is really the behavior that comes most naturally.

I have repeatedly pointed out that the problem with naturalistic definitions is that they backfire. If ‘good’ and ‘pleasant’ are synonyms, then our talk about goodness and pleasantness is really talk about only one thing—and that thing is most easily identified as pleasure. We do not reduce the familiar to the strange. By trying to define value into existence, naturalists actually defined it out of existence. Rather than giving values a boost by identifying them with facts, their definitions paved the way for a value-free

conception of the world. This is also the problem with forms of naturalism that defend a non-definitional identity between a moral and a natural property. They concede that the word ‘good’ doesn’t *mean* ‘promotes survival’, but they still insist that being good and promoting survival are in fact the same thing. But this hardly supports moralism. By “identifying” goodness with the natural property of promoting survival, they end up with a natural property (that of promoting survival) and two ways of referring to it. Again, the moral property has disappeared.

7. Conclusion. Divine command theorists are moralists; and so are the moral rationalists and the empiricists of the moral sense school who hold that moral properties of objects give rise to special feelings which alert us to their presence. It is more difficult to know what to say about those who offer definitions of moral notions in non-moral terms. If someone who holds that ‘good’ means ‘pleasant’ says that a thing is good, should we charge him with believing in objective moral properties, or with adopting a misleading way of saying that something is pleasant?

These points all remain controversial. Some philosophers continue to search for better definitions of moral terms, while others seek better arguments to show that moral terms can’t be defined. Other moral philosophers would admit that we may eventually have to confront difficult “theoretical” questions about meaning and justification, “metaethical” questions, but they hope to be allowed to put those “theoretical” questions to one side so that they can move directly to questions about what is truly valuable and about what actions or kinds of actions we ought to perform or avoid—“normative” questions. This hope is often frustrated in practice because the theoretical questions

about meaning and justification always seem to pop up before philosophers interested in the normative ones want them to.

In the next chapter, after glancing briefly at metaethics, we will survey the main theories of normative ethics. There are two attitudes someone might adopt when examining normative ethics. The first attitude is that of a convinced moralist looking for the true (or at least the best) moral principles. Here the only questions are within morality. Which normative account of obligation stands up best to criticism? Is happiness the only end worth seeking or only one such end? What duties do we have to strangers, to the poor, and to animals? Moral skeptics are rarely welcome at conversations where this first attitude is dominant.

The second attitude one might take toward normative ethics is that of someone who has not accepted the credentials of normative ethical theories but is willing to look at what they have to offer. This could be a moralist who is just beginning to have doubts, or it could be a convinced but intellectually curious error theorist who wants a closer look at all the things he or she is committed to denying. In either case, if we are considering rejecting some belief, or some whole class of beliefs, it only makes sense to get a relatively clear idea of that belief or class of beliefs. Doing that will be our project Chapter Five.