**Chapter 2: Standard Objections to Moral Realism**

An appropriate place to begin investigating the defensibility of moral realism is by taking a closer look at what the thesis involves and seeing whether it can handle the objections raised against it. Recall that the thesis will be defensible if it provides a plausible explanation of common features of moral practice, and if it explains these features better than, or at least as well as, competing theories about the nature of morality. Moral realism’s defensibility thus depends on at least three things: whether there are positive reasons for accepting the thesis; whether it can handle all or most of the objections that might be raised against it; and whether there are as yet unanswered objections for any alternative view.

In this chapter I shall specifically look at those objections to which I think the moral realist has a cogent response. More serious difficulties for the realist will be addressed in the remaining chapters.

In the process of seeing how the moral realist can handle certain objections, we also get a sense of the varieties of moral realism that have some chance of being defensible. While nearly all moral realists are committed to the two core tenets mentioned in Chapter 1,[[1]](#footnote-1)1 we can distinguish between various types of moral realism based on further, related commitments—for example, moral realists’ views regarding moral psychology, moral epistemology, the nature of moral properties, or the possibility of first-order moral theory. A number of objections raised against the realist question one or more of these further commitments, the assumption often being that the two core tenets entail the commitments under attack, as if, for example, realist moral properties must be ontologically “queer”, or as if the moral realist must have an intuitionist epistemology. What we find, however, is that these objections do not threaten all forms of moral realism; they in fact leave untouched the most appealing varieties.

One aim of this chapter, then, is to take note of some of the commitments the moral realist can and ought to avoid, and argue for some that she can and should make. Doing so will help to clear up what are still fairly widespread misunderstandings about the thesis. Those philosophers who dismiss moral realism merely because a particular brand of it cannot meet some objection fail to recognize just how many ways there are for one to be a moral realist, or they fail to understand what is and is not essential to the thesis. We should ask ourselves, then, if there aren’t forms of moral realism left untouched by the standard objections. We ought not dismiss the thesis before we have seen its strongest candidate(s).

It is worth noting that my method of identifying the more robust varieties of moral realism does not amount to an *ad hoc* procedure. I do not intend to deflect criticisms of the thesis simply by looking for a variety not affected by them. A brand of moral realism won’t be defensible simply in virtue of meeting all of the standard objections. It will also have to provide us with a plausible explanation of common features of moral practice—meaning that there will have to be positive reasons for accepting it. What we seek is the most plausible and coherent set of realist commitments. We want the set as a whole to be appealing, and we want the individual commitments to be attractive in their own rights. Thus, a particular variety of moral realism has the best chance of being defensible if it strongly coheres with a defensible epistemology, a defensible ontology, a defensible first-order moral theory, and so forth. This of course does not mean that a brand of moral realism is defensible only if *all* of its further commitments are the most appealing, or the best candidates, in their own right. It may be that moral realism is defensible even if realist moral properties turn out to be queer, or even if the realist must be an intuitionist. This is because the defensibility of the position as a whole ultimately hinges on what the competing theories have to offer as a whole. Perhaps parts of the competing theories are more problematic than, say, having to be an intuitionist in our moral epistemology.

In what follows I won’t be able to address in detail all the objections to which I think the realist has a cogent response. But my hope is that by focusing on how the realist can and should respond to some of the major objections, it will become much clearer which varieties of moral realism have a chance of being defensible. Also, my aim is to show that the realist’s thesis is not as vulnerable as many philosophers have thought. I believe these aims will be best achieved by taking up the following five objections: (1) moral realism is incompatible with the idea that moral properties (or moral claims) supervene upon various sets of base properties (or claims); (2) realist moral properties are “queer” or mysterious compared to other realist properties; (3) the moral realist must have an intuitionist epistemology; (4) the logical gap between ‘is’ premisses and an ‘ought’ conclusion[[2]](#footnote-2)2 (i.e., between statements of fact and statements of ethical evaluation) forces the realist into a sceptical or nihilistic position; and (5) G. E. Moore’s Open Question argument is evidence against realism because it forces the realist to admit that moral properties must be nonnatural properties (properties immune to empirical observation), in which case the realist will need to be an intuitionist.

In showing how the moral realist can respond to these standard objections, I will be relying quite heavily on arguments David Brink has already presented in his book, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (1989). This is especially true when I describe how the realist can respond to objections (2)-(5). Since I have not seen any antirealist arguments which show there to be a problem with how Brink says the realist can handle these objections, it makes sense to look at what Brink has to say in this regard.

If we are to properly assess moral realism’s vulnerability to the above objections, we need to determine what is and is not essential to the thesis. So before we look at how the moral realist can respond to the five objections, it behooves us to get clear on who the realist is and who his main opponents are.

*The moral realist and his opponents, briefly characterized*

Philosophers disagree over how to characterize the moral realist’s core commitments. My own view is that David Brink offers us the best understanding of the moral realist. Like Brink (1989: 17), we can say that all moral realists maintain two core tenets:

(a) there are moral facts or truths; and

(b) these facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them.

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord and Michael Smith (as well as others) offer an importantly different account of moral realism. They identify the core tenets as:

(1) moral claims, “when literally construed, are literally true or false”; and

(2) “some [moral claims] are literally true” (Sayre-McCord 1988b: 5; also see Smith 2000a: 15).

I will refer to (a) (and (1)) as the ‘cognitivist thesis’, and I will refer to (b) as the ‘mind-independence claim’.[[3]](#footnote-3)3

There are three reasons for preferring Brink’s account. The first is that it does a better job conveying the idea that moral realism is primarily a metaphysical thesis. As such, it makes a claim about the kinds of properties that can be said to exist in the world. Moral properties (i.e., facts),[[4]](#footnote-4)4 the realist says, exist as part of reality rather than appearance. It is ordinarily thought, then, that the realist has an additional metaphysical commitment relative to non-realists (see footnote 16 below). Although Sayre-McCord and Smith both agree that moral realism is primarily a metaphysical thesis, this point is only implicit in (1) and (2). It is not obvious that ‘literally construed’ or ‘literally true and false’ captures the distinctively metaphysical aspect of the realist’s thesis. For example, if you are committed to a coherence theory of truth, you could affirm (1) and (2) but deny that moral properties exist in the world independent of our evidence for them. Such a position is often regarded as anti-realist.[[5]](#footnote-5)5

The second, related reason for preferring Brink’s account is that it contains (b), the moral realist’s mind-independence claim. One would have to interpret ‘literal’ in a very special way in order to have (1) and (2) entail that moral properties exist independently of our beliefs or attitudes toward them. The kind of independence the realist has in mind is metaphysical or conceptual independence; more precisely, the moral realist holds that moral facts are “metaphysically or conceptually independent of the beliefs or propositions which are our evidence that those facts obtain” (Brink 1989: 15). This is not to say that moral facts or truths would exist if human beings didn’t exist. But it does mean that *what makes* a moral judgment true is something other than the beliefs or attitudes we have—whether as individuals or as groups of individuals—regarding the object of the judgment. The moral realist is claiming, rather, that what makes a moral judgment true, if it is true, are properties existing in the world prior to our coming to have any beliefs about them.

It is evident that Sayre-McCord’s account does not capture this aspect of independence because it identifies only two kinds of antirealist (1988b: 5). One kind of antirealist rejects (1) and asserts some form of noncognitivism (such as expressivism). The other type of antirealist agrees that moral claims are truth-apt but denies that there are any true moral claims. This is the position that J. L. Mackie takes (1977). I will follow Smith and Brink and refer to it as *nihilism*.[[6]](#footnote-6)6 With respect to Brink’s account we would say that both the nihilist and noncognitivist reject (a), although for different reasons. But unlike Sayre-McCord and Smith, I think we should also classify the *constructivist* as an antirealist. The constructivist accepts (a) but rejects (b). This is my third reason for preferring Brink’s account. We want to be able to distinguish between the moral realist and the moral constructivist. If we understand moral realism primarily as a metaphysical thesis, then there ought to be a way of distinguishing between the two in metaphysical terms. (b) enables us to make such a distinction by denying that moral properties are, as some constructivists claim, a product of our mental states, or a product of serious reflection on right and wrong (even if those doing the reflecting are ideal rational agents employing such methods as reflective equilibrium).

The downside of relying on Brink’s account is that it somewhat obscures what (1) and (2) make so clear—the fact that moral realism is also a thesis about the nature and status of moral claims. The moral realist is saying that our moral claims ought to be literally construed: we ought to interpret a moral judgment as purporting to refer to real properties in the same way that we commonly take scientific claims to refer to real properties; if a moral judgment is true, it is because it successfully describes how things really are—how they are prior to our theorizing about them.

It is helpful to look at an example. The moral realist will say that the evaluative statement, ‘Torturing babies is wrong’, is truth-apt in the same way that ‘Horses are mammals’ is truth-apt. If the former is a true judgment, it will be true in virtue of there being features about the act of torturing babies which make the action wrong. The moral term ‘wrong’ is understood to be referring to such features, just as ‘mammals’ refers to those properties instantiations of which are found in all horses. The moral realist might talk of a property of wrongness inhering in the act of torturing babies.

We can acquire a better sense of the moral realist’s core position by briefly taking a closer look at who his main opponents are.

Warren Quinn emphasizes one way of contrasting the moral realist with the moral noncognitivist. We can say that they disagree in terms of how they understand “the connection between certain *features* we attribute to objects and certain mental *responses* that somehow or other provide a basis for these attributions” (Quinn 1978: 1). This gives us a way of seeing how the realist-antirealist debate over the nature of moral properties is similar to realist-antirealist debates over other sorts of properties. At the heart of each of these debates, Quinn observes, are certain controversial feature-response pairs (1978: 1). One such pair in the area of ethics is moral goodness and moral approval: Do we morally approve of honesty because it is good, or is honesty morally good because we approve of it? A controversial feature-response pair in the area of aesthetics is that of funniness and amusement: Does a joke amuse us because it is funny, or is it funny because it amuses us? And a third example in the philosophy of perception is that of something’s being red and it’s looking red: Does something look red because it is red, or do we think it is red simply because it looks red?

Quinn writes:

What makes these and many other examples controversial is the fact that one kind of philosopher (the *realist*) finds it plausible to claim first that whether an object possesses one or another of these features is independent of and prior to the question whether it provokes the correlative response and second that the response itself is a genuinely cognitive state of mind in some way directed to the feature as part of its object. While another kind of philosopher (the *mentalist*) finds it plausible to deny both these claims and to assert instead that the response has conceptual priority over the feature and that what the realist takes in the response as cognitive of the feature is really some noncognitive attitude, disposition, sensation, or act of will. In other words, the realist regards the response as a response *to* the feature while the mentalist sees the feature as some sort of construction *out of* the response. (1978: 1-2)

By framing the debate in this way, Quinn emphasizes the realist’s belief that a moral property exists *prior* to our mental perception of it. The realist also believes that this perception is cognitive in nature (so that we can talk about the possibility of our having *knowledge* of the moral property’s existence). In contrast, the noncognitivist (mentalist) takes the response, or mental perception, to be conceptually prior to the feature that elicits that response. Also, the response is taken to be noncognitive in nature. The emotivist, for example, will say that ‘Torturing babies is wrong’ should be understood primarily as an expression of the speaker’s attitudes toward torturing babies. As such, the speaker does not intend this expression or statement to convey information so much as to express a view, perhaps with the aim of getting others to not torture babies. The moral noncognitivist thus holds a view which contrasts starkly with the position of the moral realist.[[7]](#footnote-7)7 What about the moral constructivist and the moral nihilist?

There is not much more to add about the nihilist than has already been said. The nihilist agrees that we intend a sentence like ‘Torturing babies is wrong’ to be saying something about how the world really is. But he denies that any of our moral claims give a true description of the world. He believes that all such claims are false because there are no features in the world that our moral claims can refer to. As already mentioned, Mackie was one prominent philosopher who held such a view. Oddly enough, Mackie didn’t think that the truth of nihilism means we ought to change our moral discourse and behavior. He thought instead that we should construct an error theory to explain and justify our continued use of these false claims (Mackie 1977).

The constructivist is like the nihilist in holding (1)—that our moral claims when literally construed are literally true and false—but unlike the nihilist in accepting that some of these claims are true. The constructivist accepts (1) and (2), and therefore (a), but rejects (b)—the claim that moral facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them. The constructivist position lies somewhere between Quinn’s realist and mentalist. Like the mentalist, the constructivist will say that moral features (properties) are some sort of construction *out of* our responses. But the constructivist sides with the realist in believing that the relevant responses out of which to construct, say, rightness and wrongness, are cognitive in nature. One kind of constructivist, for example, is the cultural relativist. This person will say that we ought to look to the moral beliefs currently held in society if we want to know what is right and wrong. The Rawlsian constructivist, on the other hand, will say that we ought to look to those beliefs that are the outcome of a process of reflective equilibrium, a process begun from a hypothetical ‘original position’ in which we stand behind a ‘veil of ignorance’. This second sort of constructivism, if it does in fact yield a single set of moral facts, would be nonrelativistic.

Another way to describe how the moral realist differs from his opponents is in terms of the kind of objectivity attributed to moral judgments (cf. Brink 1989: 20). The moral realist asserts that our moral judgments can be objective in two senses. First, they can be objective insofar as they concern matters of fact and can, accordingly, be true or false. Second, they can be objective in the sense that their truth or falsity doesn’t depend on anyone’s moral beliefs or moral attitudes. Brink adds: “This first kind [or we might say ‘level’] of objectivity distinguishes moral realism and other cognitivist theories from nihilism and noncognitivism; the second kind [or further level] of objectivity distinguishes moral realism from constructivist versions of cognitivism” (p. 20). It is worth keeping in mind, though, that the objectivity which the moral realist attributes to moral judgments is much stronger than the |objectivity| described in Chapter 1. This should be immediately evident from the fact that certain kinds of noncognitivists and constructivists will claim that our moral judgments can be |objective|. What makes the moral realist’s form of objectivity so strong is the strength of its mind-independence claim.

The above gives us some idea of the core commitments of all moral realists. Let’s turn our attention now to some of the major objections that have been brought against the realist. A couple of these objections do have force against certain forms of moral realism. But I will argue that they do not undermine all varieties of moral realism, and especially not the most appealing ones.

*The supervenience objection*

Moral realism asserts the existence of moral properties. What is the nature of these properties and how are they related to other types of properties? Core tenets (a) and (b) do not entail specific answers to these questions. There is no particular view regarding the nature of moral properties that the realist must have. Still, some views are more plausible than others. In what immediately follows I shall suggest that the moral realist ought to subscribe to a form of nonreductive ethical naturalism (the same sort of naturalism that Brink advocates). I will then address a well-known objection to this understanding of moral facts.

As Brink points out (1989: 9, 22), when characterizing the nature of moral properties the realist might be an ethical naturalist, nonnaturalist, or supernaturalist. The ethical naturalist says that moral properties are natural properties, the nonnaturalist that they are nonnatural properties, and the supernaturalist that they are supernatural properties. A natural property is, roughly, one that permits of direct or indirect empirical observation, and so can be studied using the methods of science.[[8]](#footnote-8)8 Supernatural properties are those which can only be investigated through the methods of religion. Nonnatural properties fit into neither of these two categories; they are such that we cannot infer anything about their existence solely through empirical observation. In the early twentieth century ethical nonnaturalism held sway among moral realists; among its proponents were G. E. Moore, W. D. Ross, and H. A. Prichard. Today the most common type of moral realist is the ethical naturalist.

I will assume that *moral realism has a better chance of being defensible if the realist subscribes to a form of ethical naturalism*. Several reasons can be offered in support of this assumption.[[9]](#footnote-9)9 First, if supernatural properties can only be understood via religion, it doesn’t seem that a moral realism positing the existence of supernatural properties will be rationally defensible; the worry, then, is that moral claims themselves won’t be rationally defensible. Religions too often depend, ultimately, on claims that are supposed to be accepted solely on faith; the nature of these claims is such that they cannot be subjected to rational scrutiny. But then such claims, by their very nature, won’t be rationally defensible, and any moral position which ultimately rests on them won’t be rationally defensible. It won’t do to say that a position is defensible if it depends on premises which cannot be rationally defended.1[[10]](#footnote-10)0 (Of course, in pressing this argument I am assuming that we want our moral claims to be rationally defensible, and that moral realism is far more appealing if it makes this possible.) Second, for any particular religious view, it does seem as if there are people who do not subscribe to that view and yet are morally good in a non-accidental way. Thus it seems people can have a correct understanding of morality without subscribing to any particular religious view; this observation suggests, in turn, that if there are moral properties we need to be aware of in order to have a correct understanding of morality, these properties won’t be of the supernatural variety.1[[11]](#footnote-11)1 Third, moral realism will be defensible if it provides a plausible explanation of many common features of moral practice; in fact, the realist’s claim is that it can provide a better explanation than competing theories. Yet it is not at all clear (to me anyway) how a supernaturalist moral realism could meet either of these criteria. In this regard nonnaturalism also seems to face some major hurdles. If, as the nonnaturalist claims, moral properties are unlike nearly all of the properties we are most familiar with, then she has to find a way to explain this, and she will also have to explain how we acquire knowledge of such *sui generis*, or ontologically independent, properties. The nonnaturalist’s ontological commitment looks to be much stronger than necessary, and it is not clear to me what would justify holding on to it given the problems it faces. But rather than argue against nonnaturalism or against supernaturalism, let’s see what some of the reasons are for thinking that at least one kind of ethical naturalism is plausible.

The moral realist who is an ethical naturalist will say that moral properties are natural properties. Is there a way of making sense of this idea? It wouldn’t be plausible for the realist to say that a moral property is a kind of physical property like mass or shape, or a kind of psychological property like certitude or fear. Yet if moral properties are natural properties, they must have some kind of connection with these other sorts of natural properties.1[[12]](#footnote-12)2

It seems that the most plausible way of establishing such a connection is through the relation of supervenience. Moral realists often take moral properties to be higher level properties that *supervene* on various configurations of lower level properties (e.g., Moore 1903, Brink 1989, Bloomfield 2001, Smith 1994). We might say, like Paul Bloomfield, that the lower level properties are “ontologically more fundamental” (2001: 43). The idea is that the presence of a particular moral property depends on the presence of a certain set of base properties. In general, *a property F supervenes upon a particular set of properties, G\*, just in case, necessarily, anything that is G\* is also F*. It follows that two things cannot differ in their supervening properties without differing in their base, or subvenient, properties.

But it does not follow that there can be only one set of underlying properties for F; it may be that F is “multiply realizable”. In other words, supervening properties might supervene on different sets of underlying properties.1[[13]](#footnote-13)3 The moral realist might say, for example, that there are different ways for a person to be intemperate, or that there are different ways for a person to be unjust. So it is not necessary that the presence of a particular moral property always depends on the presence of the very same set of base properties.

The ethical naturalist will “claim that moral properties supervene on natural properties *because* moral properties are constituted by natural properties” (Brink 1989: 160). This constitution might occur in one of two ways (Brink 1989: 156-159). A moral property might be constituted by a certain set of natural properties because it is *identical* with that set—identical in the way that some philosophers claim that water is identical with H2O. If water is identical with H2O, then there is no *possible world* in which water is composed of something other than H2O; we would say that ‘water’ and ‘H2O’ refer to the very same thing in every possible world.1[[14]](#footnote-14)4 But we can also say that moral properties are natural properties even if they are not identical with them. We can say that moral properties are *constituted* by natural properties in the same way that a table is constituted by a certain configuration of particles. In a different possible world, the table could have been realized by a slightly different combination of particles, and it is in that sense that the table is not identical with the particles comprising it.

Brink argues that the naturalist ought to say that moral properties are natural properties in this second sense (what Brink calls “the ‘is’ of constitution”; the first sense he calls “the ‘is’ of identity”). One reason the naturalist might want to understand moral properties in this way is to be able to allow that they are multiply realizable. If moral properties exist, it seems reasonable to think that they “could have been realized by an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of sets of natural properties” (Brink 1989: 158). This is preferable to allowing that a moral property is *identical* to the infinite disjunction of the ways it can be realized, since the latter seems to require that we expand, in an unacceptable or counterintuitive way, either our notion of the identity relation or our notion of a discrete, natural property. Brink writes: “If we deny that identity is a relation that can hold between relata that are indefinitely or infinitely disjunctive—say, because we insist that identity holds only between genuine properties and we deny that disjunctive properties are genuine properties . . .—then the multiple realizability of moral properties provides us with a reason for resisting the identification of moral and natural properties” (Brink 1989: 158-159).

There is also another reason for saying that the person who is both a moral realist and a naturalist should hold the view that moral properties are constituted by, but not identical to, natural properties. Realists and antirealists alike (whether with respect to color properties, moral properties, or some other type of property) often rely on an *explanatory criterion of reality* to distinguish between appearance and reality. The criterion is that a property or fact is real only if it is required in order to give the best explanation of the phenomena around us, including our beliefs and responses to the world (Stroud 2000: 74). If a property is *not* needed to explain existing phenomena, we assign it to the category of appearance.

If we rely on this criterion, but also insist that moral properties are identical to certain configurations of natural properties, then the terms referring to moral properties would seem to be superfluous when it comes to explaining moral phenomena.1[[15]](#footnote-15)5 It seems we could simply make use of those natural terms which denote the configurations of natural properties that were picked out by the moral terms. In other words, if moral properties are identical to natural properties, we would likely have a way of reducing moral claims to natural claims, and in such a way that the latter have as much explanatory power as the former. The explanatory power of the natural claims would be equivalent because no differences would show up in any possible counterfactual situation. The natural claims would address all the counterfactual situations in the same way that the moral claims would. If this assumption is correct and a reduction of this sort is possible, then the explanatory criterion of reality requires us to say that moral properties are not really distinct from the properties the moral nonrealist accepts, contrary to what the moral realist is insisting.1[[16]](#footnote-16)6 This result gives the moral realist a second compelling reason to avoid saying that moral properties are identical to the configurations of natural properties that constitute them. Moreover, Brink presents some persuasive examples for thinking that moral facts are not reducible to natural facts without a loss in explanatory power (1989: 195-197).1[[17]](#footnote-17)7

For these reasons I think the realist ought to be committed to a nonreductive form of ethical naturalism. It is a naturalism which denies that we can *logically* derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’ (i.e., that moral claims can be deduced from natural claims using only the basic inference rules of logic) or that moral terms (assuming a distinction can be made between moral and nonmoral terms) are analytically equivalent to natural terms (Brink 1989: 9).1[[18]](#footnote-18)8 By committing to this form of naturalism, the moral realist can say that moral properties are genuine properties in their own right. This fits with the understanding that moral realism is a distinctively metaphysical thesis, one that involves an *additional* metaphysical commitment that moral nonrealists do not have (see footnote 16). The nonreductive ethical naturalist makes this commitment, however, without saying that moral properties are *sui generis*. For according to this understanding of naturalism, moral properties are ontologically dependent on natural properties, dependent in just the way described by the notion of supervenience.

Some have claimed that there is a serious problem for the moral realist who espouses this form of naturalism, and exactly because it involves the relation of supervenience. Simon Blackburn (1985b: 145-146) views the relation with suspicion, as does J. L. Mackie (cf. Mackie 1977: 41). Philosophers often rely on supervenience to avoid problems that arise in the metaphysics of their respective subjects. For example, the moral realist who is a nonreductive ethical naturalist wants to say that there is a *necessary* connection between moral properties and certain natural properties—but without denying that there is a logical gap between ‘is’ premisses and ‘ought’ conclusions, and without extending our ontology in any way.1[[19]](#footnote-19)9 Blackburn points out, though, that “it is one thing to assert such necessities but quite another thing to have a theory about why we can do so” (1985b: 145). How do we explain, for instance, the asymmetry between a supervening property F and its subvenient properties, G\*? The existence of the G\* properties necessitate F, but if F is multiply realizable, it won’t necessitate G\*. Blackburn’s concern, on a general level, may be that supervenience is no more than an *ad hoc* solution; to avoid this charge it would help to have reasons for positing the existence of such a relation other than the fact that it solves a number of problems for us.2[[20]](#footnote-20)0

I think this is a genuine concern even though, with respect to the question of asymmetry, the moral realist doesn’t seem to face any special disadvantage. The asymmetric way in which moral properties supervene on various configurations of natural properties is no more mysterious than the asymmetric way in which the property of being a table supervenes on various configurations of natural properties. Surely the property of being a table (or even the property of being a particular table) does not necessitate just one way of being a table.

But if Blackburn’s general concern merits attention, is it something that only the realist needs to address? Antirealists also subscribe to supervenience, but instead of talking about moral properties supervening on natural properties, they talk about moral *claims* or judgments supervening on (descriptions of) the situations to which they apply. Blackburn himself believes we are not competent in our moralizing unless we moralize within the constraints imposed by this second form of supervenience (1985b: 137). Why might it be legitimate for the antirealist to rely on the notion of supervenience but not the realist? Paul Bloomfield (2001: 50) observes that antirealists such as Blackburn and R. M. Hare see supervenience to be closely related to the notion of universality that many moralists, including Kant, say is implicit in our ‘ought’ statements. Bloomfield quotes Hare as follows:

One cannot with logical consistency, where *a* and *b* are two individuals, say that *a* ought, in a certain situation specified in universal terms without reference to individuals, to act in a certain way, also specified in universal terms, but *b* ought not to act in a similarly specified way in a similarly specified situation. This is because in any “ought”-statement there is implicitly a principle which says that the statement applies to all precisely similar situations. (Hare 1991: 456)

If Bloomfield is right, the antirealist believes that a claim-oriented notion of supervenience merely expresses the ‘universality constraint’ that all correct moral judgments must satisfy if they are to be considered moral judgments at all: “if a situation is G and this implies that one ought to F, then anytime something is G one ought to F” (Bloomfield 2001: 50). Supervenience understood in this way looks, not just unproblematic, but intuitive. For the realist who is a nonreductive ethical naturalist, on the other hand, the supervenience claim is a claim about the existence of a metaphysically necessary connection between moral properties and certain natural properties in the world. So if there is any special problem for the realist concerning supervenience, it must be due to this metaphysical claim.

Blackburn claims that just such a problem exists for the realist, one severe enough to make all forms of moral realism false (1971: 123). This is the objection that I will look at in some detail.2[[21]](#footnote-21)1 It is much different from the general concern that supervenience as employed by the realist appears to be an *ad hoc* solution. I think the realist needn’t worry too much about the *ad hoc* objection because it seems to be an even greater problem for the antirealist.2[[22]](#footnote-22)2

Blackburn believes that the moral realist is committed to the following formulation of the thesis:

(S) Necessarily ((∃x)(Fx & G\*x & (G\*xUFx)) ⊃ (y)(G\*y ⊃ Fy))

Here ‘U’ is a two-place relation such that ‘G\*xUFx’ means that the set of G\* properties or truths underlies F, or equivalently, that F supervenes on G\*. Thus, (S) reads as follows: “As a matter of [logical or conceptual] necessity, if something x is F, and G\* underlies this, then anything else in the physical or natural or whatever state G\* is F as well” (Blackburn 1993: 131). Given this commitment to (S), Blackburn says the realist has trouble explaining why there cannot be a *mixed world*, a world in which something has all the G\* properties and is F, while something else has all the G\* properties but lacks F. It is (S) that imposes the ban on mixed worlds—exactly because it requires that if a situation is G\* and this implies that one ought to F, then anytime something is G\* one ought to F.

Blackburn also thinks the realist faces a second, related problem. He points out that (S) does not entail

(N) Necessarily (x)(G\*x ⊃ Fx)

because we cannot infer “Necessarily q” from “Necessarily (p ⊃ q)”. But if (S) does not entail (N), it is consistent with

(P) Possibly (∃x)(G\*x & ~Fx).

Blackburn claims that the antirealist, but not the realist, has a way to explain why we can hold both (S) and (P).

The antirealist can explain the ban by appealing to the logic of moral evaluation itself, where moral evaluation is understood in terms of projecting value on to the world (1984: 186). The constraints of proper projection are such that “it is not possible to hold an attitude to a thing because of its possessing certain properties and, at the same time, not hold that attitude to another thing that is believed to have the same properties” (1971: 122). Blackburn explains:

The nonexistence of the attitude in the second case shows that it is not because of the shared properties that I hold it in the first case. Now, moral attitudes are to be held towards things because of their naturalistic properties. Therefore, it is not possible to hold a moral attitude to one thing, believe a second to be exactly alike, yet at the same time not hold the same attitude to the second thing. Anybody who appears to do this is convicted of misidentifying a caprice as a moral opinion. (1971: 122)

Thus the antirealist explains the ban on mixed worlds by saying that an evaluation won’t count as a *moral* evaluation unless it is consistent and adheres to the supervenience constraint. If our moral thinking and moralizing isn’t regulated by (S), we aren’t engaged in moral thinking and/or moralizing. The reason this is so, Blackburn says, is because our moral thinking and moralizing are meant to serve a certain practical function—that of guiding behavior in certain ways (1994: 195; 1985b: 137); and moralizing cannot serve that practical function if it doesn’t adhere to (S).

The realist, on the other hand, cannot explain the ban on mixed worlds by substituting ‘belief’ for ‘attitude’ in the antirealist’s argument. Our beliefs may indeed have to be consistent for the purposes of proper moralizing, but this does not explain why *reality* must be such that there can be no mixed world (1971: 122). Logical constraints on belief-formation do not extend to the world beyond our beliefs; a mixed world can therefore exist in spite of the need for our beliefs to be consistent. The trouble for the realist, then, is that she has to explain the facts as they are or could be, whereas the antirealist only needs to explain the constraints on proper moral thinking.

Likewise, the antirealist can explain (P) by saying that it is conceivable that our moral practices could have turned out differently: as things stand, we say that something is F if it has the G\* properties, but it could have been the case that we said something was Y if it had the G\* properties. But if the realist allows that (P) is true as well as (S), then it becomes even more difficult for her to explain why reality can be such as to allow (P) but not be such as to allow the existence of a mixed world.

I think that there are at least three ways the realist can respond to these objections.

First, she will note what Blackburn himself already concedes (cf. 1985b: 136-37): that his objections have no force against her if she understands the modality of (S) as that of metaphysical necessity rather than logical or conceptual necessity. Blackburn’s concession is quite surprising, given that this is exactly how we ought to understand the realist’s supervenience claim. The realist who is a nonreductive ethical naturalist is claiming that moral *properties* supervene on natural *properties*; she is not claiming that moral evaluations supervene on natural descriptions. Moral realism (as we are understanding it) is a metaphysical thesis, not a conceptual one, and nothing in core tenets (a) and (b) forces the realist to maintain that there are certain *conceptual* constraints involving moral properties. Furthermore, even if the realist *also* accepts Blackburn’s interpretation of (S)—we will see in a moment why she probably should—this doesn’t pose a problem for her.

With the modality in (S) interpreted as metaphysical necessity (let’s call this realist interpretation of (S), ‘(S)-m’, and Blackburn’s interpretation of (S), ‘(S)-l’), the realist can readily explain the ban on mixed worlds and the combination of (S)-m and (P). The realist can hold (S)-m and (P) by interpreting the latter in terms of logical possibility: clearly there is a logically possible world in which ‘(∃x)(G\*x & ~Fx)’ is true. (Since Blackburn derives (P) through logical inferences, there is nothing in his argument which suggests that there is a metaphysically possible world in which (∃x)(G\*x & ~Fx).) Or, if our realist accepts the arguments in (Salmon 1989), she can allow that (P) is true understood in terms of metaphysical necessity, but deny that such a world is *accessible* from the actual world, the world in which F supervenes on G\*. Salmon argues that metaphysical necessity is such that the relation of accessibility between possible worlds is intransitive.2[[23]](#footnote-23)3 He also argues, and I think rightly, that the realist interpretation of (S) ought to be that ‘(∃x)(Fx & G\*x & (G\*xUFx)) ⊃ (y)(G\*y ⊃ Fy)’ is true in every metaphysically possible world that is accessible from the world that interests us (in most cases this would be the actual world). Salmon writes: “What is possible and what is impossible according to a world is determined by the world itself”; thus, “a world *w'* is *metaphysically possible relative to* a world *w* if and only if every fact of *w'* is a possibility in *w*” (18).

The realist can explain the ban on mixed worlds using either of the strategies for explaining the combination of (S)-m and (P). She can say that mixed worlds are not metaphysically possible under the realist interpretation of (S). Or she can say that mixed worlds are metaphysically possible but inaccessible from the actual world, the world in which (S)-m is true. (Analogously, it seems true to say that mixed worlds are logically possible but inaccessible from any world in which (S)-l is true. See footnote 14 above.)

Of course, one can insist that the realist still has to explain why a mixed world is not metaphysically possible, or why such a world is possible but inaccessible. To this further challenge the realist can offer a two-part response. First, she can agree that the explanatory gap is undesirable but say that the challenger is imposing an unfair burden, that asking this type of question is equivalent to asking physicists why the physical laws and physical constants of the universe are what they are and not something else. It is unlikely that such questions will ever be answered to our satisfaction. One could just as well ask the antirealist why (S)-l is *logically* true, for surely there are logically possible worlds in which (S)-l is false; they are just not possible worlds that are accessible from those worlds in which (S)-l is true. The antirealist also faces another explanatory gap: although his explanations of the ban on mixed worlds and the (S)/(P) combination may be fairly solid, they give us little assurance that his metaphysical claims are true, for it is not as if the realist has no explanation at all for these two things, and it is not as if the realist’s explanations are implausible. At the very least, the antirealist has to explain what motivates us to moralize, and hence constrain our practical thinking by (S)-l. Second, the realist can point to all the reasons for accepting (S)-m. (S)-m forbids the metaphysical possibility or accessibility of mixed worlds, and it forbids the metaphysical possibility or accessibility of a world in which (∃x)(G\*x & ~Fx).

Are there reasons for accepting the realist’s interpretation of (S)? The realist can say that any reasons for accepting moral realism in general will be reasons for accepting (S). For example, one reason moral realism is appealing is because it provides a way to explain, or justify, the commonly held belief that at least some of our moral judgments are capable of being correct and incorrect, and objectively so.2[[24]](#footnote-24)4 Also, it seems that the realist can better explain our belief in the universality constraint. This kind of objectivity follows directly from the core tenets. If there is a single moral reality that is entirely mind-independent, then moral requirements won’t vary from individual to individual just in virtue of the individuals being distinct. Blackburn’s antirealist expressivist, by contrast, has to understand the universality constraint as the expression of an attitude, and say that we are justified in holding it because it coheres well with our other moral attitudes. But what constrains our other moral attitudes in a way that we should think there are objectively correct and incorrect answers to at least some moral questions?2[[25]](#footnote-25)5 If we accept the realist’s interpretation of (S), we have an explanation, in terms of the nature of moral properties themselves, for why moral objectivity is possible and for why our belief in the universality constraint is justified. (S)-m therefore coheres with some other important beliefs about morality.2[[26]](#footnote-26)6

If the realist can disarm Blackburn’s objections in this way, and this is something Blackburn himself concedes, why does Blackburn think that his objections have any force against the realist? It is hard to say. Blackburn argues as if his objections have force once we grant that the realist must be committed to (S)-l. But if this is how he intends his argument to work, it is deeply flawed.

It is not that he is wrong in thinking that morality, understood as a set of practices, requires us to be committed to (S)-l. It seems right to say, as he does, that “Anyone failing to realize this, or to obey the constraint [i.e., that moral claims supervene on natural ones, where the modality is that of logical or conceptual necessity], would indeed lack something constitutive of competence in the moral practice . . . [To deny (S)-l] would betray the whole purpose for which we moralize, which is to choose, commend, rank, approve, or forbid, things on the basis of their natural properties” (Blackburn 1985b: 137). The antirealist’s interpretation of (S) aims to capture the universality constraint discussed above. If (S)-l succeeds in this aim, then we ought to accept it. For we do want and expect moralizers to be consistent when applying moral concepts, and thus, in making moral judgments. If we reject the universality constraint, it is hard to see how we could make sense of our moral practices. So the realist may in fact need to adhere to (S)-l if she is to properly engage in moral evaluation, i.e., show competence in moralizing.

But even if Blackburn is right to insist that the realist must be committed to (S)-l, why think that this poses a problem for the realist? What prevents her from holding both (S)-l and (S)-m? I see no reason to think that these two interpretations of (S) conflict. (S)-m makes a claim about the nature of moral properties, whereas (S)-l says something about our understanding of the nature of moral claims. I see no incompatibility here. If anything, the realist can say that (S)-l properly reflects, for the most part, (S)-m—that it is appropriate for us to understand moral claims to supervene on descriptions of the situations to which they apply if it is the case that moral properties supervene on natural properties in the way that the realist suggests. The only point at which (S)-l does not properly reflect a realist view of things is in permitting (P). But as we have seen, that (P) is logically possible but metaphysically impossible, or modally inaccessible from the actual world, doesn’t pose a problem for the realist. There are many things that are logically possible but metaphysically impossible. For example, I take it that it is logically possible for me to be a dog, but not metaphysically possible.

Thus, a second way the realist can disarm Blackburn’s objections is by noting that she can (and perhaps should) be committed to both interpretations of (S). The realist can then explain the ban on mixed worlds and the (S) and (P) combination from either of two perspectives.

It is unlikely, then, that Blackburn intends his arguments to work in the way just outlined. Perhaps the reason he thinks his objections have force against the realist simply boils down to this: the belief that the antirealist has a better explanation for the ban on mixed worlds and the (S)/(P) combination. This brings us to a third strategy the realist can employ in an attempt to disarm Blackburn’s objections: she can argue that it isn’t the case that the antirealist has better explanations for these things *because the realist can also accept the antirealist’s interpretation of (S)*. So if the antirealist does indeed have a better explanation than the realist, it must be because the antirealist can more readily explain (S) itself, or can more easily make room for it given his other commitments. But the realist can point out that it is not at all clear that Blackburn’s expressivist has a good explanation for (S)—not so much the consistency that (S) requires, but the supervenience itself. Let me try to explain.

Earlier we saw that Blackburn’s own explanation of (S) rests on the idea that “[To deny (S)] would betray the whole purpose for which we moralize, which is to choose, commend, rank, approve, or forbid, things on the basis of their natural properties” (Blackburn 1985b: 137). What I want to know is: How does the antirealist explain the connection to natural properties? Why think that Blackburn’s expressivist has a better explanation than the realist? The expressivist holds that when saying something like “Kicking dogs for fun is cruel” we are primarily expressing an attitude; we are not describing how things are in the world. But if the distinctively important aspect of my moral response is its noncognitive nature, why is it that I am logically prevented from saying “Kicking dogs for fun is a fine way to amuse oneself; while it may be cruel, there is nothing morally wrong about engaging in this activity”? How does expressing this attitude reveal incompetence with the concepts involved, when the primary function of using the concepts involved is to express an attitude? What Blackburn has to explain, in other words, is why it makes sense for us to say that the primary purpose in using moral concepts is to express an attitude, rather than saying something about what the world is like, when it is the case that our moral concepts involve a necessary connection to the descriptions of those situations to which they apply. Indeed, Blackburn argues that ethical concepts are not genuine concepts, and that to be a competent user of ethical concepts one does not need any special cognitive sensitivity (1998: 94). (A genuine concept, presumably, is something whose correct application requires only an awareness of the particulars of the situation to which it is applied—as opposed, say, to an understanding of some particular evaluative outlook.)

Blackburn will appeal to the larger purpose of expressing moral attitudes; expressing such attitudes serves some sort of practical function, and that practical function won’t be served unless our moral concepts are connected as they are to natural properties. But what function is that? It won’t do to simply say that the purpose of moralizing is to guide our practical decision-making (Blackburn 1984: 186). Immoral agents seem to get along well enough in the world. Or if inconsistency between agents (in their use of moral concepts) is the worry, Blackburn still has to explain why the consistency that is so crucial to moralizing is one that connects moral claims with natural properties in the world. It isn’t enough to say that this is what we do. Blackburn has to explain–-and this is just the converse of the demand made in the previous paragraph—why it is that it makes sense for us to do this, why it makes sense for us to tie our moral concepts to the world in this way *when the primary function of our moral claims is to express attitudes*. (The realist explanation, recall, is that it makes sense for us to accept (S)-l if (S)-m is true.) If Blackburn says that our attitudes have to be *to* something, that we are responding *to* something in the world, his noncognitivism is threatened (as we will see in Chapter 5); and he will still need to explain why inconsistency between agents in their use of moral concepts defeats the purpose of moralizing.

As we’ll see in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, Blackburn’s expressivism runs into a number of other serious explanatory problems.2[[27]](#footnote-27)7 By pointing to these other explanatory problems, the realist can try to shift the burden of proof.

This concludes our look at three ways the realist can respond to Blackburn’s supervenience objections. I don’t see any serious problem for the realist in relying on supervenience. In fact, for the rest of the dissertation I shall assume that the only defensible brands of moral realism are those committed to understanding the nature of moral properties as the nonreductive ethical naturalist does. (We see more reasons why the realist ought to be committed to this form of naturalism when discussing the remaining objections.)

*Mackie’s argument from queerness*

J. L. Mackie insists that, although the moral realist’s metaphysical commitments are intelligible, they are “queer” relative to other realists’ metaphysical commitments (1977: Chapter 1, esp. pp. 38-42). The claim is that moral properties will have to be quite mysterious and unusual because, like Plato’s Forms, they will have to be such that knowledge of their existence must not only tell an agent what is morally required of him or her, but also motivate the agent to act, or give the agent a reason to act, in accord with these requirements (40). By contrast, the properties posited by other types of realists (like scientific realists) lack this built-in prescriptivity and accordingly pose no mystery.

It is worth looking at how the moral realist can respond to Mackie’s argument from queerness because the argument still has a great deal of influence on those who have rejected moral realism.2[[28]](#footnote-28)8 Indeed, some critics still insist that realist moral properties must be as strange as Plato’s Forms (Blackburn 1984).

In saying that realist moral properties will be queer due to a kind of built-in prescriptivity, Mackie assumes that the moral realist cannot subscribe to an externalist moral psychology. The externalist rejects one or more forms of internalism. In one of its forms, internalism is roughly the view that knowledge of a moral requirement gives one reason to act in accord with that requirement.2[[29]](#footnote-29)9 What is key to the thesis is the claim that a necessary connection exists between moral beliefs or moral considerations and an agent’s reasons for acting, or an agent’s motivating states. This necessary connection is thought to exist because we understand morality to be practical, or action-guiding, in character. We would find it odd if a person were to say that she sincerely believes that morality requires her to give to famine relief, but then expresses indifference to giving, or claims that she doesn’t actually have a reason to give to famine relief. The externalist, on the other hand, is saying that, while we might find this to be odd, it is a real possibility nonetheless. To say otherwise is to deny that there can be such a thing as an amoralist—one who is capable of recognizing morality’s requirements but who fails to see why they should have any practical import for him.

Although internalism (in at least one of its forms) is a very plausible thesis, one which Mackie and many other moral philosophers view as crucial to any adequate account of the nature of morality, it doesn’t fit well with moral realism. The moral realist claims that moral facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them. In this respect moral properties are supposed to be like all other realist properties. But this suggests that we should be able to hold any attitude we like toward these facts or truths, including that of remaining indifferent to them; for we don’t believe that perception of other realist properties requires us to have a certain attitudinal state, nor do we believe that perception of other realist properties necessarily *causes* us to have a particular kind of attitudinal state. If moral properties are truly independent of us, there is no reason to think that we should be compelled to care about them, or be compelled to see them as giving us reasons for acting. However, if one says, as the internalist does, that a necessary connection exists between recognizing X to be a moral requirement and taking oneself to have a reason to do X (or if one holds one of the other forms of internalism), there is reason to think that realist moral properties are *not* truly independent of our evidence for them. The existence of such a necessary connection would seem to entail that the existence of moral facts or truths depends on the psychological states of the person who comes to recognize them, or who would come to recognize them, as facts or truths. Thus, moral realists tend to be externalists. As such, they do not take moral properties to have the kind of built-in prescriptivity that Mackie objects to. From the moral realist’s point of view, it is externalism and not internalism that is the plausible thesis.

So one way of partially disarming Mackie’s argument is by rejecting the thesis of internalism. Contrary to what Mackie suggests, this is a real option for the moral realist.3[[30]](#footnote-30)0 I say ‘partially’ because, as Brink points out (1989: 172-180), the externalist still faces a problem if it is true that moral properties, even without the prescriptivity, are nevertheless quite mysterious and unlike any of the properties we are familiar with. Mackie writes:

Another way of bringing out this queerness is to ask, about anything that is supposed to have some objective moral quality, how this is linked with its natural features. What is the connection between the natural fact that an action is a piece of deliberate cruelty—say, causing pain just for fun—and the moral fact that it is wrong? It cannot be entailment, a logical or semantic necessity. Yet it is not merely that the two features occur together. The wrongness must somehow be ‘consequential’ or ‘supervenient’; it is wrong because it is a piece of deliberate cruelty. But just what *in the world* is signified by this ‘because’? (1977: 41)

Brink offers a very solid response to the worry that Mackie expresses here. I will summarize the key points of Brink’s argument and then briefly mention how it might be possible for a moral realist to espouse *internalism* and yet not be susceptible to Mackie’s queerness argument. Thus, the realist, whether an internalist or externalist, has a cogent response to the worry that Mackie raises.3[[31]](#footnote-31)1

A brief remark is in order before we take up these tasks. If it can be shown that realist moral properties must be nonnatural properties, Mackie’s argument from queerness may have a better chance of succeeding. G. E. Moore thought that his ‘Open Question’ argument establishes that the moral realist must be committed to a form of nonnaturalism. I will address Moore’s argument later in this chapter and show how it can be disarmed. So let’s continue to assume that the moral realist can understand the nature of moral properties as described in the previous section. What we want to know, then, is whether the metaphysical commitments of the moral realist who is both an externalist and a nonreductive ethical naturalist are queer or mysterious compared to the commitments made by other, more respected realists.

The nonreductive ethical naturalist says that moral properties supervene on natural properties because they are constituted by natural properties. Part of the aim of the previous section was to show that such a connection between properties is not queer. Or, if we insist on calling it queer, it is at any rate quite common among the many things that exist in our world, and so, not queer relative to the kinds of properties we are familiar with. Brink’s externalist response is then no more than a reiteration of points already made: “This relation of constitution . . . is quite familiar. Tables are constituted by certain arrangements of microphysical particles; biological processes such as photosynthesis are constituted by physical and chemical events causally related in certain ways; psychological states are constituted by certain arrangements of brain states; and large scale social events such as wars and elections are constituted by enormously complex sets of smaller scale social and political events causally and temporally related in certain ways” (Brink 1989: 177). Thus, if moral properties are queer because they supervene on other properties, then we have to be willing to say that some very familiar properties (like the property of being a table, or the property of inflation) are also queer.

Brink also notes (pp. 178-79) that moral properties needn’t be queer even if, as some suppose, the thesis of materialism were true (i.e., even if the only types of facts and properties at the most basic level are physical ones). The realist is said to face particular difficulty explaining the nature of moral properties from a materialist ontology (Putnam 1981: 211). But if the materialist allows that there are higher-level properties (e.g., biological or psychological properties) which supervene on lower-level properties, then the moral realist can account for the existence of moral properties in the same way that the materialist accounts for other higher-level properties. Only, the realist might want to say that moral properties in this case are higher, higher-level properties, since we might expect them to supervene on other higher-level properties, such as biological or psychological properties, rather than the most basic of the physical properties. The realist can understand moral properties in this way and still see them as ultimately constituted by physical properties.3[[32]](#footnote-32)2

Finally, Brink reminds us that we cannot expect to be able to say anything about the particular natural properties that constitute the subvenient base of some moral property without drawing upon substantive moral theory. The constitution of a moral property depends on the type of substantive moral theory we subscribe to. The more detailed our substantive moral theory, the better chance we have of identifying the natural properties which constitute a particular moral property. Thus, the fact that the moral realist may not be able to identify all the natural properties constituting some moral property does not weaken the claim that moral properties supervene on, and are constituted by, natural properties.

We can conclude then that Mackie’s argument has force against the externalist moral realist only if we think that supervenience is in fact a mysterious relation, and only if we think that the moral realist alone needs to be committed to supervenience. I am suggesting that these two conditions are not fulfilled and that Mackie’s argument therefore does not affect the externalist moral realist.

What about the internalist moral realist? The argument from queerness would seem to present a much greater challenge for this type of realist because he or she holds that moral properties do have a kind of built-in prescriptivity. Mackie is claiming that properties that are both mind-independent and prescriptive are queer relative to other realist properties. As we will see in Chapter 8, this argument does indeed present a problem for any moral realist who is truly committed to the mind-independence claim, and if we believe that the “other realist properties” referred to are truly mind-independent and non-prescriptive. But Mackie’s argument won’t have force against the realist who can successfully argue that moral properties are as mind-independent as any property can be, and who can successfully argue that the degree of mind-*dependence* involved is not such as to justify our labeling his position antirealist.

For the sake of argument, let’s suppose that *this* moral realist can in fact subscribe to some form of internalism. Specifically, let’s suppose that this realist can consistently claim that if a person sincerely believes that she ought to do X (because she believes that doing X is morally required), then she necessarily believes that she has a reason for doing X. (John McDowell is an example of such a moral realist.)

Let’s also suppose that virtuous agents come to believe (correctly) that doing X is morally required in circumstances C because they have correctly perceived all of the morally relevant features of C. In other words, let’s assume that the perception of certain realist moral properties is what leads virtuous agents to believe that X is morally required, and thus, to believe that they have a reason for doing X. I set things up this way because I think that this is the type of scenario Mackie has in mind. His charge is that these moral properties are queer entities relative to other realist properties because they necessarily give those agents who perceive them certain reasons for acting.

Our special realist can respond to this charge by pointing out that the prescriptiveness of moral properties is really not much different than the prescriptiveness of other kinds of realist properties; he can respond, that is, by pointing out that we hold a similar internalist thesis with respect to other realist properties. For example, if all the evidence we gather suggests that the earth revolves around the sun, so that we take it to be a fact that the earth revolves around the sun, then we must necessarily take ourselves to have a reason to believe that the earth revolves around the sun. When we find that F is true, we take ourselves to have a reason to believe F. (Or we might put the point this way: if we sincerely believe that Y is evidence for F, then we necessarily take ourselves to have a reason to consider Y when deciding whether or not F is true.) Of course, the argument the realist makes here only goes through if we accept his assumption that reasons for acting are no more suspicious than reasons for believing. But at present I don’t see grounds for rejecting this assumption. The realist can argue that if we find nothing queer about the necessary connection in (1) below, we should find nothing queer about the necessary connection in (2):

(1) taking F to be a fact and taking oneself to have a reason for believing F

(2) taking X to be a moral requirement and taking oneself to have a reason for doing X.

If an agent takes F to be a fact, she must take herself to have a reason for believing F because if she didn’t, we won’t think that she truly takes F to be a fact.

Mackie is particularly suspicious of the idea that moral facts can motivate us to act in certain ways. While our internalist needn’t assert that, upon recognizing a moral fact, an agent is necessarily motivated to act in accord with its prescriptions, it is assumed that the reasons involved in our internalist’s thesis are at least potentially motivating reasons. They motivate us to act in accord with them if we have certain other beliefs and attitudes. Even so, the realist can say that moral facts won’t be unusual or queer due to having this sort of normative force. There are other types of realist facts which necessarily give us reasons with a similar potential to motivate. For instance, if you discover that intense radiation is harmful and that enriched uranium emits intense radiation, then you will take yourself to have reasons for believing that intense radiation is harmful and that enriched uranium emits intense radiation. But these reasons can also motivate you to handle enriched uranium very carefully; or they can motivate you to believe that enriched uranium ought to be handled very carefully—a belief which in turn can lead you to handle the stuff carefully.

Proponents of Mackie’s argument from queerness will almost certainly be disappointed with this response. They will insist that it is not plausible to think that the very act of perceiving that X is morally required *causes* us to take ourselves to have a reason to do X—necessarily so, regardless of the contents of the perceiver’s mind. But I am assuming that the internalist realist does not have to hold this view; I am assuming that the internalist realist would also see such a causal connection as implausible. She would instead say that the perception involved in these examples is of a far more complex nature.3[[33]](#footnote-33)3 She will almost certainly argue that the divide between reality and appearance is not where Mackie thinks it is, and that Mackie’s queerness objection presupposes a certain metaphysical view which, although commonly held, is one we ought to reject. The internalist realist could, in other words, offer us a conception of reality that is quite different from how we commonly see it. This realist will say that moral properties are not truly mind-independent, but insist that they are as mind-independent as any property can be. The general strategy would be to show that moral properties are not queer or unusual when reality is properly conceived of. But it is incumbent upon this internalist realist to show why it is that the conception of reality that Mackie relies on fails to adequately make sense of human beings and the relations in which we stand to the world. John McDowell has given us some of the elements of such an argument (1983, 1985).

It is along the above lines that I think the internalist moral realist can handle Mackie’s objection. The internalist moral realist can easily handle the argument from queerness if he can persuade us that we ought to reconceive reality, or rather, refine our understanding of the relations in which we stand to the world. But this realist does need to give up the second core tenet, for as I argue in Chapter 8, internalism and the mind-independence claim are very much incompatible.

*Must the moral realist be an intuitionist?*

The two standard objections we have looked at thus far question the realist’s understanding of the nature of moral properties. A third type of objection questions whether we can have knowledge of these properties.

Those who dismiss moral realism based on epistemological grounds often do so because they think the thesis requires a form of foundationalism called *intuitionism*. The moral intuitionist claims that moral knowledge is ultimately grounded in self-evident *moral* facts or truths—facts or truths which we can know directly, or noninferentially. As such, these facts or truths are often said to be self-justifying. The realist position is then attacked by way of attacking intuitionism. As Brink points out (1989: 108), there have been two main objections. The first is that intuitionism would require us to have a special perceptual faculty in order to have knowledge of moral properties, yet we have no evidence that such a faculty exists. The second is that the moral intuitionist cannot adequately explain the existence of moral conflicts that result when disputants’ responses to a problem are shaped by different moral intuitions.3[[34]](#footnote-34)4

The critics offering these objections have not had to argue that the moral realist must be an intuitionist. Prominent proponents of moral realism such as G. E. Moore (1903) and W. D. Ross (1930) (see Brink 1989: 100 for others) have already done that. At least some present-day moral realists also appear to argue in favor of an intuitionist epistemology (McDowell 1979, 1981, 1995b; McNaughton 1988 and 2000; Dancy 1993).

The moral realist can respond to the criticisms in one of two ways. She can either attempt to show that she needn’t be an intuitionist, or she can argue that intuitionism can handle the criticisms brought against it. Like Brink (1989: Chapter 5), I find the second approach unsatisfactory. As a form of foundationalism, intuitionism fails to meet the criterion that justifying beliefs also be justified.3[[35]](#footnote-35)5 But this still leaves the first approach. The moral realist needn’t resort to intuitionism because moral realism is perfectly compatible with a coherentist epistemology. In this next section I shall briefly look at Brink’s arguments for why this is so, and at his explanation for why many philosophers have mistakenly thought otherwise.

A couple of remarks are appropriate before we take up these tasks. It is important to address the objection that the moral realist must be an intuitionist for two reasons: first, (a sophisticated form of) coherentism appears to be a more defensible epistemology than foundationalism, and this seems to hold true for the epistemology of moral beliefs; second, moral realism has a better chance of being defensible if its further commitments are defensible in their own right. Since justification of our moral claims is such an important part of moral practice, epistemological issues and commitments need to be taken quite seriously. If the moral realist must be an intuitionist and there is good reason to be sceptical of intuitionism, then, due to the centrality of epistemology to our moral practice, a fairly heavy burden is placed on the moral realist. So it is important to see whether moral realism is compatible with a coherentist epistemology.

Let’s start by considering the arguments that have led philosophers to conclude that the moral realist must be an intuitionist. As mentioned, the moral intuitionist is a kind of foundationalist regarding moral beliefs, what Brink calls a ‘moral foundationalist’ (1989: 102). The moral foundationalist “holds that one’s *moral* belief *p* is justified just in case *p* is either (a) foundational [meaning noninferentially justified or self-justifying] or (b) based on the appropriate kind of inference from foundational beliefs” (102). Historically, the moral intuitionist (hereafter simply ‘intuitionist’) strengthens condition (b) by adding that the foundational beliefs which underlie all our justified moral beliefs must also be *moral* beliefs. The explanation for the stronger claim has to do with the belief in an ‘is-ought’ gap. Brink writes:

Historically, intuitionism has been motivated by acceptance of foundationalism and the existence of an is-ought gap . . . roughly the line of argument is as follows: Because of the existence of an is-ought gap, the inferential justification of a moral belief must always involve another moral belief (the latter belief must be a more general moral belief under which the former may be subsumed). By foundationalism, however, all justification must terminate in foundational beliefs. Therefore, the justification of any moral belief must terminate in a foundational moral belief. (102, n.3)

Thus, many philosophers have thought that the moral realist must be an intuitionist because they have believed that moral ‘ought’ conclusions cannot be derived solely from nonmoral facts (‘is’ premisses) and because they were already predisposed toward foundationalism.

Of course philosophers have also thought that moral realism requires intuitionism because they didn’t think a coherentist epistemology could provide evidence of objective moral facts. I will follow Brink and call the coherentist regarding justification of moral beliefs a ‘moral coherentist’. This is someone who “holds that one’s moral belief *p* is justified insofar as *p* is part of a coherent system of beliefs, both moral and nonmoral, and *p*’s coherence at least partially explains why one holds *p*” (Brink 1989: 103). Those who believe that the moral realist cannot be a coherentist argue as follows: they start with the premise that we are not justified in believing *p* unless we are justified in believing *p* to be true (Brink 1989: 106). They then observe that coherentism’s only requirement for a belief *p* to be justified is that it cohere with our other *beliefs*. The combination naturally leads one to ask how coherence with one’s beliefs can provide evidence “about a world whose existence and nature are independent of our beliefs” (ibid., 127). Why think that the beliefs *p* needs to cohere with are true and correctly describe how things are in the world? Or, even if these other beliefs are true, why think that *p*’s coherence with them justifies our thinking that *p* is true (i.e., that *p* actually corresponds to facts in the world)? Coherentism doesn’t seem to provide us with justification for believing that *p* is true, and thus it doesn’t seem to provide us with justification for believing *p*. Since we generally are not willing to say that a person has knowledge of some fact or truth unless they can justify their belief in it, moral coherentism appears to be incompatible with moral realism because the realist says that moral knowledge is possible, and that what this knowledge consists of are facts or truths which exist in the world independently of our evidence for them—the very facts or truths for which coherentism seems unable to provide justification.3[[36]](#footnote-36)6

How can the moral realist respond to these arguments that she must be an intuitionist? What reasons are there for thinking that the moral realist needn’t be an intuitionist?

The first argument regarding the is-ought gap begs the question in a way, since it depends on the assumption that foundationalism of one sort or another is the right epistemology for our beliefs in general, including our moral beliefs. But I am inclined to agree with many others that foundationalism is not nearly as appealing as some forms of coherentism. Furthermore, even if foundationalism is the better theory of justification, the moral realist who is a nonreductive ethical naturalist needn’t hold that the foundational beliefs for our moral claims must be moral beliefs. For the necessary connection between a supervening moral property and its constitutive natural base properties will, according to this moral realist, be that of metaphysical, not conceptual or logical, necessity. So one could appeal to belief in the presence of the base properties—a belief or set of beliefs which could ultimately be justified by foundational nonmoral beliefs—in support of one’s belief in the presence of the supervening moral property, but deny that the justificatory appeal is deductively inferential. (I say more about the kind of nondeductive inference that might be involved below.) This kind of realist thus has a way to avoid intuitionism and still allow that there is a logical gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’.3[[37]](#footnote-37)7

At the same time, the moral realist who is a nonreductive naturalist can still allow that many, if not most, of our moral beliefs or judgments draw deductive inferential support from our other moral beliefs. For instance, a moral judgment about some particular action may follow from one’s commitment to a more general moral belief regarding actions of that type—what we would call a moral rule. Perhaps this moral rule is in turn justified by appealing to an even more general principle of morality that explains the presence of a number of moral rules (see Brink 1989: 107). If this is the justificational structure for all of our moral beliefs, and if justification of moral beliefs is foundational, then the levels of abstraction must come to an end. The moral realist could then say that the moral principle appealed to that is at the last and most general level of abstraction has near-foundational status, and that the beliefs which represent the natural properties that this principle supervenes upon have foundational status. (The kind of foundationalist in question here just has to allow that some forms of nondeductive inference from these nonmoral foundational beliefs are appropriate. Since we rely on forms of nondeductive inference all the time without adverse effects, this seems to be a very reasonable assumption. Indeed, it would be implausible to assert that the only justified forms of inference are deductive in nature.)

What about the argument that if *p* is a moral belief, then *p*’s coherence with other beliefs, both moral and nonmoral, cannot provide evidence of the objective truth of *p*? Brink argues at some length (1989: 126-143) that the moral realist has a cogent response to this objection. Here I will summarize what I take to be the main points of Brink’s argument.

What we need to begin with is a more detailed picture of coherentism. In order for a set of beliefs to be coherent they must not only be logically consistent, but also hang together explanatorily. A coherent set of beliefs is usually thought of as an interconnected network, or system, of beliefs, one in which each belief acquires support from one or more of the other beliefs in the set, and perhaps also gives support to one or more beliefs in the set. What the coherentist needn’t assert is that inferential support can only be linear and unidirectional, as the foundationalist insists, or that inferential support must be circular in such a way that the justification of some belief always ultimately rests on the credibility of that belief itself. Ideally, a coherent set of beliefs will be such that the reliability (and/or credibility) of any given belief adds to the reliability (and/or credibility) of the other beliefs in the set, and conversely, the reliability of these other beliefs add to the reliability of the belief under scrutiny. The hope then would be that the reliability of the set as a whole (the chances of it providing us with a correct description and understanding of reality) is actually increased with each new belief that is coherently added to the set (cf. Griffin 1996: 9-10).

We can arrive at a (maximally) coherent set of beliefs by employing the method of *reflective equilibrium*. The method involves comparing the beliefs we have at different levels of generality and, if necessary, revising beliefs at one or more of these levels to achieve overall coherence. Unlike the foundationalist who takes there to be a privileged class of beliefs that needn’t be further scrutinized, the coherentist allows that all of our beliefs require justification, and are thus potentially revisable. Even so, when employing the method of reflective equilibrium we want to start with the beliefs that seem to have the greatest credibility and test the credibility of any further belief against that set. In the area of ethics, for instance, our most credible beliefs may be our pretheoretic intuitions about particular cases. What we look for in any adequate moral *theory*, then, is that the judgments it entails cohere with these intuitions. (Our general moral principles, in other words, should be such that they help us make sense of our moral practice.) If they do not, and if we stand firm in our pretheoretic intuitions even after further reflection, coherence will demand that we either give up the theory or make adjustments to it. In other cases, it may be that the most reasonable step would be to revise our intuitions. The process of revising continues back and forth between the different levels of beliefs until we hopefully reach a point of reflective equilibrium between intuitions and theory, between beliefs regarding particular cases and the general principles we are committed to that are relevant to thinking about the cases in question. We say that our beliefs are in a state of reflective equilibrium if they are maximally coherent, or if they are coherent enough that they are acceptable to us without further revision.

Now if *p* is a moral belief, *p*’s coherence with one’s other moral beliefs would by itself not be particularly reliable evidence for the truth of *p*. There can be any number of sets of beliefs none of which are alike—including sets which actually conflict—with which *p* might cohere. Still, *p*’s coherence can provide evidence of the objective truth of *p* if the set of beliefs *p* coheres with is wide enough. What is needed for the proper justification of objective moral truths is the method of *wide reflective equilibrium*. Using this method, we can have evidence for *p*’s objective truth if *p* coheres with the set that includes one’s other moral beliefs and all relevant nonmoral beliefs—for example, beliefs having to do with the conditions under which one’s moral beliefs were formed. A nonmoral belief would be relevant if it has anything to do with establishing *p*’s reliability or unreliability. (Of course, since we ultimately want *all* of our beliefs to cohere, there is a sense in which all of our beliefs are relevant to establishing wide reflective equilibrium with *p*.) Let’s see how this is supposed to work, first for beliefs in general and then for moral beliefs.

In making a case for why coherentism (in general) can provide evidence of objective truth, the coherentist emphasizes the distinction between first-order beliefs and second-order beliefs: “First-order beliefs are about features of the world external to us; second-order beliefs, by contrast, are about our first-order beliefs, typically about the relationship between first-order beliefs and the world. Second-order beliefs include beliefs at various levels of generality about the nature and reliability of our belief-formation mechanisms” (Brink 1989: 127). We appeal to our second-order beliefs in order to justify our first-order beliefs. And we would say that our second-order beliefs are further confirmed if they provide us with a way to explain our first-order beliefs (especially if they provide us with what seems to be the *best* explanation of those first-order beliefs).

The coherentist will then point out that the second-order beliefs we already accept (those that have to do with nonmoral first-order beliefs) presuppose realism. These second-order beliefs are realist in nature because we take the external world to be metaphysically and conceptually independent of our evidence for it. “Our realist second-order beliefs include beliefs about our psychological makeup, our cognitive and perceptual equipment, and their hookup to the world. We combine these second-order beliefs with belief in (other) scientific theories, such as evolutionary theory, and form still other realist second-order beliefs about the nature and reliability of various belief-formation mechanisms that we possess. The result is a theory of the world and our place in it that identifies certain features of the world that we reliably detect and explains why this should be so” (ibid., 127).

This theory provides us with a set of beliefs (revised and adjusted through reflective equilibrium) which make it possible for us to justify our believing in various first-order beliefs. If a first-order belief coheres with the theory, it will be because the set of second-order *realist* beliefs can explain why it makes sense to take the first-order belief to be objectively true. This explanation is all we need for justification; that is, it is all we need in order to say that we have evidence of the first-order belief’s objective truth. The reliability of the evidence obviously depends on the reliability of the second-order beliefs comprising our theory. But as Brink observes, “Such a theory is justified insofar as it provides part of a unified explanatory account of all our beliefs, including, importantly, our observational beliefs” (128).3[[38]](#footnote-38)8 Also, since so much of our waking experience involves perceptual input of one kind or another, it is reasonable to expect the second-order beliefs in question to be highly reliable. The coherentist thus has a way of saying how our beliefs maintain their contact with reality. (Our observational beliefs may themselves be theory-laden, but they clearly won’t be entirely a construction of theory.3[[39]](#footnote-39)9 Keep in mind, too, that reflective equilibrium is being employed to eliminate the discrepancies between observation and theory. Revision and adjustment take place at both levels, or in both directions, and what gets revised depends on where it makes most sense for the revision to take place.)

Of course, to say that we have evidence for the objective truth of some belief is not to say that the belief is in fact true. We can have evidence for *p* without it being the case that *p*. But recognition of this fact doesn’t pose any special problems for joining realism with coherentism. The same gap between evidence and truth also exists for the foundationalist. Neither theory of justification can guarantee that our justified beliefs are true. So the possibility of knowledge about the external world is no less under coherentism than it is under foundationalism.

Finally, we need to ask if there are any special problems for the *moral* realist being committed to moral coherentism. The moral realist claims that moral knowledge is possible. Moral coherentism will therefore need to have the resources for giving us evidence of objective moral truths. There are reasons for thinking these resources exist if there are reasons for thinking that our second-order beliefs about morality are (or ought to be) *realist* in nature. It is these second-order beliefs we would appeal to in order to justify our realist first-order beliefs. (First-order beliefs would include beliefs about, among other things, the existence of certain moral properties and about whether a particular action or type of action is right.) Brink takes these second-order beliefs about morality to be nonmoral beliefs that say something about “the relation between our moral beliefs and the world” (131), and hence, about the reliability of those moral beliefs (132). If there are any such second-order realist beliefs, they will have to be such that they “cohere with our other beliefs, both moral and nonmoral” (131).

Brink states three reasons for thinking that our second-order beliefs about morality are, or ought to be, realist (131-132; 141). One reason is that we have plausible theories of cognitive reliability. We know the conditions under which belief-formation is reliable, and if our realist first-order moral beliefs are formed under such conditions, then there is some justification for thinking that those moral beliefs are objectively true (exactly as the moral realist claims).

There is also another way in which plausible theories of cognitive reliability can help to justify our holding realist second-order beliefs about morality. The employment of wide reflective equilibrium will require that realist moral beliefs cohere with our nonmoral observational beliefs—empirical beliefs that we often take to be highly reliable exactly because of our well-tested theories of cognitive reliability. If these nonmoral observational beliefs didn’t cohere with realist moral beliefs—beliefs whose existence is best justified by realist second-order beliefs about morality4[[40]](#footnote-40)0—then this lack of coherence would be evidence against holding realist second-order beliefs about morality. The moral realist is of course claiming that our empirical observations do cohere with our realist moral beliefs, and hence, with our realist second-order beliefs about morality.

The line of reasoning employed in the last paragraph is what I think is behind Brink’s second reason. He seems to be arguing that there are ‘considered moral beliefs’ that are highly reliable (“e.g., beliefs that slavery is unjust, that avoidable suffering is wrong, and that promises should in general be kept” (136)) and which cohere with realist second-order beliefs about morality. The considered moral beliefs are highly reliable because they have been formed under good conditions for belief-formation and incorporate certain values that we take to be necessary for any adequate moral theory (values such as impartiality and promoting human good). This reliability lends credibility to realist second-order beliefs about morality if those beliefs cohere with the considered moral beliefs.

The third reason for holding realist second-order beliefs about morality is the set of arguments that can be made in support of moral realism itself. It is crucial that a second-order belief about morality be the belief that moral realism is true. Without such a belief, we won’t be able to properly justify our realist first-order beliefs. Consequently, *moral coherentism can give us good evidence of objective moral truth, but only if we have reasons for thinking that moral realism is true*. We have not seen those reasons yet, but for the present argument they are not needed.

All the realist needs to show at this point is that moral coherentism is compatible with moral realism. The argument just stated seems to have accomplished that. We started with the worry that this compatibility wasn’t possible because moral coherentism didn’t seem capable of providing evidence of objective moral truth. But we now see that a coherence theory of justification can provide such evidence as long as we are justified in holding realist second-order beliefs about morality. Finally, we will be justified in taking moral realism to be true if it coheres with our other beliefs in such a way that we can achieve a state of wide reflective equilibrium. Such coherence will be possible if moral realism is defensible. As stated earlier, the thesis has a better chance of being defensible if it coheres with those ‘further commitments’ that look to be most defensible in their own right. Moral coherentism is one of those further commitments, since it looks more appealing than the alternative epistemologies. That moral realism coheres with moral coherentism thus gives evidential support to moral realism itself. So rather than seeing the two theses as incompatible, we can actually view them as mutually supporting.

*The is-ought thesis*

The objection that has perhaps been most influential in casting doubt on the defensibility of moral realism is that which points to the logical gap between statements of fact and statements of evaluation. Many believe that we cannot validly argue from a consistent set of premises, all of which are descriptive, to a conclusion that *prescribes* how things ought to be, morally-speaking.4[[41]](#footnote-41)1 In other words, we cannot logically derive an ‘ought’ conclusion (a moral statement) from ‘is’ premisses (nonmoral statements) without the help of at least one evaluative premise (a moral statement). Two important arguments have been given in support of this thesis. I shall give a brief account of both arguments and then say how they are thought to be a threat to moral realism. We will also see that the moral realist has a cogent response to these perceived threats.

The first argument in support of an is-ought gap appears simply to emphasize a basic principle of deductive logic: the conclusion of any argument that is valid in virtue of its logical form, if it is not a logical truth, must be about whatever the premises are about. More precisely, the sense or meaning of the nonlogical terms found in the conclusion must be contained in the sense or meaning of one or more of the nonlogical terms found in the premises. Those who assert the existence of an is-ought gap based on this principle would thus appear to have to assume that a sharp distinction can be made between factual and evaluative statements. In particular, it seems they need to assume that a sharp distinction can be made between moral statements and nonmoral statements. This would be possible if, say, we could distinguish moral from nonmoral senses of terms. Although there is some reason to doubt that such a distinction can be made, if we grant this assumption, it is quite plausible to think that there is a logical gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’.

A second argument in support of such a gap comes from Hume. The argument is that, since moral considerations and convictions have a necessary connection with motivation but factual considerations do not, we can never derive moral conclusions from factual premises alone. Hume’s argument relies on the internalist assumption that moral considerations necessarily motivate, so that if we fully understand and sincerely affirm some moral judgment, we will be motivated to act in accord with that judgment. The argument also relies on the assumption that factual considerations needn’t have any effect on our motivation. (Hume claimed something even stronger, saying that awareness of a set of facts is never sufficient by itself to motivate us in any way.) The idea is that a person can fully acknowledge that some fact or set of facts is true without this making a difference to their behavior one way or another. This is so because, according to the assumption, we are free to take whatever attitude we want toward facts. Given these two assumptions, it is clear why moral conclusions won’t be derivable from factual premises alone: a person can affirm all of the premises of a moral argument but deny that this logically requires them to affirm the conclusion, since the motivation that is “contained” in the conclusion is not to be found anywhere in the premises. This second argument might be seen by some opponents of moral realism to be stronger than the first because it not only claims that an important difference exists between moral statements and factual statements, but identifies what it is. There seems to be a practical, or action-guiding, aspect to moral statements which factual statements lack. Or, we might say that factual statements have a kind of objectivity, or scope, that moral statements lack since the force of the latter, but not the former, seem to depend on our motivational makeup.4[[42]](#footnote-42)2

How does the is-ought thesis threaten moral realism?4[[43]](#footnote-43)3 Brink offers three reasons why it might be seen as a threat (1989: 155-156). I will discuss two of those reasons here. The third I will address in the next section of this chapter.

One threat the is-ought thesis poses for the moral realist is that of scepticism. If there is an inferential gap between factual statements and moral conclusions, the moral realist may not be able to justify his or her moral beliefs. The moral realist who is a coherentist and a nonreductive ethical naturalist *needs* to claim that nonmoral beliefs can provide evidential support for our moral beliefs. For if it is the case that moral properties supervene on natural properties, but our evidence for these natural properties cannot be evidence for the moral properties, it seems that moral knowledge won’t be possible without our having the mysterious perceptual faculty we’ve already dismissed as implausible. Yet the evidential support required by this realist may not be possible if there is a gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. And, as Brink points out (155), if moral realism isn’t capable of providing us with justification for our moral beliefs, it becomes very difficult to believe that the thesis is true; it simply won’t provide us with the best explanation for some of the most important features of our moral practice.

The is-ought thesis also threatens moral realism’s cognitivist thesis, the claim that there are such things as moral facts or truths. “Someone might argue,” Brink writes, that “a set of claims cannot be fact-stating if none of its members is deducible from other, recognizably fact-stating disciplines” (155). If moral statements were really fact-stating, we should be able to derive them from nonmoral statements that are widely accepted as factual. Since the is-ought thesis shows this to be impossible, moral realism must be false.

The moral realist has a forceful response to both of these threats without having to deny the existence of a logical gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’.4[[44]](#footnote-44)4 Consider the threat of scepticism. The moral realist who is a nonreductive ethical naturalist can insist that the connection between moral properties and natural properties is one of metaphysical, not logical, necessity. This would allow her to claim that factual beliefs can still provide evidence for moral beliefs even if the latter cannot be logically derived from the former. Indeed, if moral properties supervene on natural properties in the way suggested, it is plausible to think that the inferential relation between the moral and nonmoral statements in question would be of a nondeductive sort, not unlike the relation that holds between empirical data and many scientific conclusions. Of course the sceptic can always deny that the metaphysically necessary connection exists. Even so, why think that the only acceptable inferential relation is one that employs the inference rules of deductive logic?

One form of nondeductive inference that allows one to infer moral conclusions from factual premises is inference to the best explanation (Harman 1965, 1968). This type of inference allows that if the truth of some moral belief provides the best explanation of a set of facts all of which are believed to be true, then we can view these facts as evidence for the moral belief being true. Whether an explanation is best is judged in terms of certain background assumptions. Brink writes:

For example, in light of physical and optical theories that cohere with other theoretical and observational beliefs we hold, we may conclude with strong nondeductive warrant from a belief that there is a vapor trail in the cloud chamber that a proton passed through the cloud chamber. Now, given only *nonmoral* background assumptions, for example, that moral realism is true and that the appraisers in question are fully rational and fully informed, the moral fact that torturing kittens is wrong may provide the best explanation of the nonmoral fact that appraisers unanimously agree that pouring gasoline over a kitten and igniting it is wrong. (1989: 169)

By appealing to a nondeductive form of inference such as inference to the best explanation—a form of inference that is quite commonly used in the sciences—the moral realist has at least one plausible reason for asserting that nonmoral beliefs can give evidential support to moral beliefs.

Brink also points out that the moral realist who is a nonreductive ethical naturalist has another way to disarm the sceptical threat.4[[45]](#footnote-45)5 The realist can agree that an is-ought gap exists, but claim that we can close the gap by making use of *moral bridge premises* (Brink 1989: 168). A moral bridge premise describes the connection between a particular moral property and the natural properties constituting it. It will be a *nonanalytic* moral statement—nonanalytic in the sense that its truth would not be a function solely of the meanings of the words comprising it. Justification for moral bridge premises would come from coherence with our other beliefs, perhaps in the form of inference to the best explanation. Here it is worth emphasizing once again that, while the moral realist is asserting that moral bridge premises exist, she is not claiming that they will be easy to identify or formulate. Given the complexities of morality, we should expect that the set of base properties constituting a moral property will be very hard to pin down. But once the realist has correctly identified the appropriate moral bridge premises, she can say that we do have a way of deriving moral conclusions from factual statements; the deductive inference is made possible by the addition of the appropriate moral bridge premise. The moral realist grants that there is still a logical gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ (for we should assume that moral bridge premises always contain the equivalent of an ‘ought’), but denies that there is a logical gap, and hence an evidential gap, between factual statements and moral conclusions.

What about the threat to the cognitivist thesis? The claim is that moral statements cannot be fact-stating because, given the is-ought gap, they are not directly deducible from statements that are already widely recognized as fact-stating. The realist can respond to this argument by showing that it proves too much (Brink 1989: 167). If we use this deducibility criterion for determining whether or not a statement is factual, it may be that no statement will pass the test. Brink notes that philosophers of science have convincingly argued that there are *is-is* gaps between scientific disciplines. That is, the statements of one discipline (such as biology) cannot be successfully reduced to statements that lie completely in another discipline (such as chemistry or physics) without employing nonanalytic bridge premises that state what the connection is between the properties picked out by the first discipline and the properties picked out by the second. These bridge premises would provide the nomological laws needed in order for the reduction to be successful. In any case, if we insist that the inferential gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ is enough to show that there are no moral facts, then consistency forces us to also maintain that is-is gaps likewise show that disciplines we have always taken to be fact-stating really aren’t. Obviously, such a conclusion is unacceptable. We therefore should give up the premise upon which this conclusion is based and deny that is-ought gaps can be used to threaten cognitivism in this way.

There is a third way in which the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ has been used to undermine moral realism. Early in the twentieth century G. E. Moore presented a version of the is-ought thesis which relied on his “open question argument.” He argued that realist moral properties had to be nonnatural, or *sui generis*. Nonnaturalism, however, forced Moore to resort to intuitionism—an epistemology that moral philosophers later came to reject. These philosophers co-opted Moore’s argument in support of nonnaturalism to arrive at a much different result; for them, the argument showed that *none* of the ways of understanding moral properties was defensible and that moral realism therefore had to be rejected. Moore’s argument, they said, should lead us to favor some form of noncognitivism. Because major proponents of antirealism such as Simon Blackburn still think this is a successful argument against the moral realist (1998: 85-87), it is worth looking at the central elements of that argument and then seeing how the realist can respond to it.4[[46]](#footnote-46)6

*G. E. Moore’s Open Question argument and the naturalistic fallacy*

The is-ought thesis claims that no moral statement is derivable from any consistent set of premises all of whose members are nonmoral statements. As we saw above, one way to argue for this conclusion is by relying on internalist assumptions. But the Moorean version of the is-ought thesis makes use of a different set of assumptions. It starts by presupposing that a distinction can be made between moral and nonmoral statements and terms. It also assumes that we can distinguish between analytic and synthetic (nonanalytic) statements. It assumes in addition that *all* analytic statements, including those containing moral terms, are nonmoral statements. This last assumption makes it more difficult to argue that moral statements are not derivable from any consistent set of nonmoral statements, for now it has to be shown that moral and nonmoral terms are not interdefinable. (Why this is the case should become clearer in a moment.)

This is where Moore’s Open Question argument enters the picture. The Open Question argument is used to show that moral, evaluative terms are not synonymous with nonmoral, fact-stating terms. Two terms are synonymous, or interdefinable, if they have the same meaning—if, that is, their criteria of application are the same. If ‘F’ and ‘G’ have the same criteria of application, we can substitute ‘F’ for ‘G’ in some sentence containing ‘G’ and not change the meaning of that sentence. It will be clear to any speaker who is a competent user of the two synonymous terms that this kind of substitution doesn’t bring about a change in the meaning of the sentence.

Moore maintained that substituting factual terms for the moral term ‘good’ (in a particular sentence) can always leave some competent users of the two sets of terms in doubt about whether the meaning of the sentence has changed. For example, some people have argued that pleasure is good because pleasure is sought by all men, and what is sought by all men is good. So one might suggest that ‘good’ in moral contexts can be equated with ‘pleasant’, i.e., that ‘good’ just means ‘pleasant’ in these contexts. If this is true, it should always be the case that anyone who fully comprehends the meaning of the terms will be able to readily say whether the question ‘Is X pleasant?’ has the same meaning as ‘Is X good?’. Moore argued, however, that a person may fully understand ‘good’ and ‘pleasant’ but not know how to answer the question about meaning-equivalency. In particular, he argued that the question ‘Are good things good just insofar as they are pleasant?’ is an *open* question: a competent user of the terms can always sensibly doubt whether the question ought to be answered in the affirmative. Similarly, the same sentence-form will leave us with an open question for any other proposed definition of ‘good’ that makes use of only nonmoral terms (‘Are good things good just insofar as they are F?’). The question would be closed if understanding it were enough to answer it. Such is the case with questions like ‘Are bachelors bachelors just insofar as they are unmarried adult men?’. If one fully understands the meaning of the terms ‘bachelor’, ‘unmarried’, ‘adult’, and ‘men’, then one cannot sensibly doubt that the question deserves an affirmative answer.

This argument, or observation, also seems to be true for moral terms other than ‘good’. For example, philosophers have attempted to give necessary and sufficient conditions for what makes an action morally right, but every proposed definition of moral rightness in nonmoral terms seems to leave something out. It is not unreasonable to conclude then that any question of the form ‘Are E things E just insofar as they are F?’ is open for any moral term, ‘E’, and for any set of nonmoral terms, ‘F’. Notice how this result parallels the result of the is-ought thesis. The latter claims that there is a logical gap between evaluative and descriptive *statements*, while the Open Question argument tries to show that there is a definitional gap between evaluative and descriptive *terms*.

The Open Question argument is of course used to bolster the is-ought thesis. It is supposed to establish the fact that there are *no* necessary truths which might help the moral realist derive a moral conclusion from nonmoral premises. This result presents a serious difficulty for the realist because she would like to have some way to close the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. Before the Open Question argument came along, the realist could suggest that a moralist’s argument may not always be formally complete. A moralist might claim, for example, that

X is pleasant

Therefore, X is good and ought to be pursued.

is a valid argument, not in virtue of its form, but because it is necessarily true that something is pleasant just in case it is good, and it is necessarily true that what is good ought to be pursued. The realist could say that the moralist is implicitly relying on these necessary truths and that the argument we actually see is only in an enthymematic form. But Moore is saying that such necessary truths do not exist, for moral terms can never be analytically reduced to nonmoral terms. Moore refers to any such attempted reduction as the “naturalistic fallacy.” The fallacy “consists in identifying the simple notion which we mean by ‘good’ with some other notion” (Moore 1903: 109). So the Open Question argument blocks what is perhaps the most straightforward way for the realist to close the is-ought gap.

How does this result lead to nonnaturalism? Moore concludes that the Open Question argument, when combined with the is-ought thesis, shows that realist moral properties must be nonnatural properties; as such, they must be ontologically independent from all the other properties that we are familiar with. To derive nonnaturalism we need two other, related assumptions. We need to assume that two terms are synonymous if and only if they denote the same property, and we need to assume that term ‘A’ implies the meaning of term ‘B’4[[47]](#footnote-47)7 if and only if the set of properties denoted by B is a subset of the set of properties denoted by A (i.e., if and only if A features necessitate B features). Let’s follow Brink (1989: 162) and call these two assumptions the *semantic test of properties*. These assumptions acquire some of their credibility from a theory of meaning that has had wide acceptance (Brink, for instance, refers to the writings of Frege, C. I. Lewis, and Carnap; Brink 1989: 148). This “traditional” theory of meaning holds that “the meaning of a term is the set of properties that any competent speaker (i.e., a speaker who knows how to use the term) associates with that term. In this view, the criteria that all speakers use to determine the application of a word constitute the meaning of that word” (ibid., p. 148).

The Open Question argument shows that no relation of synonymy exists between moral terms and nonmoral, fact-stating terms. It can also be adapted to show that there are no *meaning implications* between moral and nonmoral terms (see footnote 47). These results, combined with the semantic test of properties, entail that moral properties can be neither identical to, nor constituted of, natural properties. (One can similarly argue that moral properties can be neither identical to, nor constituted of, supernatural properties, for the Open Question argument can also be used to show that moral terms are not synonymous with supernatural terms.) Finally, since Moore didn’t think the objectivity of ethics could be preserved without some form of moral realism, he concluded that moral properties must be *sui generis*. Let’s call this argument ‘the antinaturalist argument’. We might also think of it as a Moorean version of the is-ought thesis.

As mentioned above, the antinaturalist argument is turned into an antirealist argument. If moral properties are nonnatural properties, there is some difficulty explaining how we can come to know about them. Moore thought intuitionism to be a plausible epistemology, but we have seen some good reasons for rejecting it. Many moral noncognitivists think the objections against intuitionism are decisive. They thus view Moore’s arguments as strong evidence against moral realism.

There are a number of ways the moral realist can respond to the noncognitivist’s use of Moore’s argument against naturalism. Here I will simply mention two such ways.4[[48]](#footnote-48)8 For both of these responses we will suppose that the moral realist grants that a distinction can be made between moral and nonmoral terms (and thus between moral and nonmoral statements), and also that a distinction can be made between analytic and synthetic statements.

The first way the moral realist can respond is by accepting the antinaturalist argument in its entirety. This means granting that the Open Question argument is sound and that the semantic test of properties holds true. The moral realist can claim that the antinaturalist argument is by itself not enough to undermine moral realism. This is true despite the fact that nonnaturalism seems to require a commitment to intuitionism. For if we take the Open Question argument to be sound, then we are forced to admit that the properties referred to in nearly every other discipline will also be *sui generis*, including disciplines we have always confidently understood in realist terms, disciplines such as biology and chemistry. (I will explain in a moment how the realist can argue this.) If in spite of the antinaturalist argument we hold firmly to our beliefs that the properties of these other disciplines are real rather than noncognitivist in nature, then we ought to also allow that moral properties are real. In other words, if the Open Question argument is sound, nonnaturalism cannot be that mysterious after all; most importantly, it cannot be evidence against realism unless we are willing to be noncognitivists regarding many disciplines that we think clearly involve realist properties.

Together the Open Question argument and the traditional theory of meaning prove too much. As Brink observes, except for logical truths, “[f]ew statements are impossible to doubt,” and “almost any question worth asking is open in Moore’s sense” (1989: 154). This is especially true if we are trying to look for terms that are synonymous across disciplines, as is the case when we are trying to reduce a discipline like biology to that of chemistry and/or physics. We can always wonder, for instance, whether ‘water’ and ‘H2O’ are equivalent in meaning.

‘Water’ and ‘H2O’, ‘temperature’ and ‘mean kinetic molecular energy’, ‘light’ and ‘electromagnetic radiation’, ‘pain’ and ‘C-fiber firing’, ‘table *x*’ and ‘microphysical particles *a*, *b*, *c* . . . organized in such and such a way’, ‘World War I’ and ‘events *x*, *y*, *z* . . . causally and temporally connected in such and such a way’ are all pairs of terms between which neither synonymy nor meaning implication obtains. It is simply false that any speaker’s criteria of application for one term of such a pair must contain his criteria of application for the other term of that pair as a proper subset. So, [if we accept the semantic test of properties], neither water and H2O, nor temperature and mean kinetic molecular energy, nor light and electromagnetic radiation, nor human pain and C-fiber firing can be property identities. Tables cannot be constituted by arrangements of microphysical particles, and world wars cannot be constituted by social, political, and economic events. But these identity and constitution claims are just the kind of claims that chemistry, commonsense physical theory, neuropsychology, and history make. (Brink 1989: 164)

In this way the moral realist can argue that the antinaturalist argument poses no special difficulties for moral realism. It might follow that realist moral properties will by nonnatural, but the properties of many other disciplines commonly viewed as realist will likewise be nonnatural. So unless we are willing to give up a realist view of these other disciplines, we needn’t give up a realist view of morality.

The second way the moral realist can respond to the antinaturalist argument is by rejecting the semantic test of properties. Without this premise, Moore’s Open Question argument has no implications for naturalism or nonnaturalism. This is because it is an argument about the *meanings* of statements and terms, and not about the *properties* that these terms refer to. To ask whether the sentence ‘X is pleasant’ is equivalent in meaning to the sentence ‘X is good’ is very different from asking whether X is pleasant just insofar as it is good, or whether X is good just insofar as it is pleasant. The traditional theory of meaning is partly to blame for the mistaken notion that synonymy entails property identity. But identity at the property-level does not follow unless we are willing to say that *analyticity* and *necessity* amount to the same thing. Brink, drawing on the work of Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam, explains the difference between the two notions (165): we ought to understand necessity as a metaphysical notion—“the claim that something is necessary is the claim that things could not have been otherwise in certain respects” (165). The notion of necessity, so understood, is epistemologically neutral; we would expect to have knowledge of these sorts of necessary truths only through a posteriori means. “Analyticity, on the other hand, appears to be a *linguistic* or *semantic* notion; a claim that a statement is analytic appears to be a claim about language or the meaning of words. As such, analyticity is not epistemologically neutral; analytic truths are based on language and not experience and so are a priori, not a posteriori” (166).

By drawing a distinction between analyticity and necessity, the moral realist has a way to close the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. She can say that there are necessary truths available for moral arguments in enthymematic form. They will be *nonanalytic* necessary truths, truths we discover a posteriori. They will be the moral bridge premises spoken of earlier. The nonreductive ethical naturalist can appeal to such bridge premises because of the way moral properties are said to supervene on natural properties. The connection under this supervenience relation is one of metaphysical necessity, not logical or conceptual necessity. Again, this supervenience relation allows the moral realist to acknowledge that there exists a gap between descriptive and evaluative statements but nonetheless claim that descriptive statements can, with the help of moral bridge premises, logically entail moral conclusions. The moral realist can thereby remain a naturalist and still claim that descriptive statements can provide evidence for moral conclusions.

The semantic test of properties erases the distinction between analyticity and necessity, or at least between analyticity and metaphysical necessity. We might diagnose the problem somewhat differently, and perhaps more directly, by saying that the semantic test of properties should be rejected because it erases the distinction between *properties* and *concepts*. This is closer to the argument that Putnam (1981: 206-208) and Kripke (1980: 128-133) make. It seems clear why we would want to maintain such a distinction. There was a time when we didn’t know that water is H2O, that lightening is electromagnetic radiation, that temperature is mean kinetic molecular energy, or that pain is C-fiber firing. Today we might take ‘water’ to be synonymous with ‘H2O’, but that water *is* H2O is something that had to be discovered empirically. As Putnam observes, “it takes empirical and theoretical research, not linguistic analysis, to find out what temperature is . . . , not just reflection on meanings” (1981: 207). He adds: “Kripke is saying that ‘temperature is mean molecular kinetic energy’ is a *necessary* truth *even though we can’t know it apriori*” (208). Thus, the fact that the question “X is pleasurable, but is it good?” is open doesn’t mean that the property, Good, cannot be constituted of the property, Pleasurable. It is still possible, in spite of our lack of certainty about synonymy, that the concepts of pleasurable and good refer to the same set of properties. Whether or not they are the same is something that experience will have to tell us.

We thus have two good reasons for thinking that the antirealists’ appeal to Moore’s Open Question argument fails to undermine moral realism. This antirealist objection has even less force for the moral realist who denies that a clear distinction can be made between moral and nonmoral terms, or between analytic and synthetic statements.

*Concluding Remarks*

In this chapter we have seen how the moral realist can respond to five standard objections. We saw that moral realism is compatible with the notion that moral properties supervene on various sets of base properties. So if the moral realist finds it necessary, or useful, to resort to the notion of supervenience, she can do so (unless of course good arguments are found saying why such a commitment is incompatible with moral realism). We also saw that realist moral properties are not “queer” or mysterious in comparison to other realist properties. The moral realist can commit to a nonreductive form of ethical naturalism, one that understands moral properties to be constituted by natural properties and related to these natural properties via supervenience. Natural properties are not queer; nor is the relation of supervenience. Nor is it queer to think that facts in the world can give agents normative reasons for acting in certain ways.4[[49]](#footnote-49)9 Third, we saw that the moral realist needn’t have an intuitionist epistemology. The moral realist who is a nonreductive ethical naturalist is free to subscribe to a coherentist epistemology. Fourth, we saw that the moral realist is not threatened by the logical gap between statements of fact and evaluative ‘ought’ statements. The moral realist who is a nonreductive ethical naturalist can rely on nonanalytic moral bridge premises to close the gap. Furthermore, the moral realist can point out that moral statements needn’t be logically derived from nonmoral factual statements in order for the latter to be evidence for the former. Nonmoral factual statements can provide evidential support for moral judgments in a nondeductive way, along the lines, say, of inference to the best explanation. Finally, we saw why it is that Moore’s Open Question argument fails to undermine moral realism. The argument not only proves too much, but erases the distinction between analyticity and metaphysical necessity; it is a mistake to say that two terms are synonymous just in case they refer to the same set of properties.

It is worth remarking that, in responding to these five objections, the realist’s commitment to the thesis of nonreductive ethical naturalism is quite important. If this way of understanding the nature of moral properties is untenable, the realist may not have a very good response to one or more of these objections. The form of nonreductive ethical naturalism presented here involves the notion that moral properties supervene on certain configurations of natural properties; the supervenience relation involves, in turn, a metaphysically necessary connection between the two sorts of properties. The realist’s position could be made even stronger if something more were to be said about the notion of metaphysical necessity and if this something more coheres with what has already been said.

1. 1 The tenets are: (a) there are moral facts or truths; and (b) these facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 The objection is that the rules of deductive logic do not allow us to derive conclusions about how things ought to be solely from premises which only describe how things are. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3

   Strictly speaking, it is inaccurate to say that (a) itself is a statement of moral cognitivism. But as Brink writes, if we “construe cognitivism in ethics as the claim that we possess or could possess moral knowledge, . . . [then] cognitivism [so understood] implies that there are moral facts and true moral propositions” (1989: n. 6 on p. 18). One could be a sceptical moral realist, affirming (a) and (b) but denying that we have any epistemic access to moral truths. But in this chapter and the chapters that follow, I will be concerned only with the nonsceptical moral realist. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4 For the time being, I will use the terms ‘property’ and ‘fact’ interchangeably. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5 It is surprising that Sayre-McCord and Smith say that moral realism is primarily a metaphysical thesis, given what they take to be the core tenets of the thesis. I think that others who take (1) and (2), rather than (a) and (b), to be the core tenets understand the debate between the moral realist and antirealist as a linguistic one; they see the disagreement to be over the meaning of moral judgments, and not over whether there are moral facts or objective values in the sense that the metaphysical realist is claiming (see, e.g., the first paragraph of (Schueler 1988)). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6 But unlike Brink, I will not also refer to the noncognitivist as a nihilist. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 7 But we should not see these as the only positions one might hold with regard to feature-response pairs. In Chapter 6 I discuss John McDowell’s view in which neither the feature nor the response has either epistemic or conceptual priority. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 8 James Griffin (1996: 38) discusses the difficulty of stating necessary and sufficient criteria for a natural property. We only have an intuitive sense of what a natural property is. We have even less of a sense of what is distinctive about supernatural or nonnatural properties. I am assuming, like Griffin, that natural properties are those properties that are involved in empirical explanations. Griffin points out, however, that the line between the empirical and the non-empirical is also not clear-cut. In characterizing natural properties as I have, I do not assume that a claim like, ‘moral properties are constituted of natural properties’, gives us a clear idea of the nature of moral properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 9 More reasons for subscribing to such a view will become apparent once we look at a number of the objections that have been brought against the realist. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 10 Given what I say in Chapters 6 and 7 about normative evaluative frameworks and the dependence of our moral claims on these frameworks, I recognize that this argument I am making is, in its current form, not very strong. The case against supernatural properties might be strengthened by pointing out that it is hard to see how such properties could be connected to human well-being or any other area of morality; that it is hard to reconcile the existence of such properties with a scientific understanding of the universe; and that there are far more plausible views upon which to base and justify our moral claims. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 11 This is a point that Norman Dahl has kindly made me aware of. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 12 If moral properties are natural properties, one would think, for instance, that they have some kind of causal connection with other sorts of natural properties. Otherwise it wouldn’t be clear how they could permit of empirical observation or confirmation. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord makes some important remarks on this matter in his paper, “Moral Theory and Explanatory Impotence” (1988c); see especially pages 275-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 13 Although a distinction is often made between weak and strong supervenience, it isn’t crucial to the current discussion. However it is worth noting that Brink (1989: 160-161) and Bloomfield (2001: 44) draw the distinction in very different ways. According to Bloomfield’s way of making the distinction, if property F strongly supervenes on G\*, then F cannot be multiply realizable. So the kind of supervenience relation I am discussing is not the strong supervenience that Bloomfield refers to. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 14 Nathan Salmon gives what I think is the best understanding of a ‘possible world’ when we are talking about *metaphysical* possibility and necessity. “A [metaphysically] possible world is a total way for things to be that conforms to metaphysical constraints concerning what might have been”; “Strictly speaking, a [metaphysically] possible world is not a way for things to be that might have existed; it is a way for things to be such that things might have been that way” (1989: 12). Here we want to think of a ‘world’ in abstract terms, not physical ones. A world is to be understood as “an infinitely long, complex, and detailed set of states of affairs or (potential) facts or statements . . ., [a set] that does not leave any question of fact undecided [and is for this reason called a ‘total’ or maximal set]” (Salmon 1989: 6). Regarding the distinction between “ways for things to be that might have existed” and “ways for things to be such that things might have been that way”: the distinction is needed because there are possible worlds—ways for things to be which might have existed—which are, metaphysically speaking, impossible worlds. They are impossible in the sense that they are modally *inaccessible* from the actual world. For example, I think it right to say with Salmon that it is not metaphysically possible for him to be a Visa credit card account. But just as there is a world according to which there is life on Mars and no life on Mars, there is some world according to which Nathan Salmon is a Visa credit card account. But the latter world will not be modally accessible, in the metaphysical sense, from the actual world (nor, presumably, from any metaphysically possible world). The world according to which there is life on Mars and no life on Mars will not be modally accessible, in the logical sense, from the actual world (nor, presumably, from any logically possible world). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 15 Michael Smith explicitly rejects this claim in his *The Moral Problem* (Oxford 1994). He espouses what he calls a non-reductionistic form of ethical naturalism. The view is non-reductionist in the sense that it denies that moral concepts can be fully analyzed, or defined, in naturalistic terms. Yet I take it that when Smith says things like “moral properties . . . must just be natural properties” (57), that moral facts are “facts about our reasons for action” (59) and reasons for action can “be identified with natural features of our circumstances” (58), (see also pp. 27-28, 57, 127, 182, 185-86), he is also maintaining that moral properties are identical to certain sets of natural properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 16 In asserting core tenets (a) and (b), the moral realist who is a reductionist *is* making a metaphysical commitment. But I think it would be misleading to describe this as an “additional” metaphysical commitment because the reductionist is not saying that there exists a property which nonrealists refuse to recognize. In my view, the reductionist moral realist is, strictly-speaking, not a moral realist at all—exactly because he denies that moral properties extend our metaphysics. (I say ‘metaphysics’ rather than ‘ontology’ in this last sentence because I am reserving the word ‘ontology’ to refer only to the kinds of objects that exist in the world. Stating one’s ontological commitments doesn’t tell us what the world is like or what is true of the objects said to exist (see Stroud 2000: 49). But we begin to know what a person thinks the world is like or thinks is true of the objects said to exist when they state their metaphysical commitments.) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 17 In this regard, see “issue 5” discussed at the end of Chapter 4, just before the *Concluding Remarks*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 18 Why this is so will become clearer below. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 19 See footnote 16 regarding the word ‘ontology’. If the moral realist expands her ontology, moral realism is no longer compatible with any metaphysical thesis which doesn’t recognize this expansion. Thus, if materialism is true, the nonreductive moral realist will want to be a materialist. It is possible for the nonreductive moral realist to be a materialist by relying on supervenience. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 20 Norman Dahl has also pointed out to me a second reason supervenience has been regarded with suspicion. G. E. Moore first used the term to describe a synthetic necessary connection between nonnatural moral properties and their subvenient natural properties. So, historically, the notion has been seen to depend on the existence of synthetic necessary truths, truths which philosophers have had trouble defending ever since Kant first postulated their existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 21 To get a good sense of the argument Blackburn is making, it is helpful to read his 1971 and 1985b articles as well as pp. 182-187 in *Spreading the Word* (published in 1984). The 1985b article (“Supervenience Revisited”) relies a great deal on the 1971 and 1984 writings, especially for establishing that the realist has to commit to the antirealist’s interpretation of (S). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 22 The reader will get some sense of why this is so at the end of this section, and an even deeper sense of why this is so in the penultimate section of Chapter 4. To my mind, supervenience is incompatible with other typical antirealist commitments, commitments such as internalism and noncognitivism. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 23 The accessibility relation, R, is transitive if, for any possible worlds w1, w2, and w3, if w1Rw2 and w2Rw3 hold, then w1Rw3 holds. Thus, if w2 and w3 are accessible to w1 and some sentence is necessarily true in w1, then that sentence will also be true in w2 and w3; the sentence will also be true in any other world that is accessible to w1. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 24 We think that at least some moral judgments can be objectively correct or incorrect in part because we believe that some kinds of human lives, character traits, and actions are clearly better for us than others. For example, we believe that a life without autonomy is not as good a human life for us as a life with autonomy. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 25 According to Blackburn’s form of expressivism, when voicing our moral opinions we are *projecting* attitudes onto objects. Yet projecting doesn’t seem to be a very accurate description of what we are doing if indeed we are also adhering to the universality constraint. To my mind, anyway, projecting attitudes suggests a large degree of freedom in what can be projected. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 26 See Chapter 1 and the beginning of Chapter 6 for more examples of moral intuitions and practices with which realism coheres, or for which it seems to offer the best explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. 27 In Chapter 8, for example, I offer the following argument: Expressivism is supposed to give us a way of talking about moral judgments being correct or incorrect, for we believe that our moral judgments can be such. The expressivist, it seems, thus needs a way to say whether some expressed moral sentiment fits the situation that it is a reaction to because the expressivist is committed to (S)-l. In order to critically assess the fit between reaction and feature, or feature and response, we will have to be able to disentangle the feature from the response in the way that “there are just fat people, and the teenagers’ expression of their disgust at them” (Blackburn 1998: 95). Only then can we determine whether the response fits the feature. However, disentanglement is problematic for the expressivist because it forces him to accept the possibility of the amoralist—someone who doesn’t care about the demands of morality but is still capable of reliably applying moral concepts. And the possibility of the amoralist conflicts with the expressivist’s commitment to internalism.

    It seems that Blackburn’s expressivism, because it is a form of noncognitivism, is unable to explain why we believe that our moral judgments can be correct and incorrect, and why we believe that the correctness of these judgments is partly a function of the natural features of the situations being judged. While Blackburn tells us that kicking dogs just for fun is morally wrong because it causes them pain (1984: 218), in saying this he is, according to the expressivist, primarily expressing an attitude. But in that case, why do we think that moral judgments can be correct and incorrect, or that the correctness of our moral judgments is partly a function of the natural features of the circumstances being judged? [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 28 The thought is that moral realism cannot make room for what Michael Smith calls “the practicality of moral judgments”—our belief that moral convictions have practical import. See (Smith 1994: Chapter 1) and (McNaughton 1988: Chapter 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 29 The internalist thesis comes in two basic flavors. One kind of internalist says that there is a necessary connection between moral considerations and an agent’s *motives* to act on such considerations. This ‘motives internalist’ says that it is a conceptual truth that moral considerations motivate agents. Another kind of internalist says that there is a necessary connection between moral considerations and an agent’s *reasons for acting*. The ‘reasons internalist’ says it is a conceptual truth that moral considerations give agents a reason for performing the action demanded by such considerations. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 30 In Chapter 8 I argue against externalism, but do so by separating it from moral realism. So what I say in Chapter 8 against externalism does not mean that the moral realist cannot resort to the view in order to escape the argument from queerness. If one is a moral realist, there are good reasons for being an externalist. We can say then that the externalist moral realist has an adequate response to the argument from queerness as long as he doesn’t have to defend the truth of moral realism. In other words, part of Mackie’s argument from queerness simply begs the question against the realist. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 31 In Chapter 8 I argue that moral realists who are committed to the two core tenets cannot be internalists. As already noted, internalism conflicts with the realist’s second core tenet, the mind-independence claim. The internalist realist that I have in mind here is one who gives up the second core tenet. He claims instead that, while moral properties are not truly mind-independent, they are as mind-independent as any property can be, that in this respect moral properties are no different from other properties which we take to be real. Of course, philosophers dispute whether this position is genuinely realist. In characterizing the realist as I have above, I have assumed that there are properties which are indeed mind-independent, that other realists (e.g., scientific realists) believe this, and that the moral realist aims to say that moral properties are no different, metaphysically-speaking, than these other realist properties.

    John McDowell sees himself as a moral realist, and he is committed to a strong form of internalism. I discuss McDowell’s view in Chapter 6. I myself take McDowell to be offering us an antirealist view of moral properties, but only because I hold that a genuine realist must be committed to the two core tenets. But McDowell has some ground to stand on; as he rightly points out, just because color properties have a subjective aspect to them does not mean that they are not real; it is a fact that lemons are typically yellow; the yellowness of lemons does not simply belong to the realm of appearance, as if lemons lose their yellowness when they are no longer perceived. Using a different set of criteria, there are very good reasons for saying that McDowell is defending a form of moral realism.

    The disagreement over whether McDowell’s view is realist shouldn’t concern my reader too much. Yes, I am investigating the defensibility of moral realism, but I am doing so with the aim of learning more about the kind of objectivity, if any, that we can justifiably attribute to our moral value judgments. With respect to this aim, it is not a problem that I end up concluding in this dissertation that any form of moral realism committed to the two core tenets is not defensible, and yet argue that McDowell offers us the most promising view of moral properties and moral judgments. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. 32 James Griffin doubts that values can supervene on natural properties (Griffin 1996: 44-48). He points out that if values do supervene on natural properties, they will only supervene on those that are *relevant* to the supervening property. But these relevant properties, he says, will seem to have to be something more than the typical natural property that science investigates. (For instance, we value poetry that reflects an understanding of important matters. Understanding and importance, however, are normative properties.) At the same time, he believes that the supervenience relation presupposes a sharp distinction between facts and values, so that if values do supervene on other properties, the latter will have to be natural properties in a very clear sense. Thus, he concludes that values cannot supervene on natural properties.

    While the issue of relevance deserves our attention, I am not persuaded that Griffin’s objection against the idea that values might supervene on natural properties has any force. His argument relies on drawing a sharp distinction between facts and values, but why think that supervenience requires this? The moral realist who is a nonreductive ethical naturalist is claiming that moral properties are facts; if others refer to these moral properties as ‘values’, then this realist is not making a sharp distinction between facts and values; indeed, this moral realist is doing just the opposite. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. 33 For an idea of what this perception might involve, see the discussion of John McDowell’s view of moral and color properties in Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. 34 As Norman Dahl observes, the moral intuitionist has trouble explaining how there can be moral disagreements between people who are morally educated and unbiased. It seems that such disagreements exist. The intuitionist has trouble explaining them, though, because she will allow that moral truths are accessible to all normal adult human beings in full possession of their faculties; she is claiming in fact that such truths are directly accessible to us. But in this case, how can there be moral disagreements between unbiased, morally educated persons, especially long-standing moral disagreements? [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. 35 I won’t argue for this claim here except to say that Brink’s argument against the foundationalist (1989: 117-122) is on target. Brink writes: “To be justified in holding *p*, one must have reason to hold *p*. If *p* is a first-order belief, this would seem to imply that one must base *p* on beliefs about *p*, in particular, on second-order beliefs about what kind of belief *p* is (e.g., under what conditions *p* was formed) and why *p*-type beliefs are likely to be true. But this shows that one’s belief *p* cannot be *self*-justifying” (117). Brink’s argument, however, is incomplete since it seems to presuppose an internalist view of justification, something Brink doesn’t argue for. (The internalist regarding justification holds that a person won’t be justified in their belief that *p* unless they can state good reasons in support of their belief that *p*.) Brink is also construing the notion of self-justification in a very literal way even though some foundationalists argue that foundational beliefs can draw evidential support from non-belief psychological states (cf. Paul K. Moser’s “epistemology” entry in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. 36 What requires explanation, however, is why philosophers who have accepted foundationalism for nonmoral beliefs have at the same time rejected intuitionism. This brings us back to the two standard objections made against intuitionism: (i) that we need a special perceptual faculty to have knowledge of moral properties, and (ii) that moral disagreements pose a problem for moral intuitionism. Brink suspects that “Because the most plausible candidates for nonmoral foundational beliefs are perceptual beliefs, critics of intuitionism have assumed that foundational moral beliefs would have to be perceptual as well,” and would accordingly require their own perceptual faculty (109). Refer to pp. 110-112 of Brink 1989 to see how the intuitionist might respond to objection (ii). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. 37 Norman Dahl notes that the realist still has to say something about how we can come to believe that a metaphysically necessary connection holds between moral properties and the corresponding subvenient properties. The realist, I think, will claim that our beliefs in these metaphysical necessities are nonmoral beliefs. See p. 69 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. 38 An observational belief would be one kind of first-order belief. It is assumed, however, that observational beliefs would be highly reliable relative to our other first-order beliefs because of the amount of perceptual input we process. So if the second-order realist beliefs in our explanatory theory cohere with these observational beliefs and we have good reason to assume that these observational beliefs are highly reliable, then we have good reason for taking the realist second-order beliefs to be highly reliable. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. 39 If they were, it seems we could always predict what we would observe. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. 40 Moral realism will have ramifications for substantive normative moral theory; for example, any normative theory that coheres with the nonreductive moral realism discussed earlier in this chapter will have to say something about the nonmoral natural properties upon which a particular moral property supervenes. These substantive claims are first-order moral beliefs that will in turn entail certain observational consequences. We can then look to the real world to see if these observational consequences actually hold true (see p. 137 of Brink 1989 for an example of an observational consequence that follows from one particular moral principle). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. 41 The historically well-known expression of this worry is found in the last paragraphs of Book III, Part I, Section 1 of Hume’s *Treatise*. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. 42 John Searle writes: “The inclination to accept a rigid distinction between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, between descriptive and evaluative, rests on a certain picture of the way words relate to the world. It is a very attractive picture . . . it is constructed something like this: first we present examples of so-called descriptive statements (. . . “Smith has brown hair”), and we contrast them with so-called evaluative statements (“my car is a good car,” . . .). Anyone can see that they are different. We articulate the difference by pointing out that for the descriptive statements the question of truth or falsity is objectively decidable, because to know the meaning of the descriptive expressions is to know under what objectively ascertainable conditions the statements which contain them are true or false. But in the case of evaluative statements . . . [we see that they] are not capable of objective or factual truth or falsity at all. Any justification a speaker can give of one of his evaluative statements essentially involves some appeal to attitudes he holds, to criteria of assessment he has adopted, or to moral principles by which he has chosen to live and judge other people . . . . The underlying reason for these differences is that evaluative statements perform a completely different job from descriptive statements. Their job is not to describe any features of the world but to express the speaker’s emotions, to express his attitudes, to praise or condemn, to laud or insult, to commend, to recommend, to advise, and so forth. Once we see the different jobs the two perform, we see that there must be a logical gulf between them” (Searle 1964: 52-53). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. 43 In answering this question I ignore one of the problems associated with Hume’s argument—that of whether moral realism is compatible with internalism—since internalism itself is not a result of the gap, but an assumption needed to show that the gap exists. Notice that *the externalist moral realist isn’t susceptible to Hume’s argument*, at least not as it is currently presented. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. 44 The moral realist could respond by denying the existence of such a gap. In the case of the first argument in support of the is-ought gap, the realist could deny that a distinction can be made between moral and nonmoral terms (or between facts and values in general). For example, John Searle (1964) shows how for a certain set of cases there is no logical gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. In the case of Hume’s internalist argument, the realist could deny the thesis of internalism, or claim that the facts relevant to moral judgments have a necessary connection to motivation. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. 45 Whether or not we see this as different from the suggestion already made depends, I think, on the type of moral thinking that we are engaged in. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. 46 The argument we want to consider is just a form of the first argument in support of an is-ought gap discussed above, but it takes a broader view of what counts as a nonmoral statement. What follows is not intended as an accurate summary of Moore’s specific arguments against naturalism. In fact, I will merely summarize Brink’s exposition of the Moorean version of the is-ought thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. 47 The parallel notion to synonymy is *meaning implication*. “There is a meaning implication from one term to another just in case the set of properties conventionally associated with the second term is a proper subset of the set of properties conventionally associated with the first term” (Brink 1989: 148). The second assumption of the semantic test of properties is saying that there is a meaning implication between terms ‘A’ and ‘B’ just in case A-things are constituted of B-things. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. 48 In mentioning these responses, I will be continuing to summarize the material in Brink 1989: Chapter 6. The first response is found on pp. 153-154 and 164-165, the second response on pp. 165-166. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. 49 This is true, anyway, if we accept McDowell’s view of reality. Although I take McDowell’s view of moral properties to be antirealist, McDowell sees his position as realist. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)