**Chapter 1: Objectivity and Ethics**

A central problem for ethics is whether we can justifiably attribute objectivity to our moral judgments, and if so, what kind of objectivity?

The intractibility of this problem is due in part to deeply held, but conflicting intuitions.[[1]](#footnote-1)1 On the one hand, we are fully confident that there are correct answers to at least some moral questions. We believe, for example, that any rational, sensible person can see that torturing small children is wrong, or that putting an innocent person to death to quell the rage of a mob is unjust. On a more mundane level, we believe that it is often quite clear whether some particular action is unkind, or unfair. We firmly believe, for example, that unnecessarily drawing attention to a person’s deficiencies is unkind, and that insider trading is unfair because it takes advantage of others. In all these cases we take such actions to be wrong regardless of who the perpetrators or the victims are. As for actions like torturing and killing innocent persons, we think they are so clearly and completely wrong that no set of circumstances could ever justify doing them. Moreover, there are certain kinds of actions and character traits which it seems people have always morally disapproved of, and other types of actions and character traits which people have always seen as morally valuable.[[2]](#footnote-2)2 Thoughts and observations like these lead us to believe that there are such things as moral requirements, requirements that apply with equal force to all agents, regardless of their other reasons for acting.

On the other hand, we also think (or are inclined to think) that many moral matters cannot be rationally settled. For one cannot help but notice the prevalence and intensity of moral disagreements. Not only do we find people defending strongly opposing views on such matters as abortion, euthanasia, distributive justice, civil and human rights, and caring for the environment; we also find people at odds even over how to go about thinking about these issues. Widespread cultural differences in the treatment of women, children, the elderly, workers, minorities, and the environment seem to suggest, at the very least, that morality is in some important way culturally relative and historically conditioned. When we also notice the degree of moral disagreement *within* societies, and on such a wide range of questions, we are tempted to conclude that many, if not all, of our moral convictions are subjective, that they may be little more than expressions of personal opinion and feeling.

This stronger form of relativism draws additional support from the fact that it doesn’t seem that there can be moral experts who could tell us how we, as individuals, ought to live our lives. If there were such experts, where would their authority come from? what criteria could they use to decide that some actions and lives are, morally-speaking, better than others? Any criteria chosen must presuppose a certain evaluative outlook, but what justifies that outlook? What makes it better than other views? It seems clear that a definitive justification for any particular evaluative outlook—one that all of us *must* accept—simply won’t be found. Hence we have reason to doubt that morality is objective in the sense that there is just one set of criteria, or moral requirements, that all human agents must heed, or that have the same reason-giving force for all agents.

Another intuition also seems to speak against moral objectivity. We believe that there are times when our personal convictions and feelings merit deliberative priority and so ought to be the primary consideration when arriving at decisions about what to do. When Bernard Williams gives the example of George, a chemist who is strongly opposed to chemical and biological warfare but whose only job offer is to work for a company that produces the weapons used in this warfare, our sense is that George should remain true to his convictions and refuse the job offer. Indeed, we think that there is something awry with a morality which recommends or obligates him to take the job (on, say, consequentialist grounds; see (Williams 1973: 97 ff.)).[[3]](#footnote-3)3 The thought, then, is that moral decisions must be personal ones, and that it is up to each individual to formulate and live by her own moral convictions. However, this intuition—which I think partly has its source in the value that we place on personal autonomy, but also partly in the value we place on personal integrity and in our understanding of what constitutes that integrity—appears to be in direct conflict with the notion that there are moral requirements having the same authority for all agents.

Of course, the conflicting intuitions don’t sit well with us. There is a tension here that needs to be resolved. How can we coherently think that there are answers to moral questions, answers that need to be discovered or recognized by *all* of us, 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?

In this dissertation I try to make some headway on the question of the kind of objectivity, if any, that we can justifiably attribute to our moral judgments by investigating the defensibility of moral realism. If problems are to be found in attributing objectivity to our moral judgments, they should be more apparent the stronger the objectivity attributed. Thus it makes sense to begin addressing what might be called *the problem of moral objectivity* by first looking at that position, from among those that aren’t obviously implausible, that attributes the strongest kind of objectivity. Moral realism, at least at the outset of this project, looked to be just such a view.

The realist maintains that moral value can be found *in the world* and that moral judgments can be objectively true in virtue of this moral reality. By contrast, one of his opponents, the noncognitivist, denies this and argues that our moral evaluations have more to do with how we respond to certain things in the world than with features of the world that lie beyond those responses. For the noncognitivist, our moral responses reveal something about *us*, and not, as the realist will say, about the world as it is independently of us (McNaughton 1988: 10).

This dissertation offers another look at the moral realist and his opponents. Again, the overall aim is to address the problem of moral objectivity by investigating the defensibility of moral realism. Moral realism will be defensible if it is plausible and if it can explain common features of our moral beliefs and practices as well as, or better than, competing views.[[4]](#footnote-4)4 In line with the tension just described, we will see that certain common features of our moral beliefs and practices seem to best support a realist view of morality, whereas other such features undermine that view.

In what immediately follows I attempt to further motivate the problem of moral objectivity and my approach to it. I start by inquiring into the importance of objectivity for ethics. What kind of objectivity should we be talking about, and what is lost if our moral judgments fail to have it? Conversely, what degree of moral relativism can we live with? what degree of moral relativism would truly present problems for us (given the moral beliefs that many of us typically subscribe to, and given the moral behavior that many of us typically engage in)? No doubt some people think it obvious that a kind of objectivity is needed for our moral judgments; they’ll say, for example, that it doesn’t make much sense to engage in moral disagreements if there aren’t single correct answers to at least some moral questions. But it seems equally clear that other people think it obvious that no such objectivity is necessary or even attainable; they’ll say, too, that we are simply misguided if we think we can persuade others, by way of rational discourse alone, to accept our values.

After further motivating the problem of moral objectivity, I set out a number of reasons why I think the thesis of moral realism deserves another look despite the readiness of many, if not most, moral philosophers to dismiss it in favor of either a noncognitivist or a constructivist approach to ethics.

*The problem of moral objectivity*

Let’s say that morality is objective if our moral judgments (or equally, our answers to moral questions) are capable of being objective. By ‘morality’ I mean everything that is involved in the business of assessing human actions and lives from a moral point of view. I will assume that we are able to broadly distinguish between moral and nonmoral assessments. Very roughly, moral judgments (evaluations, appraisals, answers) are about what we ought (or ought not) to do and about how we ought (or ought not) to live. They include recommendations and commendations, proscriptions and condemnations. Such judgments are thought by philosophers to have a normative aspect to them.[[5]](#footnote-5)5

As noted, the demands of morality are often seen as having a very wide scope: we expect all rational persons who are neither cognitively nor emotionally impaired to avoid those actions that are wrong and do those actions that are right, to develop those character traits that lead to morally good lives and to shun those traits that lead to bad lives. The thought is that moral requirements or imperatives apply categorically; they are supposed to have authority for us—in the sense of giving us a reason to act in accordance with them—regardless of our individual preferences and desires; what is morally right does not depend on what we want to do or on what we may happen to think is best for us. Certain moral considerations are thus seen as giving *all* moral agents a reason for acting on them. The question is whether there is a way to justify this kind of normativity. If there is, we may be able to say that moral judgments can in fact be objective.[[6]](#footnote-6)6

While there are various ways to understand ‘objective’ and thus various kinds of moral objectivity that we might talk about, the objectivity of most interest to us here is the kind which, if our moral judgments were capable of it, important concerns about morality would vanish. What is especially problematic for morality in relation to objectivity? The primary concern, I take it, is that moral judgments are at bottom merely expressions of personal opinion or a product of culture and human conventions, and in a way that prevents us from saying whether one judgment or moral outlook is better than another; so if we take these judgments to have normative force for all agents, as we often do, this normativity won’t have the justification we expect it to have. There may then be insufficient reason for agents to heed the demands of morality.

Consider, for example, the recently dismissed executives of Enron, Tyco, Global Crossing, Adelphia, and WorldCom. They could claim that, while there were prudential reasons for not cheating their employees, stockholders, and customers, the *moral* reasons for not doing so weren’t really reasons for them. They could say that those of us who morally disapprove of their actions are not justified in thinking that our moral views have a claim on them because the considerations which constitute reasons for us (not to commit fraud, etc.) fail to constitute reasons for them. There are other action-guiding principles, it might be said, which one has just as much or more reason to subscribe to. If they can defend this view, morality obviously won’t have the authority which many of us grant it. It is likely, too, that morality will lose some of its importance for us.[[7]](#footnote-7)7

Similar problems arise if morality is simply a matter of convention or highly relative to culture. We don’t think that the moral views of a nation or people are justified merely because the majority find them acceptable. Nor do we think that, because a person belongs to a different culture, their moral views are exempt from criticism. We instead believe that some moral views are more justified than others and that it is always possible we could be wrong in adopting a particular moral outlook. These are assumptions we would have to abandon if morality were to a large degree conventional in nature, or if it were mostly a function of culture.

The problem of moral objectivity, described in the very broadest sense then, is the thought that there isn’t any; and the worry is that if there isn’t any, we lack a rational basis for the interpersonal and intercultural authority we typically grant our considered moral judgments.[[8]](#footnote-8)8 (Of course, one might understand the nature of the problem from a different point of view, siding with the intuition that morality is more a matter of feeling and opinion than fact. In this case one is likely to say that the problem of moral objectivity is the thought that there *is* such a thing.)

If a kind of objectivity isn’t possible for our moral judgments, the problem we mainly run into, it should be emphasized, is one of *justification,* not motivation. There are many ways of motivating people to act morally, even though we would much prefer if rational discourse alone were sufficient. But without justification, our moral judgments would lose their importance and authority (or scope), and we would find it difficult to be confident agents and judges, or to take morality seriously.[[9]](#footnote-9)9 In fact, if moral judgments really are no more than expressions of personal opinion, it would seem that people could1[[10]](#footnote-10)0 justifiably disregard the demands of morality. Also, without the possibility of there being at least some degree of moral objectivity, we maybe have to conclude that there isn’t as much at stake regarding morality as we are often inclined to think.

What kind of objectivity is needed if we are to avoid this set of problems? If the primary desideratum is that answers to moral questions apply with equal force to all moral agents, we might hope that, at the very least,

(i) there are correct answers to at least some moral questions;

(ii) the correctness of these answers is not a function of the particular beliefs about right and wrong that we happen to have; and

(iii) this correctness is in virtue of a single set of conditions or parameters.

Let’s call this kind of objectivity **moral |objectivity|**. If moral judgments are capable of |objectivity|, surely we would have good reason for taking the normative force of at least some of them to be justified. Nonetheless, it is not immediately clear that we need something as strong as |objectivity| in order for morality to have the importance and authority that we grant it, and in order for us to be confident moral agents and judges. We can determine the importance of |objectivity| for ethics by identifying those common features of our moral practices and beliefs which cannot be adequately explained without it. For example, if we firmly believe that we can be systematically mistaken in our moral beliefs, it will be hard to justify having this belief unless (ii) is true. Also, we cannot legitimately insist that answers to moral questions apply with equal force to all moral agents (even to those living in different societies and cultures) unless (iii) is true.

If moral realism is true, our moral judgments are capable of being |objective|. So we can get a better sense of the importance of |objectivity| for ethics, and the problem of moral objectivity in general, by investigating the defensibility of moral realism, that is, by seeing whether the realist can offer the best explanation of common features of our moral beliefs and practices.

*Why the thesis of moral realism deserves another look*

The realist maintains **two core tenets**, claiming that

(a) there are moral facts or truths and

(b) these facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them (Brink 1989, p. 17).

It follows from (a) that there are correct answers to moral questions, and it follows from (b) that the correctness of these answers doesn’t hinge on our beliefs about what is right and wrong. Also, since the realist takes there to be only one moral reality, there will be only a single set of conditions or parameters which make a moral truth true. The core tenets of moral realism therefore entail |objectivity|.

The moral realist thinks that our moral judgments can be as objective as scientific ones. Clearly this is a very substantial claim. Scientific claims are typically understood as being true or false in virtue of an independent reality. The thought is that what makes a scientific claim true, if it is in fact true, is how things are in the world. It is not true because we believe it might be true, or because we hope it might be true, or because some well-respected scientist said it was true. Moreover, it will be true for everyone, meaning that anyone else who properly investigates the matter will reach the same conclusion.

What follows are four reasons why moral realism deserves another look despite all the attention it has already been given.

*First Reason*: In Chapters 2, 4, and 5, and in the introduction to Chapter 6, we see a number of reasons why moral realism is not obviously implausible. The general strategy the realist takes is to argue that he can best explain many common features of moral practice and belief. For example, if objectivity were understood merely in terms of there being correct answers to moral questions (include (i) but not (ii) and (iii)), we would want to know what makes these answers correct. If they are correct simply because a majority of people in society say so, then we will have trouble explaining why we take (or should take) morality as seriously as we do. But if moral realism is true, an explanation for this common feature of our moral behaviour is at hand. The realist will claim, too, that we believe that we can be systematically mistaken in our moral judgments (see (Brink 1989)). It is not easy to see how one can explain such a belief (i.e., how this belief could be justified) if realism isn’t true. In any case, it does look as though the moral realist can best explain certain common features of morality. Also, as we see in Chapter 2, the moral realist has a cogent response to five objections that are still often thought to provide definitive reasons for rejecting the thesis. Thus, the thesis is not as vulnerable as many philosophers think, or at least not for the reasons many philosophers have cited.

*Second Reason*: It may be that the best case has yet to be made for moral realism. Defending the thesis is more than a matter of defending the core tenets. There are other, further commitments the realist will have regarding the nature of moral properties, moral psychology, moral epistemology, and the possibility of first-order theory. We see in Chapter 2, for example, that realism’s ability to avoid many of the standard objections is due in part to the variety of ways one can be a moral realist. The form of realism which has the best chance of being defensible is that which is comprised of the most plausible and coherent set of such further commitments.

*Third Reason*: Since it wouldn’t make sense looking into moral realism’s defensibility if it were already clearly defensible, it is worth noting that there are reasons for thinking the thesis is not in fact defensible. It is still an open question whether it provides the best overall explanation of moral phenomena.1[[11]](#footnote-11)1 Although moral realism seems to be able to handle most of the objections brought against it, and is alive and well as far as many are concerned, there are still good reasons for doubting that moral facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them.

For example, the realist doesn’t seem to be able to adequately account for the practical or action-guiding character of morality. We believe that people are motivated to act in accordance with their firmly held moral convictions. Indeed, the thought is that there is a necessary, or internal, connection between our moral convictions and motivating states. The moral realist has difficulty accounting for this internalist aspect of our moral psychology because he understands moral judgments in purely cognitive terms—as belief states which aim to represent the world as it is independently of us. He thus faces a dilemma: If, on the one hand, he denies the necessary connection, he will have trouble explaining why we are so often motivated to act in line with our moral beliefs; if moral judgments are like other realist beliefs, we should be able to take any attitude we want toward them. If, on the other hand, he accepts internalism, moral properties end up looking “queer” relative to other realist entities:1[[12]](#footnote-12)2 upon perceiving a moral fact or truth, we would be compelled to care about it and see it as giving us a reason for acting.

*Fourth Reason*: Given that the moral realist-antirealist debate is still alive and well, one has to ask if there are any untested argumentative strategies that can shed new light on it. One such set of strategies is to be found in Barry Stroud’s recent book, *The Quest for Reality* (Oxford UP 2000). Stroud’s book is about the metaphysical nature of colors. He investigates and counters the claim that “colour is not part of the world as it is independently of us, or is ‘subjective’ or dependent on us in a way that shape, size, motion, and other ‘primary’ qualities of things are not” (42). His approach to investigating this claim can be tailored to an investigation of the metaphysical status of moral properties.

In sum, there are at least four reasons for investigating the defensibility of moral realism as a first step toward learning more about the degree to which our moral judgments might be objective. First, the thesis entails a very strong form of objectivity—stronger even than |objectivity|. But |objectivity|, at first glance anyway, looks to be important, and moral realism is not obviously implausible. In fact, the moral realist seems to provide us with the best and most straightforward explanation of certain features of morality. Second, there are many varieties of moral realism, and it is not clear that those who defend some form of the thesis have identified the most defensible form of it, or have offered the best defense. Third, there are reasons for thinking that the thesis is *not* defensible. And fourth, there are argumentative strategies recently set out by Barry Stroud that shed new light on the debate between the moral realist and antirealist, adding to our reasons for rejecting many prominent antirealist accounts.

Finally, in order to ensure that the reader is clear about the nature of my project, three points ought to be emphasized. First, I am *not* trying to defend moral realism. Rather, I want to find out if the thesis is defensible. Second, I am investigating the defensibility of moral realism as a way of learning more about the kind of objectivity we might justifiably attribute to our moral judgments. If a moral judgment can be correct or incorrect, what makes it so? And third, I am *not* equating moral realism with moral objectivity; the former, if true, simply gives us one kind of objectivity for our moral judgments. Moral realism could be untenable and yet we might still be justified in attributing a kind of objectivity to our moral judgments, even moral |objectivity|.

*What the dissertation has to offer in the way of something new*

There are four ways in which this dissertation *seeks to* offer something new to the debate over moral realism. It does so by adapting Stroud’s arguments to moral properties, by starting out with a neutral stance toward the defensibility of moral realism, by searching for and focusing on only the most plausible form of moral realism, and by looking into whether the thesis might offer a better explanation of moral phenomena than certain constructivist accounts.1[[13]](#footnote-13)3

As for what the dissertation actually does offer in the way of something new, I would say that it 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 enable us to satisfactorily solve “the moral problem” (cf. Smith 1994).

1. 1 See, for example, (McNaughton 1988: Chapter 1) and (MacIntyre 1984: 6-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 It is instructive to compare this “evidence” with two of the observations Hume offers as evidence for the existence of a standard for aesthetic judgments. (See Hume’s essay, “Of the Standard of Taste”.) One of these observations is the fact that there are objects “so disproportioned” that it is clear what general kind of response they merit. For example, it would be a “palpable absurdity”, one equivalent to maintaining that a mole-hill is as high as Teneriffe, Hume says, if one claimed that Ogilby’s works exhibit more genius and elegance than Milton’s. His second observation is that there are certain works, such as those of Homer, which have withstood the test of time, which have been admired through “all the changes of climate, government, religion, and language.” Regarding morals specifically, Hume writes: “It is indeed obvious that writers of all nations and ages concur in applauding justice, humanity, magnanimity, prudence, veracity; and in blaming the opposite qualities. Even poets and other authors, whose compositions are chiefly calculated to please the imagination, are yet found from Homer down to Fenelon, to inculcate the same moral precepts, and to bestow their applause and blame on the same virtues and vices.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 Williams presents this example as an objection against utilitarian theories, but it potentially poses problems for any moral theory committed to objective moral requirements. At issue is whether ethical considerations should always have the highest deliberative priority and importance—should we always take them to give an agent most reason to do something? Objective moralities typically say ‘yes’ to this question: what is a moral reason for one person will also be a moral reason for anyone else, and moral reasons should override all other reasons when we are engaged in practical deliberation. Williams has more to say about deliberative priority, importance, and the necessity of practical conclusions in Chapter 10 (“Morality, The Peculiar Institution”) of his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4 One such feature is the fact that moral judgments are generally expressed in declarative form. Another feature is the fact that we seek moral advice. A third, that we try to morally educate our children.

   The kind of explanation we are interested in is not of the causal variety but of the rationalizing kind. We want to know what, if anything, justifies our having the moral beliefs we have, or engaging in the moral behavior that we do. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5 See, for example, (Copp 1995: Chapter 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6 Again, I understand the important issue to be that of *justifying* our moral evaluations, not *explaining* their existence or origins as Allan Gibbard attempts to do in his book, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 7 See (Scanlon 1995: 228); I agree with most of what Scanlon says there about importance, authority, and confidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 8 What I am calling ‘the problem of moral objectivity’ is similar to, and yet also different from, what Christine Korsgaard refers to as ‘the normative question’ (Korsgaard 1996, Chapter 1). I assume that if morality is objective, then we can justifiably say that there is a standard, evaluative framework, or set of facts that everyone has reason to accept, and that it is this standard, framework, or set of facts that we would use to help us determine the rightness and wrongness of actions. The thought, too, is that if morality is truly objective, then everyone has an equal reason to be moral, or at least an equal reason to arrive at the same moral judgments. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 9 As Scanlon observes, we want to be confident in our condemnations of wrongful conduct. For, “if we give up the idea that an agent can be properly condemned for his action then we must also withdraw the claim, on his victims’ behalf, that they were entitled not to be treated in the way that he [treated them], and that it was therefore wrong of him to treat them that way” (1995: 228). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 10 Under certain, perhaps even many, circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 11 We need to keep in mind the holistic nature of defending a metaphysical view in terms of explanatory adequacy. If explanatory adequacy is our criterion, we will say that a view is defensible if *on the whole* it can explain common features of moral practice and moral beliefs as well as, or better than, competing views. While the moral antirealist is in a better position to explain some of these features, the realist clearly has the upper hand explaining others. When employing an explanatory strategy to defend one’s metaethical position, therefore, the aim is to show that all or most of one’s commitments are not only individually plausible, but also mutually supporting (Brink 1989: ix). The realist insists that he can offer the best *overall* story in this sense; if this is true, it maybe doesn’t matter so much if there is some aspect or feature of morality for which the antirealist has the better explanation. Whether it does matter will largely depend on the significance of this aspect or feature and on the ability of the realist to account for it. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 12 See (Mackie 1977: Chapter 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 13 Namely, those constructivist accounts that do not attempt to unmask psychological facts about moral properties in the way that the colour antirealists whom Stroud addresses attempt to unmask psychological facts about colour properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)