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PRECIS OF *MORAL REALISM: A DEFENCE* (CLARENDON PRESS: OXFORD, 2003)

My book is an effort to address, in a fairly comprehensive way, most of the central questions within metaethics. Metaethics is that area of ethical theory that seeks to determine whether there is any objective basis that underwrites moral judgments. Thus the task I had set myself was not that of identifying the conditions under which actions were morally right, or motives and persons morally good. Rather, I sought to investigate whether claims of these kinds could be true. I believe they can be true; further, I believe that they can be, in a very strong sense, objectively true.

Moral realism is a species of moral cognitivism, which is the view that moral claims are truth evaluable, can serve as the contents of beliefs, and are potential objects of knowledge. What distinguishes moral realism from other forms of cognitivism is the realist's insistence that moral claims, when true, are true independently of what any human being, even under idealized circumstances, thinks of them. The basic principles that specify our moral duties, or dictate the conditions of moral value, are not vulnerable to alteration based on the attitudes of those to whom they apply.

There are a great many features embedded within our moral thought and practice that lend some presumptive favor to moral cognitivism. I present these considerations in the book's first chapter, where I try to create a burden of proof against noncognitivist and expressivist accounts of morality. I don't take myself to have provided anything like a knockdown argument against such theories, and, for all I say in this initial chapter, these anti-realists may have adequate

answers to all of the challenges that I offer. I don't believe they do, of course, but I am pretty sure that vindicating these many challenges against possible replies would have amounted to a book-length undertaking. I sought a broader scope for my book, and so accepted a corresponding sacrifice in the depth of the critiques that I was able to offer my opponents.

Even if one finds cognitivism attractive, however, realism is not the only game in town. Constructivists are cognitivists who make the truth of basic moral claims in some way dependent on our attitudes. This dependence can take one of two basic forms. Either moral claims are true because of our attitudes taken toward the content of these claims (or the principles that imply the claims). Or moral claims are true because they are somehow implied by our basic attitudes, even though the claims are not the content or object of our attitudes. (It is an error of my presentation in the book to have omitted this last possibility, which strikes me as the correct way to characterize Kantian approaches to morality.) The book's second chapter is dedicated to displaying the real attractions of constructivism, while also pointing to significant problems for it.

The overall strategy, then, is to present an argument from elimination. Expressivism and constructivism are beset by serious problems. Though there are several problems raised by critics of moral realism, my contention is that they are all solvable. The remainder of the book is my effort to vindicate that claim, and in so doing, to create a series of positive proposals that yield a coherent, integrated realistic conception of the status of morality.

The beginnings of the positive account are provided in the two chapters that constitute Part II of the book. This is given over to moral metaphysics. There I defend ethical nonnaturalism, which is the view, as I take it, that moral properties are not natural properties. This metaphysical view implies a semantic one, namely, that moral terms are not synonymous with natural ones. I canvas a number of different understandings of the natural and the nonnatural, and then come down, perhaps surprisingly, to the view that the distinction is really

an epistemic one. The nonnatural, according to this conception, is one whose fundamental truths are discoverable *a priori*. I believe that moral truths meet this description.

Apart from my efforts to provide a helpful taxonomy of the natural and nonnatural, these chapters on metaphysics are devoted to a critique of ethical naturalism, and to a defense of nonnaturalism against two majors objections. The first is that there is no plausible account of how the moral supervenes on the natural; my reply invokes an account according to which the moral features of something are wholly constituted by, but not identical to, the natural features on which they supervene. The second criticism is Harman's, to the effect that moral properties, being causally irrelevant, are best construed anti-realistically. I agree with Harman about the causal inefficacy, but deny that this is a good reason to demote morality to anti-realistic status. I argue that a causal test of ontological credibility is perfectly plausible when it comes to the natural world, but is out of place in the normative realm.

Part III of the book also consists of two chapters, devoted in this case to issues about moral motivation. I aim here to undermine a classic anti-realist argument, which begins with the claim of motivational judgment internalism: necessarily, if one sincerely judges an action morally right, then one is, to some extent, motivated to do it. The argument's second premise is Humeanism about motivation, which I construe as the claim that beliefs are, by themselves, motivationally impotent. It follows that moral judgments are not beliefs, and so are not truth evaluable, and so not capable of generating knowledge. This is all inimical to moral realism.

My strategy for dealing with this argument is to devote a chapter to criticizing the Humean theory of motivation, and then another to a critique of motivational judgment internalism. In the former chapter, I consider the strongest arguments in support of the Humean theory, and find them all wanting. As I see things, evaluative beliefs are intrinsically motivating -- they can motivate all by themselves, though they do not necessarily motivate, since their motivational

force can be entirely extinguished by various defeaters. Since, by my lights, moral judgments are beliefs that can fail to motivate, motivational internalism is false. I supply a number of examples designed to weaken allegiance to this form of internalism, and then enter a discussion of how, even if the Humean theory of motivation were true, realists would have an adequate explanation of the reliable (but not invariant) connection between sincere moral judgment and motivation.

Part IV of the book is concerned with moral reasons. A perennial source of skepticism about morality has to do with its ability to supply categorical reasons for action. Such reasons are those that apply to individuals independently of their desires and commitments. Many think that the fate of morality hinges on a vindication of its ability to generate such reasons.

I am not sure that this is so, but in any event, I try to provide such a vindication. If I am right, morality does indeed supply categorical reasons for action. This view, which I call *moral rationalism*, receives its defense after a preliminary chapter in which I criticize reasons internalism. This view, which says that one has a reason to do something only if one can be motivated to do it, is, in its most popular form, perhaps the major impediment to accepting moral rationalism. If one's motivations stem from one's contingent commitments, and if (as moral realists will insist) moral demands need not align with those commitments, then one will lack reason to do as morality requires. After rejecting the most powerful arguments for reasons internalism, and providing two arguments in favor of its negation (reasons externalism), I proceed, in the subsequent chapter, to defend moral rationalism against its many critics.

In the next chapter, I distinguish between two versions of the anti-realist argument from disagreement, and attempt to show why neither is successful. The argument is sometimes run as an inference to the best explanation, the explanandum being the breadth of actual moral disagreement. It is at other times presented as a hypothesis that predicts dissensus about moral matters among idealized observers. The reply that I

like the most is one that draws a parallel between ethical and philosophical inquiry. Since ethics is a branch of philosophy, we should expect the sort of intractable disagreement we see in moral matters, since we see it in philosophical matters generally. But just as such disagreement is compatible with philosophical realism, and the existence of philosophical knowledge, so too is it compatible with moral realism, and moral knowledge.

The last section of the book is devoted to moral epistemology. In the first of three chapters on the subject, I consider a variety of arguments for skepticism about justified moral belief, and try to provide some considerations that give us reason for optimism here. I then, in the penultimate chapter, defend my view that basic moral truths, which I regard as statements of Rossian prima facie duties, are self-evident truths, knowable *a priori*. The concluding chapter defends a reliabilist moral epistemology. The Rossian intuitionism does not tell us how to attain knowledge of our all-things-considered duties. Reliabilism, I suggest, can aid us in this matter. In this last chapter, I try to rebut a number of worries that beset moral reliabilism, and I provide the outline of a research program that, with work, may fill in the many details needed to make this a plausible account of how to gain moral knowledge.

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