

Dissertation Title: “Another Look at Moral Realism”

Dissertation Abstract

The overall aim of the dissertation is to learn more about the kind of objectivity, if any, that we can justifiably attribute to our moral judgments. I take a step toward answering this question by investigating the defensibility of moral realism. The thesis will be defensible if there are positive reasons for accepting it, and if it can explain common features of our moral beliefs and practices as well as, or better than, competing views.

The moral realist who concerns me is characterized by two core tenets: (i) there are moral facts or truths; and (ii) these facts or truths are not a function of the beliefs or attitudes we have regarding the object being judged. Moral value, according to this view, is something to be found *in the world*, and moral judgments are objectively true in virtue of this moral reality; what makes a moral judgment true then, if it is true, are properties existing in the world prior to our coming to have any beliefs about, or affective responses to, them.

Chapters 2-5 show why this thesis has had some staying power: first, by showing how the moral realist can respond to five often-voiced objections; second, by showing the inadequacy of three prominent kinds of antirealist views—views which attempt to “unmask” moral properties. (To unmask something is to explain why it belongs to appearance rather than reality, and to explain why we commonly believe that something to be real.) We see that moral realism is less vulnerable, or less explanatorily problematic, than many have thought. In fact, we see why there is reason for thinking that *any* antirealist unmasking strategy will be unsatisfactory if we are relying on an explanatory criterion of reality. In Chapters 6-8 I argue, nonetheless, that forms of moral realism committed to the two core tenets look to be indefensible. Not only is the second core tenet incompatible with three very important features of morality, but there is a metaethical view (along the lines of what John McDowell has set out) which can account for these features and still avoid all of the objections raised against the varieties of antirealism discussed in the earlier chapters, in part because it does not aim to unmask moral properties.

Of course, even if moral realism is indefensible there may still be a kind of objectivity that we can justifiably attribute to our moral judgments. In the Conclusion I say a little about the kind of objectivity that I think our moral judgments can aspire to. What follows is a brief description of the content of each of the other chapters.

Chapter 1 motivates the issue of objectivity by noting the tension that exists in our beliefs regarding morality. We cannot coherently think that there are answers to moral questions, answers which apply with equal force to *all* agents, while also thinking that moral value is something we ourselves create (whether as individuals or as groups of individuals) and then project on to the world in such a way that the demands of morality are different for different individuals, or for different groups of individuals. This tension arises from the fact that, while certain features of our moral beliefs and practices seem to best support a realist view of morality, other such features undermine that view.

Chapter 2 considers five standard objections to moral realism and shows that the realist has a cogent response to all of them.

Chapter 3 discusses the method I use to investigate the defensibility of moral realism in the next two chapters—explaining why I think we can make use of the kind of strategies that Barry Stroud employs against the color antirealist (Stroud 2000) to argue against views that reject one or both of the moral realist’s core tenets. Much of the chapter is a detailed look at Stroud’s arguments.

Chapter 4 investigates the defensibility of the realist’s first core tenet by considering the defensibility of what seems to be the strongest form of noncognitivism—expressivism. The expressivist, as yet, has no adequate way to interpret evaluative predicates found in indirect contexts. Most of Chapter 4 focuses on this problem, for if the expressivist cannot solve it, his position is indefensible. I conclude that the expressivist’s prospects in this regard are very dim. I also outline and briefly discuss six other problems for expressivism. All of these difficulties lead me to conclude that the cognitivism associated with the realist’s first core tenet is tenable and gives us a far better account of the meaning of moral language than do emotivist accounts.

Chapter 5 primarily looks at the defensibility of the realist’s second core tenet, once again by considering the viability of certain views that reject it. It is here that Stroud’s strategies are especially helpful in shedding new light on the realist-antirealist debate. His arguments against dispositional and error theory accounts maintaining the unreality of colors are adapted to investigate whether analogous accounts of moral properties are explanatorily adequate. I conclude that they are not.

In Chapters 6, 7, and 8 I argue, all the same, that moral realism is not defensible. I suggest that we understand moral properties as having both objective and subjective aspects. The antirealist views considered in Chapters 4 and 5 are inadequate because they fail to properly account for the objective aspect; the realist’s views are inadequate because they fail to properly account for the subjective aspect. We can understand moral properties in realist terms only if we reconceive what constitutes reality, perhaps along the lines suggested by John McDowell. (Among other things, this means allowing that not all aspects of reality are entirely mind-independent; but it does not mean that we abandon the criterion that we include in our conception of reality only what is required in order to give the *best explanation* of what “is so, including our having the beliefs and responses to the world that we do” (Stroud 2000: 74).)

This dissertation contributes to the work that has previously been done in connection with moral realism and the objectivity of moral judgments in at least five important ways. First, it sheds greater light on the defensibility of moral realism, and in so doing, sheds greater light on the kind of objectivity that we can or cannot have for our moral judgments. Second, I show that moral realism is compatible with supervenience and why Simon Blackburn’s arguments to the contrary are unsound. Third, I offer more reasons for rejecting Michael Smith’s argument for the compatibility of realism and internalism, and thus, for thinking that the realist must be an externalist. Fourth, I elaborate on the connection between morality and human well-being and argue, contra T. M. Scanlon (1998), that a notion of human well-being has a crucial role to play in our moral deliberations. Finally, I defend a view of internalism that not only gives us strong non-question-begging reasons for rejecting moral realism, but may also provide us with a way of satisfactorily solving “the moral problem” (cf. Smith 1994).