**Chapter 3: A Methodology for the Metaphysical Question at Hand**

The overall aim of this dissertation is to learn more about the kind of objectivity, if any, that we can justifiably attribute to our moral judgments. The means by which we are trying to do so is by asking whether moral realism is a thesis we can confidently dismiss or one that should still be taken seriously. The moral realist claims that our moral judgments can be objective in a very strong sense: not only should such judgments be understood as being true or false; we should understand them to be true or false independently of our evidence for them. If the moral realist is correct, the truth of a moral judgment will not be a function of the particular beliefs about right and wrong that we happen to have. Rather, what would make a moral judgment true are certain features in the world. Because these claims are so strong, one would think that moral realism is more likely to run into problems than positions committed to weaker forms of objectivity. If we find that all brands of moral realism are untenable, we will have taken a small but important step toward answering our central question: we will know what kind of objectivity is not possible for our moral judgments, and we will have an idea of why that is the case. On the other hand, if we discover that one or more brands of moral realism look to be defensible, we will have come much closer toward answering our central question. For then we shall have a fairly clear idea of the kind of objectivity that we can justifiably attribute to our moral judgments, or at least some of those judgments.

The task of the present chapter and the chapters that follow is to continue our investigation into the defensibility of moral realism.

In Chapter 2 we saw how the moral realist can respond to five standard objections. These objections attack, not the two core tenets[[1]](#footnote-1)1 which characterize nearly all moral realists, but rather further, peripheral commitments. The problem with this approach is that, unless one can show that all moral realists must hold the further commitment being attacked, one will not have shown that all forms of the thesis are untenable. Clearly the best way to defeat moral realism once and for all is to strike at one of the core tenets. In this chapter and the two that follow, we’ll look at how antirealists have argued against the core tenets by using *unmasking explanatory strategies*. Chapter 4 focuses on antirealist arguments against part of the first core tenet (namely, the cognitivist thesis that moral utterances express belief states of the speaker and should thus be interpreted as having a descriptive function), while Chapter 5 assesses antirealist arguments against the second core tenet (the mind-independence claim) and against the idea that there are moral facts or truths. Before critically assessing these arguments, however, it would be very helpful to have, as Barry Stroud says, “a rich sense of what it takes to engage in [the philosophical quest for reality] in the right way and to see what sorts of conclusions can be reached” (2000: 3).

Investigating the defensibility of moral realism involves trying to answer a particular *metaphysical question*: Do our perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs having to do with what is morally right and wrong represent anything that is part of the world independently of us? Relatedly, do our moral evaluations (those which we take to be correct) represent anything that is part of the world independently of us? If we have reasons for thinking that the answer to this metaphysical question is “yes”, then we have reasons for thinking that moral realism is defensible. So investigating the defensibility of moral realism engages us in what Stroud calls a quest for reality. The goal of such a quest is knowledge of the nature of reality. If we are to know what the world is really like, we have to be able to distinguish “what is really so from what only appears to be so” (Stroud 2000: 3). Thus, “[t]he philosophical quest for reality asks about the relation between the world and our conception or beliefs about it. It asks that question with the prospect of eliminating from our conception of the world certain features which most or all people appear to believe in” but which do not correspond to anything existing in reality (Stroud 2000: 15). As we have seen in Chapter 1, some (if not many) of our ways of thinking about morality and moralizing appear to presuppose a realist understanding of moral properties. We often talk, for example, as if there really is a right and wrong way of behaving, and as if certain kinds of lives really are better, morally-speaking, than other kinds of lives.

It is because the task of distinguishing what is really so from what only appears to be so can be so difficult that we need a rich sense of what it takes to engage in the philosophical quest for reality in the right way. Unless we are clear about the nature of this metaphysical project and the kinds of conclusions we can legitimately reach, we won’t be able to properly assess arguments brought against the moral realist’s core tenets. More generally, we will lack the understanding we need to properly assess the defensibility of moral realism, including any positive arguments in favor of the thesis. The aim of the present chapter, then, is to advance our understanding of what it takes to engage in the philosophical quest for reality in the right way when what is at issue is the metaphysical status of moral properties. What we seek is a methodology for the metaphysical question at hand. That question, again, is whether our perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs having to do with what is morally right and wrong represent anything that is part of the world independently of us.[[2]](#footnote-2)2

The way I shall fulfill this aim is largely by building on the work Barry Stroud has done in his book, *The Quest for Reality* (2000). Stroud’s purpose in that book just is to give us a rich sense of what it takes to properly engage in a philosophical quest for reality. He does so by first setting out the general form of any such quest, including the considerations and constraints that quests for reality, rightly done, will have to take into account. The book then focuses on how such a metaphysical project might proceed in one particular area of philosophy, the area of colour. Stroud assesses “the prospects of arriving at the conclusion that colour is not part of the world as it is independently of us, or is “subjective” or dependent on us in a way that shape, size, motion, and other “primary” qualities of things are not” (42). His assessment of the colour antirealist’s prospects is worth looking at in some detail, not because moral properties are similar in important ways to colour properties,[[3]](#footnote-3)3 but because the colour antirealist and the moral antirealist employ some of the same basic strategies to undermine realist accounts.

In particular, they both employ unmasking explanatory strategies. These strategies involve using an explanatory criterion to distinguish between appearance and reality. This criterion is that a property is real only if it is needed to give the *best explanation* of what “is so, including our having the beliefs and responses to the world that we do” (Stroud 2000: 74). The antirealist tries to “unmask” our beliefs in the contested properties (beliefs to the effect that these properties are real) by explaining why it is that these properties appear to us to be real when in fact they are not. In other words, the antirealist attempts to provide the best explanation of what is so without presupposing the existence of the contested property; and this requires an unmasking explanation of realist beliefs to the contrary (assuming these realist beliefs are commonly held).

Stroud concludes that one cannot succeed in establishing that colours are unreal, or real but entirely subjective, by the unmasking route. Showing that this approach is unsuccessful, however, does not allow us to conclude that colours are real. But it does show that we still have to take the reality of colours seriously. The concern of the remaining chapters is whether we should arrive at similar conclusions regarding moral properties.[[4]](#footnote-4)4

The idea then is to try to advance our understanding of the right way to undertake a philosophical quest for the reality of moral properties by taking a close look at the arguments and conclusions of Stroud’s book. This will include looking carefully at the arguments Stroud employs against the colour antirealist. Even though moral properties are importantly different from colour properties, there are good reasons for thinking that a number of Stroud’s argumentative strategies can be adapted and used in the quest for the reality of moral properties. We have seen one reason already. Other reasons will become evident once we look at the details of the argumentative strategies themselves and compare and contrast those strategies with the ways moral antirealists have tried to undermine the moral realist’s core tenets.[[5]](#footnote-5)5 (In Chapter 4 we’ll see that a very powerful argument against moral noncognitivism makes direct use of one of these strategies.) Beyond the adaptability of Stroud’s strategies to the moral debate, his work can inform that debate in a more general way. His book provides us with valuable insights regarding the general form any quest for reality would seem to have to have if it is to be successful, especially if it is not to rely on a prior conception of reality that would prejudice the results of such an enquiry. Even more generally, we get “a better understanding of the ways we actually think about the world” (Stroud 2004: 208).

Before we begin to take a look at Stroud’s work, some final remarks are worth making regarding the methodolgy we are seeking. When I speak of a methodology for the metaphysical question at hand, I have three things in mind. One is to get a sense of the approach we may need to take in our specific quest for reality if that quest is to yield reliable, unbiased results. Second, I am assuming that the argumentative strategies Stroud employs against the colour antirealist will inform the debate surrounding moral properties, and it is how those strategies inform this debate that then becomes part of our methodology.[[6]](#footnote-6)6 Finally, it is not clear that an investigation into the reality of moral properties makes sense without having on hand some minimum conception of morality. I shall therefore set out what I take the elements of such a minimum conception to be. (Here I have in mind commitments like, “moral judgments nearly always have to do with benefits and harms to human beings” and “moral requirements apply to agents universally”.) Since how we ought to conceive of morality is a matter of some controversy, I shall set out a conception of morality that has enough content to be of help in our investigation, one that I think most everyone already largely accepts, and one that doesn’t beg the question of the reality of moral properties.

*A summary of Stroud’s arguments and observations*[[7]](#footnote-7)7

The quest for reality is an enterprise that “involves distinguishing what is really so from what only appears to be so, or separating reality as it is independently of us from what is in one way or another dependent on us and so misleads us as to what is really there” (3-4). The enterprise is thus an attempt to answer “whether what we perceive or believe or come to think about the world represents it as it really is” (4); it is an attempt to find out “how much of what we think and feel is due to the way the world is . . . and how much is due to features of us” (12-13). We talk about there being an “objective” source and a “subjective” source for our conception of the world. We say that our thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions which represent the world as it really is have an objective source—those features existing in the world which the thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions represent—, whereas those of our thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions which do not represent the world as it really is have a subjective source; they are caused by features in us (something about the way the human mind and affective capacities experience and come to know the world) rather than by features existing in the world independently of how we perceive that world. The quest for reality is an enterprise in which we attempt to arrive at a conception of the world that represents the world as it really is. Part of the task of arriving at the proper conception is to eliminate from our conception of the world those elements that have only a subjective source.

The way philosophers have approached this task is by employing an explanatory criterion of reality. The thought is that we should include in our conception of reality only whatever is needed to give the best explanation of all our responses to the world, and all our beliefs about what is so. The philosopher then attempts to unmask those beliefs and responses that are suspected of not representing the world as it really is. Unmasking explanations not only expose false beliefs and illusory perceptions; they explain why it is that we come to have these false beliefs and illusory perceptions. We might see a quest for reality, then, as a project in which we attempt to minimize our metaphysical and ontological commitments but without losing any explanatory power in the process.

*The importance of starting with a determinate conception of reality*

Stroud emphasizes that this project cannot get off the ground unless we start with some *determinate* conception of an independent reality (16-44). This may seem obvious, given that I have described the project as one of reflecting on our current conception of what reality is like and trying to eliminate any elements in that conception which have a subjective source. But it is worth noting why this is the shape that a quest for reality must take and what it means for the nature of that task.

When engaging in such a quest, all that we have to work with are our current beliefs about what reality is like. It is not possible for us to investigate the world directly, to get at things-in-themselves. Nor is it possible to “hold all our current beliefs about the world up against the world and somehow measure the degree of correspondence between the two” (27). But having to work from within the set of beliefs we already have regarding an independent reality presents us with a problem—that of arriving at a negative verdict. We aim to eliminate from our conception of the world those elements that have a subjective source, and this means we aim to weed out those of our beliefs about the world which aren’t true. But without direct access to the world, or some way of knowing about the world other than through our beliefs and experiences, we can only ask if a particular belief about the world corresponds to how things are in our conception of the world. And because the belief in question is part of that conception, the answer we arrive at will always be: “yes, there is a correspondence.” (Our beliefs about what reality is like wouldn’t have the status of beliefs if we didn’t take them to be true. Even so, we know that we can believe things to be true that are not really true, just as we know that something can be true even though no one believes it.) How, then, are we to distinguish the true beliefs from the false ones?

Perhaps one could escape this difficulty by avoiding all talk of beliefs being true or false, and by avoiding all talk of correspondence. But such a radical solution isn’t necessary. A far better solution is to start our metaphysical project by relying on a determinate conception of reality, only one that is not *fully* determinate. If we start with a conception of reality that has determinate content, we can sensibly make use of notions like truth and correspondence. And if that conception is not fully determinate—if it is not comprised of *all* our beliefs about what the world is like—there is room for arriving at a negative verdict when holding a belief up against that conception. This is a solution which recognizes the fact that “We cannot have a conception of the world that is somehow completely separate from the way we take things to be” (27), and the fact that “If we want to find out what is really so, we have no choice but to start where we are, with what we already believe or think we know, and go on from there” (28).

Before suggesting what seems to be the most promising way to arrive at the kind of determinate conception we need, Stroud considers a couple of ways that won’t work.

The ideal determinate conception would be what Bernard Williams has referred to as an “absolute conception of reality”. An absolute conception of reality aims at a description of the world that is independent of how humans, or any other cognizer, represents or experiences the world. It is a conception that “identifies what is real with what is accessible from any point of view” (McNaughton 1988: 68). Unfortunately, it won’t do to rely on such a conception at the start of a particular quest for reality; although this conception will certainly have determinate content and will presumably exclude at least some of our beliefs about what the world is like, we won’t know what that content is until all quests for reality are completed. The only other way for this approach to work, it seems, is if there is some general test which would allow us to decide whether some way of thinking is more “absolute” than some other way of thinking. But we have no such general test (Stroud 2000: 32-41).

Since an absolute conception of reality isn’t available to us, we must find some other way to proceed. If we had a way to identify what makes a concept “peculiarly ours”—when it is that a concept is, in Williams’ words, “peculiarly relative to our experience” (see Stroud 2000: 32)—we might be able to work backwards from our current conception of reality, whittling away at it until we have a true and accurate picture of reality. Like Williams, J. J. C. Smart thought that our use of certain concepts gives us a distorted picture of reality. Smart referred to these concepts as “anthropocentric” because they “relate the things in the world to our human concerns and interests, and . . . depend, in often unnoticed ways, on our human physiology and our particular station in space-time.”[[8]](#footnote-8)8 But Stroud argues, and I think rightly, that while the *possession* of these concepts may be anthropocentric in the sense that we wouldn’t have such concepts if we didn’t have certain interests, aims, and tastes, the concepts themselves are not necessarily anthropocentric (36). Even if we didn’t exist, there would still be mountains and fish and trees.[[9]](#footnote-9)9 Just as there is no general test for absoluteness, there is no general test for anthropocentricity, a test that would allow us to identify which of our concepts give us a distorted view of reality. Thus, this second way of proceeding also won’t work.

Stroud therefore suggests that we start instead with a minimal conception of reality, one that includes only what people predominantly believe to be part of reality, and then *see if anything needs to be added to this conception* in order to give the best explanation of everything that is so, including our perceptions and beliefs regarding what is so. Since the determinate conception we start with should be one which doesn’t beg the question regarding the metaphysical status of the properties being investigated, it cannot be such as to assume the reality of these properties. The approach, then, is to see if these properties can be explained, or unmasked, from an antirealist position. (The antirealist has to explain, for example, why the properties in question appear to us to be real even though they are not.) If the antirealist cannot adequately account for them, we have reason to conclude that something needs to be added to our minimal determinate conception.

*A Purely Physical Conception of the World*

Since Stroud’s project is an enquiry into the metaphysical status of colour properties, he needs to start with a conception of reality which is often thought to exclude the reality of colours; we can then see if it adequately explains all our perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs having to do with colours. Stroud thus starts his enquiry “by trying to form a purely physical conception of the world” (46), one that limits reality to the properties and features of the world investigated by the physical sciences. Since the time of Democritus many philosophers have thought “that the world as it is independently of us is fundamentally a physical world, a world of purely physical goings-on” (46). It has also often been thought that colours, being somehow subjective, are not part of that world. If we assume that the world as it is independently of us1[[10]](#footnote-10)0 is fundamentally a physical world, we can ask: Are colours to be found in that world? In order to answer this question, we need to know what belongs to a purely physical world. Finding out the latter will also help us decide if we should assume that the external world is an exclusively physical one.

We might say that a purely physical world is one that contains only physical objects, and a physical object is any object that occupies space. This won’t get us very far, however, because “Ontology alone—what objects there are in the world—can never settle completely the question of what the world is like, or what is true of those objects” (49). Tomatoes are physical objects which occupy space. They also happen to be red. Should we then say that colours are to be found in a purely physical world? Thus far our conception of a physical world isn’t such that we can answer this question. Suppose we say that a purely physical world is not just a world whose only objects are physical objects, but one in which the only types of properties and relations are physical ones. This helps, although we will still need to say what distinguishes a property or relation as a physical one before we can determine whether colours are part of a purely physical world.

At this point Stroud suggests that we conceive of a physical world, “not as a collection of all the physical objects, but as the totality of physical facts” (50), where we can understand a fact to be “what is said to be so by a sentence that is true” (51). The totality of physical facts would tell us not only about all of the objects in the purely physical world that we are trying to conceive of, but also about all the properties and relations that exist among and between those objects. Stroud writes: “to have any conception of a world we need to be able to think about what is true of whatever objects there are [in that world]” (50). The notion of “physical fact” aims at giving us the ability to say everything that can be said about what a purely physical world is like and what is true of the objects in it.

What we need to do now, if we are to discover whether objects are really coloured, is find a way to identify the physical facts (51). Without criteria or a method for determining when a fact is a physical fact, we won’t be able to say whether facts regarding colours (and many other properties and relations) are physical facts. A second question also faces us: “what are we saying about those facts when we say that they are physical?” (51). We want to know what is being said about the world when we say that it is an exclusively physical world. To evaluate the assumption that the external world is a purely physical world, a world exhausted by the physical facts,1[[11]](#footnote-11)1 we need a determinate idea of the “physical”.

Stroud shows how difficult it is to answer these two questions (51-61). Even if we were to identify all the physical facts by ostension (say, by identifying physical facts as those facts which can be expressed in terms of a “physical vocabulary” and finding a way to pick out the elements of this vocabulary), this still leaves us with the second question. One way the physicalist might attempt to support his thesis is by arguing for the idea that the physical facts are the only facts in virtue of which any of our thoughts or beliefs could be true. The claim is that physical facts are the only facts which “make true” any sentences about the world that are true. Stroud notes that in the 1930s Rudolph Carnap and other positivistic physicalists embarked on a translational reductionist program along these lines (59-60). They aimed to show “that everything that is true is translatable without remainder into purely physical truths,” that all true sentences referring to what is so are expressible in purely physical terms (60). But the project ran into insurmountable difficulties. Interestingly, if this reductionist program had worked, the physicalist would have to have admitted the reality of colours; for “If statements of a certain kind mean the same as, or are strictly equivalent to, statements of another kind, it cannot be said that only statements of the second kind say how things really are” (60-61).

With the failure of the translational reductionist program we are still left wanting to know what is being said about the world when we say that it is a physical one. Only then can we begin to determine whether objects in such a world are coloured, and whether the external world is an exclusively physical world. Stroud explores two general ways we might understand the notion of “physical world” (61-65). We might understand it as “the world as described in terms of the physical sciences” or as “the world that the physical sciences describe” (63). He argues that neither of these understandings support the claim that the external world is an exclusively physical world. Take the first conception of a physical world; under this conception, the physical world is just the totality of physical facts. Since colour terms are not part of the vocabulary of the physical sciences, facts about colors will not be part of this world. But

to say that something (e.g., colour) is not part of the world as described in a certain way is to say that certain kinds of descriptions, or certain kinds of statements (e.g., statements about the colours of things), are not part of that way of describing the world. That does not imply that that feature is not part of the world at all. It does not imply that sentences describing the colours of things, for instance, are not true. It does not even imply that they are not true of the very same world that the more austere, purely physical statements are also true of. (62)

On the other hand, if we were to identify the physical world with “the world that the physical sciences describe”, why think that this world is one that *only* the physical sciences can truly describe? Why think that we cannot give true descriptions of it in nonphysical vocabulary? If such a world is to be an exclusively physical world, we have to assume that the physical truths are the only truths there are. But why should we assume this when there are so many other facts which we take to be true (facts not expressible solely in the physical vocabulary)? For example, economists talk about an “economic world” using the vocabulary of economics. In their descriptions of the world nothing need be said about the height and weight of economic agents—those, say, who are the consumers and producers. But that the heights and weights of economic agents don’t figure into any true economic descriptions of the world doesn’t mean that economic agents aren’t of a certain height and weight (62). More things are true in the world than what is found solely in economists’ descriptions of it.

We are trying to get a sense of what it takes to engage in quests for reality in the right way, and we are doing so by looking at the issues facing one particular quest, the quest for the reality of colours. We have seen that any such quest must start with a determinate conception of reality, but one that is not fully determinate. We have also seen that that reality or world should be conceived of as a set of facts and not merely as a set of objects. This is due to the fact that ontology alone cannot give us a complete picture of what a world is like, or of what is true of the objects in that world.1[[12]](#footnote-12)2 It has also become clear that the method of deciding whether some contested belief is true cannot be one of holding that belief up against the set of beliefs which form the partially determinate conception of reality with which we start our quest and then checking for correspondence, or a lack of it. For this partially determinate conception must not presume the reality of the things whose reality is being investigated if our enquiry is ever to arrive at a negative verdict. Yet, with the contested beliefs not in our minimal determinate conception, we will also never arrive at a positive verdict when holding the contested beliefs up against the beliefs constituting that conception.1[[13]](#footnote-13)3 This is why it makes sense to take a sceptical approach: assume that what the contested belief, thought, or perception represents is unreal, or real but entirely subjective. Then see if the core set of beliefs—those in our minimal, restricted conception of reality—are capable of adequately explaining (indeed, offering the best explanation of) the contested beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions without assuming that the latter represent reality as it really is. Key to this approach is the idea that we include in our conception of what is truly real only what is needed to give the best explanation of what is so, including our having the beliefs and responses to the world that we do.

When enquiring into the reality of colours, it seemed appropriate to start with a purely physical conception of the world and ask two questions: (a) are colours a part of that world?; and (b) is the world that exists independently of us an exclusively physical world? If we find that colours are not part of a purely physical world, we cannot conclude from this fact that colours are not part of the external world, not unless we also find that the world as it exists independently of us is a purely physical world. Answering question (a) is possible if we have a way to identify which facts are the physical facts. We can then see if the colour facts are among them. But even if we have a way to identify the physical facts, we still need a determinate idea of the “physical” if we are to know what is being said about the world when it is claimed to be an exclusively physical world. Only then can we begin to answer question (b). Stroud offers reasons for thinking that it won’t be easy to come up with a determinate idea of the “physical”, especially not one which would lead us to think that the external world is an exclusively physical world. In fact, if we are relying on an explanatory criterion of reality to defend an antirealist view of colours, we cannot consistently maintain the thesis of physicalism. We want to take a look at why that is the case, since doing so adds to our understanding of what it takes to properly engage in any quest for reality.

*The Need for Psychological Facts in our Conception of the World*

The physicalist holds that physical truths expressed in a physical vocabulary are all that is needed to explain everything that is so, including why we perceive and believe what we do about the colours of things. But, Stroud points out, physicalism lacks the resources for providing the needed explanations. For *facts about colour are psychological facts*, and psychological facts are not part of a purely physical world. Thus, the physicalist who maintains that the external world is colourless has no way to even recognize, or grasp, the facts about colour that need to be unmasked and explained away. Stroud writes:

To arrive at a view of the world without colour . . . we must explain how in that world there come to be perceptions of and beliefs about the colours of things . . . The whole rich complex of all our colour beliefs and perceptions would have to be fitted into and explained in a world described by nothing more than the statements and laws of physical science.

[But] . . . it is clearly impossible to do that. We have conceded that no colour facts are to be found in a purely physical world; the physical vocabulary does not contain the resources for saying anything about the colours of things. But the physical vocabulary does not contain the resources for saying anything about anyone’s perceiving or believing or thinking anything either. No psychological facts are to be found in a purely physical world. So the facts we are supposed to explain—that people perceive and hold beliefs about the colours of things, that Smith sees a yellow lemon, that Jones believes that there is a yellow lemon in front of her, and so on—are not themselves facts of the physical world, if that “world” is understood as everything that is true and is expressed in exclusively physical terms. (77)

For an unmasking explanation to do the work it aims to do, it needs an *explanandum*. Stroud is assuming here that psychological truths are not reducible to physical truths, i.e., that a full semantic reduction from the psychological vocabulary to the physical vocabulary is not possible (78). Since I see no reason to disagree with this assumption,1[[14]](#footnote-14)4 I think Stroud is right to conclude that, if we employ an explanatory criterion of reality, then reality must consist of more than just physical facts. Without an explanandum, the physicalist cannot offer the required explanations. It is an undeniable fact that human beings have perceptions of colour and believe that things are coloured. These perceptions and beliefs are what need to be explained.

What if the physicalist says that physical facts “are all that it takes to “make it true” that human beings perceive colours and come to believe what they do about the colours of things” (79)? The problem with this approach is that it is not clear how we are to understand “makes true” (79-80). If the physicalist understands this notion in causal terms, it seems he will have to be committed to psychological facts. For if physical goings-on cause us to have perceptions of and beliefs about colours (something we might expect to be the case), then “the physical processes cannot be *all* that is going on. Psychological events and processes would be going on as well, if they are effects of what goes on physically” (79). And given that semantic reduction from the psychological to the physical vocabulary looks to be impossible, the physicalist cannot interpret “makes true” in terms of logical implication (80).

The long and the short of it is that, in order to acknowledge our perceptions and beliefs having to do with colours, we have to admit psychological facts into our conception of reality. This condition reflects something characteristic of many quests for reality. As we have seen, the would-be unmasker can end up facing a dilemma of sorts. If the unmasker is to have anything to explain, she must acknowledge the facts that she aims to unmask. But in acknowledging these facts, she may end up being committed to the very properties whose objective reality she denies (80). However, it remains to be seen whether accepting the existence of the relevant psychological facts presents such a dilemma for colour antirealists.

In fact, some colour antirealists may say, “once it is recognized that facts about colours are psychological facts, why can’t we declare victory? If colours are psychological facts or properties, it seems right to say that colours do not exist in the world (as properties of objects) so much as in our heads, and that colours therefore depend on perceiving subjects for their existence.” This move is not available to the antirealist for at least two reasons. Stroud is saying that *facts about colours* are psychological facts;1[[15]](#footnote-15)5 it doesn’t follow from this understanding that colours just are a kind of psychological fact. It is not even clear what it would mean to assert this stronger claim, for as yet we are not clear on what is meant in calling a fact “psychological”. (This means, of course, that we are also not clear yet on what the weaker claim involves.) In any case, there are good reasons for thinking that colours are not psychological facts in the sense of being merely a thought, a belief, a perception, or a sensation; we will see these reasons in detail when we look at Stroud’s responses to colour antirealists’ unmasking explanatory strategies. (A preview of one such reason: we predicate colours of objects and do so as if colours were properties of objects, but the suggestion that inanimate objects can have psychological properties along the lines of a sensation seems unintelligible.) We will also see reasons why, if colours are understood as instantiations of a kind of psychological property (a dispositional property, say), they won’t be subjective in the way the antirealist is claiming. Finally, the colour antirealist cannot declare victory if she is a physicalist for the reasons already given above.

Of course the physicalist may be thinking: “if certain physical goings-on cause us to have perceptions of and beliefs about colours, why think that these physical processes cannot be all that is going on? Why isn’t it enough to explain colours and facts about colours in terms of surface reflectances?” The physicalist, no doubt, can explain the colours of objects in the sense of explaining what causes objects to appear to us as coloured. But what she cannot explain is why we perceive and believe what we do about the colours of things (82). For example, she cannot explain why we have an experience of yellow when we look at lemons under the appropriate conditions. Why an experience of yellow and not one of red? Why is it a *perception* of yellow that we have and not the *thought* of the square root of minus two, “or a perception of something cubical, or a pain” (92)? A satisfactory explanation of this aspect of our experience requires talking about more than just surface reflectances. While surface reflectances tell us why certain wavelengths of light reflect off the lemon, they don’t tell us why human beings perceive yellow given these particular light wavelengths hitting the retina. Nor does it seem that this psychological event or process will be fully explained in terms of what is happening at the cellular and electrical levels in the eye and the brain. Stroud writes: “there are a great many physical processes going on when one person buys a house from another . . . but explaining in a particular case why those processes are going on is not to explain why that person is buying that house from that other person” (83).

We want to make sense of human beings and this means making sense of the particular thoughts and responses we attribute to them (81, 73). So *we need an explanation of colour which allows us to make sense of our attributing to others perceptions of and beliefs about colours*. It may be that we can best explain these kinds of attributions only if we think things are really coloured. Stroud concludes at this point in his enquiry that, at the very least, the would-be unmasker of colours will need to include psychological facts in her restricted conception of reality if she is to unmask any perceptions, beliefs, or thoughts about colours.

Adding psychological facts to our restricted conception of reality complicates things quite a bit. It is not exactly clear what is being added, or what else may have to be added to that conception in order for us to make sense of the thoughts and responses that we attribute to human beings (80-81). We have already seen that we need a determinate idea of the “physical” and a way to identify the physical facts if we are to support a claim like, “All physical facts are objectively real”. But now we also need a determinate idea of the “psychological” and a way to identify the psychological facts if we are to feel comfortable adding any such facts to our restricted conception of reality. (Stroud suggests we proceed as we did with the physical facts—by identifying them in terms of the vocabulary in which they are stated (80). While this only moves the problem of identification back a level, we can at least begin to identify some of the facts we take to be psychological facts: “They contain what we recognize as psychological verbs: ‘Human beings *perceive* colours and *believe* that things are coloured’, ‘Smith *sees* a yellow lemon’, [etc.]” (80). Here it is assumed that these verbs cannot be expressed in the physical vocabulary.)

Why is it important that we have a way to identify the psychological facts and a determinate idea of the “psychological”? We noted that the would-be unmasker won’t be able to unmask facts about colours unless she is able to acknowledge such facts. This means (among other things) that the would-be unmasker must have an idea of the kind of facts she aims to explain away (97). It also means being able to pick out those facts. Additionally, some understanding of the nature of colour facts is needed if we are to judge whether the unmasking explanations are successful (87). When judging whether any explanation is successful we can do no more than rely on our intuitions, or what we already believe. (The unmasking explanations themselves have to appeal to other things we take to be true (82); this is why quests for reality must start with a determinate conception of reality.) Another reason why a determinate idea of the “psychological” is important is that we have to have “some understanding of what makes one explanation of something better than another explanation of that same thing. And that, in turn, depends on what an explanation is, or what it is meant to do” (82). But what an explanation is meant to do depends in turn on our understanding of the nature of what we are trying to explain.

We want to know how psychological facts are to be explained. To answer that question we will need to know “what psychological facts are and how they are to be understood” (97). In particular, if we are to explain “how colour perceptions and colour beliefs arise, we need some way of understanding them as the psychological facts we take them to be” (97).

This brings us back to the concern raised earlier: how much are we expanding our restricted conception of reality (what started as the set of all physical facts) when we introduce psychological facts into that conception? Quests for reality need to start with a determinate conception of reality, but not a fully determinate one. If the would-be unmasker of colour facts needs to add psychological facts to her restricted conception of reality, there is the worry that this will make it impossible for any unmasking explanation to be successful. It could be that in admitting psychological facts into her restricted conception, the would-be unmasker has no choice but to concede the reality of colours—not because colours are in fact objectively real, but because we started the quest for the reality of colours with a conception of reality which was less restrictive than it ought to have been. On the other hand, we have already seen that the would-be unmasker cannot proceed in the metaphysical project at hand without acknowledging at least some psychological facts (facts like those found in the upcoming Sample Sentences on page 121).

The solution is to add some, but not all, psychological facts to her restricted conception of reality. That restricted conception should include all the physical facts plus some psychological facts, while leaving out any facts which prejudice our metaphysical quest. We do not need to know which psychological facts get added to that conception, for we can approach the enquiry into the metaphysical status of colours simply by trying to answer the following question: “Can we understand and accept all the psychological facts of perception and belief concerning the colours of things as we do and still arrive at the conclusion that no object in reality has any colour or that colour is something “subjective” or dependent upon us?” (97). If we like, we can see the colour antirealist as staking out a metaphysical position which goes beyond physicalism but stops short of claiming that colours are objectively real.

*A Look Ahead*

It is worth pausing a brief moment to see what lies ahead. Stroud goes on to take a close look at three different unmasking strategies colour antirealists have employed in their attempts to show that colours are not objectively real. These strategies are the “sensation account”, “dispositional account”, and the “error theory account”. We will want to look at what Stroud says about each of these efforts, since philosophers have tried to undermine the core tenets of moral realism in very similar ways.1[[16]](#footnote-16)6 The sensation account is an unmasking strategy with close similarities to certain noncognitivist understandings of moral properties. Dispositional accounts accept that there are colour facts—e.g., that it is true that we see lemons to be yellow when perceiving them under the appropriate conditions—but deny that these facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them. In fact, these accounts claim that colours are purely subjective. They are thus analogous to the accounts that some moral constructivists have offered. Finally, error theory accounts of colours understand statements about colours as being truth-apt, but deny that any such statements are true. This is the same kind of strategy that J. L. Mackie employs to deny that moral properties are objectively real.

The summary of Stroud’s discussion presented thus far should have given us some sense of the general shape of quests for reality. The reader may have noticed that there is nothing in the discussion up to this point that is peculiar to colours, not even the statement that facts about colours are psychological facts. For any X which figures in our mental lives, facts about X (as it figures in our mental lives) are psychological facts. Because we make moral judgments and have thoughts and beliefs about the moral rightness and wrongness of things—because we think that torturing young children is cruel, that stealing from others is unjust, that exploiting workers is inhumane, that donating a kidney is supererogatory, and so forth—it is the case that some facts about moral properties are psychological facts. Stroud notes that we don’t have to confine the discussion of colour facts to thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions. All the ways in which colours figure in our mental lives have to be accounted for; we could, for instance, focus our attention on “hopes, fears, wishes, imaginings, memories, and fantasies involving colours” (97). This variety of psychological facts is worth keeping in mind as we continue to look at Stroud’s discussion to see how it might inform the debate surrounding moral properties. As we will see shortly, Stroud focuses on a particular set of psychological facts about colours—facts mostly involving modes of perception (e.g., “Jones sees yellow”; “Jones sees something yellow”). This list of facts (103-104), or sample sentences, is crucial to what follows in the rest of his book. If we attempt to apply Stroud’s discussion to moral properties, we should expect our list of psychological moral facts, or sample sentences, to reflect the ways in which our understanding of moral properties differs from our understanding of colour properties. One would expect, for example, less of an emphasis on psychological facts of perception in the investigation of moral properties. Perhaps some of that emphasis ought to shift to motivational states.

By now the reader is certainly aware of the indirectness of Stroud’s approach, and one might worry that this indirectness will undermine the conclusions he reaches. One kind of indirectness is unavoidable. Since we have no epistemic access to things-in-themselves, we cannot ask about colours and their nature directly. Instead, we must start our quest for reality with a certain restricted set of beliefs about what is so, a set of beliefs which we already take to be true and have found to be highly reliable. We then see if anything needs to be added to this restricted conception of reality in order to give the best explanation of our perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about colours. It is another kind of indirectness that is potentially worrisome, though. Stroud is putting a lot of weight on the observation that facts about colours are psychological facts. Yet we have just noted that facts about any X which figures in our mental lives are psychological facts. So Stroud’s discussion may seem to be not so much about colours as about perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs in general. Houses and protons also figure in our mental lives. We have to take these entities to be objectively real if we are to make the best sense of our perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about them. But what if there is something about perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs in general which would force us, under Stroud’s approach, to take the content of them to be objectively real no matter what this content is?

Two points can be made in response to this worry. First, it just is the case that (many) facts about colours are psychological facts; thus, an adequacy condition for any metaphysical theory about colours is that it be able to explain these facts and why we have the understanding of them that we do. Even if we insist that there are also physical facts about colours, the only direct evidence we could have for those physical facts are psychological facts. If this is right, then it seems that the satisfactoriness of any explanation of physical facts about colours will depend on the satisfactoriness of one’s explanation for psychological facts about colours.

Second, the psychological facts having to do with colour are quite different from the psychological facts having to do with houses, protons, and moral properties. Also, among colour facts themselves there is a range of facts that will be quite different from the ranges of psychological facts about houses and moral properties. Stroud’s sample sentences (see page 121 below) illustrate some of this variety. Another condition of adequacy for any metaphysical theory of colours, then, is that it be able to explain the connections between these kinds of facts, and why we understand them to be connected in the way we do. As Stroud observes, “colour as it figures in perception is connected with colour as it figures in thoughts and beliefs” (103). So when it comes to understanding colours, “There must be some intelligible relation between what we perceive and what we think or believe” (105). Among other things this means that it will be quite awkward if we have to employ different accounts of colour when explaining the variety of facts about colour. One would think, for instance, that the content of our colour perceptions is closely related to the content of our thoughts and beliefs about colours. (When we think that lemons are yellow we think they have a property, yellowness, which is the very same property we perceive when we see lemons to be yellow.) However, the kinds of connections we expect among perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about colours are not the kinds of connections we would expect among perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about moral properties. (For example, if it makes sense to talk about perceiving moral properties, the kind of perception involved will be quite different from that involved in the perception of colours—if only because surface reflectances have nothing to do with moral perceptions. Another difference is that moral judgments seem to have some connection to motivation or reasons for acting, but we don’t take facts about colours to give us reasons for acting. A third difference is that we don’t predicate moral properties of physical objects but instead predicate them of actions and persons.) Therefore, while it is true that there is an indirectness to Stroud’s discussion of the nature of colours, it isn’t true that by focusing on psychological facts about colours Stroud is missing his target—the colours themselves. Moreover, this second form of indirectness seems as unavoidable as the first, and for the same reason.

There is another way of understanding Stroud’s project and how he intends to proceed. We attribute to others and ourselves perceptions, beliefs, and thoughts about colours. Doing so requires us to have some understanding of these psychological states. So we can ask: what are the conditions of these attributions? Can we attribute to others the perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about colours that we do and still think that objects are not really coloured, or that colour is real but entirely subjective (97)?

*the Sensation Account*

Stroud argues that the sensationalist’s unmasking strategy faces serious difficulties and that it is not at all clear how its proponents can overcome them.

The sensation account holds that “perceiving yellow, for example, involves the presence or occurrence of something called a “sensation” (or sometimes an “idea” or “impression” or “sense datum” or even just an “experience”) of yellow” (97). This “sensation” is said to be the effect of physical goings-on, e.g., certain wavelengths of light reflecting off an object and interacting with the retina of the perceiver’s eye. Sensationalists often compare colour “sensations” to sensations of pain. That a painful sensation might arise in us when we are pricked by a pin doesn’t lead us to conclude that some quality, painfulness, is a property of the pin. Similarly, it would make as little sense to think that colour “sensations” are properties of the objects or sources which cause us to have them. So the suggestion is that objects can cause us to see colours even though the objects themselves are not really coloured, just as objects can cause us pain even though pain itself is not a property of these objects.

Sensation accounts, whether for pains or colours, face a number of difficulties. One is being able to explain why it is we have the sensations we do when the circumstances under which these sensations are usually had are met. For instance, when a pin pricks us, why do we experience a sensation of pain rather than a perception of yellow or a perception of something cubical (98)? Why do we find the correlations we in fact find between various psychological and physical phenomena (91-93)? “To say that Jones, in whom certain physical events are occurring, sees something yellow, because everyone in whom physical events of just that kind occur sees something yellow, does not really explain why Jones sees what she sees” (91). The second difficulty for these sensation accounts is that of specifying any determinate content for them (99-101). If we cannot distinguish between different colour “sensations” (e.g., distinguishing a “sensation” of yellow from a “sensation” of green), how will we be able to properly attribute such sensations to oneself or to others? What would it mean to *think* of ourselves as having such sensations?1[[17]](#footnote-17)7

However, let’s focus (as Stroud does) on a third difficulty for sensation accounts of colours. Any adequate account of colours has to be able to make sense of the range of psychological facts about colours that we attribute to ourselves and others. Stroud shows why it is that sensation accounts of colours will have great trouble meeting this adequacy condition. He begins by presenting a list of sample sentences that are meant to be representative of some of the kinds of psychological facts about colours with which we are all very familiar (103-104).1[[18]](#footnote-18)8

**the Sample Sentences - I (SS-I)**

(1) Jones sees yellow.

(2) Jones sees something yellow.

(3) Jones sees something to be yellow.

(4) Jones sees a yellow lemon.

(5) Jones sees a lemon to be yellow.

(6) Jones sees that a lemon on the table is yellow.

(7) Jones sees that there is a yellow lemon on the table.

(8) Jones believes that there is a yellow lemon on the table.

(9) Jones hopes that there is a yellow lemon on the table.

(10) Jones wonders whether there is a yellow lemon on the table.

Sensation accounts are most suited for giving an account of direct perceptions of colours—what sentence (1) aims to represent. But our experience of colours and the experiences we attribute to others are far richer than this one kind of perception.

Stroud gives names to these other kinds of perceptual colour experiences. One such range of experiences he calls “predicational seeing” (102). This range is partly illustrated by sentences (3) - (5). We mostly see, not colours themselves, but coloured objects. When

[s]omeone sees a yellow lemon nearby in good light . . . [this] is not just a case of seeing yellow. The person does see yellow, but the yellow he sees is the yellow of a lemon, and he sees the lemon to be yellow. He sees the colour to be a property of an object that he sees . . . he sees an object to have a certain property. (102)

Predicational seeing may also be nonveridical (102). Jones may see a yellow lemon when there is no yellow lemon in front of her. Or, it may be true that Jones sees a yellow lemon even though she sees neither a lemon nor the colour yellow (say, because she is too distant to identify the object as a lemon or to see the colour of the object).

Another range of perceptual colour experiences is called “propositional seeing” (e.g., sentences (6) and (7)). This occurs “when we see that something or other is so” (102). Stroud adds: “In these cases, too, the perceiver typically sees yellow, sees a yellow lemon, and sees a lemon to be yellow. But again, that need not be so. It is possible to see that a certain object has a certain property without seeing an instance of that property or even seeing the object . . . You can see that the Pope has been elected by seeing smoke coming from a chimney” (103).

Since it is often the case that perception provides us with valuable input for what we think and believe, we take there to be a connection between colour as it figures in thoughts, beliefs, and other psychological attitudes and colour as it figures in perception (103). That perception is connected with thought and belief 1[[19]](#footnote-19)9 is reflected in the fact that “Our understanding of each of the sample sentences is not independent of our understanding of the others” (104). In the quest for the reality of colours we must be able to “understand and accept” the kinds of facts expressed by the sample sentences and “do justice to the differences and interconnections we recognize among them” (104).

It is a strike against an account of colours if we have to employ different understandings of colour when interpreting the sample sentences. The most straightforward way to interpret ‘yellow’ in the sample sentences is “as a predicate used to ascribe a property to something” (104). But under the sensation account, a perception of yellow is understood as a kind of “sensation”; whatever that is, it is something we cannot coherently ascribe to objects. If we understand colour perceptions as sensations, how are we to interpret sentences (2) - (10)? When Jones sees a lemon to be yellow, she is not just having a perception of yellow alongside a perception of a lemon; the best explanation we have of this event is that she is seeing the lemon to have a certain property, and this property is a certain colour.

I won’t go into all of the details of Stroud’s argument against the sensation account. What he does in general, though, is show how our understanding of each of the sample sentences is connected with, and depends on, our understanding of each of the other sample sentences. It is because of this interconnectedness that a single account of colour is most desirable. Stroud then drives home the point that, while we can perhaps make sense of ‘yellow’ in sentence (1) in terms of a kind of sensation, such an interpretation of ‘yellow’ won’t allow us to make sense of sentences (2) - (10).

Here are three ways we take the sample sentences to be interconnected. We take the “objects” or contents of propositional seeing to be the same kinds of “objects” we can find in our thoughts and beliefs. Jones may very well believe that there is a yellow lemon on the table because she sees that there is a yellow lemon on the table. We in fact assume that if Jones sees that there is a yellow lemon on the table, she will believe that there is a yellow lemon on the table, for “seeing is believing” (103). Second, propositional seeing is typically connected with predicational seeing: typically, if Jones sees that the lemon is yellow, then she sees the lemon to be yellow. And third: Stroud points out that we will even have difficulty interpreting sentence (1) under a sensation account, for we also don’t understand (1) in isolation from the other sentences. If Jones sees a lemon to be yellow, she sees yellow. Thus, if we interpret the ‘yellow’ of sentence (5) as a property, we can no longer interpret the ‘yellow’ of (1) as a sensation. On the other hand, if we insist that ‘yellow’ refers to a sensation, we seem to have no way of making sense of (2) - (10). And if we aren’t able to make sense of these other sentences, we have to worry that we don’t really understand ‘yellow’ as it is used in sentence (1).

Stroud also reminds us that sensation accounts will need to handle the less typical cases (110). For example, ‘Jones sees something yellow’ can be true even if ‘Jones sees yellow’ is not. Jones may be looking at a lemon in blue light, or in the dark. In this case she sees something yellow even though her perceptual experience doesn’t involve the “sensation” that is said to be associated with yellow. So it is not at all clear how we could interpret ‘yellow’ in ‘Jones sees something yellow’ as a certain kind of sensation. This is especially true given that we don’t ascribe such a sensation to the something that Jones sees.

In a nutshell, the central problem for the proponent of the sensation account is that “What we are aware of in colour perception [under the sensation account] cannot be the property we see an object to have when we see it to be coloured, but we do see colours, and see them to belong to physical objects” (113). The sensation account, in other words, “leaves predicational seeing . . . completely mysterious” (113).

It also leaves us in a predicament over how to regard the perception of properties which we take to be objectively real (113). If the shape of a lemon is objectively real, what is going on when we perceive the ovoidness of lemons? Do we have sensations of ovoidness? If so, how do they differ from the property of ovoidness that we ascribe to lemons? Why is ovoidness a property we can truly ascribe to lemons but not yellowness? If we don’t have sensations of ovoidness, why is this the case? what makes ovoidness different from yellowness such that this is so? It seems that if we are committed to a sensation account of colours we will have to be committed to a sensation account of perception in general. But this in turn would mean that whatever properties we might intelligibly ascribe to objects, these properties will not be ones we can perceive, nor ones which we could perceive objects to have (114).

In sum, the prospects for sensation accounts of colours succeeding with the unmasking explanatory project look bleak. Such accounts seem unable to make sense of the range of psychological facts about colours.

Stroud identifies two alternative strategies for the antirealist. The alternatives seem limited to the two described below if we assume that an explanatory strategy has little chance of success unless it allows (what the sensation account does not) that the contents of our colour perceptions can be the very same contents of our thoughts and beliefs about colours. In other words, the alternative strategies need to regard the perception of colours as “intentional” if they are to avoid the main hurdle facing the sensation account. Stroud writes:

It seems undeniable that we do intelligibly ascribe certain properties to objects . . . and that we also sometimes perceive objects to have those very properties. It follows that at least *some* perceptions are perceptions of properties, or of objects’ having properties, that we can also think belong to objects in the independent world. Those perceptions are in that sense “intentional”. They are perceptions *of* a certain property or thing, or perceptions *of* a thing’s having a certain property. What we can perceive in that way, we can also believe to be true of certain objects. We can accordingly perceive *that* such and such is so. The “objects” or contents of such perceptions are also possible “objects” or contents of other psychological attitudes. What we can perceive overlaps in that way with what we can think. (114)

Of course, if the antirealist holds that “the colours we see are the very properties we think physical objects have when we think of them as coloured” (115-116), then the job of showing that colours are not objectively real looks to be more difficult (115). For when we understand colours as intentional properties, it will be the case that, if thoughts about objects being a certain color are sometimes true, then objects are coloured (116). Stroud notes that this is one reason why antirealists find the sensation account so attractive.

Be this as it may, the remaining alternatives can be distinguished by the kind of connection which the antirealist claims exists between the contents of our colour perceptions and the contents of our thoughts and beliefs about colours. One line of attack allows that colour perceptions are *directly connected* to our thoughts and beliefs about colours. Here the content of our colour perceptions will be the same content which we ascribe in thought and belief to physical objects (116). This view gives the same interpretation to ‘yellow’ in each of the sample sentences. If we are to argue that reality is nonetheless actually colorless, “we would then have to argue that physical objects do not really have the colours we perceive and believe them to have” (116). We would have to offer an *error theory*, explaining why it is we ascribe to others thoughts and beliefs about colours, where these colours are understood as actual properties of objects, and why it is we understand ourselves to have perceptions of such colors, when in reality it is not the case that objects are coloured. All of our perceptions involving colour will be illusory, and all our beliefs to the effect that objects are coloured will be false.

The other line of attack involves denying that such a direct connection exists. One maintains instead that there is an *indirect connection* between the colour properties we perceive and the colour properties we think and believe objects to have. Despite the indirect connection, colour properties are still seen as intentional properties. But the property we perceive when perceiving a coloured object will not be the property we ascribe to the object in our thoughts and beliefs that the object is coloured. Here ‘yellow’ will not have the same interpretation for each of the sample sentences. Because perception has such an important role in what we think and believe, this kind of antirealist has to “explain what our thoughts and beliefs to the effect that objects are coloured amount to, and how they are related to the colours we perceive” (117). One kind of explanation offered is the *dispositional account*: allow that objects are coloured, but say that the colours of objects “depend on what sorts of responses they would produce in certain perceiving subjects” (117). In this case, the connection between thought and perception is that “in thinking of physical objects as coloured we are thinking only of what kinds of colour perceptions they would produce in certain kinds of perceivers under certain conditions” (117).

*the Dispositional Account*

Stroud offers a number of very forceful arguments against dispositional accounts of colours.2[[20]](#footnote-20)0 What follows are some of the details of those arguments.

Stroud thinks the most promising way to establish an indirect connection is to look again at how we think and talk about sensations of pain (119-120). When we talk of painful instruments giving us painful sensations, we use the word ‘painful’ in two different senses. The two uses do not denote the same property: “What is said to be true of the thumbscrew is not that it has that feature which serves to identify a sensation as a painful sensation. What is true of the thumbscrew is, roughly, that some sentient beings get painful sensations if it is attached to them in certain ways” (120). We might explain our use of the word ‘yellow’ along these lines. What we perceive when we perceive yellow will not be the same property predicated of physical objects. A yellow object, then, will not be yellow in virtue of having the property that serves to identify a perception as a perception of yellow. We can say that the colour of an object is simply the disposition or capacity of the object “to produce certain perceptions of colour in sentient beings under certain conditions” (120).

Dispositional accounts will express the conditions for an object’s being yellow in terms of **a biconditional** (121):2[[21]](#footnote-21)1

“x is yellow if and only if normal human perceivers standing in certain relations R to x in certain kinds of perceptual circumstances C would get perceptions of yellow”

When R, C, and “normal human perceivers” are fully specified, we have what Stroud calls “the biconditional about yellow things” (121). The filled-in biconditional would give us a sense of what it means to predicate ‘yellow’ of physical objects. The dispositionalist is claiming that there is a corresponding biconditional for each colour.

(In order to properly understand Stroud’s criticisms of dispositional accounts, it is important to notice that he is understanding such accounts in purely antirealist terms. In other words, he is addressing only those dispositional accounts which take colours to be *entirely* subjective.2[[22]](#footnote-22)2 So his criticisms do not apply to accounts which hold that there are both objective and subjective aspects to colour properties. (For such an account see John McDowell’s 1985 paper.) It would therefore be a mistake to think that, in arguing against the dispositionalist, Stroud is arguing against the idea that colours are partly subjective in nature.)

Although such biconditionals do not give us a general account of colour or of the meaning of colour words in all their uses,2[[23]](#footnote-23)3 they do establish a connection between perceptions of colour and thoughts and beliefs about the colours of objects. This is important for arriving at a satisfactory interpretation of all of the sample sentences. Stroud adds: “If we could understand what perceptions of colour are and how they differ from one another, and if we could identify them and the differences among them, independently of accepting any filled-in biconditional of this form, we might have all we need for understanding what it is for an object to be coloured, and so what our thoughts and beliefs about the colours of objects amount to and how their contents are related to the colours we perceive” (123).

While dispositional accounts retain the commonsense belief that objects are coloured, they hold that the colours of objects are entirely subjective. Colours wouldn’t exist without perceiving subjects. Further, the color of an object would depend on the type of response which normal human perceivers have to it: “Statements about colour would not be true or false independently of what is true of human beings” (124).

But Stroud notes that the colour antirealist who is a dispositionalist along the above lines is typically not an all-out idealist or phenomenalist (124-125). This antirealist wants to say that colours are subjective in a way that other properties, like shape and size, are not. She wants to say, for example, that the shape of an object doesn’t depend on the perceptions of normal human perceivers under specific conditions. But this means that the *truth* of the biconditional about yellow things is not sufficient to tell us what it is for an object to be yellow. For we can replace ‘yellow’ in the biconditional with ‘ovoid’, and if all the details are properly filled in, we will have a true biconditional for ovoidness—a property that we take objects to have independently of our responses to them.

If the biconditional about yellow things is to capture the notion that yellowness is a subjective property, it will have to be *necessarily true*. We need it to be a necessary condition of x being yellow that the right-hand side (RHS) of the filled-in biconditional is true. In contrast, consider again the property of ovoidness: our antirealist is assuming that it is not essential for a thing’s being ovoid that normal human perceivers of the object have perceptions of ovoidness when viewing it under certain conditions. The world could have been otherwise.

What are the reasons for thinking that a necessary connection exists between an object’s being coloured and human perceptions of colour? How might the connection be shown to hold necessarily? In order for us to show that things could not have been otherwise, we have to have some understanding of perceptions of colour (127). In particular, we need a way to identify perceptions of colour independently of the left-hand side (LHS) of the biconditional. We need to be able to distinguish perceptions of colour from non-colour perceptions, and we need a way to distinguish between different colour perceptions. Only then can we begin to determine whether the connection between an object’s being coloured and human perceptions of colour holds necessarily. For instance, we have to be able to identify what constitutes a perception of yellow independently of any yellow object before we can determine whether, under normal circumstances and for normal perceivers, such a perception occurs only in the presence of yellow objects. When Stroud argues against the error theory account, he gives reasons for thinking that this condition cannot be fulfilled. He proceeds with the present discussion, though, as if the condition could be fulfilled.

Suppose, then, that colour perceptions can be identified independently of the LHS of the biconditional. If this is so, we will have good reasons *against* thinking that a necessary connection exists between an object’s colour and the colour perceptions we get when viewing the object under standard conditions. We ascribe the property of yellowness (as in the LHS of the biconditional) to things which cause us to have perceptions of yellow. But if we are able to identify perceptions of yellow independently of the things that cause those perceptions, then we can surely imagine a world in which we do not have perceptions of yellow when perceiving objects that are yellow. Or conversely, we can imagine a world in which we have perceptions of yellow when perceiving objects that are blue. The laws of nature might have been different, or the perceptual mechanisms of human beings might have been different than what they currently are.

It seems we can ensure that the connection between the LHS and RHS of the biconditional holds necessarily only if we have a way to talk about yellow objects independently of the colour perceptions they cause us to typically have. (For instance, take perceptions of yellow to be “perceptions of whatever colour normal perceivers perceive in the specified circumstances in the presence of an object that is yellow” (130).) But if we secure the necessity of the biconditional in this way, we no longer have any reason to think that colours are subjective.

The dispositionalist is claiming that the occurrence of perceptions of colour under certain standard conditions is essential to an object’s being coloured. This is what would make colours subjective, i.e., not due to features in the real world but due to features of perceiving subjects. But Stroud is saying that “a subjectivist dispositional view of the colour of an object cannot be correct, not because yellow objects do not have the dispositions the subjectivist thinks they have but because that view requires that the biconditional about yellow things be more than contingently true. It requires that in attributing such a disposition to an object you must necessarily be saying or implying what colour the object is” (138). But “Once perceptions of yellow are identified or fixed independently of any appeal to the color of an object [as they will need to be if we are to show that a necessary connection exists], we will always be able to conceive of an object that is yellow, and a way the world could have been, such that, if the world were that way, that yellow object would not be disposed to produce perceptions of the kind identified as perceptions of yellow in normal human perceivers under the specified conditions” (132).

The dispositionalist might respond by saying that the biconditionals about colours will hold necessarily if we take a subjectivist view of colours (137). While this may be true, it doesn’t help us in our quest for the reality of colours because it begs the question; we are asking if there is any reason for accepting the dispositionalist’s subjectivist view of colours. The dispositionalist thus needs to give us reasons for thinking that the biconditionals about colours hold necessarily independently of the claim that colours are subjective.2[[24]](#footnote-24)4

Finally, Stroud tells us why a certain hybrid account won’t work (140-144). The hybrid account he refers to is one in which we try to combine a dispositional view of colours with the claim that there is a *direct connection* between the content of perceptions of colour and the content of our thoughts and beliefs about colours. In the view just discussed, ‘yellow’ in sentence (1) means something quite different from ‘yellow’ in sentence (5). The contents of our perceptions of yellow are not what we ascribe to objects that we say are yellow. We instead attribute to these objects a disposition or power to produce perceptions of yellow in normal human perceivers standing in a specific relation to the objects. Under the hybrid view we would want to say that a perception of yellow just is a perception of this disposition. But Stroud argues that we cannot perceive the type of property we would have to perceive under a hybrid account. If we are to perceive the same property that we ascribe to coloured objects in our thoughts and beliefs, ‘yellow’ would have to have the same meaning on both sides of the biconditional about yellow things. This, however, leads to an infinite regress when we try to analyze ‘yellow’ on the RHS of the biconditional. We would be saying that a perception of something’s being yellow is just “a perception of something’s being disposed to produce perceptions of something’s being yellow” (142). We can never rid ourselves of all unexplained occurrences of ‘yellow’ on the RHS. We thus have no way to identify colour perceptions, and hence, no way to distinguish perceptions of yellow from, say, perceptions of blue. This means, in turn, that we lack an adequate understanding of our sample sentences. It also means we have no way of showing that a necessary connection exists between the RHS and LHS of the biconditional (without presupposing the reality of colours).

Therefore, the prospects for a dispositional account look dim, and this is true even if we could identify perceptions of colour in the way that the theory requires. (We will see in a moment why Stroud thinks that this condition cannot be fulfilled.) Stroud adds to the argument one final point: Because dispositional theories need to assume an indirect connection between the intentional objects of perception and thought, they suffer the same problem as sensation accounts—the inability to explain predicational seeing. Predicational seeing, it seems, cannot be adequately explained unless we have a direct connection between the intentional objects of perception and thought. For “Predicational perception involves the perception of a property, and perception of an object to have that same property, where the property in question is the property that is also thought to belong to an object in the thought that it has that property” (143-144). Dispositional accounts, in other words, simply won’t be able to adequately account for the interconnections which we take to exist between the sample sentences.

*the Error Theory account*

The colour antirealist can avoid the problems facing the sensation and dispositional theories by assuming that the contents of colour perception are intentional, and that a direct connection exists between the objects of perception and thought regarding colours. Under a direct connection, “What we believe to be so when we believe an object is yellow is what we see to be so when we see it to be yellow” (145); more generally, ‘yellow’ will have the same meaning in each of the sample sentences. But with these assumptions in place, the antirealist now has to argue that all our beliefs about the colours of things are false and that all our perceptions of colours are illusory. For it is undeniable that we perceive colours and that we believe objects to be coloured. These are some of the facts about colours which need to be explained. But if a belief like ‘lemons are yellow’ is true or a perception that some lemon is yellow is veridical, then—contrary to what the antirealist maintains—one or more objects in the world are coloured. What has to be offered, then, is an error theory—an explanation of why all our colour perceptions are illusory and why all our beliefs about the colours of things are false.

Stroud argues that this third type of unmasking strategy won’t succeed because the error theorist cannot consistently acknowledge the kinds of facts that she aims to unmask. It seems that, in order for us to meaningfully ascribe to ourselves and others the perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about the colours of things that we do, we need to assume that at least some objects are coloured. Following Stroud, let’s call this *the requirement on attribution*. A condition of meaningful attribution is being able to specify, or identify, the contents of those perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, etc. Without some understanding of the contents of our colour attributions, the unmasker won’t be able to recognize the perceptions, beliefs and thoughts about colours which we do in fact attribute to ourselves and others. (In fact, unless the error theorist can identify the contents of the beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions in question, he cannot even legitimately say that our beliefs about the colours of things are false, or that our perceptions to the effect that things are coloured are illusory.) Stroud emphasizes that the unmasker “must understand colour predicates as they are understood by the perceivers and believers whose beliefs he would unmask” (2004: 204).

Stroud defends the requirement on attribution by first setting out “some very general considerations about the acknowledgement of psychological facts”(2000: 149).2[[25]](#footnote-25)5 In what follows, I summarize what I take to be the main elements of that discussion. (When assessing the observations that follow, it is helpful to keep in mind that Stroud’s purpose is to get clear on what is required in order for us to use colour terms predicatively, to have such predicational thoughts (Stroud 2004: 204). His observations do not entail that the error theorist has no beliefs about colours, or that if the error theorist uses colour terms, she must attach a meaning to them which is importantly different from what we typically have in mind.)

Our understanding of many psychological facts2[[26]](#footnote-26)6 relies in an important way on our understanding of the world around us. Many of the psychological facts that we can intelligibly attribute to others, or interpret them as having, have what we consider to be nonpsychological content. In the sentence “Jones thinks that tomatoes are red”, we take the content of Jones’ thought to be nonpsychological in character: that tomatoes are red. We feel we have an adequate understanding of the thought attributed to Jones because we not only believe that tomatoes are red, but also believe that Jones, like the rest of us, is part of, and engages in, “a common world we all share” (Stroud 2000: 151). It makes sense for Jones to think that tomatoes are red, and for us to think that Jones thinks this, if indeed it is the case that tomatoes are red. Similarly, we believe that people perceive yellow, ovoid lemons because we believe that there are yellow, ovoid lemons.

Because we rely upon our own beliefs about what is so in the world when trying to understand the perceptions and beliefs that we attribute to others, it can be more difficult to ascribe to others beliefs which we ourselves see as false. We do so only if we can explain why they might have those beliefs.2[[27]](#footnote-27)7 But that requires, in turn, that we be able to *identify* the contents of the false beliefs (151).

(Since the error theorist who is trying to unmask our colour perceptions and beliefs denies that objects are coloured, she has to find some other way than the one we typically rely on2[[28]](#footnote-28)8 to identify the contents of our colour perceptions and beliefs. Moreover, the difficulty of her task is further increased by its all-encompassingness: she has to acknowledge people’s perceptions of and beliefs about colour while holding that *nothing* has any colour at all. Her explanation is of a much different order, then, than that of explaining why someone sees a lemon to be green under a blue light, or acknowledging that people have thoughts and beliefs about unicorns and golden mountains (147). This is because we can conceive of a unicorn as a complex thought built up out of thoughts of things that we believe do exist, and we can explain why a yellow lemon appears green in blue light by drawing on certain beliefs about colours, including the belief that the lemon in question is in fact yellow.)

How can the unmasker identify the contents of our false perceptions of and beliefs about the colours of things?

If we agree with Stroud that psychological facts “typically have what might be called both a psychological and a nonpsychological aspect” (“There is an attitude or state of a certain kind, on the one hand, and the object or content of that state on the other, which is typically specified in nonpsychological terms”), we will be inclined to agree that “what psychological fact a sentence states depends both on the verb specifying the psychological attitude or state of the person and on the complement of that verb specifying the object of that attitude or state” (Stroud 2000: 151). Notice, for example, that if Jones is the same person in each case, we can distinguish between “Jones believes that it is snowing in Buffalo” and “Jones believes that it is raining in Budapest” only in terms of what follows the psychological verb (152). This shows that “Our understanding of nonpsychological sentences and facts is inextricably involved in our understanding of psychological sentences and facts” (ibid.).

Stroud extends this observation to other psychological attitudes:

When the object of the attitude is not propositional, the specification of the object can also be all that serves to distinguish one psychological fact from another. ‘Jones wants a ball’ differs from ‘Jones wants a brick’ only in the difference between the objects Jones is said to want. We understand the difference between those two psychological facts because we know the difference between a ball and a brick. And a ball and a brick is nothing psychological . . . .

This is equally true of perception. It is because we know the difference between a ball and a brick that we know that seeing a ball is different from seeing a brick. If we did not know the difference between these objects, we would not understand the difference between those perceptions, and we would be in no position to attribute them to anyone. We would not know whether we ourselves were having such perceptions either, even if we were. Knowing that I am having a perception of a certain kind is a matter of knowingly ascribing a perception of that kind to myself. But without knowing what a ball or a brick is, I could not ascribe perceptions of such things to anyone. (Stroud 2000: 153)

In the same vein, if we are to intelligibly ascribe predicational perceptions to others, “we must be able to think of a certain object as having a certain property. If we could not think of a yellow lemon, we could make no sense of predicational perception of a yellow lemon, since we could make no sense of what it is a perception of” (153; see also footnote 19 above). Furthermore, predicational thought has a close connection to propositional thought because in thinking of a yellow lemon, we are thinking *that* a certain lemon is yellow (ibid.). It seems then that “We can think of coloured objects, and so think of ourselves [or others] as seeing such things, only because we can make sense of propositional thoughts in which colours are predicated of physical objects” (153). What is required for such propositional thoughts to be true must be understood, or grasped, by those who ascribe predicational and propositional colour perceptions of objects to others. In other words, “understanding propositional thought involves a capacity for *judgment or assertion*. That capacity is exercised by someone who believes that a certain physical object is coloured,” even by someone who, while thinking of an object as coloured, doesn’t actually believe that it is in fact coloured (154; my emphasis).

The above observations are, I think, the most important of the “very general considerations about the acknowledgement of psychological facts” which Stroud relies on when he goes on to defend the claim that a condition of acknowledging the facts about colours that the error theorist aims to unmask is that of believing that at least some objects are coloured.

Stroud’s argument in support of this requirement on attribution proceeds by asking us to consider the perceptions of and beliefs about colours that we could understand people to have if “we held no beliefs [at all] about the colours of objects” (157).2[[29]](#footnote-29)9 It is immediately clear that, with no beliefs about the colours of objects, we are unable to attribute to others propositional perceptions like “Jones sees that there is a yellow lemon on the table” (158). We make such an attribution only if we believe that there is a yellow lemon on the table, in part because, if it is true that Jones sees that there is a yellow lemon on the table, then—contrary to what the error theorist maintains—there is a yellow lemon on the table. We would also have trouble with other sorts of ascriptions involving perception (158).

Similarly, how does one who has no beliefs at all about the colours of objects find or identify the beliefs people have when believing that objects are coloured?

If Jones utters the sentence “There is a yellow lemon on the table” about the table right before us, what belief could we recognize her to be expressing? What property could we understand her to be predicating of a lemon on the table? It could not be a property that we find to belong to any physical object . . .

If she goes on to say, “I see yellow, and I see a lemon on the table to be yellow”, . . . we could not take her to be seeing a property that the object actually has. (Stroud 2000: 158-59)

Stroud notes that antirealists have tried to explain, say, our perceiving lemons to be yellow by suggesting that we perceive coloured patches, patches which exist only insofar as they are seen (161). We might then think of yellow as a property of a patch or shape that we see when perceiving yellow lemons. There are, however, several problems with this interpretation of our colour perceptions. First, as we have already noted, when we see lemons to be yellow (when we have this predicational perception), we are not simply having a perception of yellow alongside of a perception of lemons; we are seeing these lemons to have a certain property—the colour yellow. Talk about perceiving patches of yellow does not capture this thought. Second, to attribute perceptions of patches of colour to others is not to attribute perceptions of colour (166). We have concluded that whatever a perception of colour is, it is something whose contents can be the contents of our thoughts and beliefs about colours. The error theorist in question is someone who accepts this conclusion. However, the properties the error theorist refers to when talking about the colours of nonexistent patches are not the properties we think objects have when we think they are coloured. So the patch theory of colour perception fails to maintain a direct connection between the contents of colour perception and the contents of thoughts and beliefs about colours. Third, we think that people can see the same colour (i.e., have the same colour experience) when perceiving yellow lemons, but this won’t be the case if we have perceptions of coloured patches; for the patches exist only insofar as they are seen, meaning that every individual sees a different patch (161). Thus, under the patch interpretation we do not have shared coloured experiences, a result that conflicts with our pre-theoretic understanding of our colour experiences.

In addition to the patch theory of colour, Stroud explores a number of other ways the error theorist might try to specify the determinate content of a colour perception (or any other psychological attitude involving colours), but shows why all these attempts fail or are unsatisfactory (162-166); in doing this, he gives us a sense of just how great the difficulties facing the error theorist are. Rather than summarize the details of those other attempts, let me simply re-emphasize a point already made: even if the error theorist could uniquely specify the perceptions she understands herself to have when she has perceptions of colour, and these perceptions, so understood, could be attributed to others, they would not be perceptions of colour (166). However the error theorist identifies her perception, the contents of it won’t be the same as the property people believe objects to have when they believe objects are coloured. When people have perceptions of yellow objects, they typically believe the objects themselves to have the colour that they see them to have;3[[30]](#footnote-30)0 they do not believe the objects have the property that the would-be unmasker says they perceive (for whatever the latter is, it cannot belong to physical objects). ‘Yellow’ under the would-be unmasker’s interpretation has to denote an altogether different property if she is to consistently deny that physical objects are coloured.

The two main constraints facing the error theorist are closely intertwined: she needs to have a way to identify the contents of our psychological attitudes involving colours, but this is made a lot more difficult by the added constraint that she still be able to make sense of the sample sentences (SS-I).

It seems that any interpretation the error theorist might come up with for the contents of our colour perceptions *must* conflict with our understanding of colour properties, since the error theorist denies that we are really perceiving a property of the objects perceived. Or, if the error theorist were to find a workable interpretation, it seems unlikely that it would provide us with the best explanation of the sample sentences if only because, whatever interpretation that will be, it will clearly be nonobvious relative to the straightforward interpretation that we already employ.

Certain conditions must be met in order for us to meaningfully ascribe to ourselves and others the perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs about the colours of things that we do. The error theorist claims that we can meet these conditions without believing that anything in the world is coloured. But, as we have just seen, we have reasons for thinking that this is not possible, or, if possible, that the explanations provided for the sample sentences are unlikely to be the best explanations.

*More observations and some overall conclusions*

Stroud concludes that the unmasking explanatory strategies used to support the claim that colours are unreal or real but subjective are riddled with difficulties (169). The would-be unmasker needs to acknowledge the facts she aims to unmask, but it seems that a condition of doing so is believing that some things are really coloured.3[[31]](#footnote-31)1 (This is a problem facing all three of the accounts just discussed.) Stroud rightly emphasizes, however, that even though unmasking explanatory strategies are unlikely to succeed in showing that reality is colourless, we cannot conclude from this result that colours are real properties of physical objects. Doing so would be to conclude that objects are coloured simply from the fact that we must hold some beliefs about the colours of things in order to acknowledge and attribute colour beliefs to others (201). Why think that acknowledging facts like “Jones sees the lemon to be yellow” or “Jones sees that a yellow lemon is on the table” entails that objects are coloured? This would be to “draw a nonpsychological conclusion about the world around us from certain psychological facts of belief. It would be to say that statements about the colours of things would have to be true if psychological statements attributing perceptions and beliefs about the colours of things to people were true” (194). In order for me to sincerely say of Jones, “Jones sees that there is a yellow lemon on the table”, I myself must believe that there is a yellow lemon on the table. If I didn’t have this belief, it would be hard to make sense of my attributing such a perception to Jones. Stroud has argued that a condition of such an attribution is having that belief. But that I must believe that there is a yellow lemon on the table (or that people see lemons to be yellow) does not entail that yellowness is indeed a property of lemons.

Stroud has shown us something about the position the antirealist, or would-be unmasker, is in when trying to engage in the quest for reality. But the realist faces a similar problem. For the realist, like the would-be unmasker, is not able to ask the metaphysical question with the required degree of detachment. Again, that question is, “Do our perceptions and beliefs involving the colours of things represent anything that is part of the world independently of us?” (192). If to acknowledge the relevant psychological facts we have to have some beliefs about the colours of things, then the realist cannot get himself into a position which makes it possible for the question to be answered in the negative. In other words, the realist cannot detach himself enough from how we already perceive and understand the world such that the metaphysical question is an open question (192-93).

Stroud reassures us that our commonsense beliefs about the colours of things—beliefs which happen to be realist—are “invulnerable” to the metaphysical project. Despite the fact that the results of our enquiry into the reality of colours do not allow us to conclude that colours are objectively real, we are still justified in continuing to think and talk about colours as we always have. And we are still justified in continuing to believe that the colours we see objects to have are actual properties of those objects. The legitimacy of continuing in these practices follows from the fact that the metaphysical quest for reality does not give us any solid conclusions one way or the other regarding the existence of colour properties (203). Stroud writes: “We can confidently say that objects are coloured and that most of the particular beliefs we hold about the colours of things are true” (205); because we see that objects are coloured, “we cannot grant that it is possible that objects are not coloured” (206).

One might think that if we are justified in believing that objects are coloured, this must be because there is some justification for a realist view of colours. But Stroud says explicitly that what we know to be true about the colours of things at the everyday level does not help us settle the question of the metaphysical status of colours (205). Nonetheless, can we not say that our empirical “knowledge” of colours is *evidence* in favor of a realist view of colours? The fact that we must believe some objects are coloured to be able to ascribe psychological facts about colours to ourselves and others also seems to lend support to a realist view of colours. If we are relying on an explanatory criterion of reality that gives pride of place to the set of facts which provides us with the best explanation of what is so, one might think that our empirical observations of colours and the failure of the unmasking strategies are indeed evidence which supports the everyday, straightforward interpretation of the sample sentences. And if the straightforward interpretation is the best explanation we have, should this not be taken into account in our conception of reality? (This is the kind of conclusion David Brink draws with respect to moral properties (1989).) Given that Stroud is saying that we are justified in continuing to think and talk about colours as we do, and given that the way we currently think and talk about colours is in a realist sense, he is saying that we are justified in taking a realist stance toward colours. But he is also saying, importantly, that our question regarding the metaphysical status of colours is not settled. “The most we have found is that the metaphysical conception of a completely colourless reality cannot be reached by the explanatory route” (193).

I am inclined to reach a slightly stronger conclusion than this. Stroud is right to say that if we engage in a metaphysical quest for the reality of colours and are employing an explanatory criterion of reality, it is unlikely that we will reach any solid conclusions for or against the reality of colours. But I think we can add to this conclusion. If we are using an explanatory criterion of reality for determining what to include and what to leave out of our conception of reality, then we are justified in tentatively concluding that colours ought to be included in that conception of reality. This is what our current “best explanation” tells us. The best explanation we currently have of the sample sentences is the straightforward interpretation wherein colours can be properties of objects. Stroud is saying that we are justified in taking a realist stance toward colours in our everyday lives. I am suggesting that Stroud has also given us some very good reasons for taking a realist stance toward colours at the philosophical level, at least as long as we insist on employing an explanatory criterion of reality.3[[32]](#footnote-32)2

*Considerations when trying to employ Stroud’s strategies to moral properties*

Stroud has shown that we still have to take the reality of colours seriously. The aim of this dissertation is to discover if the same is true for moral properties; that is, we aim to find out if moral realism is a thesis which moral philosophers ought to take seriously. We are interested in this question because we are interested in having a better sense of the kind of objectivity, if any, that we can justifiably attribute to our moral judgments. This, in turn, will allow us to know more about how we ought to engage in first-order, normative ethics. For example, we want to know something about the kind of authority our first-order judgments can aspire to and what the standards of correct argumentation for first-order, normative ethics might be (cf. Smith 1994: 14). If our moral judgments are largely the product of subjective elements (i.e., are largely due to features about the judge rather than due to features existing in the world—e.g., features that are true for all human beings), then they may lack a basis for the authority we typically grant them. Or, if our moral judgments are merely expressions of subjective opinion but we think they still have some claim to authority, we may think we are justified in relying, say, on the manipulative methods of advertising executives when engaging in moral argumentation (see Smith 1999); we might believe that anything that works to persuade others to accept the moral view we are trumpeting then counts as a reason for accepting that view.

Stroud notes at the end of his book that we cannot generalize his results regarding colour properties to other properties whose metaphysical status is being questioned (210). The details of any particular quest for reality have to take into account the nature of the property being investigated and the relevant beliefs we have about it. Sounds, for example, are not qualities of things. “They are particulars with definite temporal position, and not the sort of thing that gets predicated of objects as colours do” (210). Therefore, important aspects of our discussion regarding colour properties are not relevant to a discussion of sounds. For instance, when explaining the predicational perception of colours we saw the importance of maintaining a direct connection between the contents of our colour perceptions and the contents of our other psychological attitudes involving colours. But since sounds are not predicated of objects in the way that colours are, it is not at all clear that such a direct connection will have the same importance in a discussion of the reality of sounds.

There are many ways in which moral properties differ from colour properties.3[[33]](#footnote-33)3 So we would expect the details of a quest for the reality of moral properties to look quite different from the details of our discussion of colour properties. Even so, Stroud is right to say that his efforts give us a good sense of the “feasibility and validity” of other quests for reality (210). We must start with a determinate conception of reality, but not a fully determinate one. The would-be unmasker must be able to acknowledge and identify the beliefs she aims to unmask. She must start with some understanding of those beliefs if she is to have anything to explain away. The project must also be undertaken without a prior metaphysical conception of reality intruding (211).

Regarding evaluative beliefs in general, Stroud notes that “there is a question whether the conditions of recognizing any such beliefs in the world can be fulfilled by someone who has no beliefs of that kind at all” (215). For example,

Some way of understanding and recognizing the contents of the [evaluative] judgments we make is required even of the kind of “dispositional” theory that says that in believing something to have a certain value we believe only that the thing is disposed to be valued in certain ways. The judgments that such an object is said to have a disposition to produce must be intelligible independently of the object’s having that disposition. Only if that is so could the disposition in question be identified, and the contents of judgments which mention it be explained. The psychological facts of evaluation must be acknowledged and understood in some way or other. (216)

If the would-be unmasker of evaluative beliefs needs to have some evaluative beliefs of her own (beliefs of the sort that she is trying to unmask) in order to acknowledge the beliefs she is trying to unmask, then the unmasking will not succeed.

Stroud thinks that evaluative beliefs will be much more difficult to unmask than colour properties because he thinks evaluative beliefs are indispensable for any conception we might have of an independent world:

It is hard to believe that anyone could have any conception of an independent world at all if he could not see himself as acting in it and also see others as acting in the same world that he and they have beliefs about.

Making sense of people as acting intentionally in a world they understand would seem to require attributing to them judgments or beliefs about the relative values of the different courses of action they see as available, given their beliefs. Desires or impulses seen as mere pushes and pulls, understood nonintentionally, would not be enough to distinguish human beings from other things that move but have no beliefs and perform no actions. But if that is so, and some evaluative beliefs or other are indispensable to any human agent, and so are part of anyone’s conception of the world, anyone who can recognize other agents in the world as holding evaluative beliefs would have to have some evaluative beliefs of his own. And if that were so, he could not consistently see others as making evaluations while holding that there are no evaluative states of affairs at all in the world that he acknowledges. The indispensability of evaluations in general is what would guarantee their unmaskability. (216-217)

One of the reasons Stroud thinks colour properties are so difficult to unmask has to do with the fact that the contents of all our colour perceptions and beliefs make up so large a portion of all the things we take to be true of the world. Here Stroud is saying that evaluative beliefs may be even more difficult to unmask because they may be indispensable to how it is that we conceive of the world. It may be that without such beliefs we cannot even begin to understand human agents.

At the same time, it may be that *moral* evaluative beliefs are not crucial to understanding human agents in this way. Perhaps moral judgments are not nearly as pervasive as colour judgments and are not indispensable to any possible conception we may have of the independent world. Perhaps moral evaluative beliefs make up only a small part of the total set of evaluative beliefs which the typical human agent has. These are things we will need to look into in our quest for the reality of moral properties. Our answers will depend a great deal on how it is that we conceive of morality. How we conceive of morality determines, for example, the kinds of judgments we take to be moral judgments.

In the next section of this chapter I consider what I take to be some of the elements necessary for any adequate minimal conception of morality. It seems clear that we cannot engage in a quest for the reality of moral properties without some working conception of morality, especially if we intend to employ the basic outlines of Stroud’s approach. We need some sense of how it is that we understand moral properties, or moral evaluations, before we can begin to judge the would-be unmasker’s prospects for unmasking those moral beliefs which seem to commit us to a realist understanding of moral properties. For the moment, however, I want to focus on how Stroud’s quest into the reality of colour properties can inform our enquiry into the reality of moral properties. The two kinds of properties are importantly different and these differences need to be taken into account when employing Stroud’s methodology in our quest. Here are five such differences:

(1) Our everyday understanding of colours is that they can be properties of physical objects. We talk about lemons being yellow and tomatoes being red. Moral properties, on the other hand, are not predicated of physical objects; instead they are predicated of human actions and human agents. We talk about certain actions being right or wrong, cruel or kind, cowardly or noble, etc. And we talk about agents being morally good or morally bad, generous or mean-spirited, and so forth.

(2) We feel very comfortable talking about colours as properties. We are fairly confident in the way we talk and think about colours because we can directly perceive them. If I want to know what the colour of some visible object is, I just need to look at it in good lighting and from not too great a distance. Most, if not all, of our knowledge of colours comes from empirical observation. In contrast, talk of moral properties is I think somewhat strained, less intuitive, even suspect. It is suspect because it seems to beg the question about the reality of what is referred to in favor of a realist view. It is strained because of the intensity of the debate over what constitutes these “properties”, whether their sources belong more to the subjective features or the objective features of the world. Talk of moral properties is less intuitive because we don’t take ourselves to be able to directly perceive them. We also take moral properties to be far more complex than colour properties, so even if they are understood as visually perceivable in some sense, or as perceivable properties in some wider sense, that perception will rely a lot more on what the perceiver knows about the world (e.g., cause and effect relations) and about human beings in general. Moral properties are also relational in a complex way: the very same kind of action (event?) may be judged morally appropriate in some contexts, but morally inappropriate in other contexts. In sum, moral perception (of the visual or non-visual sort) is much more complex than colour perception. (Another example: both philosophers and non-philosophers debate, not just over what makes a particular moral evaluation correct or incorrect, but over whether moral evaluations can even be correct or incorrect; there is widespread disagreement then, not just over what might cause moral misperception, but over whether such misperception is even possible.)

(3) Moral judgments are thought to have a connection to human motivations in the sense of giving us reasons for acting in a certain way, whereas judgments about colour have no such connection.

(4) Moral judgments are said to be, not about how things are, but about how things ought to be. Moral judgments have a prescriptive element to them, whereas colour judgments are understood primarily in descriptive terms. The former are evaluative, the latter non-evaluative.

(5) The disagreement over how we should conceive of morality is far more extensive than the disagreement over how we should conceive of colours. Thus, we perhaps cannot be as confident in our pre-theoretic understanding of the differences and interconnections between the sample sentences that we will rely on to illustrate our use of moral terms. Greater caution is then needed if we are not to beg the metaphysical question that we are trying to answer.

If we are to make good use of Stroud’s methodology, we will want to have a set of “sample sentences” for moral properties like the kind of sentences for colour seen on page 121. Let’s consider, then, what such a sample set might look like.

Given the above differences between colour properties and moral properties, we should expect that the *range* of psychological facts about moral properties will be quite different from the range of facts about colours to which Stroud draws our attention. Perception would seem to have a less prominent role, or certainly a very different role. Also, we might expect that the interconnections found to be centrally important among the sample sentences involving colour terms may not be relevant to our discussion of moral properties. In our discussion of colour properties we found that a direct connection between the contents of our colour perceptions and the contents of our other psychological attitudes involving colours is crucial to any adequate explanation of predicational perception. But is such a direct connection important to our understanding of moral properties?

Do we say things like (a) “Jones sees cruelty”, or (b) “Jones perceives the action to be cruel”, or (c) “Jones sees that the action is cruel”? I think that we sometimes do talk this way and that this is not just a way of talking, as if the use of ‘sees’ and ‘perceives’ in these sentences are best understood in a non-literal sense. (Perhaps it might help to think of one reporting on Jones seeing the Abu Ghraib prison photographs taken during the United States’ military occupation of Iraq.) Nonetheless, I don’t think we should give the same weight to these sentences as Stroud has given to their colour counterparts. Moral perception is too complex a matter for us to gain much understanding from (a) - (c). These sample sentences fail to give us any sense of the role played by the non-visual element involved in these perceptions. If an action is cruel, it is because we take certain intentions to be present in the agent, and it is because we take the action to adversely affect the needs and/or interests of others. If the perceiver is wrong about these intentions and needs or interests, or about the cause and effect relations involved, nothing in the data that is visually present to the perceiver at the time of the judgment or attribution can make up for this. We cannot read off intentions and needs directly from agents in some visual sense; we have to infer their existence from a variety of inputs.3[[34]](#footnote-34)4 On the other hand, when we talk about seeing a lemon to be yellow, I think we often have in mind an experience much closer to that of direct perception. One can see a lemon to be yellow even if one doesn’t know they are seeing a lemon.

It seems that the psychological attitudes mostly involved with moral properties are those of thought and belief. If so, this is where we need to look for the core of our sample sentences stating psychological facts about moral properties. This is not to say that we should ignore perception and the other psychological states involving moral properties. But it is to suggest that we want a set of sample sentences which most everyone would agree express the kinds of psychological facts about moral properties that we commonly attribute to ourselves and others. We also want a set of sample sentences which is representative of the range of psychological facts about moral properties.

In attaching importance to this list of sentences, I am assuming that the general shape of Stroud’s quest into the reality of colour properties can inform our quest in an important way. We cannot talk about moral facts or truths directly, since our enquiry aims to discover whether there are any. What we can do instead is try to make sense of human beings and the relations in which we stand to the world. This means trying to make sense of the particular thoughts and responses we attribute to ourselves and others. This is why we are looking for an understanding of moral properties which allows us to make sense of our attributing to others the various psychological states involving moral properties that we do. While we (those of us engaged in the metaphysical project) cannot enquire into the wrongness of abortion directly, given the nature of our quest, we can examine what are real facts in the world: our beliefs and thoughts about abortion (or our beliefs and thoughts about what makes something morally right, or what makes something morally wrong, etc.). These psychological facts cannot be denied. The sentences we use to express them give us insight into our understanding of the nature of these facts. Stroud’s quest actually operates at a level of indirectness one degree greater (thereby avoiding the sceptic’s worry about the existence of other minds). Consider not the thoughts and beliefs themselves so much as our understanding of them. Consider, that is, the psychological states involving moral properties that we attribute to ourselves and others. What are the conditions that have to be met in order for us to make such attributions? Do these conditions entail that we understand the content of these psychological states in realist terms?

My concern in finding a good set of sample sentences has to do with trying to make use of this approach. The sample sentences should give us an accurate picture of the psychological states involving moral properties that we attribute to others, and they should give us a good sense of the range of these psychological facts. Only then will it be meaningful to talk about doing justice to the differences and interconnections we recognize among them (Stroud 2000: 104). A proper representation of the range of these psychological facts is important because we want to make sure that the would-be unmasker is capable of unmasking all the various kinds of facts about moral properties. We saw above how the sensation account can provide us with an adequate interpretation of “Jones sees yellow”; it is only when the other kinds of facts about colours are added to the list that this account’s weaknesses become apparent.

I am assuming then that Stroud’s main contribution to the project at hand is that of focusing our attention on the one question: What are the conditions that have to be met in order for us to attribute to others the psychological facts about moral properties that we do? Must we have moral beliefs of our own in order to recognize others as having moral beliefs? (Or more precisely: must we be capable of making judgments about the morality of things in order to understand the contents of beliefs about the morality of things so that, in turn, we can recognize other people as having such beliefs? See footnote 31 above.) We get a sense of the conditions which have to be met through the set of sample sentences we have before us. We must rely heavily on our pretheoretic understanding of the differences and interconnections we believe exist among these sentences when trying to identify those conditions.

Stroud’s approach is not entirely new to the moral realist-antirealist debate. When in Chapter 4 we look at the prospects for moral noncognitivism, we see that the moral noncognitivist faces a serious problem interpreting moral terms when these terms are found in unasserted contexts. One such context is the antecedent of conditionals. If we give a noncognitivist interpretation to a moral term embedded in the antecedent of a conditional, then it is hard to see how we can validly use this conditional as one of the premises in a modus ponens inference—the kind of inference we employ all the time in our moral reasoning. Or, what is more relevant to the present discussion, this is the kind of inference we take ourselves and others to make quite regularly when engaged in moral reasoning. We thus need a way of acknowledging the content of these attributions. We need a way of making sense of human beings as the moral reasoners we take them to be. We would do well, then, to include an example of this kind of inference in our sample sentences.

What follows is a *tentative* list of sample sentences expressing psychological facts about moral properties. It doesn’t come close to capturing the complexity of these kinds of psychological facts or the complexity of moral properties themselves. One reason for this is that the following sample sentences represent only a very small part of the range of such facts. But we have to start somewhere, and we can always add to the set later. For the moment we simply want to get some sense of the variety of psychological facts any would-be unmasker will need to account for.

**Sample Sentences - II** **(SS-II)**

(A) Jones wonders whether having an abortion is the right thing to do.

(B) Jones believes that having an abortion is the right thing to do.

(C) Jones believes that kicking dogs just for fun is wrong because it causes them pain.

(D) Jones perceives the politician to be disingenuous and self-serving.

(E) Jones finally sees that what she did was morally wrong.

(F) Jones believes that organized games should be a part of school curricula because she believes that courage is an intrinsically good thing and that if courage is an intrinsically good thing, then organized games should be a part of school curricula. (cf. Schueler 1988: 493)

(G) Jones believes that the rationing of medical care is, under certain circumstances, morally permissible.

(H) Jones believes that she is morally obligated to develop her talents.

(I) Jones used to believe that capital punishment was wrong but now thinks he was mistaken to have held this belief.

(J) Jones believes that Smith chose to steal the money and that is why he should be punished.

(K) Jones believes that millions died in Russia as a result of Stalin’s inhumanity. (cf. Sayre-McCord 1988c: 275)

(L) Jones believes that Mother Teresa’s goodness won her a Nobel Prize. (cf. Sayre-McCord 1988c: 275)

I think most people would agree that we do attribute such psychological states to others. What may not be so clear is the nature of the moral properties involved, or whether these moral property terms really are, as the terms themselves may suggest, real properties. What does it mean to say that some action, purposefully undertaken, is morally right or wrong? Why are the terms ‘disingenuous’ and ‘self-serving’ as used in sentence (D) considered moral terms? Is it significant that there are so few “thin” moral terms (‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘permissible’, ‘impermissible’, ‘obligatory’)? I will respond to the first of these questions in a moment. Before doing so, a few other comments regarding the list are in order.

To repeat, the main value of the list is to give us a sense of the range of facts that the would-be unmasker has to acknowledge. If the claim is that moral properties are not real, or are real but entirely subjective, we can see whether either of these views provides us with the best explanation of the above sample sentences. I take this to be the primary way in which Stroud’s work can inform our quest into the reality of moral properties.

Given the sentences that are included in our list, the general shape of Stroud’s quest may also inform our quest in a second way. Recall why the sensation account of colours failed. It interpreted colours in a way that doesn’t make sense of the interconnections we take to exist among the sample colour sentences. The sensation account understands colours as nonintentional properties, meaning that the contents of our colour perceptions cannot be the contents of our thoughts and beliefs about colours. At the end of his discussion of the sensation account, Stroud concluded that the colour antirealist will need to understand colours as intentional properties to have any chance at successfully unmasking facts about colours. This seemed to leave the colour antirealist with just two alternatives—either a dispositional account or an error theory account. Stroud distinguished the two accounts in terms of the type of connection they establish between the contents of our colour perceptions and the contents of our thoughts and beliefs about colours. The error theory account holds there to be a direct connection, the dispositional account an indirect connection.

The sample sentences in the above list might be enough to take us in a similar direction. Noncognitivist accounts of moral properties are analogous to sensation accounts of colours. They too take moral properties to be nonintentional insofar as they deny that moral properties are properties *of* something. According to the noncognitivist the utterances used to express our moral perceptions and beliefs are distinctively nonrepresentational; moral judgments are best understood as expressions of the speaker’s attitudes. But we will see in Chapter 4 that the moral noncognitivist has just as much trouble making sense of sentence (F) as the proponent of the sensation account of colours has making sense of predicational perception. So if we take Stroud’s approach seriously, this interpretive difficulty should be enough to make us think that the moral antirealist has to reject noncognitivism and look to the remaining alternatives. We find, in other words, that the moral realist’s first core tenet (that there are such things as moral facts or truths) looks to be defensible—unless, that is, the error theorist has a way to adequately account for the sample sentences.

If the noncognitivist is unable to unmask the facts in question, the alternatives remaining also seem to be of just two sorts. Accept a cognitivist view of moral properties—in the sense of interpreting sentences containing moral terms in a cognitivist fashion—but deny that any moral properties exist. This again is the error theorist’s approach. Or accept a cognitivist view of moral properties, but reject the moral realist’s second core tenet (that moral facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them). I have been referring to this second alternative as constructivism. It remains to be seen whether the most promising form of constructivism is a kind of dispositional view. It also remains to be seen if it matters to the project of interpreting the sample sentences whether a direct or indirect connection exists between the contents of our psychological attitudes involving moral properties. Still, we can see that the general shape of our quest for the reality of moral properties is much like the general shape of Stroud’s quest.

Should we then conclude from this fact that the moral antirealist’s prospects will be no better than the colour antirealist’s? It has already been suggested that evaluative beliefs may be more difficult to unmask because of their pervasiveness and apparent indispensability. This means trouble for moral antirealists, whether they are error theorists, dispositionalists, or noncognitivists. We have also seen Stroud suggest that dispositional views of moral properties will probably run into the very same problems facing the dispositionalist regarding colours. And I have just given warning that the prospects for moral noncognitivism look pretty dim. All of this might lead us to think that we can make short work of the quest for the reality of moral properties and be fairly confident that our results will parallel those of Stroud’s quest.

However, we have one very good reason to proceed with caution. Although the general shape of our quest closely resembles that of Stroud’s, we cannot forget the sharp differences between moral properties and colour properties. The dissimilarities are great enough that it is still an open question whether the moral antirealist will fare better or worse. At the very least, the dissimilarities are great enough that we should expect the *details* of our quest to be quite different, and it is to the details that we will need to look to support any analogous conclusion about moral properties. We also need to look to these details if we are to deepen our understanding of the kind of objectivity we might justifiably attribute to our moral judgments. The details may lead us to find that the reasons in favor of moral realism are even stronger than those favoring the reality of colours. Or we may find that there is something about the nature of moral properties and our understanding of them which does indeed give solid support to an antirealist view.

One dissimilarity especially complicates our quest. Because we are noticeably less comfortable with our pretheoretic understanding of moral properties than we are with our understanding of colours, it can be more difficult to judge the adequacy of the competing accounts of the sample sentences. Moral properties, if there are any, seem to be far more complex than colour properties. They involve (among other things) actions and agents, the consequences of actions, the intentions of agents, and the needs and interests of those affected by the actions. Just knowing the consequences of actions can be very difficult—we need only think of trying to formulate the best social policies. This complexity may be part of the reason why we are less confident or settled in our understanding of the kind of facts expressed in sample sentences (A) - (L) (hereafter SS-II), and in our understanding of the differences and interconnections between them.3[[35]](#footnote-35)5 But there is also a deeper reason for the unsettledness. It has to do with the ongoing disputes over how we ought to conceive of morality.

Aside from the dispute over the metaphysical status of moral properties, moral philosophers disagree about the formal and substantive elements necessary for any adequate minimum conception of morality. Different views of what these elements are or should be will yield very different interpretations of the sample sentences and the connections we take to exist between them. So how we conceive of morality in this respect will have important consequences for the conclusions we reach in our quest for reality.

In the next section I argue for a particular conception of morality, since I don’t think we can move forward in our quest without some such conception. This next section will also give us a better sense of why we need to proceed cautiously and not simply assume that the quest for the reality of moral properties will lead to results which mirror the ones Stroud arrived at in his quest for the reality of colour properties. In Chapter 7 I say more about how a reliance on the conception of morality I argue for affects the results we arrive at regarding the metaphysical status of moral properties.

*A conception of morality and its importance to the project*

The methodology which Stroud employs in his quest for the reality of colours is one which also looks suited to a quest for the reality of moral properties. But we cannot judge the explanatory adequacy of the different accounts of moral properties without some criteria. We have to have some understanding of what it is that needs to be explained. This means having some understanding of the kinds of facts we identify as facts about moral properties and some understanding of the differences and interconnections between those facts. This understanding comes from, and thus reveals to us, what I will refer to as our “pre-theoretic” conception of morality.3[[36]](#footnote-36)6 Without such a conception of morality in hand, our quest for reality won’t have any traction. Yet it is also true that, if we hope to avoid prejudicing that quest from the start, we must include in this conception only what we can actually find to be a part of it. In particular, one would expect that this conception is such that the metaphysical status of moral properties remains a live issue; otherwise that issue would have been settled a long time ago.

In fact I suspect that the issue remains alive partly due to *competing* pre-theoretic conceptions of morality. This would explain why there are times when people arrive at strikingly different answers regarding what morality requires of us. And it would explain why people sometimes disagree even about what counts as a moral matter.3[[37]](#footnote-37)7 Disagreements of this deeper sort show up within societies, between different societies, and across periods of human history.3[[38]](#footnote-38)8 That there might not be a single pre-theoretic conception that we all draw upon would also explain the divergence of views found among moral philosophers. Some give a very wide scope to morality (see (Scheffler 1992) and (Annas 1993)), others a relatively narrow one (I take Kant to fit in this category). Some take the central concern of morality to be human interests and needs; others see it as living according to the will of some deity; others think the focus should be on human dignity; others understand morality simply in terms of following one’s individual conscience, or in terms of obligations to ourselves and others. The list goes on. One doesn’t have to read many moral philosophers before wondering if they are even addressing the same subject matter. The concerns of the ancient virtue ethicists (Aristotle, et. al.) contrasts sharply with those of Kant, and these two different sets of concerns can seem worlds apart from Hume’s and Mill’s. Gibbard’s approach to understanding morality (1990) is entirely different from Griffin’s (1996), and Harman’s (1977, 1996) not at all like Hursthouse’s (1999).

The existence of these competing conceptions gives us another reason for making explicit as many of our pre-theoretic commitments as we can. If the commitments I outline below conflict in some way with my reader’s understanding of morality, the reader will at least know that the quest for reality I am engaged in is not the one they thought. This quest for the reality of moral properties then needs to be evaluated on its own terms. Of course, I hope that the commitments I identify are ones which accurately reflect at least one widely shared part of most everyone’s pre-theoretic conception of morality.

I have suggested that our pre-theoretic conception of morality assumes too much if, once this conception is articulated, it becomes immediately clear what the metaphysical status of moral properties is. But if I am right in thinking that there are competing conceptions at the pre-theoretic level, this is no longer necessarily true. It may be that once we make our pre-theoretic conception of morality explicit, there will be less doubt about the metaphysical status of moral properties *given that conception*.

Let’s begin identifying some of the elements of that conception.3[[39]](#footnote-39)9 Unlike certain philosophers,4[[40]](#footnote-40)0 I think our pre-theoretic conception involves more than just formal elements. I will argue that a certain substantive element also has an important role in that conception.

In his widely used introductory text for moral philosophy, James Rachels argues that any adequate conception of morality must include the following two features: (i) when engaged in practical deliberation the moral agent must base her decisions on the best reasons available; and (ii) she must consider the interests of all those affected by her actions impartially; that is, she is not to place her own interests, or the interests of some individual, ahead of the interests of others unless there are good reasons for doing so.4[[41]](#footnote-41)1 These features give us only a vague sense of what morality is about substantively: among other things, it has to do with deciding upon courses of action, taking into account how those courses of action affect the interests and needs of the agent and others. What distinguishes moral deliberation from prudential deliberation is the nature of the impartiality clause. Prudential deliberation is typically concerned only with what is in the best interests of the person deliberating.

Despite the vagueness, or even because of it, Rachels’ ‘minimum conception of morality’ is a good place to start in our efforts to discern what our pre-theoretic conception of morality consists of. I do think that these two formal features, and the substantive feature joined to them, are implicit in most people’s understanding of morality. These features don’t preclude morality from also being about character or the overall shape of an individual’s life. And although there is a heavy emphasis on reasons, nothing so far has been said about what counts as a reason. Nor has anything been said yet about whether perceived interests and needs count for more, or less, than “real” interests and needs. This minimum conception of morality does presuppose however that, for those engaged in moral deliberation, there are right and wrong, or better and worse, answers to moral questions. The relativist may say that this begs the question, but I am not so sure. When we look for what constitutes our pre-theoretic understanding of morality, is it better to look at what we say about morality in a philosophical frame of mind, or at how we practice it? With regards to morality our practices may sometimes be a better indicator of the true nature of our commitments. In practice, we are concerned with getting things right in our moral deliberations. We are not at all surprised, for example, to find people attributing to others the psychological states expressed in sentences (A) and (B) of SS-II. Thus, it seems right to say that we are looking to base our moral decisions on the best reasons available.

Another formal element that is clearly part of our pre-theoretic conception of morality is the “universality constraint” (discussed in Chapter 2 when we addressed Blackburn’s supervenience objection). One way of expressing the constraint is to say that “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). The constraint is universal in two senses. It holds for any moral agent whenever they are confronted with the exact same set of moral considerations. And it holds for all moral agents in the sense that, if it is true that agent x ought to do F given moral considerations, G, then agent y also ought to do F when confronted with G. If there is some difference between the agents that is morally relevant in the circumstances, then for the given situation y will never face the same set of morally relevant considerations that x faces. Thus, in being universal in the second sense, the constraint doesn’t ignore morally relevant differences between agents. The universality constraint is also referred to as the consistency constraint. If we don’t grant the existence of this constraint in our pre-theoretic conception of morality, it is not clear to me how we could even begin to make sense of our moral practices. If we think it is wrong for the executives at Company X, in circumstances C, to defraud their shareholders, then (other things being equal) we also think it is wrong for the executives at Company Y, in circumstances C, to defraud their shareholders.

There are probably other formal elements we could identify as part of our pre-theoretic conception of morality. Rachels’ first feature isn’t very informative, and the impartiality clause is also somewhat vague. Tom Scanlon offers us one way of combining these two features and elaborating upon them: he suggests that “thinking about right and wrong is, at the most basic level, thinking about what could be justified to others on grounds that they, if appropriately motivated, could not reasonably reject” (Scanlon 1998: 5). Scanlon takes “the morality of right and wrong” to be just one important area of morality, an area “having to do with our duties to other people”, but one that is “broader than justice” (6). He suspects that morality in its widest sense may not be a single subject that can be “unified by a single manner of reasoning” (7). Even so, the matters of right and wrong that he is referring to comprise a good part of what we take morality to be about, and he identifies what I think is also a part of our pre-theoretic conception of morality. This is the formal element of justifiability, the criterion that the reasons we rely on in support of the principles upon which we act should be reasons which others find they can accept (or cannot reasonably reject).

This formal constraint of justifiability coheres well with the universality constraint. If the principles that we act upon must be based upon reasons which others cannot reasonably reject, then it seems these principles will be ones which others could (and perhaps should) also see themselves as having a reason to act upon when facing similar circumstances.4[[42]](#footnote-42)2 In fact, if a particular principle meets the justifiability constraint, and if the principle requires that one do F in situation G, then it applies to all moral agents unless another principle exists for G which also meets the justifiability constraint. If no other such principle is to be found, then G always implies that one ought to F (and by hypothesis, it implies this regardless of who the moral agent is). We can say that the implication is due to the justifiability constraint.

Again, there may be other formal elements to be found in our pre-theoretic conception of morality, but I will stop with these four. I don’t see that any of them is very controversial. We just have to keep in mind that they may not be applicable or very illuminating for certain areas of morality (areas such as the treatment of animals and treatment of the environment). Scanlon may be right in thinking that morality is too broad a subject to be characterized in some unified manner. It is important to recognize this possibility. But I think that it won’t pose a serious problem for our project. What we need to move forward in our quest is enough of an understanding of morality to be able to judge the explanatory adequacy of various accounts of our sample sentences (SS-II). We need to have some understanding of the kinds of facts that these sentences express, the differences between them and how they are interrelated. We want some way of identifying when a particular psychological fact is a fact involving moral properties. If morality involves a number of distinct kinds of reasoning, we should focus on the reasoning involved in the matters seen to be most central to morality. Our quest for reality can then be seen as an enquiry into the metaphysical status of those moral properties involved in that central type of reasoning.

Our sample sentences should then be ones expressing facts about these “central” moral properties. If we are to have an understanding of the kinds of facts these are, we need a way to identify them. Or we should perhaps say: unless we have an understanding of the kinds of facts we are talking about, we won’t have a way to identify them. By themselves the four formal elements are not sufficient in this regard. They do not articulate enough of our pre-theoretic understanding of morality such that we can identify and understand the psychological facts in question. It seems that, rather than searching for additional formal elements, more needs to be said about our *substantive* understanding of morality. The constraints discussed thus far do give us some idea of the substantive nature of morality; they tell us that morality is a kind of impartial practical deliberation, or that the area of morality we are interested in is about “principles for the general regulation of behavior” (Scanlon 1998: 4). They also tell us that the interests and needs of people are usually relevant. But nothing has been said yet about what might make an interest or need relevant, or even what qualifies as an interest or need. And for our purposes it is not enough to say that morality is about what one ought to do. Prudential deliberation is about this. If it is then said that morality is about what one ought to do considered from some sort of impartial viewpoint (one different from the impartial point of view needed for prudential deliberation)—that is, if it is said that moral deliberation is a kind of practical deliberation done from a moral point of view—, we still have to ask, “what is the purpose of taking this impartial stance in our practical deliberations?” What we need is a deeper sense of the purpose and aim of morality. We are reflective creatures who can act intentionally, with certain purposes in mind. If we take up the moral point of view when engaging in some practical deliberation, we must take ourselves to have a reason for doing so. We also want to know when it is appropriate to take up this point of view, and when it is inappropriate or unnecessary. If moral principles aim to regulate human behavior, they do so with what purpose in mind?

My sense is that our pre-theoretic understanding of morality involves *the substantive belief that a good part of morality aims at human well-being*.4[[43]](#footnote-43)3 When we inquire into matters of right and wrong, we are (in the final analysis) often asking about what promotes or detracts from human well-being. We believe that morally correct actions will generally be ones which non-accidentally promote, or help to promote, human well-being; similarly, we generally see character traits that often detract from human well-being as morally disvaluable. Of course, to judge the accuracy of this observation, more needs to be said about the notion of human well-being. Let’s briefly take up this task, and do so by way of addressing a potential worry.

If we understand morality as aiming at human well-being in the way suggested, does it prejudice our quest for reality? Well, if our substantive claim is genuinely a part of our pre-theoretic understanding of morality (an understanding we cannot give up on pain of unintelligibility), then the answer is “no”. We might be inclined to think that since certain kinds of behavior clearly promote human well-being (e.g., educating our children, instituting widespread immunization programs) and other forms of behavior clearly detract from it (exposing children to violence, severely limiting individual freedom), and that since this is true not because of what we think about these behaviors but simply because human beings are a certain kind of creature, our substantive claim will force us to accept moral realism.4[[44]](#footnote-44)4 But this reasoning doesn’t take into account the complexity of human well-being. It also seems to be the case that, given the kind of creatures we are, human well-being is more than a function of empirical facts existing in the world (such as facts about the kind of creatures we are); it also seems to be a function of how we respond to some of those facts. The attitudes we take toward events and situations in the world make a real difference to the quality of our lives. So too do the desires which arise from these attitudes, or which give shape to them. For instance, things which cause us physical, mental, or emotional pain are typically seen as detrimental to human well-being. But an individual may value a goal like climbing Mt. Everest enough that the loss of several toes due to frostbite gotten during the climb makes little difference in the larger picture of things. That individual may think it would have been better if the loss hadn’t occurred, but the fact that it did occur hardly detracts from the achievement of the goal, or we might say, ‘the satisfaction of their desire’. This kind of thinking permeates our lives. While physical health, longevity, and offspring are important to us, they are not always so important that we won’t sacrifice them for other things that we feel we need (e.g., political freedom and certain other “human rights”) or that we have set our hearts on. So attitudes and desires can and do play a very large role in our lives, and accordingly are an important part of the equation of human well-being. In saying this, however, I do not want to deny that one can have attitudes and desires inappropriate to their circumstances, or that certain attitudes and desires can detract from human well-being.

There is another, related way in which human well-being is complex. It is also a function of the human world which we have constructed around ourselves—our history, our understanding of ourselves, and our cultural forms. Human well-being is not just a forward-looking matter; it is also a backward-looking one. How certain groups of people were treated in the past makes a difference to how their present-day treatment affects their well-being. For how a certain group of people were treated in the past (e.g., American Indians, Australian Aborigines, African-Americans, the Armenians, women, etc.) makes a difference to how they think they ought to be treated today. To ignore the past is to ignore the fact that we have individual and collective memories; it is to ignore the importance that past events have in shaping who we, and other groups of people, are today; it is thus to treat others without the dignity and respect with which they wish to be treated.4[[45]](#footnote-45)5 This is why, given our history, we are disappointed in those who don’t find the Confederate flag or Nazi swastikas to be morally repugnant.

Something similar can be said regarding cultural artifacts. For example, given the place that the Impressionist painters have had in the history of Western art, it makes a great moral difference to us if a visitor to the Van Gogh Museum destroys any of the works inside of it. We go to great lengths to protect cultural treasures because they tell us something about ourselves, or other peoples, and because they are expressions of the human spirit capable of further nourishing that spirit. Our culture and history are such that they transform, or define, certain of our needs, interests, and responsibilities. They also provide us with an important stimulus for the further expression of human energies. We as a society then have a deep interest in preserving and sustaining the arts. That interest is deep enough and real enough for us that it cannot simply be trumped by what are typically seen as the basic needs of those currently living. Likewise, the metric for human well-being cannot simply be a matter of *the number* of people doing well in some physical and mental sense of doing well. This too would be to ignore the importance of culture and history in our lives and the need for humans to creatively express themselves.

Human well-being is also complex because it is a function of how we understand and perceive ourselves as individuals; it depends on the things upon which we, and those around us, already place value. Individuals measure their own well-being in culturally relative ways all the time. For instance, we often take ourselves to be successful individuals if society views us as such; certainly public recognition helps to convince us that our lives have meaning and point. I suspect that most full-time athletes prefer that their sport be given recognition in the Olympics, just as most novelists prefer that their novels be widely read and praised. Public recognition is important to individuals in both a psychological and material sense. Even though the novelist who is widely read and praised may not necessarily be a better novelist due to the recognition they receive, they will almost certainly be better off both materially and psychologically than if they hadn’t received that recognition. The novelist is likely to be better off psychologically given that we are social creatures who typically seek and appreciate recognition for our efforts. In this way individual well-being can hinge on what others value. There is also this related observation: an individual’s well-being depends in part on how they themself view things to be going, but our understanding of how well we are doing is often partly shaped by how others think we are doing. It is a terrible thing for a young woman to be raped. But I think the damage is often much greater in the mind of that woman if she is Muslim and living in Bosnia or Pakistan. This is not to say that individuals are doing well if and only if they think they are doing well and those around them think they are doing well. Clearly we can get things wrong regarding what is good for us. Entire nations can be wrong regarding what is good for the nation or the individuals in it. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the fact that how we see ourselves (whether at the level of self-concept, national identity, or historical consciousness) has an important role in our well-being.

As the reader will have noticed, I am assuming that it is part of our pre-theoretic conception of morality that human well-being is inextricably linked to individual well-being. Human well-being, as I think we conceive of it, has to do with both individuals and societies flourishing. We know, however, that human well-being is not promoted whenever some particular individual’s interests are advanced. Individuals can flourish at the expense of society (or the common good), and society can flourish at the expense of individuals. I think we believe, though, that a balance can be struck between preserving individual freedoms and promoting the common good. In fact, we seem to think that a society is not truly flourishing unless the individuals in it are doing well, and conversely, that individuals cannot truly flourish (i.e., do as well as they could be doing) unless those around them are also flourishing.4[[46]](#footnote-46)6

It would be surprising if morality were generally opposed to individuals’ interests. What reason would we have for abiding by moral requirements? Morality would lose its importance and authority for us if the well-being it aims at has no room for the interests and needs of individuals. So while morality has often come to be seen as being opposed to individuals’ self-interests, I don’t think this view is actually a part of our pre-theoretic conception of morality. We recognize that moral requirements can conflict with what an individual perceives to be in their self-interest and that morality may also require genuine self-sacrifice. But I think we also recognize that our individual well-being depends a great deal on how the other members of our human community are doing. For instance, an individual’s opportunities to pursue their interests and projects are typically much greater if that individual lives in a wealthy and free society rather than a materially impoverished one. Also, it is worth noting that the people of a wealthy society are much better off (security-wise, if nothing else) if that wealth doesn’t come at the expense of the peoples of other countries. For the most part, morality and prudence coincide, or at least do not conflict. If this weren’t the case, we wouldn’t think of prudence as a virtue.

If at a very basic level we do understand morality to aim at human well-being, then we don’t need to be concerned that this understanding undermines our quest for the reality of moral properties. But why think we understand morality to aim at human well-being? One reason is the general consensus that morality has to do with benefits and harms to human beings. We take it as a grave defect of any moral theory if it fails to establish some connection between morality and basic human interests and needs.4[[47]](#footnote-47)7 Utilitarian theory appeals to so many exactly because it does make such a connection. (At the same time, it is unappealing to many of us due to the *kind* of connection it establishes.) In contrast, hardly anyone is convinced by Kant’s arguments that lying is morally impermissible regardless of the circumstances, and for the very reason that these arguments ignore basic human interests and needs.

But I also think there are other reasons why we understand morality to aim at human well-being. One such reason is that doing so has long been part of the tradition of ethical thought. Many of the ancient Greek thinkers approached ethical reflection along these lines (Annas 1993). For them morality was an inquiry into how we ought to live our lives as individuals who are also part of a human community. They believed that some kinds of lives are better for us *qua* human beings than other kinds of lives.4[[48]](#footnote-48)8 Ethics was then seen as an inquiry into what constitutes the best kind of life for human beings, where it was understood that, because we are social creatures, the interests of individuals are not independent of the interests of others. This explains, in part, why Aristotle considered ethics a subdiscipline of political science.4[[49]](#footnote-49)9 Although Julia Annas emphasizes that for ancient virtue ethics “the entry point for ethical reflection . . . is the agent’s reflection on her life as a whole, and the relative importance of her various ends” (1993: 11), and that in this inquiry an agent is seeking to know what her final end, or *telos* is, in order to make sense of her life as a whole (the idea being that without knowledge of our final end we can neither correctly choose our other ends in life or properly coordinate them (1993: 33-34)), she also emphasizes that this final end or good was thought by some of the ancients to be intimately linked with the good of others. She argues that not all forms of ancient virtue ethics were egoistic. “[T]he agent is concerned about developing her virtues as a way of achieving her final end”, but this is not an egoistic pursuit: “For what are to be developed are the *virtues*, and these are, for example, justice, courage, and the like. Some of them have a direct connection with the good of others, for example justice. All of them involve having at least a disposition to do the right thing, where the right thing to do is established independently of the agent’s own interests” (127). Annas adds: “For an ethics of virtue, the good of others matters to me because it is the good of others, and it is part of my own final good” (127-128; see also n. 258 on p. 128).

In saying that there is a long tradition behind conceiving of morality as aiming at human well-being, I am not saying that it is part of our pre-theoretic conception of morality to associate human well-being with an agent’s final end, or telos. We don’t assume, as Aristotle did for example, that man has a ‘proper function’. But I do want to suggest that some of the eudaimonistic ethical theories of the ancients have features which help to explain why it is that our everyday conception of morality involves the idea that morality aims at human well-being—something that has to do with individuals doing well and societies doing well. We don’t take morality to be concerned only with our immediate needs and interests. The notion that people have moral outlooks suggests that morality also has to do with how we structure our lives as a whole. And I think morality has weight and authority in our lives because we do believe that there is a much better chance for us to flourish as individuals if those around us are also flourishing.

A third reason why I think we conceive of morality in this way has to do with the fact that people still see the question, ‘How should one live?’, as being at the center of ethics, and the fact that people still do generally believe that some kinds of lives are better for us as human beings than other kinds of lives. (No one believes, for example, that a life of slavery is typically good for a human being, or that totalitarian regimes are the most conducive to the individual freedoms that we value.) It is because of this second belief that we worry about whether we are responding appropriately in particular situations, or doing the right thing; it is why we worry about the overall shape, or direction, of our lives. Together the two beliefs help to explain why we take morality to be a central concern in our lives. We are concerned with how to conduct our lives because we know that our actions make a difference in the kind of life we have and in the lives that others have; we believe that there are things we can do to make our lives go better for us. We also know that individuals flourish in societies, not alone. So we don’t conflate moral deliberation with prudential deliberation, or think that only individual well-being lies at the heart of morality.

Much more can surely be said regarding our pre-theoretic understanding of morality and the conception of human well-being which it seems to contain. (For instance, I don’t think we can understand human well-being as a state of affairs that could be maximized in some way. It instead has to do with how human agents live their lives and the best lives we can live given our needs, capacities, and interests.) My hope, however, is that I have set out enough of that understanding to give us what we need for a proper and fruitful application of Stroud’s strategies to the arguments of moral antirealists.

We need enough of an understanding of our pre-theoretic conception of morality to be able to evaluate competing accounts of the sample sentences. The competing accounts give us different ways of understanding moral properties. Some antirealists claim that these properties do not exist. Other antirealists claim that moral properties exist but have an entirely subjective source, i.e., are not due to features existing in the world independently of how we perceive that world. My claim is that we need to know something about morality’s aim or purpose if we are to have enough of an understanding of the sample sentences of SS-II to evaluate the competing accounts using Stroud’s methods. I don’t think formal constraints alone enable us to say what distinguishes putative moral properties from other kinds of properties. Nor do I think that our pre-theoretic conception of morality involves only formal constraints. We seem to conceive of morality as largely aiming at human well-being, however vaguely we understand the latter. I think it is this feature of our conception that we rely on most when identifying moral discourse, and when we say what it means to say that some action, purposefully undertaken, is morally right or wrong. It should become evident in the remaining chapters of this dissertation how the above picture of human well-being and the formal constraints discussed set adequacy conditions for accounts of the metaphysical status of moral properties.

1. 1 They 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 Note that this is not the same question as whether there is a form of moral realism committed to the two core tenets that is defensible. As the reader will have discovered by the conclusion of this dissertation, my answer to the above question is in the affirmative: our perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs having to do with what is morally right and wrong do represent something that is part of the world independently of us. Yet I also conclude that any form of moral realism committed to the two core tenets is not defensible. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 While there are some important similarities (on this, see Chapter 6), the two kinds of properties are largely dissimilar. See, for example, footnote 43 on page 275 of (Sayre-McCord 1988c). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4 I find Stroud’s conclusions to be significant for two reasons. First, many prominent philosophers deny that colours are objectively real. Among them are Bernard Williams, Colin McGinn, J. J. C. Smart, J. L. Mackie, John Locke, and David Hume. Many of these philosophers base their denial on reasons that Stroud undermines. Second, I think his arguments regarding the difficulties facing the colour antirealist are very persuasive. If I weren’t convinced by his arguments, I wouldn’t bother to see if they can shed any light on the debate over the metaphysical status of moral properties. (In this regard, it is worth noting the strength of Stroud’s responses to Mark Johnston’s criticisms of his views. See (Johnston 2004) and (Stroud 2004).) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5 In the discussion that follows, I will use the phrase ‘Stroud’s strategies’ or ‘Stroud’s argumentative strategies’ to refer to the arguments Stroud employs *against* antirealist unmasking explanations. These strategies are not to be confused with the unmasking explanatory strategies themselves. Nor should the reader infer from my use of this phrase that I take Stroud to be the sole author or originator of the strategies referred to. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6 But we won’t fully know how Stroud’s strategies inform the debate over the metaphysical status of moral properties until we look at the arguments brought against the moral realist’s core tenets. Broadly speaking, my methodology is to use Stroud’s arguments and observations to inform my investigation into the defensibility of moral realism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 7 Unless otherwise indicated, all page references in this summary will be to Stroud’s book, *The Quest for Reality* (Oxford UP 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 8 See Smart’s *Philosophy and Scientific Realism*, London, 1963, p. 149. I am quoting Stroud quoting Smart (Stroud 2000: 32). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 9 See also Israel Scheffler’s arguments in Chapters 2 and 3 of his book, *Science and Subjectivity* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 10 I will also refer to the world as it is independently of us as the “external world”. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 11 Like Stroud, I will refer to this assumption as the thesis of physicalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 12 The distinction between ontological and metaphysical commitments is an important one. I take it that most color realists are not claiming that colours are real in the sense of being ontological building blocks. They are claiming, rather, that colours are real in the sense of being properties or qualities of real objects in the world. They are saying that a statement like “lemons are yellow” is true. The color antirealist (one kind anyway) is denying that lemons are actually yellow. This antirealist is not simply saying that colours are not among the objects that really exist in the world; he is saying that any statement which entails the objective reality of colours is false. Or, if a statement about colours is true (this is a second kind of antirealist), this is because of certain things peculiar to us. As such, colours shouldn’t be included in our metaphysical commitments.

    Note that neither of these colour antirealists can resort to semantic reduction in support of their position. If true statements regarding colours semantically reduce to some more metaphysically-acceptable vocabulary, it will still be true that there are colours, and this will be true in virtue of objective facts in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 13 That is, there will be no positive verdict insofar as there will be no *direct* correspondence. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 14 Why think, for example, that descriptions of brain states involving only physical terms can distinguish between *thinking* that lemons are yellow and *believing* that lemons are yellow? [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 15 Stroud seems to be saying that *all* facts about colours are psychological facts. All he needs for his arguments to go through (i.e., the arguments he makes against the colour antirealists’ unmasking explanatory strategies) is that certain important facts about colours are psychological facts.

    (I am inclined to agree with Stroud that all facts about colours are psychological facts because, as we see in Chapter 6, any adequate conception of colours requires reference to subjects’ experiences of colours. Of course, in the same vein, I am also inclined to say that all facts about colours are, in a certain sense, physical facts, since I believe that colours also involve, essentially, something objective.) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 16 This is to be expected if we take the core tenets of the colour realist to be exactly analogous to those of the moral realist, that is, if we take the colour realist to be claiming that (i) there are colour facts or truths; and (ii) these facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them. The three kinds of strategies that Stroud discusses are aimed at undermining these core tenets of the colour realist. (Note, however, that there are those, like John McDowell, who will characterize the colour realist differently. Stroud himself does not rely on (i) and (ii) in his understanding of what it means for one to be a realist about colours. McDowell says that we ought to take colours to be real even though they are not completely mind-independent.) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 17 Stroud refers us to Wittgenstein’s treatment of simple “private objects” in the *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1953). Stroud notes that his discussion relies heavily on that treatment. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 18 Professor Dahl asks whether these are facts which need to be included in the determinate account of reality from which an investigation of the reality of colours must start. In one sense, the answer is “yes”. We ascribe the above kinds of psychological attitudes to people. If the antirealist can plausibly deny that we make such ascriptions, then he needn’t worry about having to explain our making them. So there is an assumption here that such facts are indeed facts existing in the world. Notice, however, that they don’t tell us directly about what the world is like; these Sample Sentences aren’t explicitly ontological or metaphysical claims. Also, Stroud does *not* intend the Sample Sentences to be facts we use to help us explain facts about colours; they just are the facts about colours which we have to explain. The determinate account of reality from which we start our investigation of the reality of colours is supposed to give us, if it is the correct account of reality, everything we need to explain such things as facts about colours. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 19 Stroud writes: “Surely someone could perceive something to have a certain property only if the thought of its having that property made sense to him, and he could perceive that something or other is so only if he could have the thought of its being so. If you weren’t even capable of having the thought of something’s being F or the thought that *p*, how could you ever perceive something to be F or perceive that *p*?” (111). This is just one of the ways in which we take perception to be connected with thought and belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 20 He actually argues against two kinds of dispositionalist accounts. In one, perceptions of colours are understood as certain kinds of sensations, while thoughts about coloured objects are interpreted as ascribing a property to those objects. The other way is to understand both perceptions and thoughts of colours as intentional, though the content of the perception is not the same as the content of the thought. Here I am mostly interested in the second kind of account. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 21 Mark Johnston denies that the colour dispositionalist is committed to this biconditional holding necessarily (Johnston 2004: 198), but I think Stroud is right when he points out that Johnston is mistaken regarding what the biconditional involves (Stroud 2004: 209). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 22 Here it is helpful to understand ‘subjective’ as McDowell defines it: “A subjective property . . . is one such that no adequate conception of what it is for a thing to possess it [e.g., for a lemon to be yellow] is available except in terms of how the thing would, in suitable circumstances, affect a subject—a sentient being” (1983; 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 23 In particular, the biconditional does not explain the meaning of colour terms when they are used to identify perceptions of colour. The biconditional doesn’t tell us what it is to have a perception of yellow (rather than, say, a perception of ovoidness), nor does it tell us what distinguishes a perception of yellow from a perception of green. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 24 Mark Johnston is one critic of Stroud’s views who makes just this mistake. See (Johnston 2004) and (Stroud 2004, esp. p. 211). Stroud writes: “. . . the fact that an object has a “rigidly” [*a la* Kripke] specified disposition to produce perceptions of certain kinds in us as we are is not sufficient to support identifying the object’s having that disposition with its having the property that occurs essentially in giving the content of those perceptions. Some additional reason must therefore be found for identifying an object’s being yellow with its having such a disposition. What supports that particular proposal rather than holding that objects that have that “rigidly” specified disposition have it in part because they are yellow?

    “There is nothing to recommend a comparable view of the property of being actually-anxiety-producing. In that case, unlike being ovoid or being an elephant, there is nothing other than an object’s having such a disposition for its having that property to be. And it makes no sense to attribute to an object the anxiety we feel when that disposition is activated. But when an object’s “rigidly” specified disposition to produce perceptions of yellow is activated, we see something yellow, and it makes perfect sense to say that an object is yellow. What in that case supports the idea of identifying an object’s having that property with its having that disposition? To say that there is nothing in the world other than that disposition for an object’s being yellow to be would raise the question of how that in turn is to be supported. To argue on grounds of “parsimony” that there is no such thing in the world because a world of non-dispositionally-colored objects is an “idle hypothesis” that is not needed to explain “the generation of our experience” (p. 192), would take us back to the prospects of successfully unmasking the colors of things” (Stroud 2004: 211-12). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 25 In the considerations that follow Stroud tells us that he is making use of ideas found in Wittgenstein’s treatment of psychological concepts in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) and in a number of Donald Davidson’s essays, including “Radical Interpretation” and “Belief and the Basis of Meaning” in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 26 Psychological facts are “expressed in sentences with a psychological main verb attributing thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, feelings, or other attitudes to someone”, whereas “Nonpsychological statements say nothing that implies the existence of any thinking, perceiving, feeling subjects at all” (Stroud 2000: 150). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. 27 Oftentimes we can take certain nonpsychological states to be causally connected with the psychological states whose contents have to do with what does or could hold in the nonpsychological world. Jones will perceive that there is a yellow lemon on the table if she has normal eyesight, is in a well-lighted room, is close to what she is looking at, and if there is in fact a yellow lemon on the table in front of her and this is what she is looking at. But it won’t make sense for the error theorist to assert such a causal connection in the case of colour perceptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 28 Stroud claims that we typically distinguish between different perceptions of colour by noting the “differences among the colours of objects that they are perceptions of” (Stroud 2000: 159). I think this is right. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 29 The initial condition must be that we have no beliefs about the colours of objects rather than that we believe that no objects are coloured, for the latter implies that a judgment has been made, that one has an idea of what is involved if an object were in fact coloured. Although this way of setting up the “thought experiment” may appear to beg the question against the error theorist (for presumably she has a story to tell about what colours are, and so will have some beliefs about colours; indeed, she denies that physical objects are coloured), what is at issue is whether she can *consistently* deny this, whether she can attribute to others the perceptions of and beliefs about the colours of objects that they actually have and yet consistently deny that physical objects are coloured (cf. Stroud 2004: 208). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 30 When we perceive lemons to be yellow, or when we think that lemons are yellow, what are we thinking and perceiving if it is not that yellow is a property of lemons? [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 31 Stroud gives a more precise description of what he has done: “I have argued that only someone capable of making judgments about the colours of things could understand the contents of beliefs about the colours of things and hence could come to recognize other people as holding them” (216). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. 32 My own view is that we ought to understand colours as real properties, properties that are both objective and subjective in nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. 33 In saying this, I don’t mean to presuppose the existence of moral properties. Perhaps another way of expressing this statement is to say that there are many ways in which our use of moral terms differs from our use of colour terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. 34 Agents may of course simply tell us their intentions, and the ‘others’ may simply state their needs and/or interests. But even in these cases, we still have to rely on visual cues and other inputs (e.g., testimony from others) to judge the sincerity of these claims. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. 35 We discover that lemons are yellow by looking at them. It is far more difficult to know what moral properties to associate with euthanizing a dying patient, or to associate with a particular policy on euthanasia. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. 36 We might say that the understanding referred to is what *constitutes* our pre-theoretic conception of morality. This is why I think it makes sense to talk about this understanding both “coming from” and “revealing to us” this conception.

    I hesitate to use the term ‘pre-theoretic’ since it is clear that our efforts at theorizing about what morality does and does not involve have had an important role in shaping whatever we identify, at this point in history, as part of our pre-theoretic conception. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. 37 As opposed to disagreeing over *how* much weight should be given to something which the disputants already recognize as deserving of moral consideration. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. 38 One example: many people in the United States still think a person’s sexual orientation is clearly a matter of morality. It is just as clear to many others that it is not. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. 39 I am concerned only with the pre-theoretic conception of morality in the West (or one such conception). My knowledge of non-Western cultures and human communities is very limited. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. 40 I have in mind R. M. Hare in particular. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. 41 James Rachels. 2003. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy, 4th edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill. Pages 11-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. 42 Assuming that what is morally relevant in the circumstances is not a function of who the moral agent is. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. 43 I prefer to view this as a substantive feature of morality rather than a formal one because of the way it would constrain the content of moral requirements. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. 44 For example, it would be true that slavery is wrong if ‘slavery is wrong’ means ‘slavery detracts from human well-being’ and if it is true that the enslavement of individuals does in fact detract from human well-being. Whether or not the latter is true will depend on the kind of connection we posit between individual well-being and human well-being. Let’s say that the connection is such that the enslavement of individuals does in fact detract from human well-being. Then it would be true that slavery is wrong, and this would be true independently of our beliefs about right and wrong (unless our beliefs about right and wrong are employed in our conception of what constitutes human well-being). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. 45 I am assuming here that it is just a fact about us that we would like others to value the things we value, and disvalue the things we disvalue. Or, if this isn’t possible, we desire that others at least acknowledge and respect the things that are deeply important to us. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. 46 For the moment, we needn’t worry about the soundness of these beliefs. Our purposes simply require that we have enough of a sense of our pre-theoretic conception of well-being such that we can begin to articulate what we seem to mean when we say that some action, purposefully undertaken, is morally right or wrong. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. 47 See, for example, pp. 110-111 of (Griffin 1996). Griffin says that deontological theories are inadequate exactly for this reason. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. 48 See, for example, Book I, ch. 7 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle employs the assumption that man has a proper function. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. 49 Book I, ch. 2 of *Nicomachean Ethics*. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)