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# Saving Moral Realism: Against Blackburn's Projectivism

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SAVING MORAL REALISM: AGAINST BLACKBURN'S PROJECTIVISM

BY

PAUL J. CUMMINS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Philosophy in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015

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This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Philosophy in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

SAVING MORAL REALISM: AGAINST BLACKBURN'S PROJECTIVISM

by

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Adviser: Professor Steven M. Cahn

In the argumentative dialectic between moral realists and non-cognitivist moral antirealists each side in the debate is typically thought to enjoy a different *prima facie* advantage over its rival. Moral realism gains plausibility from its truth-conditional semantics because it can explain the meaning of moral judgments on the same basis as ordinary propositions. However, many moral philosophers doubt moral realism because the theory is committed to the existence of moral properties, which are, in J. L. Mackie's term, "queer." Moral antirealism denies that these moral properties exist, and this is a principal reason why many moral philosophers endorse the theory. However, if moral terms like "good", "immoral", or "right" do not refer to anything, then the meanings of the moral judgments in which they appear cannot be explained with truth-conditional semantics; moral antirealists who wish to preserve moral practice need to develop a semantics that can accommodate it. The general perception of the dialectic is that moral realists have the upper hand in semantics, but a disadvantage in metaphysics, and vice versa for moral antirealists. This essay challenges this assumption.

Simon Blackburn's quasi-realism is one of the principal examples of non-cognitivism, a form of moral antirealism that tries to develop an alternative account of moral semantics in

which the function of a moral proposition is not to express belief but attitude. Quasi-realism is Blackburn's research program of developing a semantics for moral discourse that is consistent with projectivism, the metaphysics of his metaethical theory. After situating Blackburn's project within the history of twentieth century metaethics, this essay reviews Blackburn's quasi-realist semantics and criticizes it. This essay then aims to extend the metaethical dialectic by developing and critiquing an account of Blackburn's projectivism.

This essay interprets projectivism as an explanation of moral awareness that aims to explain the realist phenomenology of that experience when realist explanations of it fail. After developing an account of the mechanism of projectivism, this essay argues that a metaethical theory feature projectivism as its metaphysical element contrasts negatively with moral realism in several ways: e.g., if it postulates new mental states and more events to account for moral awareness, then its ontological economy is less certain; it does not solve a metaphysical problem, supervenience, that moral realism cannot; it is incompatible with desirable features of moral practice; it undermines Blackburn's rejection of error theory. This essay then concludes that when assessing the dialectic between moral realism and non-cognitivist moral antirealism, it is inappropriate to presume a metaphysical advantage for the latter on the basis of the mere denial of the existence of moral properties. This suggests that non-cognitivist moral antirealists need to supplement their theories with more robust metaphysical research programs.

*For Stacia.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since defending my dissertation the preeminent emotion I have experienced is appreciation for all of the support and encouragement that I have received as I worked on this dissertation.

Composing these acknowledgements marks the completion of my preparations to deposit this dissertation; I saved this task for last because it makes me glad to publicly thank the people who contributed to the successful completion of this project.

I have been exceedingly fortunate to have Steven Cahn as my advisor. When I approached Professor Cahn about supervising my dissertation, I came to him with nothing but the bare notion that non-cognitivist moral antirealism is wrong. Professor Cahn helped me to tailor my project to Simon Blackburn's version of moral antirealism, and discussions with him clarified my objections to it. Professor Cahn also demystified the process of researching and writing the dissertation; I have learned so much about scholarship from Professor Cahn, and I doubt I would have ever gotten this project off the ground without his sage advice.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the rest of my committee, Stefan Baumrin and Rosamond Rhodes. Professor Baumrin's generosity in reviewing and commenting on multiple drafts of this dissertation was more than I hoped for or had a right to. Professor Baumrin's comments and references to texts I overlooked were enormously valuable; this work and I have been the beneficiaries of his encyclopedic knowledge of twentieth century philosophy. Between drafts of the dissertation, papers, and talks, Professor Rhodes has reviewed more of my philosophical work than any other person, and her exhortations to clarity ring in my ears; to whatever degree this dissertation achieves the goal of clarity, she deserves the credit. In addition, Professor Rhodes' suggestion to see the vicissitudes of the dissertation process as fun challenges has



buoyed me more than once. I cannot fully express how much my committee's generosity and confidence in me and my project has served as an inspiration; I can only promise that they will be models for my career.

This dissertation also bears the imprint of other members of the Graduate Center's philosophy faculty. The readers of my dissertation, David Rosenthal and Peter Simpson, also deserve thanks; both were incredibly accommodating in scheduling the defense and their questions and comments at the defense have stimulated new ideas to research. My interest in realism-antirealism debates and how to think about them have benefitted from studying with Professors Alberto Cordero, Michael Devitt, and Steven Ross. I am grateful for their influence.

My classmates at the Graduate Center are amazingly bright, and I cannot ignore how the friends I have made have been professionally and personally enriching. I want to thank Jason Altilio, Matias Bulnes, and Jean-David Lafrance. Teaching has been an enormous part of my education at CUNY; when you spend so much time with your classmates as colleagues, you cannot help but learn from them; to my Lehman College officemates, Carl Brownson, Leonard Finkelman, and Chris Sula: thank you, our casual conversations about philosophy and our projects has been formative. I have benefitted from my service as an ethics fellow at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai under Professor Rhodes; discussing biomedical ethics with Nada Gligorov, a Graduate Center alumna, and my classmates, Steven Birnbaum, Katherine Mendis, and Carolyn Plunkett has challenged me to improve as a philosopher. Amanda Favia, Kyle Ferguson, and Lily Frank are also colleagues from Mount Sinai, and we have a shared an affinity for biomedical ethics and metaethics; conversations with them have shaped my thoughts and reinforced my confidence that the questions that interest in me are worth pursuing.

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Without my family’s support and love this dissertation would not have been possible. My brother-in-law, Ryan Casillo, and my parents-in-law, Harry and Kathleen Casillo, welcomed me, a philosophy graduate student, into their family with warmth and encouragement, and I can honestly say my in-laws are great. On each of his birthdays my brother Mark remains the best-read person his age I know, and when I have called him to talk about it he has never failed to impress me with his insights on my dissertation. The hardest part about graduate school is that Mark has been living in Los Angeles for most of it, but even so, I have known his support every day. My parents, John and Mary, are immigrants from Ireland, and I doubt many immigrants have said, “I hope my son becomes a philosopher.” But, what did they expect when argument, in

its best sense, was our family's dinnertime sport? My parents have been unfailingly encouraging of my interest in philosophy; major in philosophy; quit work to do a master's degree in philosophy; pursue a Ph.D. in philosophy? "You will do terrific!" My parents will never know how much their encouragement and the example of their work ethic has contributed to my education. Mom, Dad, Mark I cannot repay you for all of your support, but I hope I make you proud.

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## Introduction

I recently ran into a neighbor and his young daughter who were out for a walk. I asked them how they were doing, and the little girl, excited, replied that she was very happy because she had found twenty dollars on the street. When I asked what she would do with the money, she said she would buy candy for her and her sisters. I said to her, “Giving some of your candy to your sisters is kind.”

This is just one example of making a moral judgment. Some other examples include the following. When I read in newspapers about Jerry Sandusky, the former assistant football coach at Pennsylvania State University, using his charity to groom children to molest, I thought to myself that what he did was bad. I think Victoria Soto, the teacher who threw herself into the line of fire trying to save the lives of her students at Sand Hook Elementary School, was a hero. And, moreover, the tragedy that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School is an example of evil in the world.<sup>1</sup> These are just some examples of moral judgments I have made, and other people make their own moral judgments.

These examples of moral judgment – that giving to others is kind, that sexual contact between children and adults is wrong, that sacrificing one’s life for others is heroic, and that the killing of multiple innocent people is evil – are part of a practice, morality. This practice consists of moral codes that regulate interaction among the members of social and/or cultural groups by

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<sup>1</sup> Some readers may be uncomfortable with my use of the word “evil” to describe this tragedy, or any person, thing, or event in the world, but I want to make use of it in the examples I discuss in this essay. One reason for this is that I think metaethical theories should be able to make sense of the argument from evil for the non-existence of God, and I do not think that the metaethical view I critique in this work can do this. A second reason for this is that “evil” is a word that seems to have a strictly moral use (“sin” might be another example); I find this interesting when compared, for example, with “good”, “bad”, “right”, or “wrong” which have moral and non-moral uses.

prescribing or forbidding certain conduct. So, a moral code might require its adherents to care for the elderly and it might forbid its adherents to take what belongs to others. It also includes ranking the values that are part of the moral code, for example honesty is more important than loyalty. Morality also involves deliberation about whether an action is right or wrong; for example, some wonder whether it is wrong to intentionally conceive biological-related children when there are children without parents who would benefit significantly from being adopted. Morality also involves the inculcation of a code and its values among group members, and so it will involve praising and censuring group members depending on whether they adhere to the moral code. Another part of morality is comparing actions; for example, a subscriber to a moral code may compare killing one's brother to gain his share of an inheritance unfavorably to letting him die, when one can prevent it, to gain his share of an inheritance. Similarly, a moral code may compare people; so a subscriber to a moral code may favorably compare Mother Theresa to Bill Gates, saying, "Mother Theresa is more generous than Bill Gates." And, of course, morality will include assessing actions as morally good or morally bad: giving to others is kind; sexual contact between children and adults is bad.<sup>2</sup> Simon Blackburn uses the term "**moralize**" to refer to engaging in the activities that constitute the practice of morality, and I will adopt this term (Blackburn-1984, 184).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I will simply use evaluative predicates like "good" or "bad" without appending "morally" to the front of them. I assume it will be clear to the reader when I use "good" in a moral sense as opposed to in a non-moral sense, e.g., a good argument.

<sup>3</sup> The term "moralize" marks the introduction of the first piece of jargon in this work. Jargon has its advantages – as the argot of a specific activity, it allows its practitioners to discuss precise or complicated ideas succinctly; however, the use of jargon has the tendency to obfuscate, too. In this dissertation I will include definitions with the introduction of jargon, and all appearances of jargon terms will appear in bold face type to indicate to the reader that the term is a jargon term whose definition can be found in the glossary at the end of this essay.

Moral philosophy is the branch of philosophy that examines the practice of morality, and it is subdivided into three traditional areas: metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Normative ethics is the area of moral philosophy that devises and examines standards for distinguishing good actions from bad ones, and applied ethics is the area that examines the practical implications these standards have for human conduct. These activities don't have to be mysterious to non-philosophers; non-philosophers engage in arguments about the morality of abortion, for example, and they offer reasons for their opinions, and the more thoughtful arguments will involve discussions of what makes those reasons valid. Metaethics is the area of moral philosophy that analyzes this practice and explains what humans are up to when they engage in it; it tries to explain what it is for something to be good, what is the meaning of "bad," or how knowledge of morality is possible. In comparison to normative and applied ethics, metaethics is unfamiliar to non-philosophers.

It is oversimplifying matters to state it this way, but metaethicists trying to make sense of moral practice have traditionally proposed three analyses: **realism**, **constructivism**, and **antirealism**. The **moral realism** analysis of moral practice claims that the practice is about properties that are out in the world, and moral language either accurately or inaccurately describes them; the **moral antirealism** analysis claims that there are no moral properties that are out in the world, and moral language does not attempt to describe them; the **moral constructivism** analysis claims that the practice is about a system of rules that all rational humans consent to, and moral language either conforms to those rules or it does not. Even though metaethics is unfamiliar to non-philosophers, metaethical considerations form the backdrop of a common belief, **relativism**, the view that the sentences of a domain express the same propositions in different contexts, but their truth values can legitimately vary across

contexts, and within moral practice **moral relativism** is the view that moral judgments' truth values must not be identical in all contexts. Many non-philosophers claim that the moral code of one group is as valid as that of another since there are no moral properties.

I do not think this is true; I am a **moral realist**, and I think whether a moral code is valid or not depends on how accurately it reflects the moral properties in the world. One reason that I am a **moral realist** is the Euthyphro problem; I think that it is because giving to others is kind that we call it kind, not that giving to others is kind because we call it kind. Some people are tempted to a **realist** or **antirealist** position about morality because of the practical consequences at stake in the debate. For example, Joshua Greene thinks embracing **antirealism** about morality would help people with different values to get along; he suggests that a person who does not believe there is a single objective, correct answer to a moral question is more likely to compromise on it (Greene, 4-5).

If it is the case that a moral question does not have a single, objective correct answer, several possibilities might still be the case: there are several correct answers to it, and several incorrect answers; all the answers to the question are incorrect; all the answers to the question are correct. In the latter two cases, I suspect a person who believes her answer to the moral question is as good as any other, will not see any reason why her answer should not win out; in the first case, the same situation is probable among the people whose answers are among the correct ones. So, while I doubt that embracing **moral antirealism** will lead to cooperation on thorny ethical problems, I agree that something significant is at stake in the **realism-antirealism** debate over morality; but, I suspect that embracing **moral realism**, appreciating the importance of answering moral questions, and humility is more likely to lead to resolution of thorny ethical problems. Still, I am not very sure of this; a philosophical consensus on **moral realism** is not

likely to make much impression on non-philosophers, and there is no consensus on thorny ethical problems among the partisans of the **realist** and **antirealist** camps, respectively. Still, whether **moral realism** or **moral antirealism** is correct does not depend on the practical benefits of embracing either.

Many moral philosophers criticize **moral realism** because they are suspicious of its metaphysical claim that moral properties are out there in the world; such claims seem ontologically extravagant, and, worse, it seems difficult to make the nature of the properties understandable. As J.L. Mackie would put it, **moral realism** – the view that there are people, acts, circumstances that are good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc., and which would be so if human beings did not think them so, and moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances – is metaphysically queer (Mackie-1977, 38-42). **Moral antirealism** – the view that human beings' experience of people, acts, circumstances as good, immoral kind, deceitful, evil, etc. are not the product of features of the world that are themselves good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc. independent of human beings thinking them so – is attractive to many moral philosophers because they think it is on firmer metaphysical footing than **moral realism** since it denies the existence of these queer moral properties. Ordinarily the meaning of a word is explained in terms of the object in the world that it refers to, but because **moral antirealists** deny that there are moral properties in the world, they must develop a special explanation of the meanings of the words that feature in moral language. Success here has proven to be elusive, but Simon Blackburn's **quasi-realism** is considered a promising version of **moral antirealism** that meets this challenge.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Despite my earlier promise to define jargon terms as they arise, I will defer defining quasi-realism until I begin to discuss Blackburn's view at length. Impatient readers may refer to the



Optimism for the prospects of **quasi-realism** providing an explanation of the meaning of moral language may be warranted or unwarranted. However, I think it is a mistake to emphasize the solution to this problem when assessing the merits of **moral antirealism**. In other **realism** debates about the existence of ordinary physical objects, **antirealists** have to explain why it seems like there are black cats even though there is no such thing. Once **antirealists** do this, the conflict in those debates strikes me as a common sense account of the world versus a mad account of it. I often think the best case for **realism** is its theoretical alternatives, sort of like the best case for not being the Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Champion is seeing what it involves. For example, Berkeley's **subjective idealist** solution to the problem of **skepticism** strikes me as absurd.<sup>5</sup> **Skepticism** is the view that there is not sufficient evidence to support a claim of knowledge in some domain of inquiry. This characterization, which limits the claims to a particular domain, is **local skepticism**; some **skeptics** argue that this is the case for all domains enquiry – they advocate **global skepticism**. Yes, **skepticism** undermines **realism** about the world; I might be under the delusion that there is a computer on the desk before me, and it is not too difficult to motivate this worry. However, if I contemplate the **antirealist** solutions to this **skeptical** worry, they seem worse than the problems that beset **realism**. I would rather live with the problems of **realism**. And, when it comes to morality, the main **antirealist** rivals, **quasi-realism** included, to **moral realism**, beggar my belief. Blackburn has touted the metaphysics of **quasi-realism** as one of the theory's virtues, and I want to subject it to scrutiny in this essay.

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glossary for a definition. In addition, quasi-realism served as an inspiration of other attempts to meet this challenge: see Gibbard, and Horgan and Timmons-2006.

<sup>5</sup> **Subjective idealism** is the view that the only things that exist are minds, and objective reality is dependent on the existence of these minds to perceive it to exist; Berkeley's term for his view was **immaterialism**.

The form that this scrutiny will take is as follows. In chapter 1 I will briefly outline how metaethical inquiry arises; then, I will discuss the **realist** response to this inquiry and G.E. Moore's argument against a particular version of **moral realism**. In chapter 2 I will canvass the historical **antirealist** responses to metaethical inquiry in light of Moore's argument, and then discuss some challenges **moral antirealism**. The aim of the first two chapters is to provide a context for Blackburn's **quasi-realism**, to provide a comparison and contrast for assessing how his theory addresses the questions that motivate metaethics. In chapter 3 I will present and critique how Blackburn explains the meanings of the words that feature in moral language in a way meant to preserve the features of **moralizing**, what is commonly thought to be the principle problem for **moral antirealism**, the view that human beings' experience of people, acts, circumstances as good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc. are not the product of features of the world that are themselves good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc. independent of human beings thinking them so. The main aim there is to show that because **quasi-realism** does not satisfactorily meet this challenge, whatever advantage it has over its **realist** rivals must rest on its metaphysics. Chapter 4 will constitute an original attempt to describe the metaphysics of **quasi-realism, projectivism**.<sup>6</sup> In chapter 5 I will argue that this metaphysics is not better than **moral realism** at explaining the feature of moral practice in which moral properties supervene on natural ones. Finally, in chapter 6 I will argue that this **projectivism** is not developed on respectable naturalistic grounds, which undermines it; and, I will also argue that the **projectivism** and **quasi-realism** combination does not have the resources to preserve features of **moralizing**, which Blackburn wishes to retain in his metaethics. In my conclusion, I will then

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<sup>6</sup> Projectivism is the view that the putative features of a domain do not exist independently of human beings experiencing those features, and that instead they are the products of internal mental processes that produce an experience that the features exist independently of human beings.

point out that if **projectivism** is the metaphysics of Blackburn's **moralizing**, Blackburn faces the challenge explaining why a **projectivist** should not be an **error theorist**, and I will argue that he cannot do so without undermining his claim that **projectivism** is the metaphysics of **moralizing**.

## Part I Metaethics, History, and Blackburn's Semantics

### Chapter 1 Metaethics, and Moral Realism

#### 1.1 Making Sense of Morality: Metaethics

Suppose that a person is interested in understanding the phenomenon of morality. Mark Schroeder proposes that any philosophical inquiry into a phenomenon will be characterized by asking “domain-neutral” “core questions” in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind – these are the questions that a person can ask about all phenomena (Schroeder, 4, 9). Since assessing actions as morally good or bad is the basic example of **moralizing**, let's imagine this person begins by considering moral judgments of the kind discussed earlier. The core questions would be as follows:

Metaphysics: what are moral judgments about?

Epistemology: how do we know about morality?

Philosophy of Mind: how do we manage to think about morality?

Philosophy of Language: how do we manage to talk about morality (Schroeder-2012, 4-8)?<sup>1</sup>

A person investigating morality may notice that the practices of morality and description are on their face similar in the way they are expressed; moral judgments, like, “Sandusky's actions are bad,” seem quite like ordinary propositions, e.g., “The cat is black.” If so, this person is likely to suppose that since ordinary propositions are about reality, moral judgments are about reality, too.

I share the intuition that moral judgments are about reality; this makes me a **moral realist**. I offer the following as a preliminary definition of **moral realism**: the view that there is a moral reality (Shafer-Landau-2003, 13). Despite the *prima facie* plausibility of **moral realism**,

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<sup>1</sup> These questions are not exhaustive of the domain-neutral, core questions, but what further, say metaphysical questions should be asked will turn on the answer to what moral judgments are about.

Schroeder suggest that its difficulty in answering the core questions should undermine the confidence people have in it (Schroeder, 6). There may be something to this; in “Aberrations of the Realism Debate,” Michael Devitt claims that one of the occupational hazards of philosophy is being an **antirealist** about the world.<sup>2</sup> Consider the ordinary proposition “The cat is black.” An antirealist about the world denies that there is anything that is a cat to be black (if black itself is anything at all).<sup>3</sup> I suspect that this view tempts many philosophers because it is difficult to answer the core questions. And the **antirealist** hazard is more extensive than just **antirealism** about the world; philosophers can be, and have been, **antirealists** about **theism** (the view, roughly, that at least one divine being exists), science, numbers, and, of course, morality, this essay’s subject (**antirealism** about morality is, probably, the second most common **antirealism** philosophers believe).<sup>4</sup> I take the unifying element among these various **antirealisms** to be that they all deny that an inventory of the world must include the elements of the domain under consideration to be accurate.

Schroeder argues that several variations on a particular form of **moral antirealism** are attractive because they can dodge the core questions by denying that moral judgments are about anything, and thus denying there are any questions about how we find out, think, or talk about them. Instead these theories can focus on explaining why it is that a person who makes a sincere moral judgment is inclined to act on that judgment. I don’t believe this is correct. For one, these theories also need to explain why it seems to us that there is the phenomenon of morality that initiated this investigation. **Moral antirealists** will probably have to address some of the core

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<sup>2</sup> I offer the following as a preliminary definition of **antirealism**: the view that putative elements of a purported domain do not exist.

<sup>3</sup> It certainly seems that to me when I look at the cat that it is black, so an important part of antirealism will be explaining why it seems that way to me, even though it is not that way.

<sup>4</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that antirealism about **theism** is the most common antirealism among philosophers.

questions to explain why sincerely holding a moral judgment inclines people to act on that judgment. And, if moral judgments are about nothing, then isn't the appropriate response to abandon moralizing, or at least radically revise the practice? If not, then **moral antirealists** will have to address, at least, how we manage to think about and talk about morality, a sophisticated practice in which people are remarkably competent.

Asking the core questions about morality, examining the apparent connection between holding a moral judgment and being inclined to act on it, and explaining why there is the phenomenon of morality constitute the branch of moral philosophy called metaethics. The major debate within metaethics is the one between moral **realists** and **antirealists**.

In order to provide context for Blackburn's theory, I will do the following in the rest of this chapter: outline two distinct, traditional formulations of **moral realism**; describe the advantages and disadvantages of each; explain G.E. Moore's argument against **moral realism**; describe Moore's metaethical theory. Then in the next chapter, I discuss the **antirealist** response to Moore before examining challenges to **moral antirealism**. What I have proposed to do in the next two chapters is, essentially, to review a century's worth of work in metaethics. The constraints of this project preclude a precise analysis of the various positions, so sketches of the views will have to suffice to give a sense of the metaethical landscape out of which Blackburn develops his **quasi-realism**.

## **1.2 Moral Realism, and its Advantages and Disadvantages**

To begin understand the phenomenon of morality I am beginning with the metaphysical question: What are moral judgments about?<sup>5</sup> Earlier I said that a person investigating morality might notice that ordinary propositions and moral judgments seem quite alike. With ordinary

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<sup>5</sup> This prioritization of the metaphysical question is inspired by Michael Devitt's approach to **realism-antirealism** debates in *Realism and Truth* and *Putting Metaphysics First*.

propositions people aim for the proposition to accurately describe the world, i.e., they want to state the facts of how things are – they want to get things right. People who moralize also aim to get things right, and they engage in arguments to prove their moral judgments are right. If this comparison is appropriate, then it seems moral judgments are about moral reality.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.2.1 Characterizing Moral Realism

Approaching metaethics by focusing on the fact that people aim to get their moral judgments right reflects that **moral realism** is a view committed to there being a moral reality. The **realist** answer to the core metaphysical question, what are moral judgments about, is that they are about moral reality, but this does not exhaust the metaphysical questions about morality. Other metaphysical questions are: What constitutes moral reality? What is the nature of moral reality's constituents? The divisions in **moral realism** arise from how **moral realists** answer these questions.<sup>7</sup>

The phenomenon that people are concerned with getting their moral judgments right is likely to guide metaethicists in determining what constitutes moral reality. Since it is typically facts of the matter that people are concerned to get right with ordinary propositions, then it is

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Moral Problem* Michael Smith argues that the central problem for metaethics is addressing the tension between two common features of morality and common view about human motivation: 1. the objectivity of moral judgments; 2. the practicality of moral judgments; 3. the Humean theory of motivation which claims that beliefs and desire are distinct psychological states, and actions are explainable only through these two states – desires reflect how a person wants the world to be, and beliefs tell us how to change the world to make it so (Smith-1994). The objectivity of morality reflects our concern to get things right when it comes to morality, suggesting that moral judgments express beliefs. The practicality of moral judgment reflects that people who have sincere moral judgments are inclined to act on them; this suggests that moral judgments express psychological states that are desires or quite like desires. The Humean theory says that the psychological state expressed by a moral judgment cannot be both a belief and desire. Metaethicists who face the challenge of addressing this tension have to pick one of these views as a way into the problem, and none seem to have a priority; I make my way into the problem through the apparent objectivity of morality.

<sup>7</sup> Any list of the possible positions is likely to exclude some of the more subtle versions because moral philosophers have proposed many different versions of **moral realism**.

probable that it is the moral facts of the matter that people are concerned to get right with moral judgments. If this is so, then **moral realists** will believe that moral reality is constituted by moral facts.<sup>8</sup>

So far, the commitment to the existence of moral facts or moral properties distinguishes **moral realism**, but the distinctions between different versions of **moral realism** lie in the nature of these facts or properties. Some moral philosophers appear to be **moral realists** because they agree that there is a moral reality constituted by moral facts, but they explain that these facts are constructed from an idealized standpoint. These theories are not examples of **moral realism** because in the absence of the idealized standpoint there would be no moral facts to constitute moral reality. So far, **moral realism** is a strictly ontological thesis characterized by endorsement of two claims: (1) the existence of moral facts or properties; (2) their existence is independent of humans thinking about them.<sup>9</sup> **Moral realism** is committed to the mind-independent existence of moral facts or properties.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In an article defending the prospects of one version of **moral realism** Michael Devitt suggests that explaining **moral realism** in terms of objective moral facts may be a mistake since such an explanation would presumably exclude from the ranks of **moral realism** those people who have qualms about the “ontological status of facts.” Devitt proposes that it would be better to explain **moral realism** in terms of there being objectively good/bad persons or actions (Devitt-2010, 185). I think there is something to Devitt’s suggestion, but because so much of the discussion is couched in terms of facts or properties, I will use these terms, too.

<sup>9</sup> Early on in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, J.L. Mackie contrasts **moral skepticism**, what Mackie characterizes as the denial of objective values, with **moral subjectivism**, “the doctrine that moral judgments are equivalent to reports of the speaker’s own feelings or attitudes” (Mackie, 18). For Mackie, **moral skepticism** is the rejection of **moral realism** as outlined above. And in characterizing it as the denial of objective values, Mackie indicates that the view holds that no mind independent moral fact or property exists. He makes this clear when he says that **moral skepticism** is distinguished by the fact that it is a negative doctrine – the objective values people believe exist do not – and an ontological thesis – it is not a thesis about the meaning of moral words (Mackie, 17-18). In *Moral Realism: A Defence*, Russ Shafer-Landau includes **subjectivism** among the moral theories he labels **constructivist** – theories that acknowledge moral reality, but claim it is the output from some constructive mental activity; see for instance Firth, Rawls, Korsgaard, Scanlon (Shafer-Landau, 14). I don’t think Mackie would



It may be unclear what it is for something to exist mind-independently. Some examples of things that exist mind-independently are trees, rocks, or cats. (Of course, some philosophers have denied this, some claiming that these things are constructed out of sense data.<sup>11</sup>) In addition, the nature of mind-independent existence is complicated by the existence of things like tools and cars; these objects would not exist except for human imagination, ingenuity, and invention – all examples of intellectual activity. And, for some normative moral theories like hedonistic utilitarianism (the theory that an action is good if and only if it will produce as much net happiness as any alternative action), it does seem that the moral facts will depend on human intellectual activity, in this case on human happiness. David Brink characterizes mind-independence as the claim that “there are facts of a certain kind that are metaphysically or conceptually independent of the beliefs or propositions which are our evidence that those facts obtain” (Brink-1989, 15). To claim that something exists mind-independently, then, is to claim that its existence is not dependent on whether there is evidence that it exists – its existence is or is not the case. There is little evidence that the Loch Ness Monster exists, but the lack of evidence for its existence is not the cause of its nonexistence; that the Loch Ness Monster does not exist either is the case or it is not the case. The mind-independent existence of an object should be understood to mean that if that object was not the object of thought, or whatever intellectual activity, the object would continue to be part of the inventory of the world. So, a tree has a mind-independent existence because if there were no being observing or thinking about the tree, it would continue to exist. And, a moral fact, that an instance of sexual contact between an

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have any difficulty assimilating this characterization of **subjectivism** into his view since without those feelings moral words would have no meaning.

<sup>10</sup> This characterization of **moral realism** being committed to the existence of moral facts and to their mind-independence reflects Devitt’s claim that realism is characterized by these two commitments (Devitt-2010, 182).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Russell-1914, “On Our Knowledge of the External World.”

adult and a child is evil, would exist even if the act were not the object of any intellectual activity.

If the claim that mind-independent moral facts or properties exist reflects the core of **moral realism**, then another metaphysical question about morality is, what is the nature of a moral fact or property? In *Principia Ethica*, G.E. Moore distinguishes two theories of ethics, naturalistic and metaphysical, which he criticizes; these two theories approximate the traditional versions of **moral realism** (Moore-1903, 91). So far, I have presented **moral realism** as a monolithic theory, but now I will distinguish different versions of the theory by how each explains the nature of a moral fact or property.

### 1.2.1.1 Naturalistic Moral Realism

One form of **moral realism**, **naturalistic moral realism** is committed to the mind-independent existence of moral facts or properties, which are identical to or reducible to natural facts or properties. Moore claimed, “[N]ature’... is the subject of the natural sciences and psychology,” suggesting that natural facts or properties are those studied or established by the natural sciences and psychology (Moore-1903, 92).<sup>12</sup> In distinguishing the natural from the metaphysical, Moore marks the distinction by the former being the object of perception, and the latter not (Moore-1903, 163). One of Moore’s commentators suggests that a natural property is better understood as a causal property (Baldwin, xxii).<sup>13</sup> **Naturalistic moral realism** is best understood as the view

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<sup>12</sup> Brink identifies natural facts or properties as the subjects of the social sciences, too, greatly expanding the disciplines we must consult to get a handle on the possible natural facts or properties to which the moral ones may be reduced or identified (Brink-1989, 22).

<sup>13</sup> Shafer-Landau questions relying on being causal to distinguish the natural properties from those properties that are not because there are putatively natural properties that are not causal; the property of being self-identical is an example of a natural property that is not causal (Shafer-Landau, 58-59). Devitt attempts to capture the connection between natural and causal when he claims that moral facts and properties must be able to play a role in causal explanations (Devitt, 187).

that there are mind-independent moral facts or properties that can be identified with or reduced to facts or properties that are the studied by or identified via the senses, natural sciences, and psychology, and they can play a role in causal explanations. Some historical examples of **naturalistic moral realism** include Aristotle's virtue ethics and Mill's hedonistic utilitarianism. According to virtue ethics, roughly, an action is good if it springs from a virtue within a person, and the virtue is explained as what contributes to human flourishing. According to hedonistic utilitarianism, an action is good if and only if it will produce as much net happiness as any alternative action.

### 1.2.1.2 Metaphysical Moral Realism

**Metaphysical moral realism** is harder to define since it is difficult to cache out what makes a fact or property metaphysical. The difficulty in defining **metaphysical moral realism** is compounded by Moore's proposed version of **moral realism**, which holds that moral properties are non-natural *sui generis* properties and is meant to be an alternative to both versions discussed here. Moore characterizes a metaphysical object as one that is not the object of experience and exists "in a supersensible real world" (Moore-1903, 90). Later, Moore claims that metaphysical objects are investigated by religion, thus contrasting it with natural objects, which are explored by the natural sciences (Moore-1903, 163). This suggests that **metaphysical moral realism** is best understood as the view that there are mind-independent moral facts or properties, undiscoverable by the senses, that can be identified with or reduced to facts or properties that are studied by or identified by religion. This definition does not accurately reflect **metaphysical moral realism** since it is possible to accept the view without holding religious beliefs. A better definition is probably the following: the view that there are mind-independent moral facts or

properties, undiscoverable by the senses, that can be identified with or reduced to facts or properties that are studied by or identified via non-empirical methods.

Still, the elusiveness of defining **metaphysical moral realism** suggests that it is probably best understood by considering examples of the theory. Sometimes the metaphysical is thought to be the supernatural, so, for example, **divine command theory** – the view that moral facts or properties are identified with or reducible to a divine being’s will – is an example of a metaphysical moral theory (Brink-1989, 22).<sup>14</sup> The Platonic theory in which the Good is an eternal, universal Form, and so the moral facts or properties are identified in terms of resemblance to this Form is another example of a **metaphysical moral realism**. Moore cites Spinoza’s moral philosophy as an example of metaphysical ethics; Spinoza thought, roughly, that the good consists in a person’s appreciation of how she is a mode of God. Mary Warnock suggests that an important result of Moore’s work was its refutation of the metaphysical ethics of idealists like F.H. Bradley (M. Warnock, 10). She characterizes Bradley’s view as one that holds that the good is best understood as the realization of the self as a will which is above itself (M. Warnock, 7).<sup>15</sup>

Earlier I suggested that when metaethical investigation begins with the core metaphysical question, “What are moral judgments about,” **moral realism** is an intuitive account of morality.

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<sup>14</sup> Some may challenge the inclusion of **divine command theory** among the examples of metaphysical moral realism since it seems quite similar to **subjectivism**, except that it replaces human approval with divine approval, or **constructivism**, except that morality is constructed out of a divine being’s mental activity. If **moral realism** in general reflects a commitment to the existence of moral facts or properties which exist even when they are the object of no intellectual activity, then **divine command theory** may not be realist since if there were no divine being, there would be no moral facts or properties. On the other hand, it may be appropriate to include **divine command theory** among the examples of **metaphysical moral realism** since it is connected to a metaphysical system with a divine being at its center, the theory is only plausible on the prior acceptance that a supernatural divine being exists.

<sup>15</sup> I will not discuss what a will which is above itself is, but the metaphysical character of it comes through enough to serve as an example.

**Naturalistic moral realism** and **metaphysical moral realism** then are attempts to explain the nature of the moral facts or properties that moral judgments are about. Now, I want to consider the advantages and disadvantages of both of these versions of **moral realism**.

### 1.2.2 Moral Realism: the Advantages

Our attempt to get things right when it comes to morality is a reason to believe that morality is about something that is part of the inventory of the world. That **moral realism** is very easy to motivate is a significant advantage for it over other accounts of morality, and it seems to be a part of the ordinary package of beliefs about the world. However, **moral realism's** answers to two other core questions – how do we manage to think about morality, and how do we manage to talk about morality – are its other advantages.

#### 1.2.2.1 Moral Realism's Advantage in Explaining How We Think About Morality

As I understand it, the question, how do we manage to think about morality, is a question about what kind of mental or psychological state a person having a moral thought is in. The similarity between our ordinary practice of talking about the world and morality – the effort at getting things right – suggests that the mental states in both practices are alike, and because it is generally agreed that the kind of mental state a person is in when she is thinking about the cat on the mat is a belief, **moral realists** claim that a moral mental state is a belief.<sup>16</sup> In metaethics, the view that a moral mental state is a belief is called **cognitivism**.<sup>17</sup> Not all **cognitivists** are **moral**

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<sup>16</sup> I do not think that **moral realists** must be committed to the claim that all moral mental states are beliefs. It seems plausible that there can be moral mental states that are not beliefs; e.g., a wish that wealthy people would do more to relieve poverty may be a moral mental state, even if it is not a belief. One marker, then, of **moral realism** is a commitment that at least some, and probably most, moral mental states are beliefs.

<sup>17</sup> I have introduced **cognitivism** strictly as a thesis about the nature of moral mental states; many moral philosophers would take issue with this characterization. As they see it, **cognitivists** are committed to two claims: (1) the view I have outlined, in which moral mental states are beliefs states; (2) moral judgments express propositions which are truth apt, i.e., suitable for being

**realists**. For example, **error theorists**, like Mackie, agree that moral mental states are beliefs about the world, but they claim that these beliefs fail to accurately reflect the world since there are no moral facts or properties. Another example of an **antirealist** theory that is **cognitivist** is **moral relativism**, the view that the moral status of a person or action is determined by a culture or society's attitude toward it; on this theory moral mental states would be beliefs about what a culture or society's attitudes are, with there being no moral facts or properties independent of humans thinking there are. A similar claim can be made about **constructivism**: the **constructivist** thinks there are true moral judgments, but their truth is established by facts that are dependent on at least one agent's reflection.<sup>18</sup> The persistence of our efforts to get things right in morality suggests that moral mental states are beliefs since in ordinary thought it is beliefs that people try to get right; that **moral realism** has a plausible story about how we think about morality that comports with the commitment to getting it right is a significant advantage of the theory.<sup>19</sup>

Particular characteristics of morality support that moral mental states are beliefs. The manner in which people express most of their moral mental states is, at least on surface grammar,

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assessed for truth or falsity. See, for example, Van Roojen. I reject this characterization for several reasons. First, I think it confuses the core question from philosophy of mind – how do we think about morality – with the one from philosophy of language: how do we talk about morality? Second, it seems that it might be possible to develop a view in which moral mental states are beliefs about how the world is, but moral judgments are not meant to describe how the world is; see, for example, Horgan and Timmons-2006.

<sup>18</sup> Some philosophers might include **subjectivism** among the example of **cognitivist** but **antirealist** theories about morality. They would claim that moral judgments report the speaker's belief about his attitudes. I am doubtful that it should be included for the reasons discussed in the previous footnote.

<sup>19</sup> This advantage might weigh even more heavily in favor of **moral realism** if being a **cognitivist** was a necessary condition for being a **moral realist**, but a position that (i) endorses the existence of mind-independent moral facts and properties, (ii) denies that we have cognitive access to them, and (iii) claims that moral mental states are not belief seems possible, if implausible.

the same as how they express mental states that are indisputably beliefs. For example, the belief that Antigone killed her children is expressed with the sentence, “Antigone killed her children,” and, a moral mental state that sexually touching children is immoral would be expressed with the sentence, “Sexual contact between an adult and child is bad.” People can disagree in ordinary practice – one person may believe that O.J. Simpson killed his wife, and another person may believe that he did not – and, their having incompatible beliefs is what explains the disagreement. People also disagree about morality – one person thinks elective abortion is immoral, and another thinks it is moral; a very natural way to explain this is that their conflicting moral mental states are beliefs. People that disagree about Simpson’s culpability in his wife’s murder often debate each other and they offer evidence in support of their beliefs; people that debate the morality of abortion do the same thing, and this suggests that the moral mental states are beliefs. Ordinary thought and morality are also alike because it is possible to be uncertain whether to accept a belief in each case, and, in turn, withhold acceptance of it. Just as a physicist may be unsure whether she ought to believe loop quantum gravity or string theory and can remain agnostic about each theory, a person may be unsure whether to believe abortion is moral or immoral and sincerely say he is unsure what to believe. Finally, the possibility of doubting belief is connected to this; a physicist may come to doubt her belief in loop quantum gravity, while a person may come to doubt his belief that abortion is immoral.

That **moral realism** is able to account for these features of morality by endorsing a **cognitivist** account of moral mental states is important advantage for it because theories that reject **cognitivism** struggle to account for the same features. Moral theories that reject **cognitivism**, called **non-cognitivist**, must explain the nature of moral mental states, which they typically do by comparing them to mental states that are desires. **Non-cognitivists** are not

committed to moral mental states being desires, but they do believe that whatever they are, they are more like desires than beliefs. This contrast is often explained by the notion of direction of fit; beliefs are meant to fit to the world, while the world is meant to fit to desires. This way of drawing the contrast acknowledges that there is an external world, and humans attempt to get their beliefs to match how that world is, while humans have desires and they try to change the world to satisfy them. For example, I like to drink a beer when I get home from work in the evening, so to get the world to match this desire I buy a six-pack of beer when I do my grocery shopping on Sunday mornings. When I am on the subway home from work and I look forward to drinking the beer, I may wonder if there is still beer in my refrigerator – did my father and I drink the last beers watching the football game? Here I want to make sure my belief – there is still a beer in the refrigerator – is accurate, so I ask myself, did I see a beer in the refrigerator when I got cream for my coffee that morning? If I think my belief matches up with the world, then I do not stop at the market to buy beer on the way home from work.

**Non-cognitivists** claim that a moral mental state is supposed to reflect how its subject means for the world to be. For now, I will use desires as a model for moral mental states. Say a person has the moral mental state reflected by the judgment, “Lying is wrong.” **Non-cognitivists** believe that this reflects that the person has the desire that nobody lie. But, it is difficult to explain how another person with the contradictory moral mental state of desiring that people lie disagrees with first person. And this desire-like account of moral mental states also has trouble explaining how a person can be unsure which moral mental state to accept or can doubt his moral mental state; desires are just the sort of things I have, and the idea of doubting that I have a desire is strange.



### 1.2.2.2 Moral Realism's Advantage in Explaining How We Talk About Morality

Another advantage of **moral realism** is that it has a fairly uncomplicated answer for the core question, how do we manage to talk about morality? **Moral realists** claim that we manage to talk about morality the same way we manage to talk about anything else in ordinary thought because, *prima facie*, language about the world and moral language are the same. Language about the world is typically called descriptive language. People can talk of cats because the word, “cat,” refers to a cat; and I can tell another person that my cat is black by saying, “My cat is black.” The meanings of the words in this sentence are established by being about things in the world. This view that the meaning of a sentence is explained in terms of what they are about is called **descriptivism** (Schroeder-2010, 226). **Moral realists** make the same claim about the meaning of the words in my moral judgment, “Giving candy to your sisters is kind;” they are established by being about things – in this case an action and a moral property – in the world.

There are other *prima facie* similarities between descriptive language and moral language. The surface grammar, or syntax, of ordinary sentences and most moral judgments are similar: they both refer to something in the world and predicate a property of that thing. In addition, for both descriptive language and moral language, it is possible to compose an indefinite number of complex sentences. For example, “My cat is black, and, “My cat is fuzzy,” can be conjoined to create the sentence, “My cat is black and fuzzy.” Similarly, my judgment, “Giving candy to your sisters is kind,” can be combined with “Giving candy to your sisters makes your sisters happy,” to make “Giving candy to your sisters is kind and makes your sisters happy.” Schroeder points out that this phenomenon is composition, and any theory of meaning must be able to account for it (Schroeder-201, 27). Another similarity between descriptive language and moral language is that they both apparently share the same rules of logic: “If

giving candy to your sisters is kind, and giving some of your chocolate to another person is giving candy, then giving some of your chocolate to another person is kind,” is as instinctive an inference as, “If my cat is black, and my car is the same color as my cat, then my car is black.” And, just as a descriptive sentence about a cat is true or false depending on whether it accurately describes the world, a moral judgment is likewise true or false. In ordinary descriptive language the accepted theory of meaning is **truth-conditional semantics** – the theory that the meaning of a sentence is established on the conditions under which it would be true – and **moral realism** is an attractive theory because it can apparently adopt the same theory to explain how we manage to talk about morality (Schroeder-2010, 230).

The advantages of **moral realism** are the following: (1) its commitment to the existence of moral facts or properties is consonant with our moral practice of trying to get matters right; (2) its **cognitivism** is consistent with the fact that moral practice has the same features as our practice about beliefs – it is usually beliefs that people try to get right, the manner in which people express moral mental states is the same as for beliefs, and they can doubt them and remain agnostic about them; (3) its **descriptivism** permits the adoption of a fairly well-understood theory of meaning, **truth-conditional semantics**. Despite these features, **moral realism** does face some problems.

### **1.2.3 Moral Realism: the Disadvantages**

Despite the advantages described above which make **moral realism** a compelling and plausible account of morality, the theory does face drawbacks. One pressing difficulty for **moral realism** is answering the epistemological core question about morality, how do we know about morality? Most people know that sexual contact between an adult and a child is bad, but it is difficult to explain how they know it beyond the explanation that other people told them; the question is

really about how human beings come by moral knowledge at all. In addition, there is the question of what accounts for our confidence that sexual contact between an adult and a child is bad; how can we justify this belief? **Metaphysical moral realism** and **naturalistic moral realism** will answer these questions in different ways; let's consider the answers of **metaphysical moral realism** first.

### 1.2.3.1 Moral Realism's Epistemological Disadvantages

The different versions of **metaphysical moral realism** may equate moral facts or properties to a divine will, resemblance to a universal form, being a mode of a God, or an idealized self. If morality is ultimately understood in terms of one these ideas, then the question of how can we know about morality is a question about how we can have cognitive access to these kinds of things. When knowledge of morality is identical or reducible to knowledge of a divine will is probably the easiest of these explanations to account for: the traditional account is revelation – God reveals His will to certain people who disseminate it. While this is a relatively straightforward account of how we know about morality, it does raise other epistemological issues; e.g., how can a person distinguish genuine revelation from hallucination, or how can she determine which prophets are genuine and which are false? The other versions of **metaphysical moral realism** offer accounts of how we know about morality that raise their own problems. On the Platonic theory of forms, knowing that an action is moral is recognizing its resemblance to the Form of Good, but this is predicated on a prior knowledge of the Form that is innate; explaining how people came to possess this innate knowledge is tricky. Moore's and Warnock's characterizations of Spinoza's and Bradley's theories indicate that knowledge of the good is an understanding of the true nature of reality that is arrived at through reason. The moral knowledge of the latter three theories would be *a priori* knowledge, but it is matter of significant

controversy whether *a priori* knowledge is possible. However, a significant issue for **metaphysical moral realism** is that these accounts of how we manage to know about morality are quite different than the account of how we know about ordinary things. A person knows that baseballs are white and red because of her experiences of seeing baseballs. Most ordinary knowledge is empirical, but in **metaphysical moral realism** moral knowledge is not empirical; the analogy between ordinary practice and moral practice is supposed to count in favor of **moral realism**, but it breaks down here, which is a disadvantage for **metaphysical moral realism**.

Since **naturalistic moral realism** claims that moral facts or properties are identical to or reducible to natural facts or properties, it seems to have the advantage of claiming that people have cognitive access to them through the scientific-empirical way of knowing; but this may actually be disadvantageous for **naturalistic moral realism** because Hume famously objected to **naturalistic moral realism** on the grounds that a person could not detect the viciousness in a willful murder just through observation (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 468-469). **Naturalistic moral realism** has not yet met the significant challenge of explaining how people empirically detect these moral properties. Whatever the prospects of meeting this challenge, an old criticism of **naturalistic moral realism** is that it may not be able to give an account of how moral judgments are justified. Again, it is Hume who raised this problem; he pointed out that it is typical for people to justify moral judgments by pointing to natural facts or properties – e.g., giving to others is kind because it makes people happy, kicking a dog is wrong because it causes pain; people offer a train of “is” statements, and then suddenly introduce an “ought” statement (T 3.1.1.27; SBN 469). Hume’s point is that people, like **naturalistic moral realists**, who make inferences from natural facts or properties to moral judgments, must show how the latter follows from the former. If they cannot, then **naturalistic moral realism** lacks an account of how moral judgments can be justified.

J. L. Mackie raised an epistemological challenge for these versions of **moral realism** as part of the argument from queerness. Mackie assumed that moral facts or properties, metaphysical or natural, are strange kinds of facts or properties because they have a “to-be-pursuedness” inherent in them, and detections of such strange facts or properties would require an unknown epistemic faculty (Mackie, 38, 40).<sup>20</sup>

### 1.2.3.2 Moral Realism’s Metaphysical Disadvantages

So far, I have made it seem that **moral realism**’s disadvantages only lie with epistemological challenges, but it also faces a metaphysical challenge and a non-core challenge. **Naturalistic moral realism** faces a metaphysical challenge to specify just which natural fact or property is the one to which moral properties are identical or reduce; there is no consensus among **naturalistic moral realists**, so it remains an unmet challenge.<sup>21</sup> In addition, **naturalistic moral realism** faces another variation on Mackie’s argument from queerness; the “to-be-pursuedness” of moral properties makes it unlikely that they are natural properties since none of the natural properties discovered, so far, have this quality. **Moral realism** also faces a problem in explaining how our moral judgments track changes in the natural facts or properties; a difference in moral judgments about two sets of circumstances is attributed to differences in the natural facts of those circumstances. This connection is so deep that within moral practice people think something has gone terribly askew when someone judges two situations to be identical in their natural facts or properties, but different with respect to their moral properties. **Metaphysical moral realism**’s prospect for explaining this seems to rest on some sort of epiphenomenal connection between

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<sup>20</sup> The obvious way for **moral realists** to avoid this challenge is to deny that moral facts or properties have this magnetic quality. However, doing so would come with costs since in moral practice, we expect that people who admit, say, that lying is bad, will avoid lying.

<sup>21</sup> The use of the singular of natural fact or property is not intended to claim that only one natural fact property could be the reduction base for moral properties; it is possible that moral properties reduce to multiple natural facts or properties. I am not offering a position on this issue.

moral and natural facts. **Naturalistic moral realism** seems to require the positing of a necessary connection between the natural facts or properties and the moral facts or properties to explain this; this relationship is poorly understood. These metaphysical challenges are typically taken to be significant disadvantages for **moral realism**.

### 1.2.3.3 Moral Realism's Non-Core Disadvantage

One non-core challenge for **moral realism** is connected to the Humean theory of motivation; this theory holds that understanding an action can only be accomplished by identifying a desire that motivates the action and a belief about the best means of satisfying the desire. The main issue here for **moral realists** is that on the Humean picture only a desire can serve as the motive for action, but it seems that a person who makes the moral judgment, "Giving to others is kind," is motivated to give to others. This suggests that a moral mental state is not a belief, but a desire, or something like a desire. If this is right, then moral judgments are not about anything because they do not reflect beliefs. So, a final disadvantage of **moral realism** is that it is at odds with the Humean account of motivation, which the majority of philosophers with an opinion on it support (Bourget and Chalmers).

A comparison of the advantages and disadvantages of **moral realism** does not decisively tip the scale for or against it, but many philosophers have thought that G. E. Moore's open question argument does count decisively against **naturalistic** and **metaphysical moral realism**.

### 1.3 G.E. Moore's Open Question Argument

Moore's open question argument in *Principia Ethica* is the epicenter of twentieth century attempts to refute **moral realism**. In the first chapter of the *Principia* Moore claims that the aim of ethical inquiry is to answer the question, "What is good" (Moore-1903, 54)? And, a successful answer to this question will specify the property that "good" denotes and which is common to all

things called “good” (Moore-1903, 54). Moore contends that the basic question of ethics is what is the definition of “good” (Moore-1903, 57)? Moore points out that moral philosophers may have identified the properties that belong to all the things that are good, but he argues that it is a mistake to think that doing so has defined “good.” Moore argues that ethicists may discover, for example, that all actions that are good are also pleasant, but ethicists would make a mistake if they thought that from this discovery they could either give a definition of “good” as “pleasant” or identify the property of goodness with the property of pleasantness; Moore calls this mistake the naturalistic fallacy (Moore-1903, 62). To demonstrate that doing this would involve a fallacy Moore sets forth the open question argument.

The basic outline of the argument is that “good” either denotes a simple property or a complex property or nothing at all, and if it denotes a complex property, then it is possible to define it via an analytic proposition that breaks down the complex property into its constituent properties; but “good” cannot be defined in this manner because for whatever definition one gives of “good” it is always an open question whether this definition denotes the same property “good” denotes; and, further because this question is open, “good” must denote something.<sup>22</sup> The ultimate point is that attempting to give a definition of “good” that reduces it to natural terms commits the naturalistic fallacy.<sup>23</sup> Because Moore also thinks that attempts to define “good” in metaphysical terms will make the same mistake, he ultimately concludes that “good” denotes a

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<sup>22</sup> If a person attempts to define “good” as “Good is what maximizes happiness,” it is possible to show this attempt is unsuccessful because it is still possible for a person who has understood the meaning of all the words in the definition to ask, “Is what maximizes happiness good?”

<sup>23</sup> The “naturalistic fallacy” actually appears to be a misnomer since it really seems to be a specific example of a more general kind of fallacy. Moore claims that ethical theories that attempt to define “good” in metaphysical terms, e.g., “approved by God,” or identify good with a metaphysical property, e.g., God-approved, are guilty of the same naturalistic fallacy (Moore-1903, 91).

simple *sui generis* non-natural property, and any proposition in which the word “good” features is a synthetic proposition.<sup>24</sup>

Subsequent commentators have interpreted Moore’s argument as decisively refuting **naturalistic moral realism**; to illustrate this putative effect of the argument, I find it helpful to interpret Moore’s open question argument as an experiment which falsifies **naturalistic moral realism**: if **naturalistic moral realism** is true, it would be possible to give a definitive explanation of moral properties in naturalistic terms, but it is not, so **naturalistic moral realism** must not be true. Recall my friend’s daughter’s act of giving candy to her sisters; it has certain natural properties, including among them, increasing the happiness among the sisters, and, at least in my opinion, it also has the property being good. Some **naturalistic moral realists** propose that the act’s increasing happiness and its being good are one and the same property, but Moore believes this is mistaken — they are distinct properties.<sup>25</sup> According to Moore, it is not possible to give an explanation of its being good in these naturalistic terms because for any explanation of the moral property as some natural property, *N*, it remains an open question whether the moral property is *N*. The argument proceeds as follows.<sup>26</sup>

The argument assumes, for the purpose of reductio, that good and happiness maximizing are one and the same property of giving to others. If this is so, Moore argues that “good” and “happiness maximizing” are analytically, or *a priori*, equivalent. However, Moore claims that we

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<sup>24</sup> My presentation of Moore’s open question argument is deeply informed by Stefan Baumrin’s analysis, which I discuss in depth in § 2.3.1.2 (Baumrin-1968). And, in comments on this draft Baumrin has brought to my attention that an important element in Moore’s analysis of “good” is his attempt to prove that synthetic *a priori* propositions are possible.

<sup>25</sup> This identification of goodness with increasing happiness is offered merely as an example.

<sup>26</sup> The explication of the argument here follows the outlines of Michael Smith’s account of the open question argument in his “Moral Realism” as reprinted in *Ethics and the A Priori*. Moore’s argument is typically explained as a rebuttal of definitional naturalistic moral realism (see Miller, 12), but I think that Smith’s presentation of the argument makes it clear that the open question argument can also target attempts to equate moral properties with natural properties.



know “good” and “happiness maximizing” are not analytically equivalent since it is an open question to ask a competent English speaker, “Giving to others maximizes happiness, but is it good?” Asking a competent English speaker, “Giving to others maximizes happiness, but is it happiness maximizing,” or “Giving to others is good, but is it good,” can only yield one answer: “Yes.” Anyone who answered, “No,” would reveal himself to be an incompetent English speaker — these are closed questions. And, it is the fact that these questions are closed that confirms that the properties are analytically equivalent.<sup>27</sup> However, “Giving to others maximizes happiness, but is it good,” is not a closed question; it is an open question since the person who answers, “No,” does not reveal himself to be an incompetent English speaker. These considerations purport to show that “good” and “happiness maximizing” are not analytically equivalent, and they do not identify the same property in the act of giving to others.

The open question argument appears to make a devastating case against **naturalistic moral realism**.<sup>28</sup> **Naturalistic moral realists** cannot respond to any specific iteration of it by claiming that the wrong natural property was identified with good because the open question argument can be applied to the identification of any natural property of giving to others with being good. Whatever natural property a person may try to identify with good will always be subject the open question test; it will always be an open question whether a person or an act with that property is also good. **Naturalistic moral realism** must be false since being good cannot be

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<sup>27</sup> Closed questions are questions whose answers are immediately obvious to anyone who understands the meaning of the words in the questions. Consider the following examples of closed questions: Jane is vegetarian, but does she eat meat; Sam is a bachelor, but is he an unmarried male? Anyone who was unsure of the answer to these would not be a competent speaker of English; we know “vegetarian” and “non-meat eater” and “bachelor” and “unmarried male” are analytically equivalent because all competent English speakers know the answer to these questions right away.

<sup>28</sup> If the open question argument is a devastating argument against **naturalistic moral realism**, then it also refutes **metaphysical moral realism** since it will be an open question whether an act that has a metaphysical property is also good: Giving to others is God’s will, but is it good?

identical to any natural property, and so there cannot be an explanation of good in naturalistic terms. The open question argument as falsifying experiment effectively demonstrates that a crucial element of **naturalistic moral realism**, its prediction that a person or action being good can be explained in natural terms, is false.<sup>29</sup>

#### 1.4 Moore's Non-naturalistic Moral Realism

The twin considerations that “good” cannot be defined in natural terms (or good cannot be identified with natural properties) and that “good” cannot be defined in metaphysical terms (or good cannot be identified with metaphysical properties) should be evidence that **moral realism** cannot be the correct theory of morality. However, it seems that Moore assumed that **moral realism** must be the correct theory of morality, and he reacted to his open question argument by developing a different version of **moral realism**. Moore claimed that since “good” cannot be defined or identified with another property, it must be a *sui generis* non-natural property, which is detected by a special moral intuition.

Moore's **non-naturalistic moral realism** – the view that the goodness, immorality, kindness, deceitfulness, evilness, etc. of people, acts, circumstances cannot be explained in any non-moral terms even though such people, acts, circumstances do have *sui generis* moral

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<sup>29</sup> There are multiple responses to Moore's open question argument, the most promising being the Kripke-Putnam line of attack. Moore's argument turns on the assumption that if two properties were identical, then the terms used for them, “good” and “happiness maximizing,” are analytically or *a priori* equivalent. However, the Kripke-Putnam line on natural kind terms posits that there may be different terms that refer to the same thing even though this is unknown to the users of those terms; the terms refer to something that is necessarily identical to itself, but the equivalency will turn out to be a synthetic, or *a posteriori*, discovery. The Kripke-Putnam line on natural kind terms makes it possible that a person who knows how to use the term “good” and other naturalistic terms might not be aware that they refer to the same property (or properties), only discovering this later through empirical investigation. Whether or not the essence of the open question argument is sound remains a hotly debated matter in metaethics, but the argument does appear to have set the tone for the rest of twentieth century metaethics by putting **naturalistic** and **metaphysical moral realism** on the back foot.

properties independent of human beings thinking they do, and moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances – possesses many of the same advantages and disadvantages as the other **moral realisms**. However, for philosophers who doubt the mind-independent existence of moral facts or properties, it is a convenient target; if Moore’s open-question argument is sound, then **antirealism** about morality can be established by refuting **non-naturalistic moral realism**.

### **1.5 Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented **moral realism** as a *prima facie* plausible response to metaethical inquiry, and then presented Moore’s open-question argument as a significant challenge to it. However, Moore’s own theorizing about morality reflects the pull of **moral realism** – it is hard to shake the feeling that there is something about morality that makes it independent of human beings. So, while Moore’s open-question argument suggests that **naturalistic** or **metaphysical moral realism** are not viable moral theories, his own theory raises metaphysical worries. In the next chapter, I will explain how **moral antirealists** argue against **non-naturalistic moral realism**, and then describe some representative **antirealist** accounts of morality. After that, I will present several lines of argument that challenge the prospects of these **antirealist** theories and revive the plausibility of **moral realism**.

## Chapter 2: From Moral Realism to Moral Antirealism and Back Again

### 2.1 Denying Non-naturalistic Moral Realism

The open question argument's effect on metaethical debate was profound. It practically ruled out **naturalistic** and **metaphysical moral realism** as viable metaethical theories for a generation of moral philosophers; moral philosophers trying to develop a theory of morality faced the choice of pursuing **non-naturalistic moral realism** – the view that the goodness, immorality, kindness, deceitfulness, evilness, etc. of people, acts, circumstances cannot be explained in non-moral terms even though such people, acts, circumstances do have *sui generis* moral properties independent of human beings thinks they do, and moral judgments, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances – or if they wished to maintain their naturalistic *bona fides*, pursuing an **antirealist** account of morality. Because many moral philosophers did wish to preserve their naturalistic *bona fides* **antirealist** theories of morality became quite common, if not the norm.<sup>1</sup>

In the rest of section 2.1 I will present A.J. Ayer's positivist argument against **non-naturalistic moral realism**, which putative success motivated **antirealist** theories of morality. After that I will review different early versions of **expressivism**, which attempt to provide a naturalistically respectable **antirealist** theory of morality. These two tasks occupy the first half of this chapter, sections 2.1 and 2.2; in the second half of this chapter, beginning with section 2.3, I will examine arguments that challenge early versions of **expressivism** and restore **moral realism** as a viable theory of morality. This chapter essentially reviews a half century of

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<sup>1</sup> In "What do philosophers believe?" David Bourget and David Chalmers produce a meta-analysis of the frequency of positions philosophers hold; according to their study, about 56% of philosophers are moral realists, while 28% are **antirealists** and 16% endorse some other position. The results surprised me since, on a personal level, I feel myself to be in the minority in defending moral realism.

metaethics; that subject could easily comprise its own project, so this chapter cannot capture all the nuances of the theories or cover every figure in it, but I discuss it to provide context for understanding the philosophical climate in which Blackburn develops his metaethical theory, which I explore in chapters 3 and 4.

### 2.1.1 Ayer's Argument against Non-naturalistic Moral Realism

A.J. Ayer was one of the earliest philosophers following Moore to propose an account of morality that rejected the options of **naturalistic** and **non-naturalistic moral realism**. Ayer probably best exemplifies Russ Shafer-Landau's claim that the core approach to metaethics in the twentieth century models Moore's argument in which moral philosophy proceeds via argument from elimination: three rival accounts of morality are posited, and two are rejected (56). In *Language, Truth and Logic* Ayer offers arguments against utilitarianism (which stands in for any attempt to identify morality with natural properties) and **intuitionism** – the non-naturalistic theory, which Moore endorsed, that claims “good” cannot be defined or identified with another property, so it must be a *sui generis* non-natural property, which is detected by a special moral intuition. Ayer must have accepted that Moore's open question argument eliminated **naturalistic moral realism** as an option because the argument Ayer presses against utilitarianism is just an application of Moore's: “[S]ince it is not self-contradictory to say that some pleasant things are not good, or that some bad things are desired, it cannot be the case that the sentence ‘x is good’ is equivalent to ‘x is pleasant,’ or to ‘x is desired’” (Ayer, 105).<sup>2</sup> Ayer relies on Moore's argument to eliminate **naturalistic moral realism** – the view that the goodness, immorality, kindness, deceitfulness, evilness, etc. of people, act, circumstances can be

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<sup>2</sup> Ayer's reliance on the open question argument is representative of the **antirealist** camp's attitude towards **moral realism** – they believe the argument effectively rules out naturalistic **moral realism**.

explained in terms of natural properties, identified by the natural sciences or psychology, which are causal or detectable by the senses, and moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances – from consideration, and then he relies on assumptions from **logical positivism** to argue against **non-naturalistic moral realism**.

The **logical positivists** had a criterion for meaningfulness that claimed that a statement could be cognitively meaningful only if it was either analytic (true in virtue of the meaning of the words contained within it) or empirically verifiable (confirmed by experience or science). And Ayer uses this criterion to refute Moore's **intuitionism**.

According to Ayer, the meaning of moral terms is either analytic or empirical. One implication of the open question argument is that it is always an open question whether a definition of a moral term given in natural terms is accurate, and I already pointed out that Moore also admits that attempts to define moral terms in metaphysical terms will also commit the naturalistic fallacy. Moore claimed moral property terms are *sui generis* and cannot be analyzed, and Ayer leans on this to establish that the meaning of moral terms cannot be analytic. If moral terms are meaningful, as Moore apparently assumes they are, but their meaning is not analytic, then their meaning must empirically verifiable. However, Ayer argues that this cannot be possible since on Moore's theory any knowledge of the meaning of moral terms must come via intuition. Ayer argues that intuitions cannot be verified since there is no basis for discriminating among intuitions that conflict: "[U]nless it is possible to provide some criterion by which one may decide between conflicting intuitions, a mere appeal to intuition is worthless as a test of a proposition's validity. But in cases of moral judgment, no such criterion can be given" (Ayer,

106).<sup>3</sup> Ayer uses the open question argument's refutation of **naturalistic moral realism** and the application of the principles of **logical positivism** to show that **non-naturalistic moral realism**

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<sup>3</sup> In *Foundations of Ethics* W.D. Ross refuted Ayer's claim that moral judgments are meaningless. Ross points out, as have I, that Ayer's argument that moral judgments are meaningless turns on the assumption that a judgment is either analytic or empirically verifiable, but not synthetic and *a priori* (Ross-1939, 35). Ross objects that Ayer and his supporters do not offer any proof for this claim, but he will press the case against this view anyway. First, Ross points out that Ayer claims that the putative synthetic *a priori* judgment, "A material thing cannot be in two places at once," is not a statement about the nature of things, but one about the nature of language; it is a necessary claim only because of how we use the words in the statement, but there is no necessary link between words and their meanings – a word could have come to have some other meaning. Ross admits this, but says that once people accept what a word means there is still the question of whether the things picked out by the words have the connections people claim they do (Ross-1939, 35). So, once people settle what they mean by "A material thing cannot be in two places at once," there are still questions if the claim is true, necessary, and synthetic (Ross-1939, 36)?

Second, Ross raises the problem of a statement about an historical event for Ayer's view that if a statement is not analytic then it is an empirical hypothesis about what may be expected in the future, about what evidence will verify the statement. To account for the meaning of statement about a past event Ayer must hold that they are actually rules for predicting the historical experiences that will verify them (Ross-1939, 36). For example, "The New York Mets won the World Series in 1986," is a prediction that anyone who investigates the matter will have experiences that will satisfy him that the Mets won in 1986. Ross is incredulous that a statement about the past is revised to be a statement about the future, but he considers Ayer's claim that the revision is supposed to avoid the commitment that there is an objective past to which the statement corresponds (Ross-1939, 36). Ross points out that if the existence of a past to which a statement corresponds is problematic, it must be equally problematic that the meaning of such a statement is assumed to correspond to an objective future (Ross-1939, 36).

Ross' diagnosis of Ayer and the logical positivists' mistake is that they identify what a statement asserts with what evidence would be grounds for believing the statement is true (Ross-1939, 36-37). The logical positivists deny that moral judgments can have meaning because it is a fact that moral judgments cannot be verified by sensible experience and their commitment that the only synthetic judgments that have meaning are those which can be verified, sometimes even equating the meaning of a synthetic judgment with its verification (Ross-1939, 37). Ross points out that if a statement, "All *As* are *B*," is verified by producing via the senses multiple instances of *As* that are *B*, then the facts which verify the statement are the ones summed up by the statement, which leads to a loose identification of the meaning of the statement with the facts verifying it. But Ross points out there still must be some difference between that which is being verified, the statement, "All *As* are *B*," and that by which it is verified (Ross-1939, 37). Ross points out that sometimes the statement, "All *As* are *B*," is verified by the intermediate recognition that *As* are *C* which implies *B*; in a case like this it is clear that the meaning of the statement cannot be identical to the way it is verified (Ross-1939, 37). Finally, Ross acknowledges that logical positivists do not have to make this mistake, instead they can claim

also fails to make sense of moral terms; with all forms of **moral realism** – and their claims about the meaning of moral terms – eliminated, the only position about morality that appears viable is some species of **antirealism**, that view that the putative elements of the domain do not exist, which claims moral terms are cognitively meaningless because they do not refer to a property in the world.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2 Early Expressivism: Emotivism<sup>5</sup>

Nearly all philosophers, including Ayer, have since rejected **logical positivism**, so the argument presented here against **non-naturalistic moral realism** does not hold up. There are other, better considerations against **non-naturalistic moral realism** – its inability to explain the mechanism of intuition by which we have knowledge of non-natural moral properties, its inability to account for the **supervenience** of the moral on the natural (Smith-2000a, 193-194) – but Ayer’s argument and his subsequent formulation of a **non-cognitivist** account of morality was incredibly influential in establishing a research paradigm for **antirealists** about value: provide

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that no statement can have a meaning unless it is analytic or verifiable. The claim, “All meaningful statements are either analytic or empirically verifiable,” is obviously not analytic, and Ross points out that we can never know by sense experience that a statement has no meaning that we cannot verify by sense experience. So, if the theory is true, then the statement of the theory cannot be verified, so the statement and the theory are meaningless (Ross-1939, 38).

<sup>4</sup> Shafer-Landau characterizes the procession of Moore’s argument as first postulating three possibilities — moral terms have naturalistic meanings, moral terms have *sui generis* moral meanings, or moral terms have no meaning — and, then, dismissing the last without argument, using the open question argument to refute the first (56). Ayer believed he established that moral terms are meaningless, so he would challenge Moore’s flat dismissal of the possibility that they are so.

<sup>5</sup> In an interview Blackburn expresses sympathy for **emotivism** (Dall’Agnol, 102). Initially, I did not put much emphasis at all on this sympathy, but Mark Schroeder’s analysis of the **emotivists’** common focus on the function of language made me reassess their importance in situating Blackburn’s view. Schroeder’s chapter “The Noncognitivist Turn” in *Noncognitivism in Ethics* influences the discussion of their views in this section.



an account of moral practice that is consistent with **non-cognitivism**, the view that the mental states expressed by moral judgments are not beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

Ayer points out that rebutting non-naturalistic, intuitionist theories of morality, like Moore's, was an important part of shoring up the **logical positivists'** project (Ayer, 106). But he then admits that **logical positivists** are in a difficult position since they have also rejected the naturalistic alternative to **intuitionism**; **logical positivists** need to give an account of morality that is compatible with "radical empiricism" (Ayer, 107).<sup>7</sup> Ayer's view, and others that share its central features have come to be called **emotivist** theories.

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<sup>6</sup> Supervenience is the relation by which one level of properties is connected to another level of properties in which the second level of properties determines the first level, but the first level is not reduced to the second level of properties; the rough idea is that if one level of properties *A*, supervene on another level of properties *B*, then for any two things that are identical at the level of *B* properties, they are also identical at the level of *A* properties. In moral philosophy, Hare is credited with introducing the term to characterize the relation between moral properties and psychological and/or natural properties. However, as early as 1922, Moore had introduced the notion of supervenience, but not the term, "supervenience," to moral philosophy in "The Conception of Intrinsic Value":

[I]f a given thing possess any kind of intrinsic value in a certain degree, then not only must that same thing possess it, under all circumstances, in the same degree, but also anything *exactly like* it, must, under all circumstances, must possess it in exactly the same degree. Or to put it in the corresponding negative form: It is *impossible* that of two exactly similar things one should possess it and the other not, or that one should possess it in one degree, and the other in a different one" (Moore-1922, 261).

<sup>7</sup> I do not think this is a real difficulty for Ayer and the logical positivists; they could extricate themselves from this problem by being **eliminativists** about morality. This is a point that I will return to later in the essay, but I think the real difficulty for Ayer, and Blackburn and other **non-cognitivists**, is explaining why if moral properties do not exist as either natural or non-natural ones, they still find it necessary to provide an account of moral practice, rather than calling for us to abandon it. I grant that it is a matter of intellectual interest to determine what kind of meaning moral language can have if it is cognitively meaningless, but it is strange that the interpretations that **non-cognitivists** propose leave moral language as *meaningful*.

### 2.2.1 Ayer

According to Ayer, ethical terms are cognitively meaningless because they are “pseudo-concepts” that do not add any “factual content” to the statements in which they appear (Ayer, 107). On this view, a moral judgment like, “You acted wrongly in stealing that money,” does not include any description of the situation over and above the simpler statement, “You stole that money” (Ayer, 107). Ayer’s view has been called **emotivism**, the view that a moral judgment expresses a mental state identified as a feeling or emotion rather than a proposition.<sup>8</sup> A person who utters the moral judgment rather than the simpler statement is not adding a further fact to the description of the scenario that the simpler statement offers. Instead, all the moral judgment does is express the attitude toward stealing of the person who utters it: “It is as if I had said ‘You stole that money,’ in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks” (Ayer, 107). Mark Schroeder explains this idea by contrasting the effect of adding “quickly” or “wrongly” to the simple statement, “You stole that money.” To say, “You acted quickly in stealing that money,” does add more to the simple statement, it does add a further fact to the description of the scenario by describing how the act of stealing was accomplished; in contrast, the addition of “wrongly” does not describe how the act of stealing was accomplished (Schroeder, 21-22). On Ayer’s view, the addition of “wrongly” to the simple statement serves to express the attitude of the utterer to stealing. Schroeder suggests an apt

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<sup>8</sup> In subsection 2.2.4.2 I note that Schroeder points out that it is their emphasis on the function of moral language that distinguishes Ayer, Stevenson, Edwards, and Hare’s theories of morality, and the various versions of **moral antirealism** that argue that an essential element in the meaning of moral language is its function apart from any descriptive content that is part of its meaning are known collectively as **expressivism** (Schroeder, 34). To use the term “**emotivism**” to refer to the views of Ayer, Stevenson, Edwards, and Hare is something of a misnomer since it suggests that their views simply claim that to understand the meaning of moral language all one needs to attend to is emotion. I will refer to them and their views as early **expressivists** and early **expressivism**, and I will only use the terms “**emotivist**” or “**emotivism**” when quoting other works.

comparison is to the function interjections like “heck” (or more profane ones) play in adding “meaning” to questions (Schroeder, 22); e.g., in “What the heck do you mean,” the addition of “the heck” adds something new to the question, “What do you mean?” It does not add any content to the question, but it can convey that the person asking the question is confused, annoyed, etc.

Blackburn has noted, “Emotivism is sometimes called the ‘boo-hooray’ theory of ethics” (Blackburn-1984, 167). He once took advantage of this characterization to use boo (B!) and hooray (H!) operators to develop a moral semantics compatible with **projectivism**, the view that the putative features of a domain do not exist independently of human beings experiencing those features, and that instead they are the products of internal mental processes that produce an experience that the features exist independently of human beings.<sup>9</sup> This notion of boo and hooray operators can help to further elucidate Ayer’s claim that moral terms do not add any factual content to a statement. Here are a couple of simple statements and two statements corresponding to moral judgments:

S1: Megan gives to her sisters.

S2: James takes from his brothers.

M1: Megan rightly gives to her sisters.

M2: James wrongly takes from his brother.

On the boo-hooray characterization of Ayer’s **expressivism**, M1 and M2 obscure the real grammar of the propositions they are meant to express by making it appear that some factual content has been added to S1 and S2. The boo-hooray version of Ayer’s **expressivism** claims that we would not make the same mistake if we appreciated that M1 and M2 are better understood as follows:

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Blackburn-1984 and Blackburn-1988b.

AE1: H! |Megan giving to her sisters|  
AE2: B! |James taking from his brother|.

Ayer points out that individual moral judgments can be generalized, and this is another way that the grammar of moral judgment makes it seem like moral terms add something cognitively significant. The generalized versions of M1 and M2 make it appear like a genuine property is being predicated of giving and taking:

M3: Giving is good.  
M4: Taking is bad.

However, the boo-hooray version of Ayer's **expressivism** claims that there should not be this confusion, if M3 and M4 are interpreted as follows:

AE3: H! |Giving|  
AE4: B! |Taking|.

The key insight for an **expressivist**, someone who thinks that the meaning of moral judgments cannot be explained without reference to their function apart from any descriptive content that is part of their meaning, like Ayer is that within moral practice the function of moral judgments – despite their appearance of representing the world – is to express attitudes toward acts or person; as such moral judgments are not descriptions of the way the world is, and so they are not truth evaluable.<sup>10</sup>

### 2.2.2 Stevenson

Ayer's contemporary Charles Stevenson also advanced an early **expressivist** account of moral language. Ayer makes clear that his theory is not a version of **subjectivism** because in **subjectivism** moral language describes the attitude of the utterer, while on **expressivism** moral

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<sup>10</sup> Ayer was careful to distinguish his version of **expressivism** from **subjectivism**, the view that moral judgments describe their utterers' attitudes; a significant difference between the two theories is that in **subjectivism** moral judgments can be true or false since they either accurately or inaccurately describe the utterers' attitudes.

language does not describe anything, it is a cognitively meaningless expression of attitude.

Stevenson develops a less extreme position. He claims that **subjectivism** is mistaken to propose that moral language is exhausted by the description of its utterers' interests (his word for attitudes); instead the main purpose of moral language is to influence other people. Moral language does not merely describe people's attitudes to actions, it also intensifies those attitudes and recommends that other adopt the same attitudes (Stevenson-1937, 18-19).

In *Ethics and Language* Stevenson proposes two patterns of analysis for roughly capturing the meaning of moral language. On his first pattern of analysis, a statement like M3 should be interpreted as follows:

SE3.1: I approve of giving, do so as well.

Stevenson is willing to grant that a moral judgment like M3 is descriptive of the attitude of the utterer and also about the action of giving of which the utterer approves (Stevenson-1937, 18).

However, M3 also has another, more important function; it is meant to influence those who hear it to adopt the same attitude of approval to giving. The second pattern of analysis interprets M3 as follows:

SE3.2: Giving has the quality of increasing the happiness of many people.  
(Accompanied by a laudatory emotion.)

Stevenson writes, “‘This is good’ has the meaning of ‘This has qualities or relations X, Y, Z...,’ except that good has as well a laudatory emotive meaning that permits it to express the speaker’s approval, and tends to evoke the approval of the hearer” (Stevenson-1944, 207). On this second pattern of analysis “good” is like a persuasive definition which evokes the association of giving to others with increasing happiness, or kindness or whatever else might stand in for the variables X, Y, Z. The idea here is that this usage of “good” associates the act of giving to others with some description of it, which the utterer approves, and the hearers are supposed to come to

approve of giving to others because it has those praiseworthy characteristics.<sup>11</sup> Stevenson's version of **expressivism** augments **subjectivism** while Ayer's rejects it.

### 2.2.3 Edwards

In *The Logic of Moral Discourse*, published in 1955, Paul Edwards independently proposed an early version of **expressivism**, the view that the meaning of moral judgments cannot be explained without reference to their function apart from any descriptive content that is part of their meaning, which is quite similar to Stevenson's version. Three questions motivate Edwards' investigation of moral discourse:

- (1) What is the meaning, more broadly, what is the function of moral judgments?
- (2) What kind of disagreement is moral disagreement?
- (3) Are moral arguments whose premises do not include any moral judgments ever valid (Edwards, 20-21)?

Edwards' intention, similar to Ayer and Stevenson's, to include the function of predicates or statements in their meaning is immediately apparent, and he distinguishes three senses of meaning for a statement, *s*: (i) the facts whose existence one asserts in uttering *s*; (ii) what one intends to achieve in uttering *s*; (iii) anything that can be inferred about a person, given general knowledge about human psychology, from his utterance of *s* (Edwards, 21).

Edwards' explanation of moral discourse turns on a comparison to meaning in taste discourse. He famously proposes to analyze the meaning of "The steak at Barney's is rather nice" (Edwards, 105). Edwards claims that when a person calls a steak "nice" she is referring to the steak's features – whatever they may be, since some people prefer different features of a steak, e.g., rare or well-done – which evoke in her an appreciation for the steak (Edwards, 110). So, while it is the person's taste that fixes the features that "nice" refers to, "The steak at

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<sup>11</sup> The evocative element in the meaning of moral language is especially important in Stevenson's theory of moral language because he thinks that for many moral disagreements resolution cannot be achieved through reason, but only through persuasion (see Stevenson-1948).

Barney's is rather nice," is an objective claim because it refers to features that are present in the steak (Edwards, 110). So far, this analysis of the statement's meaning corresponds to the sense of meaning (i) in the previous paragraph. Edwards points out that if someone asked this steak-lover why she thinks it is nice, she would answer by referring to the features which evoke appreciation, e.g., it is rare, well marbled, tender, etc., but he also cautions that this should not lead people astray into believing that the steak's niceness is over and above this.<sup>12</sup> People should not make this mistake because they should also notice that "The steak at Barney's is rather nice" also expresses the person's gustatory appreciation of the steak and there can be reasons for an attitude like appreciation, which corresponds to sense of meaning (iii) in the previous paragraph (Edwards, 111).

Edwards claims that for any taste evaluation, "X is nice," where "X" is replaced with the name of a food, the statement's meaning involves both the reference to some feature(s) of the food and the appreciation the feature(s) evoke in the person who makes the statement (Edwards, 118). Edwards also points out that because different features of different foods evoke appreciation towards them in people, the meaning of "nice" in "X is nice" will change with variation in "X"; in fact, the features that "nice" refers to in the same food may vary from person to person because people have different tastes (Edwards, 118).

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<sup>12</sup> Edwards returns to this distinction later, when he insists, on the following about the steak being nice:

- (i) the niceness belongs to, is "located" in the steak, not in me or my feelings;
- (ii) the niceness of the steak is *not* identical with any one or any one set of nice-making characteristics;
- (iii) although niceness is objective there is no feature or set of features to which one can point and say, 'This is niceness';
- (iv) nevertheless niceness is not something distinct from or over and above these features – it disjunctively refers to an indefinite set of terms (Edwards, 120).

When Edwards shifts his attention to moral discourse he proposes to expressly compare the function of terms like "good" that apply to actions or characters to "nice" as it applies to food. Edwards claims that "good" and "nice" are alike in being objective because they both refer to characteristics of the thing being judged, and they are polyguous – different cultures, and different people within a culture, refer to different characteristics when they call something good or nice (Edwards, 141–142).<sup>13</sup> Edwards presses the comparison when he reemphasizes his point that while his taste determines the features in a steak that "nice" refers to, when he says, "The steak at Barney's is rather nice," the statement refers to the steak and not his taste (Edwards, 147). Edward says that when he judges, "X.Y. is a good person," it is similar to the case of taste; X.Y.'s gentleness, truthfulness, freedom from envy evoke a appreciation for X.Y. in Edwards, but in the statement he refers to those features and not his approval (Edwards, 147). Edwards insists that "*the referent of the moral judgment is determined by the speaker's attitude, but it is not the attitude*" (Edwards, 148).

Edwards' analysis is similar to Stevenson's second pattern of analysis discussed in subsection 2.2.2, but Edwards draws a distinction between their views. Edwards points out that the kind of analysis that Stevenson puts forward only permits resolution of a moral disagreement, which Edwards analyzes as disagreement in attitude, via the parties' convergence on one attitude (Edwards, 27-28, 180). This is unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, any reason that would move one of the parties to align his attitude with the other party's attitude would be a valid one in a moral argument (Edwards, 180). Second, it overlooks another possibility for resolving this disagreement: the properties that evoke the differences in attitudes, and to which the terms "good" and "bad" refer in the statements expressing these attitudes, either are or are not present.

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<sup>13</sup> Earlier in *The Logic of Moral Discourse* Edwards defines a "polyguous expression" as "any term which has a large number of referents" (Edwards, 74).



So, the disagreement can be resolved by noting that the features one party claims are present in a person or action, actually are not (Edwards, 181-182). Edwards believes his account of morality is superior to Stevenson's because it includes this method for resolving moral disagreement.

However, Edwards also includes room within his theory for fundamental moral judgments that people cannot support by pointing to features of a person or action that evoke the attitude, but he insists that these kinds of moral judgments only have emotive meaning and are very rare (Edwards, 189-190).

#### **2.2.4 Hare**

R. M. Hare developed a version of **moral antirealism** that, like Ayer, Stevenson, and Edwards', puts the focus on the function of moral language; and although he is explicitly sympathetic to Ayer and Stevenson's projects, Hare does criticize their proposals. Hare thinks that the best way to know a person's moral commitments is to observe her actions, what she does when she knows the facts of a situation and has to choose among alternative actions; her actions answer the moral question, "What shall I do" (Hare-1952, 1)? Observing a person's actions is the best way to determine her moral commitments because the function of moral judgments is to guide conduct, or to tell people what to do. According to Hare, moral language is a subspecies of prescriptive language, and it is comparable, though not reducible, to imperative language, which is also a species of prescriptive language (Hare-1952, 2).

##### **2.2.4.1 Hare's Criticism of Ayer and Stevenson**

Hare thinks that Ayer makes a mistake in explaining moral language's meaning by linking it to the function of "evincing" our feelings (Hare-1952, 10; Ayer, 107). This characterization suggests that moral judgments are made when an emotion wells up inside a person, and no longer able to suppress it, the emotion erupts from us in the form of an imperative. Hare

dismisses this possibility because it would not be able to account for the meaning of the imperatives that compose a list of instructions for building a bookshelf, for example. In addition, Hare doubts Stevenson's analysis that part of the meaning of a moral judgment is a description of the attitude of the utterer because it is difficult to characterize the attitude; to say somebody has an attitude of "moral approval" is to say that she thinks something is right, but Hare complains that this does not explain what she thinks when she thinks something is right (Hare-1952, 11). And, if we don't know what a person thinks when she thinks something is right, then we can only understand her moral judgment, if we already know what the judgment means.

Hare thinks the most significant problem in Ayer's and Stevenson's theories is their emphasis that the function of moral language is to influence people. Hare agrees that when we make moral judgments we want the person who hears them to act accordingly, but Ayer's and Stevenson's views suggest that the moral judgments are meant to causally affect hearers, so that moral judgments *get* hearers to do something (Hare-1952, 13). Hare distinguishes between *telling* someone to do something and *getting* someone to do something (Hare-1952, 13). If a person wants to get someone to act, then he can use rhetoric, propaganda, threats, etc. to get her to do so; moral judgments offer people guidance, they tell someone what to do – once a person has been told what to do, she can act on it or not, but she has not been influenced to act or not to act (Hare-1952, 14-15).<sup>14</sup> Hare points out that the implication that moral language should be causally effective was the source of a major objection to Ayer and Stevenson's theories – they make moral discourse irrational since any method that succeeds in getting people to conform to moral judgments will be a legitimate one.

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<sup>14</sup> Hare underlines the difference between indicative (descriptive) language and imperative language earlier in *The Language of Morals*: "An indicative sentence is used for telling someone that something is the case; an imperative is not – it is used for telling someone to make something the case" (Hare-1952, 5)

#### 2.2.4.2 Hare's Account of Morality

As noted in subsection 2.2.4, Hare thinks a moral judgment is a form of imperative, or command, and he points out that statements and commands are actually more alike than usually supposed; they both tell somebody something in answer to a rational question, and both can be governed by logical rules (Hare-1952, 15-16). Statements and commands are similar because they contain a “*phrastic*” element – what the sentence is about; the sentences

H1: You are going to shut the door,

and

H2: Shut the door,

are both about the same thing:

HP: Your shutting the door in the immediate future (Hare-1952, 17).

HP represents the *phrastic* element that is common to H1 and H2, but H1 and H2 also each contain a “*neustic*” element – the mode of assent to the *phrastic* element – that is different for each sentence. To represent the *neustic* element of H1 in HP, add “yes” to the end:

HPS: Your shutting the door in the immediate future, yes.

And, to represent the *neustic* element of H2 in HP, add “please” to the end:

HPC: Your shutting the door in the immediate future, please.

HPS and HPC reflect a full representation of the *phrastic* and *neustic* elements in H1 and H2, respectively, with the *phrastic* element demonstrating how they are similar, and the *neustic* element demonstrating how they are different: assent to H1 is a matter of believing HP, and assent to H2 is a matter of doing HP (Hare-1952, 18-20).

Hare draws on the common *phrastic* element between statements and commands to try to demonstrate the rules of logic apply to both. He claims the negation of H1, “You are not going to shut the door,” should be represented as

HPSN: Your not shutting the door in the immediate future, yes.

The negation, the logical connective, is part of the *phrastic* element, so the negation of H2 should be represented as

HPCN: Your not shutting the door in the immediate future, please (Hare-1952, 20).

Hare contends that the other logical connectives – if, and, or – are also parts of the *phrastic* elements of a sentence (Hare-1952, 21). So, Hare’s proposal is that since the logical connections between sentences lie in their *phrastic* elements, if sentences contain *phrastic* elements, they can be logically connected or not, and commands do have *phrastic* elements, so commands can be logical. If moral judgments are or entail imperatives, commands, then they can be logical, too.

Hare goes on to argue that a moral judgment is a special kind of imperative, which involves a descriptive content and a prescriptive content. The prescriptive content is the imperative, which has the function of guiding or telling a person what to do and can feature in logical connection. The descriptive content describes the facts of the situation, which, due to a feature Hare calls supervenience, universalizes the prescription to all situations with the same facts.<sup>15</sup> Hare shares Stevenson and Edwards’ insight that to understand the meaning of moral

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<sup>15</sup> As noted in footnote 6, supervenience is the relation by which one level of properties is connected to another level of properties in which the second level of properties determines the first level, but the first level is not reduced to the second level of properties; the rough idea is that if one level of properties *A*, supervene on another level of properties *B*, then for any two things that are identical at the level of *B* properties, they are also identical at the level of *A* properties. Hare introduced the term “supervenient” to call attention to the peculiar feature of evaluative terms like “good” that they cannot be applied only to one of two objects that are alike in all characteristics (Hare-1952, 80).

judgments, **antirealist** moral philosophers must focus on more than the descriptive content of those judgments, they must also focus on their function. Hare though identifies an imperative function in moral judgments, which he uses to establish a rational basis for moral discourse by comparing imperative sentences to indicative ones and claiming that they both have a *phrastic* element, which is the locus of logical connections. Hare draws on the descriptive content to explain how moral judgments are universal prescriptions; they prescribe the same action when the facts of a situation are the same.

Ultimately, it is the emphasis on the function of moral language that distinguishes Ayer, Stevenson, Edwards, and Hare's theories of morality: "What the theories in this family have in common is the idea that to understand the meaning of moral words like 'wrong' and 'good' we need to understand that they have an importantly different *kind* of meaning from ordinary non-moral words" (Schroeder 34, italics original). The various versions of **moral antirealism** – the view that human beings' experience of people, acts, circumstances as good, immoral kind, deceitful, evil, etc. are not the product of features of the world that are themselves good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc. independent of human beings thinking them so – that argue that an essential element in the meaning of moral language is its function apart from any descriptive content that is part of its meaning are known collectively as **expressivism**. Whether **expressivism** is conceived as Ayer, Stevenson, Edwards, or Hare does, the element common to all is that the meaning of moral language cannot be explained as description alone; on every characterization, to understand the meaning of moral language we must pay attention to its function.

### 2.3 Cognitivism Revitalized

Schroeder suggests that when Hare was writing *The Language of Morals* he took it for granted that a **non-cognitivist** theory of morality must be correct, the challenge for moral philosophers being determining which one (Schroeder, 31). The ascendance of **non-cognitivism** – the view that the mental states expressed by moral judgments are not beliefs – through the nineteen-fifties should be attributed to the presumption of naturalism against **non-naturalistic moral realism** and to the assumption that Moore’s open question argument had cleared **naturalistic moral realism** – the view that the goodness, immorality, kindness, deceitfulness, evilness, etc. of people, acts, circumstances can be explained in terms of natural properties, identified by the natural sciences or psychology, which are causal or detectable by the senses, and moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances – from the field of possible accounts of morality. William Frankena’s argument that that the open question argument begs the question in rejecting **naturalistic moral realism** was one of the first challenges to the assumption that Moore’s open question argument was sound. Other challenges to the open question argument would soon follow. These challenges denied that the field of metaethical theories was cleared save **non-cognitivism**, but the Frege-Geach problem was a direct challenge to the plausibility of developing a complete **non-cognitivist** account of morality. Despite these challenges I would argue that most moral philosophers still think **non-cognitivism** holds a dialectical advantage against **moral realism**, the view that there are people, acts, circumstances that are good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc., and they would be so if human beings did not think them so, and moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances. In section 2.3 I will present considerations meant to undermine confidence in **non-cognitivism**.

### 2.3.1 Arguing Against the Open Question Argument

Moore thinks that anyone who attempts to define a moral term in natural terms is guilty of the naturalistic fallacy. At the heart of Moore's argument for this is the premise that for any natural property (really any property since Moore's argument applies against metaphysical theories of ethics, too) it is always an open question whether something that has that property is good.

William Frankena criticized this premise as begging the question against **naturalistic moral realism**: "the fallaciousness of the naturalistic fallacy is just what is at issue" between Moore and **naturalistic moral realists** (Frankena, 465). Stefan Baumrin challenges the open question argument for not establishing what it aims to: that "good" is simple and denotes something (Baumrin-1968).

#### 2.3.1.1 Frankena

Frankena begins his criticism by noting that the naturalistic fallacy is associated with the "bifurcation between the 'ought' and the 'is', between value and fact, between the normative and descriptive" (Frankena, 466). Frankena proposes that Moore understands the bifurcation to mean

(1) Ethical propositions are not deducible from non-ethical ones.

Moore is correct to object when moral philosopher violate (1), and if this was all that Moore took the naturalistic fallacy to be, then his criticism of a philosopher making this move would be valid, but Frankena claims that Moore is also committed to understanding the bifurcation to mean

(2) Ethical characteristics are not definable in term of non-ethical ones,

and

(3) Ethical characteristics are different in kind from non-ethical ones (Frankena, 467).

Frankena points out that since (2) entails (1) and (3) entails (2), (3) is the core of Moore's position.

Frankena notes out that the violations of (1) cannot be what Moore has in mind for the naturalistic fallacy since to infer (c) from (a) -

(a) Pleasure is sought by all men

(c) Therefore, pleasure is good -

is fallacious, and not because an ethical term occurs in (c), but not (a). This is a garden-variety invalid inference of the form, "A is B, therefore A is C" (Frankena, 468-469.) Most arguments like this are not truly invalid; they are enthymemes with a suppressed premise. Frankena notes that the suppressed premise can be an "induction, an intuition, a deduction from a 'pure ethical argument,' a definition, or a proposition which is true by definition, and if it is one of the first three, the argument will not violate (1) because one of the premises will be ethical (Frankena, 468). However, since Moore has judged some valid arguments to be instances of the naturalistic fallacy, Frankena examines arguments where the suppressed premise is a definition or a proposition that is true by definition. He supplements the argument above with premise (b):

(a) Pleasure is sought by all men.

(b) What is sought by all men is good (by definition).

(c) Therefore, pleasure is good.

If committing the naturalistic fallacy violates (1), does this argument violate it? The answer to this question turns on whether (b) and (c) are ethical propositions (Frankena, 469).

In order to violate (1), (b) must be a non-ethical proposition, and (c) must be an ethical proposition. To suppose though that (b), which is a definition, is non-ethical is to assume that ethical terms cannot be defined, which is what Moore is trying to establish. Without a reason to think (b) and (c) can be different kinds of propositions, non-ethical and ethical, respectively, they



must both be the same kind of proposition in the argument, and the argument does not violate (1) (Frankena, 469). However, since Moore thinks an argument like (abc) does commit the naturalistic fallacy, the naturalistic fallacy is not simply the violation of (1). Frankena claims that for Moore it is the presence of (b) in the argument that involves the naturalistic fallacy; what “(b) involves [is] the identification of goodness with ‘being sought by all men’, and to make this identification or any other such identification is to commit the naturalistic fallacy” (Frankena, 469). The naturalistic fallacy is defining natural characteristics as goodness or substituting some other characteristics for goodness (Frankena, 470).

Frankena then cites some passages from Moore in which Moore explains that the so-called naturalistic fallacy applies to other terms, too; e.g., defining pleasure as the sensation of red commits the same fallacy (Frankena, 470; Moore-1903, 65). Frankena concludes that the putative mistake in the naturalistic fallacy is not the mistaken identification of good with a natural property, but the general mistake of confusing or identifying two distinct properties, or defining one property by a second distinct property, or substituting one different property for another (Frankena, 471). The mistake is treating two properties as one, and Frankena calls this the definist fallacy.

Frankena accepts that it is a mistake to confuse two distinct properties for one property, but he notes that **naturalistic moral realists** will deny they are doing this – instead they will claim “that two words or sets of words stand for or mean one and the same property” (Frankena, 472). Frankena claims that **naturalistic moral realists** will agree that “[g]oodness is not identifiable with any ‘other’ characteristic[,]” i.e., they will concede that people who think some characteristic that is not goodness is actually goodness have gone wrong (Frankena, 472). But, what the **naturalistic moral realists** want to know is what are the characteristics in the world

that are not goodness and what are the names that stand for them. (Once all the characteristics that are not goodness have been listed and labeled, the characteristic left over will be goodness, and then the **naturalistic moral realists** will note that there are multiple words besides “goodness” that mean that characteristic.) To claim that a definition of “goodness” like “goodness is pleasure” is mistaken because it identifies goodness with some characteristic other than goodness begs the question (Frankena, 472).<sup>16</sup>

In subsection 2.3.1 I pointed out that at the heart of Moore’s argument that defining a moral term in natural terms is a mistake is the claim that for any natural property it is always an open question whether something that has that property is good. Frankena’s point is that to claim that it will always be an open question is to assume that a natural, or otherwise, property is not the same property as good just known under a different term, which is just what is at issue. Moore’s argument does not establish that **naturalistic moral realism** is obviously wrong.

### **2.3.1.2 Baumrin**

Stefan Baumrin offered a more withering assessment of Moore’s argument than Frankena did. Baumrin outlines Moore’s argument, and then analyzes it:

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<sup>16</sup> Frankena makes the further point that if the definist fallacy rules out any definition of “good” because it defines it with words that stand for the same property as “good” stands for, then it makes any definition a fallacy, and ultimately amounts to the claim, “Every term means what it means, and not what is meant by any other term” (Frankena, 472-473).

Premise (A) “Good” denotes either:

- (1) a simple (part or property)
- (2) a complex
- (3) nothing at all

Premise (B) “Good” is definable or indefinable.

Premise (C) If “good” is definable it must denote a complex, for only complexes are definable.

Premise (D) If “good” is indefinable it must denote:

- (1) simple
- (2) nothing at all

Premise (E<sub>1</sub>) ( $\neg C$ ) It does not denote a complex (open question argument 1).

Conclusion (E<sub>2</sub>)  $\therefore$  (D) It is indefinable (B &  $\neg C$ ).

Premise (F<sub>1</sub>) ( $\neg D_2$ ) It does denote something (open question argument 2).

Conclusion (F<sub>2</sub>)  $\therefore$  (D<sub>1</sub>) It does denote a simple.

Assumption I: “Good” denotes a simple notion.

Assumption II: “Good” denotes a simple notion and is therefore indefinable (Baumrin-1968, 79).

Baumrin says that if Moore assumed Assumption I, then we need to only decide whether it is warranted and (D) is true to assess Moore’s argument. If Assumption I is warranted and (D) is true, then there is a naturalistic fallacy. If Moore assumed Assumption II, then the argument is pointless since if Assumption II is true, Moore has all he needs to establish that a person who tries to define the indefinable is making a mistake. If Moore assumed either Assumption I or Assumption II, it is possible to assess his argument by deciding independently whether Assumption I is warranted. And, if Moore did not assume either I or II, then Baumrin charges that (A) is incomplete, (C) is false, (D) is suspect, and open question arguments 1 and 2 are not adequate to establish E<sub>1</sub> or F<sub>1</sub> (Baumrin-1968, 79).

First Baumrin takes aim at (C) and (D). To begin, he points out that Moore’s claim that “good” is indefinable depends on demonstrating that “good” is not complex, because Moore is under the mistaken belief that something can only be definable if it is complex (Baumrin-1968, 80). Baumrin attributes this to Moore confusing part-whole analysis and substance-property analysis. Baumrin quotes Moore: “Definitions of the kind I was asking for, definitions which

describe the real nature of the object or notion denoted by a word, and which do not merely tell us what the word is used to mean, are only possible when the object or notion in question is something complex” (Baumrin-1968, 80; Moore-1903, 59). On the traditional theory of definition a thing can be defined in terms of its essential properties; it requires that a thing must be definable in terms of simpler properties, and complex properties must be treated like things to be defined in terms of simpler properties. But, the traditional theory does not require that a thing be complex in order to be definable, which Moore somehow has managed to assume (Baumrin-1968, 80).

Baumrin also quotes Moore claiming that a definition of horse is possible “because a horse has many different properties and qualities, all of which you can enumerate” and once “you have enumerated them all, when you have reduced a horse to his simplest terms, then you can no longer define those terms” (Baumrin-1968, 80; Moore-1903, 59). The first quotation highlights Moore’s confusion about definition: to define a horse on the traditional theory of definition does not involve enumerating its properties, it involves identifying the minimal set of properties that distinguishes a horse from any other thing; to define a horse with part-whole analysis involves enumerating a horse’s parts and the specific arrangement of the parts. Regarding the second quotation, Baumrin points out that Moore is mistaken to think just because a term features in a definition it is simple full-stop; the term may be simple in its domain, but then definable with respect to other domains (Baumrin-1968, 81). Baumrin also makes the point that even if we grant that to define something is to reduce a complex thing to its simplest parts, it does not follow that “good” which may be one of the simplest parts of a definition is not complex or that “good” is a part of anything (Baumrin-1968, 82). These considerations indicate

that Moore is confused about the nature of definition, and there is little in Moore to support claims (C) and (D).

The claims that (a) if something is definable it must be complex and (b) if it is indefinable, it must denote something simple or nothing at all, are strange and dubious, but they are not the lynchpin of Moore's argument because even if they are granted, Moore still must show that "good" is not complex and that "good" denotes something, that good exists and it is simple (Baumrin-1968, 85). Baumrin considers two versions of the open question argument meant to demonstrate this.<sup>17</sup> Baumrin outlines Moore's open question argument as follows:

- (1) Of every definiens in every definition it can be *significantly* asked whether what it refers to is or is not the thing, or has the property that we think is referred to by the definiendum.
- (2) If we doubt that it is or does then the definiens does not render (for us) what the definiendum does (render to us).
- (3) This is true of "desire to desire" as a potential definiens [of good].
- (4) Inspection will show that it is true of every other candidate [definiens of good].
- (5) Therefore, good is not a complex renderable by a definition (Baumrin-1968, 86).

Baumrin focuses on premise (2), which claims that if we doubt that the definiens refers to, or has the property, that we think the definiendum refers to, then the definiens does not mean what we mean by the definiendum. Baumrin points out that no one person's doubt could make a definition faulty, and to suppose it does would mean that the definitions of mathematics, science, and other esoteric fields are faulty since ordinary people doubt them. Moreover, Baumrin points out that even if premise (2) isn't false, it may be trivial and irrelevant. If (2) is true, the more reasonable conclusion to draw is that the person is confused even though he is "staring at the correct

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<sup>17</sup> Baumrin notes that part of what motivates the interest in this question is the fact that there is no universally agreed upon definition for "good." He suggests that the two best explanations for this are that no one has yet discovered the right definition or there is nothing "good" names, but Moore has rejected these in favor of the view that "good" cannot be defined (Baumrin-1968, 85).

definition of good” (Baumrin-1968, 87)! Moore’s open question argument is too strong since it seems possible for a person to doubt whether any definiens refers to, or has the property, that he thinks the definiendum refers to. So much for Moore’s argument that “good” is not complex.

Finally, Baumrin considers Moore’s argument that “good” does have a meaning, and so denotes something, and outlines it similarly to above:

- (I) Of every definiens in every definition it can be *significantly* asked whether what it refers to is or is not the thing, or has the property that we think is referred by to the definiendum.
- (II) If we doubt that it is or does then the definiens does not render (for us) what the definiendum does (render to us).
- (III) This is true of “pleasure,” “the desired,” and the “approved.”
- (IV) Inspection will show that it true of every other candidate [definiens of good].
- (V) Therefore, “good” does name a unique object distinct from every other object (Baumrin-1968, 87).

Clearly, the objections Baumrin raised against premise (2) will apply to premise (II), but Baumrin points out that to plausibly infer (V) from the argument Moore needs to insert another premise, (X): “Whenever he [anyone] thinks of ‘intrinsic value,’ or ‘intrinsic worth,’ or says that a thing ‘ought to exist,’ he has before his mind the unique object – the unique property of things – which I mean by ‘good’” (Baumrin-1968, 88). Baumrin objects that Moore has made no argument for this premise, and worse, he has offered definitions for the indefinable (Baumrin-1968, 88). Ultimately, Moore’s open question argument is neither able to establish that “good” is not complex nor that it denotes something, and so it is not able to support the claim that it is a mistake to explain or define moral terms in naturalistic terms.

### 2.3.2 Frege-Geach

Despite Frankena's and Baumrin’s criticisms of Moore’s open question argument, the argument’s effect endured; many moral philosophers thought it eliminated **naturalistic moral realism** – the view that the goodness, immorality, kindness, deceitfulness, evilness, etc. of people, act,

circumstances can be explained in terms of natural properties, identified by the natural sciences or psychology, which are causal or detectable by the senses, and moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances – as a viable theory, so the only naturalistically respectable theory of morality was some form of **non-cognitivism**, the view that the mental states expressed by moral judgments are not beliefs. With **non-cognitivism** enjoying a dialectical advantage of *prima facie* plausibility, its critics focused on assessing the prospects of developing a complete **non-cognitivist** account of morality. Moral philosophers consider Peter Geach’s challenge to **non-cognitivism** the most important.

Earlier I presented M2 — James wrongly takes from his brother — as an example of a moral judgment, Ayer and Stevenson would offer the following as interpretations of M2, respectively:

AE2: B! |James taking from his brother|

SE2.1: I disapprove of taking from one’s brother, do so as well.

Something that is not truth evaluable is an essential element in the meaning of each of these examples, whether an expression of attitude or an attempt to influence. In a series of articles Peter Geach argues that because the different early **expressivist** approaches to moral language eschew truth-conditional semantics, they all run into a significant challenge in accounting for the sameness of meaning of moral terms and sentences across different moral practices.

Geach pointed out that propositions might be asserted or unasserted depending on whether or not they are part of larger propositions.<sup>18</sup> Consider the following argument adapted from Geach (Geach-1965, 463):

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<sup>18</sup> “Assertion” (1965) is the *locus classicus* for Geach’s view on how non-truth evaluable theories of meaning are defective, but he had raised the same challenges in “Imperative and Deontic Logic” (1958) and “Ascriptivism” (1960).

G1. If it is bad to torment the cat, then it is bad to get your little brother to torment the cat.

G2. It is bad to torment the cat.

GC. Therefore, it is bad to get your little brother to torment the cat.

In G1, the antecedent of the conditional – “It is bad to torment the cat” – is not asserted, or as Geach says, it occurs in an “unasserted” context (Geach-1965, 450). The presence of the proposition in a conditional means that there is no commitment to it being the case that tormenting the cat is bad; the first premise only claims a dependency – if the action in the antecedent is bad, so is the one in the consequent. Or, the proposition in the antecedent does not express an attitude since it is part of a conditional. In the second premise of the argument, “It is bad to torment the cat,” occurs in an asserted context; according to Geach, in traditional truth-conditional semantics, the conclusion can be inferred from the first and second premises because the proposition, “It is bad to torment the cat,” has the same meaning in both premises; its meaning is determined by the conditions under which it would be true. Geach maintains that any semantics that is not truth conditional, like a **non-cognitivist** one such as **expressivism**, faces the challenge of explaining how the meaning of “It is bad to torment the cat” remains the same between the first and second premises of the argument.

Applying the boo-hooray operator I used to illustrate how to understand Ayer’s claim about the meaning of moral language to the second premise yields the following account of its meaning:

AP2: B! |Tormenting the cat|.

Geach’s point is that there is no obvious way to account for the meaning of the proposition, “It is bad to torment the cat,” in G1 where it has the same meaning as in G2. In G2 the proposition can be given the **expressivist** interpretation because it is a straightforward expression of an attitude toward tormenting the cat, but in the antecedent of the conditional G1 there is no straightforward



expression of an attitude toward tormenting the cat; it at best expresses a qualified negative attitude toward tormenting cats. There are other kinds of propositions where moral judgments may be unasserted like negation and disjunction, and the attitude expressed must change with these propositions; the early **expressivist** – a person who thinks that the meaning of moral judgments cannot be explained without reference to their function apart from any descriptive content that is part of their meaning; the function of moral language can be to express emotions, attitudes, commands, etc. – should surely not interpret “It is not bad to torment the cat,” as H! [Tormenting the cat] (Shafer-Landau, 24).

So, a major challenge for **non-cognitivists** like the **expressivists** is to explain how the meaning of moral propositions remains consistent across contexts. And, **non-cognitivists** must do this or argue that we should give up engaging in moral arguments like the one about tormenting cats; the latter option is undesirable because it would require abandoning an important feature of our moral practice.<sup>19</sup> Schroeder raises a further implication of the Frege-Geach problem; typically a theory of meaning can explain how more complex propositions can be assembled from smaller ones, and how speakers can understand them, by pointing, in part, to the consistency of meaning in the smaller propositions. But, an account of the meaning of moral language like the one early **expressivists** proposed may not be able to do this, and this will undermine its plausibility as an account of morality (Schroeder, 43).

The combination of Moore’s purported refutation of **naturalistic moral realism** and the nascent **non-cognitivists’** desire to avoid a non-naturalistic account of morality spurred them to

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<sup>19</sup> Another issue follows from the Frege-Geach problem; usually inferences of the kind in the argument about tormenting cats are thought to be valid because the conclusion must be true if the premises are both true, but **emotivists** deny that, at least, P2 has a truth value. Even if there is a way to get consistency for the meaning of the antecedent in P1 and P2, there is this further problem.

develop a new theory about the meaning of moral language. A successful **non-cognitivist** moral semantics would be important evidence that **moral antirealism** is true. However, if we consider the Frege-Geach problem as a test of **non-cognitivist** theories, then it is very similar to Moore's open question argument; both make predictions about a phenomenon that a moral theory should be able to account for, but then demonstrate the moral theory fails to do so. The difference between them is that the open question argument seems to decisively refute the possibility of accounting for the meaning of moral terms in naturalistic ones, but the Frege-Geach problem seems to be a challenge to **non-cognitivists**, people with the view that the mental states expressed by moral judgments are not beliefs, to revise their account until they get it right. Consequently, a significant portion of recent work in **antirealist** metaethics is **non-cognitivists** attempting to develop a moral semantics that solves the Frege-Geach problem with critics pointing out the flaws in these attempts.<sup>20</sup> Like scientists who persist in revising their theories after they are falsified, **non-cognitivists** persist in their project under the expectation that they will someday succeed in developing a complete **non-cognitivist** moral semantics. The apparent motivation for this persistence is the conviction, stemming from confidence in Moore's open question argument, that some form of **non-cognitivism** is the only viable candidate for explaining moral practice.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Hare-1970, Gibbard-1990 and Gibbard-2003, and Horgan and Timmons-2006 for non-cognitivist attempts to answer the Frege-Geach problem, and see Schueler-1988, Hale-1993, Unwin-1999, and Schroeder-2008 for examples of challenges to these answers; this list is not meant to be exhaustive.

<sup>21</sup> I acknowledge that the account of metaethics I am offering here omits the role **non-naturalists** played and are playing in the debate. The main reason for that is I, like the **non-cognitivists**, am sympathetic to a naturalistic metaphilosophy, but not all moral philosophers shares this metaphilosophy. Moore obviously was a non-naturalist, and so was W. D. Ross (see Ross). More recently Russ Shafer-Landau and Jonathan Dancy have defended **non-naturalism** (see Shafer-Landau-2003, and Dancy-2006).

### 2.3.3 Kripke and Putnam

In footnote 17, in subsection 2.3.1.2, I noted that part of the motivation for Moore's open question argument is bewilderment that there is no definition of "good;" Baumrin suggests it is less likely that "good" is indefinable than that either nobody has discovered the right definition of "good" or that "good" is a term that denotes nothing. The work of Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam provided an explanation as to why the right definition might be undiscovered. In *Naming and Necessity* Saul Kripke argued that the description theory of names — the theory that proper names refer because their users associate some descriptive content with the name that fixes its referent — is incorrect, and he proposed to replace it with, what has come to be called, a causal theory of reference. According to Kripke a proper name refers because it rigidly designates a person via an initial baptism and its transmission through a causal-historical chain of use. For example, the proper name "Aristotle" has as its referent the person who was initially dubbed with that name, and when the person who dubbed him "Aristotle" tells another person that this person is "Aristotle" the reference is transmitted — this transmission goes on and on. Kripke's account of rigid designation helps to show that identity is not a relation that holds between names, it is a relation that holds between an object and itself, an important implication of which is that identity claims that are necessarily true may only be known *a posteriori*.

In "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" Hilary Putnam applied Kripke's treatment of proper names to natural kind terms like "gold", or "tiger", or "water." A traditional view interpreted these terms as descriptive — "gold" means the metal composed of the chemical element atomic number 79; "tiger" means the animal with a certain genetic makeup; "water" means a chemical molecule composed of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom joined by a covalent bond — and the description fixes their reference, so anything that fits the description is called by that

natural kind term. Putnam argues that this view must be mistaken since a person can associate the same descriptive content with multiple natural kind terms and yet use the terms to correctly refer to their natural kinds; for example, she may associate the description “yellow perennial flower” with both “Begonia” and “Heliopsis” and still be able to use these terms to refer to the appropriate natural kind. Putnam’s Twin-Earth thought experiment is further confirmation of the idea that the descriptive content cannot fix the referent of a term. In the Twin-Earth thought experiment Putnam proposes that if there was another planet in the universe identical in all respects to our own planet except that the liquid we call “water” is composed of molecules that are more complex than H<sub>2</sub>O, then “water” would not refer to the same natural kind on each planet even though the inhabitants would be in identical psychological states and have the same content in mind — clear, colorless, flavorless liquid that falls from the sky and collects in bodies — when they used the term. On Putnam’s view the meaning of a natural kind term is largely constituted by its reference, which is fixed by experts.

The combination of Kripke’s and Putnam’s views yields a causal theory of reference for natural kind terms. A baptism or dubbing of some example of a natural kind establishes the reference of a term for it, and then that term refers to anything that has the same underlying nature. When the initial baptizers share the term with other people this reference is transmitted. And people who do not know the underlying nature of the objects the same term refers to can still successfully use the term as long as they stand in a causal chain of reference transmission stretching back to the initial dubbing.

Earlier, in subsection 1.2.1, I claimed that an important element of **naturalistic moral realism** is the claim that moral terms can be explained in naturalistic terms. When interpreted according to the scientific method, the open question argument is an experiment that falsifies this

prediction from **naturalistic moral realism**. Moore's argument is that if a moral term and naturalistic terms refer to the same property, then they should be analytically, or *a priori*, equivalent. However, Moore argues we know that they are not analytically equivalent since for any moral term and any natural terms, it is an open question to ask whether an act or a person with those natural features also has the moral feature. For example, the question, "Giving to others maximizes happiness, but is it good," is an open question. And, therefore the moral term – "good" in this example – and the natural term – "maximizing happiness" – do not refer to the same property. Kripke and Putnam's causal theory of reference challenges the assumption that if terms are not analytically equivalent, then they cannot refer to the same property.

On this way of thinking about Moore's argument, it turns on the assumption that if two properties are identical, then the terms used for them, "good" and "happiness maximizing", are analytically or *a priori* equivalent. However, the Kripke-Putnam line on natural kind terms posits that there may be different terms that refer to the same thing even though this is unknown to the users of those terms; the terms refer to something that is necessarily identical to itself, but the equivalency will turn out to be a synthetic or *a posteriori* discovery. In essence the Kripke-Putnam line charges that Moore's assumption conflates the concept of a property with the property (Putnam-1981, 207).<sup>22</sup> Moore assumes that if a single item is referred to by different terms with distinct descriptive content, then a person who knows how to use the terms — *has* the concept — will know that the term refers to the same thing (Fenske, 302). Supposedly then, if it is an open question whether the different terms refer to the same property, it cannot be the case that they do. The Kripke-Putnam line on natural kind terms makes it possible that a person who knows how to

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<sup>22</sup> The reference is from reviewing Fenske, but a subsequent review of Putnam's second volume collected works, *Mind, Language, and Reality*, shows he made a similar comment about Moore in "Language and Philosophy."

use the term “good” and other naturalistic terms might not be aware that they refer to the same property (or properties), only discovering this later through empirical investigation.

If the Kripke-Putnam line is correct, then the alternative Baumrin suggested – we have not discovered the right definition of “good” yet – has more credence. A version of **naturalistic moral realism** called Cornell Realism has latched on to the Kripke-Putnam line to argue that a moral term like “good” refers to a moral property, which is itself a natural property, that cannot be reduced to non-moral natural properties, but nonetheless supervenes on natural properties, and “good” is then transmitted through a causal chain of reference.<sup>23</sup>

#### 2.3.4 Mackie

Subsection 2.3.2 posed a problem for **moral antirealists**: the Frege-Geach problem challenges **antirealists** to develop a moral semantics in which moral language retains the same meaning across asserted and unasserted contexts. And subsection 2.3.3 explained how the causal theory of reference undermines that dialectical advantage of **non-cognitivism** – the view that the mental states expressed by moral judgments are not beliefs – by providing confidence that if **naturalistic moral realists** keep working at it, they can uncover which naturalistic properties are moral properties.<sup>24</sup> This subsection will examine how J. L. Mackie’s **error theory** presents a problem of motivation for **non-cognitivists**: why try to vindicate moral practice if moral properties do not exist? Why develop an account morality at all?

Like all **antirealists** Mackie denies that moral properties exist, but he disagrees with **non-cognitivists** who deny that moral language aims at describing a moral reality, and instead claim that it is non-truth evaluable language that expresses some sort of non-cognitive mental state.

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Boyd, Brink-1989, and Sturgeon-1986a and Sturgeon-1986b

<sup>24</sup> The dialectical advantage that I claim **non-cognitivists** believed they enjoyed is just that **naturalistic moral realism** is untenable because of the open question argument.

Mackie argues that moral language does aim at describing a moral reality, it does express a cognitive state, and it is truth evaluable — it's just that all moral claims are systematically false. Mackie's claim that moral language is descriptive of a moral reality that people mistakenly believe exists is known as **error theory**, and it challenges **non-cognitivist moral antirealists** to explain why their analysis of moral discourse as non-descriptive and **non-cognitivist** is correct.

This is a rough outline of Mackie's argument for the **error theory**:

E1. Moral thought and language implies that there are objective values (Mackie-1977, 48-49).

E2. There are no objective values (Mackie-1977, 15).

EC. Moral thought and language is fundamentally mistaken.

To support premise E2 Mackie deploys the argument from queerness. The argument from queerness has both metaphysical and epistemological elements (Mackie-1977, 38):

Q1. If objective values exist, then they would be entities of a very strange sort, unlike anything else in the universe. (Metaphysical element.)<sup>25</sup>

Q2. Knowledge of objective values could only be a special sensory faculty, unlike any other form of knowing. (Epistemological element.)<sup>26</sup>

Q3. A naturalistic account of the world cannot accommodate either special sensory faculties or objective values.<sup>27</sup>

QC. Objective values do not exist.

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<sup>25</sup> According to Mackie, Plato's form of the Good is an example of an objective value which is distinguished by it having an intrinsic "to-be-pursuedness" as part of its nature; the strangeness of objective values rests on the "metaphysical peculiarity of the supposed objective values, in that they would have to be intrinsically action-guiding and motivating" (Mackie-1977, 40, 49).

<sup>26</sup> Intuitionists like Moore, Ross, and Prichard proposed just such a faculty.

<sup>27</sup> In Mackie's explicit formulation of the argument from queerness on page 38 Q3 is an enthymeme, but a few pages later he explains how the queerness can be drawn out by asking "about anything that is supposed to have some objective moral quality, how this is linked with its natural features. ...[I]t is not merely that the two features occur together. The wrongness must somehow be 'consequential' or 'supervenient'; it is wrong because it is a piece of deliberate cruelty. But just what *in the world* is signified by this 'because'? And how do we know the relation that it signifies[?] ...It is not even sufficient to postulate a faculty which 'sees' the wrongness: something else must be postulated which can see at once the natural features that constitute the cruelty, and the wrongness, and the mysteriousness consequential link between the two" (Mackie-1977, 41, emphasis original).

In so far as the argument from queerness supports E2<sup>28</sup> — the denial of the existence of independent moral properties — **non-cognitivists**, people with the view that the mental states expressed by moral judgments are not beliefs, can go along with Mackie; but Mackie and **non-cognitivists** disagree on premise E1.

According to **non-cognitivists** what moral language does is express a moral mental state that is an attitude of some sort, and since it is not meant to represent beliefs about the way the world is, it is not descriptive of the world. Mackie denies this, claiming that moral language does attempt to represent beliefs about the way the world is, and citing a litany of philosophers whose analysis of morality reflect this aspiration: Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Sidgwick (Mackie-1977, 30-31).<sup>29</sup> Mackie appeals to more than authority to support his claim that moral language reflects some aspiration toward depicting moral reality. First, he examines the uses to which moral language is put, and second, he notes the consequences of denying moral reality.

Mackie thinks **non-cognitivist** and naturalistic theories of morality both capture part of the truth, but that each position derives most of its plausibility from the sense that the other is inadequate to our purposes for moral language (Mackie-1977, 32). So, **non-cognitivism** seems inadequate because there must be something external that establishes the authority of moral judgments; it lacks the objectivity of naturalism, which on the other hand seems inadequate because it cannot explain why moral judgments should be practical except by referring to the

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<sup>28</sup> Mackie also supports E2 with an argument from relativity — the empirical fact of moral disagreement across cultures is evidence that there is no objective moral reality because the best explanation for this is that these moral customs simply “reflect adherence and participation in different forms of life”, not that these moral customs “express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values” (Mackie-1977, 36-37).

<sup>29</sup> In an interview Blackburn claimed that a key area where he thinks Mackie is wrong is in thinking that ordinary moral language points at moral reality. Blackburn thinks that philosophical analysis of moral language is wrong – it is philosophers who get it wrong when they claim moral language aims at describing moral reality; ordinary language talks as if there is one, and that is perfectly all right (Dall’Agnol, 102-103).



desires of the person who holds that moral judgment (Mackie-1977, 32-33).<sup>30</sup> Mackie argues that the “ordinary user of moral language” wants to objectively characterize a particular action as good or bad in itself, but she also wants this characterization to involve some “call for action” (Mackie-1977, 33). Mackie illustrates this duality in the use of moral language when he suggests that a person who wonders whether his research on bacteriological warfare is good is not simply wondering about his attitude toward it — he is wondering about the research itself.

Mackie also points out that there is evidence that ordinary people tend to assume values really do exist. Many people who are exposed to the existentialist claim that human beings create their own values come to the conclusion that life is meaningless and purposeless, leaving them in despair. Mackie notes that the latter does not follow logically from the former, but the fact that for many people coming to believe that values are subjective produces this reaction is evidence that many people do experience morality as an objective phenomenon (Mackie-1977, 34). These two points offer reasons to think that moral practice aims — at least in part — at representing moral reality.

## 2.4 Chapter Conclusion

The objectivist pretenses of moral practices, the Frege-Geach problem, and the causal theory of reference, present a trio of considerations that call for a reappraisal of the dialectic between **moral realists** – people who think that there are people, acts, circumstances that are good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc., and they would be so if human beings did not think them so, and moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances, and **moral antirealists** – people who think that human

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Smith’s analysis of the moral problem as the reconciliation of the objectivity of moral judgments, practicality of moral judgments, and the Humean theory of motivation echoes this (Smith-1994).

beings' experience of people, acts, circumstances as good, immoral kind, deceitful, evil, etc. are not the product of features of the world that are themselves good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc. independent of human beings thinking them so. In the next chapter I will present Blackburn's own explanation of how he conceives his **moral antirealist** project and an account and assessment of how he tries to achieve these aims. I will then argue that Blackburn's work does not successfully address this important aim of metaethics.

## Chapter 3: Blackburn's Metaethics

### 3.1 Blackburn's Project

In an interview in which he discusses **quasi-realism**, Blackburn characterizes **expressivism** as being on the retreat in the 1970s, and he attributes that principally to the influence of the Frege-Geach argument (Dall'Agnol, 101).<sup>1</sup> There he describes his project as an attempt to answer the Frege-Geach argument by “trying to give an account of the constructions, the contents of moral speech ... to give an account of what we are doing when we use language in that way ... that would be an explanation of what we are doing and a justification” (Dall'Agnol, 102). Beyond his sympathy for **expressivism** Blackburn appears to have an idiosyncratic reason for taking on this project (Dall'Agnol, 102). Blackburn interprets Mackie's **error theory** as claiming that that “ordinary language is full of mistakes about what normative facts were” (Dall'Agnol, 102). Due to Wittgenstein's influence Blackburn is uneasy with this; Blackburn thinks ordinary language is in perfect order, and ordinary thought is better than philosophical thought. So, Blackburn thinks he needs to address the Frege-Geach argument in order to vindicate ordinary talk and thought about morality, given an **antirealist** base.

This is a rather idiosyncratic interpretation of **error theory**, which is typically interpreted as claiming that all moral propositions are false because none of their predicates refer to properties that exist; and Mackie seems to take ordinary language at face value in this argument. But, Blackburn objects that what Mackie and other philosophers have done to ordinary moral talk is foisted a metaethical theory, **moral realism**, on it (Dall'Agnol, 103). Blackburn thinks in ordinary moral talk, we talk as if there is a moral reality even though there is not one. This claim is confusing because Mackie would agree with it.

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<sup>1</sup> I will put off defining **quasi-realism** until the start of the next section.

Blackburn appears to be accusing moral philosophers of describing moral practice in such a way that certain metaethical views, like **naturalistic moral realism**, are elements of that practice, i.e., that a person who affirms that giving to others is good is also a **realist** about goodness. If moral philosophers do this, they are wrong to do so, but I don't think Mackie is guilty of this; he appears to be interpreting moral language literally, which is a charitable interpretation. Blackburn is right, though, that philosophers should not assume that most people who engage in moral practice have any conscious metaethical views. In this essay's conclusion I will argue that Blackburn's argument against **error theory**, but in this chapter, I want to turn to Blackburn's attempts at answering the Frege-Geach problem.

### 3.2 Quasi-Realism

In the interview cited above Blackburn explains that one of his motivations for trying to answer the Frege-Geach problem is his sympathy for **expressivism**; he thinks there is "something fundamentally right about giving an account of the meaning of moral language in terms of the attitude it expresses when we moralize" (Dall'Agnol, 102). Even though he is sympathetic to early versions of **expressivism**, Blackburn endorses a modified version of **expressivism**, **projectivism**, which he has defined as "the philosophy of evaluation which says that evaluative properties are projections of our own sentiments (emotions, reactions, attitudes, commendations)" (Blackburn-1984, 180). (This definition of **projectivism** is only meant to be provisional since in the subsequent chapter I will attempt to provide a nuanced analysis of the view.) Blackburn's other motivation – vindicating ordinary moral talk – is evident in his description of **quasi-realism**: "[It] is the enterprise of explaining why our discourse has the shape it does, in particular by way of treating evaluative predicates like others, if projectivism is true. It thus seeks to explain, and justify, the realistic-seeming nature of our talk of evaluations"

(Blackburn-1984, 180). **Quasi-realism** is less a theory than a research program – it is an attempt to provide a semantics for moral discourse that is consistent with **projectivism** and that, at the same, does not require a revision of moral discourse. In the next subsection, I will examine Blackburn’s first attempt at this task.

### 3.2.1 Proto-quasi-realism

Blackburn’s 1973 paper, “Moral Realism,” is principally known for the introduction of his **supervenience** argument against **moral realism**, but in the third section he addresses some of the challenges for **antirealist** theories of morality. He points out that it is easy to assume that a complete analysis of moral discourse has been provided when the meaning of moral predicates has been explained in terms of expressing speakers’ attitudes (Blackburn-1973, 123). The analyses of moral propositions in the previous chapter reflect this approach. However, Blackburn notes that philosophers have criticized this analysis because it is only sufficient to explain the meaning of moral language in straightforward assertions like “Courage is an intrinsically good thing;” the meaning of this moral judgment is explained as expressing approval for courage (Blackburn-1973, 123). However, this analysis cannot provide an account of the meaning of moral language when it is used in ways that are not straightforward assertions, as in the following examples: “If courage is an intrinsically good thing, then organized games should be part of school curricula;” “No statement of the naturalistic properties of courage entails that courage is an intrinsically good thing” (Blackburn-1973, 123). In “Moral Realism” Blackburn develops his first **antirealist** moral semantics to address the use of moral language in these contexts.

Blackburn proposes that moral language be interpreted as the “propositional reflection” of moral attitudes (Blackburn-1973, 125). Consider one of Blackburn’s examples above:

Z. No statement of the naturalistic properties of courage entails that courage is an intrinsically good thing.

Blackburn's proposal is that this proposition makes a claim about the attitude of approval toward courage; the claim is that nobody who disapproves of courage, while knowing all there is to know about it, is guilty of a logical mistake. In the previous chapter, I presented **antirealist** analyses of moral propositions for the various **antirealist** moral theories discussed, but it is not obvious how to represent this proposition given Blackburn's interpretation; a plausible candidate for interpreting the propositional reflection in Z seems to be:

Z'. Approval of courage is not entailed by complete knowledge of courage.

Blackburn defines a propositional reflection as "any statement that, while appearing to make a factual claim about states of affairs, their interrelations, and their logic, is actually making claims about attitudes, *although* none of the propositions involved in the statement is to be analyzed into one whose subject is an attitude" (Blackburn-1973, 125-126).

Blackburn claims that his proposal is promising because it can be extended to hypothetical propositions like this one:

B. If courage is an intrinsically good thing, then organized games should be part of school curricula.

Ordinarily, a hypothetical claims that if one state of affairs obtains, then another one does, too, but Blackburn suggests that it would be a mistake to interpret B that way. B, too, is a propositional reflection; but, since both the antecedent and consequent involve moral propositions, it is a claim about a connection between attitudes: B is the "claim that an attitude of approval to courage involves an attitude of approval toward organized games as part of the curriculum in every school" (Blackburn-1973, 126). It seems that B should be interpreted as follows:

B'. Approval of courage involves approval of organized games as part of school curricula.

Blackburn says that it would be wrong to think that the former attitude involves the latter one as a matter of logic; instead, to demonstrate that approval of courage involves approval of organized games at school, it is necessary to show that organized games produce courage in students. Blackburn does not think that B and B' are different in this respect; he thinks that B is not true as a matter of logic, either – to prove it, we would have to show that organized games produce courageous students, just as for B'.

Blackburn argues that there are several bases for holding “if ... then...” propositions in both moral and natural discourses, and the notion of “involvement” he uses to analyze moral propositions as claims about attitudes is flexible enough to accommodate them. Blackburn claims that the notion of “involvement” at work here is one of consistency – a person cannot hold one attitude without holding the other attitude. This is supposed to be Blackburn’s solution to the Frege-Geach problem because it can preserve the validity of *modus ponendo ponens* (Blackburn-1973, 127). Under this analysis of moral language, “anybody asserting ‘*P*, and if *P*, then *Q*’ where *P* attributes worth to a thing *expresses* his attitude to that thing, and *asserts* that the attitude involves a further attitude or belief” (Blackburn-1973, 127). Once a person makes this assertion, there is a logical inconsistency in not holding the further attitude or belief, and according to Blackburn, this logical consistency is expressed when we say *modus ponendo ponens* is valid for B': “its validity is a reflection of a possible logical inconsistency in attitude and beliefs” (Blackburn-1973, 127).

### 3.2.1.1 Problems for Proto-quasi-realism

In “Moral Realism” Blackburn’s answer to the Frege-Geach problem is to show that his “involvement” notion is flexible enough to preserve the *modus ponendo ponens* inference.

Originally, Blackburn says neither B nor B' are making logical claims, so his notion of “involvement” is not a matter of logic, but this is a strange solution because *modus ponendo ponens* is a logical rule of inference. Blackburn is not reproducing the logical inference, he is offering a justification for inferring *Q* from if *P*, then *Q*, and *P*.

Blackburn’s comparison of B and B' as both not reflecting logical claims may be due to the fact that in many contexts people make connections that are not entailments, but which they nonetheless express, inexactly, via *modus ponendo ponens*. The fact that this practice is common in naturalistic discourse appears to provide cover for the practice in moral discourse. This interpretation casts Blackburn as answering the Frege-Geach challenge by denying that we are making actual logical inferences in moral discourse. In other words, Blackburn answers the Frege-Geach problem by denying that what seems to be a feature of moral discourse really is a feature of it. In chapter 1 I suggested that metaethical theories are meant to answer questions about moral practice, but on this interpretation Blackburn seems to be re-characterizing moral practice. I do not think this is what moral philosopher should aim to do in metaethics, but I will set aside this criticism for now because it is premature to argue that this is what Blackburn is doing.

A problem for Blackburn’s comparison of B and B' is that the inference in B, can be interpreted as a matter of logic if B, “If courage is an intrinsically good thing, then organized games should be part of school curricula,” is supplemented with an enthymeme premise like the following:

Intrinsically good things should be fostered in students.



Once this moral judgment is conjoined with B, that organized games should be part of school curricula is a matter of one or two logical inferences of the *modus ponendo ponens* variety.

Consider:

- P1. If courage is an intrinsically good thing, then organized games should be part of school curricula.
- P2. Courage is an intrinsically good thing.
- P3. Intrinsically good things should be fostered in students.
- C. Organized games should be part of school curricula.

If a suppressed premise underlies the inference in B, then inferences like B', "Approval of courage involves approval of organized games as part of school curricula," can no longer deflect the charge that they are illicit by pointing to illicit inferences like in B.

Blackburn does not have the option of claiming that B' can be supplemented with an enthymeme premise that generates the inference; it is hard to imagine how to express the enthymeme premise above in terms of approval. Compare the argument generated from B' when it is supplemented with an enthymeme premise:

- P1'. Approval of courage involves approval of organized games as part of school curricula
- P2'. Approval of courage.
- P3'. Approval of fostering approved things.
- C'. Approval of organized games as part of school curricula.

The Frege-Geach problem draws attention to the fact that it is hard to see how a **non-cognitivist** interpretation of moral language can be preserved from asserted to unasserted contexts; Blackburn's solution to the problem is to argue that moral language propositions involving unasserted contexts are just disguised assertions. But the more important insight of the Frege-Geach problem is that **antirealist** accounts of moral language have difficulty preserving the functions that are accepted elements of moral practice; the Frege-Geach problem indicates that logical inferences are hard to preserve on the **antirealist** account by calling attention to moral

language in unasserted contexts. Blackburn seems to have focused on the propositions rather than the practice when devising his solution for “Moral Realism”; he seems to think that if he can provide an **antirealist** account of moral language in unasserted contexts, then he will have provided a solution. What Blackburn actually needs to do is preserve the practice of making logical inferences in moral discourse, and this solution seems to commit something like the fallacy of equivocation.

In the second argument above, Blackburn transforms the proposition in which moral language occurs in an unasserted context into an assertion, but the assertion in P1' is no longer a moral assertion as P2' or P3' are moral assertions. The kind of assertion that P1' is now, is a belief. The inference that Blackburn asks us to make – approval of organized games on the basis of a belief about a connection between two attitudes of approval and the relevant attitudes – seems to depend on us being distracted into thinking P1' is an expression of attitude rather than belief because of the presence of a term like “approval.” Blackburn asserts that there can be logical consistency between attitudes and beliefs, but this is doubtful. There is no logical connection between having the attitude of approval to courage and approving of organized games as part of school curricula; nothing logically compels a person to have the latter attitude if she has the former one. Ultimately, this second criticism of Blackburn’s attempt to solve the Frege-Geach problem levels two charges at it: (1) the supposed examples of non-logical inference in naturalistic discourse that provide cover for non-logical inferences in moral discourse do not exist, so this kind of inference in moral discourse requires a special justification; (2) even supposing that there is nothing illicit in using the form of *modus ponendo ponens* for non-logical inferences, Blackburn’s claim that logical consistency among attitudes and beliefs justifies its use is false since there is no such consistency among them.

Another criticism, related to the idea that there is a form of equivocation at the heart of Blackburn's proposed solution, is that it assumes that the positive moral evaluations in propositional reflections like B are identical to the moral attitudes of approval towards the distinct objects in B'. But *prima facie* B implies two different kinds of moral assessment toward the objects in it. The moral judgment, "Courage is an intrinsically good thing," suggests a positive evaluation of courage, such that a situation would be improved by the presence of courage, while the moral judgment, "Organized games should be part of school curricula," suggests a more rigorous evaluation, such that a situation will be made worse by the absence of organized games (presumably there will be less courage than is desirable). This kind of difference in moral evaluation is the difference between supererogatory acts and duties. Donation of a kidney to a stranger is good, it improves how things are, but moral evaluation of such an act typically stops there. (To be fair, we praise this act highly, but we do not suggest other people imitate it.) Duties, on the other hand, seem to be the kind of act that if we fail to perform them, then things are made worse off than they are; it is not just good that a lifeguard saves a drowning bather at the beach, it is her duty to do it. In B' the moral evaluation of courage and the moral evaluation of organized games is not differentiated, for both it is approval. Blackburn is wrong that B and B' have the same meaning since the former makes separate kinds of evaluation of its objects; while in B' they both receive the same evaluation. The only way Blackburn can avoid this criticism is to provide an argument that all moral judgments are expressions of one kind of attitude, and then specify that attitude.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Miller argues that **emotivist** theories face what he calls, the moral attitude problem – **emotivists** must specify what sort of feeling, emotion, attitude, etc. moral judgments express – and this is a particular challenging problem (Miller, 43). This criticism of Blackburn is inspired by Miller's point, but it is different. I will return to the moral attitude problem when examining Blackburn's subsequent revisions to his account of moral language.

### 3.2.1.2 Schueler on Proto-quasi-realism

My interpretation of Blackburn's initial answer to the Frege-Geach problem in "Moral Realism" is that it attempts to show that within naturalistic discourse non-logical inferences are discussed using the form of *modus ponendo ponens*, so it is not inappropriate to do the same thing in moral discourse. My criticism of this approach is that there is reason to think that the purported examples of non-logical inference in naturalistic discourse are actual logical inferences, but not for Blackburn's analysis of moral discourse. In "Modus Ponens and Moral Realism" G. F. Schueler interprets Blackburn as trying to preserve *modus ponendo ponens* as a logical rule of inference for moral discourse (Schueler, 493), and he quotes Blackburn to support this interpretation: "the validity of *modus ponendo ponens* as a rule of inference is preserved" (Blackburn-1973, 127). Schueler's critique of this approach focuses on arguing that Blackburn's treatment in "Moral Realism" cannot prove that the inferences examined here are genuine examples of *modus ponendo ponens*. Schueler takes Blackburn's claim that his approach in "Moral Realism" is meant to preserve *modus ponendo ponens* at face value, while I interpret it as an early version of the approach I will examine in subsections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3.

Schueler focuses on the argument using B as a putative example of *modus ponendo ponens*:

- A. Courage is an intrinsically good thing.
- B. If courage is an intrinsically good thing, then organized games should be part of school curricula.
- C. Organized games should be part of school curricula.

An example of *modus ponendo ponens* has the following logical form:  $P; P \rightarrow Q; \text{therefore, } Q$ .

Schueler argues that if this is so, then Blackburn's account cannot show that the argument in ABC is an example of *modus ponendo ponens* because A and B cannot have the logical forms that  $P$  and  $P \rightarrow Q$  have in standard logical inferences (Schueler, 494).

According to Schueler, A will not have the same form as *P* once A is interpreted as Blackburn claims it should be. Schueler does not explain why A and *P* cannot have the same form, but I think he has something like the following in mind. In ordinary logical inferences, *P* is understood to be a straightforward proposition.<sup>3</sup> But Blackburn cannot intend for A to be a straightforward proposition on his interpretation of moral claims – A is an expression of attitude rather than a proposition. So, however Blackburn intends for A to be understood, it will not be a proposition like *P*, and cannot function the way *P* would in *modus ponendo ponens*.

Schueler also claims that if B is understood as Blackburn proposes, it cannot have the logical form of  $P \rightarrow Q$ . In a conditional, the truth functional connective “ $\rightarrow$ ” is used to join two independent propositions. But Schueler claims that the “gloss” Blackburn gives of B, B', “Approval of courage involves approval of organized games as part of school curricula,” could not have “ $\rightarrow$ ” as its main logical connective because it cannot be analyzed into two propositions that can be connected by “ $\rightarrow$ ” (Schueler, 494). If B' is a proposition, it is simple – it is not an example of two propositions being joined by “ $\rightarrow$ ”. Schueler claims the same problem arises if B' has a logical form, and its logical form is the following:

(x) [(x has an attitude of approval toward courage)  $\rightarrow$  (x has an attitude of approval toward organized games as part of the curriculum in every school)]  
(Schueler, 494).

This is not an example of  $P \rightarrow Q$ . If the universal quantification of B' were to be used as a logical premise in propositional logic, its logical form would be “R” – it would be a simple, and not truth functionally compound (Schueler, 494-495). This problem is damning since that would make the logical form of the reasoning from A and B to C, the following: P; R; therefore, Q. And, that is definitely not an instance of *modus ponendo ponens* (Schueler, 495). Schueler does

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<sup>3</sup> I am using proposition in the logical sense of a sentence that affirms or denies a predicate of a subject and can have truth values.

not see how Blackburn can preserve ABC as an example of *modus ponendo ponens* since neither of Blackburn's glosses on A or B have the logical form that the premises in a *modus ponendo ponens* argument are typically assumed to have.

Schueler also considers a different possibility; even though the reasoning in ABC is not an instance of *modus ponendo ponens*, it might nonetheless be valid on different grounds. Schueler seems to have in mind the possibility that I examined above – there may be non-logical inferences that are valid. Schueler suggests that Blackburn may have this in mind when Blackburn proposes that B itself expresses a moral standard, or makes a moral claim (Blackburn-1973, 127). In other words, B, like A, is a moral proposition because it expresses an attitude. On this interpretation, a person who utters B is not asserting a link between the two attitudes; she is instead expressing an attitude that having the attitude expressed in A involves having an additional attitude. (Schueler draws on a subsequent article of Blackburn's, "Rule Following and Moral Realism" to characterize this as a commitment). Blackburn does think that once a person has expressed both attitudes in A and B, she is logically inconsistent, if she does not hold this further attitude (Blackburn-1973, 127).

Schueler denies that this is logical inconsistency. If a person does not fulfill a commitment – in this case the commitment to having one attitude, if she has another – she acts wrongly, she fails to do what she should do; this may be a form of inconsistency, but it is not logical inconsistency. The reasoning involved in ABC is not valid since it is not an example of logical consistency.

In "Attitudes and Contents" Blackburn acknowledges the force of Schueler's criticism, but even before that, in *Spreading the Word*, he had reformulated his response to the Frege-Geach challenge.

### 3.2.2 Early Quasi-realism

In “Moral Realism” Blackburn tries to answer the Frege-Geach problem by arguing that like the **realist**, the **antirealist** can preserve the meaning of moral propositions from asserted context to unasserted context; the **antirealist** does this by claiming that moral propositions that are hypothetical propositions are disguised assertions of a link between moral attitudes, but not expressions of an attitude. This solution to the Frege-Geach problem does not hold up because the **antirealist** is not able to preserve the practices of moral discourse that **realists** can easily accommodate.

In *Spreading the Word* Blackburn’s approach to answering the Frege-Geach problem shifts. In the intervening period between “Moral Realism” and *Spreading the Word*, Blackburn adopted **projectivism** as the explanation for why there is moral practice; roughly, **projectivism** is the view that there is a practice of judging acts good or bad because we project our attitudes onto those acts. The problem for this version of **antirealism**, is still the same; “[u]nasserted contexts show us treating moral predicates like others,” i.e., like naturalistic predicates (Blackburn-1984, 191). Blackburn thinks that **projectivism** must explain both what is our purpose when we state a sentence in which there is a moral judgment that is unasserted and why this is the *particular* sentence appropriate to serve that purpose (Blackburn-1984, 191). Blackburn’s new solution to the Frege-Geach problem is to argue that the hypothetical propositions, in which there are moral judgments that are unasserted, are expressions of attitudes, too.

#### 3.2.2.1 Conditionals as Conjunctions

Blackburn claims that our purpose in uttering a sentence like, “If it is wrong to tell lies, it is wrong to get your little brother to tell lies,” in which a moral judgment is unasserted, is to

express an attitude to a moral sensibility. To support this claim he begins by pointing out that we frequently want to communicate multiple commitments, even when those commitments are distinct kinds of commitments; e.g., we want to communicate an evaluation and a belief like, “It is wrong to tell lies and your mother is going to be annoyed” (Blackburn-1984, 191). We do this by conjoining the two commitments with “and” Blackburn intends to propose that if “and” can conjoin an evaluation and a belief, it can conjoin two evaluations, and so conditionals are really conjunctions of evaluations. Blackburn admits, though, that squaring this proposal with the standard semantics of “and” is problematic. The standard semantic account of “and” is that “it stands between two sentences to make one larger sentence out of them; the larger sentence is true if and only if each smaller one is true” (Blackburn-1984, 191). A problem for his approach is that because he is a **projectivist** Blackburn thinks that moral sentences do not express propositions that are truth evaluable, and so *prima facie* it seems wrong to combine them via a device that is meant to link truth evaluable propositions.

Blackburn argues that this is not genuinely problematic since “and” is commonly used to conjoin propositions – like commands – that no one thinks are truth evaluable; consider, “Fall in and stand at attention.” Nobody would argue that it is a mistake to join “Fall in” and “Stand at attention” with “and”, so Blackburn claims we should “expand the way we think of ‘and’.” He proposes that our understanding of “and” be expanded so that it “links commitments to give an overall commitment which is accepted only if each component is accepted” (Blackburn-1984, 191-192). So, according to Blackburn, the purpose of conjoining commitments is to express an overall commitment to both.<sup>4</sup> Blackburn does not appear to suggest that this overall commitment

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<sup>4</sup> Blackburn is imprecise in his use of the term “commitment” – it seems like a catch-all term for mental states when he calls beliefs and attitudes, habits, and prescriptions commitments (Blackburn-1984, 192). The imprecision is unfortunate because it is not clear whether the



is meant to express a commitment to holding the one constituent attitude if one holds the other constituent attitude. However, it seems to me that this must be part of the purpose of conjoining attitudes. What unites **expressivists** is their contention that moral language cannot be understood except by reference to its purpose. On a truth-functional analysis of “and,” its meaning is simply to unite statements of what is the case. For Blackburn’s analysis to be different than the truth-functional one, his “and” must do more than unite attitudes; this suggests that the overall commitment expresses something like a judgment that a person should have both constituent attitudes, or a person should not have one constituent attitude and the negation of the other constituent attitude.

This is an important amendment to Blackburn’s account of conjoining attitudes since he contends that the purpose of conditionals is to work out the implications of commitments by ranking sensibilities (Blackburn-1984, 192). Blackburn defines a moral sensibility as “a function from *input* of belief to *output* of attitude” (Blackburn-1984, 192, italics original). Blackburn argues that we must rank sensibilities since these have an immense influence on how people behave, which, in turn, impacts the quality of the world in which we live.<sup>5</sup> If this is the case, then it seems that what particularly interests Blackburn about a sensibility is its output of attitudes, and so sensibilities should be ranked according to the attitudes that compose them. A sensibility, then, is, for all intents and purposes, a conjunction of attitudes. Ranking of sensibilities then is a matter of approving of this conjunction of attitudes, and the conditional forms, in which moral

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conjunction of two different kinds of commitments – belief and attitude – can be an overall commitment to both or whether the components of an overall commitment must be the same type of commitment. It seems to me that the components of an overall commitment must be of the same kind, and that the overall commitment must be a similar kind of mental state as the components; the overall commitment to two conjoined beliefs is itself a belief, and the overall commitment to a conjunction of attitudes is a non-cognitive state.

<sup>5</sup> Something like the **internalist** view that beliefs cannot motivate behavior seems to be at play here; the outputs of a sensibility are attitudes, which motivate behavior.

propositions are unasserted, are endorsements of these conjunctions.<sup>6</sup> So, e.g., “If it is wrong to tell lies, it is wrong to get your little brother to tell lies,” is an endorsement of a sensibility which conjoins an attitude of disapproval of telling lies to an attitude of disapproval of getting one’s little brother to tell lies.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.2.2.2 Expressive Language and Conjunction

Blackburn points out that once he has explained the purpose of conditionals that include moral propositions, he will need to provide a semantics of this account since his analysis eliminates moral predicates from language; Blackburn proposes that there could be an expressive language,  $E_{ex}$  (Blackburn-1984, 193).  $E_{ex}$  explicitly represents the **expressivist** nature of moral judgments with what Blackburn dubs ‘hooray!’ and ‘boo!’ operators that are to be represented as “H!” and “B!” These operators can then be attached to descriptions of actions to express attitudes. In  $E_{ex}$  moral judgments like, “Giving to others is kind,” and “It is wrong to tell lies,” would be expressed as follows:

$E_{ex}1.$  H! (giving to others)

and

$E_{ex}2.$  B! (telling lies).

$E_{ex}1$  expresses an attitude of approval to giving to others, and  $E_{ex}2$  expresses an attitude of disapproval to telling lies. Blackburn has already pointed out that we want to be able to talk about and compare sensibilities, which are conjunctions of attitudes, so  $E_{ex}$  will need ways of

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<sup>6</sup> This analysis is consistent with footnote 4 in which I suggested that the kind mental state of an overall commitment to the conjunction of two attitudes must itself be an attitude.

<sup>7</sup> A sensibility is more complex than the example of one in which an attitude of disapproval of lying is conjoined with an attitude of disapproval of getting one’s little brother to lie. For one, it will include indefinitely many more attitudes. But, it is a functional mechanism by which these attitudes are conjoined.

doing this. Blackburn proposes that bars, “|”, be used to indicate that an attitude is being talked about. So, a reference to  $E_{ex1}$  would be represented as follows:

$E_{ex3}$ . |H! (giving to others)|.

And, a semi-colon is to be used to denote that one attitude involves or is coupled with another attitude. The attitude in  $E_{ex2}$  may involve, or be coupled with, a disapproval of getting others to lie, which would be represented as follows:

$E_{ex4}$ . B! (getting little brother to tell lies).

Blackburn, then suggests that the view that these two attitudes are linked in this way would be represented as follows:

$E_{ex5}$ . |B! (telling lies)|;|B! (getting little brother to tell lies)|.

Since we are interested in ranking sensibilities that are conjunctions of attitudes, Blackburn’s  $E_{ex}$  needs a way to represent conditionals that express endorsements of sensibilities. Blackburn finally proposes that the conditional, “If it is wrong to tell lies, it is wrong to get your little brother to tell lies,” be represented as follows:

$E_{ex6}$ . H! (|B! (telling lies)|;|B! (getting little brother to tell lies)|).

$E_{ex6}$  expresses an attitude of approval to an attitude, which is composed of the attitude of disapproval to telling lies and the attitude of disapproval to getting little brother to tell lies.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Blackburn is ambiguous about the relationship between the two attitudes united by a semi-colon in  $E_{ex5}$ . The semi-colon is meant to indicate “that one attitude ... involves or is coupled with another” (Blackburn-984, 194). However, involvement can be interpreted in multiple ways, while coupling suggests mere conjunction. Involvement could be interpreted as consistency, entailment, or psychological propensity. I do not think any of these interpretations will do. The consistency interpretation will have difficulty accounting for a person approving of an attitude that is consistent, even if he does not approve of the attitude. For example, some vaccines are developed from the tissue of aborted fetuses; consistency suggests that a person who disapproves of abortion also disapproves of using these vaccines. It seems plausible for a person to admire the attitude of another person even though they do not share it. Some would suggest that humility in the face of ethical questions requires such charity. And, interpreting “involvement” as

If we assume that Blackburn's explanation of how the meaning of moral propositions can remain constant from asserted to unasserted contexts does not face any immediate challenges, the next question for it is whether this account of the meaning of moral propositions can preserve important features of moral practice, in particular *modus ponendo ponens* in moral argument. If it

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entailment cannot be correct, either. This seems similar to the notion of logical consistency that Blackburn suggested for "involvement" in "Moral Realism;" it would be subject to the same criticisms it faced in the previous section. This interpretation also suggests that having the one attitude necessitates having the other, but Blackburn admits that people can disagree over these; e.g., people can share the attitude that it is immoral to have discriminated against African Americans, but not share the attitude that they should receive preferential treatment now (Blackburn-1984, 193). Under the psychological propensity interpretation, the "involvement" may be a disposition to disapprove of getting little brother to tell lies as a consequence of having an attitude of disapproval to telling lies. This interpretation has the benefit of being compatible with Blackburn's definition of a sensibility as a function from input of belief to output of attitude. I think this interpretation would be wrong, too, because it is possible that a person could have these attitudes independently from each other; this "involvement" interpretation of the semi-colon does not seem flexible enough to accommodate this scenario. I think the semi-colon is, therefore, best interpreted as a conjunction that conjoins attitudes. Blackburn claims that we are particularly interested in the outputs, the attitudes, of sensibilities since these are what generate behavior. If this is right, then really, what matter in a sensibility just are the attitudes; the connection between the attitudes, signaled by "involvement" are not so important. We want to evaluate attitudes because they manifest in behavior; so it seems that we are most interested in evaluating sets of attitudes, which are expressed by their conjunction with the semi-colon.

This interpretation suggests a mistake or gap in Blackburn's  $E_{ex}$ . Under this interpretation in  $E_{ex}5$  and  $E_{ex}6$ , the notation suggests a reference to the conjunction of two separate attitudes and an attitude of approval to two separate attitudes. Since, we want to refer to or evaluate the union of those two attitudes, the sensibility they compose, there seems to be a need for another device to represent that; I would propose brackets, [ ], to represent a sensibility. I think the notation in  $E_{ex}5$  is actually a reference to two attitudes, and I think the notation in  $E_{ex}6$  is actually approval of two attitudes, but Blackburn thinks they refer to or evaluate one sensibility composed of multiple attitudes. To refer to a single sensibility or evaluate it, they should be represented as follows, respectively:

$E_{ex}7$ . [|B! (telling lies)|;|B! (withholding the truth)|]

and

$E_{ex}8$ . H! ( [|B! (telling lies)|;|B! (getting little brother to tell lies)| ] ).

These amendments to Blackburn's semantics for  $E_{ex}$  do not do anything to anticipate and avoid that criticism to follow, but I did want to draw attention to them.

does, then Blackburn has a solution to the Frege-Geach problem, which would provide evidence to think **moral antirealism** is correct. For the realist, the following argument is a standard example of this logical inference:

- D. It is wrong to tell lies.
- E. If it is wrong to tell lies, then it is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.
- F. It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies (Blackburn-1984, 191).

In  $E_{ex}$ , the argument is represented as follows:

- G. B! (telling lies)
- H. H! (|B! (telling lies)|;|B! (getting little brother to tell lies)|)
- I. B! (getting little brother to tell lies) (Blackburn-1984, 195).

According to Blackburn, the inference to I from G and H is an example of logical inference, and the **projectivist** can preserve this important feature of moral practice. The inference is a logical one because anyone who holds G and H must hold I, too, or his attitudes will clash; anybody who expresses the attitudes represented by G and H, but expressed the attitude represented by J:

- J. H! (getting little brother to lie),

would have a “fractured sensibility” (Blackburn-1984, 195). This fractured sensibility would be represented as follows:

- $E_{ex}^9$ . |B! (telling lies)|;|B! (getting little brother to tell lies)|;|H! (getting little brother to tell lies)|.

And a fractured sensibility like this cannot be an object of approval because it cannot fulfill the practical purpose of evaluating things (Blackburn-1984, 195). Blackburn does not say why this is so, but it seems that since we want to rank sensibilities to encourage people to adopt the better ones, which will improve behavior, this sensibility is not susceptible to ranking since we would not to be able to begin to figure out where to place a sensibility with incompatible attitudes.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Blackburn cannot appeal to notion of contradiction to explain the inconsistency. It would be tempting to argue that the inference to I and G and H is valid because to make the

Blackburn preserves *modus ponendo ponens* as a feature of **antirealist** moral discourse and answers the Frege-Geach problem by claiming that if one holds G and H, then logical consistency requires holding I.

Blackburn concludes this response to Frege-Geach problem by arguing that if an expressive language for moral discourse like  $E_{ex}$  can do the same things as natural language does for naturalistic discourse, then the speakers of  $E_{ex}$  will help themselves to the more elegant forms of expression of natural language to assist them in expressing “concern for moral improvement, clashes, implications, and coherence of attitudes” (Blackburn-1984, 195). In order to use the more elegant forms of natural language the speakers of  $E_{ex}$  have to mimic naturalistic predicates by inventing moral predicates, which are rooted in attitudes. Blackburn does not think, then, that the fact that moral language has the same form as natural language is evidence that **expressivist** theories are wrong – it only highlights that people have adopted a form of language that meets moral discourse’s needs.

### 3.2.2.3 Schueler’s problem for early quasi-realism

Blackburn describes a failure to hold G and H, but not I, as a logical mistake; if this is so, then GHI is an example of a logically valid inference, and he has effectively responded to the Frege-Geach problem. Crispin Wright claims that someone who holds G and H, but not I commits a mistake, just not a logical mistake. Wright argues that the essential component of a valid inference is the inconsistency of accepting the premises and denying the conclusion. And, while Blackburn tries to replicate this with the clash of attitudes, which arises from endorsing G and H and not endorsing I, Wright denies there is anything to call inconsistency in this. Wright says that

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inference to J would generate a contradiction, but Blackburn cannot make this argument since contradiction is understood in terms of propositions with conflicting truth values, and, as an **expressivist**, Blackburn does not think that moral judgments have truth values.

what has happened when a person holds G and H, but not I is that he has failed to hold one of the combinations of attitudes they endorse; this is a *moral* failing, not a logical one (Wright-1988, 33, italics original).<sup>10</sup>

In “Modus Ponens and Moral Realism” Schueler arrives at the same conclusion independently. Before pressing this criticism Schueler makes two points about how Blackburn’s approach to the Frege-Geach problem has changed from “Moral Realism” to *Spreading the Word*. First, as I noted above, in “Moral Realism” a conditional is an assertion that one attitude involves another, but in *Spreading the Word* the conditional is now an expression of attitude toward the conjunction of two attitudes. Schueler points out that Blackburn characterizes conditionals as commitments (see Blackburn-1984, 195), but “commitment” is a term that suggests a realist interpretation. If the conditional is still meant to express an attitude, Schueler claims that Blackburn cannot use “commitment” in its usual sense, and Blackburn owes an explanation of this different sense (Schueler, 498).<sup>11</sup> Second, unlike in “Moral Realism” Blackburn does not claim in *Spreading the Word* to prove that the inference to I from G and H is an example of *modus ponendo ponens*, and Blackburn doesn’t claim the argument in GHI is valid. This second point spurs Schueler to examine what Blackburn says is going on in GHI.

Blackburn says, “[I]t is a logical mistake that is made if someone holds the first two commitments, and not the commitment of disapproval of getting your little brother to lie”

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<sup>10</sup> In “Moral Blindness” Stefan Baumrin argues that a person who is morally blind, who fails to see why he should do what he morally judges as right, is guilty of failing to appreciate that the moral judgment implies the imperative (Baumrin-1963, 209). He suggested in comments that the moral failing Wright diagnoses is the same as a logical failing. I do not think this is correct because Baumrin is diagnosing the failure to live up to one’s moral judgments as the product of not accepting an imperative that is implied by the moral judgment. Here, for Wright there is no logical implication between the moral judgments.

<sup>11</sup> Schueler’s criticism here is similar to my observation in footnote 4 that Blackburn’s use of the term “commitment” is not precise.

(Blackburn-1984, 195). Like Wright, Schuler objects that having clashing attitudes or not doing what you commit yourself to doing are not logical mistakes, at least not as “logical mistake” is ordinarily understood (Schueler, 498-499). Schueler suggests a charitable interpretation of Blackburn as giving an **antirealist** account of what a logical mistake is within moral argument; Blackburn does after all show there is some kind of mistake being made by having a fractured sensibility (Schueler, 499). But, Schueler finds fault with this interpretation because he cannot see why Blackburn thinks someone’s attitudes would clash if she accepted G and H, but not I. Imagine that you had the following three attitudes: disapproval of lying; approval of the view that disapproving of lying “involves” disapproving of getting one’s little brother to lie; approval of getting my little brother to lie. Schueler argues that Blackburn cannot explain what makes us think these attitudes clash. The most promising explanation would be to just say that disapproving of lying clashes with approving of getting my little brother to lie, but Schueler points out that this situation would make the conditional redundant. If the conditional is made redundant in the argument, then Blackburn is not providing an account of the inference to I from G and H that mirrors, at least, *modus ponendo ponens* (Schueler, 499).

In order to generate the clash, the conditional – the attitude of approval towards the view that disapproval of lying involves disapproval of getting others to lie – is the key attitude, and it is the involvement claim that must do the job. Schueler does not know what “involvement” means. He notes that Blackburn describes this as a commitment to having the consequent disapproval from G and H (see Blackburn-1984, 195), but this runs into the criticism Schueler made before: “commitment” invokes a realist construal, and without an antirealist construal of it, it begs the question (Schueler, 499). And, the other terms that Blackburn interposes for “involves” – “is coupled with” and “follow upon” (see Blackburn-1984, 194 and 195) – do not



do anything to explain how the attitudes clash. Schueler suggests a psychological gloss like the one I offered in footnote 8 – the connection between disapproving of lying and disapproving of getting others to lie is a psychological one, so that a person who had the one, could not help but have the other – but he also rejects it because it is false (Schueler, 499). Schueler thinks Blackburn is only able to say that the attitudes are different, not that they clash (Shuler, 500).

Finally, Schueler argues that even if Blackburn can explain how a person who accepts G and H, but not I has a clash of attitudes, he cannot explain what is the mistake in having a fractured sensibility (Schueler, 500). Schueler points out that people often have fractured sensibilities; an athlete can approve of drinking beer since his experience of drinking it is one of enjoyment, and he can also disapprove of it since his experience of drinking it has impacted his performance. There is a clash of attitudes here, but there is no fractured sensibility, or mistake; the only thing for the athlete to decide whether to have a beer or not, but there is nothing odd about having both attitudes. If Blackburn cannot even explain what the mistake is in having a fractured sensibility, he cannot claim there is a logical mistake in having one; he has not preserved *modus ponendo ponens* for **antirealist** moral discourse after all.

#### 3.2.2.4 Hale's problems for early quasi-realism

In a review of *Spreading the Word* Bob Hale raises similar objections to Schueler's ones against Blackburn, but he proposes a revision that might defend the **quasi-realist** against them; Hale suggests that there needs to be a different interpretation of the conditional E in  $E_{ex}$ . Recall that in DEF, E is

E. If it is wrong to tell lies, then it is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.

And in  $E_{ex}$ , Blackburn proposed that the conditional be represented as  $E_{ex}6$ , (H, in argument GHI):

H. H! (|B! (telling lies)|;|B! (getting little brother to tell lies)|).

Hale suggests that Blackburn is mistaken in treating the conditional as approval of a sensibility that combines disapproval of telling lies with disapproval of getting little brother to tell lies. Hale claims that the important thing about E for  $E_{ex}$  is that it is a commitment to “*disapproving* of anyone who disapproves of lying but does not disapprove of getting little brother to lie” (Hale-1986, 74). For Hale, a person who does not disapprove of getting little brother to lie does not, therefore, approve of doing so – they may have no attitude about it. Hale thinks  $E_{ex}$  needs to be supplemented with a method for representing a lack of an attitude; he proposes that the negation symbol be used to indicate this. In Hale’s expanded semantics for  $E_{ex}$  the lack of an attitude, positive or negative can be represented as “-|H! (x)|” and “-|B! (x)|,” and E should be represented as follows:

$E_{ex}10$ . B! (|B! (telling lies)|;-|B!(getting little brother to tell lies)|) (Hale-1986, 74).

So, Hale would propose that GHI should be represented as follows:

G. B! (telling lies)

H'. B! (|B! (telling lies)|;-|B!(getting little brother to tell lies)|)

I. B! (getting little brother to tell lies).

Now, any person who has the attitudes represented in G and H' is guilty of a simple inconsistency, if he lacks the attitude of disapproval of getting little brother to tell lies (and, this is so either by not having any attitude to getting little brother to tell lies, or by approving of doing so). Anybody who had the attitudes in G and H', but not I “would have a combination of attitudes of which he himself disapproves” (Miller, 63). According to Miller, Hale’s proposal would provide an intuitive account of the validity of the inference in GHI: anybody who committed to G and H', but not I would have an inconsistent set of attitudes, thereby preserving *modus ponendo ponens* (Miller, 63).

Hale thinks his reformulation of the conditional E for  $E_{ex}$  can account for how there can be a clash of attitudes for a person who has the attitudes in G and H', but not I. Hale thinks that what happens when a person has the attitudes in G and H', but not I is he commits a moral failing; this moral failure consists in failing to make one's actions conform to one's attitudes, and there can be a principle that prescribes doing so (Hale-1986, 74). This inconsistency can be expressed as a principle about attitude inconsistency:

$$E_{ex}11. B!(|B! (x)|;x);$$

Hale translates this as “Don't do what you Boo” (Hale-1986, 74)! Hale supposes this moral failure might as well be called inconsistency (Hale-1986, 74). However, Hale points out that though Blackburn can now provide an account of moral inconsistency, this revision does not provide other kinds of consistency – presumably logical consistency.

### 3.2.3 Late Quasi-realism and Commitment-Theoretic Semantics

In “Attitudes and Contents” and, then, again, in *Ruling Passions* Blackburn cites Schueler's and Hale's doubts about the kind inconsistency he relies on to answer the Frege-Geach problem, and he attempts to provide an account of how attitudes can function in logical relationships, that is how they can have a role in a “theory of inference” (Blackburn-1988b, 189). According to Blackburn, the solution is to focus on the function of the indirect contexts in the propositions that generate problems for an **antirealist** semantics; their function is to express a “structure of commitments,” or what Blackburn calls being “‘tied to a tree’: in a state in which he or she can only endorse some combination of attitude and belief” (Blackburn-1998, 71). According to Blackburn, when a person make an assertion in which there is an indirect context, the person is expressing how he is tied to a tree of commitments.

What Blackburn aims to do is to develop a logic of inferences for commitments, which he understands as a catchall term for mental states. Blackburn's strategy for answering Schueler and Hale is to show that his new account, commitment-theoretic semantics, can provide an account of inconsistency for propositions that express beliefs or attitudes because both can be construed as commitments. So, if he can develop a logic of inferences for commitments that licenses the inferences we make with beliefs, then its accounts of consistency and inconsistency will be logical consistency and logical inconsistency. (Paraphrased from Miller §4.5) And if the commitment theoretic account generates logical consistency and logical inconsistency for beliefs *qua* commitments, it will do so for attitudes *qua* commitments. Let's examine a case of *modus ponendo ponens* that is usually understood to involve propositions expressing beliefs:

- K. Citi Field is in Queens.
- L. If Citi Field is in Queens, then Citi Field is in New York.
- M. Citi Field is in New York.

All of the propositions are descriptive and express facts, and their meaning can be explained in truth-conditional terms. Of particular interest is that L's truth-condition can be explained in terms of its components' truth-conditions: L is true if and only if there are no situations in which the truth-condition of the antecedent obtains while the truth-condition of the consequent fails to obtain. And this is just what we would expect from the truth table for the material conditional:

p	q	$p \rightarrow q$
T	T	T
T	F	F
F	T	T
F	F	T

According to Blackburn, a person who utters K is expressing her commitment that the truth-condition of K obtains. Now, let's look at L; at first, it would seem that a person who utters L is expressing her commitment that there are no situations in which the truth-condition of the antecedent obtains while the truth-condition of the consequent fails to obtain. But Blackburn claims this commitment is more complicated than that: "To avow a mental state is to express acceptance of certain norms. To avow anything of the form 'If p then q' is to commit oneself to the combination 'Either not-p or q'" (Blackburn-1998, 72). So, according to Blackburn a person who utters L is, in effect, expressing her commitment that either it is not the case that Citi Field is in Queens (i.e., that the truth-condition of the antecedent does not obtain) or Citi Field is in New York (i.e., the truth-condition of the consequent does obtain). This is borne out when we compare the truth tables for the material conditional and disjunction, with  $\neg p$  as a disjunct:

p	q	$\neg p$	$p \rightarrow q$	$\neg p \wedge q$
T	T	F	T	T
T	F	F	F	F
F	T	T	T	T
F	F	T	T	T

Blackburn thinks that this interpretation of indirect contexts, like the one in L, can generate the kind of logical inconsistency that Schueler and Hale demand. According to Blackburn, he can explain this as a logical inconsistency because the people who express K and L and not-M "represents themselves as tied to a tree of possible combinations of belief and attitude, but at the same time represents themselves as holding a combination that the tree excludes" (Blackburn-1998, 72). So, a person committed to  $(p \rightarrow q)$  is also committed to  $(\neg p \wedge$

q), and “to be tied to that combination is to disavow the combination of p with not-q”  
(Blackburn-1998, 72).

Blackburn’s interpretation of the material conditional as a disjunction would produce the following revision of KLM:

- K. Citi Field is in Queens.
- L'. Either Citi Field is not in Queens or Citi Field is in New York.
- M. Citi Field is in New York.

Blackburn thinks that to hold p (K in the argument) and not-q (not-M in the argument) is unintelligible, and logic is our way of organizing intelligible combinations of commitments. So, given that K denies the truth of the first disjunct, if the disjunction in L' is to be true, then the second disjunct must be true, and the conclusion M, must follow; anybody who has the commitments expressed by K and L', but not the commitment expressed by M is guilty of logical inconsistency.

Blackburn’s insight is that the disjunction in L' represents a branching among the commitments of a person who utters K and L', and this branching can be used to demonstrate the inconsistency involved in having those commitments and not having the commitment expressed by M. Let’s imagine someone who has the commitments expressed by K and L', but not M, and catalogue them:

Catalogue of Commitments-I
commitment that Citi Field is in Queens
commitment either that Citi Field is not in Queens or that Citi Field is in New York
lack of commitment that Citi Field is in New York.

The combination of commitments in the catalogue of commitments is inconsistent only if each branch of the commitment issuing from the disjunction generates an inconsistent set of

commitments (Miller, 65). The middle commitment with its disjunct generates two branches, which should be represented as follows:

Branch I-1	Branch I-2
commitment that Citi Field is in Queens	commitment that Citi Field is in Queens
commitment that Citi Field is not in Queens	commitment that Citi Field is in New York
lack of commitment that Citi Field is in New York	lack of commitment that Citi Field is in New York

The illustration of these two branches helps us to see that a person who has the commitments catalogued above has an inconsistent combination of commitments. If this person has the combination on Branch I-1, then she is committed to a contradiction: that Citi Field is in Queens and that it is not in Queens. And if she has the combination on Branch I-2, then she is committed to Citi Field being in New York and she is not committed to Citi Field being in New York. If this person accepted K and L', but not M she is logically inconsistent, and so if she makes the argument KL'M, she must be logically consistent. Since KL'M has the same truth-conditions as KLM anybody who makes the argument KLM is logically consistent, too; KLM is logically valid. Having demonstrated a logical consistency among these commitments, which are beliefs, the challenge for Blackburn is to export this approach to propositions expressing moral judgments, that is, to commitments that are attitudes; if he can, then Blackburn may have answered the Frege-Geach problem.

### 3.2.3.1 Exporting Commitment-Theoretic Semantics to Moral Judgments

Blackburn does not explicitly demonstrate how this commitment-theoretic semantics would be implemented for moral judgments and their deployment in indirect contexts like the DEF argument we looked at before:

- D. It is wrong to tell lies.
- E. If it is wrong to tell lies, then it is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.
- F. It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.

To use the disjunction instead of the material conditional, DEF should be represented as follows:

D. It is wrong to tell lies.

E'. Either it is not wrong to tell lies, or it is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.

F. It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.

It would seem that given that D denies the truth of the first disjunct, if the disjunction in E' is to be true, then the second disjunct must be true, and the conclusion F, must follow; anybody who has the commitments expressed by D and E', but not the commitment expressed by F is guilty of logical inconsistency. Now, the next thing to do is show through the catalogue of commitments and the branches that the combination of commitments represented in DE'F yields an inconsistent set of commitments on each branch, if a person accepts D and E', but not F.

But, how should the commitment in each proposition be represented; for example, are D and E' as follows, respectively?

- commitment to the attitude that telling lies is wrong

and

- commitment either to the attitude telling lies is not wrong or to the attitude getting little brother to tell lies is wrong.

This does not appear to be the correct representation because the way Blackburn formulates attitudes in  $E_{ex}$  suggests that D and E should be represented as follows:

- commitment to |B! (telling lies)|

and

- commitment either to |H! (telling lies)| or to |B! (getting little brother to tell lies)|.

There is a problem in the disjunction since it is not clear how to render negation in the first disjunct; a person does not have to approve of telling lies to not be committed to disapproving of telling lies. In addition, Hale points out that it would be hard to figure out how to represent a



proposition that involved both a belief and an attitude like, “If John did it, he is to blame” (Hale-2002, 146). It would seem quite strange for this proposition to be represented as follows:

- commitment either to John did not do it or to |B! (John)|.

Hale proposes that the best solution for how to represent the commitments of beliefs and attitudes in commitment-theoretic semantics is to take Blackburn at face value when he describes propositions as the objects of commitments, as for example, “‘If p then q’ is to commit oneself to the combination ‘Either not-p or q’” (Blackburn-1998, 72), and then to introduce the notion of acceptance of the beliefs or attitudes these propositions express (Hale-2002, 146). So, K (Citi Field is in Queens) and D (It is wrong to tell lies) would be represented as follows:

- commitment to accepting the belief expressed by “Citi Field is in Queens”

and

- commitment to accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”

With this approach, we can catalogue the commitments of a person who accepts D and E', but does not accept F as follows:

Catalogue of Commitments-II
commitment to accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”
commitment either to not accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies” or accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”
lack of commitment to accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”

The next step is to examine the branches of commitments that arise from this set of commitments for consistency. However, Blackburn cannot use satisfaction of truth-conditions for establishing consistency as he did with beliefs; Hale points out that Blackburn recognizes this and proposes a

notion of consistency such that attitudes are only consistent “if they admit of simultaneous realization” (Hale-2002, 146). With this notion of consistency in mind, let’s look at the branches.

Branch II-1	Branch II-2
commitment to accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”	commitment to accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”
commitment to not accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”	commitment to accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”
lack of commitment to accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”	lack of commitment to accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”

Like with the combination of commitments on Branches I-1 and I-2, we can see that a person who has the commitments catalogued above has an inconsistent combination of commitments. A person with the combination on Branch II-1 is committed to accepting a negative attitude toward telling lies, but he is also not committed to accepting the same attitude. Similarly, a person with the combination on Branch II-2 is committed to having a negative attitude toward getting little brother to lie, but he is also not committed to accepting the same attitude. The point is that at each point on the branch the person has some attitude, and this is so even when they lack commitment to an attitude. The person who has the combination of commitments on Branch II-1 has a negative attitude towards telling lies, but he also has, at least, a neutral attitude towards it, and these are not simultaneously realizable. And, the same is true for the other branch; this person has negative attitude towards getting little brother to lie, but he also has, at least a neutral attitude towards it. The person who accepts D and E', but not F is logically inconsistent, and so if he does make the argument in DE'F, he is being logically consistent. Having demonstrated a logical consistency among commitments, it appears that Blackburn has answered the Frege-Geach problem.

### 3.2.3.2 Problems for Commitment-Theoretic Semantics

Blackburn's commitment-theoretic semantics is a novel response to the Frege-Geach problem, but it does not succeed in answering the Frege-Geach problem. There are two problems for this approach given its dependence on an analogy between belief propositions and moral propositions. First, Blackburn's application of commitment-theoretic semantics to assertoric discourse is meant to give commitment-theoretic semantics an air of respectability; if it produces consistency for assertoric discourse, then this must be logical consistency.<sup>12</sup> But, this argument from analogy holds only if commitment-theoretic semantics is the best semantics for assertoric discourse, i.e., if that is the best explanation of the meaning of conditionals in assertoric discourse. On this count, commitment-theoretic semantics comes up short since **truth-conditional semantics** is a more straightforward account of meaning for assertoric discourse. Consider K, "Citi Field is in Queens," again; on **truth-conditional semantics**, it is because 'Citi Field is in Queens' is true if and only if Citi Field is in Queens that the meaning of 'Citi Field is in Queens' is Citi Field is in Queens. On Hale's revised version Blackburn's theory, the meaning of "Citi Field is in Queens" is a commitment to accepting the belief expressed by the proposition; that is much more complicated. If this criticism is right, then the semantics of assertoric discourse and moral discourse will be distinct, and moral discourse will not be able to lay claim to logical consistency on identical grounds as assertoric discourse.

### 3.2.3.3 Commitment-Theoretic Semantics and *Modus Tollendo Tollens*

There is a stronger challenge for Blackburn than this; Hale points out that Blackburn may preserve *modus ponendo ponens* for moral discourse with commitment-theoretic semantics, but he does not preserve other logical theorems. For an antirealist semantics to be a genuine

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<sup>12</sup> I will use assertoric discourse to mean a discourse that involves propositions that state facts (express beliefs).

alternative to **truth-conditional semantics**, it should be able to accommodate the widely accepted logical principles that the latter accommodates, but Hale argues that Blackburn's approach will not accommodate *modus tollendo tollens*.

Below are variations on arguments KLM and DEF reflecting *modus tollendo tollens*.

¬M. Citi Field is not in New York.  
L. If Citi Field is in Queens, then Citi field is in New York.  
¬K. Citi Field is not in Queens.

¬F. It is not wrong to get little brother to tell lies.  
E. If it is wrong to tell lies, then it is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.  
¬D. It is not wrong to tell lies.

To use the disjunction instead of the material conditional,  $\neg FE\neg D$  and  $\neg ML\neg K$  should be represented as follows, respectively:

¬M. Citi Field is not in New York.  
L'. Either Citi Field is not in Queens or Citi Field is in New York.  
¬K. Citi Field is not in Queens.

¬F. It is not wrong to get little brother to tell lies.  
E'. Either it is not wrong to tell lies, or it is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.  
¬D. It is not wrong to tell lies.

If Blackburn's commitment-theoretic semantics is a viable alternative, it should be able to demonstrate that a person who endorses  $\neg M$  and  $L'$ , but does not endorse  $\neg K$ , (and, likewise if she endorses  $\neg F$  and  $E'$ , but does not endorse  $\neg D$ ), has inconsistent commitments.

To examine this let's look at the catalogue of commitments, and its branches, for such a person. Hale suggests that the person who asserts the negation of the second disjunct in the disjunction be understood as rejecting the disjunct; so in  $\neg p \wedge q$ , a person who asserts  $\neg q$  is committing "to *rejecting*  $q$  (i.e., accepting  $\neg q$ , as opposed to merely not accepting  $q$ )" (Hale-2002, 147). The catalogue for  $\neg ML'\neg K$  and the catalogue for  $\neg FE'\neg D$  are represented as follows, respectively:

Catalogue of Commitments-III
commitment to rejecting the belief expressed by “Citi Field is in New York.”
commitment either to not accepting the belief expressed by “Citi field is in Queens” or accepting the belief expressed by “Citi Field is in New York.”
lack of commitment to rejecting the belief expressed by “Citi Field is in New York.”

Catalogue of Commitments-IV
commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”
commitment either to not accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies” or accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”
lack of commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”

And, their branches are represented as follows, respectively:

Branch III-1	Branch III-2
commitment to rejecting the belief expressed by “Citi Field is in New York.”	commitment to rejecting the belief expressed by “Citi Field is in New York.”
commitment to not accepting the belief expressed by “Citi Field is in Queens.”	commitment to accepting the belief expressed by “Citi Field is in New York.”
lack of commitment to rejecting the belief expressed by “Citi Field is Queens.”	lack of commitment to rejecting the belief expressed by “Citi Field is in Queens.”

Branch IV-1	Branch IV-2
commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”	commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”
commitment to not accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”	commitment to accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”
lack of commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”	lack of commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”

On branch 2 of each, it is obvious that there are commitments to attitudes that are not simultaneously realizable: such a person would be simultaneously committed to rejecting and

accepting the same belief or attitude. However, it is not possible to identify the beliefs or attitudes that are not simultaneously realizable on branch 1 of either set of commitments. On branch 1 of both sets of commitments, the person is committed to “accepting  $\neg q$  [(i.e., rejecting  $q$ )], not accepting  $p$ , coupled with the non-acceptance of  $\neg p$ ” (Hale-2002, 147); such a set of commitment is not inconsistent. The commitments to not accepting the belief expressed by “Citi Field is in Queens,” and the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies,” are essentially commitments to withhold acceptance or rejection of them until there is sufficient evidence to do so, and those are not inconsistent with a lack of commitment to reject either. Blackburn’s commitment-theoretic semantics cannot apparently account of logical inconsistency for *modus tollendo tollens*.

Blackburn argues that  $p \rightarrow q$  should be interpreted as  $\neg p \wedge q$ , and in the criticism just discussed Hale interprets that as a commitment either to not accepting that  $p$  or accepting that  $q$  (i.e. a commitment either to not accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies” or accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies,” as E'). But Hale admits an alternative interpretation might be available: either accepting that  $\neg p$  or accepting that  $q$  (a commitment either to reject the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies” or accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies,” as E'). So, the catalogue for  $\neg FE'\neg D$  and its branches could alternatively be represented as follows:

Catalogue of Commitments-V
commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”
commitment either to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies” or accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”
lack of commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”

Branch V-1	Branch V-2
commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”	commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”
commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”	commitment to accepting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to get little brother to tell lies.”
lack of commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”	lack of commitment to rejecting the attitude expressed by “It is wrong to tell lies.”

It is obvious that on branch V-2 there is inconsistency, just as it was in branches in III-2 and IV-2; but, unlike with branches III-1 and IV-1, there is an inconsistency on branch V-1: a person with the commitments on that branch accepts an attitude that it is not wrong to tell lies while simultaneously not accepting an attitude that it is not wrong to tell lies. This interpretation of the disjunction does not vindicate commitment-theoretic semantics after all, though.

Hale points out that this interpretation of the disjunction would generate contradictions for the law of identity:  $p \rightarrow p$ . On this alternative interpretation of the material conditional,  $p \rightarrow p$ , is meant to be interpreted as  $\neg p \wedge p$  – either accept that  $\neg p$  (i.e. reject that  $p$ ) or accept that  $p$  (Hale-2002, 148). This is a very strong and substantial commitment: for any claim, we should either reject it or accept it. But we may not be in a situation in which we have sufficient information to reject it or accept it. For this alternative interpretation of the disjunction to be the correct one, then it is either the case that there can never be a situation in which we have insufficient information to reject or accept a claim, or the law of identity is false; neither is plausible, so this interpretation must be incorrect.

It is clear that the first interpretation of the disjunction cannot generate logical inconsistency for *modus tollendo tollens*, but Blackburn argues that he can defend the second. He claims that Hale misunderstands his re-interpretation of the material conditional as a disjunction;

a person who asserts  $p \rightarrow q$  is actually expressing two commitments: a commitment to accept that not  $p$  or accept that  $q$ , and a commitment to adopt one of the disjuncts, if the other is rejected, or abandon the first commitment all together (Blackburn-2002, 171). So, a person who says, “If it is wrong to tell lies, it is wrong to get little brother to tell lies,” is really expressing her commitment to accept that it is not wrong to tell lies or accept that it is wrong to tell lies, and to adopt whichever disjunct is not rejected, or to abandon the first commitment all together. First, it is doubtful that the proposition expresses anything so complicated, and if it did, it is up to Blackburn to explain just what kind of non-cognitive state this would be and what it would be like. Second, this solution is undesirably *ad hoc* compared to the alternative of **truth-conditional semantics**. Blackburn has tried to excuse this by suggesting that **quasi-realism** will have to earn the logical trappings of descriptive discourse for moral discourse on a case-by-case basis, and he calls this project “slow track quasi-realism” (Blackburn-1998b, 184-186, 197).

### 3.3 Chapter Conclusion

I doubt whether slow track **quasi-realism** can earn all the logical trappings of descriptive discourse for moral discourse with an antirealist semantics, but even if it can, because it is *ad hoc* it will suffer in comparison with a **truth-conditional semantics** for moral discourse. This is an important way in which **moral antirealism** is deficient compared to **moral realism**, and it will have to compensate by offering comparative advantages in other areas. **Moral antirealism** typically does this by pointing to its metaphysical advantages; in the following three chapters I will assess the metaphysical advantages that Blackburn’s metaethics are purported to possess over **moral realism**.



## Part II: Quasi-Realism's Metaphysics

### Chapter 4: Projectivism

#### 4.1 Establishing Projectivism

In the previous chapter I noted that Blackburn characterizes **quasi-realism** as the attempt to reconcile our moral practices with a **projectivist** understanding of the moral realm. On his view, a “*quasi-realist*’ ... [is] a person who, starting from a recognizably **antirealist** position, finds himself progressively able to mimic the intellectual practices definitive of realism” (Blackburn-1980, 15).<sup>1</sup> **Quasi-realism** is Blackburn’s response to the need to account for moral practice given an **antirealist** base, and **projectivism**, what Blackburn calls the metaphysics of **moralizing**, is his account of that **antirealist** base. I am interested in this starting point of **moral antirealism**, denying that the putative elements of the moral domain, moral properties, exist, and this reflects my methodological prioritization of metaphysics. My aim in chapter 4 is to develop an account of **projectivism**, what Blackburn calls the metaphysics of **moralizing** (and which I characterize as its phenomenology), in his metaethics and raise some problems for it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In “Morals and Modals” Blackburn makes a similar remark about the impetus for **quasi-realism** when he writes, “It starts with a theory of the mental states expressed by commitments in the area in questions: the habits, dispositions, attitudes they serve to express” (Blackburn-1987, 55). In “How to be an Ethical Anti-Realist” Blackburn suggests that **quasi-realism** is what we should expect, if **projectivism** is correct (Blackburn-1988a, 167), and **projectivism** is motivated by naturalism because in **projectivism** the analysis of the mental state of someone “who has an ethical commitment makes natural sense” (Blackburn-1988a, 168). Earlier, I pointed out that Blackburn’s use of the term “commitment” is inconsistent with the typical **realist** construal of the term, and he owes an account of “commitment” that is consistent with **antirealism**.

<sup>2</sup> It may seem odd to categorize **projectivism** as the phenomenology of moralizing. However, I think it is apt since as I read Blackburn, his **projectivism** is a metaphysical theory in which moralizing is best understood as the product of mental phenomena by which we come to moral “awareness.” I think this characterization of **projectivism** is consistent with Blackburn’s description of **projectivism** as “a metaphysical view, ... which explains what we do when we moralize” (Blackburn-1985b, 164). I call **projectivism** the phenomenology of moralizing because part of what **projectivism** is supposed to explain is the **realist** feeling of morality.

It is difficult to get a handle on what the theory of **projectivism** amounts to since philosophers often use “projection” metaphorically, Blackburn included.<sup>3</sup> Blackburn’s explanation of **projectivism** echoes David Hume’s language, and Blackburn claims that his form of **projectivism** is consistent with Hume’s account of the way the mind spreads itself upon the world and how it guilds and stains natural objects with sentiment (T 1.3.14.25; SBN167; EPM App 1.246; SBN 294). A large portion of this chapter will be devoted to outlining Humean **projectivism** and two distinct versions of **moral projectivism** in Blackburn’s texts, and I will argue that the version Blackburn prefers is not Humean, after all. (However, first, I want to draw on the work of Richard Joyce and Peter Kail to establish the criteria that an account of a domain must satisfy for it to be a **projectivist** account, using examples of projection to support this characterization.) I will also use Mackie’s version of **moral projectivism** to serve as a point of comparison for assessing which form of Blackburn’s **projectivism** is Humean. This will help demonstrate that his preferred version of **projectivism** does not correspond to the Humean version, and if Blackburn is truly Humean, the alternative version of **moral projectivism** should be considered the **moral projectivism** that is his metaphysics of moralizing.

#### 4.2 Projectivism: the preliminaries

In “Is Moral Projectivism Empirically Tractable?” Richard Joyce tries to devise a set of theses that are common to different forms of **moral projectivism**; the two theses he identifies are:

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Joyce makes the very point in “Is Moral Projectivism Empirically Tractable?” Nelson Goodman made use of the metaphor of projection in *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*. There Goodman tried to explain how to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate projections (inferring that a concept from a known case applies to an unknown case on the basis of induction). Part of Goodman’s solution was to propose that a projection is legitimate if it involves projectible predicates, i.e., whose application is well-entrenched. Blackburn uses “projection” in a different manner – as a way of explaining why we have the experience of a property when the property is not actually present. It is odd that Blackburn uses the metaphor of “projection” without distinguishing it from Goodman’s use of the concept, especially since Blackburn examined Goodman’s new riddle of induction in “Goodman’s Paradox.”

1. We experience moral wrongness (e.g.) as an objective feature of the world.
2. This experience has its origins in some non-perceptual faculty; in particular upon observing certain actions and characters (etc.) we have an affective attitude (e.g., the emotion of disapproval) that brings about the experience described in 1 (Joyce-2009, 56).<sup>4</sup>

These two theses comprise a view that Joyce dubs minimal **projectivism**, and when the list is supplemented with thesis 3, the resulting view is what Joyce calls metaphysical **projectivism**, which is a form of **antirealism**:

3. In fact, moral wrongness does not exist in the world (Joyce-2009, 56).

We must supplement theses 1, 2, and 3 to characterize a moral theory like Mackie's **error theory**, which Joyce calls nihilistic **projectivism**, with a fourth thesis:

4. When we utter sentences of the form "X is morally wrong" we are misdescribing the world; we are in error (Joyce-2009, 56-58).

Joyce recognizes that a **non-cognitivist** form of **projectivism** like Blackburn's will not feature these 4 theses; it will include 1, 2, and 3, deny 4, and replace 4 with a thesis of **expressivism** (Joyce describes it as the view that the function of a sentence like "X is morally wrong" is not to describe the world, but to express an attitude) (Joyce-2009, 57-58). In light of this version of **projectivism**, Joyce amends nihilistic **projectivism** to include the denial of **expressivism**.

Blackburn has called **projectivism** the metaphysics of moralizing, so his metaethics comprises a

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<sup>4</sup> Joyce suggests that these two theses are compatible with **moral realism**, error theory, and **non-cognitivism**. **Projectivism** with error theory and **projectivism** with **non-cognitivism** are the views of Mackie and Blackburn, respectively; a view that combines **projectivism** and **realism** is a view that Joyce claims R.M. Sainsbury attributes to Hume in his "Projections and Relations." Sainsbury argues that Hume's **projectivist** accounts of causation and morality are distinct and not parallel; the kind of projection that yields claims about causation lead us into error, while the different kind of projection that yields moral claims produce "literal truths" (Sainsbury, 134). According to Sainsbury, Hume has a relational theory of value that is not **subjectivist**, **expressivist**, or **relativist** (Sainsbury, 135). I doubt that Joyce is correct in characterizing this as a **realist** position. Such a characterization suggests that the **realist/antirealist** fault line should be drawn on the distinction between **cognitivism** coupled with a success theory and error theory and **non-cognitivism**, but, as noted in chapter 1, I take it that an essential element of **realism** is the mind-independence of the category of objects.

metaphysical element, metaphysical **projectivism**, and a semantic element, **quasi-realism**, so his **projectivism** should be committed to theses 1, 2, and 3. If **moral projectivism** is constituted by these three theses, then they must be true, for **moral projectivism** to be true.

I am going to assume thesis 1, which I understand as claiming that the phenomenology of moral experience is **realist**, is true, and I acknowledge that many people may find this controversial. I believe it is true because when I reflect on my own sensitivity to the moral status of a state of affairs it feels to me like the morality is real, but I am not going to argue that my experience is veridical. I defend making the assumption because **projectivists** like Mackie and Blackburn appear to accept it.<sup>5</sup> They need the phenomenology of moral experience to be **realist**, along with the rejection of **moral realism**, to motivate the second thesis in **moral projectivism**; if thesis 1 is false, then **moral projectivism** is false, but then it being false would also threaten **moral realism**. Thesis 1 is a common starting point for some **moral realists** and **moral projectivists**; the former think that moral experience feels real because it is real, while the latter need to explain why it feels real, when it is not real.

According to thesis 2, a person's experience of morality as part of the world begins with an affective response to observing, say, an action and results in moral experience with a **realist** phenomenology. Joyce claims that thesis 2 is compatible with **moral realism**, which is what thesis 3 denies, but I doubt it is possible to consistently hold thesis 2 and be committed to **moral realism** because I believe a key element of **moral realism** is that morality is mind independent,

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<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Russell seems to suggest that he feels like morality is real when he writes, "In opposing the proposal, I should *feel*, not only that I was expressing my desires, but that my desires in the matter are *right*, whatever that may mean. As a matter of argument, I can, I think, show that I am not guilty of any inconsistency in holding to the [expressivist account] of ethics and at the same time expressing strong ethical preferences. But in so feeling I am not satisfied." (This is quoted from Olson, 90; the quotation is from Russell's "Reply to my Critics" in The Library of Living Philosophers' anthology *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* edited by P. A. Schilpp).

and thesis 2 would make it unacceptably mind dependent. But, if I grant it is possible, the **realist moral projectivist** and the **antirealist moral projectivist** will accept thesis 2 for distinct reasons. A **moral projectivist** who is a **realist** will accept thesis 2 because she has a view in which a moral property is not the kind of thing that can be detected by a perceptual faculty; a **moral projectivist** who is an **antirealist** will accept thesis 2 because he has a view in which a moral property cannot be detected because there is no such thing as a moral property. My main point is that if it is possible for a **moral projectivist** to be a **realist** or **antirealist**, her metaphysical commitments about morality will be a core part of her **projectivism**; it will not be an add-on thesis to a core of minimal **projectivism** as Joyce suggests. Both the **realist** and **antirealist projectivist** must provide an explanation of how we come to have an experience of morality that feels real. Thesis 2 is an explanation of what is going on when a person has a moral experience, but there is no need for the explanation without the metaphysical commitments of **realist** and **antirealist**; and it is metaphysical because it proposes there is a process that causes the experience in thesis 1.

Joyce identifies an affective response as the non-perceptual faculty origin of the experience of moral experience in thesis 1; this indicates that the moral experience is not identical to the affective response and is the culmination of a process. (This is one way in which **moral projectivism** is distinct from moral **intuitionism**, the view that human awareness of moral properties, in the realist sense, is constituted by direct, non-inferential appreciation of these properties. A moral **intuitionist** claims that there is a special non-perceptual faculty that detects moral properties directly, so that moral awareness is the activation of that faculty.) So **moral projectivism** is a theory that explains how a person comes to have a moral experience,

which is realist in character. **Moral projectivism** supplies this explanation through the metaphors of projection and projective mechanisms.

Because Blackburn is a **moral antirealist** and I want to refute his theory I am interested in **antirealist** forms of **moral projectivism**, and given my remarks about **projectivism**, I want to propose the following preliminary reformulation of **moral projectivism** as the view that:

- i. moral experience has a **realist** phenomenology;
- ii. there are no features of the world that correspond to moral experience;
- iii. moral experience is a projection that has its origins in a **non-cognitive** response to features of the world, i.e., is the culmination of a projective mechanism that begins with a **non-cognitive** response to features of the world.

An explanatory theory is only as good as its explanation, so the next step in developing an account of **projectivism** is to explain what a projection is. I will draw on Peter Kail's account of what a projection is to explain this. Since I want to reject Blackburn's **moral projectivism** I have to mine Blackburn's texts to develop an account of Blackburn's **projectivism** but because he identifies the metaphysical element of his theory with Humean **projectivism**, I must first articulate and examine Hume's accounts of causation and morality to determine if they are forms of **projectivism** to draw on them to accomplish the task of articulating Blackburn's version of **moral projectivism**. In addition, since the rejection of **moral realism** is an important element of **antirealist moral projectivism**, I must examine Blackburn's case for why **moral realism** is false; I will do that in the following chapter, chapter 5.

#### **4.2.1 Kail on Projection**

In "Projection and Necessity in Hume" Peter Kail devotes himself to two tasks: (1) making exegetical sense of Hume's **projectivism**; (2) demonstrating that Hume's **projectivism** is compatible with a skeptical-realist interpretation of Hume's view of necessary connection (Kail,

24). I am interested in the first task, so I want to focus on Kail's attempt to explain what it is to be a projection.

Kail offers multiple quotes from Hume on necessary connection, but one is sufficient to provide a sense of its **projectivist** character: "... as we *feel* a customary connexion between the ideas, we transfer that feeling to the objects; as nothing is more usual than to apply to external bodies every internal sensation which they occasion" (Kail, 25, quoting EHU 7.61, SBN 78). Kail interprets projection to involve the "ascription of aspects of our minds to other items" (Kail, 26). Kail suggests that Hume can be interpreted as offering two different explanations of necessary connection. In one explanation Hume claims "that there seems to be necessity in the world ..., but since Hume tells us there isn't any, he must explain the phenomenology. So he explains the phenomenology by saying we project our feelings onto the world" (Kail, 26). This is Hume as an **antirealist** about necessary connection. The other explanation is one in which Hume is a skeptical realist about necessary connection: "if there is necessity, it is not revealed to us by experience, ... and so we need to explain why it seems to us that it is" (Kail, 26). In both cases the motivation for proposing an explanation of the phenomenology as a projection is different, but in either case explaining the phenomenology as a projection is appropriate. Kail's view of **projectivism** is that it is an explanatory theory; it is meant "to explain why the subject takes the world to be a certain way (either on the level of phenomenology or belief) when it is not possible to invoke the world *being that* way to explain why the subject takes it to be so" (Kail, 27-28). Kail and Joyce both agree **realism** and **antirealism** are compatible with the need to explain the phenomenology, which supports my reformulation of Joyce's theses.

Kail wants to unpack what a "projection" is, and he identifies various uses of the metaphor of projection: Freudian projection of anger; passage of time as the projection of

changes in belief state; Feuerbach's projective account of the Christian God; moral value as projection (Kail, 27). Kail proposes a schema of projection that underlies these "different *modes*" of projection, and he shows how these "different *modes*" fit within the schema to justify it.

According to Kail, *S*'s commitment in a domain counts as a projection when:

- (a) the best explanation of the commitment does not advert to the putative facts or properties corresponding to the commitment;<sup>6</sup>
- (b) the commitment is not derived or sustained by inference;
- (c) the explanation of the commitment essentially involves appeal to psychological facts about *S*;
- (d) the phenomenology of the commitment does not intimate to the subject its best explanation" (Kail, 27).<sup>7</sup>

Kail's account in which a commitment is a projection is in tension with my reformulation of Joyce's theses of **projectivism**, which casts moral experience as a projection. My first instinct is to try to reconcile the view, and one possible way to reconcile the two views is to identify the commitment with the experience. This would be a mistake because it is possible to distinguish experience and commitment; when I look at a pencil in a glass of water, I have the experience that it is bent, but I do not have the commitment (in this case belief) that it is bent. I think Kail has unnecessarily complicated the picture by introducing the notion that a commitment is a projection.

The key question is: what is the projection in **projectivism**? Once that is answered, then the task is to explain why moral experience has a **realist** phenomenology. One answer to the question is that moral experience is itself the projection. Kail appears to contemplate that the projection is a commitment. So, if Kail thinks the commitment is the projection, how does this

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<sup>6</sup> Kail uses the term "commitment" so as "not to beg any questions about the cognitive status of the [mental] state involved" (Kail, 49). I have already noted the variable ways Blackburn uses this term. I will use it here to explain Kail's views.

<sup>7</sup> This last condition reflects Kail's view that a person who has a commitment that is, in fact, a projection will not be aware that the commitment is a projection.



contribute to the **realist** phenomenology of a moral experience? The only way I can imagine a commitment contributing to the phenomenology of an experience is if the commitment itself has a phenomenology, and if the experience is to have a **realist** phenomenology, the commitment's phenomenology must be **realist**, too. This cannot be what projection is because a commitment with a **realist** phenomenology must be a belief – what else can it be; and, since a **non-cognitivist antirealist projectivism** must be able to encompass a view in which moral commitments are not beliefs, but non-cognitive states, this treatment of commitment as projection is not compatible with such a possibility. On the other hand, the view that moral experience is a projection is much simpler – moral experience has a **realist** phenomenology because it is a projection. What needs to be explained is why a projection has a **realist** phenomenology. An important advantage of this is that it is open to the possibility that a moral commitment is a response to the phenomenology, which leaves space for Mackie's **projectivism** and **error theory** and for Blackburn's **projectivism** and **quasi-realism**.

With these considerations in mind, I propose the following tentative amendment to my formulation of **non-cognitivist antirealist moral projectivism**; **antirealist moral projectivism** is the view that

- MPi. moral experience has a **realist** phenomenology;
- MPii. there are no features of the world that correspond to moral experience;
- MPiii. moral experience is a projection that has its origins in a **non-cognitive** response to features of the world, i.e., is the culmination of a projective mechanism that begins with a **non-cognitive** response to features of the world;
  - MPiiia. a moral experience is a projection if its explanation essentially appeals to non-inferential psychological facts about its subject;
  - MPiiib. the explanation of a moral experience is opaque to the subject.

A general account of **projectivism** for domains other than the moral would be as follows:

**Projectivism** is the view that

- Pi. Experience in a domain has a **realist** phenomenology;
- Pii. there are no features of the world that correspond to the experience;
- Piii. the experience is a projection that has its origins in a psychological state, i.e., is the culmination of a projective mechanism that begins with a psychological state;
  - Piiia. an experience is a projection if its explanation essentially appeals to non-inferential psychological facts about its subject;
  - Piiib. the explanation of the experience is opaque to the subject.

## 4.2.2 Projectivisms

In the next subsection I want to defend the plausibility of this account of **projectivism**, and **non-cognitivist antirealist moral projectivism**, by showing how examples of **projectivism**, which are not about morality, reflect the characterization in Pi-Piiib.

### 4.2.2.1 Freudian Psychological Projection

Freud introduced the psychological defense mechanism of projection, in which a person unconsciously attributes his “own threatening impulses, emotions, or beliefs onto other people or things” (Ewen, 35).<sup>8</sup> And Jung proposed that a person’s “shadow” – the shameful and unpleasant elements of her personality that is repressed in the unconscious – “is projected onto other people” (Ewen, 91-94). In projection, a person may be angry with his spouse, but because it is inappropriate to be angry with the spouse he unconsciously suppresses the anger and comes to have the belief that the spouse is angry with him. Projection should be able to explain why the person has this belief, and on the analysis of **projectivism** I proposed in subsection 4.2.1 the phenomenology explains it – it feels like the spouse is angry to the person who is projecting. In conversation with two psychologists they agreed that their patients who engage in projection “perceive” the person on whom they are projecting as having the quality they are projecting on to

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<sup>8</sup> Freud first identified a defense mechanism of psychological projection in *Totem and taboo* (1912-1913).

them.<sup>9</sup> Freud distinguished projection from displacement, a defense mechanism in which “feelings or behaviors are transferred, usually unconsciously, from one object to one that is less threatening” (Ewen, 35). An example of displacement would be a person who is angry at a superior at work, but directs this anger at a child at home (displacement may sometimes be conscious).

This kind of Freudian psychological projection is an example of **projectivism** because it meets the conditions I put forward at the end of subsection 4.2.1. First, the phenomenology of the experience where the man projects his anger on his spouse is realist; it feels to the man like his spouse is angry with him – this satisfies condition Pi. Second, the man’s spouse is not actually angry with him, so there is no feature in the spouse that explains the experience – this satisfies condition Pii. Third, the projection – the man’s experience of his spouse as angry – originates from the man’s own anger with his spouse, and an explanation of why he experiences this anger as his spouse being angry with him depends on other non-inferential psychological states (one explanation might be that the man was raised to be uncomfortable with anger) – these factors satisfy condition Piii and Piiia. Finally, all of this process takes place unconsciously, so the man is not aware that he is doing this – this satisfies condition Piiib. This is one example of a theory that appeals to projection and satisfies the conditions I put forward in subsection 4.2.1, but I must consider some others to provide more support for my formulation.

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<sup>9</sup> I am not aware of psychological studies on the phenomenology of anger projection, so I cannot say whether people who use this defense mechanism experience the person, on whom they project anger, as angry at them. However, on a personal anecdotal level, reflection on instances in which I have been able to recognize that I engaged in projection, do suggest to me that I believed that the person I was projecting onto was angry at me.

#### 4.2.2.2 Anthropomorphic Projection

Kail defines anthropomorphic projection as the “representation of non-human objects as possessing human attributes” (Kail, 32). Kail’s definition suggests the aesthetic device in which an artist depicts a non-human object as having human characteristics. Animals are often depicted in art, especially fables, to have human traits, e.g., the cunning fox or proud lion. A different example is in cartoons when weather systems are represented as human; one example is a cold wind that has a face and blows its wind from its mouth. I do not think these are examples of **projectivism** because I do not believe the artists who depict them or the art-goers who experience the depictions have an experience of the fox or the wind as if it really had those characteristics and, at least for the artists, the depiction of the objects as human is conscious. I do think that in raising the issue of anthropomorphism Kail has suggested a kind of projection that is anthropomorphic. I propose that anthropomorphic projection involves experiencing non-human objects as having human characteristics and the experience has a **realist** phenomenology.

Here is one example I have in mind: many people attribute human characteristics to animals, but especially their pets. People characterize beavers as industrious, and I suspect many people do so because it does seem to them that the beaver has the characteristic of being a diligent worker. Of course, the most common examples of people attributing human characteristics to animals is with their pets: my cat is indifferent to me; Michael Jackson’s Ben who needs a friend; the dog loyal to his master. A dog, man’s best friend, seem to be the pet most susceptible to projection. I do believe that some people do sincerely come to believe a dog misses its deceased master when the dog waits by the front door for a walk at the customary hour the master would walk it. I think a plausible explanation for why people have this belief is that they do experience the dog as really missing the master, and the experience is a projection

(condition Pi). The dog does not really miss the master – it is trained to wait for a walk

(condition Pii). The experience has its origin in an emotion in the person, and the experience is arrived at non-inferentially (conditions Piii and Piiia). And, the person is not conscious of the process that gives rise to the experience (condition Piiib). I think the depiction of non-human objects as having human characteristics is different than the experience of non-human objects as having human characteristics; if the latter is a real phenomenon, then the explanation of it I suggested is a form of **projectivism**.

Belief in God is a phenomenon that some people have explained in terms of **projectivism**. **Projectivism** is a plausible explanation of belief in God when the belief is a response to an experience of God that has a **realist** phenomenology, but not all belief in God would be an example of **projectivism**. For example, some people may believe in God because they are convinced by any of the traditional arguments for God's existence even though they do not experience God. On the other hand some people who believe in God claim to know God exists because they feel God in the world; **projectivism** is a possible explanation in such cases. Ludwig Feuerbach and Freud offered analyses of belief in God that roots it in projection.

In *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach offers an analysis that explains the Christian experience of God as a projection, rather than just the general experience of God. Feuerbach examines the characteristics that God is supposed to have and identifies a human characteristic or need for which it is an analog; the point is to demonstrate that God's characteristics arises from human psychology rather than a reaction to God revealing these characteristics. In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud offers an account of belief in God where we experience God as a part of the world because of a human need. According to Freud, humans have needs or fears that fathers fulfill or protect them from, but when they realize fathers cannot fulfill all of the needs or protect

them from all dangers, they project an idealized father figure, God, on the world. (One might combine Freud's and Feuerbach's views to use Freud to explain why humans experience God as part of the world and use Feuerbach to explain why Christians experience God in the form they do.) Both of these explanations appear to fit the pattern I laid out for **projectivism**.

I think it is plausible to interpret the experience of God as part of the world or as human-like as having a **realist** phenomenology satisfying condition Pi. And, if there is no human-like God or no God at all, then Feuerbach's and Freud's explanations satisfy condition Pii. And, in both explanations the experience arises from features of human psychology and is not a product of inferences from the psychology, which satisfies conditions Piii and Piiia. And, finally the process by which this occurs is presumably unconscious, so these explanations also satisfy condition Piiib.

#### **4.2.2.3 Phantom Limb Sensation: Projectivism?**

In the "The Perception of Phantom Limbs" neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran and philosopher William Hirstein examined the phenomenon of phantom limb sensation. They reported that nearly all amputees experience phantom sensations of their limbs that were amputated and some people who are born without limbs report sensation of those limbs (Ramachandran and Hirstein, 1605-1606). The subjects used terms like "vivid" and "perception" to discuss the phenomenology of these sensations, and they reported subjects describing the feeling of a ring or watchband on the phantom limb (Ramachandran and Hirstein, 1605, 1607). If we understand this to reflect a **realist** phenomenology, then phantom limb sensations are candidates for a **projectivist** explanation.

A theory of phantom limb **projectivism** would immediately satisfy conditions Pi and Pii: the experience of phantom limb sensation has a **realist** phenomenology and there is no fact of

sensation in the limb since it has been amputated. The phantom limb sensation is a projection if the experience has its origins in a psychological state, is not arrived at via inference, and the subject is not aware of this process. I cannot fully present Ramachandran and Hirstein's full theory, but they offer the following abstract schema to account for phantom limb sensation; the sensation depends on integrating experiences from the following five sources:

- i. from the stump neuromas, as taught by old textbooks;
- ii. from remapping;...
- iii. the monitoring of corollary discharge from the motor commands to the limb;
- iv. a primordial, genetically determined, internal 'image' of one's body; and
- v. vivid somatic memories of painful sensations or postures of the limb being 'carried' over into the phantom (Ramachandran and Hirstein, 1624).

Because the five sources Ramachandran and Hirstein propose as being necessary to account for phantom limb sensation are or can be identified with psychological states, the schema does not imply that the sensation is the product of any inference between states or that their integration has to be conscious, this account would qualify as a version of **projectivism**.

#### 4.2.2.4 Projectivism and Disgust

Proponents of a **projectivist** understanding of morality often compare their account to **projectivist** accounts of the disgusting. They cite the plausibility of explaining the disgustingness of, say, a child consuming his dried nasal mucus, as a projection of a person's subjective response to it as an example for accounts of properties like goodness or badness to emulate. In *Projection and Truth in Ethics* John McDowell disputes the appropriateness of this comparison, but he does admit that projection seems to be a suitable explanation for why we talk as though disgustingness is a property of things, which they have "independently of their relations to us" (McDowell-1987, 1).

Here is a different example of disgust; seafood is disgusting – I will not eat it. I have tried seafood (fish, mollusks, lobster) a few times, but I feel nauseous when I encounter seafood; it is

disgusting. I have had this aversion since childhood, and even though I know now that my disgust for seafood is about me and not about the seafood that has not changed the fact that when I find myself among friends who order oysters, and I resolve to eat one, I fail at the moment of truth. It seemed to me as a child, and now it still seems to me, that there is something in the oyster that is foul, loathsome; the only difference now is that I know the disgustingness is not, literally, in the oyster. McDowell describes projection's aim as explaining "certain seeming features of reality as reflections of our subjective responses to a world that really contains no such features" (McDowell-1987, 5). This description captures my example of seafood's disgustingness, but McDowell adds a condition to **projectivist** accounts: the projected response has an explanatory priority to the property, i.e., we should be able to think about the response without making reference to the property.<sup>10</sup> McDowell thinks the disgust I feel for seafood can be given this priority since it is a "self-contained psychological ... [item], conceptualizable without any need to appeal to any projected ... [property] of disgustingness..." (McDowell-1987, 6).

In characterizing projection as explaining what seem to be features of reality on the basis of responses he likens to psychological items, McDowell's analysis meets conditions Pi and Piii of a general **projectivism**. However, the account includes the other elements, too. By positing a need to explain "seeming features of reality," McDowell's account indicates that need for explanation of those features because the features are not actually part of reality, which

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<sup>10</sup> In "Values and Secondary Qualities" McDowell points out that a feature of **projectivism** is that "the response that, according to such a treatment, is projected onto the world can be characterized, without phenomenological falsification, otherwise than in terms of seeming to find the supposed product of projection already there" (McDowell-1985, 143). Here McDowell clarifies important features of a **projectivist** explanation of a seeming feature of reality: it must be able to identify the mental process/state that is projected without reference to the feature; and it must do so without falsifying the phenomenology that it is attempting to explain.



incorporates condition Pii to the account. It is not obvious that McDowell's account includes condition Piiia and Piiib. Piiia claims that the projection is a psychological state that is not the product of inferences. McDowell is silent on whether the projection can be sustained inferentially, so his account does not reject Piiia. Piiib holds that the **projectivist** analysis is not evident to the subject, but when McDowell identifies there is a need for an explanation of the "seeming features of reality" he suggests that the **projectivist** explanation is not obvious.

Before considering one last putative example of **projectivism**, I want to emphasize the addition McDowell has made to the elements of **projectivist** account of a phenomenon.

McDowell requires that it must be possible to describe the projection without appealing to the feature of response it explains; my accounts of general **non-cognitivist antirealist moral projectivism** and general **projectivism** should be supplemented with the following conditions, respectively:

MPiv. It is possible to characterize the **non-cognitive** state in terms other than the moral property whose experience it explains.

Piv. It is possible to characterize the psychological state in terms other than the property whose experience it explains.

#### 4.2.2.5 Comic Projectivism?

One last example of a feature of reality that seems a prime candidate for a **projectivist** treatment is the comic, which Blackburn uses as an example in "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value" (and which McDowell criticized in *Projection and Truth in Ethics*). Blackburn explains the experience of "[f]inding things very funny" is a product of our "tendency to laugh which we project on the world" (Blackburn-1985a, 155). I think Richard Pryor is funny, and my favorite joke he tells is one in which he discusses his use of cocaine: "I'm not addicted to coke... I just love the smell." Drug addiction is a horrible disease, but whenever I watch him tell that joke, I

either laugh and laugh, or just think to myself, “That’s so funny!” A **projectivist** explanation of the funny may meet all the conditions to be an example of **projectivism**.

Does my experience of finding Richard Pryor telling that joke funny, have a **realist** phenomenology, i.e., satisfy condition Pi? I am not sure it does, but I think it is plausible that it does have a **realist** phenomenology; a friend once told the joke, and I did not laugh, so perhaps it seems to me that the funniness is there in Pryor telling it. I am not a student of the theory of humor, but it is easy to suppose that funniness is not something in the world, so a **projectivist** explanation can fulfill the second condition, Pii. And, this explanation can appeal to a disposition, or maybe could even appeal to an unconscious emotion expressed by laughter, to explain why I experience Pryor telling the joke as funny, which does not suggest the process to me, so it appears like it satisfies conditions Piii, Piiia, and Piiib. A **projectivist** account of the comic must also be able to characterize the psychological state from which the projection arises in terms other than the experience it explains. McDowell doubts whether it is possible to characterize the subjective psychological response in terms that do not illegitimately appeal to comic notions; I will not say it is impossible to do so, but for an account of the comic to count as **projectivist** it must do so (McDowell-1987, 6).

#### **4.2.3 Moral Projectivism**

This canvassing of **projectivist** explanations of phenomena is not intended to be exhaustive, but it is meant highlight that for an explanation of the phenomena within a domain to be plausibly interpreted as a form of **projectivism** it should satisfy the conditions I proposed based on my review of Joyce, Kail, and McDowell. And, so I want to propose that for an explanation of the moral to count as an example of **antirealist moral projectivism** that is compatible with **non-cognitivism**, it must meet these conditions:

- M*P*i. moral experience has a **realist** phenomenology;
- M*P*ii. there are no features of the world that correspond to moral experience;
- M*P*iii. moral experience is a projection that has its origins in a **non-cognitive** state that is a response to features of the world, i.e., is the culmination of a projective mechanism that begins with a **non-cognitive** response to features of the world;
  - M*P*iii*a*. a moral experience is a projection if its explanation essentially appeals to non-inferential psychological facts about its subject;
  - M*P*iii*b*. the explanation of a moral experience is opaque to the subject.
- M*P*iv. It is possible to characterize the **non-cognitive** state in terms other than the moral property whose experience it explains.

In the remaining sections of the chapter, I want to use this as a standard by which to measure putative examples of **moral projectivism**; if a theory does not satisfy these conditions, it is not a form of **moral projectivism**. My attempt to excavate an account of **moral projectivism** in Hume and Blackburn will follow this schema.<sup>11</sup>

### 4.3 Mackie's Projectivism

In chapter 2 I highlighted the considerations Mackie offers to support a **realist** semantics for moral language: the phenomenology of morality is objective, it feels like it is out there. But, Mackie thinks his arguments from relativity and queerness establish that morality is not out there, it is not objective. According to Mackie, even though morality is not objective, it seems that way to us, and because it seems that way, our moral judgments reflect this – our moral

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<sup>11</sup> In order to develop an account of Humean moral **projectivism** I will have to develop an account of Hume's causal **projectivism**; in developing the latter account I will follow this schema of general **projectivism**:

- P*i*. Experience in a domain has a **realist** phenomenology;
- P*ii*. there are no features of the world that correspond to the experience;
- P*iii*. the experience is a projection that has its origins in a psychological state, i.e., is the culmination of a projective mechanism that begins with a psychological state;
  - P*iii**a*. an experience is a projection if its explanation essentially appeals to non-inferential psychological facts about its subject;
  - P*iii**b*. the explanation of the experience is opaque to the subject.
- P*iv*. It is possible to characterize the psychological state in terms other than the property whose experience it explains.

judgments are meant to be descriptive. Mackie's **error theory**, the view that all of the propositions about a domain of inquiry are false because none of the purported elements within the domain exist, needs to be supplemented with an explanation of why it seems that morality is objective when it is not, and in a subsection of chapter 1 of *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* entitled "Patterns of Objectification" Mackie offers a **projectivist** explanation, which he links to Hume (Mackie-1977, 42). Blackburn agrees that Mackie is a **projectivist**, just one who does not think that moral language can be explicated via **quasi-realism**, his project of earning the right to deploy moral judgments in all the ways supported by **descriptivism** and **realism** even though the meaning of moral judgments is explained by referring to their function to express non-cognitive mental states (Blackburn-1984, 180). And, he also characterizes Mackie as sounding a "Humean theme" (Blackburn-1985a, 150). It appears that Blackburn views Mackie's **projectivism** as substantially the same as his own, and that it is not a deviation from the Humean **projectivism**, with which Blackburn equates his view. If we can develop a picture of what **projectivism** is for Mackie, we will have a point of comparison for Blackburn's theory.

Mackie proposes that we "understand the supposed objectivity of moral qualities as arising from what we can call the projection or objectification of moral attitudes" (Mackie-1977, 42). Mackie compares this to the 'pathetic fallacy' – the "human tendency to read our feelings into their objects" (Mackie-1977, 42). The term was coined by English cultural critic John Ruskin in *Modern Painters*; the term is meant to identify the attribution of an emotion a human is experiencing to objects that cannot have those emotions, and some examples include sullen clouds or indifferent stones (Joyce-2010, 36). This habit would not qualify as an example of **projectivism** since in **projectivism** the object of moral judgment is not experienced as possessing a human emotion. Joyce points out that Mackie appears to try to explain this by

comparison with the attribution of foulness to a fungus, which arises from disgust (Joyce-2010, 36). But, Joyce notes that this is not an apt comparison since to commit the pathetic fallacy with the fungus would involve attributing being disgusted to the fungus” (Joyce-2010, 37). Joyce suggests that the attribution of foulness to the fungus constitutes a projection, but this cannot be correct; what must happen is that the disgust causes us to experience the fungus as foul, and based on that experience we attribute foulness to the fungus. Joyce endorses this as what objectification or projection involves on Mackie’s theory. But, it is important to note that this picture reinforces the idea in element Piv. that the experience and the mental state from which it arise should be given distinct characterizations.

Mackie compares moral values with aesthetic values, claiming that both are “logically in the same position ... with much the same metaphysical and epistemological considerations apply[ing] to them” (Mackie-1977, 43). And yet, he points out that the latter are “less strongly objectified” (Mackie-1977, 43). This suggests that Mackie thinks that an explanation of aesthetic judgments should be **projectivist**, too. I am not sure that this is correct because an aesthetic experience may not be able to satisfy the conditions of a **projectivist** account. For example, when I contemplate Rothko’s *Orange, Red, Yellow*, it does seem to me that my aesthetic appreciation for it is rooted in an affective response, which contravenes condition Piiiib. in a **projectivist** account. But when I imagine what Jerry Sandusky did to children, it is not evident to me that my response to that has its roots in my emotions (and, this is true despite studying **projectivist** accounts of morality). While it is doubtful that an account of aesthetic judgments can be strictly analogous to one for moral judgments, Mackie’s comparison can help him explain why the phenomenology of moral experience has an objective character. Unlike with aesthetic judgments, it matters greatly to us that other share our moral judgments since these are used to

regulate human behavior and interactions (Mackie-1977, 43). And, in the rest of the passage Mackie provides different ways by which we can come to see something as having objective values, e.g.: we can confuse our desire for something with its goodness; we fail to see the connection between an imperative and desire because the desire generating it is some social desire that is not our own; the objectivity is a holdover from when morality was believed to reflect divine law (Mackie-1977, 43-45).

Mackie's theory satisfies the elements of **projectivism** catalogued in subsection 4.2.3. For Mackie, moral experience has an objective feel to it, a **realist** phenomenology (condition MPi.), and he denies that this can be explained with reference to instantiated moral properties by arguing against them with the arguments from relativity and queerness (condition MPii.). Then, he explains that this experience of moral properties arises from feelings, wants, or demands (condition MPiii.). Mackie does not explicitly state that the projection is not transparent to us (condition MPiiib.), but his conclusion that projection results in beliefs, which we express in moral judgments meant to describe the world, indicates that he is committed to this feature of **projectivism**. At the start of the passage entitled "Patterns of Objectification" Mackie places his **projectivist** explanation of morality in the Humean tradition, so if his account of moral awareness is an example of **moral projectivism**, it can serve as a comparison point for other putative examples of **moral projectivism**, the view that the moral properties which people engaged in moral practice reference do not exist independently of human beings, and that instead they are the product of non-cognitive reactions to natural properties.

#### **4.4 Humean Projectivism**

A recurring theme in Blackburn's work is his insistence that his **projectivism** is Humean **projectivism** (see Blackburn-1981, 165; Blackburn-1984, 170-1, Blackburn-1993, 5). Blackburn

goes as far as claiming that his theory is a modern version of Hume's moral theory (Blackburn-1988a, 167). I already suggested that Blackburn is mistaken; to demonstrate this I will develop an account of Humean **moral projectivism** in subsections 4.4.1 to 4.4.3, and I will contrast it with Blackburn's **moral projectivism** in section 4.5.

#### **4.4.1 Hume's Moral Projectivism: In His Own Words**

Most of Section I of Book III Part I of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* concerns his arguments that moral awareness cannot be the product of reason alone; but at the end of this section Hume begins to explain the genesis of moral awareness. There he claims that if a person considers the act of murder in itself, she will never find viciousness in it; a person can only find the viciousness if she turns her attention inward, in which case she will find the viciousness in a sentimental reaction to the action (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 468-469). Hume notes that because the viciousness does not rest in the action, but in oneself, it is comparable to sounds, color, hot and cold, which "are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind" (T 3.1.1.26; SBN 469).

Given that the moral quality of an action resides not in the action, but in the perception, it must be either be an impression or an idea, and Hume claims it cannot be an idea by appealing to his argument that a moral quality cannot be discovered by reason, which involves the comparison of ideas only (T 3.1.2.1; SBN 470).<sup>12</sup> According to Hume, this means that morality is a matter of feeling rather than judgment, though the relative gentleness of the impression may confuse us into thinking that it is just a less vivid idea (T 3.1.2.1; SBN 470). On this view, the "impressions, by which moral good or evil is known, are nothing but *particular* pains or pleasures", and consequently an "action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious ...

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<sup>12</sup> Hume distinguishes between two kinds of perceptions, impressions and ideas; the former are sensations or feelings caused by stimuli, while the latter are copies of impressions, and are the perceptions involved in thinking; the distinguishing mark of impressions is their greater intensity (see T 1.1.1).

because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind” (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 471). So, for Hume it seems that when a person has the experience that another person is virtuous or an action is good, this is just to feel (have an impression of) pleasure of a particular sort, and this feeling is what makes up a person’s praise or admiration for the person or action (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 471). Hume is very careful to say though that we do not infer that a person is virtuous or an action is good because we have the feeling of pleasure; we feel the person is virtuous because we feel that she pleases us in a particular manner (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 471). In *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* Hume claims that a sentence that makes a moral pronouncement “depends upon some internal sense or feeling which nature has made universal in the whole species” (EPM 1.137; SBN 173). Despite these claims the mechanism remains obscure.

At T 3.3.1 (SBN 574) Hume describes a sympathetic mechanism by which our moral sense is produced.<sup>13</sup> Hume sketches the following picture by which we might come to call a person virtuous. To begin with he assumes that humans’ mental operations and feelings are alike (T 3.3.1.7; SBN 575). When we observe a person’s action, we immediately infer its cause, which is a passion, and then generate an idea of the passion, which in turn generates the passion itself in us (T 3.3.1.7; SBN 576).<sup>14</sup> So, on this view we observe a person treating another person tenderly, and we immediately conclude that this tender behavior springs from the passion of love in the person; next, we generate an idea of this love, and the idea prompts in us love toward the person.

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<sup>13</sup> In the previous paragraph the move from the impression of pleasure or pain, arising from observing the features of a person or act, to the awareness of the person’s or act’s virtue or vice appears to be immediate. It is unclear whether it is immediate because impression of pleasure, say, is identical to moral awareness, or the former triggers the latter quickly. Here Hume describes a process in which the moral awareness is less immediate indicating that feeling pleasure at an action is not identical to feeling its virtue.

<sup>14</sup> At T 1.1.2.1 (SBN 7-8) Hume distinguishes between impressions of sensation, which arise from unknown causes (presumably external to us) and impressions of reflection, which are derived from ideas; and at T 2.1.1.1 (SBN 275) Hume says the passions and other emotions resembling them are impressions of reflection.



Since Hume claims the “approbation of moral qualities ... proceeds entirely from a moral taste, and from certain sentiments of pleasure or disgust, which arise upon contemplation and view of particular qualities or characters,” it appears that in having the passion of love for that person and in feeling pleasure, we feel their virtuousness in admiring it (T 3.3.1.15; SBN 581). Despite this description of the mechanism of sympathy, the process by which we move from observation of a person or action to recognition of his or its virtue or vice remains opaque. Let’s look at Hume’s account in the *Enquiry*.

It is in Appendix I of the *Enquiry* that Hume discusses the role of sentiment in producing moral awareness. In discussing ingratitude, Hume claims that there is no matter of fact or relation that reason detects to which we could attribute vice; instead, it is a complex of factors observed by a spectator that moves the structure of his mind to produce a sentiment of blame towards the ingratitude (EPM App 1.237; SBN 287-8). Hume makes it clear that in his view “morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary” (EPM App 1.239; SBN 289). Further elaborations on the idea that moral awareness springs from sentiment include the following:

In these sentiments then, not in a discovery of relations of any kind, do all moral determinations consist (EPM App 1.241; SBN 291).

But in all decisions of taste or external beauty, all the relations are beforehand obvious to the eye; and we thence proceed to feel a sentiment of complacency or disgust, according to the nature of the object, and dispositions of our organs (EPM App 1.242; SBN 291).

The beauty is not a quality of the circle.... It is only the effect which that figure produces upon the mind, whose peculiar fabric or structure renders it susceptible of such sentiments.... Till such a spectator appears, there is nothing but a figure of such particular dimensions and proportions: from his sentiments alone arise its elegance and beauty (EPM App 1.242; SBN 291-2).

These quotations do not do anything to elucidate the mechanism; all they do is establish the dependence of moral awareness on sentiment.

Appendix 1 of the *Enquiry* concludes with a vague statement of the mechanism; taste, which appears to occupy the role of sympathy from the *Treatise*, “gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue.... [It] has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation” (EPM App 1.246; SBN 294). Finally, here is the suggestion that sympathy projects our sentiments onto actions or persons, and in so doing produces something new in the action or person, something like a moral quality. Despite this description, it is incomplete because Hume does not explain the mechanism that constitutes **moral projectivism** in his theory; in the next subsection I will develop an account of the projective mechanism in awareness of causes in order to establish a model for an account of it in awareness of morality.

#### **4.4.2 Hume’s Causal Projectivism: Cause as an Idea of Reflection**

Hume develops his **projectivist** account of cause in Book I Part III Section IV of the *Treatise* where he turns to the question, “*What is our idea of necessity, when we say that two objects are necessarily connected*” (T 1.3.14.1; SBN 155)? Shortly later Hume identifies this relation of necessary connection with other terms like “*efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connexion, and productive quality*”; and though, he does not include it in the list, “cause” is another term for this relation (T 1.3.14.4; SBN 157).<sup>15</sup>

Hume claims that since all ideas are derived from impressions, to understand the idea of cause we must look for an impression that produces the idea, but he points out that when we examine a situation, in which one event is supposed to cause a second event, the only

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<sup>15</sup> In discussing the relation that putatively exists between two objects, one a cause and the other the effect, Hume tends to call the relation “necessary connection”; I will call it “cause”.

impressions we have are that (1) the two events are contiguous, and (2) the event called “cause” precedes the second (T 1.3.14.1; SBN 155). Hume argues that just as we cannot detect causation in a single putative instance of it, we cannot detect it in multiple putative instances; we still only detect the contiguity and succession of the two events (T 1.3.14.1; SBN 155). However, Hume argues that the repetition of this contiguity and succession among similar events produces an impression in us, which in turn produces the idea of cause in us (T 1.3.14.1; SBN 155). Hume writes, “For after a frequent repetition, I find that upon the appearance of one of its objects, the mind is *determin’d* by custom to consider its usual attendant, and to consider it in a stronger light upon account of its relation to the first object. ‘Tis this impression, then, or *determination*, which affords me the idea of necessity” (T 1.3.14.1; SBN 156). It seems that Hume think this frequent repetition of contiguity and succession of type-A and type-B events determines the mind to expect the type-B event every time we become aware of the type-A event, and this expectation gives rise to the impression of a stronger relation than contiguity or succession between type-A and type-B events; and the idea of cause arises from this impression. I am not now prepared to outline a breakdown of the **projectivist** processes by which we come to call one event the cause, but after examining Hume’s account further, I will do so.

Hume spends several pages dispatching alternative accounts of how we come to have an idea of causation – including a theory claiming that the multiple resembling instances of events either discovers or produces cause in events – before returning to the task of providing his own account. Hume says, “Tho’ the several resembling instances, which give rise to the idea of power, have no influence on each other, and can never produce any new quality *in the object*, which can be the model of the idea, yet the *observation* of this resemblance produces a new impression *in the mind*, which is its real model for the idea of cause” (T 1.3.14.20; SBN 164-5).

Hume's view seems to be the following: we observe multiple instances of contiguous type-A and type-B events in which the latter succeed the former, and we also observe resemblance among these instances which produces an impression in the mind which serves as the model for the idea of cause. Two paragraphs later, Hume claims that this impression must be an impression of reflection, which gives us a hint on how to interpret this description.<sup>16</sup> With the clue that the model for the idea of cause is an impression of reflection and the order of perceptions, we can begin to sketch a picture of the process by which we come to the idea of cause:

1. There are the impressions of sensation, which arise from our observation of several instances of type-B events succeeding type-A events.
2. These produce multiple ideas of sensation of instances of type-B events succeeding type-A events, which are copies of these impressions.
3. We notice the resemblance between these ideas, which causes a new impression – an impression of reflection – in the mind, which is the model of the idea of cause.
4. Awareness of this impression of reflection produces the idea – an idea of reflection – of cause.

Despite this sketch, the last two steps remain vague; the nature of this impression of reflection and the move from it to the idea of cause must be unpacked further.

#### **4.4.2.1 Cause: from Impression to Idea of Reflection**

Hume describes the new impression as an immediate felt “determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant, and to conceive it in a stronger light on account of that relation” or “that propensity, which custom produces, to pass from an object to the idea of its usual attendant” (T 1.3.14.20; SBN 165). It seems that this new impression is a habit of having the idea of a type-B event succeed the idea of a type-A event when presented with a type-A

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<sup>16</sup> At T.1.1.2.1 (SBN 7-8), when Hume introduces his division of the perceptions, he claims that there are impressions of sensation and reflection, and there are ideas, which seem to be divided along the same lines – ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection. However, there is an order by which these come into the mind: first impressions of sensation, then ideas of sensation, then impressions of reflection, and last ideas of reflection.

event, or the idea of one, and that the idea of the type-B event is all the more vivid, and like an impression of a type-B event, because of this customary habit. Essentially, the new impression is the disposition to have an idea of a type-B event whenever we observe or have the idea of a type-A event. This equation of the new impression of reflection with a disposition is supported by Hume's claim that (a) passions are examples of impressions of reflection and (b) that passions are the spring from which actions originate (T 2.1.1.1; SBN 275; T 2.3.3.4; SBN 415).

Hume goes on to claim that cause "is nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one to another," and that the idea of it arises from impression (T 1.3.14.20; SBN 165). This suggests that Hume does not think that cause is an existing power or force in the world, but that our practice of ascribing it to events arises from our disposition to have the idea of an event from observing, or having the idea of, another event which previously preceded it. According to Hume, "Upon the whole, necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects" (T 1.3.14.22; SBN 165). The third step should now be clear as involving the development of a disposition to produce a more vivid idea of type-B events when presented with either a type-A event or idea of one. However, the fourth step is still unclear.

In the section on cause in the *Treatise* Hume moves so briskly from the just discussed account of how the idea of cause develops to an explanation of how we come to attach it to objects that the transition from the impression of reflection, which is a disposition to have the idea of an "effect" upon observing or remembering its "cause", to the idea of cause remains obscure. The transition appears to proceed as follows. Having a disposition to call to mind the idea of an "effect" upon observing or recalling its "cause", we become aware of how quickly we move from the one to other, and this serves as the model for the idea of cause. From this model we somehow manage to produce the idea that the type-A event necessarily brings the type-B

event in its wake, or that the former is the cause of the latter. Ultimately, I want to provide a **projectivist** account of cause to serve as a comparative base for a **projectivist** account of morality, so I do not want to dwell on this transition too much, but in earlier and later passages of the *Treatise* Hume makes remarks that suggest what may be going on.

When the mind, therefore, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determin'd by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination. Had ideas no more union in the fancy than objects seem to have to the understanding, we cou'd never draw any inference from causes to effects, nor repose belief in any matter of fact. The inference, therefore, depends solely on the union of ideas (T 1.3.4.12; SBN 92).

'Tis natural for men, in their common and careless way of thinking, to imagine they perceive a connexion betwixt such objects as they have constantly found unite together; and because custom has render'd it difficult to separate the ideas, they are apt to fancy such a separation to be in itself impossible and absurd (T 1.4.3.9; SBN 223).

It appears that our imaginations associate the type-A and type-B events and unite them together in such a way that makes separating them impossible to our imaginations, and we come to have the idea of a causal connection between the events. Even though this account may not fully elucidate the transition from the impression to the idea, it should do enough to make plausible that the mind does produce the idea from the impressions. Now, I want to turn to Hume's explanation of why it is we attribute cause to the type-A event itself.

Hume admits that his explanation that the origin of the idea of cause is within the mind will astonish people since it manifestly runs counter to how awareness of cause feels to us; it seems to us like we are aware of cause as something external to us that occurs between two events. After all, we talk about how the ball hitting the window caused the window to shatter; so, Hume has to explain the phenomenological aspects of causal awareness, and it is here that he introduces the element that makes his account of cause a **projectivist** account:

'Tis a common observation, that the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impression, which they occasion, and which always makes appearance at the same time these objects discover themselves to the senses. Thus ... we naturally imagine a conjunction, even in place, betwixt the objects and qualities, tho' the qualities be of such a nature as to admit of no such conjunction, and really exist nowhere (T 1.3.14.20; SBN 167).

The question then is what happens when the mind spreads itself on external objects and conjoins the internal impressions with the object. Hume supplies some hints of the process:

[W]e are led astray ... when we transfer the determination of thought to external objects, and suppose any real intelligible connexion betwixt them; that being a quality, which can only belong to the mind that considers them (T 1.3.14.22; SBN 168).

These relations, then, of causation, and contiguity in the time of their appearance, betwixt the extended object and the quality, which exists without any particular place, must have such an effect on the mind, that upon the appearance of one it will immediately turn its thought to the conception of the other. Nor is this all. We not only turn our thought from one to the other upon account of their relation, but likewise endeavour to give them a new relation, viz. that of a conjunction in place, that we may render the transition more easy and natural. For 'tis a quality...in human nature...that when objects are united by any relation, we have a strong propensity to add some new relation to them, in order to complete the union (T 1.4.5.12; SBN 237).<sup>17</sup>

From these quotations we should see that whatever happens in projection, it is a mental phenomenon, probably an act of imagination, a faculty, which operates by associating and separating ideas (T 1.1.4.1; SBN 10). Another reason to think that projection is an act of imagination is Hume's claim that the mind conjoins objects with impressions; if the two are being conjoined, then it seems this is a mental act of association, i.e. an act of imagination. Hume seems to suggest that in projection we associate a perception with an object in the world. But, this cannot be right since Hume suggests that all we are ever aware of are our perceptions, which

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<sup>17</sup> This last quotation comes at the conclusion of a passage in which Hume claims that if we contemplate a table on which a fig and an olive lie at opposite ends, we will have the idea of their respective tastes, and conjoin these with the qualities that rest in the fig and the olive so that we will think the taste is in the fig and olive, when they are really in our mind.

are either impressions or ideas (T 1.4.2.54; SBN 216).<sup>18</sup> Another apparent problem with this spreading metaphor is that Hume says we connect the impressions with the objects, but Hume's first account of the imagination as the faculty that associates ideas by resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect seems to suggest that imagination can only take ideas as its objects (T 1.1.4.1; SBN 10-11). However, later Hume defines a belief as "A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION" (T 1.3.7.5; SBN 96). This textual evidence suggests that it is plausible to think that what Hume meant by his spreading metaphor, and what projection of cause consists of, is the mind associating an idea with a present impression of an object, thus producing a belief in which the idea is a part of the impression of the object.

This suggests that on the **projectivist** account of cause what happens is that the mind has an impression of successive type-A and type-B events and the imagination associates them with the idea of cause it already has, thus producing a belief that event A causes event B. If that is correct, then the following should accurately capture what Hume thinks happens when we think one event causes another:

- (HCP1) the natural features of events causally interact with a person's senses;
- (HCP2) these external stimuli produce impressions of sensations of the events in the mind;
- (HCP3) the impression of sensation of the first activates the disposition – an impression of reflection – to have the idea of the second event;
- (HCP4) which in turn calls to mind the idea of cause – an idea of reflection – in a lively way;
- (HCP5) the imagination unites the impressions of the events and the idea of cause that have been brought to mind in near instantaneous succession into a belief that the first event causes the second.

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<sup>18</sup> In the same place in the text, Hume claims it is a matter of fancy to think external objects resemble our impression of them.



With this picture of Humean causal **projectivism** in place, I will now sketch a picture of Humean **moral projectivism**, a version of the view that the moral properties which people engaged in moral practice reference do not exist independently of human beings, and that instead they are the product of non-cognitive reactions to natural properties.

#### **4.4.3 Humean Moral Projectivism**

Even though I reviewed Hume's own words about the development of moral awareness in subsection 4.4.1, I want to restate a few key claims to draw out parallels between moral awareness and causal awareness.

Hume claimed that we can never find the viciousness of the murder in the murder itself; it can only be found within a sentimental reaction, and so it is like other qualities – sound, color, hot or cold – that can only be found in the mind (T 3.1.126; SBN 468-469). This parallels Hume's comparison of causal awareness to awareness of sound or smell in his **projectivist** explanation of why we think cause is external to us. In addition, this means that we should think of the source of our moral awareness as parallel to our source of awareness of cause – they both spring from an impression.<sup>19</sup> Assuming that human's mental operations and feelings are similar (T 3.3.1.7; SBN 575), Hume sketches the process by which we might call a person virtuous; it goes as follows: we observe a person's action and on the basis of the impression of sensation the action produces in us we immediately infer its cause, which is a passion; this generates in us an idea of the passion, which in turn via the mechanism of sympathy generates in us the passion itself toward the person – an impression of reflection (T 3.3.1.7-8; SBN 576-577).

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<sup>19</sup> The parallel is reinforced by the fact that one of Hume's argument why moral awareness is a matter of sentiment is that moral awareness can motivate us, and only passions do this (T 3.1.1.6; SBN 457). In discussing the impression of reflection from which the idea of cause arises, I noted that it was a disposition, which moves us to action.

Again this parallels Hume's claim that we come to think of one event causing another because witnessing the two events activates a disposition to have the idea of the second event producing the idea of cause. However, an important difference between Hume's views on morality and cause is that it seems that the process by which we become aware of a person's virtue terminates in the impression of reflection of passion, while our awareness of an event causing another is the combination of the idea of cause and the impressions of the events. Hume also said that what makes an action virtuous or vicious is that it causes an observer of the action to feel a particular sort of pleasure or pain, so that what really happens is that we think the action is virtuous or vicious because in witnessing the action, this causes an impression of reflection of pleasure or pain of a particular sort, and this impression is just what it is to be aware that the action is virtuous or vicious (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 471). There are missing steps here.

First, the sketch from T 3.3.1 that I outlined two paragraphs back neglects Hume's theory of the "double relation of ideas and impressions" (T 2.1.5.5; SBN 286). Second, the sketch omits that moral awareness is constituted by that impression of reflection of pleasure or pain of a particular sort, which turns out to be approbation, which must be a passion, since moral awareness motivates and only passions motivate, or at least according to Hume. This is supported by Hume's description of his hypothesis about morality in Appendix 1 of the *Enquiry*: "[M]orality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*; and vice the contrary" (EPM App 1.239; SBN 289). I think this is the new creation that Hume speaks of in Appendix 1 of the *Enquiry* where he offers a vague statement of the mechanism of moral projection: "[Sympathy] gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue.... [It] has a productive faculty, and

gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation” (EPM App 1.246; SBN 294).<sup>20</sup>

If the impression of approbation is the new creation and the feeling of a particular sort that constitutes moral awareness, it is still not clear what this particular sort of feeling is. For one, it must be a passion. Second, this feeling of a peculiar sort should not be identified with the passion that is supposed to be the mirror of the passion that inspires the person, whom we admire, to act. Hume suggests the approbation is a new mental state when he claims that sympathy stains natural objects with sentiment, i.e., the mirroring passion. So, what seems to happen is that sympathy generates both the passion that resembles the passion in the person whom we admire, and, on the basis of this passion, the approbation. Approbation has a peculiar phenomenological feel, and it strikes me that the peculiarity consists in the sympathy associating the passion with an impression of the person (remember that Hume claims all we are ever truly aware of are perceptions); this is what it means to feel her virtue (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 471). And, this act of association by the sympathy is moral projection in Hume. Given these considerations, I suggest that the following sketch is an accurate account of Humean moral projection:

- (HMP1) the natural features of another person’s actions causally interact with a person’s senses;
- (HMP2) these external stimuli produce impressions of sensations of the actions in the mind;
- (HMP3) from these impressions of sensation the mind infers the person acted from some passion, producing the idea of the passion;
- (HMP4) in turn, the idea of the passion produces an impression of reflection of pleasure or pain;
- (HMP5) the sympathy generates the passion, which was inferred in the person;
- (HMP6) uniting the passion with the impression of the person, the sympathy generates approbation, which is moral awareness.

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<sup>20</sup> Hume actually is speaking of taste in the quotation, but I take it he is making an analogy of sympathy with taste, so I do not think it misrepresents Hume to make the parenthetical change in order to illustrate his view.

With this account of Humean moral projection in place, I want to now turn my attention back to Blackburn's **moral projectivism**.

#### 4.5 Blackburn's Projectivism

In this section I will sketch an account of Blackburn's **projectivism** supported by his own words. My aim, as much as possible, is to work chronologically by cataloging Blackburn's own descriptions of **projectivism**, offer interpretations of what they mean, and noting any substantive changes to the position. In the places where Blackburn is inconsistent about the nature of **projectivism**, I will suggest a resolution to it either by offering reasons to think one account is better than the other or by comparing the accounts to Hume's version of **projectivism**, taking divergence from it to signal a possible mistake on Blackburn's part.

##### 4.5.1 Blackburn's Projectivism: In His Own Words

Blackburn is largely silent about **projectivism** in his first foray into the **moral realism-antirealism** debate, "Moral Realism." He makes only one remark that can be interpreted as reflecting **projectivism**, when he claims that a moral proposition is just a "propositional reflection" of an attitude even though it appears to make a factual claim about states of affairs (Blackburn-1973, 125-6).<sup>21</sup> This claim though contains the kernel of Blackburn's theory that moral propositions are the outputs of a system, or mechanism, in which moral mental states play a crucial role, and these moral mental states are some kind of **non-cognitive** mental state.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Twenty-five years later, in *Ruling Passions*, Blackburn will harken back to this account of a moral proposition when discussing whether "**projectivism**" or "**expressivism**" or some other name is the best title for his theory of moralizing (Blackburn-1998, 77).

<sup>22</sup> In his essay "The Flight to Reality" Blackburn says that he will call the attitudes and feelings at the center of Humean theories of ethics "conative states" (Blackburn-1995, 36). A **conative state** is one of three mental states constitutive of the mind; the other two are cognitive states and affective states. A **conative state** is a mental state directed toward action like volition, desire, or disposition. An affective state is a mental state of experiencing feelings like emotions or moods. Both a **conative state** and an affective state are examples of a **non-cognitive state**. By labeling

It is in “Opinions and Chances” that Blackburn first provides details about the mechanics of **projectivism**. In that article he describes a process in which the natural features of the world impinge on the mind, which has a reaction to that stimuli in the form of attitudes, and in turn, in the crucial step, the mind manifests the reaction by “spreading itself on the world” (Blackburn-1980, 75). Blackburn explains that when a mind spreads itself on the world “we regard the world as richer or fuller through possessing properties or things that are in fact mere projections of the mind’s own reactions” (Blackburn-1980, 75). This explanation suggests that projection involves the imposition of some property into our awareness of the world that cannot be accounted for by identifying a cause in the world that impinges on the mind. However, only a page later when he compares **projectivism** about **moralizing**, engaging in an activity constitutive of the practice of morality, to **projectivism** about cause, Blackburn suggests that projecting a cause is dignifying a regularity in a certain way (Blackburn-1980, 76). This suggests that projection in **moralizing** is dignifying attitudes in a certain way, and this might capture his previous claim that moral propositions are propositional reflections of attitudes; a moral proposition like, “Rape is evil,” dignifies our negative attitude toward rape in a certain way. Blackburn does not explain what is involved in dignifying an attitude in a certain way.

#### 4.5.1.1 Tension in Explaining Projection

This contrast is the first example of a recurring tension in Blackburn’s explanation of **projectivism**; in different places Blackburn claims projection either is identified with voicing

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the mental states at the heart of projective theories “**conative states**” Blackburn distinguishes them from emotions and moods; the effect is to distance moral mental states from emotion. I cannot be sure why Blackburn does this, but it may be that he wants to distinguish a **projectivist** theory from **emotivism**. Since I will quote Blackburn extensively in the material to follow, and “**conative state**” appears often in those quotes, I will use “**conative state**” rather than “**non-cognitive mental state**” in the remainder of this chapter to be consistent with Blackburn’s terminology.

**conative states** via moral propositions or is identified as a further mental process. In “Rule Following and Moral Realism” Blackburn appears to back away from the idea that the projection consists in merely voicing moral propositions when he contrasts the realist with the Humean: “[The realist] holds that the moral features of things are the parents of our sentiments, whereas the Humean holds that they are their children” (Blackburn-1981, 165). This claim suggests that moral features are the products of attitudes, but these features seem like they would be something that are part of our awareness of the world, inserted into it by our minds. However, in the same article, Blackburn suggests that the reaction to external stimuli, which must be an attitude to be consistent with Blackburn-1980, is the output of the projective mechanism, thus making the attitude the projection (Blackburn-1981, 175). And, in the same place, Blackburn suggests that **moralizing** is a commitment to taking inputs from the naturalistic world to determine an output, suggesting the process is transparent to **moralizers**.<sup>23</sup> Blackburn returns, though, to the theme in which moral awareness is not awareness of an aspect of the natural world, but something that is the product of mental phenomena: “Someone with realist sentiments makes the world rich, but the interpreting mind lazy; someone with the opposite instincts makes the world poor, and the interpreting mind busy” (Blackburn-1981, 181). This characterization of the interpreting mind as busy suggests an active faculty that augments the stimuli of the external world; such an active faculty implies that there are intervening mental processes between the attitude and expression of

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<sup>23</sup> Again, Blackburn’s use of the term “commitment” is problematic. Later, Blackburn suggests that the moral mental states expressed by moral propositions are commitments, but then says to voice the moral proposition is the commitment (Blackburn-1981, 179). In some places a “commitment” seems to be the mental state expressed by a moral proposition (see Blackburn-1984, 167, Blackburn-1987, 60, and Blackburn-1988a, 168), and yet other times he says a commitment is any mental state, belief or attitude, that gets expressed in propositional form; in other places it seems to be a disposition, which strikes me as not the same thing as an attitude (see Blackburn-1984, 170-1), and then sometimes the commitment seems to be the moral proposition expressing something other than a belief (see Blackburn-1984, 167 and Blackburn-1987, 55).

a moral proposition. This inconstancy in the nature of projection is a recurring feature of Blackburn's account of **projectivism**.

In *Spreading the Word* Blackburn gives an extended account of **projectivism**; suggesting it is a form of **expressivism**, the view that the meaning of moral judgments cannot be explained without reference to their function apart from any descriptive content that is parts of its meaning and the function of moral language can be to express emotions, attitudes, commands, etc., he claims that what **expressivism** seeks to do is give a causal explanation of **moralizing** (Blackburn-1984, 169). In *Spreading the Word* Blackburn almost always accounts for what constitutes projection as the use of moral propositions in **moralizing** to express attitudes. For example, he writes, "Suppose that we say we *project* an attitude or habit or other commitment which is not descriptive onto the world, when we speak and think as though there were a property of things which our sayings describe.... Projecting is what Hume referred to when he talks of 'gilding and staining all natural objects with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment', or of the mind 'spreading itself on the world'" (Blackburn-1984, 170-1). And further on he claims that "[w]hen we announce A-commitments we are projecting, we are neither reacting to a given distribution of A-properties, nor speculating about one" (A-commitments and A-properties are moral commitments and moral properties) (Blackburn-1984, 182).

Projection is the key mechanism in Blackburn's metaphysics of **moralizing**, engaging in an activity constitutive of the practice of morality, and these quotations indicate that his considered assessment of projection is that it consists in the voicing of moral commitments. However, when Blackburn goes on to identify the elements of the **projectivist** metaphysics of **moralizing** he again vacillates on the nature of projection; he characterizes **projectivism** as a philosophy of evaluation that claims evaluative properties are projections of sentiment

(Blackburn-1984, 180). This is another instance in which Blackburn is inconsistent between the idea that projection merely consists of expression of attitude and the idea that projection involves some additional mental process, which imposes properties on the inputs from external stimuli.

Even though Blackburn is inconstant on the nature of projection, his discussion of **projectivism** in *Spreading the Word* does begin to sketch out the whole **projectivist** theory of what happens in **moralizing**. He suggests its elements and mechanisms when he claims it asks “no more from the world than what we know is there — the ordinary features of things on the basis of which we make decisions about them, like or dislike them, fear them and avoid them, desire and seek them out. It asks no more than this: a natural world, and patterns of reaction to it” (Blackburn-1984, 182). Moreover, he says that establishing **projectivism** involves close examination of the nature of the attitude that is “spread on the world” and determining what makes such an attitude a moral attitude (Blackburn-1984, 192). This claim is ambiguous between projection as voicing and projection as mental process, too. And, this description of one of the **projectivists’** tasks seems to assume that the nature of the mental state expressed by moral judgment is not belief, a view for which Blackburn has not yet argued.<sup>24</sup> Blackburn goes on to characterize **moralizing** as the product of a moral sensibility that is “defined by a function from *input* of belief [or awareness] to *output* of attitude” and also by the interactions of attitudes (Blackburn-1984, 192).

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<sup>24</sup> In chapter 5 I argue that Blackburn’s motivation of **projectivism** by hypothesizing that the moral mental states expressed by moral propositions are **conative states** does not seem to be part of good theorizing; Blackburn’s assumption here that a moral mental state is an attitude is perhaps the first instance in which he does this.



#### 4.5.1.2 Sketching the Tension in Blackburn's Projectivism

Since the second part of Blackburn's *Spreading the Word* was his first extended analysis of the connection between the world and our talk of it, now is a good time to take stock of the picture of **moralizing** Blackburn has presented so far.

Blackburn wavers on whether projection is merely the voicing of attitude or some other mental process, but if **projectivism** is to be the metaphysics of **moralizing**, then based on what Blackburn has claimed, so far, we can sketch the causal process of **moralizing** in either of two ways:

- (BP1) the natural features of an action causally interact with a person's senses;
- (BP2) these external stimuli produce perceptual beliefs about the presence of certain natural features in the action;
- (BP3) these perceptual beliefs produce attitudes about the action as outputs;
- (BP4) we become aware of the attitudes as moral judgment in propositional form;
- (BP5) the attitudes are voiced by uttering moral judgment in propositional form.

or

- (BP'1) the natural features of an action causally interact with a person's senses;
- (BP'2) these external stimuli produce perceptual beliefs about the presence of certain natural features in the action;
- (BP'3) these perceptual beliefs produce attitudes about the action as outputs;
- (BP'4) these attitudes are impressed on the perceptual beliefs yielding some further mental state, which is also an attitude;
- (BP'5) we are aware of this attitude as a moral judgment in propositional form, and it is voiced by uttering moral judgments in propositional form.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Neither BP1-BP5 nor BP'1-BP'5 are complete as they are. These accounts of **projectivism's** causal processes need to be supplemented since the beliefs alone do not produce the attitudes; the output of attitude is also determined by our natures, desires, and needs interacting with belief; these are part of a moral sensibility (as described in subsection 3.2.2), and according to Blackburn they limit what attitudes can be the output of this process since not all sets of attitudes can be coherent (Blackburn-1984, 197). In addition, in "Morals and Modals" Blackburn claims that the move from step (4) to step (5) is not a trivial one — not all attitudes will be projected, only the sufficiently strong ones. Apparently, we won't move from step (3) to step (5) for any attitude because we are aware that our attitudes may be flawed due to defects in what must be our sensibility; the transition will only occur when the attitude is strong and we are convinced that the attitudes cannot be explained by a defect in our sensibility. It is unclear if this is a conscious process. And Blackburn further claims that this is not really a step: "The 'step' from a

The first sketch of **projectivism** reflects the model of projection as voicing. The conscious manifestation of attitudes as moral judgments in propositional form, step BP4, is where projection occurs because a person who does not utter moral judgments, but silently thinks them is **moralizing**, engaging in an activity constitutive of the practice of morality, and if **projectivism** is the metaphysics of **moralizing** then this form of **moralizing** must be accounted for. The second sketch reflects the model of projection as mental process; in it, projection is a mental process that imposes the attitude onto the perceptual belief that caused it, so that the attitude comes to a person's awareness as if it were part of the belief. Because adjudicating between these competing pictures of Blackburn's **projectivism** is difficult due to the inconstancy in the account, I want to review more of Blackburn's pronouncements on projection.

#### 4.5.2 Blackburn's Projectivism: In His Own Words – More Tension

As noted, Blackburn regularly compares his **projectivism** to Hume's, and he describes Hume's account of causal necessity as the quintessential example of a projective theory (Blackburn-1984, 210-1). And, then he later claims that his theory is a modern version of Hume's moral theory (Blackburn-1988a, 167). In making these two claims Blackburn seems to indicate that Hume's moral theory is **projectivist** in the same way that his causal theory is **projectivist**.<sup>26</sup> Hume provides a detailed description of the process by which we come to judgments about cause, but he is more circumspect in accounting for the process by which we arrive at moral judgments.

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fully integrated sentiment of sufficient strength to the moral expression now becomes no step at all: the moral is just the vocabulary in which we express the state" (Blackburn-1987, 70).

<sup>26</sup> Sainsbury and Kail would find fault with Blackburn here since both argue that Hume's projective accounts of causation and morality are distinct. I have no intention of investigating whether they or Blackburn are correct. What I am interested in is developing an account of projectivism that would be Blackburn's. If Blackburn's interpretation of Hume is wrong, that does not matter; what matters is that Blackburn thinks his interpretation of Hume gets **projectivism** right.

Blackburn describes Hume's account of causation as one in which the "central thought is that dignifying a relationship between events as causal is spreading or projecting a reaction which we have to something else we are aware of about the events — Hume thought of this input in terms of regular succession of similar such events, one upon the other. Exposed to such regularity, our minds (cannot help but) form habits of expectation, which they then project by describing the one event as causing the other" (Blackburn-1984, 210-1). Once again Blackburn's describes a **projectivist** process so that projection consists of expressing or voicing the reaction via judgments in propositional form. This account though is not consistent with the account of Humean causal **projectivism** I outlined earlier.

As noted before, according to Blackburn, the genesis of moral awareness lies in **conative states**, the idea that the **conative states** are the parents of the moral features of things; the core idea in Blackburn's **projectivism**, then, is that the moral mental state is a "state of mind [that] starts theoretical life as [...] a stance, or conative state or pressure on choice and action" (Blackburn-1988a, 168). This suggests that the state of mind that is characteristic of moral awareness is not the same one as the initial **conative state**, that it has undergone some change, which reflects what I called projection as mental process. In the introduction to *Essays in Quasi-Realism* Blackburn says that Humean **projectivism** is "the mechanism whereby what starts life as a non-descriptive psychological state ends up being expressed, thought about, and considered in propositional form" (Blackburn-1993, 5). Though it is unclear in this quotation what the "what" that is expressed in propositional form is, it is ambiguous in reflecting the models of projection outlined; there is nothing in it that is inconsistent with either BP1-BP5 or BP'1-BP'5.

There is ample textual evidence that Blackburn thinks that projection occurs when the **conative state** – a mental state characterized by being directed toward action, e.g., desires,

volitions, wishes – that is central to **projectivism** is expressed in propositional form as BP1-BP5 reflects. In “Errors and the Phenomenology of Value” Blackburn equates projection with voicing an attitude when he explicitly says that “we ‘gild or stain’ the world by describing it as if it contained features answering to these” attitudes (Blackburn-1985a, 152). In “Morals and Modals” Blackburn claims that his preferred account of projection is the one in which when “we ‘project’ ... we use the ordinary propositional expressions of our commitments, saying that there is this causal relation, that natural law, this other obligation” (Blackburn-1987, 56). However, there is a further inconstancy in Blackburn’s account of **projectivism** when he claims that an **antirealist** picture of morality can be successful so long as it can be argued that **moralizing** “is visibly the upshot of a natural process of voicing and projecting the nonrepresentational states” (Blackburn-1993, 9). This suggests that projecting a **conative state** is something more than just voicing it.

In the preface to *Ruling Passions*, Blackburn compares a person to a device, or an ethical sensibility, that takes inputs (i.e., facts about, say, an action), and produces outputs – attitudes – about that action; Blackburn identifies these attitudes as values (Blackburn-1998, 5-6). In this description, it is clear that the values are not to be located in the action outside of the observer, but it is unclear where the projection occurs; the output is just a **conative state**, but that does not seem to match the conditions of **projectivism** I proposed in subsection 4.2.3. Sorting out the mechanics by which we move from **conative states** to moral awareness turns out to be a challenge. If this account is to be similar to Humean **projectivism**, then there should be some notion that this output is then pressed upon the input. Perhaps, the projection comes into Blackburn’s account when the agent announces a moral judgment. Whatever occurs, this description implies that there is some process occurring, but it leaves the mechanism opaque.

### 4.5.3 Which Account of Blackburn's Projection is Humean?

If Blackburn's aim is to develop an account of **moral projectivism** – the view that the moral properties which people engaged in moral practice reference do not exist independently of human beings, and that instead they are the product of non-cognitive reactions to natural properties – that is faithful to Hume's, then it is important to examine whether his account does model the Humean picture of morality. At the start of subsection 4.5.2 I noted that I do not think Blackburn's preferred version of **projectivism**, BP1-BP5, is Humean. But, to refer to one of Blackburn's works out of order, his theory must model Humean **moral projectivism**; in "How to be an Ethical Anti-Realist" Blackburn does not just claim that his view is a moral version of Humean **projectivism** about causality; he claims that his **projectivism** is not new, just a "modern version of Hume's theory of the nature of ethics" (Blackburn-1988a, 167). In this subsection I will compare the BP1-BP5 and BP'1-BP'5 accounts of Blackburn's **projectivism** from subsection 4.5.1.2 with the account of Humean **moral projectivism** from subsection 4.4.3.

Those accounts are as follows:

- (BP1) the natural features of an action causally interact with a person's senses;
- (BP2) these external stimuli produce perceptual beliefs about the presence of certain natural features in the action;
- (BP3) these perceptual beliefs produce attitudes about the action as outputs;
- (BP4) we become aware of the attitudes as moral judgment in propositional form;
- (BP5) the attitudes are voiced by uttering moral judgment in propositional form.

- (BP'1) the natural features of an action causally interact with a person's senses;
- (BP'2) these external stimuli produce perceptual beliefs about the presence of certain natural features in the action;
- (BP'3) these perceptual beliefs produce attitudes about the action as outputs;
- (BP'4) these attitudes are impressed on the perceptual beliefs yielding some further mental state, which is also an attitude;
- (BP'5) we are aware of this attitude as moral judgment in propositional form and it is voiced by uttering moral judgments in propositional form.

(HMP1) the natural features of another person's actions causally interact with a person's senses;  
(HMP2) these external stimuli produce impressions of sensations of the actions in the mind;  
(HMP3) from these impression of sensation the mind infers the person acted from some passion, producing the idea of the passion;  
(HMP4) in turn, the idea of the passion produces an impression of reflection of pleasure or pain;  
(HMP5) the sympathy generates the passion, which was inferred in the person;  
(HMP6) uniting the passion with the impression of the person, the sympathy generates approbation, which is moral awareness.

BP1-BP5 and BP'1-BP'5 diverge at step 4; in the former, which I think is Blackburn's preferred version, the projection that occurs in step 4,

(BP'4) these attitudes are impressed on the perceptual beliefs yielding some further mental state, which is also an attitude,

is the awareness of the attitude in propositional form, but in the latter, the projection that occurs in step 4,

(BP'4) these attitudes are impressed on the perceptual beliefs yielding some further mental state, which is also an attitude,

is the imposition of the attitude on belief, which yields a new mental state.

BP'1-BP'5 more closely models Humean **projectivism** than BP1-BP5 because step BP'4, the step in which projection occurs, is similar to the step in HMP1-HMP6 where projection occurs, step HMP6,

(HMP6) uniting the passion with the impression of the person, the sympathy generates approbation, which is moral awareness.

In both BP'4 and HMP6 there is a mental phenomenon in which two mental states are overlaid or united to generate a new mental state, but this phenomenon does not occur in BP1-BP5. In addition, BP1-BP5 cannot be an account of moral projection is because it does not satisfy all the conditions for **moral projectivism**, while BP'1-BP'5 and HMP1-6 do satisfy them. Those conditions were

- MPI. moral experience has a **realist** phenomenology;
- MPii. there are no features of the world that correspond to moral experience;
- MPiii. moral experience is a projection that has its origins in a **non-cognitive** state that is a response to features of the world, i.e., is the culmination of a projective mechanism that begins with a **non-cognitive** response to features of the world;
  - MPiiia. a moral experience is a projection if its explanation essentially appeals to non-inferential psychological facts about its subject;
  - MPiiib. the explanation of a moral experience is opaque to the subject.
- MPiv. It is possible to characterize the **non-cognitive** state in terms other than the moral property whose experience it explains.

**Moral projectivism** is supposed to explain why it is that moral experience has a **realist** phenomenology, and BP'1-BP'5 and HMP1-6 can explain why it does. In HMP6, it is the passion being overlaid on the impression that generates that **realist** phenomenology. In BP'4, the new attitude that is generated from the imposition of the first attitude onto the belief has the **realist** phenomenology because of that interplay. On the other hand, in step BP4 there is no interposition of the attitude with a mental representation of the world to generate the **realist** phenomenology. If there is nothing in BP1-BP5 to explain the **realist** phenomenology, there is no role for a projection to play in the theory, and it is not an example of **moral projectivism**.

#### 4.5.3.1 Blackburn: Projection is Voicing

So, it seems we should conclude that BP'1-BP'5 is Blackburn's all things considered account of **projectivism** due to its similarity to Humean projectivism. However, Blackburn appears intent on resisting an account of projection in which projection is some further mental phenomenon springing from the attitude via another mental process. For example, he claims that a **projectivist** "will not accept any charge that we tendentiously inflate our sentiments into metaphysical discoveries (discoveries about the independent structure of the world of obligations), precisely because he denies that in our awareness of duty and obligation we are in fact making such discoveries" (Blackburn-1987, 60). This suggests that the sketch that best reflects Blackburn's view of the metaphysics of **moralizing** is BP1-BP5. If Blackburn's version of **moral**

**projectivism** is BP1-BP5, then his **moral projectivism** is neither Humean nor **moral projectivism** after all.

Blackburn often criticizes other philosophers for misinterpreting Hume, and he would likely argue that I have incorrectly interpreted Hume, and if suitably interpreted, Hume's view will make projection voicing as in BP1-BP5 (Blackburn-1990, 94). But, I do not think I am wrong, and one reason is that the **projectivism** of BP1-BP5 does not threaten to generalize into idealism, whereas Humean **projectivism** about morality does generalize to other areas, causation, for example. Moreover, Blackburn is aware that a challenge for **projectivism** is to establish a boundary for fixing which of the features of the world of which we are aware are projections, or it risks making all of natural reality “noumenal” (Blackburn-1984, 212-3; Blackburn-1993, 5). If **projectivism**, in its best form, is local **idealism** as opposed to global **idealism**, which must be resisted by establishing a line between domains that are to be explained via **projectivism** and those that are not, then it does not seem that Blackburn's projection as voicing is consistent with **projectivism**. First, Blackburn's **moral projectivism** a la BP1-BP5, in which projection is voicing, does not appear to pose a risk of extending to other domains. Second, a version of **projectivism** that is consistent with **idealism** would suggest that the phenomenal awareness is the projection of the mental states caused by noumenal reality onto the mental states representative of noumenal reality, and BP1-BP5 does not suggest this.

**Projectivism** is meant to be the metaphysics of **moralizing** upon which **quasi-realism** – Blackburn's project of earning the right to deploy moral judgments in all the ways supported by **descriptivism** and **realism** even though the meaning of moral judgments is explained by referring to their function to express non-cognitive mental states – is based, so Blackburn must have an account that is truly **projectivist**. However, Blackburn's apparent preferred account of



**projectivism** is not Humean, and I am not sure it is **projectivism**, at all; BP1-BP5 seems no different than early versions of **expressivism**. If Blackburn is serious about being a Humean, then we should take BP'1-BP'5 to be his theory of the metaphysics of **moralizing**; but, his repeated insistence that projection is mere voicing suggests that we should take BP1-BP5 to be his view. Ultimately, I will argue that the BP'1-BP'5 version of **projectivism** must be **quasi-realism's** metaphysics of **moralizing**, engaging in an activity constitutive of the practice of morality. I will review Blackburn's remarks about **projectivism** in general before I press that case.

#### 4.5.4 Blackburn on Projectivism in General

Since Blackburn wrote the entry on **projectivism** in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, examining his remarks there may help to determine the best way to understand **projectivism** within the **quasi-realist** program.

There Blackburn says that the term “projectivism” is used to characterize “philosophies that agree with Hume that ‘the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on the world,’ that what is in fact an aspect of our own experience is treated as a feature of the objective order of things. Such philosophies distinguish between nature as it really is, and nature as we experience it as being” (Blackburn-1998c).<sup>27</sup> The same tension I already noted in Blackburn recurs here; the projection can rest either in a mechanism that treats the world as if it has a feature in it that it does not or in a mechanism that causes our experience of the world to have a feature in it the world does not. Whatever projection is, Blackburn claims that **projectivism** involves the commitment that some aspect of the world is not independent of us. The distinction must be that some of the features of our experience of the world are the products of aspects of the world and

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<sup>27</sup> This quotation suggests that Blackburn is quoting Hume, but it is incorrect; at T 1.3.14.25 (SBN 167), Hume says, “the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects.”

some of the features of our experience of the world are the products of our mental activity.

Blackburn sketches two accounts of the **projectivist** mechanism, and I will describe them to reflect this distinction.

There is the “simple and forthright” mechanism “of displacing, or relocating, what is in fact a feature of our experience, and making it into a feature of the world” (Blackburn-1998c). This formulation appears to reflect the notion of projection in psychological projection, but it does not clearly articulate the metaphysics of projection because it is metaphorical. This description is not careful enough for two reasons. First, the dislocation of a feature of experience cannot be made into an aspect of the world unless Blackburn takes naive realism to be the paradigm form of **realism**. Blackburn must mean that a feature of an experience *x* is dislocated onto/into experience of the world. Second, Blackburn is not clear on what the experience is: is it (1) a **conative** mental state; (2) the empirical experience of belief prompted by the world; (3) some further mental state in which the **conative** mental state is impressed upon the empirical experience of belief so that we think the feature was caused by an aspect of the world? Clearly, if **antirealism** is correct, it cannot be option (2). Either of the other two interpretations of the experience here are consistent with BP1-BP5 and BP'1-BP'5. However, the notion that projection involves a “dislocating” or “relocating” suggests that interpretation (3) is the right way to think of experience on the “simple and forthright” version of **projectivism**. On this view, projection involves the projection of a **conative state**, a mental state characterized by being directed toward action, e.g., desires, volitions, wishes, onto experience of the world; and if that is right, then the “simple or forthright” mechanism of projection reflects BP'1-BP'5.

Blackburn contrasts the “simple and forthright” version of **projectivism** with the “contemporary” version.<sup>28</sup> On the contemporary version of **projectivism** “the mind manages to make the world look as though some things have beauty, for example, without the really beautiful objects being in the mind itself; instead, some kind of pleasure or delight is objectified, it then appearing that there is a feature of things correlated with it” (Blackburn-1998c). Once again, this analysis is metaphorical, so much so that I do not know how to unpack it, and it scarcely seems to be different from the simple and forthright analysis. However, Blackburn explains that on this view **projectivism** is a tripartite theory, and he identifies the parts as follows: the real properties of an object; the pleasure or delight those features arouse; our propensity to voice that pleasure in a descriptive form. The metaphysics of this account would be that an aspect of the world stimulates a **conative state**, which we voice in descriptive form; such a picture reflects BP1-BP5.

“Simple and forthright” **projectivism** and “contemporary” **projectivism** track what I called projection as mental process and projection as voicing, respectively, and so the tension between them recurs in the Routledge entry. Blackburn apparently wants to be a “contemporary” **projectivist**, but in the next subsection I will offer a few reasons to think that it is not a tenable position.

#### **4.5.5 Moral Projectivism for Blackburn**

In the two possible versions of Blackburn’s **moral projectivism** that I sketched out, the projective step is the fourth in both; in BP1-BP5 the projection is merely awareness of the attitude in propositional form, and in BP'1-BP'5 the projection is attaching the attitude to one of the beliefs that contributed to its generation. Blackburn does appear to want the mechanics of

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<sup>28</sup> I take it that the contemporary version of projectivism Blackburn proposes here is supposed to reflect the version of projectivism he puts forward in his own philosophy.

**projectivism** to be the BP1-BP5 version, but I think his inconstancy in characterizing **projectivism** reflects that this version deviates from familiar forms of **projectivism**. Ultimately, Blackburn must commit to BP1-BP5 or BP'1-BP'5 as the metaphysics of **moralizing**, and I think he should choose the latter for several reasons.

For one, though, I do not think this is decisive, the BP'1-BP'5 version of **moral projectivism** is the familiar account of projection from Psychology. In subsection 4.2.2.1 I described psychological projection as a defense mechanism in which a person unconsciously ascribes his own threatening thoughts or emotions to the external world, usually another person who is less threatening, and it feels as though this other object does in fact have those thoughts or emotions. Here projection is a mental process that causes a person to experience his own internal emotions as something outside of himself and in the world; Blackburn's insistence that projection is not an inflation of sentiment into metaphysical discovery is at odds with the psychological account, unlike HMP1-6 and BP'1-BP'5. That a philosophical theory of projection is at odds with a psychological one obviously does not mean that the former is wrong, but Blackburn's account of projection would be idiosyncratic, at least, and he never acknowledges this.

Second, an account of **projectivism** should leave theoretical room for a view like Blackburn's and a view like Mackie's, but there seems to be no room for Mackie's view within BP1-BP5. On the other hand, there is no reason why BP'1-BP'5 should automatically lead to **error theory**; it will only do so if moral judgments are interpreted as expressive of beliefs. Blackburn admits an affinity between his and Mackie's metaphysics (Blackburn-1984, 180). Blackburn though does not think that moral language involves us in error because it is not used to represent the world; philosophers introduce the error when they theorize that moral judgments

are used to do so. It is an empirical matter whether the users of moral language use it to express attitudes or represent moral states in the world; BP'1-BP'5 leaves that matter open.

The third reason to think that Blackburn's **projectivism** should be the BP'1-BP'5 version is – to reprise the claim of subsection 4.5.3 – that this version is more Humean than BP1-BP5. In the Routledge entry Blackburn gives a characterization of Hume's view consistent with BP1-BP5; he says, "Hume's view [is] that, faced with some feature of character such as temperance and cheerfulness, the mind feels a pleasure which it voices by deeming those features virtues" (Blackburn-1998c). This is an oversimplification. He goes on to link this interpretation to the text: "When we do this we 'gild or stain' objects with the 'colours borrowed from internal sentiment', and thereby 'erect in a manner a new creation'" (Blackburn-1998c).<sup>29</sup> It is odd that Blackburn draws on this quotation from Hume to support contemporary **projectivism** since the text seems to suggest a mental process that draws on attitudes as a resource to produce a further mental state, as opposed to a process that moves from attitude to voicing it. The textual evidence from Hume indicates that only BP'1-BP'5 is consistent with Humean **projectivism**. Moreover, Kail claims that Hume's account of causation is an example of ersatz response projection, a form of projection in which a person's commitment is a response to a phenomenology that is best explained by referring to the person's mental life. If Hume's account of morality should be consistent with his account of causation, as Blackburn supposes, then it should be a version of ersatz response projections. In step BP'5,

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<sup>29</sup> The full quotation from Hume is:

Thus the distinct boundaries and offices of *reason* and of *taste* are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: the latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: the other has a productive faculty, and gilding and staining all natural objects with colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation (EPM App I.246; SBN 294).

(BP'5) we are aware of this attitude as moral judgment in propositional form and it is voiced by uttering moral judgments in propositional form,

it is plausible to see the moral judgment, which constitutes awareness, as a response to the phenomenology of step BP'4,

(BP'4) these attitudes are impressed on the perceptual beliefs yielding some further mental state, which is also an attitude.

In BP1-5, step BP4,

(BP4) we become aware of the attitudes as moral judgment in propositional form, is the only step where the commitment as a response to phenomenology could occur, but since there is nothing to generate the phenomenology in that step, it cannot occur there; and there is nothing there to suggest the commitment is a response to phenomenology since the commitment seems identical to the attitude, which is a response to beliefs about the external world. If this is so, then there is more reason to think that BP1-BP5 is not Humean **projectivism**, and if Blackburn wishes to be Humean, then his **projectivism** must be BP'1-BP'5.

A fourth reason to think that BP'1-BP'5 is the only plausible Humean and **projectivist** account of moral awareness than BP1-BP5 is the point I made in subsection 4.5.3; *prima facie* BP'1-BP'5 can account for the **realist** phenomenology of moral awareness. If part of moral awareness involves the feeling that there is evil in another person's action like a rape, then BP'1-BP'5 can account for this and BP1-BP5 cannot.

There is a final reason to reject BP1-5 as an account of moral experience. This reason does not claim that it fails to satisfy the conditions of **moral projectivism**; instead it claims the account is incomplete. Blackburn needs to offer some further qualification to step BP5, which claims that we internally voice or externally voice **conative states** via propositional form. If that is the case, Blackburn needs to explain why it is only the **conative states** constitutive of moral

practice that get voiced this way; how are they different from other **conative states** such that they get voiced propositionally? After all, wishing must be a **conative state**, but it is not voiced in propositional form. It stands to reason if valuing is a **conative state**, then it should be voiced in the same manner as wishing. Or, if only it should be voiced in propositional form, what makes valuing different from wishing such that the former merits this manner of voicing? This will be a difficult task since a key way Blackburn draws the distinction between moral mental states and beliefs is through the metaphor of “direction of fit” (Blackburn-1988, 185, 190, 191; Blackburn-1998, 81). The direction of fit between belief and the world is that beliefs are meant to fit the world, whereas between moral mental states and the world, it is the reverse. In articulating the difference between valuing and wishing, Blackburn must not change the direction of fit for either mental state.

#### 4.6 Chapter Conclusion

Ultimately, I think that BP'1-BP'5 –

- (BP'1) the natural features of an action causally interact with a person's senses;
- (BP'2) these external stimuli produce perceptual beliefs about the presence of certain natural features in the action;
- (BP'3) these perceptual beliefs produce attitudes about the action as outputs;
- (BP'4) these attitudes are impressed on the perceptual beliefs yielding some further mental state, which is also an attitude;
- (BP'5) we are aware of this attitude as moral judgment in propositional form and it is voiced by uttering moral judgments in propositional form

– is what Blackburn's projective account of the metaphysics of **moralizing** must be. Now contrast this account of moral awareness with what a **moral realist** – someone who thinks that there are people, acts, circumstances that are good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc., and they would be so if human beings did not think them so, and moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances – would propose:

(RMA1) the natural features of an action, which are moral features, causally interact with a person's senses;  
(RMA2) these external stimuli produce beliefs about the presence of certain natural features, which are moral features, in the action;  
(RMA3) we are aware of this belief in propositional form and it is voiced by uttering moral judgments in propositional form.<sup>30</sup>

The metaphysical challenge that the **moral realist** faces is identifying the natural features that are the moral features, and **moral realists'** difficulty in meeting this challenge is, no doubt, the source of **skepticism** about moral properties. **Moral antirealism** – the view that human beings' experience of people, acts, circumstances as good, immoral kind, deceitful, evil, etc. are not the product of features of the world that are themselves good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc. independent of human beings thinking them so – is supposed to have a metaphysical advantage over **moral realism** in its ontological economy of ruling out that there are moral properties. But, if the metaphysics of **moral antirealism** is **moral projectivism**, then this would at best only be an economy of things, and not events. BP'1-BP'5 must postulate more steps in the mechanism of moral awareness (this is true even when allowing for the further complexity to RMA1-RMA3 I noted in footnote 30 since BP'1-BP'5 is complicated by the variety of factors which contribute to the production of an attitude I discussed in footnote 25). And, at worst, BP'1-BP'5 may actually add a new ontological item into the mix; I will not press the point, but the attitude which is generated by the impression of an attitude onto perceptual belief may be new, distinct, additional kind of attitude.

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<sup>30</sup> This realist model of moral awareness is simplified because it does not take into account that the shift from the recognition of the natural features to the recognition they are moral features may be mediated by other beliefs (compare the idea in Cornell Realism that our observation of the moral features in natural properties is theory laden), but this should not be considered a complicating factor since the transition from belief to belief is an accepted mental process (Boyd).



Blackburn's **projectivism** proposes at least two extra distinct steps in the process of moral awareness: (1) a mental process produces an attitude from the resources of perceptual beliefs; (2) this attitude is then – through some kind of loop in this system – impresses upon the perceptual belief generating another attitude. It is also likely that there is some further process, (3), by which this attitude is consciously represented as a belief. In addition, the mental state that results from the impression of the attitude on the perceptual belief appears *prima facie* to be unique – is it some hybrid mental state, a cross between a belief and an attitude?

I do not know what kind of experiments would be necessary to determine whether a process like the one in BP'1-BP'5 or RMA1-RMA3 occurs when we come to moral awareness, but without such evidence I doubt that purported ontological economy of **moral projectivism** is sufficient to gain a metaphysical advantage over **moral realism**. If we set aside these complications for a moment, Blackburn would claim that **projectivism** still has a metaphysical advantage over **moral realism**: **projectivism** is better able to explain why moral features are **supervenient** on natural features. In chapter 5 I will argue that **projectivism** does not bear a metaphysical advantage over **moral realism** when it come to explaining the **supervenience** of the moral on the natural. Then, in chapter 6 I will raise three problems for **projectivism** that BP'3-BP'5 generate. **Projectivism** must be able to explain the special nature of the attitudes that arise in step BP'4 and which are fit for expression in moral judgment in step BP'5; this is the moral attitude problem, and Blackburn does not have a satisfactory account. In addition, Blackburn must also explain how we can be justified in treating these attitudes as judgments capable of being true, and he does not succeed in doing this. And last, I will point out that Blackburn is not able to support his claim that the judgments arising from attitudes are mind-independent.

## Chapter 5: Undermining the Motivation for Projectivism

### 5.1 Projectivism's Advantages?

In chapter 3 I criticized Blackburn's attempts to solve the Frege-Geach problem through his **quasi-realist** semantics. Blackburn's inability to develop a satisfactory **antirealist** semantics counts against adopting his **antirealist** theory of morality over a **realist** theory. In this chapter I examine Blackburn's principal argument for why his **projectivist** theory of morality is preferable to a **realist** one, the **supervenience** argument. **Supervenience** is the relation by which one level of properties is connected to another level of properties in which the second level of properties determines the first level, but the first level is not reducible to the second level of properties; the rough idea is that if one level of properties *A*, supervene on another level of properties *B*, then for any two things that are identical at the level of *B* properties, they are also identical at the level of *A* properties.<sup>1</sup> (In subsection 5.2.1 I present Blackburn's first account of **supervenience**.)

Blackburn identifies **projectivism** as the metaphysical complement to **quasi-realism** in his

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<sup>1</sup> Blackburn distinguishes between two forms of **supervenience**, (S) and (S<sub>2</sub>):

(S) A property *M* is supervenient upon properties  $N_1 \dots N_n$  if *M* is not identical with any of  $N_1 \dots N_n$  nor with any truth function of them, and it is logically impossible that a thing should become *M*, or cease to be *M*, or become more or less *M* than before, without changing in respect of some member of  $N_1 \dots N_n$ .

(S<sub>2</sub>) A property *M* is supervenient upon properties  $N_1 \dots N_n$  if *M* is not identical with any of  $N_1 \dots N_n$  nor with any truth function of them, and it is logically impossible that two things should each possess the same properties from set  $N_1 \dots N_n$  to the same degree, without both failing to possess *M*, or cease to be *M*, or both possessing *M*, to the same degree (Blackburn-1973, 115).

(S) **supervenience** reflects a view of how a property of one item is contingent upon other properties of that same item; for example, a steak's temperature is a function of its stored heat energy – the temperature of the steak is supervenient upon that because its temperature cannot change unless there is a change in its heat energy. (S<sub>2</sub>) **supervenience** reflects a view of how two (or more) distinct items possession of the same property is contingent upon them possessing other properties in the exact same respect; two steaks that have the same temperature, 135°F, must be exactly alike in their stored heat energy.

metaethical theory, and he thinks his **projectivist** theory of morality can explain the **supervenience** of the moral on the natural better than a **realist** one. I will first present the three variations of the argument that Blackburn has offered in the literature, and I will then offer critiques of each argument. I will conclude that Blackburn's **supervenience** argument does not present an insoluble problem for **moral realists**.

I want examine the role of the **supervenience** argument in motivating a need to develop **projectivism** as an explanation for the **supervenience** of the moral on the natural. Blackburn understands the **supervenience** argument as a metaphysical argument against **moral realism** (Blackburn-1984, 182). The intuitive idea there is that if **moral realism** is true, it should be able to explain a feature of the world – **supervenience**, but it struggles to explain it, while **projectivism** can easily accommodate it. This is supposed to be an advantage for **projectivism** over **moral realism**. Ultimately, I want to argue that **moral realism** can account for **supervenience**, so **projectivism** does not have this advantage.

## 5.2 Arguments Against Moral Realism

In *Spreading the Word*, Blackburn identifies three “motives” or arguments for **projectivism**; they are economy, **supervenience**, and **internalism** (Blackburn-1984, 182-189).

Blackburn claims that **projectivism** is preferable to **moral realism** because of its ontological economy; it “asks no more from the world than ... this: a natural world, and patterns of reaction to it” (Blackburn-194, 182). This sounds like Quine's principle of ontological parsimony from “On What There Is”; there Quine claimed that this was a desideratum of theories, and that if of two theories, both equally supported by evidence, one posits fewer entities, then we should adopt that theory. Blackburn's appeal to ontological economy can only be convincing if **projectivism** and **moral realism** are equally well supported by evidence and

equally good at explaining and predicting observations. Blackburn does not spend much time on this argument, and I think it something of a hedge: if the comparison of **projectivism** and **moral realism** cannot conclude with a judgment that the former has other advantages over its rival, then it, at least, has the advantage of ontological economy.<sup>2</sup>

Blackburn's **supervenience** and **internalism** arguments are meant to demonstrate the advantages of a **projectivist** theory by presenting two phenomena for which **moral realism** is not supposed to account. If either argument is successful against **moral realism**, then the argument from ontological economy is moot. In *Spreading the Word*, Blackburn is a bit sheepish about advancing the **internalism** argument because it is unsubtle (Blackburn-1984, 188-189). There Blackburn argues that our moral commitments – moral mental states – are frequently used to explain our actions, but if moral commitments are beliefs, this explanation would be incomplete; on the other hand, there is no incompleteness in the explanation of our actions, if moral mental states are desires or attitudes. If Tom has the moral commitment that lying is evil, and this is a belief, then to explain why Tom told the truth, we would need to supplement this belief by attributing to Tom a desire not to lie. On the other hand, if Tom has the moral commitment that lying is evil, and this is a desire not to lie or a negative attitude toward lying, then to explain why Tom told the truth, all one needs to do to explain it is attribute the desire not to lie or a negative attitude toward lying to Tom.

Blackburn's claim that an explanation of action that rests solely on attributing beliefs to the actor is incomplete reflects an assumption that the Humean Theory of Motivation – the idea that beliefs are motivationally inert – is true. Blackburn's claim that an explanation of action resting on solely attributing a desire can be complete reflects an assumption that **motivational**

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<sup>2</sup> In less charitable moments, I take the argument from ontological economy to obliquely express a prejudice against the possibility of **moral realism**.

**internalism** – the idea that moral commitments are intrinsically motivating – is true. Blackburn makes this latter commitment explicit when he claims, “It seems to be a conceptual truth that to regard something as good is to feel a pull towards promoting or choosing it, or towards wanting other people to feel the pull towards promoting or choosing it” (Blackburn-1984, 188).

There are several ways of responding to **motivational internalism’s** challenge for **moral realism**: by making **motivational internalism** a conceptual necessity, **motivational internalists** risk being out of step with our recognition that people can be diverted from acting according to their moral commitments because of distorting influences; the possibility of the amoral person, who is not motivated by his own sincere moral commitments (such a being would be a significant challenge to **motivational internalism**); denying the Humean Theory of Motivation. The literature on this topic is vast, with many moral philosophers making the case for and against **motivational internalism**, and it is not my intention to expand on it in this work. But, Blackburn does not emphasize this argument in making the case against **moral realism**, and I will follow suit. (I take it that the lack of consensus on the question motivates this strategy.) Instead, Blackburn focuses on his **supervenience** argument as the most significant challenge for **moral realism**.

### 5.2.1 Blackburn’s Supervenience Arguments

As I noted in subsection 4.5.1, “Moral Realism” was Blackburn’s first foray into the debate over **moral realism**; there he introduced his attempt to answer the Frege-Geach problem, and he also included his **supervenience** argument against **moral realism**. In the first chapter I characterized **antirealists** as trying to explain morality given the success of the open-question argument, but I pointed out in subsections 2.3.1.1, 2.3.1.2, and 2.3.2 that the work of Frankena, Baumrin, and Kripke and Putnam had undermined the effectiveness of the open-question

argument. While I have quoted Blackburn as positioning himself within the tradition of **antirealist** moral philosophers reacting to the open-question argument, by introducing the **supervenience** argument Blackburn all but admits that the case against **moral realism** cannot be made on purely linguistic grounds. Blackburn's **supervenience** argument is a metaphysical challenge to naturalist and non-naturalist versions of **moral realism**. The argument is (roughly) that **moral realism** is committed to (a) the **supervenience** of the moral on the non-moral – for two situations to differ with respect to their moral evaluation, they must also differ with respect to non-moral properties – and (b) the lack of entailment thesis – “There is no moral proposition whose truth is entailed by any proposition ascribing naturalistic properties to its subject” (Blackburn-1973, 116). Blackburn believes that these two commitments represent a challenge to understanding morality; the idea is that if no naturalistic description entails any moral evaluation (commitment (b)), then it should be possible for the very same kind of naturalistic state of affairs to sometimes be good and sometimes bad (Shafer-Landau-2003, 85). However, this possibility is exactly what **supervenience** is thought to rule out.

#### **5.2.1.1 Blackburn's Original Supervenience Argument**

Blackburn claims that a **realist** just has no way to reconcile these two claims, but a **projectivist** understanding of morality is able to accommodate both (a) and (b). Blackburn claims that some set of naturalistic properties gives rise to a person's attitude to something, and it is not possible for him to have a different attitude to another thing when he believes the same set of naturalistic properties are present. This is because it is not the naturalistic properties that cause the attitude, only that the attitude is a response to the awareness of the naturalistic properties. If this is the case, then the naturalistic properties do not entail a moral attitude; yet, it is impossible for a person to have different attitudes to two things when he is aware of the presence of the same

naturalistic properties in both (Blackburn-1973, 122). Since “Moral Realism” in 1973, Blackburn has revisited this argument in *Spreading the Word* and “Supervenience Revisited.”<sup>3</sup>

### 5.2.1.1.1 Supervenience

At the beginning of section II of “Moral Realism” Blackburn puts forth the gist of his argument as first identifying two putative features of moral truth, and second demonstrating that the two features generate intractable problems for moral truth (Blackburn-1973, 114).<sup>4</sup> The first feature of moral truth that Blackburn is referring to is **supervenience**; moral properties are supervenient upon natural properties. He introduces two senses of **supervenience**, S and S<sub>2</sub>; the former sense refers to a feature applying to the same thing over time, while the latter sense refers to the same feature applying to different objects, which are identical in all other respects. He defines them as follows:

(S) A property  $M$  is supervenient upon properties  $N_1 \dots N_n$  if  $M$  is not identical with any of  $N_1 \dots N_n$  nor with any truth function of them, and it is logically impossible that a thing should become  $M$ , or cease to be  $M$ , or become more or less  $M$  than before, without changing in respect of some member of  $N_1 \dots N_n$ .

(S<sub>2</sub>) A property  $M$  is supervenient upon properties  $N_1 \dots N_n$  if  $M$  is not identical with any of  $N_1 \dots N_n$  nor with any truth function of them, and it is logically impossible that two things should each possess the same properties from set  $N_1 \dots N_n$  to the same degree, without both failing to possess  $M$ , or cease to be  $M$ , or both possessing  $M$ , to the same degree (Blackburn-1973, 115).

(S) claims that anything that remains the same in respect to its possession of the members of  $N_1 \dots N_n$ , must remain the same with respect to its possession of  $M$ , while (S<sub>2</sub>) claims that if any two (or three, etc.) things are identical with respect to possessing members of  $N_1 \dots N_n$ , then they must be identical with respect to possessing  $M$ . Blackburn does not offer an argument that moral

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<sup>3</sup> In *Spreading the Word* and “Supervenience Revisited”, Blackburn couched the argument in terms of bans on mixed worlds and modal logic (some philosophers have taken to calling this argument the modal argument against **moral realism**).

<sup>4</sup> Blackburn does not claim the argument is original, attributing his knowledge of it to Casimir Lewy; Blackburn indicates his careful explication of the argument is its first appearance in print.

properties supervene on natural ones, evidently taking it that it is obvious; he writes only, “It is widely held that moral properties are supervenient or consequential upon naturalistic ones” (Blackburn-1973, 114). In addition, Blackburn says that there is no need to distinguish between (S) and (S<sub>2</sub>) when discussing the **supervenience** of moral properties on natural ones, since when he discusses this phenomenon, he will mean “supervenient” in both senses (Blackburn-1973, 115).

#### **5.2.1.1.2 Non-entailment**

The second feature of moral truth that Blackburn discusses is non-entailment, and he says that this feature is even more widely believed than **supervenience**. The idea of non-entailment is that whether something possesses a moral property, good or bad, is not entailed by its possession of any set of naturalistic properties (Blackburn-1973, 116). He formally defines non-entailment as follows:

(E) There is no moral proposition whose truth is entailed by any proposition ascribing naturalistic properties to its subject (Blackburn-1973, 116).

Blackburn does not want non-entailment to be confused with other views about moral properties, like the view that moral properties are not identical to natural ones, or the view that they “have no criteria in a Wittgensteinian sense” (Blackburn-1973, 116). Blackburn takes pains to distinguish non-entailment from these other claims. Even though an identity of natural with moral properties would yield an entailment from natural to moral properties, and entailment of moral properties to natural ones, Blackburn explains that (E) is not the denial of an identity between natural and moral properties; believing that an entailment would generate an identity (so that denying entailment is a denial of identity) is wishful thinking (Blackburn-1973, 116). Moreover, Blackburn points out that (E) is not claiming that there cannot be a naturalistic property that is necessarily a reason for ascribing a moral property (Blackburn-1973, 116).



### 5.2.1.1.3 The Incompatibility of Supervenience and Non-Entailment

Given (S), (S<sub>2</sub>), and E, Blackburn points out three commitments a **moral realist** has: (1) a moral proposition's truth consists in the existence of a state of affairs which the proposition describes; (2) no set of natural facts entails the existence of this state of affairs, i.e. (E); (3) the endurance of a set of natural facts entails the endurance of the moral state of affairs, e.g., (S) and/or (S<sub>2</sub>).

Reflecting on the conjunction of **realism** and (S) and (E), Blackburn asks us to consider some thing, *A*; *A* has a specific set of natural properties and relations. In addition, *A* has some degree of moral worth; it is good. On the **realist** picture, the claim, "*A* is good," describes a state of affairs, *A*'s goodness. *A* being good is not, though, entailed by its natural properties and relations, i.e. "it is logically possible that *A* should be as it is in all naturalistic respects, yet this further state of affairs [*A* being good] not exist" (Blackburn-1973, 118). But, according to (S), it is logically impossible for *A* to cease being good without some change in its natural properties or relations; this is just very strange to Blackburn. It is apparently a completely contingent matter that *A* has the natural properties and relations it does and that *A* is good; if that is so, then why is it logically impossible for *A* to remain as it is in all its natural properties and relations, but cease to be good? The natural properties and relations *A* possesses did nothing to logically guarantee that *A* is good, so it is difficult to understand why their continued endurance should logically guarantee *A* continuing to be good. Blackburn thinks it is mysterious how these three commitments, (1), (2), and (3), can simultaneously be true.

Blackburn also explains the challenge given (S<sub>2</sub>). According to (E), *A* may possess some set of natural properties and relations and it may also be good, but *A*'s being good is a further fact that is not entailed by its natural features. According to (S<sub>2</sub>), if *B* is identical to *A* in possessing the same set of natural properties, then it is logically impossible for *B* not to be good,

also. But, there is no reason why this must be the case since *B*'s being good is not entailed by *B*'s possession of those natural properties and relations. Supposing *A*'s goodness came along for free with its natural properties and relations, there is nothing inconsistent in supposing that *B* did not also get goodness for free with its natural properties and relations. And yet, (S<sub>2</sub>) does claim that it is inconsistent to suppose that *A* and *B* be identical in all their natural properties and relations, but be different in their moral properties.

Blackburn thinks that the trouble for **moral realism** lies in the fact that other examples of the correspondence theory of truth do not have the same trouble in explaining (E) and (S) or (S<sub>2</sub>). A correspondence theory of truth claims basically that the truth of a proposition consists in the existence of a state of affairs, which it reports, and Blackburn claims that such a proposition should be (S) or (S<sub>2</sub>), but not (E). Consider *C*; *C* is a single oxygen atom covalently bonded to two hydrogen atoms cooled to 0°C, or lower, in standard atmospheric pressure with a crystalline structure. This proposition entails the following one: *C* is ice. Now consider *D*; *D* is a single oxygen atom covalently bonded to two hydrogen atoms at standard ambient temperature and pressure. This last proposition entails the following one: *D* is water. The propositions, *C* is ice, and, *D* is water, entail the following proposition: *C* is denser than *D*. That *C* is denser than *D* is supervenient on *C* being ice. Now, if there is *F*, and *F* is a single oxygen atom covalently bonded to two hydrogen atoms cooled to 0°C, or lower, in standard atmospheric pressure with a crystalline structure, then this entails that *F* is ice, and it would be consistent to suppose that *F* is denser than *D*. It is because other examples of a correspondence theory do not take on (E), that as long as *C* or *F* do not change in any way, it is consistent to expect that both would be denser than *D*. When it comes to morality, though, it is different; the natural properties of something do not entail its moral properties, but we expect that as long as the natural properties remain the same,

the moral properties will, too. Blackburn admits that this is not inconsistent in itself, but he asserts that it is not a position one would enjoy holding; for **moral realists**, **supervenience** must be some brute logical fact.

Blackburn concludes his discussion of the problem **supervenience** poses for **moral realism** by pointing out that a weaker claim than (E) in conjunction with (S) and/or (S<sub>2</sub>) raises the same issue:

(E') There are some moral propositions that are true, but whose truth is not entailed by any naturalistic facts about their subject (Blackburn-1973, 120).

Blackburn points out that this weakening does not permit **moral realists** to claim that the moral truths their theory analyzes are ones whose truth is entailed by natural facts because to do so introduces a duality of kinds of moral truths, the more interesting kind – the ones that are not entailed by natural facts – being left unanalyzed. In addition, Blackburn thinks that by deploying (E') with (S) and (S<sub>2</sub>), it allows him to sidestep the argument that it is possible to derive an “ought” from an “is”, i.e. that “is” can entail “ought.” (See Searle.) (E') is meant to allow that some times you can get moral truths from natural truths, but just the same, other times you cannot, and yet the moral proposition is true.

#### **5.2.1.1.4 Blackburn Defends Non-entailment**

Blackburn considers two objections to (E'). The first objection he considers is that if he is committed to (E'), then he is committed to denying that that some natural qualities are necessarily good (Blackburn-1973, 120). It is not obvious to me why supporters of neo-naturalism would think (E') and this claim are mutually exclusive, but Blackburn seems to admit the suspicion may be warranted. Blackburn denies though that this claim implies that all moral truths are entailed by naturalistic facts; he says he cannot see how the neo-naturalist claim could entail all moral truths, even when it is complemented with the view that human injury is

necessarily bad and human benefit is necessarily good. He points out that two people could disagree about the moral merits of a state of affairs. Say, I set out to become the Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Champion expecting that I will feel a satisfied sense of accomplishment next Independence Day. One person may say that whether I am satisfied or dissatisfied by achieving this goal makes no moral difference to the state of affairs; a state of affairs in which I am a satisfied champion glutton is no morally better than one in which I am unsatisfied. The other person may say that satisfaction at achieving a trivial, or inappropriate, goal does make a moral difference to the state of affairs; a states of affairs in which I am satisfied at becoming the Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Champion is morally better than one in which I am unsatisfied. Blackburn says he cannot see how the neo-naturalist claim that certain qualities are naturally good and the naturalistic facts can help us determine which of these two people's views is true. Blackburn's point is that the neo-naturalist claim may be able to demonstrate some moral truths on the basis of naturalistic facts, but not all.

The second objection to (E') which Blackburn considers is to deny that there can be moral truth beyond any entailment by naturalistic facts, i.e., that if the naturalistic facts do not entail any moral truth, there is no moral truth. On this view the claim, "The moral worth of a state of affairs in which Paul is a satisfied Hot Dog eating champions is better than one in which he is not" is neither true nor false, and similarly, the negation of this claim is neither true nor false. If this objection is successful, then the disagreement over the merits of a state of affairs is not a moral disagreement. Blackburn points out that this objection would prove too much for the **moral realist** who wishes to deny (E'), since this objection is a departure from **realism** (Blackburn-1973, 121). According to Blackburn, a feature of **moral realism** is that the law of the excluded middle applies, so that for any proposition and its negation, one must be true and the

other false. If the law of the excluded middle does not apply, then whatever position the objector to (E') has in mind will not be **realist**. Blackburn judges that at least (E') is established.

#### 5.2.1.1.5 Supervenience and Non-cognitivism

Blackburn now returns his attention to the **supervenience** claims, (S) and (S<sub>2</sub>), i.e., moral worth is supervenient upon naturalistic properties. Blackburn points out that while there may not be an argument that the moral supervenes on the natural, he doubts that any moral philosopher, whether **realist** or **antirealist**, would want to deny **supervenience** (Blackburn-1973, 121).

Blackburn goes so far as to suggest **supervenience** should be accepted as an axiom of metaethics (Blackburn-1973, 121).<sup>5</sup> For the **moral realist** accepting **supervenience** raises a major problem: given (E'), how can he explain this feature of moral reality? One option for the **realist** is to deny **supervenience**, but Blackburn thinks that the consequence of doing so is to make moral propositions trivial (Blackburn-1973, 121). In addition, Blackburn suggests that the problem generates added leverage against **moral realism** because there is a straightforward way for **antirealists** to account for it.

According to Blackburn, a **non-cognitivist** account of morality, which roots moral judgments in attitudes, is particularly well suited to explain **supervenience**. Blackburn claims that attitudes are among the mental states that the natural properties of an object or an action cause in their observer, and these attitudes are the source of moral judgments ascribing moral properties to these objects or actions. And, according to Blackburn, it is not possible for a person to hold an attitude toward something because of its natural properties and not hold the same

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<sup>5</sup> Calling **supervenience** an axiom of metaethics is an exaggeration; there are at least two recent works I can find that deny **supervenience**: Hills-2009 and Harrison-2013. Both though deny supervenience in the service of defending versions of **moral realism** that are not naturalistic. I am not prepared to argue whether or not **supervenience** is an axiom of metaethics, but many forms of **moral realism** try to accommodate it, and Blackburn denies that they can.

attitude toward another thing, which she believes has the same natural properties; if she does, then it is not because of the natural properties of its object that she has the attitude in the first case (Blackburn-1973, 122). If a person projects a moral property onto an action, and this moral property has its origin in an attitude, which is a response to natural features of the action and which cannot vary in the response to the same natural features of a different action, then the **supervenience** of moral properties on natural ones is explained. Blackburn argues that anyone who offers different moral judgments about two actions identical in all natural respects is actually engaged in caprice and not moral judgment. This explanation of **supervenience** is not open to the **realist** according to Blackburn.<sup>6</sup> Suppose we replace all instances of “attitude” with “belief” in the foregoing **non-cognitivist** account of **supervenience**. Blackburn points out that all this would explain is why a person believes that two objects identical in all naturalistic respects are identical in their moral properties; what it does not explain is why it is the case that two objects identical in all naturalistic respects are identical in their moral properties (Blackburn-1973, 122). It might be that the person’s psychology is such that she has this belief even though it is not the case. What Blackburn has done is to create two different explanatory projects for the **realist** and the **antirealist**: the **realist** has to explain how moral properties supervene on natural

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<sup>6</sup> In comments, Stefan Baumrin said Blackburn doesn’t know the people he knows. I doubt that many of us have not met people whose moral judgments are not consistent in essentially similar contexts, but who insist they are making moral judgments. Blackburn would probably claim that these people are deluded, lying, or changed in some way, but I doubt he can insist that all cases can be explained away in this manner; there seem to be cases where two objects can be identical in relevant respects, but a person not have the same attitudes toward them, e.g., the person who loves one of identical twins, but not the other, or a child’s attachment to a transitional object that cannot be substituted for.

one, while the **antirealist** has to explain how a person comes to have the habit of forming the same attitude to objects alike in all natural properties.<sup>7</sup>

### 5.2.1.2 Blackburn's Mixed Worlds Supervenience Argument

Blackburn returns to the **supervenience** argument in *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language*; there he contrasts it with other arguments for **projectivism**, economy and **internalism**, by calling it a “metaphysical” argument (Blackburn-1984, 182).

There he reviews the notion of **supervenience**:

The idea is that some properties, the A-properties, are consequential upon some other base properties, the underlying B-properties. This claim is supposed to be that in some sense of *necessary*, it is necessary that ... if two situations are identical in their B-properties they are identical in their A-properties. A-properties *cannot* (in this same sense) vary regardless of B-properties (Blackburn-1984, 182-183).

Blackburn recognizes there are different strengths of necessity, but he thinks that moral properties seem to supervene on natural properties as a matter of conceptual necessity: “It is conceptually impossible to suppose that if two things are identical in every other respect, one is better than the other” (Blackburn-1984, 183).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, Blackburn wants to be able to say that the moral judgments that arise from such habits of attitude are true. To be able to claim this, it must be the case that we should have this habit. I cannot find a place where Blackburn argues that we should have this habit, but in subsection 5.2.1.1 I will consider Blackburn's explanation for why we have this habit.

<sup>8</sup> Blackburn does not define conceptual necessity, so it is hard to assess his claim that this is conceptual necessity: two things identical in all natural respects are identical in moral respects. As I understand it, a conceptual necessity is a relation that holds in virtue of the meanings of the words expressing it. For example, the following is conceptual necessity: Kant is a bachelor, therefore he is an unmarried man. It is not obvious to me that the following is a conceptual necessity:  $x$  and  $y$  are identical in all natural respects, therefore  $x$  and  $y$  are identical in all moral respects. Perhaps Blackburn has a different sense of conceptual necessity in mind, say, that we cannot imagine two states of affairs alike in all natural respects, but different in moral respects. This cannot be either, many people can imagine this; many people think that Abraham's (near) sacrifice of Isaac is morally different than any other human sacrifice because of God's disposition toward it.

Drawing on his initial explanation of **supervenience** as a consequential relation of A-properties on B-properties, Blackburn introduces the notion of a complete description of a thing's B-properties: B\*. He characterizes **supervenience** as *B\*/A supervenience* and defines it as follows:

*B\*/A supervenience* – necessarily if there is a thing which is B\* and A, then anything else which is like it in being B\* is like it in being A as well. There is no possible world in which one thing is B\* and A, but other things are B\* and not A (Blackburn-1984, 183).

Blackburn points out that another, stronger, relationship between B\* and A is possible; he says there could be a rigid relationship between B\* and A in which necessarily, if something is B\*, it is also A; i.e., in all possible worlds, if a thing is B\*, it is A. *B\*/A supervenience* is weaker because with this relationship it is possible that in another possible world for things that are B\* not to be A; this relationship only requires that in any possible world in which it happens that something that is B\* is A, all the other things that are B\* are A. Blackburn calls the stronger inter-possible world relationship, *B\*/A necessity* (Blackburn-1984, 184).<sup>9</sup> Blackburn reiterates that *B\*/A supervenience* is a conceptual necessity, but he does not think that *B\*/A necessity* is a conceptual necessity because he thinks that determining which moral properties arise from a set of natural properties requires a standard that cannot be established by conceptual means alone (Blackburn-1984, 184).

With the use of the possible worlds metaphor, Blackburn now reintroduces the **supervenience** problem for **moral realism**. Blackburn defines a possible world as “a complete state of affairs corresponding to the various possibilities involved” (Blackburn-1984, 184).

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<sup>9</sup> Blackburn's account of distinction between supervenience and necessity employs the metaphor of possible worlds, and so it seems to draw on Klagge's method for explaining these ideas, but Blackburn does not reference the article. This isn't surprising since Blackburn's book was published in March 1984, and Klagge's article in July 1984, but I wonder if Blackburn was aware of Klagge's paper being in development.



Blackburn claims that if *B\*/A supervenience* is true, then all of the possible worlds can be divided into two kinds: there is the kind in which all the things that are B\* are A; and, there is the kind in which none of the things that are B\* are A. Blackburn claims that there is another kind of possible world that has been left out – the possible world in which there are things that are B\* and A and things that are B\* but not A; Blackburn calls this a mixed world. *Prima facie* it seems like a mixed world is possible; if there is a possible world in which *x* is B\* and A, and a possible world in which *y* is B\* and not A, then it should be possible that *x* and *y* occupy the same world. *B\*/A supervenience* bans a mixed world like this, and Blackburn thinks that **moral antirealists** have an explanation for why there is such a ban on mixed worlds when it comes to moral properties, but **moral realists** do not.

Blackburn's **antirealist** explanation for why a mixed world is not possible is quite simple. According to a **moral antirealist**, moral properties do not exist, so if they do not exist, they cannot supervene on natural properties, so the reason there cannot be a possible world in which something is B\* and A and another in which something is B\* and not A is that there is no possible world in which anything is A. There are no A-properties that supervene on B\*. Blackburn still has to explain why we observe this **supervenience** constraint in our moral practice; after all, if I make a negative moral judgment about my friend's daughter tormenting a dog, I make the same one about my goddaughter tormenting a dog.

According to **moral antirealists** like Blackburn, the announcement of a moral judgment, or A-commitment, is not a reaction to or speculation about moral properties, A-properties (Blackburn-1984, 186). When we make moral judgments, we are projecting, and **supervenience** should be explained in terms of constraints on proper projection. These constraints are established by the purpose of projection, which Blackburn characterizes as a "guide to practical

decision-making” (Blackburn-1984, 186). So, in our moral practice, our moral judgments supervene on the natural properties, but this is because there is some type of rule, which governs making moral judgments, and it requires us not to make different ones about things that have the same natural properties.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Blackburn thinks that the **moral realist** will have a very difficult time explaining why there is a ban on mixed worlds. A **moral realist** will have some notion of a moral property, or A-property, but she also has the notion that this moral property will not track across possible worlds in which there is B\*. Now, when she considers a possible world in which a thing being A supervenes on it being B\*, this will seem to be a mysterious fact for which she has no explanation (Blackburn-1984, 185). If pressed for an explanation why in this possible world, but not in another, does A supervene on B\*, she will have no explanation. Blackburn compares it to a situation in which a person in one place being B\* and thinking of a dog and another person in a different place being B\* and thinking of an aunt not being able to travel to the same place; such a situation seems mystifying.

### 5.2.1.3 Blackburn’s Modal Supervenience Argument

A year after presenting the mixed world argument in *Spreading the Word* Blackburn returned to his **supervenience** argument in “Supervenience Revisited” to press a revised version which takes advances in modal logic into account. Blackburn asks us to imagine a domain of judgments as *F* judgments, and the truths and facts of that domain will be *F* truths and *F* facts;

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<sup>10</sup> Blackburn has explained **supervenience** as a matter of projection being constrained by a rule that our projections not differ without a difference in natural properties. This explanation works so long as projections are equated with moral judgments, but in chapter 4 I challenged this understanding of projection. Blackburn may not have a ready to hand explanation of supervenience once projection is properly understood. In addition, **supervenience** no longer seems like a conceptual necessity if the relationship between moral judgments and natural properties is dictated by a rule that could have been different. Perhaps it is a conceptual necessity that we have such a rule, but I will explore this in more depth in subsection 5.3.2.3.

and he proposes that we assume that the truths expressible in the  $F$  vocabulary “supervene upon the truths expressible in an underlying  $G$  vocabulary (Blackburn-1985, 130-131).<sup>11</sup> To say that  $F$  truths supervene on the  $G$  truths is to say, “in *some* sense of ‘necessary’ it is necessarily true that if an  $F$  truth changes, then some  $G$  truth changes” (Blackburn-1985, 131).<sup>12</sup> Blackburn next proposes that a truth that some object or event is  $F$  supervenes upon a specific total set of  $G$  truths, which he characterizes as the object or event being  $G^*$ . While it is vague what truths can go into composing  $G^*$ , and there is a difficulty in characterizing them, Blackburn says, intuitively, they are the natural states that bring it about that the object or event is  $F$  (Blackburn-1985, 131). The natural states that bring it about that an object or event is  $F$  are the  $G$  states that underlie an  $F$  state. Blackburn characterizes **supervenience** as a relation such that if an object or event is in some  $F$  state, it is in that state because it is also in some underlying  $G$  state.

Blackburn, then, introduces “ $N$ ” and “ $P$ ” to represent necessity and possibility, respectively. With these notations he introduces the following formula for **supervenience**:

$$(S) N((\exists x)(Fx \ \& \ G^*x \ \& \ (G^*x \ U \ Fx)) \supset (y)(G^*y \supset Fy)) \quad (\text{Blackburn-1985, 131}).$$

Blackburn interprets this as claiming that if something exists and it is  $F$  and it is  $G^*$ , and it being  $G^*$  underlies it being  $F$ , then anything else that is  $G^*$  will also be  $F$ . However, there is nothing in this claim to suggest that a thing cannot be  $F$  without being  $G^*$ . This kind of necessity is weaker than the following kind of necessity:

$$(N) N(x)(G^*x \supset Fx) \quad (\text{Blackburn-1985, 131}).$$

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<sup>11</sup> The use of terms like “judgment”, “truth”, and “fact” is not meant to represent any commitment that these things are genuine or real.

<sup>12</sup> The supervenience relationship could be cashed out in terms of facts: “necessarily, if two situations are identical in point of  $G$  facts, then they are identical in terms of  $F$  facts” (Blackburn-1985, 130).

This claims that necessarily for any thing, if it is  $G^*$ , then it is  $F$ . (S) does not entail (N). Finally, since (S) does not entail (N), Blackburn introduces the possibility that something exists that is  $G^*$ , but not  $F$ , and a person who holds (S) may hold (P), too:

(P)  $P(\exists x)(G^*x \ \& \ \sim Fx)$  (Blackburn-1985, 132).

On such a theory it is possible that whatever  $G$  state underlies a particular  $F$  state might not have done so. Blackburn's point is that a theory which endorses both (S) and (P), or what he calls the (S)/(P) combination, generates a mystery for how the combination is possible – a mystery which is better solved by theories which are **antirealist** about  $F$  judgments than those that are **realist**.

Blackburn returns to his mixed worlds metaphor to put the mystery into relief. (S) stipulates that in any possible world, if there is an object or event that is  $F$ , and its being  $G^*$  underlies its  $F$ -ness, then any other object or event in that same possible world that is  $G^*$  is  $F$ ; (P) entails that there are possible worlds in which an object or event is  $G^*$  and not  $F$ . Blackburn calls the former worlds  $G^*/F$  worlds, and the latter,  $G^*/O$  worlds (Blackburn-1985, 134). (S) has a further implication: there are no possible worlds that are mixed, i.e., in which some object or event is  $G^*$  and  $F$  and some object or event is  $G^*$  and not  $F$ . Blackburn calls the mixed worlds  $G^*/F \vee O$  worlds. Blackburn argues that the limit on possible worlds to  $G^*/F$  and  $G^*/O$  worlds appears to be arbitrary, violating “a principle of plentitude with respect to possibilities” (Blackburn-1985, 135).

Blackburn now turns to the matter of evaluating whether our moral practice involves a commitment to the (S)/(P) combination, and he finds that it does. First, he introduces analytic necessity, which he defines in two ways: (a) a proposition whose truth can be determined by conceptual means alone; (b) a proposition whose denial would betray a lack of competence with the vocabulary in the utterer (Blackburn-1974, 136). Blackburn proposes that analytic necessity

is the kind of necessity in play for (S) when it comes to moral practice because he takes it to be a conceptual truth that moral claims supervene on natural claims, and so anyone who did not notice or observe this would betray their lack of competence within moral practice (Blackburn-1985, 137). So Blackburn revises his formalization of (S) to (S<sub>a</sub>):

$$(S_a) AN((\exists x)(Fx \ \& \ G^*x \ \& \ (G^*x \ U \ Fx)) \supset (y)(G^*y \supset Fy)).$$

Blackburn argues that we should not hold (N<sub>a</sub>),

$$(N_a) AN(x)(G^*x \supset Fx),$$

the analytic corollary to (N), in addition to (S<sub>a</sub>) because (N<sub>a</sub>) holds that it is evidence of competence in moral practice to adopt whatever standard is expressed by (x)(G<sup>\*</sup>x ⊃ Fx).

Blackburn points out that it is a common assumption that people can be competent in moral practice even if they hold different standards, for example, two people who endorse utilitarianism but differ over what intrinsic value to maximize would recognize each other as morally competent (Blackburn-1985, 137). If the common view is that (N<sub>a</sub>) is wrong, then (P<sub>a</sub>) should reflect the common view:

$$(P_a) AP(\exists x)(G^*x \ \& \ \sim Fx).^{13}$$

So, in moral practice, we are committed to the (S<sub>a</sub>)/(P<sub>a</sub>) combination, and the problem of **supervenience** remains: if it is analytically necessary that in any possible world, if there is an object or event that is *F*, and its being *G*<sup>\*</sup> underlies its *F*-ness, then any other object or event in that same possible world that is *G*<sup>\*</sup> is *F*, and there are analytically possible worlds in which an object or event is *G*<sup>\*</sup> and not *F*, why can't there be a world in which one object or event is *G*<sup>\*</sup> and *F* and another object or event that is *G*<sup>\*</sup> and not *F*? Blackburn explains that (S<sub>a</sub>) is a

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<sup>13</sup> In both the original appearance of “Supervenience Revisited” in *Exercises in Analysis* and its reproduction in *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, (P<sub>a</sub>) is formalized as  $AP(\exists x)(G^*x \ \& \ Fx)$ , but this must be a mistake since (P) is formalized as  $P(\exists x)(G^*x \ \& \ \sim Fx)$ .

constraint that we adopted in response to the role that moral practice plays in our lives, “guiding our desires and choices among the natural features of the world” (Blackburn-1985, 137). The **moral realist** cannot explain ( $S_a$ ) in the same way since the **moral realist** must take ( $S_a$ ) as describing how the moral world is, not as a standard for assessing moral competence.

### 5.3 Criticizing the Supervenience Arguments

The crux of Blackburn’s **supervenience** argument is that there are two, apparently, non-negotiable commitments people have: (1) whatever a particular state of affairs’ moral worth is, it could have been different; (2) if two distinct states of affairs have no natural differences between them, they have the same moral worth. Despite the widespread consensus they enjoy, Blackburn thinks they are in tension. Imagine a state of affairs that is so far unrealized; (1) holds that its goodness or badness is up in the air right until the moment it is realized – it could have gone either way. Once that state of affairs is realized with its attendant, say goodness, any other subsequent state of affairs that is identical is also good; this is just to state (2). The problem is that (2) entails that the following scenario is impossible: the previously unrealized state of affairs is simultaneously realized in two different states of affairs with different moral worth. It is odd that this is impossible: if an unrealized state of affairs has no moral worth prior to its realization, why can’t it have a different moral worth for each simultaneous realization of it? Blackburn challenges moral philosophers to develop some way of reconciling the two commitments, and he claims that the **projectivist** reconciliation he proposed is better than **moral realist** reconciliations.

The **moral realist’s** obvious retort to Blackburn is, so what? You have reconciled two commitments that **moral realists** do not need to reconcile since they do not hold both commitments. The rest of this chapter mainly focuses on exploring whether **moral realists** must

hold (1) or (2), but I will conclude by considering Shafer-Landau's critique that the supervenience argument goes too far.

### **5.3.1 Denying (1): whatever a particular state of affairs' moral worth is, it could have been different**

The corollaries to claim (1) in Blackburn's original, mixed worlds, and modal **supervenience** arguments are, respectively:

(E') There are some moral propositions that are true, but whose truth is not entailed by any naturalistic facts about their subject;

(W) There is a possible world in which something is  $B^*$  and  $A$ , and there is another possible world in which something is  $B^*$  and not  $A$ ;

(P)  $P(\exists x)(G^*x \ \& \ \sim Fx)$ .<sup>14</sup>

(P) claims that it is possible that something exists that is  $G^*$ , but not  $F$ . Like James Klagge, Ian McFetridge, David Brink, and Russ Shafer-Landau, who all counsel the **moral realist** to abandon commitment (1), I think that the most promising response to Blackburn's **supervenience** argument is to avoid or deny the commitments these propositions express, so let's have a look at doing so.

#### **5.3.1.1 Avoiding (E'): There are some moral propositions that are true, but whose truth is not entailed by any naturalistic facts about their subject.**

Blackburn's **supervenience** argument in "Moral Realism" did not get serious scrutiny until James Klagge's "An Alleged Difficulty Concerning Moral Properties."<sup>15</sup> Klagge's response to

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<sup>14</sup> In *Spreading the Word*, where Blackburn introduces his mixed world supervenience argument, he does not put forward a specific commitment about the possible relationship between moral and non-moral properties, rather he derives the problem from noting that moral philosophers accept  $B^*/A$  supervenience, but not  $B^*/A$  necessity; "... it does not seem a matter of conceptual or logical necessity that that any given total natural state of a thing gives it some particular moral quality" (Blackburn-1984, 184). I am introducing (W) here to illuminate the symmetry among the arguments. I take (W) to represent the kind of claim that generates problems for supervenience in the mixed world argument.

the **supervenience** argument denies that there is a puzzle because Blackburn has not proven that (E') and (S<sub>2</sub>) reflect **moral realists'** commitments.

Klagge starts by criticizing Blackburn's interchangeable use of the terms "entailment" and "strict implication", so he offers a single interpretation of the terms (Klagge-1984, 373). Since an entailment, "involve[s] some connection of content or meaning," a strict implication should be understood in the same way, and the customary understanding of the connection is one that can "be derived solely by means of the laws of logic and the meaning of words" (Klagge-1984, 373). Finally, he thinks that the use of "strict implication" and "logical impossibility" is not meant to signal a difference since a "proposition strictly implies another if it is logically impossible for the first to be true and the second false" (Klagge-1984, 373). Having proposed an equivalence in meaning among the terms, Klagge offers these reinterpretations of (E') and (S<sub>2</sub>):

(KE') There are some moral propositions that are true, but whose truth cannot be derived by the laws of logic and the meaning of words, from any propositions ascribing natural properties to the subject;

(KS<sub>2</sub>) If two things possess the same naturalistic properties to the same degree, then from this fact we can infer, by the laws of logic and the meanings of words, that they possess the same moral properties to the same degree (Klagge-1984, 374).

As we have seen Blackburn characterizes **supervenience** as a conceptual or logical necessity, but Klagge argues that Blackburn's argument for **supervenience** is an argument for a weaker relation than the one described by (KS<sub>2</sub>). Blackburn contends **supervenience** must be

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<sup>15</sup> R. F. Holland considers Blackburn's argument in a review of *Morality and Moral Reasoning: Five Essays in Ethics*, the collection in which Blackburn's "Moral Realism" first appeared. Holland's primary criticisms of the **supervenience** arguments are that Blackburn offers a straw man characterization of **moral realism**, on which he illicitly imposes a correspondence theory of truth, and does not explain what he means by "naturalistic" (Holland, 270). Holland's critique does not respond to the charge that **moral realism** has a difficulty in explaining **supervenience**; instead, it suggests that, first, an alternative (undescribed) version of **moral realism** may not have this difficulty, and, second, **supervenience** could be easily explained if Blackburn provided a more precise explanation of "naturalistic."



true because to deny it is to admit that the moral worth of courage can change even if all its natural properties remain the same; and consequently, nothing depends on courage's moral worth shifting when its connection to the natural properties is unaltered (Blackburn-1973, 122). In light of this Klagge interprets Blackburn as defending a **supervenience** that holds that naturalistically indiscernible objects are necessarily morally discernible (Klagge-1984, 374).<sup>16</sup> Next, Klagge argues that Blackburn's defense of **supervenience** only defends a necessity that is weaker than the conceptual necessity that Blackburn insists characterizes **supervenience**; a person could insist that naturalistically indiscernible objects are *necessarily* morally indiscernible, without holding that this relationship be derived by the laws of logic and the meanings of words (Klagge-1984, 374, Blackburn-1973, 115-116).

Blackburn's argument has left the **moral realist** with the option of characterizing the connection between moral and natural properties as a synthetic necessity, which can be captured by the following:

(WSS) It is impossible that two things should differ in some moral respect without differing in some naturalistic respect.

If (E') and (WSS) represent the commitments of **moral realists**, then (1) – a moral proposition's truth consists in the existence of a state of affairs which the proposition describes – and (2) – no set of natural facts entails the existence of this state of affairs, i.e. (E) – are no longer in tension: the **supervenience** claim is one about the connection between properties, it is not a claim about a connection between propositions about those properties. Klagge dissolves the tension between the two claims by pointing out that the tension only arises from not paying attention to the different kinds of necessity at play.

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<sup>16</sup> In his text Klagge interprets Blackburn as arguing that a person who denies (S<sub>2</sub>) “must allow that naturalistically indiscernible objects might be morally discernible” (Klagge, 374).

So far, my discussion of Klagge’s article suggests that it would be more suited to discussing it in the subsection of this chapter where I explore the possibility of **realists** disowning commitment (2), but Klagge proposes that the tension can be reintroduced if (E') is reformulated more like (1):

(A') A thing could have had different moral properties from those it actually has even if all its natural properties had been the same (Klagge-1984, 375).

(A') and (WSS) would be in tension; it would be a challenge for the **moral realist** to reconcile them. But, Klagge argues that there is no reason to believe that (A') is true, and I am inclined to agree with him. In fact (A') seems to be a mere denial of **naturalistic moral realism**. Klagge suggests that a **moral realist** should reject (A') and adopt the following commitment:

(NC) If a thing of a certain naturalistic description has certain moral properties, then it is impossible that it should have been different in some moral respect without being different in some naturalistic respect (Klagge-1984, 376).

There is no tension between (NC) and (WSS), since (NC) explains why it is that two objects cannot differ in some moral respects without differing in naturalistic respects.

Ian McFetridge points out that he and Klagge agree that the primary move to make against Blackburn’s supervenience argument is to deny (E'), which he characterizes as holding, “There are moral truths which are not strictly implied by any truth ascribing naturalistic properties to their subjects” (McFetridge, 245 n3, 247). McFetridge formalizes this by use of a universal quantifier as follows (“M” and “N” range over moral and naturalistic properties, respectively; “w” and “a” are variables for possible and actual worlds, respectively; and “Mxa” should be read as “x is M in a”, etc.):

(L').  $(\exists x)(\exists M) [Mxa \ \& \ \sim (\exists N)(Nxa \ \& \ (\forall w)(Nxw \rightarrow Mxw))]$  (McFetridge, 249).

McFetridge argues that Blackburn’s **supervenience** claim holds, “Moral properties are *supervenient* on naturalistic properties in the sense that it is logically necessary that, if two

objects agree in all their naturalistic properties, then they agree in all their moral properties” (McFetridge, 247). He formalizes this claim as follows:

$$(XYWW). (\forall w)(\forall x)(\forall y) [(\forall N)(N_{xw} \leftrightarrow N_{yw}) \rightarrow (\forall M)(M_{xw} \leftrightarrow M_{yw})]$$

(McFetridge, 248).<sup>17</sup>

McFetridge calls this “intra-world” **supervenience**, which holds “that for any objects  $x, y$ , if in any possible situation they share all their naturalistic properties, then in *that* possible situation they share all their moral properties” (McFetridge, 248). McFetridge thinks that in addition to intra-world **supervenience**, we are ordinarily committed to “*cross-world*” **supervenience**: “if in a possible world an object is naturalistically just as it is in the actual world, then it is in the possible world morally just as it is in the actual world” (McFetridge, 248):

$$(XXWA) (\forall x)(\forall w) [(\forall N)(\forall w)(N_{xw} \leftrightarrow N_{xa}) \rightarrow (\forall M)(M_{xw} \leftrightarrow M_{xa})]$$

(McFetridge, 249).

McFetridge thinks that since we are committed to (XXWA), and because some assumptions about naturalistic properties make (XXWA) and (L') incompatible, then we must be committed to rejecting (L').

McFetridge cites Jaegwon Kim’s notion of a “maximal” naturalistic property, and he says that we ought to assume “that all the objects with which we have to deal have in the actual

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<sup>17</sup> (L') should be read as follows:

There exists some  $x$  and some moral property  $M$  such that  $x$  is  $M$  in the actual world and there does not exist some natural property  $N$  such that  $x$  is  $N$  in the actual world and for all possible worlds if  $x$  is  $N$  in that possible world, then  $x$  is  $M$  in the actual world.

(XYWW) should be read as follows:

For all objects  $x$  and  $y$  in all possible worlds, if, for all natural properties  $N$ ,  $x$  is  $N$  in that possible world if and only if  $y$  is  $N$  in that possible world, then, for all moral properties  $M$ ,  $x$  is  $M$  in that possible world if and only if  $y$  is  $M$  in that possible world.

world” have such a property (McFetridge, 250). The idea is that “every object actually has some naturalistic property ... which is so determinate in every possible naturalistic respect that no further naturalistic properties can be ‘added’” (McFetridge, 250). He calls this property  $N^*$ , and claims, “if  $x$  has  $N^*$  in the actual world, and also has  $N^*$  in some possible world  $w$ , then  $x$  in  $w$  shares *all* its naturalistic properties with  $x$  in the actual world,” and he formalizes this as

$$(NMA) (\forall x)(\exists N) [Nxa \ \& \ (\forall w)(Nxw \rightarrow (\forall N^*) (N^*xa \leftrightarrow N^*xw))] \text{ (McFetridge, 250).}$$

Given this assumption and (XXWA), both of which are common commitments we have, we ought to abandon (L'). (L') claims that some object has a moral property in the actual world, but that there is no naturalistic property that it has in the naturalistic world that guarantees if  $x$  has that naturalistic property in another world, then  $x$  has that moral property. This should hold for the  $N^*$  property that  $x$  has in the actual world, too. So, a consequence of (L') is that there is a possible world in which  $x$  is  $N^*$ , but not  $M$ . Therefore, (L') allows for a world in which  $x$  is  $N^*$  and  $M$  and another world where  $x$  is  $N^*$  and not  $M$ , but that possibility flouts (XXWA), which is a common moral commitment: (L') must be false. **Moral realists** are able to avoid the **supervenience** objection because they can deny that (1) is true.

### 5.3.1.2 Avoiding (W): There is a possible world in which something is $B^*$ and $A$ , and there is another possible world in which something is $B^*$ and not $A$ .

Russ Shafer-Landau also argues that the **moral realists'** obvious maneuver against Blackburn's **supervenience** argument is to deny (1), and he pursues this strategy by rejecting the lack of entailment thesis represented by (W): There is a possible world in which something is  $B^*$  and  $A$ , and there is another possible world in which something is  $B^*$  and not  $A$ . Shafer-Landau cashes this out as the claim that “no set of non-moral truths entails any particular moral evaluation” (Shafer-Landau-2003, 85). He expresses bewilderment that Blackburn thinks **moral**

**realists** are committed to rejecting this entailment, since he interprets this entailment as metaphysical entailment (Shafer-Landau-2003, 85).

In an earlier work, he suggests that Blackburn's lack of entailment assumption is a hangover from the open-question argument; this assumption is false because "the sense of 'wrong' isn't identical to the sense of any particular description of natural properties, since we are speaking here of **supervenience** relations, not identity" (Shafer-Landau-1994, 148). Shafer-Landau quotes from one of Moore's replies to his critics, "[I]f a thing is good (in my sense), then that it is so *follows* from the fact that it possess certain natural properties, which are such that from the fact that it is good it does *not follow* conversely that it has those properties" (quoted in Shafer-Landau-2003, 85). Shafer-Landau characterizes the relationship between moral properties and natural ones as "an asymmetrical relationship of dependence;" the idea is that moral properties are multiply realizable by natural properties – different combinations of natural properties can give rise to the same moral properties, so the moral properties will not exist without the natural properties, but the presence of a moral property does not entail the presence of any particular combination of natural ones (Shafer-Landau-2003, 85).

Shafer-Landau, therefore, simply rejects (W), claiming, "[A] duly specified set of nonmoral properties metaphysically must give rise to a certain moral property" (Shafer-Landau-2003, 85). The entailment relationship suggested by this is one in which non-moral properties constitute "metaphysically sufficient" conditions for the instantiation of moral properties, and the ban on mixed world is explained by the fact that anything that is  $B^*$  entails that it is  $A$  (Shafer-Landau-2003, 85).

Shafer-Landau considers a possible response that Blackburn has already made: shifting the necessities from metaphysical to conceptual ones. In this argument, it is conceptually

necessary that moral properties supervene on non-moral properties, but it is conceptually possible for the same combination of non-moral properties to underlie different moral properties. The problem is that **supervenience** implies that a competent participant in moral discourse recognizes that if something has certain non-moral properties and a particular moral property, then anything with the same non-moral properties has the same moral property, but lack of entailment implies that a competent participant in a moral discourse can imagine a world in which something has those non-moral properties, but a different moral property. How can this be? Shafer-Landau argues that it is quite simple: “people can conceive of many things that are not metaphysically possible” (Shafer-Landau-2003, 86). When competent participants in moral discourse imagine worlds that are not possible – worlds in which objects are  $B^*$  and not  $A$ , even though being  $B^*$  necessitates being  $A$  – it is because of “a limitation on our appreciation of the relevant metaphysical relations” (Shafer-Landau-2003, 86).<sup>18</sup> Shafer-Landau’s response to the shift of modality is to continue to deny (W), but explain its resilience in moral practice.

Now, let’s look at attempts to deny (P):  $(P) P(\exists x)(G^*x \ \& \ \sim Fx)$ .

### 5.3.1.3 Avoiding (P): $P(\exists x)(G^*x \ \& \ \sim Fx)$ .

The “modal argument” against **moral realism** represents a refinement of the **supervenience** argument that blunts the force of the objections to (1) I just reviewed.<sup>19</sup> Blackburn argues that even if the shift to synthetic necessities provides **moral realism** a way to reconcile (1) – a moral proposition’s truth consists in the existence of a state of affairs that the proposition describes –

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<sup>18</sup> I take this limit to reflect the fact that we have not, so far, identified the non-moral properties that necessitate the moral ones, rather than a principled limit that we are unable to do so.

<sup>19</sup> It appears that Robert Elliot was the first person to characterize Blackburn’s **supervenience** argument as a modal argument (Elliot-1987, 133). While each version of the argument is essentially modal, I have reserved the term to describe the form of argument Blackburn pressed in “Supervenience Revisited” due to Blackburn’s own description of it taking advantage of advances in modal logic (Blackburn-1985, 130).

and (2) – no set of natural facts entails the existence of this state of affairs, i.e. (E), there is still the problem of explaining how in moral practice it is analytic that the moral judgments supervene on naturalistic descriptions and it is possible for a moral judgment to be different given the same naturalistic description.

The new challenge is for **moral realists** to explain how to reconcile (S<sub>a</sub>) and (P<sub>a</sub>):

(S<sub>a</sub>)  $AN((\exists x)(Fx \ \& \ G^*x \ \& \ (G^*x \ U \ Fx)) \supset (y)(G^*y \ \supset \ Fy))$

and

(P<sub>a</sub>)  $AP(\exists x)(G^*x \ \& \ \sim Fx)$ .<sup>20</sup>

Robert Elliot introduces another assumption into this mix, E:

(E)  $(\exists x)(Fx \ \& \ G^*x \ \& \ (G^*x \ U \ Fx))$  (Elliot-1987, 133).

Elliot, pursuing a similar strategy to Blackburn’s other critics, argues that there could be another possible version of **supervenience** that participants in moral discourse are committed to that rules out (P<sub>a</sub>):

(?)  $N((\exists x)(Fx \ \& \ G^*x \ \& \ (G^*x \ U \ Fx)) \supset N(y)(G^*y \ \supset \ Fy))$  (Elliot-1987, 133).

The **supervenience** that (?) represents is the same kind of **supervenience** I have already called “cross-world” or “intra-world” **supervenience**. Elliot argues that the argument for (S<sub>a</sub>) can be extended to argue for the denial of (P<sub>a</sub>).

Elliot’s argument makes the point that the considerations Blackburn offers in support of (S<sub>a</sub>) also support (?). Once (?) is established, it and (E) entail  $N(y)(G^*y \ \supset \ Fy)$ , which is the

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<sup>20</sup> Remember, Blackburn argues that we should not hold the negations of (P<sub>a</sub>), (N<sub>a</sub>)  $AN(x)(G^*x \ \supset \ Fx)$ , because (N<sub>a</sub>) holds that it is evidence of competence in moral practice to adopt whatever standard is expressed by  $(x)(G^*x \ \supset \ Fx)$ . Blackburn points out that is a common assumption that people can be competent in moral practice even if they hold different standards, for example, two people who endorse utilitarianism but differ over what intrinsic value to maximize would recognize each other as morally competent (Blackburn-1985, 137). If the common view is that (N<sub>a</sub>) is wrong, then (P<sub>a</sub>) should reflect the common view.

denial of (P<sub>a</sub>). Recall that Blackburn makes the case that it is an analytic or conceptual constraint on competency within moral practice that moralists treat cases, which are identical in all their natural properties, as identical in their moral properties. To flout the constraint would be violate the purpose of morality: “to choose, commend, rank, approve of, or forbid things on the basis of their natural properties” (Blackburn-1985, 137). Elliot, echoing Blackburn’s point in *Spreading the Word*, points out that to flout the constraint is to engage in a practice that is not moralizing (Elliot-1987, 135; Blackburn-1984, 186).

Elliot’s argument proceeds by way of a thought experiment: imagine you are asked whether an actual state of affairs, S<sub>w</sub>, is good; noticing that G\* characterizes S<sub>w</sub>, you judge that S<sub>w</sub> is good. Now, you are asked to imagine a possible world that is not actual, and within this possible world there is a state of affairs, S<sub>p</sub>, which is also characterized by G\*; if asked, whether S<sub>p</sub> is good, you will judge that it is (Elliot-1987, 135). Elliot argues that whatever causes you to judge that S<sub>w</sub> is good because G\* underlies it, should cause you to judge that S<sub>p</sub> is good because G\* underlies it, and the “should” is conceptual (Elliot-1987, 135). Given that the states of affairs that G\* underlies are in the actual world and distributed across the possible worlds, failing to judge S<sub>p</sub> good after judging S<sub>w</sub> is good would violate the conceptual constraint on moral practice in the same way that judging S<sub>w</sub>’, which G\* underlies in the actual world, is bad would violate it. Apparently, then, part of being competent in a moral practice is observing (?). So, (?) like (S<sub>a</sub>) is a conceptual truth, is analytic. Given, (?) and (E), a person competent in moral practice will deny (P<sub>a</sub>), and the (S<sub>a</sub>)/(P<sub>a</sub>) combination that Blackburn argued was a problem for **moral realists** can be avoided.

### **5.3.2 Denying (2): if two distinct states of affairs have no natural differences between them, they have the same moral worth.**

The corollaries to (2) as they appear in Blackburn’s texts are as follows:



(S<sub>2</sub>) A property  $M$  is supervenient upon properties  $N_1 \dots N_n$  if  $M$  is not identical with and of  $N_1 \dots N_n$  nor with any truth function of them, and it is logically impossible that two things should each possess the same properties from set  $N_1 \dots N_n$  to the same degree, without both failing to possess  $M$ , or cease to be  $M$ , or both possessing  $M$ , to the same degree.

*B\*/A supervenience* – necessarily if there is a thing which is B\* and A, then anything else which is like it in being B\* is like it in being A as well. There is no possible world in which one thing is B\* and A, but other things are B\* and not A.

(S)  $N((\exists x)(Fx \ \& \ G^*x \ \& \ (G^*x \cup Fx)) \supset (y)(G^*y \supset Fy))$ .

Before, examining these propositions, I want to note that though Blackburn suggests that the **supervenience** of the moral on the natural is an axiom of metaethics, and that **realists** should be reluctant to abandon this conviction, there is an important way to deny (2) that I will not examine closely. As Klagge points out, a Divine Command Theorist would not have any difficulty supposing that two actions could possess all the same naturalistic properties, but not the same moral ones (Klagge-1984, 374-375). Blackburn acknowledges this objection, but dismisses it, first, as incoherent, and second, as promiscuously including the divine among the natural. The second reply seems to miss the point of the objection; Klagge does not propose that the divine is natural. Rather, he suggests that there are competent moral practitioners who do not accept the **supervenience** of the moral on the natural. The first, quick reply that the objection is incoherent reflects Blackburn's view that his metaethical project is to make sense of morality from a naturalistic perspective; since he believes that the only the resources he has available are natural properties and naturalistic language, he will not countenance explanations and objections appealing to the divine. Because I am interested in the divide between **moral realists** and **moral antirealists** of the naturalistic variety, I will accept Blackburn's terse rejection of this objection.

**5.3.2.1 Avoiding (S<sub>2</sub>):** A property *M* is supervenient upon properties *N*<sub>1</sub> ... *N*<sub>*n*</sub> if *M* is not identical with and of *N*<sub>1</sub> ... *N*<sub>*n*</sub> nor with any truth function of them, and it is logically impossible that two things should each possess the same properties from set *N*<sub>1</sub> ... *N*<sub>*n*</sub> to the same degree, without both failing to possess *M*, or cease to be *M*, or both possessing *M*, to the same degree.

As I noted in subsection 5.3.1.1, Klagge criticizes Blackburn for looseness in his use of logical terms, and reinterprets (S<sub>2</sub>),

(S<sub>2</sub>) A property *M* is supervenient upon properties *N*<sub>1</sub> ... *N*<sub>*n*</sub> if *M* is not identical with and of *N*<sub>1</sub> ... *N*<sub>*n*</sub> nor with any truth function of them, and it is logically impossible that two things should each possess the same properties from set *N*<sub>1</sub> ... *N*<sub>*n*</sub> to the same degree, without both failing to possess *M*, or cease to be *M*, or both possessing *M*, to the same degree,

as (KS<sub>2</sub>) to reflect his attempt to instill some consistency in their use:

(KS<sub>2</sub>) If two things possess the same naturalistic properties to the same degree, then from this fact we can infer, by the laws of logic and the meanings of words, that they possess the same moral properties to the same degree.

I also noted in subsection 5.3.1.1 that Klagge points out that Blackburn's defense of **supervenience** suggests that at its core is a commitment to naturalistically indiscernible objects being morally indiscernible. Although this can be supported by a weaker relationship than logical necessity, Blackburn repeatedly insists that it is logical impossibility that precludes naturalistically indiscernible objects from being morally discernible (Blackburn-1973, 115-116). The real force of Klagge's Divine Command Theory objection to **supervenience** can now be identified: if it is possible to conceive of moral properties supervening on God's will rather than natural properties, then it is not a matter of logical impossibility that moral properties can vary without a variance in natural ones. Klagge's conclusion is cautious: the **moral realist** does not have to accept the **supervenience** that Blackburn seems to have in mind in (S<sub>2</sub>) or (KS<sub>2</sub>), but she should hold on to the condition that "naturalistically indiscernible objects cannot be morally

indiscernible” (Klagge-1984, 375). The trick is to establish a different statement of **supervenience** that captures this condition.

Klagge points out that if the connection between moral and naturalistic properties is not logical as Blackburn proposes, then it is synthetic, not analytic. Klagge proposes (WSS), synchronic **supervenience**, as an alternative to (S<sub>2</sub>):

(WSS) It is impossible that two things should differ in some moral respect without differing in some naturalistic respect (Klagge-1984, 375).

Klagge notes that once it is no longer a matter of logical impossibility that two objects share all their naturalistic properties, but not moral ones, i.e., “naturalistic indiscernibility does not entail moral indiscernibility,” there is no reason to be surprised that propositions describing an object’s natural properties do not entail propositions about its moral properties (Klagge-1984, 375). As already noted in subsection 5.3.1.1, even though Blackburn can reformulate the lack of entailment thesis into (A') to generate a tension with (WSS), Klagge has a rebuttal for this move.

McFetridge makes the point that Blackburn’s (S<sub>2</sub>) generates a tension with the lack of entailment thesis only if it is interpreted as weak, or intra-world, **supervenience**, which he formalizes as

$$(XYWW) (\forall w)(\forall x)(\forall y) [(\forall N)(\forall w)(N_{xw} \leftrightarrow N_{yw}) \rightarrow (\forall M)(M_{xw} \leftrightarrow M_{yw})].$$

But, McFetridge insists that strong, or inter-world, **supervenience**, which he formalizes as

$$(XXWA) (\forall x)(\forall w) [(\forall N)(\forall w)(N_{xw} \leftrightarrow N_{xa}) \rightarrow (\forall M)(M_{xw} \leftrightarrow M_{xa})],$$

is just as much a part of ordinary moral competence as weak **supervenience**.

At first, it might seem as though strong **supervenience** and the lack of entailment thesis are straightforwardly incompatible. After all, if strong **supervenience** is the view that “if in a possible world an object is naturalistically just as it is in the actual world, then it is in the possible world morally just as it is in the actual world,” and the lack of entailment thesis is the

view that “[t]here are moral truths which are not strictly implied by any truth ascribing naturalistic properties to their subjects,” then it would seem that the truths ascribing naturalistic properties to subjects in the actual and possible worlds should imply a moral truth common to the subjects. McFetridge points out that strong **supervenience** does not entail that a proposition ascribing a natural property to a subject strictly implies any moral truth since it is compatible with strong **supervenience** that something could have a moral property while having no natural properties (McFetridge, 249). This is the reason that McFetridge introduces (NMA), “if x has N\* in the actual world, and also has N\* in some possible world w, then x in w shares *all* its naturalistic properties with x in the actual world.” (XXWA) and (NMA) entail the rejection of the lack of entailment thesis.

As noted in subsection 5.2.1, Blackburn provides no direct argument for **supervenience**, claiming instead that it is constitutive of moral competence, but he seems to take for granted that **supervenience** is weak. McFetridge cites an example from Hare to support strong **supervenience** being a part of moral competence. In the example, a person offers a positive moral evaluation of an action, but a negative moral evaluation of a hypothetical action that is identical in all respects. Hare argues that such a scenario would betray a logical flaw; it is not possible to have a moral distinction between the actual and hypothetical actions without some other difference. On McFetridge’s analysis, the **moral realist** does have a problem explaining the combination of (XXWW), (NMA), and lack of entailment; but she has no problem explaining the combination of (XXWW), (XXWA), (NMA), and lack of entailment since the combination is ruled out by (XXWA) and (NMA) entailing the denial of lack of entailment. McFetridge’s conclusion is that **moral realists** must take strong **supervenience** to be the case; the effect of the argument is to press Blackburn to argue against strong **supervenience** to defend his

**supervenience** argument. I cannot identify a place where Blackburn offers an argument against strong **supervenience**.

**5.3.2.2 Avoiding  $B^*/A$  Supervenience:  $B^*/A$  supervenience – necessarily if there is a thing which is  $B^*$  and  $A$ , then anything else which is like it in being  $B^*$  is like it in being  $A$  as well. There is no possible world in which one thing is  $B^*$  and  $A$ , but other things are  $B^*$  and not  $A$ .**

As noted in subsection 5.2.2, Blackburn defines  $B^*/A$  supervenience as follows:

[N]ecessarily if there is a thing which is  $B^*$  and  $A$ , then anything else which is like it in being  $B^*$  is like it in being  $A$  as well. There is no possible world in which one thing is  $B^*$  and  $A$ , but other things are  $B^*$  and not  $A$ .

This feature of morality is supposed to generate a problem for **moral realists** given it is correct to assume a lack of entailment, as expressed by (W):

There is a possible world in which something is  $B^*$  and  $A$ , and there is another possible world in which something is  $B^*$  and not  $A$ .

The problem the **moral realist** faces is how to explain why  $B^*/A$  supervenience obtains, if something being  $B^*$  does not fix its being  $A$ .

Blackburn had contrasted  $B^*/A$  supervenience with  $B^*/A$  necessity:

[I]n all possible worlds, if a thing is  $B^*$ , it is  $A$  (Blackburn-1984, 183).

Blackburn appears to assume, without argument, that weak **supervenience** is a feature of morality, but strong **supervenience** is not. Blackburn thinks that **moral realists** are committed to weak **supervenience** ( $B^*/A$  supervenience), but not to strong **supervenience**, and this is where the mixed world **supervenience** argument gets its traction; in effect, Blackburn is demanding **realists** provide an explanation for why the weaker relation should hold if the stronger does not.

As noted in subsection 5.3.1.2, Shafer-Landau argues that **realists** ought to deny (W), lack of entailment, and they should insist “that a duly specified set of non-moral properties metaphysically must give rise to a certain moral property.” But, this is simply to claim that

anything with certain natural properties also has certain moral properties, and that is what  $B^*/A$  necessity claims. **Moral realists** ought to be committed to  $B^*/A$  necessity, or strong **supervenience**; and, being committed to  $B^*/A$  necessity explains why **realists** are committed to  $B^*/A$  supervenience since the stronger relationship implies the weaker one.

For **moral realists**, at least,  $B^*/A$  necessity must appear to be a much more plausible metaphysical claim than (W) is.  $B^*/A$  necessity and (W) are contradictory; the former claims that being  $B^*$  fixes whether something is  $A$  in all possible worlds, while the latter claims that it does not. Consider the following set of  $B$  properties: a violent, non-consensual sexual act between an adult man and a 5 year-old girl. Such a set of  $B$  properties, has the  $A$  property of being evil, say. Now,  $B^*/A$  supervenience is uncontroversial; wherever in this world that set of  $B$  properties is instantiated, the  $A$  property, evil, is also instantiated. A regrettable fact of our world is that such acts are not uncommon, but in all instances they are evil.  $B^*/A$  necessity holds that in any possible world in which the  $B$  properties of being a violent, non-consensual act between an adult man and a 5-year old girl are instantiated, then the  $A$  property of evil is also instantiated. On the other hand, (W) holds that there could be two worlds which are identical in the instantiation of those  $B$  properties, but which are not identical in their instantiation of the  $A$  property of evil. Michael Ridge calls such a phenomenon “bare normative difference” (Ridge-2007, 335). Ridge characterizes the phenomenon as inconceivable, but from the **moral realist’s** perspective, it would seem that (W) is quite metaphysically strange, and much more controversial than  $B^*/A$  necessity. **Moral realists** have better metaphysical grounds for accepting  $B^*/A$  necessity than they do for (W).

### 5.3.2.3 Avoiding (S): $N((\exists x)(Fx \ \& \ G^*x \ \& \ (G^*x \ U \ Fx)) \supset (y)(G^*y \supset Fy))$ .

As noted in subsection 5.3.1.3, the modal argument Blackburn puts forward in “Supervenience Revisited” reworks the, so-called, mixed worlds argument by taking advantage of developments in modal logic. Here is a quick recap of the modal argument.

**Supervenience** is a relation between paired domains of properties  $F$  and  $G$  (i.e., the moral and non-moral, respectively), such that necessarily “if something  $x$  is  $F$ , and  $G^*$  underlies this, then anything else in the physical or natural (or whatever) state  $G^*$  is  $F$  as well,” where  $G^*$  is some specific total collection of  $G$  truths:

$$(S) \ N((\exists x)(Fx \ \& \ G^*x \ \& \ (G^*x \ U \ Fx)) \supset (y)(G^*y \supset Fy)).$$

This kind of necessity is weaker than the following kind of necessity:

$$(N) \ N(x)(G^*x \supset Fx).$$

Since (S) does not entail (N), Blackburn introduces the possibility that something exists that is  $G^*$ , but not  $F$ , and a person who holds (S) may hold (P), too:

$$(P) \ P(\exists x)(G^*x \ \& \ \sim Fx) \text{ (Blackburn-1985, 132).}$$

On such a theory it is possible that whatever  $G$  state underlies a particular  $F$  state might not have done so. Blackburn’s point is that any theory about the domains of  $F$  and  $G$  which endorse both (S) and (P), or what he calls the (S)/(P) combination, generates a mystery for how the combination is possible – a mystery which is better solved by theories which are **antirealist** about  $F$  judgments than those that are **realist**.

The previous discussion of Klagge’s and Elliot’s responses to the **supervenience** argument demonstrated that both (S) and (P) must reflect the same modality for the argument to generate the tension; if there is equivocation in the modality, there is no worry for the **moral realist**. So, the (S)/(P) combinations that presumably generate a problem must be (S<sub>a</sub>)/(P<sub>a</sub>) and

(S<sub>m</sub>)/(P<sub>m</sub>) combinations, where the subscripts of “a” and “m” refer to analytical and metaphysical modalities. Shafer-Landau argues that for **moral realists**, **supervenience** encompasses both the strong and weak form of it, which rules out the (S<sub>m</sub>)/(P<sub>m</sub>) combination, and Blackburn admits the **moral realist** has this option (Blackburn-1985, 136).<sup>21</sup> Shafer-Landau points out that Blackburn’s response to this is to simply shift the modality of his **supervenience** argument to the analytical one, and this is the **supervenience** argument that Elliot addresses.

For Blackburn, what makes a proposition analytic, or a conceptual matter, is that denying it, or failing to abide by it, betrays a lack of competence in moral practice which the proposition is about, and (S<sub>a</sub>),

$$(S_a) AN ((\exists x)(Fx \& G^*x \& (G^*x \cup Fx)) \supset (y)(G^*y \supset Fy)),$$

possesses this quality, but not (N<sub>a</sub>),

$$(N_a) AN (x)(G^*x \supset Fx).$$

For the analytic **supervenience** argument to be in play, (N<sub>a</sub>) must be ruled out so that its negation, (P<sub>a</sub>) can be combined with (S<sub>a</sub>). Blackburn’s argument against (N<sub>a</sub>) is that (N<sub>a</sub>) implies there is some particular moral commitment that is constitutive of moral competence. Blackburn rejects this implication as implausible since it appears that two people obeying the constraints on moralizing can come to different conclusions given the same complete set of non-moral facts without one being convicted of being seriously confused, and this is because they adopt different standards (Blackburn-1985, 137). So, (S<sub>a</sub>)/(P<sub>a</sub>) combination holds that (1) it is analytically necessary that if something,  $x$ , is  $F$ , and  $x$  being  $G^*$  underlies this, then anything else that is in the  $G^*$  state is  $F$ , too, and (2) it is analytically possible that some other thing is  $G^*$ , but not  $F$ .

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<sup>21</sup> Blackburn characterizes the strong form of metaphysical supervenience as (N<sub>m</sub>)  $MN (x) (G^*x \supset Fx)$ . Given this, and Blackburn’s characterization of (P) as  $P (\exists x)(G^*x \& \sim Fx)$ , (P<sub>m</sub>) should be formalized as  $MP (\exists x)(G^*x \& \sim Fx)$ . (N<sub>m</sub>) and (P<sub>m</sub>) are contradictory, so the moral realist can blunt the metaphysical supervenience argument by insisting on (N<sub>m</sub>).



Just how such a combination can be possible is a problem for the **moral realist**, but not for the **antirealist**.<sup>22</sup>

Elliot thinks that the best option for the **moral realist** is to deny that such a combination is possible, and he proposes that the **realist** do so by arguing that the considerations that support (S<sub>a</sub>) also support another claim, (?)

$$(?) \text{ N } ((\exists x)(Fx \ \& \ G^*x \ \& \ (G^*x \ \cup \ Fx)) \supset \text{ N } (y)(G^*y \supset Fy)).$$

(S<sub>a</sub>) is intra-world, or weak, **supervenience**, but (?) is inter-world, or strong, **supervenience**. So, Elliot, like Klagge and Shafer-Landau, addresses Blackburn's **supervenience** argument by making the case that Blackburn's argument does not accurately reflect the **moral realist's supervenience** commitment. If (?) is the case, then  $\text{N } (y)(G^*y \supset Fy)$ , which is identical to (N<sub>a</sub>), is the case, and this rules out the possibility of the (S<sub>a</sub>)/(P<sub>a</sub>) combination. What distinguishes Elliot's argument in the dialectic is his move to make the case that the reasons to suppose (S<sub>a</sub>) is the case also back (?) being the case.

Elliot outlines the case for (S<sub>a</sub>) roughly as follows. The practice of moralizing, as Blackburn describes it, involves ranking behaviors and things, on the basis of their natural properties, to guide choices. If behaviors or things with identical natural properties had different rankings, these rankings could not serve as a guide to choosing behaviors or things because we would not know when to choose a behavior or thing with certain natural properties. Consequently, our moral practice requires that behaviors or things with the same natural

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<sup>22</sup> According to Blackburn, (S<sub>a</sub>) is a constraint integrated into our moral practice because of “the whole purpose for which we moralize, which is to choose, commend rank, approve, or forbid things on the basis of their natural properties ... and to guide desires and choices among the natural features of the world” (Blackburn-1985, 137).

properties be ranked the same, or  $(S_a)$ .<sup>23</sup> Elliot thinks that this same reasoning supports assigning the same ranking to a behavior with certain natural properties in another possible world as the behavior with identical natural properties in this world possesses.

Earlier in subsection 5.3.1.3, I outlined the thought experiment that Elliot deploys to support his claim that the conceptual constraint on moralizing should be extended from intra-world to inter-world contexts. Recall there that  $(S_a)$  represents a conceptual constraint on moralizing; an activity would not be moralizing, if it involved assigning different moral assessments to actions, say, with identical natural properties. A person engaging in moralizing in the actual world, and observing this conceptual constraint, must make the same moral assessment,  $F$ , of two actions who possess the identical natural properties,  $G^*$ . Now, the same person is asked to contemplate a different possible world, one in which there is an action identical in its natural properties,  $G^*$ ; if the person is engaging in moralizing, the conceptual constraint of **supervenience** will yield a moral assessment of this action as  $F$ . She cannot assess it as  $\sim F$ . But, Blackburn's  $(P_a)$  implies that it is conceptually possible for her to contemplate such a different possible world and assess the action as being  $\sim F$ . A person can imagine a possible world in which an action that is  $G^*$  and  $\sim F$ , but if she is, she is no longer observing the conceptual constraint of  $(S_a)$ , and, therefore not engaging in moralizing; but, this is not the same as  $(P_a)$ .

Elliot's thought experiment indicates that however the conceptual constraint operates on moralizing, it supports  $(S_a)$  and  $(?)$ . And, when paired with Elliot's (E),

$$(E) (\exists x)(Fx \ \& \ G^*x \ \& \ (G^*x \ U \ Fx)),$$

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<sup>23</sup> This is not an exact summary of the argument for  $(S_a)$  in Elliot, but I believe it accurately reflects its spirit (Elliot, 135).

(?) implies  $N(y)(G*y \supset Fy)$ , which is  $\sim(P_a)$ . The **moral realist** is not committed to the  $(S_a)/(P_a)$  combination because she is committed to  $(S_a)$  and (?), which rules out  $(P_a)$ .

Blackburn's **supervenience** argument gets its force because of an apparently strange gap in **realists'** commitments: being committed to weak, but not strong **supervenience**. The **realist** responses reviewed here have been to argue that strong **supervenience** is a feature of **moral realism**. In section 5.4 I want to review one more possible response to the **supervenience** argument.

#### 5.4 Companions in Supervenience Guilt

Shafer-Landau outlined the companions in guilt response to Blackburn's **supervenience** argument in his article, "Supervenience and Moral Realism," and again in his book, *Moral Realism: A Defense*. Shafer-Landau's first response to the argument was to argue, to the effect, that **moral realists** are committed to a strong metaphysical **supervenience**, which rules out metaphysical lack of entailment. He noted that Blackburn has responded to this move by shifting the modality from metaphysical to conceptual. So, Shafer-Landau proposes that the **supervenience** claim be read as

(S1): if a concatenation of natural properties once underlies a moral one, then it must (in that world) always do so (Shafer-Landau-2003, 87).

And, in addition, let us assume that (S1) is a conceptual truth. Now, the **supervenience** problem is meant to arise due to the conceptual truth of the lack of entailment thesis: no set of natural properties entails the presence of any particular moral property. The difficulty in accounting for (S1) and lack of entailment is thought to support **moral antirealism**.

Shafer-Landau points out that (S1) can be generalized to describe the relation of supervening and subvening properties in other domains (Shafer-Landau-2003, 87). A general statement of **supervenience** might be expressed as follows:

(GS): if a class of base properties subserves a distinct property, once it has done so, it must (in that world) always do so.

(GS) is a conceptual truth, if (S1) is a conceptual truth. So, for a number of connections between domains, the relationship is **supervenience**: the mental supervenes on the physical and the chemical on the atomic (Shafer-Landua-2003, 87), or the image on a computer screen supervenes on a binary code. Shafer-Landau points out that there do not appear to be any entailment relations linking the physical to the mental, the atomic to the chemical, or the computer screen images to binary code.<sup>24</sup> So, for these domain pairings, we also have a lack of entailment thesis (Shafer-Landau-2003, 87). But, if (GS) is a conceptual truth about the relationship between the mental-physical, chemical-atomic, and screen image-binary code, and there is no entailment between the domains, then the mental, chemical, and screen image are not real, and best explained by **projectivism**. A consequence of Blackburn's **supervenience** argument is that if it is correct, then we should conclude that a vast number of domains beyond just the three described are not real; this implication seems dubious, to say the least, which suggests that Blackburn's **supervenience** argument does not prove what he claims.

Shafer-Landau notes that Blackburn devotes the third section of "Supervenience Revisited" to stopping the expansion of his **supervenience** argument (Shafer-Landau-1994, 151). Blackburn recognizes, like his commentators, that for the argument to work the **supervenience** claim and the lack of entailment thesis must be in the same modality, so his response to **supervenience** creep is to argue that when it comes to these other relations, they do not have the same modality. Blackburn's approach for addressing the mental-physical and chemical-atomic **supervenience** problem is the same. When it comes to the metaphysical **supervenience** of the

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<sup>24</sup> That there is no conceptual truth entailing the computer screen image from binary code is probably the most unassailable claim, but the other two non-entailments seem to hold, too.

mental on the physical Blackburn accepts that the mental **realist** should accept strong metaphysical **supervenience**, which rules out the metaphysical lack of entailment. But, Blackburn denies that the mental **realist** is committed to conceptual, or analytic, **supervenience** of the mental on the physical. He argues that “it is [not] constitutive of competence in the mental language that we recognize the **supervenience** of the mental on the physical” and it does not follow analytically “from change in a mental state that there is change in an underlying physical state” (Blackburn-1985, 139).

Shafer-Landau argues that in this defense Blackburn mischaracterizes the **supervenience** claim (Shafer-Landau-1994, 152). Intentional or not, Blackburn has oversold the **supervenience** claim in this defense. His characterization of the **supervenience** claim here amounts to the claim that a distinct property supervenes on the base property. That is not a conceptual truth because some people do deny that mental supervenes on the physical, or that the moral supervenes on the natural (Divine Command Theorists). But, the **supervenience** claim is that necessarily if something has some base properties, and it also possesses a distinct property that it possess in virtue of having those base properties, then anything else with the same base properties also has the distinct property (Shafer-Landau-1994, 152). That **supervenience** claim is a conceptual truth, and so Blackburn cannot block the creep of **antirealism** that his **supervenience** argument generates.

## **5.5 Chapter Conclusion**

The **supervenience** argument is meant to provide a rationale for **projectivism** that is independent of the open-question argument and the early moves to **moral antirealism**. But, in this chapter I have argued that the **supervenience** argument is not the problem for **moral realism** that Blackburn assumes, and, consequently, **projectivism** does not possess the *prima*

*facie* metaphysical advantage over **moral realism** that Blackburn claims. In chapter 6 I will argue that the account of **projectivism** I developed in chapter 4 faces challenges that indicate we should doubt that it is the metaphysics of moralizing.

## Chapter 6: The Problems of Projectivism

### 6.1 Projectivism's Problems

In chapter 5 I critiqued the **supervenience** argument, which constitutes Blackburn's metaphysical case against **moral realism**, and found that it does not provide **moral antirealism** a metaphysical advantage over **realism**. This is significant since without the **supervenience** argument the only *prima facie* metaphysical plausibility **antirealism** enjoys over **moral realism** is ontological economy, but ontological economy should only count in a theory's favor when a rival theory is its equal in explaining the data. **Moral realism** has a semantic advantage over its rival; it has a better explanation of the semantic data of moral practice than **antirealism**, and since this advantage is not cancelled out by the **supervenience** argument, the apparent ontological economy of **antirealism** cannot count decisively in its favor.<sup>1</sup> In chapter 4 I outlined what I take to be the mechanism that constitutes a **projectivist** account of moral awareness. In the rest of this essay, I will examine whether such an account is independently plausible. Ultimately, I hope to show that (a) Blackburn's development of **projectivism** is not motivated by good naturalistic practices, the scientific method; (b) **projectivism** cannot identify which attitude is the moral attitude; (c) **projectivism** cannot provide an objective moral standard; (d) **projectivism** cannot provide a mind-independent moral standard; (e) **projectivism** does not have the resources to explain why **error theory** is wrong without undermining itself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One may wonder about the epistemological comparison between **moral realism** and different **moral antirealism**. I will not assess the epistemological advantages or disadvantages of the two kinds of theories since they don't bear the same epistemological burdens.

<sup>2</sup> The first four problems for **projectivism** are significant in so far as Blackburn wants projectivism to address them, and they are examined in this chapter. I will address problem (e) in the conclusion of this essay.

## 6.2 A Naturalistic Motivation for Projectivism?

Blackburn wants an account of **moralizing** that squares with naturalism (Blackburn-1998, 49 and Blackburn-1984, 182). Given this, his theorizing about **moralizing** should hew to good naturalistic practices, or the scientific method. The **supervenience** argument against **moral realism** can be interpreted this way; it identifies an aspect of moral practice that needs to be explained, and then claims that **moral antirealism** is a better account of moral practice than **moral realism** since it can explain the phenomenon, and **moral realism** cannot. I have already argued that the **supervenience** argument does not undermine **moral realism**. The upshot of this is that Blackburn needs a new motivation for **moral antirealism**, since, after all, Blackburn admits in *Spreading the Word* that he needs to provide “motives” for starting **projectivism** at reasonable odds to its rivals (Blackburn-1984, 182). Two of those motives were economy and **supervenience**, leaving Blackburn with internalism to motivate **moral antirealism**. Blackburn is sheepish about this argument, admitting that it “is not quite as compelling as it looks” given moral realists like Philippa Foot’s insistence that “there is no straight inference from moral commitment to desire” (Blackburn-1984, 188-189).

### 6.2.1 Blackburn’s Naturalistic Motivation for Projectivism

Blackburn claims that that the first step in developing a **projectivist** account of morality is identifying the kind of mental state that is expressed by a moral judgment so that it can be contrasted with belief (Blackburn-1993, 9). Blackburn is aware that critics will claim that the propositional form with which we voice a mental state is inextricably linked to the nature of the mental state, and the fact that a moral proposition has a propositional form that is descriptive is evidence that the mental state it expresses is belief (Blackburn-1993, 9). Blackburn does not try to make the case that moral judgments are evidence that the moral mental states are attitudes, and



not beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Instead, he proposes that a Humean, like himself, is in the game if he can distinguish the finished project of moral judgment from its beginning, and show that moral judgment “is visibly the upshot of a natural process of ... projecting ... non-representational states” (Blackburn-1993, 9).

But, without the motivation of economy, **supervenience**, or internalism, why should Blackburn hypothesize that moral mental states are not beliefs? Blackburn’s proposal that moral judgments are the output of a **projectivist** mechanism, which originates in a mental state that is **conative**, appears to be unscientific idle speculation. Blackburn’s attempt to motivate **projectivism** implicitly invokes speculation when he proposes that in assessing the theory “let us suppose that the picture is correct. Then how far can it go to capture the elements in our thinking which at first sight seem explicable only on a realist metaphysic” (Blackburn-1981, 174)? Another example in which his development of **projectivism** appears speculative is when he rejects inferring that moral propositions have no truth conditions from the assumption that they express attitudes, preferring, rather, that if we interpret a moral proposition as expressing an attitude and see it as having no truth-conditions, the philosophy improves, so the proposition must not be descriptive (Blackburn-1984, 170).<sup>4</sup> This motivation is inadequate; it is as if idle curiosity generates **projectivism**.

The charge that **projectivism** is unmotivated is perhaps unfair since there is a way of motivating it open to Blackburn. Recall, that the general outline of **projectivism** in chapter 4

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, there is textual evidence in Blackburn to indicate that he may not see this as a necessary at all — he thinks it is incredibly difficult to define mental states (Blackburn-1998, 52).

<sup>4</sup> Blackburn does not make the same explicit claim in “The Flight to Reality”, but there he describes the **projectivist** project as describing the socially embedded attitudes that constitute ethics, and seeing how moral propositions are to be understood if they are thought to express attitudes (Blackburn-1995, 50). In both cases, Blackburn seems to indicate that **projectivism** is spawned by conjecture.

does not claim that motivating **projectivism** requires the falsification of a **realist** theory. Instead, the impetus for developing **projectivism** is an inability to provide an account of our commitments in a particular domain in which the elements of the domain are real. The phenomenology that gives rise to the commitments suggests **realism**, but **realist** explanations are unsuccessful or unsatisfactory for some reason. A more judicious claim is that the data, which **moralizing** alone provides, is not a sufficient basis on which to develop the projective hypothesis, and Blackburn needs to motivate **projectivism** by pointing out the ways in which **realism** is unsatisfactory.

However, Blackburn seems to indicate that reflection on **moralizing** alone is enough to suggest why we should theorize about it in a way that puts attitudes in the center of our theory:

“The question becomes whether ... it is the notion of an attitude or that of a belief that gains the central role. When we try to think intelligently about ethics as an aspect of life, do we need to think first in terms of belief in virtue, duty, and so on (call this representationalism), or do we need to think first in terms of certain kinds of pressure on action” (Blackburn-1995, 50)?<sup>5</sup>

Blackburn claims that upon reflection, ethics is “more a matter of knowing how (to behave), or knowing whom (to defer to, or punish, or admire), or knowing when (to act, or withdraw), than a matter of knowing that something is the case” (Blackburn-1998, 49). It is not clear how reflecting on morality and interpreting it as knowing *how/whom/when* rather than knowing *that* is supposed to spur the insight that morality is not cognitive especially since there are examples that suggest that morality, at least sometimes, seems to be knowing that.

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<sup>5</sup> Blackburn’s **supervenience** argument might be his attempt to indicate that a **realist** account of the moral domain is unsatisfactory, thereby motivating **projectivism**. I think the **supervenience** argument is meant to have more force than to indicate there could be a better explanation of the moral than **realism**; it is meant to suggest that **realism** is false. In addition, those advancing the argument need to have **projectivism** in mind already since it is supposed to gain plausibility by its consistency with **supervenience**.

Another example where Blackburn indicates reflection on ethics is supposed to be sufficient to suggest a non-cognitive interpretation of ethical thought is his assertion that valuing is not the same as describing. The mental state of a person who values something is distinct from belief, and Blackburn claims this valuing is the essential phenomenon of ethics, and **projectivism** reflects this insight because it is a theory that explains how ethical thought functions (Blackburn-1998, 49). None of this does anything to suggest that those mental states of valuing are non-cognitive or **conative** states.<sup>6</sup> A **naturalistic moral realist** could agree that valuing is the essential phenomenon of ethics, but he would argue that the right way to understand this phenomenon is as at heart a cognitive reaction to natural features of the world, similar to assessing the weight of an object. And the fact that our moral judgments typically take a **descriptivist** propositional form supports that these are cognitive activities yielding belief. Blackburn's argument seems to depend on interpreting valuing as a mental state that is **conative**, but this is exactly what is in question in the stand off between **projectivists** and **moral realists**. If Blackburn says that we can develop the hypothesis of **projectivism** from the fact that we moralize, then he seems to be begging the question; there needs to be some reason to think that moral mental states are **non-cognitive**.

### 6.2.2 Values as More Stable than Beliefs

Blackburn obliquely makes the case for why a moral mental state, such as valuing, is **conative** when he offers a basis for identifying the distinctive **conative state** of valuing. A distinctive mark of valuing, which supposedly distinguishes it from other **conative states** like desiring, is that a person resists the destabilization of her values (Blackburn-1998, 67). On Blackburn's view

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, this reflection invites the Euthyphro question: do we value things because they are valuable, or are they valuable because we value them? The first answer suggests **realism**, while the second answer implies value is mind-dependent, an outcome Blackburn wants to avoid, as we shall see.

moral mental states are mental states that a person is reluctant to alter. As Blackburn puts it, if we imagine the general scope of a person's concerns, her values are those concerns she is concerned to preserve (Blackburn-1998, 67). To value something is "to have a relatively stable disposition to conduct practical life ... in a particular way: it is to be ... *set* in that way, and notably set against change in this respect" (Blackburn-1998, 67, italics original). Blackburn's claim is that valuing is like other **conative states**, but it is peculiarly resistant to change.

Blackburn is, again, assuming that the moral mental state identified as valuing is a **conative** one. While Blackburn does not establish that the kind of mental state that concern is, is **conative**, I grant that it is likely to be a **conative** one. There are two problems with this analysis. First, Blackburn's analysis of value does not illuminate anything; he may as well define value as "a desire one desires to preserve", or concern as "a value one values preserving." This analysis makes value into a **conative state** that a person subjects to a (the same) **conative state**; this does not clarify the nature of the moral mental state of valuing – it only contributes mystery. A second problem for this analysis is that it cannot be used to distinguish moral mental states from other beliefs. One feature of a belief is that we are resistant to changing it without sufficient evidence, and the standard for altering a moral mental state requires the most evidence.<sup>7</sup> In fact, one could argue that if what is distinctive about valuing is its resistance to change, then valuing is more likely to be a form of belief since, *prima facie*, beliefs are less susceptible to change than desires, which are subjective.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Even when there is evidence, we may not wish to change the belief; e.g., consider those people who believe that the earth is flat despite evidence that it is spherical.

<sup>8</sup> The metaphor of description of fit used to distinguish belief and desire may be used to undermine the *prima facie* presumption that belief is less susceptible to change. If belief is expected to match reality, and reality is to be made to match desire, this might suggest that belief is the more fungible mental state since it is the one expected to change more readily than desire.

### 6.2.3 Instability in Values: Converts and Changing Values

Ultimately, I think Blackburn's analysis of value as a distinctive mental state that we are reluctant to change undermines his claim that moral mental states are **conative** in two ways. First, the importance of the endurance, or persistence, of moral commitments in his analysis precludes genuine transformation of values. Blackburn argues that a moral mental state, which is supposed to be a **conative state**, must be enduring for it to be a value; he argues that a person who manifests different values tomorrow than today "is not someone who has many values albeit for a short time each, but someone who has no real values at all" (Blackburn-1998, 67).<sup>9</sup> While this insight into value is undeniable, the emphasis on persistence cannot be squared with the phenomenon of the sincere moral convert. Blackburn admits that values can change, but he claims with values this shift can only occur over time with allowances for lapses in the shift (Blackburn-1998, 67). This allowance coincides with our sense that the initial values a person develops are inculcated over time. But, there are examples of converts whose values change dramatically and quickly. Blackburn derides the values of such converts as "off-color" (Blackburn-1998, 67). This is a flippant objection. Moral evaluation and aesthetic evaluation are often compared because the latter seems particularly suitable for an **antirealist** interpretation despite its descriptivist form; it would be a mistake to insist that a person whose aesthetic evaluations shift quickly and dramatically after taking an art course had no aesthetic values to begin with.<sup>10</sup>

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After all, there would be something perverse about a moral crusader who changed his desires because reality was resistant to change.

<sup>9</sup> In a comment to a draft of this dissertation, Stefan Baumrin remarked on the irony of this statement by asking, "What could this possibly mean for [Blackburn]?"

<sup>10</sup> Stefan Baumrin raised this example in comments to a draft of this work.

The only way Blackburn can preserve his analysis of values as **conative states** we are reluctant to alter is to dismiss the values of converts. But, there are cases of genuine converts whose values change dramatically. Saint Paul went from endorsing killing Christian apostles to becoming a martyr. And, many converts to Islam come to judge drinking alcohol as immoral. An objection to these examples is that they are the product of religious conversion. I think they still stand as examples of moral conversion because the religious conversion represents a change in belief, which spurs the change in values, but here is another example. When I was a freshman in high school, I believed the beneficiaries of the social welfare programs instituted in Presidents Roosevelt and Johnson's New Deal and Great Society, respectively, to be lazy malingerers chronically relying on "welfare." Consequently, I judged them to be undeserving of public assistance, and morally opposed such programs. As a sophomore in the debate society, I was assigned to research the demographics of public assistance programs, and the statistics led to an immediate change in my moral judgment about such programs. I went one morning from the commitment that such programs were unjust, to the opposite commitment, which seems attributable to acquiring new beliefs. This example, like the religious examples, highlights the role that change in belief has with respect to change in value, and identifying values with beliefs appears better suited to explaining these sudden change in values. Blackburn's analysis of moral mental states as persistent **conative states** cannot offer the same explanation for moral conversion, and must, implausibly, deny the sincerity of all moral conversion. This is the first way that the analysis undermines itself.

The second, and perhaps more damaging, way the analysis undermines itself is by this countenance of moral judgments changing. Obviously, Blackburn cannot deny that moral judgments can, and do, change, but he does not have a ready explanation of why or how

**conative states** should change. If a moral judgment is a belief, then it should change along with changes in facts or beliefs relevant to it. And, the change in moral judgment should be consistent with the change in belief. So, for example, a person may hold the moral judgment that it is wrong to injure human beings, but not non-human animals, and he should change this judgment if he learns that some non-human animals feel pain (provided the moral judgment, “Injuring human beings’ wrongness is due to the pain”). But, I cannot see *prima face* how Blackburn could insist that the moral judgment must change in the same way, if it is not a belief; mental states that are not beliefs appear to be arbitrarily variable, and moral judgments are not, and should not be, arbitrarily variable. In section 6.5 I will examine Blackburn’s attempt to impose some sort of objectivity on moral mental states. Without an explanation of what moral **conative states** should be sensitive to in order to change, Blackburn’s analysis of valuing as a **conative state** resistant, but still liable, to change is undermined.

The analysis of Blackburn’s attempt to identify valuing as a **conative state** indicates that reflection on moral activity is not sufficient to generate a hypothesis of **projectivism**. I think this counts against **projectivism** when trying to assess the rival theories of **realism** and **projectivism**; because the development of **realism** is sensitive to the data of moralizing it comports with our best scientific practice. Ultimately, a key task for Blackburn in developing a **projectivist** theory of moralizing will be to explain why it is consistent with good scientific practice to develop the **projectivist** hypothesis from the data of moralizing, i.e., moral practice.

### **6.3 The Moral Attitude Problem**

In the last section I argued that Blackburn’s proposal of **projectivism** to explain morality runs afoul of good naturalistic practice because it is motivated neither by the falsification of **realism** nor reflection on moral practice. In considering the latter possibility I noted that Blackburn tries

to motivate the possibility that moral judgments are **conative** or **non-cognitive** mental states by distinguishing them from other **conative states** as being peculiarly resistant to destabilization. This move highlights that if a moral mental state, or value, is to be identified as **conative** or non-cognitive, then it cannot be just any **conative** or non-cognitive state – it must be a particular one. The need to identify a form of **conative** or non-cognitive state that moral judgments express is also put into relief by the variability in the terms we have seen Blackburn use to characterize it: desire, attitude, disposition, concern, etc. And, even if we could hone in on one mental state, it could take many forms, e.g., revulsion; it is important not to underestimate the difficulty of identifying the unique **conative** or non-cognitive state that is expressed in a moral judgment.<sup>11</sup>

### 6.3.1 Early Expressivism and the Moral Attitude Problem

In *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, Miller initially raises the moral attitude problem against early **expressivism**, a species of **non-cognitivism**, which essentially claims “moral judgments do not express beliefs, but rather non-cognitive sentiments, emotions, or feelings” (Miller, 43). Since early versions of **expressivism** try to account for the meaning of moral propositions in terms of the mental states they express, and it claims that the mental states are **non-cognitive**, it must be able to specify which kind of **non-cognitive** state – sentiment, emotion, or feeling – is the moral one, or it will not account for the meaning of moral propositions. The challenge for early forms of **expressivism** like **emotivism** is to identify the distinctive moral sentiment or feeling which is suited to being expressed in moral judgments, and Miller suggests two possibilities: (a) the moral sentiment is *irreducibly* moral, simply *unanalysable* and *sui generis*; (b) the moral sentiment is analyzable in term of non-moral sentiments (Miller, 44).

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<sup>11</sup> Stefan Baumrin brought the point that different examples of a single mental state may take different, unique forms to my attention.



Option (a) will not do for two reasons. First, if a moral judgment expresses an irreducible, *sui generis*, unanalysable moral feeling, then option (a) blocks an account of moral judgment in terms of regular feelings, which is just what early **expressivists** want (Miller, 44). Second, Miller points out that Wright has criticized option (a) because careful attention to our moral experience does not establish that moral judgment has a distinctive irreducible, *sui generis*, unanalysable feeling – different people are likely to disagree over whether it does (Miller, 45). He quotes Wright: “[I]t seems to me very moot whether there is ... any distinctive mode of *moral* emotional concern, identified purely phenomenologically and distinguished from what we feel for other kinds of value” (Miller, 45; in Wright-1988, 11-12, italics original).<sup>12</sup> Drawing upon Wright, Miller considers that an irreducible moral sentiment can be made intelligible independent of moral judgment in the example of a child who is not able to make moral judgments, but still has a distinctive moral feeling (Miller, 45). Miller cites Wright to offer a rebuttal: it is underdetermined whether a child’s distress upon witnessing a jockey whip a racehorse is a moral disapprobation since the child’s distress could be fear or anxiety (Miller, 45-46; Wright-1988, 12-13).

If it is not possible to identify, or make intelligible, a distinctive moral feeling, then early **expressivists** must take option (b) and understand moral judgments as expressing non-moral, garden-variety feeling. This option can be criticized on two fronts, too. First, taking this option appears to eliminate moral judgment altogether. If moral judgments just express garden-variety feeling, then all judgments seem to be of the same kind, there is no judgment that is distinctively moral (Miller, 46). My judgments about Jerry Sandusky’s actions (wicked) and the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (trash) are the same kind of judgment; they may differ in intensity, but they are

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that Wright takes the opposite line of Blackburn that reflection on moral experience suggests that moral judgment has a particular feel.

the same qualitatively (Miller, 46). This effectively eliminates the category of the moral, when the **non-cognitivist** is seeking to explain the moral.<sup>13</sup>

The second problem with option (b) is that it can be rebutted with an open-question style argument: If we suppose that moral judgments are analytically equivalent to expressions of non-cognitive sentiment, then the proposition, “Paul judged Sandusky’s actions as wicked,” is analytically equivalent to “Paul expressed a negative non-cognitive feeling for Sandusky’s actions”; anybody who wonders, “Paul expressed a negative non-cognitive feeling for Sandusky’s actions, but did he judge Sandusky’s actions wicked,” would betray conceptual confusion; but it is an open-question whether a person who expresses a non-cognitive feeling for an action makes a moral judgment about the action (since to say he does always make a moral judgment has the opposite effect of eliminating moral judgment – it turns all expressions of feeling into moral judgments, which would be proving too much); so, moral judgments cannot be analytically equivalent to expressions of non-cognitive feeling (Miller, 48).<sup>14</sup> If the open-question argument’s refutation of **non-naturalistic moral realism** is presumed to open the way for **non-cognitivism**, its application to **non-cognitivism** must equally count against **non-cognitivism**.

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<sup>13</sup> Miller points out that an early **expressivist** like an **emotivist** could still try to carve out space for moral judgments as a distinctive expression of feeling by distinguishing the particular reasons for the expression of feeling to mark out moral judgments. However, Miller points out, as we have seen in chapter 2, that **emotivists** often support their account by pointing the ways in which the purest moral arguments cannot be resolved by appeals to reasons.

<sup>14</sup> Miller also provides a variation on this open-question argument, derived from Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton (1992) that applies to Stevenson’s version of **emotivism** in which a moral judgment expresses an expectation that others share the non-cognitive feeling it expresses (49-51).

### 6.3.2 Projectivism and the Moral Attitude Problem

The moral attitude problem needs to be recast when applied to Blackburn's **projectivism** since he does not want to characterize moral judgments as expressing a non-cognitive feeling; rather **projectivists** can earn the right to use **descriptivist** language on the basis of a theory that puts a non-cognitive mental state at the center of the story. Miller frames the challenge for Blackburn as giving "a characterization of the type of attitude assumed, *ab initio*, to be expressed by moral judgments" (Miller, 88). In discussing Blackburn's attempt to motivate **projectivism** simply by reflecting on moral experience, I already identified one way Blackburn tries to distinguish moral non-cognitive states from mere non-cognitive states – a value is a concern a person is concerned to preserve. Earlier in *Ruling Passions*, Blackburn has another proposal besides that one.

Only a few pages into *Ruling Passions* Blackburn proposes to analyze a mental state that is involved in a moral reaction, a moral judgment (Blackburn-1988, 9). Blackburn considers a judgment of a moral transgression, and he takes its public nature to point in the right direction for an analysis. Blackburn proposes that we think of non-cognitive states occupying steps on a staircase of "practical or emotional ascent" (Blackburn-1998, 9). At the base of this staircase are "idiosyncratic likes and dislikes", tastes, e.g., but higher up the staircase are more insistent non-cognitive states like a "hostility to some kind of action" which is "a primitive aversion to it or a disposition to be disgusted by it" (Blackburn-1998, 10, 9). Further up the staircase are reactions to these reactions; if a person has a reaction to some behavior, a second person can have a reaction to that reaction. On the one hand, the second person may be peeved with the first person's reaction, and express that the behavior is not the first person's business; this reaction is not a moral reaction (Blackburn-1998, 9). On the other hand the second person may share or "feel 'at one'" with the first person's reaction; but Blackburn supposes that the reactions may not

stop there, and the second person may feel strongly about encouraging the same reaction in others (Blackburn-1998, 9). In this last case, Blackburn claims the second person would be treating the behavior that precipitated all these reaction as a public matter, i.e., a moral issue, and this last reaction is a moral one (Blackburn-1998, 9). Blackburn proposes that further up this staircase there could be reactions such that sharing the reaction is compulsory, felt as hostility to those who do not share it, and so on, so that this reaction is compulsory, felt as hostility to those who share the reaction, but are not hostile to those who do not (Blackburn-1998, 9). He concludes: “The staircase gives us a scale between pure preference, on the one hand, and attitudes with all the flavour of ethical commitment, on the other” (Blackburn-1998, 9).

The metaphor of the scale is either unfortunate or it reveals plainly that what distinguishes moral non-cognitive states from non-moral ones is the intensity with which we experience them. If this is what distinguishes them, then Blackburn’s analysis of moral non-cognitive states in terms of emotional ascent is clearly subject to the first objection to option (b), the moral sentiment is analyzable in term of non-moral sentiments, as well. The non-cognitive states expressed by moral judgments are just emotions then, only further up a scale of emotional intensity, but one in which the emotions are qualitatively indistinct. As I already pointed out this eliminates moral judgment all together.

Suppose the metaphor of the scale is just an unfortunate mistake, and the emotional ascent reflects a shift in complexity that distinguishes moral non-cognitive states from non-moral ones.<sup>15</sup> Miller brings back the “boo” and “hooray” operators to characterize these non-cognitive

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<sup>15</sup> Blackburn is maddeningly enigmatic about the nature of the non-cognitive states that play a role in moral judgment. He writes, “While I think there is no doubt about the central ethical role of disgust, anger, and contempt, it is easy to oversimplify the reactions involved. Ethics is not always emotions: a prohibition or permission can be issued in a perfectly clinical frame of mind. ... Rather, ethics involves the *full* dynamic range of our practical natures. ... As Gilbert Ryle put

states (Miller, 89). So, at the base of the staircase are the simple idiosyncratic likes and dislikes: e.g., H!(ice cream) and B!(*Fifty Shades of Grey*). The first reaction Blackburn identified as moral might be represented as the following combination (if the behavior was an intentional killing): B!(intentional killing) and H!(everyone having the attitude B!(intentional killing)). Miller points out that this will not do since it would not provide a way to distinguish between aesthetic judgments or tastes; consider that I might have this combination of non-cognitive states: B!(*Fifty Shades of Grey*) and B!(anyone who has the attitude H!(*Fifty Shades of Grey*)). Instead, what is potentially needed is a complex non-cognitive state, represented by B!<sub>M</sub>(intentional killing), in which the subscript “M” represents that a complex non-cognitive state is taken to be a moral mental state: B!<sub>M</sub>(intentional killing) = B!(intentional killing) & H!(everyone having the attitude B!(intentional killing)) (Miller, 89).<sup>16</sup>

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it, ethics involves the ‘tempers, habits, dispositions, moods, inclinations, impulses, sentiments, feelings, affections, thoughts, reflections, opinions, principles, prejudices, imaginations and fancies’” (Blackburn-1998, 13). Blackburn might be interpreted here to be conceding to complexity of ethics by identifying several kinds of non-cognitive states, each of which has its own staircase of emotional ascent. This concession raises all sorts of problems for the complexity of the metaphysics of **projectivism** that I outlined in chapter 4. But, Blackburn may also be interpreted here to be suggesting the kind complexity of moral attitudes reflected by Miller’s approach; the moral attitude may have a different feel, dispassionate, say, then the anger that is part of the complex combination of which the moral attitude is composed.

<sup>16</sup> I want to interrupt here to raise a preliminary criticism to this approach. The B! and H! operators do not specify which non-cognitive state they represent, only that it would be a negative and positive one, respectively. In footnote 15 I quoted Blackburn citing, with approval, Ryle’s characterization of the variety of mental states that are a part of ethics; included there were such mental states as moods and fancies. The promiscuous inclusion of these kinds of non-cognitive states in an account of moral mental states points to a shortcoming of Blackburn’s case for **projectivism**. *Prima facie*, some kinds of non-cognitive mental states are not appropriate to ground moral judgments, fancies or moods, for example (even when the fancy is a complex combination of fancies and moods). A plausible **projectivist** account of morality, which roots moral judgment in non-cognitive responses, must rule out some **non-cognitivist** responses as candidates for that base. A theory that did this, and supplied criteria for which **non-cognitivist** responses can be at the heart of understanding moral judgment, would go a long way in explaining moral practice. Blackburn seems oblivious to this requirement.

Miller points out that this cannot be the correct analysis of the moral judgment since on a **non-cognitivist** account my moral judgment about intentional killing expresses a negative non-cognitive state toward intentional killing and it expresses my approval of everyone else sharing the *same type* of non-cognitive state (Miller, 89). If the non-cognitive state, (B!(intentional killing)), that everyone else has, and which I approve of, is disgust at the mess of a intentional killing, that would not do to express my moral judgment. Miller proposes that this can be corrected by refining the formulation as follows:  $B!_M(\text{intentional killing}) = B!(\text{intentional killing}) \ \& \ H!(\text{everyone having the attitude } B!_M(\text{intentional killing}))$ . The problem with this is that the explanation of the moral judgment is circular since it includes a reference to moral judgment in its explanation; and, since any attempt to define the “ $B!_M(\text{intentional killing})$ ” inside the parentheses will repeat the circularity, emotional ascent cannot provide an account of moral judgment (Miller, 89).

As I noted in subsection 6.2.2, Blackburn identifies a concern a person is concerned to preserve as a potential candidate for a moral non-cognitive state (Blackburn-1998, 67). Miller calls this the “stable sentiment” analysis of moral non-cognitive states (Miller, 89). The following is an interpretation of Miller’s formalization of a moral judgment endorsing giving to others:

$$H!_M(\text{giving to others}) = (H!(\text{giving to others}) \ \& \ H!(\text{stable } [H!(\text{giving to others})])).^{17}$$

Miller claims there is a conceptual connection between making a moral judgment and expecting others to share the non-cognitive state toward the object of the judgment, but it is possible to imagine a competent speaker who hears Jones judge, “Giving to others is good,” or “ $H!_M(\text{giving to others})$ ,” and still wonders whether Jones expects him to share in the non-cognitive state

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<sup>17</sup> The form of this analysis for positive and negative moral judgments are, respectively as follows:  $H!_M(x) = (H!(x) \ \& \ H!(\text{stable } [H!(x)]))$ ;  $B!_M(x) = (B!(x) \ \& \ H!(\text{stable } [B!(x)]))$ .

$H!(x)$  (Miller-90-91).<sup>18</sup> Miller concludes that since the meaning of  $H!_M(\text{giving to others})$  does not respect this conceptual connection, it cannot be the correct analysis of moral judgment (Miller, 91).<sup>19</sup>

### 6.3.3 Smith and the Moral Attitude Problem

Miller suggests that if the stable-sentiment analysis of moral attitudes is unsuccessful, then an analysis of moral judgment in terms of higher-order sentiments may succeed, though he is explicit in not attributing the view to Blackburn (Miller, 91, 293). In a review of *Ruling Passions*, Michael Smith seems to have little reservation in interpreting Blackburn's analysis as a higher-order one when he compares the desires and aversions Blackburn picks out as the non-cognitive states expressed in moral judgment to the "addict's desire to take drugs" (Smith-2002, 157). The essential **non-cognitivist** claim is that moral judgments express desires and aversions, but Smith wonders which ones. Answering this question is more difficult than typically supposed because both it must not be the case that when we express any old desire or aversion, we express a moral judgment, and when we do express moral judgments, we must express desires and aversions (Smith-2002, 157). So, the challenge for Blackburn is to explain (i) what aversions and desires are particularly suitable for expression in a moral judgment, and why, and (ii) how are such desires and aversions distinct from those unsuitable for expression in a moral judgment (Smith-2002, 157).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This argument is like the one I noted Miller had for Stevenson's version of **emotivism**. It depends crucially on an association between internalism and **non-cognitivism**.

<sup>19</sup> Miller points out that this analysis is subject to the same charge of circularity as the emotional ascent analysis; the non-cognitive state that the moral agent wishes to remain stable must be a moral one. The proper formalization of a positive moral judgment is not as represented in footnote 17; it is as follows:  $H!_M(x) = (H!(x) \ \& \ H!(\text{stable} [H!_M(x)]))$ . Now, this analysis also offers a definition of moral judgment that appeals to the moral.

<sup>20</sup> Smith raised the same challenge for **non-cognitivists** in a general way in the fourth section of his earlier work, "Some Not-Much-Discussed Problems for Non-Cognitivism in Ethics" (2001). I

Smith explains that this question is difficult to answer because whatever mental state a moral judgment expresses, this mental state has some of the functional features of beliefs, and desires and aversions are typically distinguished from beliefs on the basis of their difference in these functional features (Smith-2002, 158). A belief's function is to represent how things are, and it does this (partially) by being pre-connected to other beliefs and perceptions, which provide epistemic support, and without which the belief should disappear (Smith-2002, 158). A desire's function is to represent how things are to be, or how things should be; it is not pre-connected to other desires, which provide it with some equivalent of epistemic support (Smith-2002, 158). A desire is connected to beliefs about how to fulfill the desire, and with which it would produce action; when these beliefs are not present, the desire does not disappear, but it remains dormant (Smith-2002, 158). Internalism provides some of the motivation for thinking that the mental states expressed by moral judgments are desires – a person who says, "Giving to others is moral," seems disposed to share, just as a person with some desire seems disposed to act. However, whatever mental state this person is in, it is pre-connected to other mental states that provide support for it; moral judgments are in need of justification, much in the same way that mental states that are obviously beliefs need justification, and this is an important reason for thinking moral judgments are beliefs (Smith-2002, 158). The difficulty, then, for Blackburn is to identify non-cognitive states that have the same functional features of belief, a cognitive state, in being connected to other desires and aversions, which provide them with the equivalent of epistemic support (Smith-2002, 159).<sup>21</sup>

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will focus on the case he makes against *Ruling Passions'* analysis in his contribution to a series of reviews on *Ruling Passions* in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* in 2002.

<sup>21</sup> The example of an addict highlights the difficulty of this. An addict has a desire for a drug, and this desire is nested among many others: desire for the pleasure of the high; desire for easing withdrawal symptoms; desire for the emotional or intellectual insight of the high. And, yet



Smith points out that there can be a nexus of connections among desires, which provides the equivalent of epistemic support for a desire. Desires and aversions are responsive to information; e.g., a high-school baseball player who desires to dip tobacco (like his professional idols), but does not know what dip tastes like, is open to the criticism that his desire would go away with using dip. Desires and aversions are also expected to fit together in roughly coherent ways, so that if a desire undermines the coherence of a set of desires, it is subject to criticism; consider a person who wishes to improve their physical fitness, but also does not want to exercise. Smith claims it is not implausible to suppose that a desire or aversion can have a functional feature of being connected to other desires and aversions in an equivalent to epistemic support, but when Blackburn tries to explain “the special nature of the desires and aversions that we express when we make normative claims,” he must stipulate they are part of a nexus of informed, coherent, and unified desires and aversions (Smith-2002, 159).<sup>22</sup> If Blackburn cannot do this, then whatever desires or aversions are supposed to be expressed in moral judgment cannot be the mental state expressed in moral judgment.

Smith quotes extensively from the passages on pages 9 (which I quoted earlier in subsection 6.3.2) and 67 of *Ruling Passions*, and he interprets these passages as offering a higher-order analysis of moral judgment; he writes, “Blackburn thus clearly thinks that he made

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desires are mental states that can be independent of this nexus, so that even though all the other desires support the desire for the drug, it is possible for the addict not to desire the desire for the drug (Smith-2002, 159).

<sup>22</sup> “[A] set of desires and aversions is ‘sufficiently’ informed and coherent and unified ... when the links among the desires and aversions in that set are similar in number and quality to the minimum number and quality of epistemic links among beliefs to tolerate for the ascription of belief” (Smith-2002, 160). I take it that Smith is making a comparison to justified belief, a belief is justified when it fits into a network of beliefs that are sufficient to support the belief; similarly, a desire is justified, i.e. suitable for expression in moral judgments, when it fits into network of other desires and aversions that are sufficient to support the desire. However, the standard for supplying justification of desire cannot be significantly different than the standard for justifying belief.

a case for the idea that someone who has the higher order attitudes or dispositions he describes is in a state of mind that is best described as a normative commitment: having the higher-order attitudes entails having the normative commitment” (Smith-2002, 160). Smith proposes an example of someone who has the complex of attitudes that Blackburn discussed in his emotional ascent analysis of moral judgment: a person who “has a desire that people keep their promises, and who shares many other people’s anger at those who fail to keep their promises, and who feels disposed to encourage others to share that same anger, too, and who feels disposed to be angry at those who don’t share the anger” (Smith-2002, 161). Smith claims, and I agree, that it is possible to imagine that this person also regards these attitudes as illegitimate, or wishes he did not have them (Smith-2002, 161).

This person may believe the attitudes are innate or were inculcated by his parents, but all the same wish he did not have those attitudes because his life would go better if he did not have them. Such a person would be like the unwilling addict; only he would be an unwilling moralist. The addict has a nexus of desires for a drug that can be coherent, but it is also possible to characterize the addict as an unwilling addict because it is possible to interpret a desire independent of that nexus – the desire not to desire the drug – as the addict’s genuine desire.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, with the person who has the nexus of attitudes about promise keeping, it is possible to interpret his attitude that the nexus is illegitimate as his genuine attitude. How can Blackburn distinguish the attitude of the willing moralist, who thinks his nexus of attitudes about promise keeping is legitimate, as the moral attitude, but not the attitude of the unwilling moralist, who thinks his nexus of attitudes about promise keeping is illegitimate? I don’t see how Blackburn

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<sup>23</sup> It is not uncommon for an addict’s family to have this perspective: “Jimmy on drugs is not the real Jimmy; my Jimmy doesn’t want to be addicted.” In some cases this is hope, wishful thinking, or denial, but in other cases it may be belief.

can do this without denying that an unwilling addict is a real possibility. The problem with this kind of hierarchical, higher-order analysis of moral judgment is that there is no basis for saying the attitude in which the person rejects the ones below is not within the informed, coherent, and unified nexus of desires and aversions, which compose the set of desires and aversions suitable for being expressed in moral judgments.

### **6.3.3.1 How Blackburn Could Respond to Smith**

Smith concedes that Blackburn has an obvious reply to his objection: simply stipulate that the complex of desires and aversions that he claims are expressed in moral judgments are the ones which compose the set of desires and aversions suitable for expression in moral judgments (Smith-2002, 161). Smith thinks the reply is both wrong and an embarrassment, but before I explain why Smith thinks this, I want to pause to review the problem Smith poses for Blackburn.

Smith noted that a moral judgment seems to have a functional feature that a belief definitely possesses – a belief stands in a network of connections between perceptions and other beliefs that give it epistemic justification. If a moral judgment does not express a belief, but rather a desire, then Blackburn must explain how a desire can have the functional feature of being similarly supported. Smith proposed that a desire could also stand in a network of support from other desires and aversions, which would give this desire, expressed in a moral judgment, a similar kind of support that a belief has. The next step is to identify which desire in such a nexus would be suitable for being expressed in a moral judgment. Smith interprets Blackburn's metaphor of a staircase of emotional ascent as reflecting a hierarchical, higher-order analysis of this network of desires in which a desire at a suitable level is the one expressed by a moral judgment. However, the examples of the unwilling addict, whose desire not to desire a drug is independent of his nexus of addictive desires, and the unwilling moralist, who desires not to have

any of the putative moral desires, indicate that there is no basis for establishing a standard for which desires are part of the nexus from which a higher-order desire suitable for expression in a moral judgment comes.

Smith concedes that while Blackburn may not have a standard for determining the set of desires that form the nexus, he could stipulate the set; Smith sees two problems with this response. First, Smith thinks that this reply would be embarrassing because it is tantamount to an admission of the truth of **cognitivism**. The stipulation claims, in effect, that what makes a particular desire or aversion justified is its membership in the set of desires, sufficiently informed, coherent, and unified, to be suitable for expression in moral judgment; but, to claim this a person must believe the desire is situated within a set of informed, coherent, unified desires and aversions, i.e. she must believe the desire is justified (Smith-2002, 161). To claim a desire is justified is a normative claim, but it is a normative claim that is a belief, and **non-cognitivism** is supposed to rule this possibility out (Smith-2002, 161). Smith's analysis of the embarrassment indicates that he believes that for a person to be in position to express a desire in a moral judgment, she must also believe the desire is justified, i.e., by being part of an informed and unified and coherent set of desires. Smith does not make this explicit, but it comes to the fore when he explains why stipulating that the desire expressed in moral judgment is part of such a set does not answer his criticism that being a higher-order desire among a nexus of desires and aversions does not establish the desire is suitable for expression in moral judgment.

Turning away from the so-called embarrassment, let's examine why the stipulation fails to respond to the objection that the location of non-cognitive states on a staircase of emotional ascent cannot serve as the basis for establishing whether it is a member of the set of non-cognitive states sufficiently informed, coherent, and unified to be suitable for expressing in

moral judgments. If Blackburn stipulates that the complex of desires and aversions that he claims are expressed in moral judgments are the ones which compose the set of desires and aversions suitable for expression in moral judgments, then he would have to be committed to something like the following: when a person makes a moral judgment he expresses a desire that occupies the appropriate spot on the staircase of emotional ascent, but he also has other desires and aversions that occupy the same level on the staircase of emotional ascent, which together with the desire expressed in the moral judgment form a sufficiently informed and coherent and unified set (Smith-2002, 161).<sup>24</sup> It is at this point that Smith's conviction that the person must also believe the desire has these qualities becomes central to why the stipulation fails.

Smith points out though that it is possible to imagine a person who has one of the appropriate higher-order desires and believes that it is a member of a set of sufficiently informed, coherent, and unified desires and aversions, but who also believes she would not have this desire if her set of desires and aversions was "*maximally*" informed, coherent, and unified. This person would not believe the original desire is justified, even though it would meet the criteria for being suitable for expression in moral judgment (Smith-2002, 162). The implication is that for a desire to be suitable to being expressed in moral judgment it must meet a very high standard; in addition to being a suitably higher-order desire connected to other suitably higher-order desires and aversions in a relation of support, the person who expresses the desire must believe it is a member of a maximally informed, coherent, and unified set of desires and aversions (Smith-2002, 162).

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<sup>24</sup> I want to be careful here to note that Smith is hypothesizing about (1) what Blackburn's response must be to the criticism that the location of a desire or aversion on a staircase of emotional ascent cannot serve as the basis for establishing whether it is a member of the set of non-cognitive states sufficiently informed, coherent, and unified to be suitable for expressing in moral judgments, and (2) what else Blackburn must be committed to if Blackburn were to make the stipulative response Smith proposes.

So, according to Smith, Blackburn must suppose that a person who makes the moral judgment, "Giving to others is kind," is expressing a desire that is a suitably higher-order desire that is connected in a relation of support to other suitably higher-order desires, and the person (at least implicitly) believes that he would have the same desire if he had a maximally informed, coherent, and unified set of desires and aversions (Smith-2002, 162). But, if, in order to give desire the same functional feature as belief, this what Blackburn is committed to, then Smith thinks Blackburn should just go ahead and embrace **subjectivism**, just adopt the view that a person who makes a moral judgment is just expressing the belief that the desire is maximally justified (Smith-2002, 162-163).

From Smith's perspective, the only thing that is keeping Blackburn from being a **subjectivist** is the insistence that a moral judgment expresses a desire. Smith's challenge for Blackburn was to explain how desires and aversions could mimic belief-like functions by being joined to other desires and aversions in something like epistemic support. But, on the view Smith thinks Blackburn must be committed to, it is the belief that a desire is part of a maximally informed, coherent, and unified set of desires and aversions that is providing all of the support when we make moral judgments, not desires and aversions; if beliefs are the mental states fulfilling the belief-like functions of justifying, then non-cognitive states do not appear to playing the role Blackburn's **projectivism** demands. With desires and aversions appearing to play little to no role in moral judgment, **subjectivism** better reflects the role mental states play. Blackburn, obviously does not have to embrace **subjectivism** since he does not have to embrace the reply of stipulating that the desire expressed in a moral judgment is part of the set of desires suitable for expression in moral judgment, but then he will owe us a means of determining at what point on a

hierarchical, higher-order analysis a desire becomes suitable for being expressed in moral judgment.

### 6.3.3.2 How Blackburn Does Respond to Smith

In a reply to Smith, Blackburn indicates that he takes himself to have an answer to Smith's charge that the stipulation that a desire is in the set of moral desires suitable for expressing in moral judgments paves the way for a slide into **subjectivism**. Smith takes it that part of making a moral judgment involves possessing the belief that the desire expressed in the moral judgment is justified, but this belief cannot be present unless the moral agent believes the desire would be part of a maximally informed, coherent, and unified set of desires and aversions. If the agent does not believe this, then the agent cannot believe the desire is justified, and cannot be making a moral judgment. What Smith has, in effect, done is give conditions for when a person may express his desire in a moral judgment – when he believes the desire is part of the maximally informed, coherent, unified set of desires; and, when he does not have this belief, he should not express the desire in a moral judgment.

Blackburn takes this to be a matter of fallibility, and he points out that belief and recognition of fallibility can coexist (Blackburn-2002b, 175). So, a person can be aware that his sense of sight occasionally induces false beliefs (e.g., in the case of illusion), but he can still believe he sees a book before him in the present situation. Belief cannot coexist with the belief that fallibility is letting him down in the present situation. If a person believes now, at this moment, that his fallibility is getting the best of him, he should abandon the belief; “belief that *p* ... cannot ... coexist with the belief that ‘if I were better informed, I would not believe that *p*’” (Blackburn-2002b, 175).

Blackburn points out that the desires and aversions associated with moral judgment are similarly vulnerable to human fallibility. A desire or aversion can coexist with a person's fallibility, but "it cannot coexist with the thought that ... [it] is indeed, here and now, letting ... [him] down, so that a better attitude would conflict with ... [his] own" (Blackburn-2002b, 175). So, a desire is "vulnerable to the thought that a better person, or better system of norms, would not share them" and Blackburn takes the vulnerability of belief and desire to be parallel (Blackburn-2002b, 175). Blackburn has loosened the standard for expressing a desire in moral judgment; on his view, it is only when a person has the belief that her desire is fallible that she may not express a desire in moral judgment. For Smith, unless she believes her desire, in fact, is a member of the best set of desires, she should not express it in a moral judgment.

I am wary of Blackburn's equivocation between belief being destabilized by the *belief* that a better informed person would not have the belief, and desire being destabilized by the *thought* that a better person would not have the desire. The latter instability seems to arise from contemplating the possibility that there are better sets of desires, whereas the former instability only arises in the presence of the belief that there are better informed sets of beliefs. If belief and desire are to be parallel, and to fulfill the same functional role, their stability should be dependent on the same degree of epistemic certainty, so I propose this fallibility be understood as follows:

BF. A belief cannot persist in the presence of the belief that a better informed person would not have the belief.

DF. A desire cannot persist in the presence of the belief that a person with better desires would not have the desire.

Ultimately, Blackburn should be able to show that a feature of moral judgments, fallibility, which seems to be a feature of belief, can be explained in terms of desires and aversions.



Before I examine Blackburn's case for this I think there are two *prima facie* problems with the response he has crafted. First, Blackburn claims that the non-cognitive states associated with moral judgment are fallible. This is begging the question since Blackburn has not provided a means for distinguishing which non-cognitive states are associated with moral judgment. Yes, moral judgments are fallible and subject to revision; if non-cognitive states are what are expressed in moral judgment, then those states that are proposed as candidates should be fallible and revisable. Blackburn assumes that there are specific non-cognitive states that are expressed in moral judgment, even though he has given no indication which states those are, or how to distinguish them. Second, it is not obvious that a person's desires are fallible or revisable, as DF claims. It is too easy to imagine cases in which a person fully believes that there are better people with better desires than her own, but whose "inferior" desire still persists. The unwilling addict who desires drugs, and admits her desire for drugs is not one a person with better desires would possess, is one example; and, so is a person who enjoys the taste of cheap beer, even though he admits that a person with better taste would not enjoy it. What Blackburn suggests is that the special characteristic of the desires and aversions expressed in moral judgment is that they disappear when a person believes there are better desires.<sup>25</sup> I doubt that non-cognitive states could be so sensitive to the non-cognitive states of others.

Blackburn begins to try to show that it is possible for us to recognize the fallibility of the

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<sup>25</sup> In addition, it seems like the mental states that moral judgments express should be sensitive not just to beliefs about other non-cognitive states, but also sensitive to straightforward belief. For example, a moral judgment about responsibility for an action should be sensitive to belief about the age of the agent. But, it is, again, obvious that some non-cognitive states are just not sensitive to this; a vegan can still desire a pint of Guinness even though she knows isinglass is used in its production. All of this is to drive home Smith's point about how difficult it is for **non-cognitivists** to identify a non-cognitive state that is a candidate for being the mental state expressed in moral judgment: it is going to be a very peculiar non-cognitive state because it has to have the features beliefs have without being belief.

desires that constitute moral judgment by asking, “What counts as fallibility” (Blackburn-2002b, 175)? He argues that positive non-cognitive states, like esteem and privilege, directed toward qualities like informedness, coherence, unity, maturity, balance, etc. set the standard (Blackburn-2002b, 175). According to Blackburn, there is a standard to which a person can compare his desire to determine if it is fit for expressing in moral judgment, but that standard is a system of desires and aversions, with certain qualities like being informed, coherent, and unified, that is esteemed (Blackburn-2002, 176). Blackburn distinguishes between two beliefs:

(a) belief that a more unified, or informed system would not contain my attitude,  
and

(b) belief that a more unified, or informed system would not contain my attitude  
*coupled with* privileging such a system (Blackburn-2002, 176).

According to Blackburn only (b) can contribute to the fallibility of desire. It seems that Blackburn thinks the privileging of the system, which is a non-cognitive state, answers both of Smith’s charges – that at least one moral judgment is a cognitive state, the belief that a desire is justified, and that non-cognitive states do not play a functional role in justifying a desire as suitable for expression in moral judgment. It answers the first because the system is established as the system by a non-cognitive state. And, it answers the second because the desire expressed in moral judgment is justified by privileging the system of which it is a member.

### **6.3.3.3 Blackburn’s Response Fails**

The coupling of the belief about the merits of the system with privileging the system seems redundant. Blackburn proposes that a person can believe there is a better system of attitudes than his own and that this mental state is different than one in which a person believes there is a better system of attitudes than his own *and* he privileges this system more than his own system. I cannot see what this addition actually adds to the mental state; the person who believes there is a

better system of attitudes than his own, already privileges that system. Consider a reformulated account of desire fallibility that conforms with (b):

DFb. A desire cannot persist in the presence of the belief that a person with better desires would not have the desire coupled with privileging that person's desires.

Again, it would appear that implicit in the belief that a person with better desires would not have the desire is the normative prioritization of that set of desires, which is what the privileging is supposed to establish. But, if the prioritization is already established, then the non-cognitive state of privileging does not seem to do anything, and a desire, aversion, or attitude is not playing the belief-like role it must to explain the belief-like character of those desires, aversions, or attitudes expressed in moral judgment.

Blackburn is trying to respond to Smith's charge that Blackburn cannot explain how a desire can be justified as part of the maximally best set of desires without belief being at the root of the project, and he is not successful. Blackburn has not answered the moral attitude problem – he has not identified nor provided a means for identifying the non-cognitive states, which are expressed in moral judgment. What Blackburn seems to have in mind is that an attitude expressed in moral judgment is one that cannot persist in the presence of an attitude, which disapproves of the set of attitudes of which the first attitude is a member. This suggests that there is a standard for comparing sets of attitudes to, and this standard should be established on a **non-cognitivist** basis if **non-cognitivism** is to be plausible.

#### **6.4 Moral Mind-Independence**

In section 6.3 I examined how the moral attitude problem – the difficulty of identifying and defining the qualities of the non-cognitive state that is expressed in moral judgment – raises problems for **projectivism**, and which it must address to be a complete metaphysics for **quasi-realism**. Another important problem for **projectivism** is explaining how morality can be mind-

independent on a **projectivist** account of morality. That morality is mind-independent features in the rebuttal of two moral theories: cultural **relativism** and Divine Command Theory. Cultural **relativism** is frequently defined as the view that an action is morally right for a culture, if the culture thinks it is; and, the view is criticized for holding that thinking an action is morally right, makes it morally right. And, Socrates' challenge to Euthyphro's definition of piety, "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods," highlights the implausibility of supposing something has a property in virtue of somebody's beliefs or feelings about it (Plato, 14). The ensuing discussion suggests that to suppose so implies some mysterious metaphysics since a thing will only come to be the object of whatever belief or feeling a person has about it; Plato's remark, "The god-beloved is then not the same as the pious ... nor the pious the same as the god beloved," indicates that while the gods love sacrifices, their love does not impart piety to the sacrifice (Plato, 16). The upshot is that if a person thinks an action is moral, the action simply becomes thought to be moral, which is not the same as it being moral.

Nick Zangwill points out the need for a definition of mind-independence that does not beg the question in favor of **realism**, and he proposes that it be understood "in terms of a certain conditional relation which fails to hold between the values of things and our judgments about them" (Zangwill-1994, 206). He proposes that mind-independence be understood as the conjunction of two theses: value judgments do not necessitate values; values do not necessitate value judgments (Zangwill-1994, 206). These theses are reflected in the following conditionals, respectively:

- (i) It is not the case that if we think that X is bad then it is bad,
- (ii) It is not the case that if X is bad then we think that it is (Zangwill-1994, 206).

The mind-dependence of morality, on the other hand, is reflected by the following conditionals, respectively:

- (iii) If we think that X is bad then it is bad,
- (iv) If X is bad then we think that it is (Zangwill-1994, 207).

To describe the thesis that (i) and (ii) express as the mind-independence of morality is to be loose with terminology since on a moral theory like utilitarianism morality seems to be mind-dependent since whether action is moral or immoral depends on whether it produces more or less happiness – mental states – in people (Zangwill-1994, 207). The mind-independence of morality reflects the idea that the moral value of a state of affairs does not depend on a judgment that it has that moral value (Zangwill-1994, 207-208).

The mind-independence of morality appears to be a feature of moral practice, and Blackburn wants **quasi-realism** to account for this feature. But, given the sketch of mechanism of **projectivism** I outlined in chapter 4, and Blackburn's own Humean characterization of moral qualities as the children of our sentiments, it appears suspect that Blackburn can give an account of mind-independence from a **projectivist** base (Blackburn-1981, 165). It is easy to imagine Blackburn being tempted to give up the mind-independence of morality, but he is insistent that he needs to preserve it; he said **projectivism** would be refuted if it has us believing, "If we had different attitudes it would not be wrong to kick dogs" (Blackburn-1981, 179). Comparing facts about kicking dogs being wrong and trees causing shade, Blackburn claims the latter is mind-independent, and that **projectivists** do not have to deny the former is (Blackburn-1984, 215-216); and he claims that one of the failings of **subjectivism** is that it makes morality dependent on the attitudes of people engaging in moral practice (Blackburn-1980, 76).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Blackburn has reaffirmed this approach in subsequent works; see Blackburn-1984, 217-219 and Blackburn-1985, 156-157.

#### 6.4.1 Blackburn's Account of Moral Mind-Independence

As noted in the last paragraph, Blackburn agrees **projectivism** would be absurd if a **projectivist** must believe, "If we had different attitudes it would not be wrong to kick dogs." Blackburn explains that the counterfactual does not express a belief, rather it expresses a moral judgment: "The counter-factual 'If we had different attitudes it would not be wrong to kick dogs' expresses the moral view that the feature which makes it wrong to kick dogs is our reaction" (Blackburn-1981). Blackburn then claims that the **projectivist** need not hold this moral view, rather he, like the ordinary person, thinks it is the pain it causes that makes kicking dogs wrong; "[H]e approves of a moral disposition which, given this belief as input, yields the reaction of disapproval as an output; he does not approve of one which needs a belief about our attitudes as an input in order to yield the same output, and that is all that gets expression in the counterfactual" (Blackburn-1981, 179). Blackburn denies that **projectivism** implies the mind-dependence of morality because the conditionals that suggest mind-independence are actually moral judgments themselves expressive of attitudes.

Zangwill describes this approach of shifting the mind-independence and mind-dependence conditionals from expressing beliefs to expressing a "*substantive moral view*" as an "internal reading technique" (Zangwill-1994, 208). The shift constitutes an internal reading since a conditional expresses moral a commitment situated within a moral sensibility or perspective. The conditionals (i), (ii), (iii), and (iv), each express a higher-order attitude, not a belief. For example, conditional (iii) expresses a higher-order attitude of approval for dispositions to form attitudes to X on the basis of beliefs about attitudes to X's natural properties instead of just on the basis of beliefs about X's natural features (Zangwill-1994, 208). On the other hand conditional (i) expresses a contrary moral judgment; it expresses the higher-order attitude of

disapproval for dispositions to form attitudes to X on the basis of beliefs about attitudes to X's natural properties instead of just on the basis of beliefs about X's natural features, (or it expresses approval for dispositions to form attitudes to X on the basis of beliefs about X's natural features). As Zangwill point out, this analysis of mind-independence and mind-dependence conditionals interprets them as incompatible higher-order moral attitudes to forming dispositions in a particular way.

Again, the mind-independence of morality appears to be a feature of moral practice, and since Blackburn wants **quasi-realism** to account for these features, he claims that he can capture this feature by having the **projectivist** reject conditional (iii), which expresses a higher-order attitude of approval for dispositions to form attitudes to X on the basis of beliefs about attitudes to X's natural properties instead of just on the basis of beliefs about X's natural features, because it expresses a moral attitude which is repugnant. Smith points out that there are two criteria for rejecting conditionals like (iii), if we think that X is bad then it is bad, and (iv), if X is bad then we think that it is: 1. being a member of a repugnant moral sensibility; 2. repugnance for this moral sensibility can be expressed within a **projectivist** framework.

Before critiquing Blackburn's suggestion that the mind-independence of morality is a higher-order moral attitude, I want to make two points about these criteria. First, the judgment that conditionals (iii) and (iv) are members of a repugnant moral sensibility seems to be a belief that there is a sensibility with certain members and (iii) and (iv) are among them. If this is so, then the analysis may be susceptible to the same objection that Smith raised against higher-order analyses for identifying moral attitudes – the non-cognitive state no longer plays a primary role in the expression of the moral judgment, rather a cognitive state does, and it becomes hard to see how Blackburn's view remains a form of **antirealism**. Second, satisfying criterion 2 will depend

on the **projectivist's** ability to rank moral sensibilities definitively; in section 6.5 of this chapter I raise doubts that **projectivists** have the resources to do so. Assuming for the sake of the argument that Blackburn's proposal for preserving mind-independence is successful, he must be able to explain the satisfaction of criteria 1 and 2 on **projectivist** grounds.

#### 6.4.2 Zangwill on Blackburn's Moral Mind-Independence

Zangwill notes that there is a whiff of hocus-pocus to Blackburn's internal reading technique, but the trouble is explaining why it is hocus-pocus, and one way of doing that is to claim that the mind-independence of morality is a kind of commitment that is different from other moral commitments – the former is more like a moral principle than a substantive moral opinion (Zangwill-1994, 209-210). One way to explain this difference in status is to point to the “generativity” of moral mind-independence. Zangwill points out that Blackburn's internal reading technique, surprisingly, can account for the difference in status between mind-independence and ordinary moral commitments.

The mind-independence of morality must be generalizable to an infinite number of particular cases, and, “It is not the case that the wrongness of *anything* depends on my attitudes,” is a formulation of it that highlights its generativity (Zangwill-1994, 210; emphasis original). Mind-independence must work as a general principle that we can use to infer that the morality of any state of affairs does not depend on the attitudes we have toward them. Blackburn needs to provide a **projectivist** account of the principle that preserves this generative quality: “together with the relevant beliefs, the one principle must yield a potential infinity of attitudes” (Zangwill-1994, 210). The key is that Blackburn must be able to formulate a general basic statement of moral-mind independence in **projectivist** terms that lets us infer the particular expressions of



mind-independent moral judgments, i.e., “It is not that case that if we disapprove of kicking dogs then it is bad.”

Recall the general example of mind-independence, “It is not the case that the wrongness of anything depends on my attitudes.” Since Blackburn explained mind-independence as expressing a higher-order attitude of disapproval for dispositions to form attitudes to X on the basis of beliefs about attitudes to X’s natural properties instead of just on the basis of beliefs about X’s natural features (or expressing approval for dispositions to form attitudes to X on the basis of beliefs about X’s natural features), he may appear to have the resources for providing a **projectivist** version of the general principle. Zangwill claims that generative mind-independence can be explained from a **projectivist** base: “We have a disapproval of a *general* function from beliefs about attitudes to X to attitudes to X; and we have an approval of a *general* function from beliefs about X to attitudes to X (Zangwill-1994, 211; emphasis original).

This formulation can capture the generativity of moral mind-independence, and Zangwill concedes that the formulation can distinguish commitments like, “It is not the case that if we disapprove of kicking dogs then it is bad,” from ordinary moral commitments like, “Kicking dogs is bad,” because the former occupy an important place in the logical structure of a system attitudes (Zangwill-1994, 211). The suggestion that its place in a system distinguishes the mind-independence claims from ordinary moral claims is supported by Blackburn’s discussion of other **projectivist** non-moral claims:

The utterance ‘whatever I or we or anyone else ever thought about it, there would still have been ... [causes’] can be endorsed even if we accept the projective picture, and work in terms of an explanation of the sayings which gives them a subjective source. The correct opinion about these things is not necessarily the one we happen to have, nor is our having an opinion or not the kind of thing which makes for correctness. The standard governing projection makes it irrelevant, in the way that opinion is irrelevant to the wrongness of kicking dogs (Blackburn-1984, 219).

Zangwill remains uneasy with this account of moral mind-independence because he thinks it does not capture the real status difference between ordinary moral commitments and the mind-independent commitments, which he thinks is a conceptual status.

He supposes that the mind-independence has a status that is something like a *conceptual truth*; part of being a competent practitioner of morality is to realize that if we thought kicking dogs for fun was moral, that would not make it moral, and any person who did not realize this would not be participating in our moral practice (Zangwill-1994, 211). He makes the case that the mind-independence of morality is a conceptual truth via a property he calls the normativity of moral judgments. Zangwill claims that the normativity of moral judgment is an agent's commitment to correctness in making the judgment; due to this, she understands that her judgment may be correct or incorrect (Zangwill-1994, 214). So, in making a moral judgment an agent is aware her judgment may be correct or incorrect; if she is aware of this (and she reflects on this fact), then she knows that a moral judgment is not correct just in virtue of her making it. And, this is just what the mind-independence of morality is committed to. Zangwill then argues that the internal reading technique Blackburn applies to the mind-independence of morality makes it a special kind of substantive moral truth, but still a substantive moral truth like, "Kicking dogs for fun is wrong;" this means that the internal reading technique cannot capture the conceptual truth status of moral mind-independence (Zangwill-1994, 213). If the mind-independence of the moral is a conceptual truth, and if Blackburn's account of mind-independence makes it a substantive moral truth, then Blackburn has not preserved a feature of morality within his **projectivist** metaphysics.

### 6.4.2.1 Defending Blackburn Against Zangwill

In his review of recent developments in metaethics, Alex Miller claims that Zangwill's arguments for the conceptual status of moral-mind independence and the non-conceptual status of Blackburn's version of mind-independence are unconvincing. Zangwill's argument for the non-conceptual status of Blackburn's account of mind-independence appears to be the following:

- P1. Mind-independence is a substantive moral truth (per Blackburn).
- P2. If a commitment is a substantive moral truth, then it cannot be a conceptual truth.
- C. Mind-independence cannot be a conceptual truth.

When Miller claims that Zangwill's argument that Blackburn's analysis of mind-independence as a substantive moral truth implies it cannot be a conceptual truth is unconvincing, he presumably denies P2. And his objection to P2 is that it involves an unargued application of Moore's open question argument, and therefore depends on the implausible assumption that a substantive conceptual analysis is impossible (Miller, 76-77). Miller does not elaborate on this objection, so I am not positive I fully understand it since it seems to miss the point. I take it that Miller wants to deny that just because a moral mind-independence claim is a substantive moral truth, it is not a conceptual one, and so Blackburn's account of mind-independence does preserve it as a feature of moral practice despite Zangwill's objection.

Miller appears to believe that Zangwill is claiming that because substantive moral truths are non-trivial they cannot be conceptual truths because conceptual truths are trivial. Miller implies as much when he claims to read "substantive" as "informative and potentially controversial" (Miller-77). And Miller argues that this contrast depends on the open question argument, which is invalid given the no-interesting analysis objection to the open question argument – i.e., an implication of the open question argument is that there are no correct non-trivial conceptual analyses.

#### 6.4.2.2 Responding to Miller

Though it is confusing that Zangwill calls substantive moral truth controversial, I do not believe that Zangwill is trading on this distinction to make the case that substantive moral truths cannot be conceptual ones. A conceptual truth is a commitment, the acceptance of which is constitutive of competence in a practice. So, a commitment is a conceptual truth if failing to accept it means that competent participants in a practice would judge such an agent not to be competent in the practice. For example, the following claim is a conceptual truth: A gelding is a castrated male horse. A person who doesn't accept that claim is not competent in the practice of raising horses, and horsemen would judge a person who does not know what a gelding is as incompetent in horse raising, as not a horseman. Conceptual truths are not controversial among competent participants in a practice because accepting them is evidence of competency in the practice; but, other commitments can be controversial among competent participants in practice. For example, some horsemen may think geldings make better horses for jump races than flat races, but a person who thinks the opposite cannot be straightaway judged as incompetent in horse raising.

Ordinary moral commitments like, "Abortion is moral," are not conceptual truths because they are controversial in the sense that people who accept this commitment cannot accuse those who do not of being incompetent in moral practice. The others' refusal to accept, "Abortion is moral," cannot be evidence of their failure to understand the meaning of the words in the claim, nor can it be evidence they do not understand the practice of morality. According to Blackburn, making moral judgments is "moralizing" which is not done by conceptual means, and can be done poorly (Blackburn-1984, 184). What seems clear from Blackburn's internal reading of moral independence is that it is just ordinary moralizing (Blackburn-1981, 179; Blackburn-1984, 218; Blackburn-1988, 73). Per Blackburn's view, because moral mind-independence is an

ordinary moral commitment it is controversial in the sense that two people who disagree about it are still both competent in the practice of moralizing, one of them just does it poorly, or has poor morals. The real question is whether a moral mind-independence commitment like, “It is not the case that the wrongness of anything depends on my attitudes,” is just an ordinary old moral commitment like, “Abortion is moral,” or a conceptual commitment like, “A gelding is a castrated male horse.”

Miller interprets Zangwill’s argument for why moral mind-independence is a conceptual truth to be that (i) normativity is a conceptual truth – it is constitutive of competence in moral practice – and (ii) normativity implies moral mind-independence. Miller’s objection is that normativity does not imply mind-independence since a moral judgment can be normative and it still be empirically true “that if we judge that X is good, then X is good” (Miller, 76). Miller’s rebuttal appears to assume that Zangwill’s argument is the following;

- P1. If moral judgments are normative, then morality is mind-independent.
- P2. Moral judgments are normative.
- C. Morality is mind-independent.

And, Miller’s rebuttal is to deny that P1 is true since it is possible for moral judgments to be normative and for morality to be mind-dependent, and then claim that all that is necessary for normativity is the conceptual possibility that a moral judgment is incorrect.

This interpretation of the argument is too simple; Zangwill’s argument is as follows:

- P1. A person making a moral judgment aims at correctness (normativity).
- P2. A person can only aim at correctness, if he knows that either the judgment can be correct or the judgment can be incorrect.
- P3. If a person knows a judgment can be incorrect, then the person knows that just by making a judgment, he does not make a correct judgment.
- P4. If a person knows that just by making judgment, he does not make a correct judgment, then he knows judging something so does not make it so.
- C. If a person knows judging something so does not make it so, then he knows it is not the case that if I judge X is good, then X is good.

Miller wants to block the inference from normativity to moral mind-independence by insisting that mind-dependence is compatible with normativity. Miller argues that they are compatible so long as it is conceptually possible for a moral judgment to be incorrect. So Miller's claim is that in a world in which if we judge X is good, then X is good, there can also be normativity if it is conceptually possible for the judgment "X is good" to be incorrect. In Zangwill's argument there cannot be normativity without the knowledge that a moral judgment might be correct or that it might be incorrect, so for Miller's objection to be successful that knowledge – knowledge that a moral judgment might be correct or that it might be incorrect – must be compatible with mind-dependence.

I am skeptical that it is possible for there to be a world in which if a person judges X is good, then X is good, and yet the same person knows it is possible his judgment "X is good" could be incorrect, and vice versa. If a feature of one's cognitive abilities was that thinking cats are dogs made it so that cats are dogs, how could one know it is possible that "Cats are dogs" is incorrect? I cannot see why it should be any different for morality; if thinking that kicking dogs is bad makes it so that kicking dogs is bad, how could one know it is possible that "Kicking dogs is bad" is incorrect? It doesn't seem possible that it could be incorrect given that thinking it makes it correct. But, if mind-dependence and knowing it is possible for a judgment to be incorrect are incompatible, then Miller is wrong – mind-dependence and normativity are not compatible; and so if morality is normative, it must be mind-independent, which is a conceptual truth. And, Blackburn's analysis of moral mind-independence as an ordinary moral truth does not capture this.

### 6.4.3 Moral Agnosticism and Mind-Independence

Even if Blackburn is correct that the claim that morality is mind-independent can be given an internal reading in which it is an ordinary moral judgment expressing an attitude, this raises a new, different problem for a **projectivist** to address. Given Blackburn's solution to the Frege-Geach problem, Blackburn claims, "Morality is mind-independent," and, "Morality is not mind-independent," actually express the following, respectively:

PMI: H! (sensibility that H!/B! a state of affairs because of beliefs about the state of affairs).

PMD: H! (sensibility that H!/B! a state of affairs because of beliefs about attitudes toward the state of affairs and belief about the state of affairs).

Both of these judgments express a determinate attitude towards a sensibility in which attitudes toward, say, an action depend on belief about attitudes toward the actions and belief about the action. But, it must be possible for a person to wonder or be agnostic about the mind-independence of morality, and I cannot see how Blackburn can accommodate this.

Consider what an agnostic would say about morality and mind-independence: "I don't know if morality is mind-independent or mind-dependent;" how could Blackburn account for this in a **projectivist** framework? Blackburn might propose the following:

PMIA: I don't know if I H!(sensibility that H!/B! a state of affairs because of beliefs about the state of affairs) or H!(sensibility that H!/B! a state of affairs because of belief about attitudes toward the state of affairs and belief about the state of affairs).

This interpretation is implausible because people are usually aware of their attitudes. And if Blackburn thinks agnosticism about moral mind-independence is a case where a person would be unaware of his attitude, he would have to explain why it is this kind of unusual attitude. As an alternative, Blackburn might suggest that the agnostic endorses a sensibility that does not

generate attitudes toward something on the basis of just beliefs about it or on the basis of beliefs about attitudes toward it and beliefs about it:

PMIA': H!(sensibility that neither H!/B! a state of affairs because of beliefs about the state of affairs nor H!/B! a state of affairs because of belief about attitudes toward the state of affairs and belief about the state of affairs).

This is an even more implausible interpretation of the agnostic's view because it is not even clear if it is coherent and I suspect Blackburn would repudiate this as a repugnant attitude. The latter point is important because whatever judgment Blackburn would form towards it, it is properly the subject of judgment – it is either part of repugnant sensibility or part of an appropriate sensibility. But, being agnostic about a claim should actually preclude the possibility of being correct or incorrect about that claim. Any attempt to assimilate agnosticism about mind-independence into the internal reading favored by the **projectivist** framework will eliminate its distinctive feature: its suspension of judgment between the competing positions. Similar problems will arise if Blackburn tries to formulate wonder about mind-independence in the internal reading. These difficulties indicate that the internal reading approach does not capture the mind-independence of morality.

It is possible to explain the failure of the internal reading to provide a plausible account of mind-independence from a projective framework as trying to treat metaethical statements as ordinary ethical ones. Blackburn's internal reading tries to convert a metaphysical metaethical issue into an ordinary moral one, and it fails. The internal reading may not be able to accommodate other metaethical claims, and further undermine the **projectivist** proposal, too. I cannot be sure it will, but at least for the problem of mind-independence Blackburn's attempt at incorporating mind-independence into a **projectivist** framework generates a new problem for



him, provided his approach succeeds: now Blackburn must provide a way to wonder about mind-independence.<sup>27</sup>

#### 6.4.4 The Problem of Evil and Moral Mind-Independence

Part of Blackburn's project is to demonstrate that virtually, if not, all of our moral practice can be preserved in a **projectivist** framework. I think a particular version of the problem of evil, the traditional argument that God does not exist, poses a difficulty for Blackburn's analysis of mind-independence such that his analysis blocks one version of the problem, which would keep Blackburn from preserving an important element of moral practice.

In "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" William L. Rowe introduced the evidential problem of evil. The evidential problem of evil does not argue as Mackie does in "Evil and Omnipotence" that the existence of evil and God are logically incompatible; instead, it argues that the existence of evil is evidence against God's existence – it lowers the probability that there is a God.

Rowe's argument can be outlined as follows:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being (Rowe, 336).

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<sup>27</sup> Blackburn appears to appreciate the need to provide a way of asking metaethical questions when he writes that locating the wrongness of an action in natural properties is moral judgment, and talk of dependency is moral talk, but, "This is not, of course, to deny that 'external' questions make sense – the **projectivist** plus **quasi-realist** package is an external philosophical theory about the nature of morality. But external questions must be conducted in a different key once this package is brought in" (Blackburn-1988a, 173). Blackburn evinces no worry about providing this different key, as if he is unaware that the package just got bigger – it is now **projectivism** plus **quasi-realism** plus whatever it takes to ask external questions.

The intense suffering Rowe refers to is natural evil, and it is distinguished from moral evil, which is the byproduct of human action. As an example of natural evil, Rowe describes a scenario in which a fawn is trapped in a forest fire, is burned, and suffers terribly from the burns before dying several days later (Rowe, 337). Rowe implies that no human being observes this instance of natural evil, and so it cannot contribute to any greater good that explains why God does not prevent it. The evidential problem of evil is an important evolution in the traditional argument against God's existence because of the emphasis it places on natural evil. It draws our attention to phenomena that are normatively good or bad that might ordinarily slip our attention; what is evil in Rowe's scenario is not God's failure to prevent or shorten the fawn's suffering, but the suffering itself. The shift of emphasis to natural evil represents a new, stronger challenge to traditional **theism** because natural evil often does escape human observation, so it cannot serve any greater good connected to free will as moral evil does.

A naturalist like Blackburn should want to avoid undermining the evidential problem of evil, and to do so he must be able to fit its insight that certain natural phenomena are good or bad into our moral practice from a **projectivist** basis; I do not think that Blackburn can do this while respecting moral mind-independence and maintaining a distinction between **projectivism** and **realism**.

Theodicists may respond to Rowe's example of the suffering fawn as an instance of natural evil that counts as evidence against the existence of God by claiming that natural evil is permitted by natural laws so that humans may learn from it and choose how to respond to it, but that God cannot interfere with it coming to pass without disrupting the natural order, which would not serve a greater good. I do not find this response plausible, but the atheist can answer it by pointing to other forms of natural evil that humans have no prospect of observing. What I

have in mind is the animal pain that existed before human beings evolved, and in particular the pain that dinosaurs suffered during the events that precipitated their extinction. Whatever event or events initiated the extinction of dinosaurs, it is probable that their deaths were preceded by tremendous pain and suffering, and these states of affairs constitute examples of natural evil. Blackburn's **projectivism** cannot account for the evilness of this pain and suffering, and so morality is mind-dependent on his theory.

Recall the sketch I drew of the **projectivist** mechanism implicit in Blackburn's work based on his explicit appeal to Hume as a model from subsection 4.5.1.2:

- (BP'1) the natural features of an action causally interact with a person's senses;
- (BP'2) these external stimuli produce perceptual beliefs about the presence of certain natural features in the action;
- (BP'3) these perceptual beliefs produce attitudes as outputs;
- (BP'4) these attitudes are impressed on the perceptual beliefs yielding some further mental state, which is also an attitude;
- (BP'5) we are aware of this attitude as moral judgment in propositional form and it is voiced by uttering moral judgments in propositional form.

This is Blackburn's account of how moral judgments are generated, and without this process there would be no moral practice. An account of the evilness of a fawn's suffering that a human being encounters would be the following:

- (NE1) the natural features of a state of affairs causally interact with a person's senses (the fawn's moans);
- (NE2) these external stimuli produce perceptual beliefs about the presence of certain natural features in the state of affairs (the fawn is in pain);
- (NE3) these perceptual beliefs produce attitudes as outputs;
- (NE4) these attitudes are impressed on the perceptual beliefs yielding some further mental state, which is also an attitude (disapproval for the fawn's pain);
- (NE5) we are aware of this attitude as moral judgment in propositional form and it is voiced by uttering moral judgments in propositional form.

So far, this sketch could account for the evilness of natural states of affairs that human beings encounter. (And, for the sake of argument in this section, I grant that Blackburn may be able to develop a projective account of the evilness of certain contemporaneous natural states of affairs

that are qualitatively similar to the fawn's suffering we encounter, but which we do not in fact encounter.) But, I cannot see how Blackburn can account for the evilness of a state of affairs in a scenario in which there is no person with the kind of mechanism that would respond to the input of the natural features of the fawn's suffering with an output of an attitude toward it.

Consider the pain and suffering of dinosaurs dying off as they go extinct; so far as we know, no beings had evolved a psychology capable of proceeding from step (NE1) to (NE5). For the evidential problem of evil to have traction, dinosaur pain and suffering must be examples of natural evil, and yet given Blackburn's **projectivist** account, it is hard to see how they could count as such. Without a psychology in which attitudes develop, dinosaur pain and suffering appears to have no moral status. And, it seems plainly false to suppose that beings could retroactively project their attitudes onto the action, an act of "retrojection," if you will. Blackburn's theory appears to require the contemporaneous presence of a being with a psychology sufficient to undergo the process outlined in (NE1) to (NE5) for natural evils to be evil. **Moral realism** does not require such a psychology, and this is how morality fails to be mind-independent in a crucial sense on the projectivist picture.<sup>28</sup>

Blackburn has repeatedly claimed that it is the features of a thing that makes something wrong, not our attitude to that thing:

“What makes it wrong to kick dogs is the cruelty or pain to the animal”  
(Blackburn-1984, 218).

“What makes cruelty abhorrent is not that it offends us, but all those hideous things that make it do so” (Blackburn-1988, 172).

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<sup>28</sup> In commentary on a draft this, Stefan Baumrin suggested Blackburn deny that “evil” applies to natural events to reject this attempt to show **projectivism** makes moral mind-dependent. That move would avoid this criticism, but it would eliminate from moral practice, an element that is part of ordinary moral practice – finding natural events evil. Since Blackburn wishes to preserve ordinary moral practice on a projectivist basis, this should not be an attractive response for him.

“Cruelty is not wrong because we disapprove of it, but because it causes pain and anguish” (Blackburn-1998, 74).

The natural question is to ask how cruelty, pain, the hideous things, and anguish make kicking dogs or cruelty wrong. One option is to claim cruelty, pain, hideous things, and anguish are bad in themselves, and these properties have some transitive effect on actions. Of course this option concedes **moral realism**, and Blackburn cannot take it. Another option is to say the badness of cruelty, pain, hideous things, and anguish is due to our attitudes to them; and, this seems to be the option Blackburn must take. Blackburn seems to ignore that people do consider certain natural states of affairs to be bad, so he has not recognized that he cannot explain the wrongness of kicking dogs just by pointing to the pain it causes dogs, the pain must be bad, and a **projectivist** must account for this. That the second option is Blackburn’s only viable way for explaining the wrongness of kicking dogs reinforces the need to account for natural evil within a **projectivist** framework, and the challenge of doing so.

Blackburn has managed to account for the mind-independent wrongness of kicking dogs by exploiting the badness of the pain it causes, but the problem of natural evil requires him to account for the mind-independent badness of pain. Blackburn does not provide such an account even though the challenge is put to him in a different way in the appendix of questions at the back of *Ruling Passions*. There, the first two questions raise the prospects of morality in the absence of moral practitioners. Blackburn denies this would eliminate morality:

“But even if there is no discourse, bad things could still be going on. If you describe for me a possible situation in which there is no moral discourse, but people are kicking friendly dogs, then that’s a situation in which they are doing some thing wrong” (Blackburn-1998, 311).

“According to me, ‘moral truths are mind-dependent’ can *only* summarize a list like ‘If there were not people (or people with different attitudes), then  $X \dots$ ’, where the dots are filled in by some moral claim about  $X$ . One can then only assess things on this list by contemplating the nearest possible world in which

there are no people or people with different attitudes but  $X$  occurs. And then one gives a moral verdict on that situation” (Blackburn-1998, 311).

This would sound like special pleading if it were to be extended to the case of natural evil; and, a comparison to a **projectivist** account of the humorous – are there really funny things going on if there is no people to find things funny – further illustrates this.

### 6.5 Moral Objectivity

In *Spreading the Word* Blackburn describes **quasi-realism** as attempting to earn a right to moral truth while acknowledging the subjective basis of moral judgments – attitudes, desires, needs, etc. But, he also acknowledges that this can trigger concerns that morality will turn out to be relative or subjective (Blackburn-1984, 197). In an appendix of questions to *Ruling Passions* an interlocutor presses why subjectivity is a particularly acute problem: if morality is subjective, it would not be possible “to account for the common-sense notion that people may be mistaken in their moral views,” a scenario which Blackburn wishes to avoid (Blackburn-1998, 317).

Blackburn does not think there is any problem for a person to think someone else’s moral judgment is mistaken, the real challenge is for a person to be able to think his own moral judgment is mistaken (Blackburn-1998, 318). If Blackburn can develop an account of moral fallibility from his **projectivist** resources, he thinks he can also develop an account of moral truth, which will allow him to avoid the problem of subjectivity.

In the same appendix another interlocutor questions the worth of accommodating truth-aptness for moral judgments; the interlocutor suggests that Blackburn resist the need for moral truth by arguing that it is not appropriate to the domain, just as in the case of aesthetics, and to accommodate only gives in to **realist** confusion. Blackburn’s reply to the interlocutor is ambivalent between two possible responses. First, Blackburn points out that the question assumes that there is a unique genuine property of truth that only applies to physical or scientific

descriptions of the world, and that it is incorrect to attribute truth to other descriptions even when they are “‘correct’ in their own terms” (Blackburn-1998, 318). Blackburn indicates that he doubts it is possible to defend a unique genuine property of truth, but he thinks that if it is possible, moral judgments are not truth-apt. Second, Blackburn suggests that it is possible to adopt the deflationary theory of truth. On a deflationary theory of truth, a proposition like, “Snow is white,” is true if and only if snow is white. If we adopt a deflationary theory of truth, it becomes easy to accommodate truth-aptitude for morality; asserting that a moral judgment is true simply signals a commitment to or endorsement of an attitude: “‘Giving to others is kind’ is true,” endorses a positive attitude towards giving to others (Blackburn-1998, 318).

The first response Blackburn considers is a metaphysical response, while the second is a philosophy of language response, and despite the fact that Blackburn appears tempted by the deflationary theory of truth, I do not intend to take up the debate about whether deflationary theories of truth can accommodate truth-aptitude.<sup>29</sup> It is the metaphysical response that I intend to examine.

Later in the appendix to *Ruling Passions*, an interlocutor charges Blackburn with merely defending a “right to talk ‘as if’ there were moral truths ... [even though] *there aren’t any really*” (Blackburn-1998, 319). Blackburn’s response is strident:

No, no, no. I do not say that we can talk as if kicking dogs were wrong when ‘really’ it isn’t wrong. I say that it is wrong (so it is true that it is wrong, so it is really true that it is wrong, so this is an example of moral truth, so there are moral truths) (Blackburn-1998, 319).

Blackburn argues that the challenge is misplaced because it assumes there is a unique, genuine “metaphysically heavyweight” account of what moral truths really are, and all Blackburn has

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<sup>29</sup> In an interview, Blackburn endorses the deflationary theory of truth; see Gordon and Wilkinson, eds. For more on this debate see Smith-1994b; Smith-1994c; Divers and Miller-1994; Horwich-1994; Jackson, Oppy, and Smith-1994.

furnished is a meager alternative, which only licenses us to talk as if there are moral truths, really. Blackburn again expresses his doubt that it is possible to develop an account of *real* truth, which is the “TRUTH” of science, but he claims that even if it is possible, all it proves is you cannot bump into rights or duties. In drawing a contrast between TRUTH and truth, Blackburn is suggesting that there is no concept of truth that applies across every domain; instead for each domain there is a concept of truth that is correct on its own domain specific terms. Blackburn thinks it is possible to construct a notion of moral truth from **projectivism** that avoids selling out to **realism** (Blackburn-1984, 196).

### 6.5.1 Constructing Moral Truth

Blackburn thinks the fear that a **projectivist** morality will be **relativist** or **subjectivist** can be allayed by “developing a concept of moral truth out of the materials to hand: seeing how given attitudes, given constraints upon them, given a notion of improvement and of possible fault in any sensibility including our own, we can construct a notion of truth;” facts about human psychology can constrain the moral judgments we form just as facts about human senses can constrain what we may believe (Blackburn-1984, 197, 198). Earlier in *Spreading the Word*, Blackburn speculated that the notions of improvement and coherence and consistency, which he developed to address the Frege-Geach problem, might be suitable for developing a concept of truth for moral judgments (Blackburn-1984, 197).

Blackburn proposes that we hypothesize a “best possible set of attitudes”,  $M^*$ , which is “the limiting set which would result from taking all possible opportunities for improvement of attitude” (Blackburn-1984, 198). And, then a moral judgment,  $m$ , is true if it expresses an attitude,  $U$ , which is a member of  $M^*$ :

$m$  is true =  $U$  is a member of  $M^*$  (Blackburn-1984, 198).



So, the moral judgment, “Giving to others is kind,” is true if a positive attitude toward giving to others is a member of  $M^*$ .

Immediately after proposing this account of moral truth Blackburn considers the possibility that there might not be a unique best possible set of attitudes – there might be another set of attitudes that is equally as good as  $M^*$ , but which does not contain  $U$ ; if there are two equally superior sets of attitudes, then  $m$  will be both true and false, since it will express both an attitude which is a member of  $M^*$  and an attitude which is not a member of a set of attitudes that is equally good as  $M^*$  (Blackburn-1984, 198-199). If such a scenario is possible, then the definition violates the consistency constraint on truth, and moral truth cannot be constructed. Blackburn characterizes this as “the deep problem of *relativism*[:]... the suspicion that other equally, admirable sensibilities, over which I can claim no superiority of my own, lead to divergent judgments” (Blackburn-1984, 199). If there can be equally good sensibilities to mine, then I have no right to think of my moral judgments as true, which will undermine my moral commitments.

Blackburn responds to this possibility by arguing that for a situation in which it appears that there are two sets of attitudes, which are co-best, but inconsistent, it is not actually the case that the two sets of attitudes are co-best – there is a unique set of attitudes that is superior to them both. To explain why this is the case Blackburn deploys the internal reading move that he used to account for mind-independence; Blackburn argues that to suppose that two sets of attitudes are co-best is to have an attitude to each that it is beyond improvement, and he thinks that this third attitude is unsustainable. To illustrate the point, Blackburn uses an example from Hume; he asks us to imagine two literary critics, each of whom has taken all opportunities to refine his literary sensibility (Blackburn-1984, 200). One esteems Ovid as the greatest writer, and the other

esteems Tacitus as the greatest writer. Their sensibilities are assigned the respective variables  $M^*_o$  and  $M^*_t$ ; “Ovid is the greatest writer” is assigned the variable  $m_o$ , and “Tacitus is the greatest writer” is assigned the variable  $m_t$ ; and  $U_o$  is the variable representing the attitude of highest esteem for Ovid, and  $U_t$  is variable representing the attitudes of highest esteem for Tacitus.

Blackburn points out that a person who supposes that the two literary critics’ sensibilities are co-best is committed to the following:

- (1)  $m_o$  is true (=  $U_o$  is a member of  $M^*_o$ )
- (2)  $m_t$  is true (=  $U_t$  is a member of  $M^*_t$ )
- (3)  $M^*_o$  and  $M^*_t$  cannot be improved upon.

Blackburn denies that a person should be committed to (3), which essentially expresses an attitude towards  $M^*_o$  and  $M^*_t$ , once she is aware of (1) and (2); a person who is aware of both  $M^*_o$  and  $M^*_t$  can imagine an improved set of attitudes over both sets of attitudes (Blackburn-1984, 200). This improvement could include a new attitude,  $U_b$ : Ovid and Tacitus are equally good writers, whose works contain features, which appeal to different people. If this new set of attitudes, say  $M^*_b$ , is judged to be an improvement over  $M^*_o$ ,  $M^*_t$ , and whatever set of attitudes includes the attitude expressed by (3), then  $M^*_b$  is the set of attitudes that establishes a moral judgment’s truth – a moral judgment is true if it expresses an attitude which is a member of  $M^*_b$ . Blackburn’s point is that divergence in sensibility which yields new morally indiscernible sensibilities should be a trigger to try to imagine a sensibility which is an improvement over the divergent ones, and which indicates that there is a moral truth about the subject on which the sensibilities diverge (Blackburn-1984, 200).

Blackburn calls the points at which an imperfect, but improving, sensibility yield different sets of attitudes “nodes”, and the worry is that the branches flowing from each node

will be inconsistent, but impossible to distinguish as better or worse. Blackburn applies the internal reading technique to propose that the attitude that two inconsistent sets of attitudes cannot be improved upon can be subsumed to generate a new set of attitudes; this new set of attitudes can be compared to the originals, or it can be the impetus for imagining a different improved set of attitudes to the originals, the actual standard for establishing moral truth. He writes:

[A]n evaluative system should contain the resources to *transcend the tree structure*; evidence that there is a node *itself* implies that it is wrong to maintain either of the conflicting commitments. It is itself a signal that the right attitude ... is not that expressed by either of these partial perspectives (Blackburn-1984, 201).

Blackburn does not explicitly require that we are able to imagine an improved set of attitudes over the originals, but he does insist that the fact of a node serves as a signal that there is a not-yet-arrived-at truth. The prospect of this not-yet-arrived-at truth, nonetheless, forces us to engage in moral practice as though there is a moral truth even in the face of inconsistent, but apparently morally indiscernible sets of attitudes.

### 6.5.2 Problems with Constructed Moral Truth

Iain Law summarizes Blackburn's argument for moral truth as follows:

1. We make second-order moral judgments which are in fact expressions of attitudes to other attitudes.
2. Therefore we can see some attitudes and combination of attitudes (sensibilities) as inferior and need of improvement.
3. We can conceive that our own attitudes might need improvement.
4. We can conceive of a single set of most possibly improved attitudes ( $M^*$ ).
5. For a moral statement to be true is for the attitudes it expresses to be a member or  $M^*$ . (Law, 190)

Law does not think Blackburn can provide a notion of possible improvement necessary to sustain 2 and 3, the judgment that sensibilities improve or deteriorate, as opposed to the observation that they change (Miller, 87). And without a notion of possible improvement, Blackburn cannot make

the move to moral truth. Law's challenge to Blackburn is for him to explain how we can move legitimately from the fact that we disapprove of another person's approval of kicking cats to conceiving of that other person's attitude of approval of kicking cats as inferior, needing improvement: "Why, just because a sensibility is different from mine (I do not endorse all its attitudes), does that give me the right to see it as inferior? Why do I not just see it as different" (Law, 190)?

Law points out that for **moral realists**, it is easy to explain why an alternative sensibility is inferior: it gets the moral facts wrong, unlike mine. He thinks that the only way Blackburn can explain why I judge an alternative sensibility as inferior is because it clashes with my sensibility (Law, 190). And, Law points out that if the genesis of any assessment of inferiority for a sensibility is clash with my sensibility, then it will be impossible for me to assess my own sensibility as needing improvement since it will never clash with itself (Law, 191).<sup>30</sup>

Law cites Nicholas Sturgeon's interpretation of Blackburn as relying on standards for evaluating sensibilities that are not in agreement with one's own sensibility as a possibility for how we go from recognizing that our attitudes do not coincide with others, and forming attitudes about those attitudes to judging those attitudes to be inferior (Law, 191). Blackburn's remark, "...[N]ot all such sensibilities are admirable. Some are coarse, insensitive, some are plain horrendous, some are conservative and inflexible, others are fickle and unreliable; some are too quick to form strict and passionately held attitudes, some too sluggish to care about anything," suggests that he has standards in mind that are not just agreement or disagreement with one's

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<sup>30</sup> I think Law presses the case too far by claiming that Blackburn cannot get 3 from 1. I imagine that Blackburn would argue that once I am aware of other people's moral fallibility, I must contemplate my own possible moral fallibility, which would provide the impetus to consider that my attitudes might need improving. But, I take Law to be pressing the key point that Blackburn needs to provide an account of how we go from recognizing that our attitudes do not coincide with others, and forming attitudes about those attitudes to judging those attitudes to be inferior.

own attitudes (Blackburn-1984, 192). Sturgeon thinks, though, that Blackburn must have a moral standard in mind, and perhaps that is what Blackburn is committed to when he talks about sensibilities failing to be admirable or horrendous. Law claims that Blackburn cannot have a moral standard for ranking sensibilities in mind because a moral standard could only be cashed out as either agreement with the moral facts or agreement with a moral sensibility (Law, 192). The former is obviously not an option for an **antirealist** like Blackburn, and the latter generates the problem of how to see one's own sensibility as needing improvement. In fact, Law argues that Blackburn cannot possibly have a moral standard in mind when explaining how we move from second order judgments to assessing an attitude as inferior since that move is meant to build toward a moral standard,  $M^*$  (Law, 192).

### **6.5.3 Defending Constructed Moral Truth**

Miller tries to defend Blackburn against Law's criticism by offering two rebuttals. First, Miller charges that Law is mistaken to assume that what is needed to rank attitudes or sensibilities is a single standard; Miller suggests that we may make use of various standards at hand to rate attitudes or sensibilities on a case-by-case basis (Miller, 87). The second rebuttal claims that we may make use of moral claims to justify our rating of another person's attitude or sensibility as inferior from ours; as human beings, we are thrust into moral practice and we have no choice but to use the moral resources available to us to evaluate other's attitudes – we are not in a position in which our ethical views are suspended, forcing us into neutrality. Blackburn is likely to endorse this second rebuttal in particular since he often cites the example of Neurath's boat to support how the assessment of attitudes from a moral perspective is not viciously circular.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See Blackburn-1981, 176; Blackburn-1993, 374; Blackburn-1998, 275, 313, 318. Simon Kirchin quotes Blackburn-1981 and cites Blackburn-1993 to make the same point in his response to Law's article; he argue to the effect that ranking sensibilities is moralizing, which involves a

#### 6.5.4 Rejecting Constructed Moral Truth

To begin to see why Miller's defense of Blackburn is unsuccessful we must shift our focus from sensibilities to a single attitude. One reason for doing this is that Blackburn is ambiguous about what a sensibility is. For example, he defines a moral sensibility as "a function from *input* of belief to *output* of attitude" (Blackburn-1984, 192 italics original), which suggests that a sensibility must be understood on three levels – the input of belief, the mechanism into which the belief is fed and which transforms it into an output of attitude, and the output of attitude.

However, just a few pages later Blackburn suggests that a sensibility is a collection of attitudes; having just defined the best possible set of attitudes,  $M^*$ , he uses the word "sensibility" in place of "set of attitudes" to acknowledge it is challenging "to define the idea of a unique best possible sensibility" (Blackburn-1984, 198). Another reason to shift the focus is that the question is not just how can we compare sensibilities, but how can we compare attitudes. Kirchin diagnoses Law's objection to Blackburn as follows: Attitudes are the basic building blocks of **quasi-realism**, but it does not appear possible to rank them, or the sensibilities constructed from them, since there is no standard for comparing them and judging them as inferior or superior (Kirchin, 123).<sup>32</sup>

In subsection 6.5.2 I noted that Law outlines Blackburn's argument for how to construct moral truth as follows:

1. We make second-order moral judgments which are in fact expressions of attitudes to other attitudes.
2. Therefore we can see some attitudes and combination of attitudes (sensibilities) as inferior and need of improvement.
3. We can conceive that our own attitudes might need improvement.

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commitment to responding to certain features of the world with a particular reaction, and relying on this commitment is not circular (Kirchin, 124).

<sup>32</sup> Both Law and Kirchin appear to accept without comment Blackburn's equivocation on sensibility, and thus understand a sensibility as a collection of attitudes.

4. We can conceive of a single set of most possibly improved attitudes ( $M^*$ ).
5. For a moral statement to be true is for the attitudes it expresses to be a member or  $M^*$ . (Law, 190)

Law identified a problem in 2 and 3 – it is unclear how to generate a notion of improvement, but Kirchin thinks the root of the problem is 1: how can we begin to compare attitudes different from our own (Kirchin, 124)? Like Kirchin, I think the challenge for Blackburn is to explain how we make the shift from having attitudes to moralizing, having attitudes that we regard as moral ones by which we can compare attitudes.

Miller's defense of Blackburn depends on distinguishing two tasks: (i) explaining how moral judgments express attitudes and (ii) justifying some moral judgments as true (Miller, 86). Miller assumes that earning a right to moral truth is exclusively a justificatory enterprise, and once Blackburn is engaged in a practice of justification, he can take advantage of moral judgments and standards (Miller, 86, 88). Miller makes the distinction in the context of responding to one of John McDowell's criticism of Blackburn.

#### **6.5.4.1 McDowell on Truth in Ethics**

McDowell characterizes **projectivism** as the attempt to explain "certain seeming features of reality as reflection of our subjective responses to a world which really contains no such feature" (McDowell-1987, 158). So far, this corresponds to the essentials of **projectivism** outlined in chapter 4. An important element of **projectivism** is that it should be able to characterize the response in terms other than the feature that is a product of the response (McDowell-1987, 158). In some cases, projection is the appropriate account of an apparent feature of reality, e.g., the cases of disgust and nausea. Miller quotes McDowell's explanation of why **projectivism** is a plausible account of disgust and nausea: "[W]e can plausibly suppose that these are self-

contained psychological items, conceptualizable without any need to appeal to any projected properties of disgustingness or nauseatingness” (McDowell-1987, 157 in Miller, 83).

**Projectivists** compare ethical responses to comical responses; there is no comic feature in a joke, but we nonetheless judge, “It is funny,” which is comparable to moral practice.<sup>33</sup> The comic is supposed to be particularly apt for a **projectivist** analysis, and if it can be so analyzed, the prospects for a **projectivist** analysis of the ethical would be brighter. McDowell argues by analogy that we cannot explain ethical responses without referring to the ethical properties since we cannot do so for the comic; without this explanation, there is no **projectivist** explanation of the comic, or the ethical. McDowell claims that we cannot identify what is projected onto the world that leads to a judgment that a joke is funny.<sup>34</sup> He rejects the possibility that what is projected is the inclination to laugh because this may reflect embarrassment rather than amusement. And amusement is not a candidate for the response, which is projected onto the world and gives rise to the judgment that something is comic, since amusement is best understood as finding something funny or comic. We are not explaining how a joke appears funny, if our explanation is that we projected the inclination to find it funny onto the joke: “...[I]t undermines a projective account of a concept if we cannot home in on the subjective state whose projection is supposed to result in the seeming feature of reality in question without the aid of the concept of that feature, the concept that was to be projectively explained” (McDowell-1987, 158).

### **6.5.5 Rejecting Constructed Moral Truth, Continued**

McDowell’s objection to a **projectivist** account of ethics is to challenge **projectivists** to describe the nature of the output, which is a subjective response to inputs, without invoking the putative

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<sup>33</sup> See Blackburn-1985, 155, which I discussed in subsection 4.2.2.5.

<sup>34</sup> McDowell’s discussion of this problem can be found at McDowell-1987, 158.



moral property; but he suggests that this challenge cannot be fulfilled since the subjective response that leads to a comic judgment cannot be explained without reference to the comic property, and the prospect of doing this was supposed to boost the prospects of **moral projectivism**. Miller grants that Blackburn does not appear to have a response to this challenge, and so far as I can tell, he does not address the challenge (Miller, 85). In a footnote (11) to subsection 4.2.3 I outlined a **projectivist** account of a putative feature of reality, and one element it must respect was Piv:

Piv. It is possible to characterize the psychological state in terms other than the property whose experience it explains.<sup>35</sup>

Blackburn has not satisfied the condition in Piv. that requires the account to avoid referencing the putative feature of reality being explained; until he or a **quasi-realist** sympathizer can do so, he has not provided a **projectivist** explanation of the comic or the ethical.

To defend Blackburn against Law's criticism Miller distinguishes the explanatory challenge McDowell has proposed from the justificatory work of earning a notion of truth from within moral practice, and he argues Blackburn does not have a difficulty with the latter task since from within moral practice he can take advantage of moral judgments to rank attitudes, and derive rankings of sets of attitudes from this. Miller does not seem to think that it is terribly

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<sup>35</sup> The full outline is:

- Pi. Experience in a domain has a **realist** phenomenology;
- Pii. there are no features of the world that correspond to the experience;
- Piii. the experience is a projection that has its origins in a psychological state, i.e., is the culmination of a projective mechanism that begins with a psychological state;
  - Piiia. an experience is a projection if its explanation essentially appeals to non-inferential psychological facts about its subject;
  - Piiib. the explanation of the experience is opaque to the subject.
- Piv. It is possible to characterize the psychological state in terms other than the property whose experience it explains.

important for Blackburn to pursue the explanatory project since Miller suggests that psychology might supply a characterization of the subjective response that explains the putative comic or ethical feature (Miller, 85). But this underestimates the importance of the explanation; McDowell's objection also compounds the difficulty Blackburn faces in responding to the moral attitude problem, discussed in section 6.3: in identifying and explaining why which sentiment, emotion, attitude is suitable for expression in moral judgments, the **quasi-realist** must avoid referring to moral properties in the explanation.

I think insights from McDowell and Kirchin reveal a significant challenge to **projectivism** that Blackburn and Miller overlook. Law points out, on Blackburn's analysis, it is because we make second-order moral judgments that we can judge an attitude as inferior or superior. But, Kirchin points out that the key challenge is to explain how we can begin to rank attitudes, how we can make second-order moral judgments. We cannot begin to make second-order moral judgments until we make first-order moral judgments; we cannot have attitudes to the attitudes that are candidates for expression as moral judgments until we have attitudes that are candidates for expression as moral judgments. And, I take McDowell's criticism along with the moral attitude problem to show that it is quite difficult to identify the attitude that is the moral attitude and to describe its nature without appealing to the moral feature it underlies, as a **projectivist** analysis must. The focus on the attitude suggests there needs to be both an explanation for how we come to form attitudes to attitudes and how we earn the right to these attitudes; part of the story is being left out when we start at premise 1 of Blackburn's argument for constructing moral truth: We make second-order moral attitudes, which are in fact expressions of attitudes to other attitudes.

What I have in mind is this. Suppose a **projectivist** can identify the attitude that is a candidate for expression in moral judgments and explain its nature without referring to the moral property. If moral disagreement is to be possible, then there should be a contrary attitude that is also a candidate for expression in moral judgment. And, these contrary attitudes should be flexible enough to feature in judgments that fall on either side of the line of finding an action to be moral or immoral; let's call them a pro-attitude and anti-attitude, respectively. Now, consider two people, one with a pro-attitude toward action  $x$ , and the other with an anti-attitude toward action  $x$ . Once they are aware of each other's attitudes, what comes next? Kirchin focuses on premise 1 in the argument for moral truth because he thinks it is easy to see that once we are engaged in comparing one attitude to another we are moralizing, and we can use moral judgments to rank the attitudes, and go on to develop a standard of moral truth from there. What Kirchin, Law, Miller, and Blackburn all appear to take for granted is the shift from awareness of another person's attitude to critically appraising that attitude is an act of moralizing.

It is not clear why once the two people are aware of each other's conflicting attitudes they will automatically begin to critically appraise each other's attitudes. It seems possible that the two people only notice the difference in their attitudes, and let the matter rest there. In the case of disgustingness, which is thought to be a property particularly appropriate for a **projectivist** analysis, there is no expectation for people whose attitudes diverge on the disgustingness of eating crickets, say, to rate each other's tastes as inferior or superior. So, before the **moral projectivist** can launch the argument for moral truth, he must provide an explanation of why and/or how the shift from observing differences in attitudes to rating the different attitudes occurs when the attitudes are moral ones.

Miller is optimistic that psychology may be able to provide a naturalistic account of the attitude that is expressed in moral judgment without referring to the moral property, and maybe we should be optimistic that psychology will supply an account of why and how this happens for moral attitudes and not gustatory ones, but I am not optimistic. However, Blackburn's argument for moral truth alone cannot establish moral truth; it needs to be supplemented with the explanation I call for. I suspect Miller and Blackburn will call for optimism that this explanatory demand can be satisfied, and insist that the justificatory task is the more important one, and the argument for moral truth completes it. This is premature; the **projectivist** has another justificatory task: if the **projectivist** explanation of the putative moral features of reality is completed, and their subjective source is revealed, then Blackburn as a **quasi-realist** has to earn the right to the moral practice. Once the moral phenomenology which gives rise to our moral practice is revealed to be a projection, the **quasi-realist** has to earn the right to the practice – he has to justify pressing on with the practice rather than abandoning it. There is no use in constructing moral truth, if we have no right to the practice of which it is a part. In the conclusion to this paper, following this chapter, I will press this point.

## 6.6 Chapter Conclusion

I may be laboring the point, but if **projectivism** is supposed to be a rival metaphysics of moralizing to **realism**, then Blackburn's theory faces several hurdles before it can be considered a genuine rival. In addition to developing an outline of the mechanism (which I argued was less plausible than the **realist** mechanism in chapter 4), Blackburn first needs to develop a motivation for proposing this alternative mechanism of moral awareness that is supported by naturalistic practices. But, supposing he can do this, the prospects for developing a full-blown **projectivist** rival to **moral realism** are still dim. Blackburn must be able to identify the attitudes that are the

moral attitudes expressed in moral judgments, and he needs to be able to specify their nature without reference to the putative moral feature of reality the judgment suggests. Next, he needs to be able to develop a **moral projectivism** that does not make morality mind-dependent. And, finally Blackburn needs a **projectivist** explanation and justification of the shift from observing different attitudes to ranking these attitudes. The arguments of this chapter have demonstrated that Blackburn has not yet succeeded in overcoming these hurdles.

## Conclusion

### C.1 Projectivism and Error Theory

I have done my best to demonstrate that moral **projectivism** is not as simple a metaphysical rival to **moral realism** as one might suppose. Blackburn presupposes a mechanics of moral awareness without arguing on its behalf, and this mechanics is a *prima facie* less plausible account of moral awareness than **moral realism** given the realist character of popular moral practice. If you are attracted to a **projectivist** metaphysics of morality, as Blackburn is, it seems odd to want to preserve moral practice as it is by developing an exotic moral semantics meant to justify this moral practice. The question for a **projectivist** like Blackburn is this: once you are certain that moral terms do not refer, and can use **projection** to explain how we came to employ them, why don't you admit that we are simply mistaken about morality? Mackie embraced the mistake, and proposed the **error theory**, but Blackburn, a fellow **projectivist**, did not, and he owes an explanation of why, despite **projectivism**, we should not be **error theorists**.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the last chapter, I claimed that part of the formidable challenge Blackburn faces in developing **projectivism** is to explain how we go from acknowledging differences in attitudes to comparing them (the shift to second-order attitudes, which marks his version of moralizing), but given the option of **error theory**, he must also explain that this is not a mistake.<sup>2</sup> Joyce classified **projectivism** based on commitment to or rejection of certain theses:

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<sup>1</sup> Mackie's position and Ayer's position about ethics may appear to be similar, but they are different. Both accept that there are no moral properties, but they draw different conclusions about moral practice from this. Mackie claims that when a person utters a moral judgment she intends to predicate a moral property of a subject, but because moral properties do not exist, the proposition she utters is false. Ayer claims that moral propositions are neither true nor false, they are meaningless, and when a person utters a moral judgment she is expressing her feelings.

<sup>2</sup> I do not think Mackie is right that moral terms do not refer nor that projection explains why we employ moral terms, but I think he is right to draw the conclusion that if those things are true, then people engaged in moral practice are engaged in a massive error. If I was an **antirealist**, I

1. We experience moral wrongness (e.g.) as an objective feature of the world.
2. This experience has its origins in some non-perceptual faculty; in particular upon observing certain actions and characters (etc.) we have an affective attitude (e.g., the emotion of disapproval) that brings about the experience described in 1.
3. In fact, moral wrongness does not exist in the world.
4. When we utter sentences of the form “X is morally wrong” we are misdescribing the world; we are in error (Joyce-2009, 56).<sup>3</sup>

In effect, Blackburn must stake out some room for **quasi-realism** by showing that it is possible to be a **projectivist** who endorses 1, 2, and 3, but denies 4. The challenge for Blackburn is to construct a bulwark against **projectivism** sliding into **error theory** that observes condition MPiii. of the criteria for **projectivism**, which I established in subsection 4.2.3:

- MPiii. moral experience is a projection that has its origins in a **non-cognitive** response to features of the world, i.e., is the culmination of a projective mechanism that begins with a **non-cognitive** response to features of the world;
- MPiiia. a moral experience is a projection if its explanation essentially appeals to non-inferential psychological facts about its subject;
- MPiiib. the explanation of a moral experience is opaque to the subject.

Blackburn’s attempts to block **error theory** run afoul of MPiiia and MPiiib.

## C.2 Error Theory and Bad Faith

What Blackburn must do is explain why a person who believes 1, 2, and 3 does not have to believe 4. “Errors and the Phenomenology of Value” is the article in which Blackburn most clearly presses his case against **error theory**, specifically Mackie’s version. The first move Blackburn makes against **error theory** is to accuse **error theorists** of inconsistency, or what Crispin Wright calls bad faith (Wright-1996, 2); Bart Streumer notes the similarity of Blackburn’s objection to Wright’s bad faith objection (Streumer, 208). And, Miller, in

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don’t think I could or would try to preserve moral practice, as it is now constituted; and, as hard as moral **antirealists** have tried to do this, in my opinion, they have not been successful.

<sup>3</sup> Joyce’s catalog of projectivisms include: minimal projection, the endorsement of 1 and 2; metaphysical projectivism, the endorsement of 1, 2, and 3; nihilistic projectivism is the endorsement of 1, 2, 3, and 4; non-cognitivist projectivism, the endorsement of 1, 2, and 3, the denial of 4, and supplement of expressivism (Joyce-2009, 57-58)

responding to Wright's criticism of **error theory**, describes the charge of bad faith as an indirect challenge to **error theory**, which seeks to expose an internal tension for it (Miller, 118).

Blackburn summarizes Mackie as claiming that ordinary moral judgments involve an assumption that there are objective values, despite there being no such values; he then chastises Mackie for not acting appropriately in light of these beliefs: since Mackie believed our moral vocabulary was in error, he should have replaced it or used it differently, but Mackie does not propose an alternative for our moral vocabulary, and instead he proceeds to use our erroneous moral vocabulary (Blackburn-1985a, 150-151). Blackburn thinks Mackie is up to something "fishy" when he moralizes despite his **error theory** (Blackburn-1985a, 152). The bad faith charge aims to expose the following tension in an **error theorist**: if an **error theorist** genuinely believed that moral judgments are descriptive and that there are no real properties, then he would give up making moral judgments, but he does not give it up, so he must not really believe either that moral judgments are descriptive or that there are no real properties. **Non-cognitivists** like Blackburn dissolve the tension in moral practice by claiming that our moral judgments are not descriptive, but express attitudes.

The obvious response is that people behave in all sorts of ways that are incompatible with their beliefs. A person, who believes the snow will make his commute longer, should leave earlier for work, but for any number of reasons, he will not. An **error theorist's** failure to abandon making moral judgments does not constitute evidence that there is something wrong with **error theory**. But suppose that it did, which of the claims doesn't an **error theorist** really believe? The **moral realist** will be happy to suggest that the error-theorist does not really believe there are no moral properties, and Blackburn will suggest that the **error theorist** does not believe moral judgments are descriptive; if they agree that the **error theorist's** failure to quit making



moral judgments is best explained by a failure to believe one of the theory's commitments, neither seems to be in a position to argue for their position on the basis of this slender "evidence."

The bad faith objection does reveal the need for an explanation of why the **error theorist** does not change his behavior to conform to his beliefs. Again, Blackburn's diagnosis is that they do not really believe that moral judgments are descriptive. But the **projectivist-error theorist**, e.g., Mackie, has a more plausible explanation: there is a psychological impediment to changing the behavior. The phenomenology of moral experience is one of objectivity, and **projectivism** explains that experience as a psychological trick arising from an affective attitude (compare this to Hume's account of the experience of causation).<sup>4</sup> So Mackie would counter Blackburn by arguing that even when we are aware of how moral experience arises, we are misled by its phenomenology into acting like it is real and continuing to make moral judgments. And this explanation also has the advantage of explaining why our moral judgments are descriptive – they express a belief that a projection causes us to have. In contrast, Blackburn can explain moral experience via projection, but he must also supply another explanation – an explanation of why those projections cause us to express attitudes as moral judgments. The bad faith line of argument does not establish that **error theory** is wrong, and if it did, I think it is more likely to undermine the belief that there are no moral properties.

Jonas Olson argues that the so-called "freshman objection to expressivism" – "[t]hat if expressivism were true anything would be morally permissible" – at its core poses a problem for **expressivists** (Olson, 89). Even sophisticated philosophers pressing the case for **expressivism** admit the theory leaves an unsatisfying impression. Olson cites Bertrand Russell:

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<sup>4</sup> Sixty years ago Maurice Mandelbaum wrote an analysis of the characteristics of different kinds of moral judgments, which he titled *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* (1955).

In opposing the proposal, I should *feel*, not only that I was expressing my desires, but that my desires in the matter are *right*, whatever that may mean. As a matter of argument, I can, I think, show that I am not guilty of any inconsistency in holding to the [expressivist account] of ethics and at the same time expressing strong ethical preferences. But in so feeling I am not satisfied (Olson, 90)<sup>5</sup>

And, he also quotes Blackburn admitting that “[t]here is still that nagging feeling that on this [expressivist] metaphysic ‘there are no obligations, and so on, *really* (otherwise, why call the position antirealist?)” (Olson, 90-91).<sup>6</sup> Blackburn misdiagnoses the source of the unease, and Olson follows him; it is not the metaphysics of **projectivism** that create a problem for moral phenomenology, it is connecting it to a non-descriptivist – **expressivist** or **quasi-realist** – semantics for moral judgments. It is surprising that Olson makes this mistake since he quotes Mackie pointing out that “[non-cognitivist] analyses ‘leave out the apparent authority of ethics’ (Olson, 91).<sup>7</sup>

Blackburn must argue against Mackie’s **error theory** to demonstrate that a person should be a **projectivist-quasi-realist**, not a **projectivist-error theorist**. In pressing the bad faith objection to **error theory**, Blackburn charges that **error theorists** don’t really believe the two key tenets of **error theory**. However, by pressing **error theorists**, who come to the view via **projectivism**, to abandon **descriptivism** Blackburn pushes them into a position that falsifies the phenomenology of morality, which in turn undermines the **projectivist** explanation of morality. If the phenomenology is **realist**, it is difficult to see why a person would develop an **antirealist**

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<sup>5</sup> The quotation is from Russell’s “Reply to my Critics” in The Library of Living Philosophers’ anthology *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* edited by P. A. Schilpp.

<sup>6</sup> The quotation is from Blackburn-1985, 157. Earlier in the same article, Blackburn writes that while he believes the combination of **projectivism** and **quasi-realism** (read **expressivism**) supports and explains our moral practice, it still leaves people unsettled; they doubt that this is the true account of our inclination to adhere to moral codes. He compares nineteenth century philosophers to **projectivists**; the former found it hard to do ethics without God, while the latter find it hard to do ethics without objective moral properties. “It is the objective feel or phenomenology that people feel threatened by projectivism” (Blackburn-1985, 153).

<sup>7</sup> The quotation is from Mackie, 33.

semantics for expressing the experience. But this exposes a tension for Blackburn since he wants to be a **projectivist**, and yet that appears incompatible with his **quasi-realism**. Perversely, Blackburn's bad faith argument would push the **projectivist-error theorist** into choosing between the phenomenology and **antirealism**, with, I think, the **projectivist-error theorist** giving up **antirealism**, while at the same time invalidating the **projectivist** metaphysics which is to replace a **realist** metaphysics for morality.

### C.3 Error Theory and Revisionism

A second charge Blackburn makes is that an **error theorist** should revise his moral practice, but since Mackie did not, this casts doubt on **error theory** (Blackburn-1985a, 150). Blackburn claims, in effect, if you believe **error theory**, you should not make moral judgments, but it is not obvious why this is so. Blackburn would have to justify this by claiming that you should never act in ways that are inconsistent with your beliefs. It is usually good to act in ways that are consistent with your beliefs, e.g., you arrive at the station before 9:00 pm because you believe the train departs then. But, then there are instances when acting in ways incompatible with your beliefs are appropriate: believing the experimental cancer therapy will not work, but still taking it; believing marriage frequently results in divorce, but marrying; believing a publisher will not accept a manuscript, but sending it anyway. **Error theorists** might suggest that continuing to make moral judgments is worthwhile despite not believing them true.<sup>8</sup>

Suppose Blackburn is right that the **error theorist** must revise moral practice, and imagine, as Blackburn does, that Mackie has revised his practice to conform to **error theory**, and is not engaged in moral practice, but rather he is "schmoralizing" (Blackburn-1985a, 150).

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<sup>8</sup> This is just the case that moral fictionalists like Joyce (Joyce-2005) and Nolan, Restall, and West make (Nolan, Restall, West-2005). This answer will not do for Blackburn since he is on record as denying that all his **quasi-realism** achieves is to permit us to "talk as if kicking dogs is wrong, when 'really' it isn't wrong. I say that it is wrong..." (Blackburn-1998, 319).

Mackie's schmoralizing reflects the practice of making schmoral judgments, which resemble moral judgments in the deployment of identically shaped and sounding terms. To paraphrase Streumer's interpretation of the revision suggestion, Mackie has stopped using normative predicates to ascribe normative properties, and started using these predicates to express something different. Blackburn argues that since in such a situation it would be impossible to tell whether Mackie is schmoralizing or moralizing, there is no distinction between the two activities, and they are in fact the same practice; what Mackie would be doing is moralizing with a different theory (Blackburn-1985a, 150). If this is so, then the practice of moralizing, and its **realist** shape, cannot provide evidence for **error theory** in the form of supporting the belief that moral judgments express beliefs. Blackburn proposes that his **quasi-realism** supports the same practice of moralizing, so it is just as likely that moral judgments express attitudes.

The first response to this criticism is that it is only as good as **quasi-realism**; if **quasi-realism** does not support the practice of moralizing then it is not an alternative to **error theory** for **projectivists**. Chapter three of this work provided reason to think that **quasi-realism** is not sufficient for supporting moral practice. **Error theory** is the only viable option for a **projectivist** since **quasi-realism** cannot support the thesis that moral judgments express attitudes. The second response is that it is not altogether obvious that two groups of people who use terms and engage in activities that are identical in shape, sound, or form but have different meaning or significance are engaged in the same practice. I have in mind the practices of neo-pagan reconstructionists who replicate ancient pagan practices. In light of contemporary scientific knowledge, I cannot imagine that the terms and activities have the same meaning for modern practitioners of paganism as for ancient ones, and so their practices while identical in shape, sound, and form

must be significantly distinct. But, if this is correct, then it is possible that schmoralizing is not moralizing, and whatever **quasi-realists** do is not moralizing either.

#### **C.4 Error Theory and Eliminativism**

The bad faith argument does not undermine the plausibility that there are or can be genuine **error theorists**, and the revision argument does not demonstrate either that any practice identical in shape or form is moralizing or that there is a plausible alternative to believing that moral judgments express belief, given the failure of **quasi-realism**. But, as I discussed in chapter 6, the position that given **projectivism** moral practice needs to be revised, in the form of schmoralizing or **quasi-realism**, must be motivated, when there is the alternative of abandoning moral talk altogether.

Usually when we come to the conclusion that the putative entities or forces of a domain of discourse do not exist, the typically response is to stop using them. For example, people who deny there is any causal interaction between astronomical phenomena and human behavior abandon astrological talk, and when experiments revealed that some objects gained mass when burned, the phlogiston theory of combustion was abandoned. So, a challenge for any **moral antirealist** is to explain why if none of the entities of the moral domain of discourse exist, we shouldn't do away with making moral judgments; the view that advocates such a policy is **eliminativism**.

Blackburn may argue that the domains of discourse that are explained by **projectivism** are different than those that reflect attempts to explain the natural world by postulating independent forces or objects. These unique domains of discourse are different because internal mental activities explain them, and there is nothing inappropriate about preserving these domains. However, there are some domains of discourse like religion and psychological

projection, which many people think **projectivism** plausibly explains, and yet they still advocate **eliminativism** about religious talk or counsel a patient to stop talking about other people being disappointed in him when he is projecting his own disappointment. Blackburn ought to explain why morality is different than religion or psychological projection; he might compare morality to aesthetics to do so.

Aesthetics is another domain of discourse that **projectivism** may plausibly explain, but there is little call for **eliminativism** about aesthetic discourse. **Projectivists** about aesthetics could, in theory, continue aesthetic discourse in good conscience as long as it is accompanied by a revision to the language; in turn, Blackburn could insist that the moral and aesthetic are analogous in this way, and it is appropriate to revise moral practice along his **quasi-realist** line.

This comparison will fail because there are two important dissimilarities between aesthetics and morality. First, aesthetics – as it plays out in our lives – seems to be much more tolerant about divergent aesthetic judgments than morality, **realist** or **quasi-realist**, can hope to be. People engaged in aesthetic discourse do not face the same pressure to resolve disagreements in aesthetic judgment; fans of Dizzy Gillespie’s trumpet playing and fans of Miles Davis’ playing can dissent over who is superior, but their arguments over Gillespie’s and Davis’ merits are more good natured than moral arguments. The second way in which aesthetics and morality are not similar is that the **projectivist** and **quasi-realist** combination threaten to undermine the phenomenology of morality, but not aesthetics. As I argued in section C.1, the **projectivist-quasi-realist** combination yields unease that there is nothing to ethics, but it is hard to imagine the same unease in aesthetics; we are more ready to accept that beauty is in the eye of the beholder than morality is. Blackburn still faces the challenge of explaining why **eliminativism** about morality is not the best solution for a **projectivist**.

### C.5 Neither Revisionism nor Eliminativism

Mackie's **error theory** competes with Blackburn's **quasi-realism** as a supplement to **projectivism**; it is possible to be a **projectivist** and **error theorist** or a **projectivist** and **quasi-realist**, and Blackburn wants to argue we should be the latter, not the former. Blackburn seems to think that an **error theorist** should ask herself, "If moral judgments are systematically false because there are no moral properties corresponding to moral predicates, what should I do about moral talk?" The **error theorist** appears nonplussed by this question, she is pragmatic about moral talk: it is useful, so I will go on using it fictionally. Blackburn's arguments against **error theory** suggest that he thinks this response is intellectually dishonest or embarrassing; this response saves moral practice without justification. On the other hand, Blackburn saves moral practice by revising it with his **quasi-realist** project, which he thinks earns the right to continue using the same shapes, sounds, forms of moral practice.

Explaining why we should not be **eliminativists**, if we are **projectivists**, would justify the revisionist **quasi-realist** project (there are justificatory challenges within the **quasi-realist** project itself, which I discussed in sections 6.5 and 6.6, i.e., how to make morality mind-independent and how to construct moral truth), but Blackburn has not yet faced up to the challenge of **eliminativism**. The challenge reflects an assumption that *prima facie* analyses of moral judgments should be truth-conditional and following from a **projectivist** account of their origin some philosophers diagnose those who make moral judgments with error because the predicates in their judgment have no referents. But, the bad faith, revisionism, and **eliminativism** objections reflect a further diagnosis of compounded error – the continued deployment of moral judgments. Blackburn might consider rejecting the *prima facie* privileging of truth-conditional analyses of moral judgments.

So, Blackburn might contend that the actual and most plausible and natural analysis of moral judgments is the **quasi-realist** one; this inverts the typical conception of an **antirealist** project: an analysis of moral judgments that is not truth-conditional is the impetus for an **antirealist** metaphysics which uses **projectivism** to explain moral awareness. (This order of theoretical development rejects the contrast I drew between **realists** and **antirealists**; the former are trying to match the metaphysics to their moral practice, while the latter are trying to match the moral practice to their metaphysics.) This approach would reject both revisionism and **eliminativism** as responses to **projectivism** because there is no error to correct in the first place: we know we are not expressing beliefs when we make moral judgments.<sup>9</sup> There is scant evidence that Blackburn has this view, but I find some textual support for this in *Ruling Passions* when Blackburn describing **projectivism** writes, “[T]he moral proposition is created or invented or emerges naturally as the focus for our practical transactions,” and that “[w]e crossed Frege’s abyss by creating the ethical proposition” (Blackburn-1998, 70, 73).<sup>10</sup> Both, quotations suggest we intentionally developed or invented moral judgments, and Blackburn could plausibly maintain that we did so to express attitudes.

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<sup>9</sup> Another way of putting this is to suggest that for Blackburn, **quasi-realism** motivates **projectivism** – if moral judgments should be interpreted as **quasi-realism** requires, then **projectivism** is needed to explain that mental states that underlie moral judgments; but for the error theorist the situation is reversed: coming to understand that moral mental states are projections motivates an error theoretic account of moral judgments. If so, then the case for Blackburn’s **projectivism** is only as good as the prospects for completing the **quasi-realist** project, which I have argued are not good.

<sup>10</sup> Earlier textual evidence to support this interpretation can be found in *Spreading the Word*: “[An expressivist language] would invent a predicate answering to the attitude, and treat commitments as if they were judgments, and then use all the natural devices for debating truth. If this is right, our use of indirect contexts does not prove that an expressive theory of morality is wrong; it merely proves us to have adopted a form of expression adequate to our needs” (Blackburn-1984, 195).



I suspect Blackburn was tantalized by the prospect that it is transparent to us that a moral judgment expresses an attitude. Blackburn did not pursue this argument in any depth, but it would have generated more challenges to do so.<sup>11</sup> One problem he would have to address is if this process is transparent, why are there people, like me, who believe their moral judgments do express beliefs. A second issue he would face is whether it is possible to intend to express beliefs when uttering moral judgments. However, there is a larger problem for Blackburn; this approach is not compatible with **projectivism**. If the possibility of privileging a **quasi-realist** (or any **expressivist**) analysis of moral judgment were dependent on the origin of moral judgments being transparently non-cognitive, then Blackburn would have to give up **projectivism** to gain the privilege for **quasi-realism**. Recall, a metaphysics of morality that is **projectivist** must have these characteristics:

- MPi. moral experience has a **realist** phenomenology;
- MPii. there are no features of the world that correspond to moral experience;
- MPiii. moral experience is a projection that has its origins in a **non-cognitive** state that is a response to features of the world, i.e., is the culmination of a projective mechanism that begins with a **non-cognitive** response to features of the world;
  - MPiii.a. a moral experience is a projection if its explanation essentially appeals to non-inferential psychological facts about its subject;
  - MPiii.b. the explanation of a moral experience is opaque to the subject.
- MPiv. It is possible to characterize the **non-cognitive** state in terms other than the moral property whose experience it explains.

While it is not obvious that it is impossible to reconcile the transparency of our moral judgments originating in subjective attitudes with the objective phenomenology of morality, I cannot begin to imagine how it would be done; if Blackburn tries to reject **error theory** on these grounds, he risks falsifying the phenomenology. But, it does seem impossible for Blackburn to avoid **error theory** by arguing that we are and have been aware that our moral judgments start out as

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<sup>11</sup> Blackburn says that a person engaged in moral practice can know the “genesis” of this activity in “Morals and Modals” (Blackburn-1987, 72).

attitudes and respect condition MPiib; if we know our moral judgments are projections, then it seems the experience is not opaque, and a **projectivist** analysis of moral awareness is incorrect. Blackburn would have to develop a new, different metaphysics of morality.

## C.6 Conclusion and Future Considerations

At the outset of this essay I urged that because meta-ethical positions should be assessed as a package of metaphysical and semantic theories, we should only accept one meta-ethical position over another if we can accept both elements of the package. Some would suspect that the **realism-antirealism** debate in meta-ethics is at a stalemate since, traditionally, the semantic element in the **realist** package is thought to be more plausible than in the **antirealist** package, and the metaphysical element in the **antirealist** package is thought to be more plausible than in the **realist** package. In the early chapters of this work I outlined how the open-question argument spurred a generation of moral philosopher to research **antirealist** moral semantics by casting doubt on the possibility of a realist moral metaphysics; but I also pointed how arguments from Edwards, Baumrin, and Kripke and Putnam challenged the open-question argument, renewing the prospects of a **realist** moral metaphysics for the following generation. The supposed stalemate consists of **antirealists** trying to develop a semantics while **realists** try to develop a metaphysics, leaving us with no reason to choose one over the other.

The upshot of this essay is that with respect to one possible **antirealist** position, Blackburn's **projectivism** and **quasi-realism** combination, there is no stalemate – **moral realism** is more plausible. It is generally granted that the **realist** package has an attractive and acceptable semantics for morality, and in chapter 3 I demonstrated that **quasi-realism** is still not a satisfying alternative the **realist** account. If Blackburn wants, at least, to preserve the *status quo* of meta-ethical stalemate, he must be able to point to some metaphysical advantage for

**antirealism**. I have argued that the advantage cannot merely be denying moral properties and supporting **antirealism** with appeals to ontological parsimony; **antirealists** must describe the mechanism by which we come to moral awareness. I think Blackburn recognizes this need and proposes moral **projectivism** as the metaphysics of his meta-ethics.

Blackburn does not develop an account of this metaphysics; instead he invokes comparisons to Hume's moral and causal metaphysics to gesture at a picture of moral **projectivism**. In chapter 4 I tried to construct an account of what Blackburn's moral **projectivism** would probably look like by drawing on Hume's account of causation and general accounts of the elements of a **projectivist** account for a domain of human experience. To conclude that chapter I argued that **projectivism** is metaphysically suspect itself before going on to argue in chapter 5 that **projectivism** does not have any metaphysical advantage over **realism** in explaining how the moral supervenes on the natural. Subsequently, in chapter 6, I suggested that even if the **projectivist** account of moral awareness in chapter 4 is correct, it is incompatible with features of moral practice Blackburn wants to preserve. And, finally, in this conclusion, I argued that Blackburn cannot reject error-theory without undermining his **projectivism**.

The net effect is that Blackburn is unable to provide a consistent metaphysical element for his meta-ethical package. And, when this is paired with a semantic element that suffers in comparison to the semantic element in the **realist** package, there is no stalemate – **realism** is a more plausible meta-ethical position than Blackburn's.

This essay does not raise the following question, which I hope to address in the future: if **projectivism** is the correct metaphysics in the domains of morality, modality, and aesthetics, as Blackburn suggests in "Morals and Modals," how many other domains should we bring under the umbrella of a **projectivist** metaphysics? I worry – and Blackburn acknowledges this

problematic – that he will not be able to draw a line between the domains for which **projectivist** metaphysics is correct and those for which it is incorrect, reducing us to **idealism** (Blackburn-1984, 212). Blackburn believes that **idealism** is untenable because if we do not know the actual features of the world on which reactions depend, we do not have an explanation for the projections. I cannot see where Blackburn makes the case for which features of reality are not projections, and why they are not, so a future project is to try to marshal the case for which feature of reality are not projections from the resources Blackburn supplies, and examine if it is plausible. Another project that this dissertation suggests, then, is an exploration of whether empirical data supports a **projectivist** metaphysics or what kinds of empirical studies would be needed to test the hypothesis; to pursue this project would require drawing on the experimental methods developed in cognitive science and experimental philosophy.

Ultimately, I hope to have demonstrated that **moral realists** have a new line of attack against **non-cognitivist antirealists**, pressing them to explain the metaphysics that are paired with their semantic theories, and then scrutinizing them. This raises the prospect of future projects in metaethics: developing the metaphysics of other **antirealist** meta-ethics and critiquing them.

**Glossary of Terms  
(as used in this essay)**

**Antirealism:** a philosophical view which is typically defined in opposition to realism; this view denies that the objects of human experience and their qualities exist independent of humans thinking about them. (See realism.)

**Cognitivism:** the view that the mental states expressed by moral judgments are beliefs.

**Conative state:** a mental state characterized by being directed toward action, e.g., desires, volitions, wishes.

**Constructivism:** the view that within moral practice humans do not recognize mind independent moral facts; instead moral practice is a constructed system of principles or rules regulating human interactions.

**Descriptivism:** the view that the meaning of sentences can be explained in terms of what they are about; when applied to moral practice, it is the view that the meaning of moral judgments can be explained in terms of being about moral properties. This view is typically contrasted with expressivism.

**Eliminativism:** the view that if the elements of a domain do not exist, then reference to them should be purged from our discussion of the domain.

**Emotivism:** the view that a moral judgment expresses a mental state identified as a feeling or emotion rather than a proposition.

**Error theory:** the view that all of the propositions about a domain of inquiry are false because none of the purported elements within the domain exist.

**Expressivism:** the view that the meaning of moral judgments cannot be explained without reference to their function apart from any descriptive content that is part of their meaning; the function of moral language can be to express emotions, attitudes, commands, etc.

**Immaterialism:** the view that denies materialism.

**Intuitionism:** (a) the metaethical view that knowledge that certain moral propositions are true or false, in the realist sense, is constituted by direct intuition, and not by inference contra; (b) this views should not be conflated with the Kantian idea that intuition is the faculty of the understanding by which a representation of an object acquired by the senses is converted to an appearance which is the object of experience for the subject.

**Logical positivism:** a philosophical movement characterized especially by its commitment to verificationism, the view that a statement can only be cognitively meaningful if it is analytic or empirically verifiable.

**Materialism:** the view that everything that exists is composed of matter.

**Metaphysical moral realism:** the view that the goodness, immorality, kindness, deceitfulness, evilness, etc. of people, act, circumstances can be explained in terms of supernatural properties, e.g., God's will; moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances.

**Moral antirealism:** the view that human beings' experience of people, acts, circumstances as good, immoral kind, deceitful, evil, etc. are not the product of features of the world that are themselves good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc. independent of human beings thinking them so. The various versions of moral antirealism offer different accounts of these experiences.

**Moralize:** to engage in an activity constitutive of the practice of morality.

**Moral projectivism:** the view that the moral properties which people engaged in moral practice reference do not exist independently of human beings, and that instead they are the product of non-cognitive reactions to natural properties.

**Moral realism:** the view that there are people, acts, circumstances that are good, immoral, kind, deceitful, evil, etc., and they would be so if human beings did not think them so; moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances.

**Moral relativism:** the view that the moral status of a person or action is determined by a culture or society's attitude toward it.

**Moral skepticism:** the view that objective values do not exist.

**Motivational internalism:** the view that moral commitments are intrinsically motivating.

**Naturalistic moral realism:** the view that the goodness, immorality, kindness, deceitfulness, evilness, etc. of people, act, circumstances can be explained in terms of natural properties, identified by the natural sciences or psychology, which are causal or detectable by the senses; moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances.

**Non-cognitivism:** the view that the mental states expressed by moral judgments are not beliefs.

**Non-naturalistic moral realism:** the view that the goodness, immorality, kindness, deceitfulness, evilness, etc. of people, acts, circumstances cannot be explained in an non-moral terms even though such people, acts, circumstances do have *sui generis* moral properties independent of human beings thinks they do; moral judgments, thus, may be true or false whether or not they accurately describe such people, acts, or circumstances.

**Prescriptivism:** the view that the meanings of moral judgments are their function to issue commands that are universally applicable to all people in similar circumstances.

**Projectivism:** the view that the putative features of a domain do not exist independently of human beings experiencing those features, and that instead they are the products of internal mental processes that produce an experience that the features exist independently of human beings.

**Quasi-realism:** Simon Blackburn's project of earning the right to deploy moral judgments in all the ways supported by descriptivism and realism even though the meaning of moral judgments is explained by referring to their function to express non-cognitive mental states.

**Realism:** the view that the features of human experience are the products of objects and circumstances which cause and resemble them, and these objects and circumstance exist independent of human beings thinking of them; sentences are true or false whether or not they accurately describe such objects or circumstances. Realism can be augmented to reflect a view about a specific domain of human experience; see moral realism.

**Relativism:** the view that the sentences of a domain express the same proposition in different contexts, but their truth value can legitimately vary across contexts. Within moral practice moral relativism is the view that a moral judgment's truth value may not be identical in all contexts.

**Skepticism:** view that there is not sufficient evidence to support a claim of knowledge in some domain of inquiry; local skepticism limits the claim to a specific domain of inquiry, while global skepticism extends the claim to all domains of inquiry.

**Subjective Idealism:** the view that the only things that exist are minds, and objective reality is dependent on the existence of these minds to perceive it to exist.

**Subjectivism:** the view that the meaning of moral judgments is explained by identifying their function with describing the speaker's feelings or attitudes.



**Supervenience:** the relation by which one level of properties is connected to another level of properties in which the second level of properties determines the first level, but the first level is not reducible to the second level of properties; the rough idea is that if one level of properties *A*, supervene on another level of properties *B*, then for any two things that are identical at the level of *B* properties, they are also identical at the level of *A* properties. In moral philosophy, Hare introduced the term to characterize the relation between moral properties and psychological and/or natural properties. However, as early as 1922, Moore had introduced the notion of supervenience, but not the term, “supervenience,” to moral philosophy in “The Conception of Intrinsic Value.”

**Theism:** understood broadly, the view that at least one divine being exists.

**Truth-conditional semantics:** the view that the meaning of a sentence is established by the conditions under which it would be true.

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