TRUTH IN ETHICS[1]

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I

The tradition of anti-realist thought about ethics – manifest in the
desire to make some sort of disadvantageous comparison, in point
of its objectivity or the reality of the states of affairs with which it
deals, between moral discourse and, say, the discourses of
mathematics and physical science – is no doubt as old as moral
philosophy itself. In modern times the anti-realist tendency has
typically cast itself as a denial that moral statements are *true*. And
this denial has in turn taken two quite different shapes. Some, like
John Mackie,[2] have been willing to grant that moral discourse has
all the semantical features necessary to aim at truth – that it trades
in genuine assertions, apt to be true or false as literally construed –
but have gone on to contend that it sweepingly and systematically
fails in that aim. It does so because the truth of its statements
would call for items of a metaphysically outlandish sort – queer,
intrinsically reason-giving properties, for which our best science
can find no explanatory use and which seem to promise no hope of
reduction to the properties it does use. But this view contrasts
sharply with an idea of Hume, befriended by A. J. Ayer and R. M.
Hare and more recently developed by Simon Blackburn and Alan
Gibbard,[3] that although moral discourse wears a surface of
assertoric content, its *deep* syntax is different – that it provides a

[1] This paper is a lightly edited version of what I actually presented at the Reading
Conference of the same name. Readers of my *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 1992) may experience what Quine once called a sense of *deja lu*, for the
paper is in essentials merely a collation of some of the thoughts about ethics that featured in
that book along the way.

[2] J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

[3] The *loci classici* of modern ethical expressivism are of course the famous 'Critique of
Ethics and Theology' offered in ch. 6 of Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Victor
Gollancz, 1936); and R. M. Hare's *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
1952). An invaluable précis of Hare's current views is provided by his 'Universal
Prescriptivism', ch. 40 of P. Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell,
1991). Ch. 6, 'Evaluations, Projections and Quasi-realism', of Blackburn's *Spreading the Word*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) remains the best introduction to his view;
A. Gibbard's ideas are developed systematically in his *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge,
MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

medium not for the depiction of facts but rather for the expression
of *attitudes*. According to this expressivist form of moral anti-
realism, both moral realism and its error-theoretic opposition are
guilty of a mistake comparable to the assumption of a truth
condition for an indicative sentence which is actually being used to
express a rule, or an order.

That these tendencies have had distinguished adherents and are
of long standing ought not to blind us to how unlikely it is that
either can serve a satisfactory moral philosophy. The Mackie view
allows that a moral thinker quests for truth, and uses a discourse
which, at least as far as its semantics is concerned, is fitted to that
project. But the world lets the moral thinker down; there are no real
moral properties out there, no moral facts. The great discomfort
with such a view is that, unless more is said, it simply relegates
moral discourse to bad faith. Whatever we may once have thought,
as soon as philosophy has taught us that the world is unsuited to
confer truth on any of our claims about what is right, or wrong, or
obligatory, etc., the reasonable response ought surely to be to forgo
making any such claims. That wouldn't be to forgo the right to any
form of moral sentiment, I suppose. But it would, apparently, be to
forgo any conception of a *proper basis* for such sentiment – to forgo
the point of reasoned appreciation and debate about what is moral,
and of criticism of others' opinions about it. Such consequences are
surely calamitous. If it is of the essence of moral judgement to aim
at the truth, and if philosophy teaches us that there is no moral
truth to hit, how are we supposed to take ourselves seriously in
thinking the way we do about any issue which we regard as of
major moral importance? How can opinions which cool philo-
sophical reflection teaches are no better than superstition be
rationally permitted to constrain one's actions in the way that
moral opinions distinctively do?

One form of response to this kind of difficulty which has found
favour with error-theorists generally is to seek to disclose some
other purpose for the discourse in question, some norm of appraisal
besides truth, at which its statements can be seen as aimed, and
which they can satisfy. Hartry Field's[4] nominalist play with the
idea of *conservativeness* in pure mathematics precisely represents an
attempt at such a strategy: in Field's view, pure mathematical
statements are typically literally false – since their truth would call

for metaphysically outlandish objects of various kinds – but we may rationally endorse them nevertheless because their falsity does not compromise their *inferential utility*: when adjoined to metaphysically pukka, non-outlandish statements of whatever sort, they allow for the derivation only of consequences that independently follow from those statements (which makes them harmless), and typically greatly facilitate the construction of such derivations (which makes them useful).

But this strategy invites what seems to me a very good question: if, among the welter of falsehoods which we enunciate in moral discourse, there is a good distinction to be drawn between those which are acceptable in the light of some such subsidiary norm and those which are not – a distinction which actually informs ordinary discussion and criticism of moral claims – then why insist on construing *truth* for moral discourse in terms which motivate a charge of global error, rather than explicate it in terms of the satisfaction of the putative subsidiary norm, whatever it is? The question may have a good answer. The error-theorist may be able to argue that the superstition that he finds in ordinary moral thought goes too deep to permit any construction of moral truth which avoids it to be acceptable as an account of *moral* truth. But I do not know of promising argument in that direction.

The prospects for a satisfying moral expressivism seem to me to be equally doubtful. Moral discourse is *disciplined* to a very great degree. Acceptable moral opinion is not just a matter of what feels comfortable, but has to survive appraisal by quite refined and complicated standards. Moral argument can be difficult, and its conclusions unobvious. But to whatever extent such generally acknowledged underlying standards inform the appraisal of particular moral judgements and argument, to that extent the claim that moral discourse is not genuinely assertoric but serves merely as a medium for the expression of attitude will seem unmotivated in contradistinction to the idea that the truth predicate which applies within it is some sort of construct out of the relevant species of discipline. And the force of this complaint is greatly enhanced (so it seems to me, though I do not pretend to a command of all the most recent expressivist manoeuvres) by the fact that we do not seem yet to have been provided with any clear and workable idea of how to construe discourses which exhibit all the overt syntactic trappings of assertion – negation, the conditional construction, embedding within propositional attitudes, hypothesis and inference and so on – in such a way that the contents involved are not assertoric but are

presented with illocutionary force of quite a different kind, apt to the expression of attitude.

It's worth briefly illustrating this with reference to a well-known proposal of Simon Blackburn's.[5] Consider the following sample argument:

> *Premise* 1 Stealing is wrong.
> *Premise* 2 If stealing is wrong, conniving at stealing is wrong.
> ∴ *Conclusion* Conniving at stealing is wrong.

This is a moral *modus ponens* – a very simple, valid piece of moral reasoning. What account can the expressivist offer of its validity? Well, if moral statements are not strictly speaking assertions, then the major premise 2 cannot be an assertion either – you cannot make an assertion by yoking together non-assertions with a binary connective; indeed the ordinary conditional cannot be so much as grammatically applied to an antecedent that is not assertoric. So what is the logical form of premise 2? All the expressivist can offer, it seems, is that it is the expression of a complex attitude – a *conditional* attitude: roughly, to affirm 2 is to endorse taking a negative moral attitude towards conniving at stealing if a negative moral attitude is taken towards stealing itself.

Now the striking effect of this – essentially Blackburn's – construal of the content of the two premises is that there will be at the worst a *moral* failing on the part of one who accepts them but fails to possess the attitude which would be expressed by an endorsement of the conclusion. If I disapprove of stealing, and applaud disapproval of conniving on the part of anyone who disapproves of stealing, yet do not myself disapprove of conniving, then I merely fail to have an attitude of which, were I to have it, I would, in the circumstances, approve. I fail to live up to my values, if you like. That is a lapse; but it is not the grotesque lapse of rationality that ought to be involved in a failure to accept the stated conclusion on the part of one who accepts the premises 1 and 2. If the expressivist doesn't have the resources to find the more grotesque, rational failing, that's a sure sign there's something wrong with the account.

Expressivists, including Blackburn, have had other proposals to make about this particular type of difficulty, of course. But one inclined to an intuitive anti-realism about morals – to the kind of disadvantageous comparison that I mentioned – ought to worry

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[5] See *Spreading the Word*, ch. 6.

about a direction of development of his basic intuition which holds out so substantial a hostage to syntactico-reconstructive fortune. And if expressivism grinds to a stop on this type of difficulty, can it really be that only error-theory – the classification of morality as superstition – can provide a vehicle for the anti-realist?

That will certainly be the situation if to concede truth to moral statements is to concede realism. In that case the only anti-realist options must involve the denial of truth, either because moral statements are not so much as truth-apt or because, though truth-apt, they are largely false. But what we want, of course, is a way of casting the anti-realist intuition which is consistent with the integrity of moral discourse and argument, and which allows us to take a moral point of view with a clean intellectual conscience. Conversely, it doesn't seem as though the failings of error-theory and expressivism should count as establishing realism by elimination. So there had better be another shape for ethical anti-realism to take. But what shape?

II

Here is one proposal. We need to win through to a conception of truth which allows us to grant truth-aptitude, and indeed truth, to responsible judgements within a given discourse without thereby conceding a realist view of it. Such a view will hold that to ascribe truth to a statement need not be to ascribe a property of intrinsic metaphysical *gravitas*, that any sentence is a candidate for truth which is possessed of assertoric content, and that possession of assertoric content is essentially a matter of meeting certain syntactic and disciplinary constraints – essentially, sentences are assertoric which are capable of significant embedding within constructions such as negation, the conditional, and in contexts of propositional attitude, and whose use is subject to acknowledged standards of warrant. When such standards are satisfied that will then suffice, other things being equal, defeasibly to justify the claim that the sentence in question is true.

Now there is, of course, on the market a long-standing conception of truth which accomplishes all this – the so-called *deflationary* conception, according to which 'true' may indeed significantly be predicated of all sentences in the catchment just outlined, without heavyweight metaphysical commitment, precisely because the word does not express a real property at all but is only a device of *endorsement*, a device we need only because we sometimes

want to endorse a statement given by a noun phrase, like 'Riemann's Hypothesis' or 'what he just said', which does not specify its content, or because we want to endorse whole batches of statements at once ('Most of what he said is true'). But the deflationary conception will not serve our present purpose. I have argued elsewhere[6] that to accept that a truth predicate can be defined upon any discourse which counts as assertoric in the sense we are concerned with, and to accept that any such predicate must be governed by the Disquotational Scheme:

  'p' is true if and only if p,

enforces the recognition (i) that the word 'true' will record a norm governing assertion and belief-formation which is distinct from assertibility, i.e. warrant by whatever standards inform the discourse in question, and (ii) that its compliance or non-compliance with *this* norm can hardly fail to be reckoned to be a substantial property of a statement. I won't rehearse the considerations that drive that conclusion now. What I want to dwell on for a minute is how it might be possible for the anti-realist to grant that moral discourse may be truth apt, and to allow – as the error-theorist cannot – that ordinary good grounds for a particular moral opinion are indeed grounds for taking it to be true, while retaining room for conceiving of truth as a substantial property, and so avoiding deflationism.

  Consider a parallel with the concept of identity. In one sense the notion of identity is invariant as we consider different ranges of individuals. Its invariance is sustained by uniform inferential links, grounded in the twin platitudes that everything is self-identical and that identicals share all their properties. Nevertheless what *constitutes* identity is subject to considerable variation as we vary the kind of objects with which we are concerned. Thus the identity of material objects is arguably constituted by spatio-temporal continuity; identity and distinctness among numbers, on the other hand, according to Frege's famous account, are dictated by relations of one-one correspondence among associated concepts; the shapes of plane figures are identified and distinguished by relations of geometrical similarity among them; identity among directions of lines is constituted by relations of parallelism between lines; and it is notoriously elusive what constitutes identity for

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[6] See *Truth and Objectivity*, ch. 1, § III.

persons, though considerations of bodily and psychological con-
tinuity call the shots.

The notion of 'constitution' here invoked could no doubt be
usefully clarified, but I see no reason to question the authenticity of
the general idea that the instantiation of a certain concept may be
constituted in different ways, depending on the kind of instantiators
concerned. So: identity is one concept, but what constitutes the
identity of a with b may vary, depending on the type of individual a
and b are. Evidently there is space for a corresponding contention
about truth. There need be no single, discourse-invariant thing in
which truth consists. Depending on the type of statement with
which we are concerned, the constitution of truth may sometimes
reside in factors congenial to an intuitive realism, sometimes not.

I should emphasise, lest there be any misunderstanding, that the
pluralism I am canvassing would not involve the idea that 'true' is
ambiguous, any more than a corresponding conclusion is invited
about 'is identical to'. An ambiguous term typically needs a variety
of explanations, each determining a different extension for it. But if
we can make out the parallel with identity, we will succeed in
disclosing a basic set of principles – corresponding to the reflexivity
and unrestricted congruence of identity – which will govern the
concept of truth in all areas of discourse. These principles will
enshrine all that can be said in general about the explanation of the
word, and to that extent its meaning will be uniform. Moreover one
such principle will certainly be the Disquotational Scheme, which
will ensure that any pair of predicates each of which qualifies as a
truth predicate for a given discourse will have to coincide in
extension. 'True', therefore, cannot be ambiguous as are 'stage',
'still', and 'rush'.

What might be the principles which such a view of truth could
call upon to play the analogous role to reflexivity and unrestricted
congruence in the case of identity? Well, a place should certainly be
found for the Disquotational Scheme, on which traditional de-
flationism more or less exclusively focuses. But lurking behind the
Disquotational Scheme is the more fundamental thesis that to
assert is to present as true. Other relevant principles would be:

  that to every truth-apt content corresponds a truth-apt
  negation;

  that a content is true just in case it corresponds to the facts,
  depicts things as they are, and so on;

  that truth and justification are distinct;

that truth is absolute – there is no being more or less true;

that truth is stable – if a content is ever true, it always is.

Arguable further additions would concern the connections between truth and transformations of tense and other indexicals, and principles concerning other connectives besides negation. The controlling thought remains that to be a truth predicate is merely to satisfy a set of very general, very intuitive a priori laws – in effect, the platitudes noted and their kin.

Investigation discloses that any discourse which is assertoric in the sense we are concerned with – a discourse meeting the basic disciplinary and syntactic constraints outlined – will allow the definition upon it of a predicate which satisfies all these platitudes about truth.[7] Since, according to the view proposed, there is no more to an expression's being a truth predicate than its satisfaction of those platitudes, there will accordingly be no room left for the expressivist view that, appearances to the contrary, such a discourse does not really deal in truth-apt contents.[8] Equally, since the Disquotational Scheme will control the truth predicate in question, reason to accept any statement of the discourse in question will be reason to regard it as true, and there will be no space for the sort of metaphysical rift between truth and justification by ordinary standards which is the error-theorist's stock-in-trade.

III

That, then, is the outline of an approach that might provide what we want – a perspective on truth and truth-aptitude which will allow the moral anti-realist to grant that moral discourse enjoys both without jettison of the idea that truth is a real property. But I have merely sketched a shape. What needs to be indicated now,

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[7] For synopsis of the relevant considerations, see *Truth and Objectivity*, ch. 2, § I, and ch. 3, § I.

[8] This claim has proved to seem too swift to some, who have urged that it should be consistent with a discourse's sustaining a predicate which satisfies all the platitudes noted that it fail to provide a medium for the expression of *belief* – conceived, à la Hume, as, unlike both desire and e.g. ethical attitude, an intrinsically unmotivational state. Since it is plausibly also a platitude that beliefs are what sincere assertions express, it would follow that the assertoric character of moral discourse in particular is not so easily secured. The issue is usefully debated in the contributions by M. Smith (twice), J. Divers and A. Miller, and P. Horwich to the symposium on 'Expressivism and Truth' in *Analysis* 54 (1994), pp. 1–26. The objection is also pressed by F. Jackson in his review of *Truth and Objectivity* in *Philosophical Books* 35 (1994), pp. 162–9. I respond in the same number of that journal, pp. 169–75.

pursuing the analogy with identity, are counterparts of the ways in which identity can be variously constituted among varying kinds of identicals, some ways of being true being more, and some less congenial to intuitive realist and anti-realist inclination.

Consider any type of opinion for which we feel we can pretend to no conception of how truth might lie beyond human recognition in principle. Opinion about what is and isn't funny would seem to provide one example. Disagreement in such opinions may of course be intractable in principle, but in such a case we shall hesitate to regard either conflicting opinion as true. What seems to make no sense is the idea of a situation being determinate in comic quality, as it were, although human beings are simply not empowered, even in principle, to recognise that quality. By contrast, many would be comfortable with the idea that in some areas of enquiry the connection between prosecution of best method and getting at the truth is, at bottom, 'serendipitous', so that, for example, the internally blameless prosecution of best scientific method by theorists with somewhat different starting points may lead to the generation of incompatible but rationally incommensurable scientific theories.

Some forms of realist construal of the content of moral judgements – those which see moral truth as grounded in the will of God, for example, or as a potentially incalculable function of social utility – would have the effect of placing morality in the latter camp. But many would feel that there is little, if any, more sense than in the case of comedy to be given to the idea that moral quality may in principle outreach the efforts of an ordinarily receptive, careful moral thinker. Now one very important consideration – which needs detailed substantiation I can't provide now – is that when a region of thought has that feature, viz. that no clear sense can be attached to the idea that it provides means for the expression of truths which human beings are constitutionally incapable of recognising, then the concept I have elsewhere given the somewhat ungainly title of *superassertibility* will effectively function as a truth predicate: that is, superassertibility will validate the basic platitudes about truth which, according to the approach I have outlined, are constitutive of the notion.[9]

Superassertibility, as the term suggests, is a construction out of ordinary assertibility. Ordinary assertibility is relative to a state of information: it is as assessed in a particular informational

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[9] See *Truth and Objectivity*, ch. 2, §§ V and, more especially, VI.

context that statements are or are not assertible. Superassertibility, by contrast, is an absolute notion: a statement is superassertible if it is assertible in some state of information and then remains so no matter how that state of information is enlarged upon or improved.

It is instructive to compare superassertibility with the conception of truth, also constructed out of assertibility, favoured by some of the American pragmatists. C. S. Peirce conceived of truth as what is assertible – justified – at some ideal limit of enquiry, when all relevant information is in. Superassertibility, by contrast, avoids play with arguably mythical limits: it is a matter of enduring assertibility under an ideally prosecuted, indefinitely continuing investigation, rather than of assertibility attained when such an investigation is somehow completed.

I suspect that some, though probably not all, of the criticisms frequently levelled at the claims of the Peircian notion to amount to a concept of truth could have been deflected if pragmatists had worked with superassertibility instead. But however that may be, it should be clear that any assertoric discourse, disciplined by acknowledged standards of acceptability for its statements, must allow the definition on the back of those standards of a species of superassertibility: it will be a matter of justification in the light of those standards in a particular context, and of the survival of that justification no matter how much additional relevant information is accrued. There is therefore the option, for those who are content to think of morals as analogous to comedy in the relevant respect, of thinking of moral truth as a kind of superassertibility: the morally true is that which can be morally justified and which then retains that justification no matter how refined or extensive an additional consideration is given to the matter.

Moral superassertibility, so described, is vague and highly abstract. But the important thing about it comes across even at this level of characterisation. It is that it is a *language-game internal* notion, as it were. Superassertibility is a projection of whatever internal discipline informs a discourse (and such discipline there has to be if we are dealing in genuine contents). To think of a discourse as dealing with truth-apt contents, accordingly, need involve, when truth is conceived as superassertibility, no work for a type of idea which is absolutely central to traditional realist thinking: the idea of *correspondence*, of representation of real, external states of affairs. When truth is so conceived, various relations between truth and superassertibility will be possible. The super-assertibility of a statement may be *explained* by its being true (if

our standards of acceptability track the truth) or the two concepts may diverge in extension (if they do not). But there will be no *identity*. One basic form of opposition between realist and anti-realist views of a discourse will be between those who think of the truth of a statement as constituted in some substantial relation of fit or representation – the traditional imagery of the mirror – and those who conceive, or might as well conceive, of truth as superassertibility, as durable satisfaction of the discourse's internal disciplinary constraints.

Before developing that a little, let me pause to note how the looseness of the notion of moral superassertibility, as so far characterised, immediately allows an important fragmentation within the anti-realist camp. Moral truth, for the anti-realist, will be durable justifiability in the light of the standards that discipline ordinary moral thinking. But which standards are those? There is nothing in the proposal to pre-empt all belief in moral progress – belief in the possibility of a gradual refinement of moral thinking and of a gradual convergence in moral points of view, stabilised by the standards that are the very products of that refinement. But that optimistic conception contrasts with two possible others. Some will be tempted to view the detail of the discipline to which moral thinking is subjected as essentially *local* – to a culture, or a nation, or a period, or an age-group – and will want to deny that moral thinking embodies any intrinsic dynamic towards convergence across widely differing standpoints. The discipline is real enough, on this view, but it is essentially a parochial form of discipline and it is merely a sociological question how far the parish can be made to extend. Finally, and less optimistic still, there is space for the *irrealist* or nihilist view that the whole notion of the discipline to which moral discourse is subject is a sort of charade, an illusion comparable to that which, in Wittgenstein's view, conditions the idea that there could be a language fit for the description of sensations conceived as Cartesian private objects. (Such a view of morals seems evidently to fly in the face of the social facts. I mention it only to indicate how the general map of the issues which I'm proposing does leave a corner for the irrealist to try to occupy.)

Reverting to the issue of realism, there may seem to be a tension between the suggestion that the hallmark of a realist conception of truth is its implication of the notion of representation, or fit, and the inclusion, among the set of basic platitudes constitutive of any truth predicate, of one to the effect that to be true is to correspond to the facts. It is crucial to see that this is not really a difficulty. It is

indeed a platitude that a statement is true if and only if it
corresponds to the facts. But it is so only in so far as we understand a
statement's correspondence to fact to involve no more than that
matters stand as it affirms. For reflect that if 'p' says that p, then
matters will stand as 'p' affirms if and only if p. Since by the
Disquotational Scheme, 'p' is true if and only if p, it follows that
matters stand as 'p' affirms just in case 'p' is true – essentially the
Correspondence Platitude. What this simple argument brings out,
however, is not that there is no alternative to a realist conception of
truth – that realism is built into the core of the notion – but rather
that the phraseology of correspondence may embody much less of a
metaphysical commitment than realism supposes. Correspondence
phraseology – and all the paraphrases of it that we are likely to
think of – are co-licensed, as it were, with talk of truth. But since, as
just illustrated, the Correspondence Platitude is a *derived* platitude,
it follows that such talk need have no more content than flows into
it, so to speak, from the parent platitudes that license that
derivation. On the surface, the Correspondence Platitude takes us
from a predicate, 'true', to a relation, and lays it down as necessary
and sufficient for the predicate to apply to a statement that the
latter bears that relation to a suitably designated object-term. I
suggest that the question for the realist has to be whether our
understanding of what it is for this relation to obtain has, in the
case of any particular discourse, *more* to it than can be derived from
the co-permissibility of the claim that it obtains with the claim that
a relevant statement is true, and the co-permissibility of the latter
with the claim that the statement is assertible. *That* much
understanding is what is bestowed by the derivability of the
Correspondence Platitude from the minimal platitudes concerning
any truth predicate. The realist – one who holds to a contrast
between a representational conception of truth, so to say, and
superassertibility, and maintains that it is the former which
operates in a favoured region of discourse – owes us some addi-
tional substance to his talk of 'representation', 'correspondence',
and 'facts', which the Correspondence Platitude, as a mere
platitude, is insufficient to ensure.

   Naturally, there can only be two places to look for such
additional substance. One is the relational term – the idea of
representation, or correspondence. Here the quest will be for some
additional aspect to our understanding of the relational term,
exceeding anything imposed by its liaison with the minimal
platitudes, which somehow gives a point to realist intuition in

the area of discourse in question. The other course is to work on the object term – *the facts* – and, once again, to try to show how we are committed, in that area, to a more robust conception of them than is entrained merely by the ubiquitous permission to gloss 'is true' as 'corresponds to the facts'.

In the space I have remaining, I'll try rapidly to indicate how some quite familiar considerations from the debates concerning moral realism slot neatly into this perspective, tending to show – if they are correct – that the would-be moral realist cannot live up to the demands of the kind of robustly representational conception of truth by which I am proposing that realism generally should define itself. Then in conclusion I'll offer some brief, necessarily inadequate reflections about why, as it seems to me at least, the failure of moral realism would not have to be a matter of concern.

IV

The thought of a realist – unless he is pessimistic enough to think that what is true in the relevant region of discourse is altogether beyond our ken – is that responsibly to practise in that region is to enter into a kind of representational mode of cognitive function, comparable in relevant respects to, say, taking a photograph or making a wax impression of a key. Certain matters stand thus and so independently of us (compare the photographed scene and the contours of the key). We engage in a certain process, to wit, we put ourselves at the mercy, so to speak, of the standards of appraisal appropriate to the discourse in question (compare taking the snapshot or impressing the key on the wax). And the result is to leave an imprint in our minds which, in the best case, appropriately matches the independently standing state of affairs.

Philosophers, most notably the early Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin,[10] have of course tried to be much more definite about this type of conception. But even vaguely so presented, it does have certain quite definite obligations. If we take photographs of the *same* scene which somehow turn out to represent it in incompatible ways, there has to have been some kind of shortcoming in the function of one of the cameras, or in the way it was used. If the wax

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[10] The *locus classicus* for Austin's view, of course, is his 'Truth', originally in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* suppl. vol. 24 (1950), and reprinted in his collected *Philosophical Papers*, edited by J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edition 1970).

impressions we take of a single key turn out to be of such a shape
that no one key can fit them both, then again there has to have been
some fault in the way we went about it, or in the materials used.
The price you pay for taking the idea of representation in the
serious way the realist wants to take it is that when subjects'
representations prove to conflict, then (prescinding from certain
necessary qualifications, mainly to do with vagueness, which I
won't elaborate now) there has to have been something amiss with
the way they were arrived at or with their vehicle – the wax, the
camera, or the thinker. Accordingly, one obligation of the moral
realist will be to hold, and therefore to justify holding, that moral
disagreements, since they involve a clash of what purport to be
substantial representations, have to involve defects of process or
materials: at least one of the protagonists has to be guilty of a
deficiency in the way he arrives at his view, or to be somehow
constitutionally unfit.

That is an obligation imposed by an attempt to imbue the notion
of representation, or correspondence, with a more full-blooded
content than it derives from the Correspondence Platitude. The
second obligation derives from the correlative attempt to find
additional substance in 'the facts' to which true statements
correspond. Broadly, it ought to be possible to justify conceiving of
such facts as just as robust and independent of the practice of the
discourse in which we supposedly aim to represent them as are
the photographed scene and the impressed key. What would that
involve?

What needs to be shown is that the relevant beliefs are exactly an
epiphenomenon – that they are, as it were, driven by the facts. And it
is hard to see how that might be shown except by showing how the
primary phenomena – the states of affairs such beliefs allegedly
represent – display other forms of impact upon and interaction
within the wider world than are involved in their connections with
the epiphenomena. It is unclear how to think about the matter
except along these broad lines.

The second obligation on the realist is therefore exactly the dual
of an alleged obligation that an influential recent debate – I'm
thinking of that involving Harman, Wiggins and the so-called
Cornell Realists[11] – has pivoted around. That debate involves a

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[11] See G. Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Ch.
1 is reprinted as 'Ethics and Observation' in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism*
(Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). David Wiggins's principal contributions to the
debate are Essay IV of his *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 156, and

challenge to the realist to explain how moral states of affairs contribute to the best explanation of moral beliefs. What I am urging that the realist had better be able to do, by contrast, is to explain how moral states of affairs contribute to the explanation of things *other than* moral beliefs.

Of course, the two areas of obligation need more refined presentation and discussion. But enough has maybe been said to indicate why the ante-post betting might favour the anti-realist. As far as the first obligation is concerned, it is of course evident that moral disagreements can be and frequently are attributable to confused thinking, factual ignorance, and sheer prejudice. But the obligation imposed by a robust reading of the notion of representation is to show that deficiency *has* to be involved in the generation of any such dispute (prescinding from the irrelevant case of vagueness). Any student of morality who has come to feel, therefore, that a substantial body of the principles that inform our ordinary moral thought are essentially contestable, and that no rational or cognitive deficiency is needed to sustain the clashes on things like sexual morality, the value of individual freedom, the moral status of animals, and the ethics of suicide and mercy-killing, which are freely exemplified within and across cultures, won't give much for the realist's chances.

As far as the second obligation is concerned, we have to ask: of the obtaining of what states of affairs might the obtaining of moral states of affairs contribute towards the explanation? Much of the detail of the debate about the best explanation of moral belief to which I alluded is of course relevant to this question. But without going into that, it is difficult to see that matters can in the end turn out very satisfactorily from a realist point of view. What is there that is so strictly because such-and-such a *moral* state of affairs obtains – a state of affairs, say, of the general form: such-and-such circumstances impose such-and-such an obligation upon an agent who meets certain conditions?

By way of comparison consider the state of affairs of a pond's being frozen over. Reference to the ice-covering on the pond can

contribute towards explaining at least four distinct kinds of thing:

(a) someone's perceiving, and hence believing, that the pond is
    frozen;
(b) the tendency of the goldfish to cluster towards the bottom of
    the pond;
(c) someone's slipping and falling when stepping onto the surface;
(d) the tendency of a Celsius thermometer to read zero when
    placed on the surface.

The ice-covering on the pond can be ascribed, that is, each of four
kinds of consequence: cognitive effects; effects on sentient, but non-
conceptual creatures; effects on us as physically interactive agents;
and certain brute effects on inanimate matter. By contrast,
although some philosophers have made a case that moral facts can
contribute towards the explanation of agents' moral beliefs, the
kind of fact about obligation cited would seem unfitted to play any
part in the *direct* – that is, propositional-attitude -unmediated
– explanation of any effects of the latter three sorts: it is hard to
think of anything which is true of sentient but non-conceptual
creatures, or of mobile organisms, or of inanimate matter, which is
true because such a moral fact obtains and in whose explanation it
is unnecessary to advert to anyone's appreciation of that moral
fact.[12]

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Naturally, these reflections ought to leave a realist unmoved who
conceives that morality is backed by some sort of external sanction,
either on traditional theological lines or because some naturalistic
reconstruction of moral fact is proposed. But it seems to me that
there would some unclarity at this point about the motives of a
moral realist who, as a way of maintaining the line, proposed to *seek*
some such reconstruction. For what should a sensible moral realist
want which cannot be incorporated in the kind of anti-realism
which, viewing truth as a real property, grants the truth-aptitude of
moral discourse, and allows that responsible moral opinion may
justifiably claim to be true?

   [12] The limitation gestured at here is meant to be *a priori*: it is not that moral facts are
merely accidentally lazy, as it were. Accidental laziness would not be enough to create a
tension with the robustness of moral facts.

Such an anti-realism discounts any suggestion that moral discourse is beset by systematic error, or is merely the sheepish expression of emotion masked by the wolfish syntax of genuine judgement. As earlier noted, it can also be hospitable, merely *qua* anti-realism, to the idea that the sensibilities on which moral discourse is founded are capable of *improvement* – that morals can undergo significant development and, by dint of our efforts, the story of our moral development can unfold better than it might otherwise have done. It is true the anti-realist will have to grant that such ideas of progress or deterioration are ones which we can have use for only from *within* a committed moral point of view; that any refinement of which our moral sensibilities are capable can only be a matter of the approaching of a certain equilibrium as appraised by the exercise of those very sensibilities. And making out that there is indeed such a dynamic towards equilibrium in moral thought will need a lot of sensitive work. But suppose that project cannot succeed, and our moral thinking is at bottom the irreducibly parochial affair that relativists have urged it is; then I cannot see that there would be much consolation in the realist's belief in real moral states of affairs which, accordingly, some moral cultures – and it could as well be ours – are presumably doomed to miss.

For the moral anti-realist, there will be no defensible analogue of the scientific realist's thought that the real progress of science is measured by the extent to which our theories represent a reality whose nature owes nothing to our natures or the standards that inform our conception of responsible discourse about it. It will not be possible to regard the disciplined formation of a moral view as a seriously representational mode of function, or as a form of activity in which we respond to states of affairs which, precisely because they are at the service of the explanation of other things, can be put to serious work in explaining the course assumed by these responses. But my point has been that those concessions need not enforce the dilemma: either exile ethics from the realm of truth or dilute the concept of truth to the point of vacuity. So: what is so alarming about the prospect of moral anti-realism?

There may be a *psychological* problem: a tendency to cease to *identify* with those of one's opinions which philosophy discloses to lack an external sanction – to suffer a loss of moral problems, as it were. But I do not think that a clear-headed moral anti-realist ought for one moment to feel impelled to a general moral tolerance. Such a tolerance accepts that no differences of moral opinion need

involve anything worthy of criticism. But while the anti-realist will have to accept that such differences need involve nothing worth regarding as *cognitive* shortcoming – as deficiency in representation, substantially conceived – the ordinary view will remain available that shortcoming may nevertheless often be involved, albeit an irreducibly *moral* shortcoming, a type of failing which can be appreciated only from a committed moral point of view.

In general – I guess the point is obvious enough – the immediate price of anti-realism about morals is merely that the gravity of moral judgement will lack an external sanction. When one is asked, 'Why bother to try to arrive at correct moral opinion?', the only available answer will be: because such an opinion informs *better* conduct – better, that is, from a moral point of view. The value of moral truth will thus be an instrumental, moral value. It is common to think that there are, by contrast, intrinsic, general values associated with pure discovery, understanding and know-ledge of the real world. Properly to characterise and to understand such values seems to me to be a very difficult task. In any case, for the moral anti-realist, that kind of value cannot attach to moral truth. But I think it has seemed important that it should only because of the tendency of philosophers to suppose that there is nothing for truth to be that is not associated with value of that sort.

'What more could a sensible moral realist want?' What those whose intuitive inclination is to moral realism really want, I suggest, is not truth as representation – realism as properly understood – but a certain kind of objectivity in moral appraisal: ideally, precisely that a tendency towards convergence in the conception of what is morally important and how much importance it has, be indeed intrinsic to moral thinking itself. How much, and what kinds of moral appraisal may indeed contain the seeds of such convergence seems to me a great – perhaps the greatest – unresolved question in moral philosophy. My argument has been that the question has nothing to do with moral realism, but arises within the anti-realist camp.[13]

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