SUSTAINABLE MORAL SKEPTICISM:
ANTI-REALISM AND LIBERAL NEUTRALITY

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Abstract:

This essay seeks to establish that moral anti-realism (the kind that abandons the language of moral objectivism) is a meta-ethical view which can be congruent with the liberal view of people as free and equal, in which case it demands liberal moral and political neutrality. The main motivation for this endeavor is the belief that the language of moral objectivism harbors non-compromising attitudes. The principle of equal consideration of interests seems not to be the rational basis for the metaphysical nature of morality, but we can invoke it in the realm of liberal political morality because liberal portrayals of people as free and equal provide us with premises to affirm the view that our interests are just one of many, *and* that they are equally important as any other.

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"It is, I think, undeniable that moral anti-realism is often seen as a dangerous doctrine, a more or less surreptitious denial of the importance of ethics… It is thought to consort with lack of real seriousness, just as relativism is felt to undermine any real commitment."[1]

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[1] Blackburn, Simon. *Essays in quasi-realism.* p. 208.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In our everyday thinking about morality and ethical commitments, we often assume that moral judgments are a reflection of the reality of the world around us. The common sense rendering of morality has, perhaps, great practical implications, so we can be easily discouraged by the thought of relativizing or altogether negating the existence of an objective reference for our settled moral convictions. Even the prevailing Western moral philosophies, such as different accounts of utilitarianism and Kantian deontology, often rest on the assumption that morality is rooted in objective moral values. This essay is an attempt to show that certain meta-ethical approaches that undermine this objective reference to our moral reasoning can be reconciled with forms of social organization we have come to accept and find desirable.

The term "moral" often has value-laden connotations in common use of the term, but I will henceforth use it to designate all discussion of the moral domain, without referring to a desired type of behavior, unless otherwise stipulated. In our normal moral discourse we are not accustomed to distinguishing between normative morality and meta-ethics. To proclaim that "no acts are wrong," for example, might resonate of horrible disregard for morality. I will try to clear any potential conceptual misunderstandings in the following chapters, and try to affirm exactly a kind of moral skepticism which denies the truth of moral claims (on some definitions). I will not, however, advocate some kind of excessive permissiveness (in fact, I will try to refrain from any substantive moral claims).

I will attempt to present moral skepticism as a legitimate response to a difficult metaphysical problem. The aim of this essay is to provide a supporting argument for liberal

moral and political neutrality by arguing that moral anti-realism (the view which denies that moral claims are a matter of fact) is a meta-ethical stance which can not only assimiliate into the framework of liberal neutrality, but make it a necessary consequence, if its underpinnings resist challenges. The following sections of the essay are intended to clarify the concepts I will be employing and to provide a brief overview of different skeptical positions. The subsequent chapter defines what I understand to be moral realism and offers some potential exceptions. The chapter after that, I discuss moral constructivism, and argue we should abandon its impractical terminology. Afterward, I turn to the discussion of why moral realism is incorrect by laying out some attempts to refute it, and offering my comments. I will also briefly discuss some problems arising from moral motivation, and I will describe an opposing view to moral anti-realism, but hopefully, find that the main metaphysical thesis of anti-realism remains intact. The closing chapters are about the principle of equal consideration of interests, and how it might be useful to establish the connection between moral anti-realism and liberal moral neutrality.

1.1 On Moral Skepticism

There are various sources of moral skepticism, not all of which are of concern for the purposes of this essay. I insist my skepticism does not consist in post-modern relativism about normative ethics which surfaces once we discover the variety of moral principles and practices that are endorsed by different communities. I believe this to be first order moral discourse disguised as second order moral discourse.[2] First order moral discourse is essentially action guiding and is normative in character, while second order moral discourse is meta-ethical

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[2] Dworkin, Ronald. "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe it."

discourse about the nature of morality and need not be suggestive of any kind of conduct. Sometimes this distinction might become unclear. To proclaim that "no acts are wrong" might be construed as either a first order or a second order moral claim, but I maintain that this distinction can be made. Throughout this essay, any mention of moral claims and moral judgments, without further qualification, refers to first order moral discourse.

Moral skepticism that I espouse is an attempt to make sense of the meaning of our common moral beliefs. Many people believe that at least some moral claims are true. However, we might wonder what makes those beliefs true. At this point I would like to make a distinction between epistemological moral skepticism and metaphysical moral skepticism.[3] The epistemological skeptic asks "How do we know moral claims are true?", and they can be answered in a number of ways. We might accept a less demanding criterion for knowledge, or treat the lack of concrete knowledge in this regard as unimportant. If morality is utterly practical and tells us how we ought to live, we need not be concerned about the medium and the process through which we come to know it. To refer to moral intuition is a perfectly satisfactory answer to skepticism of this sort.[4] However, it should be clear that moral intuition is not what makes it true that some things are wrong, and some are right. Moral intuition might be our source of moral knowledge to some extent, but we usually tend to give further explanations why our intuitions are to be trusted. Our intuitions do not determine the rightness and wrongness of things. What renders our beliefs true might be the state of affairs in the physical world, it might have to do with our psychology, or it might be the beliefs and desires of persons in idealized circumstances, or something else. This is what the metaphysical moral skeptic is interested in,

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[3] Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. "Moral Skepticism."
[4] Greene, Joshua D.. "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and what to do about it." p. 62

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and I will be concerned only with these types of worries in this essay. It can be said that moral claims convey beliefs about moral facts (that certain acts are right or wrong) and properties (rightness or wrongness). One avenue of answers available to the metaphysical moral skeptic is to deny the existence of such moral reality and claim that no moral facts or properties exist.

There is an important dimension which I am presently not concerned with. My skepticism is not about the question of why to be moral. Moral skepticism is often frowned upon because it is believed that it advocates some sort of broad permissiveness and lack of concern for other people's interests. Nihilism of this sort is not too appealing to many people, and to my mind, not a necessary consequence of moral skepticism.[5] Joshua Greene gives an example of a man who does not endeavor to "do the right thing", nor does he think about objective moral values when he decides what to do. He considers the circumstances based on his values before he acts. However, his values reflect the care for other people's interests, and he can still be deemed moral. Alasdair MacIntyre finds that if we discard objective values we are necessarily left with treating others as means to further our own ends.[6] Much of my belief draws on the scientific evidence that our moral concern for others develops emotionally before we are able to rationalize our moral intuitions.[7] The world in which we reject moral facts would not necessarily be much different than the world we already live in. We might even evoke Lacan's famous reversal of the dictum that if God is dead than everything is permitted. "Quite evidently, a naïve notion, for we analysts know full well that if God doesn't exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer.

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[5] It can be construed that the denial of objective moral values is, in fact, moral nihilism. I would like to point out that there is a fundamental difference between the kind of nihilism that makes a first order moral claim about how to behave, and the kind that speaks about the nature of morality as such.

[6] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After virtue: a study in moral theory*. (p. 23-24).

[7] Haidt, Jonathan. "The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment."

Neurotics prove that to us every day."[8] Slavoj Zizek insists that the correct reading of Lacan is that the death of symbolic authority leads to new and more severe prohibitions psychologically, depriving us of our inner freedom to formulate our own desires. Of course, this does not defeat the claims of moral theorists who base their views on reasons for action, believing that reasons alone are motivating. I will comment briefly on this issue at a later point, but my main contention is that reasons are not motivating on their own, and that we are not in danger of becoming insensitive to other people's interests. Presently, I only want to point out that instances of caring individuals are possible even if they do not believe in objective values or a sort of moral reality.

1.2 The Historical Context

Among the early philosophers who pointed to an inconsistency in our moral reasoning was David Hume who famously conceptualized the so-called Humean Principle[9]. The problem refers to prescriptive statements that are derived from purely observational facts, but hold, in Hume's view, a new relation or affirmation which is entirely different from the descriptive statements. Without referring to something other than the factual state of affairs, one cannot reasonably assert claims about morality. Classical utilitarian moral theories, among others, assumed moral realism and moral naturalism (naturalism claims there are objective moral properties and that we can have empirical knowledge of moral truths).[10] Furthermore, some utilitarians asserted that the objective moral properties are related to entirely non-moral properties, hence the view that natural properties such as pleasure and pain (and other, more

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[8] Zizek, Slavoj. "How to Read Lacan - "God is Dead, but He Doesn't Know It": Lacan Plays with Bobok."

[9] Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. "Moral Skepticism."

[10] Lenman, James. "Moral Naturalism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

developed views) are indicators for moral demeanor. Baruch Spinoza could be said to have held the meta-ethical view of moral relativism.[11] He claimed that concepts such as good and evil have no absolute meaning, but are relative to every individual. Moral relativism assumes that the truth or fallacy of moral judgments has no objective reference. The reference for moral reasoning is either a single individual, or a group of people united by tradition, convictions or culture. David Wong is one of the more recent supporters of moral relativism.[12] His view is slightly nuanced in the sense that he holds that more than one morality may be true, but that there are objective limits on which moralities can be true. The limits are based on the conditions of human life and on an account of human nature, so a true morality would have to promote individual flourishing as well as social cooperation. This view, however, maintains that moral truths exist and can be discovered.

John Dewey, a pragmatist ethicist, was of the opinion that we are constantly involved in balancing our "ends in view", a process which is the underpinning of ethical evaluation.[13] The end in view is an objective that is rejected or adopted based on its uniformity with other objectives already held. It is a view that claims all value is instrumental. This does not mean one cannot make meaningful value judgments. Abstract value judgments might prove to be useful in a range of circumstances, but they cannot be valuable out of context. Dewey believed intrinsic value is an illusory product of our valuing activity as purposive beings. Our ethical evaluation is based on a learning process and hence, consistent with the adaptive character of evolutionary processes.

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[11] Borghini, Andrea. "Evolution and Ethical Relativism: Spinoza's Slow Revenge?."
[12] Wong, David B.. *Natural Moralities: a Defense of Pluralistic Relativism.*
[13] Dewey, John. *Theory of valuation.*

One avenue of thinking about the plausibility of moral realism is non-cognitivism. The non-cognitivists have argued that moral judgments may appear to be descriptive and truth-apt, but that they are really expressions of approval/disapproval[14], or a sort of prescriptive commands[15]. Hare asserts:

> Think of one world into whose fabric values are objectively built; and think of another in which those values have been annihilated. And remember that in both worlds the people in them go on being concerned about the same things - there is no difference in the "subjective" concern which people have for things, only in their "objective" value. Now I ask, "What is the difference between the states of affairs in these two worlds?" Can any answer be given except "None whatever"?[16]

R.M. Hare points out to the fact that we do not require metaphysical moral properties in order to conceive of morality. He developed the view called universal prescriptivism that holds moral sentences to have a certain imperative meaning that is supposed to be universal. Ayer and Stevenson are the most well-known proponents of emotivism, the view that ethical concepts are pseudo-concepts and that they merely express an emotional attitude toward a certain action. Ayer writes: "The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content. […] If now I generalise […] and say, "Stealing money is wrong," I produce a sentence that has no factual meaning—that is, expresses no proposition that can be either true or false. […] I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments."[17] Stevenson adds that moral statements have an imperative component that is intended to change the emotions of the listener. Non-cognitivists

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[14] Ayer, A. J.. *Language, truth, and logic*.
[15] Hare, R. M. *The Language of Morals*.
[16] qtd. in Mackie, J. L.. *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*. p. 21
[17] Ayer, A. J.. *Language, truth, and logic*. p. 107.

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have set out to understand the meaning of our moral practices, but not to modify them. However, these philosophers still maintained views about normative morality which were unaffected by their claims about the nature of moral statements.

Non-cognitivism has been challenged on different grounds since it does not seem to be able to explain all of the uses of moral predicates.[18] For example, even if we accept that some moral claims are mere expressions of attitudes or an emotional reaction, we notice that there is another element of moral reasoning at play when we embed these moral claims of simple predication (such as: lying is wrong) in a context. The statement "I wonder whether lying is wrong" is clearly not explained by the early non-cognitivist accounts.

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[18] van Roojen, Mark. "Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

CHAPTER 2: THE APPEAL OF MORAL ANTI-REALISM

Moral skepticism, as we have seen, might take one of many forms. However, the kind I would like to examine presently might be classified as moral anti-realism, as it doubts the nature of moral reality. We could define anti-realism as "the view according to which all the moral truths are those which are true entirely in virtue of the non-existence of moral properties, properties such as wrongness etc."[19] Moral realism submits to the belief in mind-independent moral facts. In this sense, the study of morality can be said to be continuous with scientific inquiry. This distinction might not be able to adequately capture all versions of moral realism[20] or even all versions of moral anti-realism,[21] but for the purposes of this essay this definition will do.

Projectivist anti-realists, such as Simon Blackburn, affirm the existence of moral facts but deny that they are mind-independent. For Blackburn, moral truth consists in our ability to be stimulated by the natural properties of the world; however, we project our sentiments on the natural world, and describe it as if it contained features that answer to our reactions to it, "in the way that the niceness of an ice cream answers to the pleasure it gives us."[22] He terms such truths as "quasi-truths". There are other thinkers who adopt a minimalist approach to truth, and describe themselves as realists. For Mark Timmons, what amounts for a claim to be true is to be able to state it. Nevertheless, his views do not imply that these truths correspond to the natural

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[19] Greene, Joshua D.. "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and what to do about it." p. 6-7

[20] Timmons, Mark. *Morality without foundations a defense of ethical contextualism.*

[21] Blackburn, Simon. *Essays in quasi-realism.*

[22] Blackburn, Simon. *Essays in quasi-realism.* (p. 152)

world. According to Pekka Väyrynen, moral realism can be said to submit itself to three theses.[23] First, moral statements are about moral properties and they are propositions that can be true or false. Second, some of these claims are necessarily true. Finally, they submit to the metaphysical belief that moral properties are not different from some non-moral properties in any significant way. The third thesis is the point at which much disagreement arises. Obviously, truth minimalists need not assume the metaphysical statement about the nature of moral properties. However, these approaches to truth about morality are not of particular concern for this essay; although they are more nuanced than some other forms of moral realism and offer some interesting insights, I believe that a stronger case for neutrality of the state and liberalism as a political philosophy can be made if we reject the language of realism.

2.1 What's wrong With Constructivism?

Undoubtedly, one could conceive of some practical reasons why to keep the language of moral realism, even if we reject its foundations (saying, for example, that lying is wrong). Sometimes it is just more convincing, or it shows a greater degree of determination and assigns more weight to certain kinds of behavior. It might also be useful for raising children. Joshua Greene suggests, however, that there are many reasons for revising our moral discourse to resonate better with our beliefs in moral anti-realism (presuming we come to the conclusion that it is, in fact, true).[24] Moral realists who believe not only that moral facts are true, but also that they know them, perceive the reasoning and behavior of their opponents (who likewise think that

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[23] Väyrynen, Pekka. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Moral Realism."
[24] Greene, Joshua D.. "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and what to do about it."

moral facts are true and that they know them) as disregard for morality altogether. Greene argues that moral realism is an illusion that aggravates conflict between parties who disagree with each other, and furthers misunderstanding between them. If both parties believe their dispute is about the facts, and they offer valid reasoning based on those facts, they will be content to view their opponents as immoral if they refuse to accept the arguments provided. Instead, he proposes we replace our moral discourse to reflect the nature of morality, and make it clear that the claims we are making are really about our subjective values, and that we are presenting reasons which *we* find motivating. In so doing, we would avoid unnecessary conflict which arises based on our faulty metaphysical assumptions. The conclusion that we can draw from Greene is that the language of moral realism should be avoided on many occasions, although it might have some practical use on other occasions. Whenever there is a wide-ranging agreement about certain issues, we can resort to the language of moral realism unhesitatingly in order to benefit from its simplicity and clarity with regards to what one ought to do. The question that concerns moral constructivism is whether it provides for such a wide-ranging agreement that it warrants the use of realist terminology.

If we accept Jonathan Haidt's view[25] that moral judgments are not formed by moral reasoning but by emotional responses which developed as an evolutionary adaptation, and which we later try to justify by rationalization, it might be possible to conceive why moral principles are at least as equally contentious as particular intuitions. (This is not to say that we need to accept the non-cognitivist view of moral claims. We can accept that moral claims purport to report truth, although they are post-hoc rationalizations of our intuitions). The evolutionary pressures have made us able to make spontaneous moral judgments which become almost

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[25] Haidt, Jonathan. "The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment."

commonsensical. However, different evolutionary pressures have pulled us in different directions, and that is why it is hard to find a consistent direct principle of normative morality which captures our moral intuitions. In fact, some have suggested that to be moral is to counter those evolutionary pressures.[26] I believe that many of our evolutionary responses to questions of morality are fine. Still, even the constructivist John Rawls admits that we rationalize our intuitions in his description of the method of reflective equilibrium.[27] However, the real problem is not that we rationalize, but that we cannot even expect to consistently capture all our intuitions by way of reasoning to a moral principle. Rawls asserts:

> Objections by way of counter examples are to be made with care, since these may tell us only what we know already, namely that our theory is wrong somewhere. The important thing is to find out how often and how far it is wrong. All theories are presumably mistaken in places. The real question at any given time is which of the views already proposed is the best approximation overall.[28]

Rawls' method allows us to reflect on particular intuitions as well as on particular principles, and to evaluate them against the background of existing beliefs taken as a whole. If there are some particularly disturbing intuitions held by some people that does not invalidate our moral principle which we arrived at by accounting for less controversial intuitions held by others and ourselves. However, what Haidt's findings suggest is that our disagreement about moral principles could be based on moral intuitions which are not so controversial. Consider the example given by Haidt regarding our moral intuition about incest. He tells a story about Mark and July, brother and sister, who decide to engage in sexual intercourse for fun. They use two different methods of

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[26] qtd in Singer, Peter. *The expanding circle: ethics and sociobiology*.
[27] Rawls, John. *A theory of justice*. (p. 46-53)
[28] Rawls, John. *A theory of justice*. (p. 52)

contraception to be safe. They enjoy it, and feel it has brought them closer together, but decide not to do it again and to keep it a secret. Most people intuitively disapprove of incest. However, Haidt argues their moral judgment is entirely influenced by intuitions which were shaped by evolution but do not apply to that particular circumstance. Since there is no reason to disapprove of their act based on the dangers of inbreeding, or their potential emotional pain, most people are unable to rationalize their judgment, but they do hold the intuition that incest is wrong. Some people might ultimately find the intuition to be wrong itself. Nevertheless, there are many instances in which the way we rationalize our intuitions will be contradicting, and the way we rationalize particular intuitions will influence our choice of moral principles. Moral principles will ultimately be contradicting as well.

But, does this tell us anything useful about constructivism? After all, we are aware that not all people accept constructivist theories. Moreover, John Rawls himself is not a moral realist, although he uses realist terminology:

> This rendering of objectivity implies that, rather than think of the principles of justice as true, it is better to say that they are principles of justice most reasonable for us given our conception of persons as free and equal, and fully cooperating members of a democratic society.[29]

The problem does not seem to be in whether or not constructivism as a theory holds, but rather the problem amounts to whether constructivism warrants the use of the language of moral realism. If we follow Greene's argument, we come to the conclusion that the realist language

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[29] Rawls, John. "Construction and Objectivity."

provides for a "smokescreen" which makes people perceive some neutral ground to which they can resort to in order to resolve their differences. Greene writes:

> Because there is no fact of the matter about what's right or wrong, no true moral theory, there is no neutral ground from which to sort out the putatively true moral claims from the ones that simply ring true to some people.[30]

Although neutral ground in some moral terms does not exist, different parties in Rawls' society have a perception that there is some common ground, based on political values. Rawls insists his theory is based on underlying principles that many people implicitly share - the reasonable (liberal) people. The starting point for his theory is the already normative concept of reasonableness. However, he would not go so far to call anyone who disagrees with him unreasonable. And, naturally, many people disagree with him. What does that make of his use of the words just/unjust? It is clear that reasonable, liberal people can disagree about different conceptions of justice. This disagreement arises from different rationalizations of our moral intuitions, or from assigning different weights to different intuitions. Ultimately, the disagreement arises because of our difference in subjective values (if we assume anti-realism, as it is safe to do with constructivism) but we are presenting it as a difference in reasoning from some objective common ground (which sometimes might be the case, but not always). That is why people do not need to be fundamentalists for this argument to hold. Constructivists might be able to "construct" some common ground on some level (by employing the value-laden concept

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[30] Greene, Joshua D.. "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and what to do about it." (p. 237)

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of reasonableness[31] and hence, avoiding complete neutrality with regards to specific values), but that common ground will be very limited. My claim is, following Greene, that this common ground is more easily expanded by using the language of moral anti-realism (making it clear we are expressing personal values, and not that we have objective truth on our side). People are more likely to seek compromise when they are not convinced they have the truth by their side, and obviously, the realists who believe that moral facts are true but not that they know them, do not employ the language of realism in this sense (they do not say that something is wrong, if they are not convinced it is).

2.2 Arguments against Moral Realism

The aim of the present chapter is not to conclusively refute moral realism. I understand that moral anti-realism is itself a disputed position. I will try to sketch out an anti-realist understanding of morality that would support the liberal ideas of state neutrality and pluralism by referring to well-known anti-realist theories. That is only possible after recognizing why anti-realism has such appeal, if any. I have already noted that a skeptic about the metaphysical nature of moral reality raises a legitimate question which cannot be answered by simple references to our moral intuition. If something is wrong, there has to be some reason that makes it wrong, and most commonly the realists claim there is a set of moral properties inherent in some action or institution.[32] Although there are different interpretations of moral anti-realism, I shall argue that error theories can best fit (or even promote) the framework of liberal pluralism and state neutrality. One of the most influential error theorists remains J.L. Mackie and I shall very briefly

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[31] see p. 21
[32] Väyrynen, Pekka. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Moral Realism."

outline his view. Joshua Greene was greatly influenced by Mackie, and I will further outline the position of a feasible error theory through his work.

Mackie admits that moral claims purport to report facts (a cognitivist view), but insists they are always necessarily wrong.[33] He argues that the denial of objective values should not to be confused with any one of several "first order" (normative) views, or with any linguistic or conceptual analysis. He acknowledges that an appeal to objective values is built into ordinary moral thought and language. He gives several reasons why moral skepticism has appeal. First, the argument from relativity suggests that the different moral practices found in different societies are not the result of some general principles (such as universalizability or maximizing overall happiness) being applied in different circumstances and among people with shared preferences. Instead, he argues it is the contingent fact of life that moral intuitions of some people cannot be reconciled with the intuitions of others, and that intuitions are what supplies most of the moral judgments rather than reason. Second, he has an argument about the nature of objective values; if they exist, they would have to be intrinsically motivating and inciting action (motivation-internalism will be further discussed at a later point). Third, such values would have to be supervenient upon natural features.[34] These arguments rest on the assumption that the objective values are properties of actions, agents or objects of moral concern. Hence, his fourth point is that there is an epistemological difficulty in knowing value entities and their links with the features upon which they supervene. Mackie concludes: "My hope is that concrete moral

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[33] Mackie, J. L.. *Ethics: inventing right and wrong.*
[34] "Given two classes of properties (A and B), we say that the B-properties supervene on the A-properties if and only if it is impossible for two objects, not necessarily in the same world, to differ in their B-properties without also differing in their A-properties." (as found in Greene, p. 72)

issues can be argued out without appeal to any mythical objective values or requirements or obligations or transcendental necessities…"[35]

Joshua Greene argues that moral realism requires fundamental moral principles, principles that admit of no further explanation. First, he develops his argument by insisting that there has to be something that connects the value neutral properties of objects of moral concern and their moral properties. We can refer to something being a lie without evaluating it, just as much as we can refer to something being red without evaluating it. However, if some value-neutral properties also imply moral properties, we need moral principles in order to connect them to their value-neutral properties. In other words, objects of moral concern have moral properties only in virtue of some moral principles that define them. For example, lying might be wrong because it is not conduct that can be universalizable. He explains this phenomenon in terms of supervenience of value over the value-neutral properties of things, and insists that moral realism needs moral principles. If moral realism is to be true, at least some moral principles need to be true, hence his evocation of necessary truths. Moral principles can be explained by appealing to non-moral necessary truths (which he finds highly unlikely to be successful), or necessary moral truths which are not moral principles themselves (to explain moral principles in terms of moral principles is circular). Ultimately, he concludes some principles must be true despite having no further explanation for why they are true (fundamental moral principles).

However, this alone does not come as much of a surprise. Still, Greene insists that these fundamental moral principles have to at least be clear about the supervenience of evaluative properties over value-neutral properties, and they have to explain it. Greene refuses to take non-naturalistic accounts seriously, dismissing these theories as having too much "metaphysical

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[35] Mackie, J. L.. *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*. (p. 199)

baggage." He does consider the possibility of analytic naturalist and synthetic naturalist explanations. If anything is to be accepted without further explanation, analytic claims seem to be the best candidates. Some statements are simply true in virtue of their meaning (the standard example he refers to being the claim "all bachelors are unmarried"). He further distinguishes between direct fundamental moral principles, and those that are indirect (which come with a conditional clause). Moore's open question argument suggests that analytic moral principles cannot come in a direct form.[36] To point out the value-neutral property that something is a lie still leaves an open question with regards to its evaluative properties, as I have already mentioned. Therefore, the truth of this claim is not determined by the meaning of the terms used. Alternatively, we could use indirect moral principles. Greene considers the claim that an act is wrong "if and only if we would disapprove of it if we were fully informed and fully rational." In that case, the question becomes whether the word "wrong" could mean the same as something that an ideally informed rational person would condemn. He denies that most competent users of the term "wrong" subscribe to this rationalistic metaphysics. Moreover, he sees further reasons for dismissing this approach as a viable explanation of moral realism. If we understand rationality to require only some consistency in belief, it is easy to imagine a perfectly rational being who would approve of something that is wrong (say, because they are self-interested). On the other hand, if we take the meaning of the term "rational" to have normative implications, it becomes equally problematic as other first order moral beliefs. If to be rational means to be moral, we can similarly ask why should we be rational (in that sense)? This explanation might be true only if most non-rationalists are, in fact, mistaken about the meaning of the word "wrong." Similarly, Greene considers other moral principles and explanations, and argues that our use of

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[36] Moore, George Edward. *Principa ethica.*

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the terms does not justify analytic naturalist explanations. If a theorist would, alternatively, seek to change the meaning of the terms and how they are to be understood, she would not, in the sense it is being discussed, solve the problem posed by moral skepticism. There is a possibility that semantic indeterminacy for moral terms might prove a way out for some analytic explanations of moral realism, but he contends it is a rather desperate move.[37]

The synthetic naturalist, on the other hand, agrees with Moore that there is an open question whether a natural property implies a moral property as well, but they assert that such properties may nevertheless be the same. Synthetic naturalists offer explanations which are not simply true in virtue of the meaning of the terms used. They tend to shift the burden of proof and show examples in which non-reductive supervenience relations are acceptable (for example, macroeconomic facts supervene on the lower-level facts but we do not doubt macroeconomic facts).[38] However, Greene insists that what distinguishes these cases from moral supervenience is the fact that they exemplify supervenience of value-neutral properties on lower level, also value-neutral properties. Hence, any discussion of moral properties warrants reductive supervenience relations. Ultimately, synthetic explanations rest on some account of fundamental moral principles which have a certain structure and demand further explanation, but none could be provided. Greene protests these kinds of explanations not because they lead to new, unanswered questions, but because those questions, even in principle, are unanswerable although they are construed as if they should have an answer. We are content with the fact that we cannot give definite answers to causal processes in the universe (for example, one could indefinitely ask

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[37] The idea is that people do not quite know what they mean when they employ moral terms such as "wrong" and so on, and that there might be a valid resolution of the indeterminacy that would provide for analytic principles that could be considered fundamental moral principles.

[38] Greene, Joshua D. "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and what to do about it." p. 120

"why?" some processes occur and we would sooner or later run out of answers). But such questions leave us with the exact direction of our inquiry and at least some understanding of what it takes to answer them. Fundamental moral principles, on the contrary, immediately establish a definite connection between value-neutral and evaluative properties, while we are left wondering, much like at the onset of our inquiry, why this connection holds.

Greene ultimately does not insists that moral facts have to be made true by the existence of some physical (and definitely not metaphysical) objects, but his account demands some sort of explanation of what it is that makes them true. If one was to transform the discussion of moral facts into a discussion about practical reason, giving reasons for acting a certain way or reasons that can endure certain kinds of rational scrutiny, his demand for explanation would still equally be valid. Finally, Greene maintains that his critique is made from within the moral point of view. It is not a question of why be moral, or what self-interested incentive we might have to be moral; much like it is a scientific question to ask what makes scientific beliefs true, we can ask what makes our moral beliefs true. He makes an important distinction of two accounts of morality.[39] For lack of better terminology, he dubs the notions $morality_1$ and $morality_2$. The former refers to an account of morality that is concerned with right and wrong actions. A moral person is the one, then, who tries to do the right thing and usually manages to do so. The latter version of morality is about taking into account the interests of others, and not simply focusing on self-interested actions. It is distinct from altruism in that altruism is a positive commitment to actively furthering other people's welfare. $Morality_2$ is concerned with refraining from harming the other as much as with active helping behavior. A moral skeptic can completely reject $morality_1$ and still be a moral person, concerned with the interests of others (affirming $morality_2$). The view

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[39] Greene, Joshua D.. "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and what to do about it." p. 21

that would reject both accounts of morality Greene terms "radical nihilist" (of which, perhaps, Nietzsche could be considered a proponent), and is perhaps the reason why the rejection of moral realism invites unpleasant feelings. He considers possible objections to the view that one could behave moraly$_2$ without being moral$_1$. The thesis of internalism suggests that moral judgments are intrinsically motivating. The first objection has to do with the rationalist account of moral realism. If we think that all it takes to be a realist is to engage in the process of rational reflection, then we could think of someone that takes into consideration the interests of others but rejects moral realism to simply be mistaken about her beliefs, and that she is actually involved in figuring out how to do the right thing, in the realist sense. However, Greene sees an important distinction in our ability to reason about what to do and the conclusion that what one ought to do has an objectively right answer. As was already briefly mentioned, the concept of "thin" rationality (such as is often used in rational choice theory) allows us to conceive of rational people who can completely disregard the imperatives of this rationalist ethic. On the other hand, the more substantive notions of rationality run into known problems of rationalist ethics, namely, the more the notion is normative in character, the less it becomes able to answer the skeptical question of how the value-neutral properties of things are connected with evaluative properties. The second objection to the claim that we need not be moral realists to be motivated to take into consideration the interests of others has a psychological underpinning. This is an empirical issue, and Greene finds that there is strong evidence the second objection does not hold. We can hardly speak of chimpanzees having any meta-ethical convictions, yet they exhibit exactly what was termed as morality$_2$. Our tendency to be moral seems to have evolved long before we were able to raise questions concerning moral truth.

Where does that leave us? There are many things we could conceive of as the Good, and perhaps the most pressing concerns are about finding a way to decide what our morality should further, if we accept moral anti-realism. Most of us do not wish to be radical nihilists even upon discovering (what I take to be) the true nature of moral reality. The question that needs to be answered, then, is whether the language of moral realism will help us reach compromises better and create a society of people with greater concern for others. Projectivist anti-realists are content with the realist terminology that implies objective truth about morality, as it presumably has great practical advantages. Constructivists similarly think that we can rationally arrive at notions of right and wrong which (just or unjust) which most (reasonable) people could accept and share it as neutral ground for resolving disputes. Joshua Greene proclaims: "In the real world, the vast majority of avoidable suffering is caused by people who think they have the moral truth on their side."[40] For him, the real challenge is not to clarify the true content of the terms such as "good" and educate people about it, but rather to change the inconsiderate behavior of well-meaning people. Most military aggressions are justified in moral terms, or because of claiming a right to something. One could also introduce another element in the psychology of moral realists. Slavoj Zizek supplements Lacan's aforementioned reversal of an old dictum (If God does not exist everything is prohibited), with another claim: If God exists everything is permitted![41] If one perceives herself as the instrument of God (and, I might add, if one perceives herself as being in the service of the objectively Good), her acts are redeemed in advance since they express the will of God (or they are objectively Good). In the context of our liberal societies, this means that the realist language shrinks the common ground to which we are to

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[40] Greene, Joshua D.. "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and what to do about it." (p. 238-39)

[41] Zizek, Slavoj. "How to Read Lacan - "God is Dead, but He Doesn't Know It": Lacan Plays with Bobok."

return seeking compromise. Reasonable people who agree with each other in their conception of people as free and equal, for example, still have very different understanding of the notions of justice. If Haidt is right, and our moral judgment is formed by emotional evolutionary adaptations rather than by reasoning, the rationalizations we offer will remain unconvincing to others, especially if we insist on objective truth and persist in the claim that our differences lie solely in the process of reasoning (obviously, there are very different, but consistent worldviews).

2.3 Practical Reason and Moral Motivation

The question of moral motivation is important to answer the worries of all those who think we would have trouble treating others as ends in themselves if we were to reject moral realism. Derek Parfit argues that there are normative truths (truths that are neither tautologies (true in virtue of the meanings of the terms used - or analytic statements as expressed by Greene), nor empirical) about what we have reason to believe unless we embrace epistemological skepticism.[42] The question of motivation, in his view, is a psychological question; if a belief does not motivate us to act, it nevertheless does not stem from that observation that the belief does not give us a reason to act in a certain way. Consider the example of a man with strong preferences for the present, the here and now, discounting the future (this example was provided by Peter Singer when discussing Parfit's view).[43] If that man is planning a holiday and notices the beginning of a toothache which he suspects will ruin his holiday, he has a *reason* to immediately visit the dentist, although the reason might not move him to act.

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[42] Parfit, Derek. *On what matters*.
[43] Singer, Peter. *The expanding circle: ethics and sociobiology*. 2011 ed.

Parfit's explanation of normative truths does not fully bridge the gap between facts and values. Parfit's own example is the following: If we know the argumentation is valid and it stems from true premises, we have a reason to accept the conclusions of the argument. This example does not imply the hearer will be motivated to accept the conclusions of a good argument, but, Parfit argues, he objectively has reasons to do so. What we encounter in this example is an account of normative truth which can hardly be useful without the background of given desires and preferences. Were I to seek truth and have preferences for truth, I would have reasons to accept valid arguments. However, those reasons exist independently of my preferences, as much as there are roads that exist which I do not take. If there was a "road to nowhere" which I did not know about, if nobody else used it and even if nobody really knew about it, it still might exist. In moral reasoning, the normative truths showed to exist by Parfit might be interpreted as "roads to nowhere". If such truths exist independently of us, they are no more than a framework for thinking in the context of our formed desires, or the "directions we wish to pursue." Without that context, they are an empty form, merely information we plug into our moral calculus. Joshua Greene agrees that philosophers may legitimately respond to his argument by way of offering reasons we have for acting a certain way (and even describe "right" and "wrong" in those terms), explaining which of the reasons may still be valid after certain kinds of rational reflection. However, he insists that the metaphysical question of what connects a particular set of value-neutral properties with those that are evaluative, remains unresolved. He writes: "Conceiving of the study of morality as an investigation of "practical reason" rather than a search for "moral facts" is, so far as my arguments are concerned, simply a matter of stylistic preference."[44] For Greene, reasons provide hypothetical imperatives, not categorical imperatives.

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[44] Greene, Joshua D. "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and what

There are numerous other opposing views regarding moral motivation. For Parfit, moral motivation is a psychological question. Many others, like Cornell realists, deny that moral reasons are, although objectively true, intrinsically motivating.[45] This provides for their further claim that moral judgments are cognitive states and explains the possibility of amoralists. Other objectivist realists like Ronald Dworkin show affinity toward the view of categorical imperatives.[46] However, if one is to view moral judgments as cognitive states (and, therefore, truth-apt), one is to discover familiar problems with conceiving of them as intrinsically motivating.[47] Dworkin offers two arguments to reconcile motivation internalism (the view that moral judgments are intrinsically motivating) and cognitivism. He argues that the mental states with "world-to-mind" direction of fit (otherwise known as conative states, which include impulse, desire, or striving), and mental states with the "mind-to-world" direction of fit (cognitive mental states) can be combined in one and the same mental state. Furthermore, he argues that the lack of motivation on behalf of a moral agent puts in doubt the attribution of a particular moral judgment to that particular moral agent. Dworkin offers an account which might be able to counter arguments who doubt moral knowledge based on it not being able to incite action in people, and give us an explanation of why we are moral. Presently, however, my aim is not to persuade the reader to be moral. I simply take it that we mostly are.

In the realm of moral subjectivism, the important moral decisions need to be made by individuals, and those choices might tell us something about how to relate to one another. I do not have a story to offer about why we should choose to be moral (in the sense of caring for one another). My anti-realist view of morality does not presuppose a set of principles that would

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to do about it." (p. 138)

[45] Lang, Gerald. "How Far Can You Go with Quietism?"

[46] Dworkin, Ronald. *Justice for hedgehogs*.

[47] Lang, Gerald. "How Far Can You Go with Quietism?"

order our subjective values in such a way to ensure we would live in a moral world. Some people might find this unacceptable or too permissive. We should recall that rejecting objective moral values in virtue of their inexistence in the natural world does not imply first order moral claims about how we ought to behave (for example, recklessly towards others). I do not think, nevertheless, that we are in danger of becoming immoral after rejecting objective values. Haidt asserts:

> … morality, like language, is a major evolutionary adaptation for an intensely social life, built into multiple regions of the brain and body, which is better described as emergent than as learned, yet which requires input and shaping from a particular culture. Moral intuitions are therefore both innate and enculturated.[48]

We are very much instinctively disposed to being moral, although this tendency of ours as humans is elastic enough to be directed in different ways. We recognize the value of morality and we are free to structure our society and institutions to promote caring for others, and to educate children to continue to do so too. The particular ways in which this is to be done is, of course, the real domain of contention between different moral outlooks, but it seems to me that we are more likely to reach (acceptable) compromise if we do not insist that our views are based on objective truth. Some might think that there should be no compromise with some esoteric moral judgments which go strongly against our moral intuitions. However, what the evidence presented by Haidt suggests is exactly that it is rarely the case that someone views herself as outright evil or wrong. When it comes to moral psychology and motivation for doing "evil" acts,

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[48] qtd in Greene, Joshua D.. "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and what to do about it." (p. 189)

it seems much more likely that people would be less inclined to harm other people's interests were they to view their moral judgments as not being objectively true.

2.4 Is Meta-Ethics Bogus?

I have already noted that many meta-ethical statements can be construed as a kind of abstract first order moral claims. The claim "no acts are wrong" can be considered either as a broader meta-ethical claim about the nature of morality, or as a substantive judgment about moral facts. On the latter reading, I am advocating radical nihilism and implying that one may do whatever one wants. Conversely, the broader meta-ethical claim need not have any practical implications. I have so far insisted that rejecting objective moral values in virtue of their inexistence in the natural world does not imply prescriptions about how we should conduct ourselves. Ronald Dworkin argues, on the contrary, that all second-order claims can be recast as first order claims, and that this fact significantly undermines the skeptical position:

> If I am right … that there are no non-evaluative, second-order, meta-ethical truths about value then we cannot believe either that value judgments are true when they match special moral entities or that they cannot be true because there are no special entities for them to match. Value judgments are true, when they are true, not in virtue of any matching but in virtue of the substantive *case* that can be made for them. The moral realm is the realm of argument not brute, raw fact.[49]

[49] Dworkin, Ronald. *Justice for hedgehogs*. (pg. 11)

Dworkin provides a far reaching argument against various forms of moral skepticism which I cannot here consider in its entirety. However, I will try to focus on his criticism of metaphysical moral skepticism. He insists that we need not worry about the correspondence of our moral conclusions with the metaphysical facts about the world. Error theorists find the distinction between first order moral claims and second-order claims completely independent (we can be skeptics about one sort of claims without doubting the other sort of claims), while Dworkin asserts no meaningful distinction can be made. The Humean Principle[50] has traditionally been regarded as a challenge to objectivist accounts of moral reality, but Dworkin seeks to regain it to support his thesis about the objectivity of moral belief.

What Dworkin sees as the lesson of Hume is that morality is not grounded in non-moral fact. Therefore, he argues that some things about morality can be taken for granted. There are no obstacles external to morality which need to be resolved, as morality needs to adhere only to its own standards. Hence, we can justify the ascription of value merely on the recognition of other values, without any need to search for metaphysical underpinnings of morality. Gerald Lang classifies Dworkin's view as quietism (the view that moral discourse is answerable only to the standards which are internal to it), although Dworkin finds the term unappealing.[51] Furthermore, Dworkin distinguishes between internal skepticism and external skepticism. The former rejects particular moral claims against the background of other moral claims. Internal skeptics do not violate the Humean Principle as their refutation of some moral claims does not cross the "is-ought" divide. Recall that he thinks that all second-order moral claims are practically first-order moral claims in disguise. Internal skepticism may take a global form. These skeptics may, in

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[50] Humean Principle: One cannot draw an ought from an is.
[51] Lang, Gerald. "How Far Can You Go with Quietism?"

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fact, reject all moral claims based on a further normative claim (for example, that moral claims are true only if we they hold for agents who can be held responsible for them). Conversely, external skeptics who claim to base their skepticism from outside of the moral realm breach the Humean Principle by arguing that moral claims have to correspond to metaphysical facts about the world. In other words, if the external skeptics claim that the truth-value about moral facts depends on the existence of some natural or non-natural properties they are committing a fallacy at the onset of their inquiry. Dworkin distinguishes between error theorists like Mackie who urge us to get rid of our moral convictions, and projectivist anti-realists like Blackburn who only advocate the abandonment of the faulty metaphysics, but he rejects both views. There is an important dimension of agreement between Blackburn and Dworkin; for them, morality is not grounded in matters of metaphysical fact and they both understand second-order moral claims to simply provide further information about the first order claims without being fundamentally different (for example, we can qualify the normative claim that lying is wrong by saying that "it is true that lying is wrong"). For Dworkin, however, the first order moral claims describe moral reality, while Blackburn thinks they are expressions of attitudes which warrant the use of the language of moral realism.

By erasing the distinction between first order and second order moral arguments, Dworkin annuls Greene's dissatisfaction with fundamental moral principles. Dworkin contends:

What makes a moral judgment true? When are we justified in thinking a moral judgment true? My answer to the first [question]: moral judgments are made true, when they are true, by an adequate moral argument for their truth. Of course that invites the further

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question: what makes a moral argument adequate? The answer must be: a further moral argument for its adequacy. And so forth.[52]

If we take up the position of an internal skeptic, we must be satisfied with justifications from within the framework of first order moral theorizing. However, Gerald Lang finds that Dworkin's view does not warrant the dismissal of all of the meta-ethical lines of inquiry.[53] He inists that Dworkin has too little to say about the nature of moral properties, and about the status of the supervenience relation that holds between moral and non-moral features. Dworkin admits the necessity of supervenience in moral attribution. His view is that moral properties exist in virtue of the descriptive properties which subvene them. This might further suggest that moral and non-moral properties are essentially different, but it does not provide an answer with regards to what those properties are. Lang argues that even if we take seriously the dismissal of the independence of second order moral claims we are still left wondering about the details of moral properties. Lang writes:

> Let us agree with Dworkin that the property of goodness is properly ascribed through the resources of ordinary moral argument, and that goodness supervenes on the non-moral properties which serve as the evidence of goodness. We might then imagine someone asking, in a non-sceptical spirit, what kind of property goodness is. How can Dworkin deny this is a proper inquiry? Everything else, it would seem, can be metaphysically evaluated, so why not moral properties?[54]

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[52] Dworkin, Ronald. *Justice for hedgehogs*. (p. 37)
[53] Lang, Gerald. "How Far Can You Go with Quietism?"
[54] Lang, Gerald. "How Far Can You Go with Quietism?" (p. 33)

There is another important objection that Lang makes with regards to Dworkin's theory. Namely, the distinction that Dworkin is making between external skepticism and internal skepticism might offer arguments against him. What Dworkin ultimately states is not that some types of skepticism can be legitimately termed external, but on the contrary, he insists that moral skeptics are making the claims that there is such a thing as a legitimate position of external skepticism about morality, while he finds that such a distinction is a mirage. Nevertheless, he depends on this distinction when he dismisses external skepticism. If, as Lang argues, any second order claim can be transformed to be read as a first order claim, than different meta-ethical positions can still be defended on the basis of internal skepticism without, consequently, offending the Humean Principle. He goes on to say that it is not the Humean Principle that effectively defeats external skepticism, but rather his Pertinence Condition (Dworkin writes that the proper interpretation of second order claims needs to display their pertinence to the first-order claims). Other writers, such as Russ Schafer-Landau, think that Dworkin misunderstands the claims of error theorists by assuming they must be advocating extensive permissiveness.[55] He insists that Dworkin fails to see the logical position which at once denies impressibility and fails to uphold permissibility of particular actions. However, Lang maintains that this is beside the point, as Dworkin asserts that it is basically incomprehensible to consider arguments which deny the wrongness of actions, while not affirming the goodness of those actions. This is the essence of the Pertinence Condition, as Lang sees it. However, that view is dependent on what the common participants in first order moral discourse perceive to be pertinent to their concerns,

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[55] Shafer-Landau, Russ. "Truth and Metaethics."

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which leaves us unable to fully account for the worries which can be disregarded and those which should not be overlooked.

Dworkin's criticism of moral skepticism, as has been demonstrated, is not directed against the arguments that show that we fail to account for the connectedness of evaluative and value-neutral properties, or the structure of the supervenience relation; rather, he insists that the truth of moral claims is not dependant on those properties. It seems to me that a moral anti-realist, according to the definitions that I offered, can accept that the success or failure of first order moral argument is not dependent on any developments appearing in meta-ethics. While it might happen that Dworkin's argument will have far-reaching effects with regards to how we conceive of moral facts or moral truth in general, I think it is safe to assume the position of moral anti-realism which is defined in virtue of the inexistence of moral properties.

CHAPTER 3: ANTI-REALISM AND LIBERAL NEUTRALITY

3.1 The Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests

The ethicist Peter Singer develops an argument in his 1981 book *The Expanding Circle* claiming that we can establish a rationally based morality, without appealing to objective moral values. The book itself is largely a reaction to the challenge to ethics as a philosophical category posed by sociobiology, more specifically, the influential book *On Human Nature*, by Edward O. Wilson. Due to novel explanations of the phenomenon of altruism, which had been puzzling evolutionary theorists for years, Wilson posited that science may be in a position to examine not just the origins of human values, but also their meaning. By that he meant that the study of ethics might have to be "taken over" by the biologists. Wilson writes that moral intuitions, which are consulted by moral philosophers, are shaped by the emotional centers in our brains; thus, since the development of the hypothalamus and the limbic system responsible for our spontaneous emotional reactions had been shaped by natural selection, we need to work within the framework of evolutionary biology in order to explain ethics, "if not epistemology and epistemologists, at all depths."[56]

Singer rejects this view, but still finds great value in biological explanations of our ethical sensibilities. He points to the age-old problem of drawing evaluative judgments based on descriptive statements. Wilson unknowingly commits the naturalistic fallacy when he argues that we have an interest in preserving the long term survival of our genes, by simply referring to the fact that our genes come from a common gene pool. He insists there are moral premises

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[56] Wilson, Edward O. *Sociobiology*. (p. 3)

"inherent in man's biological nature"[57], and that science may provide us with a new set of moral premises. However, Singer finds that the descriptions of the origins of our moral beliefs tell us nothing about the nature of morality as such. We can interpret the findings of evolutionary biology in various ways; from adopting a nihilist stance and insisting that these adaptations have served to increase our ancestors' biological fitness but that we can adapt to pursue any other arbitrary goal, to claiming that although our moral intuitions had been a necessary consequence of evolutionary processes in the service of ensuring our survival, there is, in fact, truth in them. The biological nature of our ethical beliefs does not determine the rightness or wrongness of our actions. If sociobiology tells us more about the consequences of certain beliefs, rules, or moral standards, it does so without fundamentally affecting the theory of value itself; it simply provides new information which moral theories take into account in moral reasoning.

Still, Singer thinks we can use the explanations of biologists in debunking some moral intuitions. This may be in refuting moral arguments based on the view that a moral conviction is sound if it advocates "natural" behavior. Certainly, there are unnatural acts we can hardly think of as wrong (e.g. curing diseases), and some natural we have come to accept as morally permissible but which have not always seen as such (e.g. homosexuality). This is the impact of sociobiology that can essentially change the study of morality, according to Singer. We can reject moral rules as absolute or deny the elevated status of some intuitions that seemed self-evident, such as the priority we give to our own kin.

However, science cannot provide the ultimate premises of morality. Singer refers to existentialist philosophers who recognize our ability to choose and depart from "nature." For them, the choice of values is a leap of faith, ultimately arbitrary. Moral subjectivism treats

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[57] Wilson, Edward O. *On human nature*. (p. 5)

different moral judgments simply as subjective preferences. This, indeed, might leave us confused about what to do, and how to behave toward one another. Singer joins the existentialists in rejecting the objectivity of moral values. He demands an explanation, following Mackie, from all those claiming that moral principles are true, and an "element of the universe existing independently of us", about how we come to know them and why they are to be taken as intrinsically motivating independently of our own preferences.[58] He argues that values are essentially practical, and motivating, but not a property of things or the nature of specific acts. Sociobiology allows us to conceive of values in a less mysterious way. Singer argues that, when making moral decisions, we are involved in a process of acting in a way that is justifiable to others, and that rational beings tend toward a principle of impartiality in explaining moral principles. He goes on to say that either every moral principle is just one preference among the others and warrants equal consideration as the other preferences, or the principles of morality are right in themselves. On the first account we try to pursue a policy that would best promote the interests of all, recognizing that our interests are one of many. On the latter account, we are left with a meaningless definition, he argues. This abstract notion of universal rules that exist independently of human beings is an empty form if there are no beings with interests to consider. One might wonder what it means to be impartial in circumstances in which particular beings with preferences do not exist. Singer asserts that the requirement of equal considerations of interests exists "only as a framework into which the deliberations of rational creatures with preferences fit…"[59], and not as a moral law authoritatively instructing certain types of behavior.

There is a noticeable dimension of universality in morality which he endorses in his argument. Singer finds that the basis of morality is rational, as well as biological, and that

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[58] Singer, Peter. *The expanding circle: ethics and sociobiology*.(p.110)
[59] Singer, Peter. *The expanding circle: ethics and sociobiology*.(p.106)

reasoning accounts for moral progress. It is universally accessible to all rational beings to perceive their own interests as one of many and therefore equally important (the view which he will later modify). This, he contends, is true independently of all beings with preferences. This line of reasoning does not mean he accepts absolute moral rules; rather, he finds we cannot speak of moral actions without considering their consequences on the all affected interests. He sees rule-based ethical principles, however, a practical way of overcoming our human nature. After all, they often bring about the greatest total satisfaction of preferences. Nevertheless, exceptions are possible (although not always commendable) because at the highest level of abstraction, the consequences (and promotion of all interests) determine the rightness of actions. Consider the rule that prohibits lying; although we might intuit there are circumstances in which we would find lying morally justifiable (say, in order to prevent an even greater wrong, such as death of an innocent child), this exception is useful only against a background of understanding that lying should be avoided (it would be hard to get by on a daily basis if we could not rely on other people telling the truth; a doctor lying about our health condition limits our ability to plan our life; executing a trade arrangement would be impossible without rules of contract etc.). The principle of equal consideration of interests is, then, rationally arrived at, and the idea of disinterestedness in moral reasoning is inherent in the idea of justifying our behavior to society as a whole. Singer's problem remained that something being rationally consistent and true is not necessarily motivating, as moral statements presumably are (in his view). But he saw a tendency in rational beings to overcome inconsistencies in reasoning and behavior.

The logical conclusion this view entails is that rationality progressively expands the circle of beings worthy of moral consideration, as all beings with interests have equal moral status. According to Singer, the expansion of moral consideration went from concern for our kin and

those with who we are in a reciprocal relationship, to members of our society, to all human beings equally. Moreover, the rational way of conceiving things this way implies concern even for the creatures in the non-human realm, all sentient beings. The problem, of course, is how far we need to go. How do we conceive of interests? Are there interests of the natural environment, rivers and rocks? Singer notes there is an elementary difficulty in imagining how non-sentient beings would have interests, and leaves it to future generations to grasp if such interests exist. He, admittedly, cannot comprehend the claims non-sentient entities have interests.

In the afterword to the 2011 edition of the *Expanding Circle*, Singer withdraws some of the claims made in the original 1981 publication of the book. He mentions many of the studies that affirm his position, but concedes an important objection to his previously held beliefs. Namely, he asserts that in giving equal consideration to all interests, he is already making a normative statement. The only rational basis he still adheres to is the observation that every particular preference is one of many, but it does not follow that they are all equally important. He assumes a modified position about moral values, and argues that what can ultimately be assumed from the descriptive statement that there are many interests that exist is a position of moral subjectivism. Singer remains unsatisfied with this position and shows affinity toward the aforementioned argument developed by Derek Parfit regarding normative truth. Singer, hence, accepts the position that some normative statements are true, in the form of objective reasons for action. He sees this stance as an alternative to our moral intuitions that seem to be emotional responses and evolutionary adaptations. However, he acknowledges that there is still an unavoidable problem of motivation which cannot be discarded in arguments about moral reasoning.

After closely considering Singer's views, it seems that there are elements in his newfound wisdom we can accept. The principle of equal consideration of interests is value-laden not only in terms of the effect of the practical difficulties in assessing how to best further the interests of all on a limited time scale (and other problems associated with accounting for those interests), but also in respect to the consequences such a stance has for particular preferences possibly not represented in the existing collection of interests. It shows a bias for the constellation of reality which is marked by the existing interests and perpetuated by focusing on the satisfaction of those interests. A truly disinterested view of morality cannot affirm neutrality between interests no more than it can affirm endorsing any particular interests. Unlike Singer, I find that moral subjectivism[60], no matter how unappealing we might think it, is the logical conclusion of his views we have to incorporate in our moral reasoning. Furthermore, it seems to me that, although we cannot come to the conclusion that rationality provides a solid basis for morality in an objective sense, the liberal conception of people as free and equal fits nicely with his principle of equal consideration of interests.

3.2 Liberal Moral and Political Neutrality

Since the period of Enlightenment, political liberalism has been dominating the discourse about societal organization and institutional justification. At first glance, it seems as the idea of liberalism is dependent on a notion of moral realism. Although political liberalism rests on the notion of state neutrality toward different lifestyles and admits some level of variation in how we

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[60] By referring to moral subjectivism I do not mean to endorse the view that moral values are made true by a person individually accepting them. I only mean to say that our personal values are what underlies any discussion of morality, and that we need to take them into account when considering how we treat each other.

relate to other persons, it ultimately needs an account of a *summum malum* (as opposed to a *summum bonum*) which is to be avoided by all members of society (and perceived as undesirable by them), and the state's role is to minimize this moral wrongness, as is reflected by the harm principle, for example.[61] It is my contention that, with a reassessment of the notion of state neutrality, we can maintain a sort of skepticism about moral realism without thereby undermining the fabric of social relations and the political order that accounts for peaceful coexistence of a plurality of worldviews.

The aim of this section of the essay is threefold. First, it sets to examine whether liberal practices may be justified if objectivism is false. Second, it seeks to establish that moral anti-realists are able to meet the demands of liberal neutrality as the requirement for equal treatment of people, using the language that rejects moral objectivism. Moreover, it aims to show that liberal moral and political neutrality is required by an account of anti-realist conception of morality. Third, it purports to show that the language of anti-realism is better suited for expanding the neutral grounds to which conflicting parties in a liberal society resort in order to settle their differences. It seems to me that the underlying concern of moral realists who insists on the truthfulness of moral propositions is that it would be hard to construct a society in which people would be motivated to respect each other and would accept moral justifications for actions if they ultimately rest on claims about moral facts that are not true. Political theorists have long been engaged in debates about whether liberalism is committed to some doctrine of neutrality, and whether neutrality provides a plausible constraint on legitimate laws and policies. The liberal view of the neutral state, for example, may demand that people be submitted to the interference of the state only if that interference can be justified on neutral grounds, appealing to

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[61] Mill, John Stuart, and Edward Alexander. *On liberty.*

political values and refraining from justifications based on disputed comprehensive doctrines. According to G. F. Gaus, discussions of neutrality normally distinguish between the idea that public justifications should be neutral, the claim that the aims of policymakers should be neutral, and the idea that the effects of policy should be neutral.[62] He insists that his view of liberal moral and political neutrality is not about neutrality between different conceptions of the good, but rather, this neutrality is concerned with persons which are not to be treated in a discriminatory way based on their affirmation of a particular conception of the good.

Gaus begins his argument by assuming that we share the conception of ourselves and others as free and equal, and in that his view closely resembles that of John Rawls. He asserts that a moral person is the one who makes and acts upon moral demands. Moral persons possess a certain capacity for autonomy; they have a capacity to disregard their private interests in order to act on justified moral claims. Such persons employ their own standard of evaluation when others offer justifications about their moral liberties and obligations. To see oneself as free, he argues, is to see oneself as bound only by moral requirements that seem valid from one's perspective. Again, he compares his view with Rawls' notion of the rational autonomy of parties to the original position, according to which "there are no given antecedent principles external to their point of view to which they are bound."[63] This view does not entail that such "self-authenticating" individuals necessarily see themselves as bound to offer justifications for their claims on others, but the principle of equal treatment requires that they do so. Gaus seems to think that we can appeal to a theory of moral reasons to ensure equal moral freedom. We can even utilize this theory of reasons, so he claims, even to override the presumption that each

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[62] Gerald F. Gaus. "The Moral Foundations of Liberal Neutrality." In *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy*.

[63] qtd in Gerald F. Gaus. "The Moral Foundations of Liberal Neutrality." In *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy*.

person knows best what is right from her own point of view, on some special occasions if the reasons given are particularly strong. We can reasonably assume that there are some instances of someone exhibiting flawed reasoning that does not lead to correct conclusions even according to her own evaluative standards.

When it comes to public justifications of principles, the requirements of impartiality in Gaus' theory demand that the principles be validated by all members of the moral public. Unless the principle is validated from the perspective of all rational and reflective free and equal moral persons, it is not a moral principle at all. His account of liberal moral neutrality urges that one person's demands addressed to another must be neutral between their respective evaluative standards; the justification should not depend on the difference between the evaluative standards. Still, some people might be unable to articulate the kinds of justifications others might have reason to accept. Nevertheless, his reading of liberal moral neutrality suggests that moral demands (that require justification) must at least provide consideration for all morally relevant subjects. A justification based on a consensus is uncontroversially neutral, he asserts, as it is based not on the differences between evaluative standards, but on the agreement about the implications of our disagreement about evaluative standards. Gaus connects the idea of liberal moral neutrality with the idea of liberal political neutrality, and insists that the Non-coercion Principle is a basic moral commitment of liberal political philosophy. Coercion is at least prima facie wrong, then, although given sufficient reasons an agent might have a moral right to employ coercive measures. Similarly, when state institutions are coercive in character, they need to display neutrality between citizens. "The justification of the state official's coercion must not

treat differentially reasonable and reflective citizen's differences in their evaluative standards."[64] Moreover, Gaus argues that it seems reasonable to presume that citizens share many evaluative standards. Consensus-based justifications might not always be available, but there might be substantive shared values that are a matter of overlapping consensus of everyone's conceptions of the good. There is another aspect which needs to be considered at this point, however. Gaus contends we might not clash so much about what is valuable, but about the ordering of different values. This provides for some difficulties to meet the requirements of liberal political neutrality, but Gaus maintains that this is a radically demanding principle.

Can the minimally coercive practices of liberal political neutrality be justified if objectivism is false? Recall the distinction between morality$_1$ and morality$_2$ offered by Joshua Greene. I have argued so far that we can maintain concern for other people even if we reject the notion of values which are objectively true, although it does not necessarily follow from moral anti-realism. The account of political neutrality outlined by Gaus is a value laden concept, derived from the notion of equality of individuals in the sense of political morality. If we ground his view of political morality in anti-realist metaphysics about moral properties, I contend that the basic structure of his argument remains intact. The notion of morality$_2$ is not dependant on the existence of such metaphysical moral properties and it is about considering the interests of others when we act. If we reformulate this claim, and argue that people who are moral$_2$ act in a way as to treat others as free and equal (essentially, to show some elementary care for their interests), we see that we depend on the same kind of contingent circumstances as liberalism already implies. Not all persons are moral$_2$, they do not understand themselves as pressing moral claims on others that demand respect, nor do they see others as moral persons. But this much

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[64] Gerald F. Gaus. "The Moral Foundations of Liberal Neutrality." In *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy*.

Gaus' (and Rawls') already admits by framing the theory to suit those who share the conception of people as free and equal (which is implicit in liberal societies). The validity of obligations which arise on these accounts depend on our evaluation of them against the background of other first order moral arguments, although they are not grounded in fact about moral reality. Moreover, it seems to me that liberal moral neutrality is required if we accept the implications of anti-realism. If moral realism was correct, we would not be guaranteed to have access to moral truths. Moral truths might turn out to be quite distinct from our intuitions at times, and we could undoubtedly give rationalizations of our intuitions which depart from the truly valuable principles. And we would be, as we often are on objectivist accounts, overwhelmed with different moral principles which are mere approximations of true moral principles and which lead to misunderstanding and conflict (as others rationalize that a different principle is a better approximation of the best true moral principle). On the other hand, the view of equal consideration of interests first developed by Singer might regain some appeal in the domain of liberalism. The reason behind our rejecting the principle of equal consideration of interest as a rational basis for our action guiding principles was that it was a value-laden concept which cannot be endorsed as a meta-ethical position as such without explanation of how the evaluative property of neutrality supervenes on the descriptive properties of interests. Here, however, we already have a value premise – liberalism rests on the assumption of our understanding of people as free and equal. We need not require a reductionist explanation of the supervenience relation as we are not attempting to bridge the is-ought gap. Yet, we are suddenly left not only with the observation that our interests are, rationally considered, just one of many, but that they are also *equal* (in virtue of being ours) as other interests. Is the language of moral anti-realism compatible with this account of liberal neutrality? If we closely consider Gaus' elaboration of liberal moral

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and political neutrality, we see that only a few terms seem to be contradicting the view of moral reality I am advocating. I have argued previously that the values which have considerably general appeal need not reflect the language of anti-realism, as they allow for some convenience in our everyday communication. The normative claim that persons are free[65] and equal is shared by all liberal people, and I do not feel obliged to insist that we always underlie the metaphysics behind these statements. However, the appeal to "rights" as such, perhaps, needs to be reconsidered. I believe there is no clear definite notion of what "rights" entail, and when many people express their preferences regarding a particular issue they are inclined to lay their claims in the form of rights. I believe we would avoid misunderstanding if we made it clear that those claims are an expression of our private desires. Likewise, as long as there are widely disputed notions of what is "just" or "unjust", it seems as the language of realism needs to be replaced with statements which clearly reflect their nature.

Charles Larmore argues in favor of political neutrality as procedure, not at the level of outcomes.[66] He posits that political values should not be construed as a common denominator for the different conceptions of the good, as they are supposed to be entirely removed from the private sphere of life of individuals. Instead, they are neutral ground to which to retreat in order to expand the scope of agreement in face of disagreement in the pluralist society. Larmore argues that Kantian liberalism (even other forms of classical liberalism) suffered from a supposition that the highest values in the private sphere should correspond to the political neutrality in the public sphere. The value of autonomy (or an experimental attitude toward different lifestyles, as Mill

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[65] I do not mean to take any particular position on whether the claim that persons are free is a factual claim, but I do think that there is at least one understanding of the term which has normative implications, and that is inasmuch as it implies that one ought to be responsible for their actions.

[66] Larmore, Charles E.. *Patterns of moral complexity*.

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argued) is, hence, emphasized and invoked in defense of many acute disputes. Since the state that aims to be neutral toward controversial comprehensive doctrines of the good life cannot, in principle, favor the value of autonomy (which can be an important value in many comprehensive doctrines, but not necessarily the highest value), it is transposed to the realm of the private sphere, which leaves this approach to liberalism vulnerable to criticism, Larmore asserts. Most of the anti-liberal critique (political romanticism, in Larmore's terms) focuses on this aspect of classical liberalism, claiming that it leads to "individualism" and atomization of society. Larmore rejects this view of liberalism, and insists that liberal individualism is only political, and liberalism is not a "philosophy of man", but a political philosophy. He offers Rawls' account of political liberalism in support of his view, maintaining that Rawls' original position need not take the form of Kantian comprehensive liberalism, as it is not the basis for arriving at truth about the Good. Larmore concedes that participants in a liberal society already share some values, such as rational conversation about their disputes and mutual respect, and insists that the state that fosters this kind of behavior is neutral. The more interesting view of Larmore is regarding why the citizens should continue this rational conversation with each other, and withdraw to neutral ground when settling disagreements. He offers a straightforward, easily acceptable explanation that it is in order to foster a sense of community and out of a desire for peace with each other.

I believe his last claim can also be reconciled with the rejection of objective moral values. It is already contained in our notion of morality$_2$ and our liberal conception of people as free and equal that we can assume some basic values to be present. We can simply take it for granted that moral$_2$ anti-realists value compromise based on their care for other human beings. Although there is no moral imperative in my account of anti-realism, my mission is to reconcile the notion

of moral$_2$ anti-realism with the liberal principle of neutrality, as given. In one of the previous chapters, I have already outlined the view that the language of moral realism promotes conflict. If I want a certain state of affairs to obtain, and I believe that this is not merely a matter of my subjective preference but the way things really ought to be, I am destined to perpetuate the conflicts I have with people who disagree with me. The belief that one really has access to moral truth is inherent in the notion of moral realism. (There is another kind of skepticism - about moral truth-value - which is the claim that no substantive moral belief is true or false although some moral beliefs are the kind of thing that could be true or false.[67] I am presently not concerned with that view.) It is reasonable to assume that people who offer valid reasons based on their moral intuitions will often fail to persuade others about the validity of their claims. As I have discussed previously, this might be due to the fact that people assign different weights to the same kind of intuitions, or their intuitions lead them in the outright opposite direction. If one presents their finding as objective truth, one risks arousing doubts about their sincerity or even moral integrity. This disagreement need not be conceived of as that between unreasonable fundamentalists. When we are speaking about matters of fact, we do not consider ourselves unreasonable for pointing out the truth (if we explain to someone that the leaves and the grass have the property of being green and they insist they are red, we do not seek compromise, but think our opponent is lying or color-blind). There is obviously some consensus among liberal people which allows for the use of realist language which is still able to provide common ground in terms of political values. The overlapping consensus seems to capture our shared sensibilities toward the moral status of people as free and equal. However, I believe that we can expand the common ground from which public policies can be reasonably justified if we were to seek

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[67] Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. "Moral Skepticism."

compromise. This point is especially important if the future studies continue to affirm the hypothesis offered by Haidt that our moral judgments are, essentially, rationalizations of our emotional gut reactions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The purpose of this essay was to reconcile the notion of moral anti-realism, defined in virtue of inexistence of metaphysical moral properties, with the notion of liberal moral and political neutrality. I have presented Greene's arguments for what I deem to be a viable version of moral skepticism and sketched out some potential challenges anti-realism might encounter, but I have argued that it raises some legitimate questions and that at least some weaker form of (metaphysical) moral skepticism is able to withstand charges against it. I have further expressed doubts that the language of constructivism yields the best results for the goals that we decide to set for ourselves. Constructivism does not commit itself to dubious metaphysical claims, but it does not ensure that the reasoning it offers will represent the beliefs of a significant portion of society (I reject the view that the disagreement that arises is solely due to inaccurate reasoning. I believe these differences of opinion will persist because they reflect the inconsistency of our moral intuitions which were shaped by blind evolutionary processes). I have claimed that the principle of equal consideration of interests is not a rational basis for the metaphysical nature of morality, but that we can invoke it in the realm of liberal political morality because liberal portrayals of people as free and equal provide us with premises to affirm the view that our interests are 1) just one of many, but also that 2) they are equally important as any other. Likewise, I have argued that we need not replace the language of moral realism in circumstances when there is a far-reaching agreement about certain values, but that in absence of such an agreement, we are better off expressing moral claims in terms it makes it clear that they are a reflection of our subjective beliefs. Finally, the most pressing open question which I did not answer is what further goals we should promote and what particular norms we should adopt in our conception of morality (political or otherwise), assuming we already care for the interests of

others. This is the ground for much discussion in the framework of moral anti-realism, as it is where the trade-offs need to be made to arrange our moral lives in a more concrete way (and depending on the context).

In this essay I did not aim to establish moral obligations or answer the question of "why be moral?" I have insisted that, regardless of how we resolve the issue of moral motivation conceptually, we are not in danger of becoming immoral by distancing ourselves from the view that at least some moral claims are necessarily true. Human moral instinct develops prior to our ability for abstract reasoning, and it seems highly unlikely that anti-realists would exhibit radical nihilism characterized by lack of scruples in their conduct. I am not in any way advocating that we rid ourselves of the values we already hold, just that they do not have any metaphysical foundation. I have indulged myself to take the condition that there are existing moral people for granted, and that they are, in fact, a majority of any given society; much like the liberals develop their theories for the people who already implicitly share the notion of people as free and equal. There is, I assume, some merit in this approach, as it seems to resemble the actual societies we live in. Likewise, I did not mean to suggest that there is no fact of the matter about what we ought to do in the context of our desires, or which actions are favored by our values. In any instances in which we are clear we are talking about hypothetical imperatives, the use of the language of moral realism might be appropriate. I also find that to deny that all first order moral claims are true is not to deny that there are no broader truths about morality, or truths regarding what people believe.

We might find that the study of morality has its own rewards. Seeking out the nature of moral claims seems like a basic drive of curiosity about that in which we are embroiled from an early age, yet seems quite mysterious and elusive. For the moral anti-realist this inquiry should,

in principle, never stop. Our inability to locate or conceptualize moral properties and their relation with the non-moral world proves only we have failed to do so, so far. The moral realist, on the other hand, is the one who thinks their inquiry has come to an end.

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