**Chapter 5: The Dispositionalist and Error Theorist**

If we accept the conclusion of Chapter 4, the would-be unmasker of moral properties cannot take a noncognitivist approach to explaining away the realist appearance of moral practice. In Chapter 3 we also saw why she cannot be a reductionist. And in Chapter 2 we saw some general reasons against a reductionist strategy; in particular, it seems right to say that we can maintain a distinction between evaluative and non-evaluative discourse, and that typical moral discourse and thought is distinctively evaluative in nature. In this chapter I therefore assume that if the moral antirealist who employs an explanatory unmasking strategy is to succeed in her efforts, she needs to be a cognitivist (in the sense of understanding moral judgments to express belief states of the speaker, and therefore interpreting these judgments as having an important descriptive function) and a nonreductionist (in the sense that, if moral properties are thought to exist at all, they cannot be reduced to some ontologically more basic property that is thought to be objectively real). It looks as if we therefore have just two kinds of potential unmasker to address: the dispositionalist and the error theorist.

The dispositionalist accepts the moral realist’s first core tenet (there are moral facts or truths) but rejects the second (these facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them). According to this type of antirealist, moral properties are *entirely* subjective in nature. Thus, if *x* stands for an action, character trait, or person, then the following biconditional holds:

*x* is morally good if and only if normal human beings [standing in certain relations R to *x* in certain kinds of circumstances C] are disposed to find *x* morally good.[[1]](#footnote-1)1

When the biconditional is filled in, we get a sense of what it means, according to the dispositionalist, to predicate ‘morally good’ of an object. The dispositionalist is claiming that there is a corresponding biconditional for each moral term. As we saw in Chapter 3, the connection between the left-hand side (LHS) and right-hand side (RHS) of any such biconditional will have to hold *necessarily* if moral properties are to be distinguished from such “primary” qualities as mass, shape, and size.[[2]](#footnote-2)2 I think Stroud is right about this despite what his critics say.[[3]](#footnote-3)3 Without the necessary connection, the biconditionals do little or nothing to distinguish distinctively dispositional properties from distinctively non-dispositional ones.

The error theorist in question will accept a cognitivist view of moral judgments but reject both of the moral realist’s core tenets. Because the error theorist denies that there are moral facts or truths, and yet thinks that moral judgments ought to be interpreted descriptively, he needs to explain how it is that moral discourse and thought came into such error.

With noncognitivism out of the picture, and reductionism never really an option in the first place, I don’t see that the potential unmasker has any other alternatives than the two just described. If one accepts cognitivism and the realist’s first core tenet, and rejects the second core tenet but holds that moral properties are not entirely subjective, then it would seem that moral properties are somehow objectively real (though not necessarily fully mind-independent). And if there is an objectively real aspect to moral properties, the antirealist cannot employ an unmasking explanatory strategy to undermine realism, for the business of unmasking is to “explain away” the putative moral properties—that is, to explain moral discourse and thought (e.g., the differences and interconnections among the sample sentences of SS-II found in Chapter 3) without assuming the mind-independent existence of the properties in question. Alternatively, if one accepts cognitivism and the first core tenet, and yet holds that moral properties are entirely subjective, it seems that the most plausible view is one that commits us to the above type of biconditional for each moral term; in other words, it seems that one ought to be a dispositionalist.

Being clear about the variety of options open to the would-be unmasker is important to what follows because I shall argue that neither the dispositionalist nor the error theorist can succeed in their unmasking projects. If this conclusion is right, the moral antirealist cannot argue against the realist by way of using an unmasking explanatory strategy.

I treat the error theorist and dispositionalist together because they are both susceptible to the same problem: neither has a way to determinately specify the contents of the moral beliefs and thoughts that we attribute to ourselves and others without relying on beliefs that are inconsistent with the antirealist view each espouses. We noted in Chapter 3 that this same type of problem afflicts all of the unmasking strategies used by colour antirealists (and that were discussed in Stroud’s book). For example, the dispositionalist regarding colour properties needs it to be the case that “the perceptual responses which serve to define the particular disposition with which an object’s having a certain colour is to be identified are specifiable independently of presupposing that any objects are coloured in a non-dispositional or non-subjectivist way” (Stroud 2004: 209); but if we accept Stroud’s arguments against the colour antirealist who is an error theorist (Stroud 2000: Chapter 7), this requirement cannot be met. In the same way, the dispositionalist regarding moral properties, if she is to show that there is a necessary connection between the LHS and RHS of the above sorts of biconditionals, must be able to specify the contents of the dispositions referred to on the RHS without referring to features of the objects on the LHS that are thought to be objectively real and that are understood by the rest of us as moral features of those objects.[[4]](#footnote-4)4 Indeed, the moral dispositionalist will claim that the moral term found on each side of the corresponding biconditional has the same meaning (see footnote 2 above); so without a way to independently specify the contents of the dispositions referred to on the RHS, there is an infinite regress: finding *x* morally good (say) will be a matter of being disposed to being disposed to being disposed to . . . (finding *x* morally good).

Recall too, from the discussion in Chapter 3, that whatever the unmasking route taken, the would-be unmasker needs to be able to acknowledge the kinds of psychological facts that she is trying to unmask. She has to have some understanding of the kinds of attributions we actually make; otherwise, from her perspective, there won’t be anything that needs to be explained away. Further, the would-be unmasker needs to understand moral predicates as they are understood by those of us who use them, those of us who have the realist moral beliefs that the would-be unmasker is challenging;[[5]](#footnote-5)5 this too is necessary for proper acknowledgement of the psychological states in question.

My aim in what follows is to argue that the error theorist and dispositionalist cannot consistently acknowledge those states. For, analogous to what we saw with colours, it seems that one must have some moral beliefs of one’s own—beliefs entailing the existence of non-subjective moral properties—in order to be able to meaningfully ascribe to oneself or others the kinds of thoughts and beliefs involving moral predicates that we find represented in the sample sentences of SS-II. The main argument that I offer in support of this requirement on attribution is a straightforward application of the strategies Stroud deployed against the colour antirealist who was an error theorist.[[6]](#footnote-6)6

Before presenting that argument, however, it is worth reviewing a very general reason for thinking that the above conclusion is plausible, and a couple of things that give support to this general line of thought. In Chapter 3 I briefly mentioned Stroud’s observation that evaluative beliefs seem to be far more pervasive than beliefs about colour and the colours of things. Stroud notes that we seem to need them whenever we want to make sense of people acting intentionally:

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. (Stroud 2000: 216-217)

The pervasiveness of a certain kind of belief in our conception of the world matters to the unmaskability of that type of belief, for the would-be unmasker must accomplish the unmasking without any such beliefs, and thus has that much less of a determinate conception of reality to work from. One would expect that the smaller the conception of reality one has to rely on, the more difficult it will be to come up with adequate and plausible unmasking explanations. The requirement on attribution begins to look very plausible, then, and the prospects for the would-be unmasker of evaluative beliefs very bleak indeed, if it is the case that such beliefs make up so large a portion of all the things that we believe to be true of the world that they are indispensable to how it is that we conceive of the world, and are essential for our making sense of the actions of human agents.

The obvious move for the error theorist or dispositionalist is, not to deny the pervasiveness of evaluative beliefs and their importance for interpreting agents’ actions (for the denial of the pervasiveness claim seems highly implausible), but to say that *moral* evaluative beliefs (those with realist implications, anyway) are not so terribly crucial to understanding the actions of human agents.[[7]](#footnote-7)7 For it is only this type of evaluative belief that the two would-be unmaskers are trying to explain away, and it is only this type of evaluative belief that they need to avoid relying on in their unmasking explanations. This response, however, conflicts with certain features of the minimal conception of morality that was discussed at the end of Chapter 3.

For many of us it seems that morality has great importance and authority in our lives; for example, it is often thought that moral considerations ought to override other sorts of practical considerations. And it makes sense for morality to have this importance and authority for us if, as it seems, we take it to be crucially connected to basic human interests and needs, to both individual well-being and human well-being; and if, as it seems, we take it to involve answering questions, not only about how we ought to act in a certain set of circumstances, but also about what the overall shape and direction of our lives ought to be, and about what kind of person one ought to be.[[8]](#footnote-8)8 If these are prominant features of one’s conception of morality (as I think is the case for many of us in Western society), then moral evaluative beliefs will be fairly pervasive in our lives. It is therefore likely that the error theorist and dispositionalist will be hard-pressed to restrict what counts as a moral evaluative belief in the way that they require and still leave us with a plausible conception of morality. Nor do I think that they can accept the minimal conception that I outline and then plausibly claim that only a small portion of the beliefs which would be described as moral beliefs under such a conception have realist implications, not while also holding that it is appropriate for us to understand moral judgments along cognitivist lines.[[9]](#footnote-9)9

One further consideration also seems to pose a problem for the antirealists under discussion. That is the dilemma described by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (1988c: 277) and mentioned at the end of Chapter 4. Any unmasking strategy that relies on an explanatory criterion of reality presupposes that some explanations are better than others, and objectively so.1[[10]](#footnote-10)0 Thus, our error theorist and dispositionalist are already committed to the existence of at least some evaluative facts that have at least some degree of objective reality; they can avoid this commitment only by giving up their claims that their metaethical views provide the best explanation of common features of moral beliefs and practices. (This is one more example of the pervasiveness of evaluative beliefs.) Assuming they won’t withdraw those claims,1[[11]](#footnote-11)1 they have to explain why it is that there can be evaluative facts of the one sort but not of the moral variety. As Sayre-McCord points out, “whatever ontological niche and epistemological credentials we find for explanatory values will presumably serve equally well for moral values” (1988c: 278). It may even be that the abstract, general principles we rely on to justify our standards of explanatory value can be used to help us justify our moral judgments (ibid., 278-279).

While this commitment to evaluative facts doesn’t give direct support to the requirement on attribution, I think it does provide some indirect support. Suppose that the error theorist or dispositionalist allows that evaluative beliefs are pervasive and even indispensable for meaningfully interpreting the actions of agents; suppose these antirealists also say that the same is true for moral evaluative beliefs, albeit with one qualification: they add that moral evaluative beliefs *with realist implications* are not essential to understanding the actions of human agents and the moral beliefs and thoughts that we attribute to them.1[[12]](#footnote-12)2 There are at least two ways to respond to this claim. One is to follow Stroud’s lead and try to show something analogous to what he shows with regard to the sentences of SS-I; that is, that our understanding of any one of the sentences is so closely tied in with our understanding of the other sentences that how we interpret a particular sentence in the list has important ramifications for the interpretability of the remaining sentences. For example, although the colour sensationalist has little trouble providing an interpretation for “Jones sees yellow”, it is not at all clear how we are to understand the other sentences of SS-I in terms of the sensation account. I offer a partial argument in support of this kind of “holism” for the sentences of SS-II below. The second way to address the above claim is by making use of Sayre-McCord’s observation that the antirealists in question are committed to certain evaluative facts.

If it is agreed that moral evaluative beliefs (those that supposedly haven’t any realist implications) are indispensable to making sense of certain phenomena, then we should expect that these beliefs will constitute part of the standard for judging the compellingness or adequacy of explanations of those phenomena.1[[13]](#footnote-13)3 So if it is an objective fact that the dispositionalist has a better explanation of the sentences of SS-II than the realist does, and yet that judgment hinges on certain moral evaluative beliefs, it would seem that a commitment to objective explanatory values must involve us in a commitment to objective moral values. Otherwise there is reason to doubt that the explanatory values are indeed objective; saying that one metaethical view better explains the phenomena than some other view ends up being a subjective matter. So the indispensable moral evaluative beliefs that supposedly don’t have any realist implications seem to need to have just such implications if the antirealist’s use of the explanatory criterion of reality is to pose any potential threat to the realist.

*Applying Stroud’s Strategies*

Let’s take a moment to review the way Stroud’s argument against the error theory account of colour properties works, or at least the way I think it mostly works. The colour theorist needs to be able to account for certain psychological facts—e.g., our perceptions of colour and beliefs to the effect that objects are coloured. The sample sentences of SS-I are illustrative of the range of psychological facts about colour that need to be explained. Since it is undeniable that the kinds of sentences we find in SS-I are what we use to attribute psychological states involving colours to ourselves and others, we can get a sense of what needs to be included in the colour theorist’s account, or the hurdles that the would-be unmasker has to overcome, by trying to identify the conditions of making such attributions. Stroud’s question thus becomes: 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 (2000: 97)?

By the time Stroud addresses the error theorist, he has concluded that psychological facts cannot be reduced to physical facts, that colour properties must be seen as intentional properties (i.e., it needs to be the case that the contents of our colour perceptions can be the very same contents of our thoughts and beliefs about colours), and that a direct connection must exist between the contents, or objects, of perception and thought regarding colours, so that “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” (Stroud 2000: 145). It seems that the meaning of ‘yellow’ needs to be the same in each of the sample sentences if we are to make sense of them, if we are to “do justice to the differences and interconnections we recognize among them” (ibid., 104).

Stroud then looks at some of the details of how our understanding of many psychological facts importantly depends on our understanding of the world around us. In particular, we can often distinguish one psychological fact from another only in terms of the content of the psychological attitude, i.e., in terms of what we take the complement of the psychological verb (the verb of the sentence which expresses the psychological fact in question) to be referring to. For example, we understand the difference between ‘Jones wants a ball’ and ‘Jones wants a brick’ because we understand the difference between a ball and a brick. Likewise, 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). Of course this way of distinguishing between different colour perceptions is not available to either the error theorist or the dispositionalist.

Predicational perception and predicational thought involving colours thus become the focus. Predicational perception and predicational thought involving colours is intimately tied to propositional perception and propositional thought involving colours. “We can think of coloured objects, and so think of ourselves as seeing such things, only because we can make sense of propositional thoughts in which colours are predicated of physical objects” (ibid., 153). The would-be unmasker of colour properties, therefore, must be able to explain *what we are thinking when we think that such propositional thoughts are true*;1[[14]](#footnote-14)4 this is a necessary condition for proper acknowledgment of those thoughts, and hence for proper acknowledgement of a particular propositional perception, or a particular predicational perception or thought involving colours. In fact, drawing upon ideas from Frege, Stroud argues that one cannot even deny that objects are coloured without an understanding of what would be involved if objects were in fact coloured (ibid., 153-54).

This means that the would-be unmasker of colour perceptions and beliefs must accomplish the unmasking task with no beliefs about the colours of objects at all! Stroud goes on to show why there is little reason to think that the unmasking project can succeed upon such a thin basis. The first difficulty is being able to give determinate content to our colour perceptions and beliefs. The second difficulty is properly accounting for the range of sample sentences in SS-I, doing justice to the differences and interconnections that we recognize among those sentences. Stroud thinks that even if the would-be unmasker can overcome the first hurdle, she won’t be able to overcome the second. This is why he says that even if the would-be unmasker could uniquely specify the content of the perceptions she understands herself to have when she has perceptions of colours, they would not be perceptions of colour as we understand them (ibid., 166); for however the error theorist identifies her perception, the contents of it won’t be the same property that people believe objects to have when they believe that objects are coloured.1[[15]](#footnote-15)5

That is the general outline of Stroud’s argument. Mark Johnston offers a noteworthy attack against it (Johnston 2004). Johnston rejects the idea that the unmasker has to work from such a thin basis. There is rich set of “colour platitudes”—“very plausible beliefs that are ostensibly about the colours” (ibid., 188). The colour antirealist can proceed by adopting “the Ramsey/Lewis account of [the] content of our colour beliefs, an account on which the colours are the best satisfiers of the “colour platitudes”” (ibid.). This means, however, that since the colour antirealist aims to talk about the colours and not something else in her claims about colour properties, she needs to assume that many of these colour platitudes are true. Johnston holds that “the Ramsey/Lewis theory of the content and reference of our colour terms allows that there could be colours even if nothing is in fact coloured” because “There would still be a massive set of platitudes [aside from our first-order beliefs about the colours of external things] that would serve to attach a sense to our thought and talk about the colours” (ibid., 188). In other words, Johnston maintains that the unmasker would be able to uniquely specify the content of our colour perceptions and beliefs about the colours of objects because she still has a vast assortment of colour platitudes to draw upon even after rejecting all beliefs about the colours of objects.

But notice what has to be the case if this solution is to have any chance of working. It must be that we actually can properly understand all the sentences of SS-I that don’t directly involve predicational perception or predicational thought about colours while holding that no objects are coloured. Stroud’s reply is that he has already argued that this kind of separation cannot be done: “colour terms when not used to predicate colour of an object mean what they do because they are “holistically” tied to the meanings they have in such predicative applications. They would not mean what they do in their non-predicational uses if that were not so. [There is also] a connection running in the opposite direction: colour terms would not mean what they do in predicational application to physical objects if they did not mean what they do when not predicated of objects” (Stroud 2004: 203).1[[16]](#footnote-16)6 Furthermore, Stroud points out that a Ramsey/Lewis assignment of referents to colour terms doesn’t help us answer the question of “what a person is doing or thinking in using a colour term predicatively” (ibid., 204).

Finally, Stroud observes that Johnston’s argument to the effect that “massive error about the colours of external things could be made intelligible” (Johnston 2004: 189) won’t be compelling until the error theorist or the dispositionalist or any other would-be unmasker provides “a way of explaining and so making intelligible the massive error of believing in the colours of objects” (Stroud 2004: 205).

At present I am convinced that Stroud has the upper hand here. I think that his holism claim is true,1[[17]](#footnote-17)7 i.e., that his understanding of the differences and interconnections among the sample sentences of SS-I is on target. If Stroud is right, the Ramsey/Lewis approach to understanding colour terms won’t help the unmasker. I am also convinced by Stroud’s arguments because I haven’t seen the dispositionalist, error theorist, or any other would-be unmasker offer an account of colours that avoids the two obstacles that Stroud identifies.

Let’s therefore apply Stroud’s strategies to the case of moral properties. Is there any reason to think that either the error theorist or the dispositionalist regarding moral properties can make sense of the sample sentences of SS-II—the kinds of psychological attitudes that we attribute to ourselves and others, attitudes whose content we describe with moral terms—without relying on any moral evaluative beliefs of their own, that is, any moral evaluative beliefs with realist implications? I am inclined to think that neither of the two unmasking projects can succeed, for the error theorist and dispositionalist are up against the same two kinds of difficulties that their respective colour antirealists face. If they work from the thin basis of not having any moral evaluative beliefs with realist implications, they won’t be able to uniquely specify the content of any particular moral belief; nor will they be able to properly account for the differences and interconnections that we recognize among the range of sentences of SS-II.

In arguing for these claims, what are the elements that we have to work with? We have already said that the moral antirealist has to subscribe to cognitivism and nonreductionism. The arguments in Chapter 4 against moral noncognitivism also suggest that the meaning of a moral term needs to be the same in all of the types of sample sentences of SS-II; otherwise we run into problems explaining the validity of modus ponens inferences involving moral evaluative judgments. Also, we should not forget the elements of our minimum conception of morality. I think it is especially important to note our commitment to the universality constraint and the supervenience claim associated with it. That is the notion that moral claims supervene on natural descriptions1[[18]](#footnote-18)8 of the objects to which they apply.1[[19]](#footnote-19)9 This notion strongly coheres with the commitment to cognitivism.

Since my argument will in fact depend a great deal on this understanding of moral claims, it is worth mentioning again that we should not expect the argument that I offer (even if it were properly filled out) to be quite as persuasive as Stroud’s argument, for the intuitions and beliefs which constitute our understanding of moral claims are not as firmly grounded as our beliefs about colours. Stroud’s argument relies heavily upon the observation that *we perceive objects to be coloured*; one cannot plausibly deny this fact. This observation is then joined to the premise that colour properties ought to be understood as intentional properties, and the premise that we should take there to be a direct connection between the contents of our colour perceptions and the contents of our thoughts regarding colours and the colours of objects. So Stroud is on fairly firm ground once he reaches the point of inquiring into the conditions of our making sense of propositional thoughts in which colours are predicated of physical objects. By contrast, I think there are some moralists and moral theorists who will deny that there is an important connection between the natural features of actions and our moral judgments of those actions; among other things, this means, or certainly would seem to mean, that they deny that the consequences of our doing a certain action or our having a certain character trait are importantly relevant to our moral evaluations of that action or character trait. My sense, however, is that most people do not actually hold such a view.2[[20]](#footnote-20)0 We take our moral judgments to be *responses to* things that actually exist in the world; and we think that a crucial part of what we are responding to are features existing in the world in an objectively real sense.

What might help settle the matter of the importance of the natural features in question is to accurately identify what we recognize to be the differences and interconnections among the sentences of SS-II. As important as that task is, it looks too large to undertake here.2[[21]](#footnote-21)1 Instead I will proceed simply by relying on the conception of morality already outlined and facts like the following: that many of us do believe that the wrongness of (say) kicking dogs just for fun is due to it causing them unnecessary pain; that we do attribute the death of millions in Russia during the 1930s to Stalin’s inhumanity; and that moral judgments in general do have an important descriptive function. True, we don’t simply talk about pain being problematic, but rather ‘unnecessary pain’, and the latter is not an entirely mind-independent, non-evaluative property. But nor is it an entirely subjective one, and it is that fact that is crucial to my argument. The pain experienced by the dog is the feature in the world that is objectively real, and without which we would not say that kicking that dog just for fun is morally wrong.

So even without taking a detailed look at what we take to be the differences and interconnections among the sentences of SS-II, I think we can say something about how it is that we uniquely specify the content of our moral beliefs. We do so, at least in part, in terms of the natural features of the objects of which we predicate moral terms. And referring to natural features like pain and loss of life seems absolutely crucial; otherwise our judgments about how things ought to be will have no connection whatsoever with how things are. It is simply implausible to suggest, for example, that what we are morally required to do needn’t take into account our physical and mental limitations.

Now our error theorist and dispositionalist are committed to cognitivism and the idea that a crucial part of the meaning of any particular moral term must be the same whatever type of sentence, among the types of sentences of SS-II, that it is found in. What can the error theorist say that we are cognizing or grasping? He has to resort to something analogous to the patch theory of colours. Or invoke a Ramsey/Lewis-type theory of moral terms and insist that we can *uniquely specify* the content of people’s moral beliefs without relying on the natural features of the objects to which our moral judgments are applied. What makes us think, however, that this can be done, and done in a way that still does justice to our understanding of the sentences of SS-II, an understanding that seems to consist of our commitment to the supervenience claim? Moral evaluative beliefs are pervasive in our lives. We are committed to the idea that they have an important descriptive function. If we firmly hold the supervenience claim that I speak of, I think we need to conclude that even if the error theorist can find a way to uniquely specify the contents of our moral beliefs, the meanings of his moral terms will no longer be the same as ours, for whatever the error theorist offers as the referent of his moral terms, it cannot be the same as the referent that is implied in our commitment to the supervenience claim.

Similarly, if we think that moral judgments are responses to things that actually exist in the world, and exist at least in part in an objectively real sense, then the dispositionalist faces the same hurdles as the error theorist. The dispositionalist won’t be able to say that we can understand the truth or falsity of our moral judgments in terms of their correspondence to the norms constituting the judge’s normative framework, or the judge’s society’s set of norms. This would satisfy the cognitivist constraint; but if this view also satisfies the dispositionalist’s claim that moral properties are entirely subjective, and even allows the dispositionalist a way of uniquely specifying the content of our moral beliefs, it won’t do justice to our understanding of the sentences of SS-II and our commitment to the supervenience claim.

*Conclusion*

Granted, I have only sketched out an argument for my conclusion. A proper defense would require quite a bit more. But I think enough has been said to provide us with good reasons for thinking that neither the error theorist nor the dispositionalist can succeed with their unmasking projects. If they have a way of uniquely specifying the contents of our moral beliefs in a fashion that is consistent with their antirealist views, they should provide us with the details of that view, and show us how it is that their views can not only make proper sense of the sentences of SS-II, but offer the best explanation of what we are doing when we use such sentences.

In the next three chapters, I provide the reader with details of my own view about how we might best understand the nature of moral properties. If the reader agrees with the basic outlines of that view, we have all the reason we need to believe that would-be unmaskers of moral properties cannot explain away the objective reality of those properties.

1. 1 It may be that the dispositionalist regarding moral properties will say that the material in the brackets is unnecessary. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 As Stroud points out (2000: 216), this account parallels the “hybrid” dispositional theory of colour (regarding the latter, see the next-to-last paragraph of the section of my Chapter 3 entitled “the Dispositional Account”). Under a hybrid account, the moral term in question will have the same meaning in each of the sample sentences of SS-II (see Chapter 3), and it will have the same meaning on each side of the biconditional. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 See (Johnston 2004) and (Stroud 2004: 209). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4 In this regard, see (Stroud 2000: 162-63). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5 See (Stroud 2004: 204). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6 See (Stroud 2000: Chapter 7) and the section entitled “*the Error Theory account*” in my Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 7 The claim, of course, is that another story can be given for the content of those beliefs, one that eschews realist assumptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 8 For more on the importance of well-being in our practical deliberations, see the material in Chapter 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 9 In what follows, I don’t actually argue for this claim. The claim requires an argument in support of the kind of holism discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 10 I think it is safe to assume that neither the dispositionalist nor the error theorist will want to subscribe to an all-out form of idealism. In any case, in our quest for reality we are interested in arriving at a conception of the world as it is independently of us. Thus, it won’t do for the dispositionalist to say that the evaluative facts in question fall entirely on the subjective side of the divide. For if it is purely a subjective matter that one explanation is better than another, relying on an explanatory criterion isn’t very helpful to the project of understanding the world as it is independently of us, for by hypothesis, the nature of that world doesn’t depend on our views and beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 11 If they were to do so, they would no longer pose a threat to the realist. As long as the error theorist and dispositionalist claim that their accounts are better by some evaluative standard or other, they are committed to evaluative facts. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 12 Here it may be helpful to recall the requirement on attribution that Stroud argued for in Chapter 7 of his book. His claim was 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. Contrast this requirement with: we need to assume that there are some colours. The former has, or appears to have, realist implications in a way that the latter doesn’t. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 13 If explanations are to do the kind of work that we expect them to do, they have to draw upon what “we already believe or can find reason to accept” (Stroud 2000: 75, 82). For example, if one is relying on an explanatory criterion of reality, one includes in reality “only whatever is needed to explain everything that is so, including our having all the beliefs and responses to the world that we do” (Stroud 2000: 74). But Stroud adds:

    It will not do for us simply to dream up stories which, if true, *would* explain our responses and beliefs. It is a question of what does, in fact, explain them. That is a question about us and the world we actually live in . . .

    Something like Descartes’s evil demon, for example, would explain all the same responses that our current scientific story is said to explain. The demon’s goal is to deceive me into believing that I live in a complex world filled with physical objects and governed by scientifically discoverable laws, even though no such thing is true of the world. That would explain my believing everything I believe, and it would explain it more economically than the kind of world I believe in now. There would just be me and the demon. But, of course, we do not in fact believe in Descartes’s demon. His machinations do not best explain my or anyone else’s responses because no such demon exists. What we can appeal to in order to explain our beliefs and responses, and so what is to be regarded as part of the world, must be something we believe in. It must be part of our conception of the world. It is what we think *does* explain our responses that is to be reckoned as part of reality, not just whatever *would* explain them if it were so. (Stroud 2000: 74-75)

    Explanations, then, must be explanations for us. In other words, they will be compelling only if they can be made to fit with our other beliefs, particularly those beliefs that cannot be given up without significant cost. This means of course that “indispensable” beliefs will constitute at least part of the standard by which we judge the worthiness of certain explanations. Thus, beliefs about the nature of what we are trying to explain, especially those which we think are necessary to making any sense of the explanandum at all, are crucial to us in determining the explanatory value of explanations of that something. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 14 See (Stroud 2000: 153, note 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 15 Mark Johnston is rightly suspicious of this claim and argues against it (Johnston 2004). Yet we’ll see in a moment that Stroud has a very forceful response to Johnston’s line of attack. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 16 Much of the argument for these claims is found in Chapter 5 of (Stroud 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 17 Although I am reminded of Nelson Goodman’s remarks about how, once forged Vermeers become identified as Vermeers, our understanding of what is or is not a Vermeer is corrupted. See Goodman’s *Languages of Art* (1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 18 I.e., any description that presupposes only the existence of natural properties and objects. So the descriptions are understood to employ terms that refer to natural properties or objects only, rather than nonnatural or supernatural properties or objects. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 19 John McDowell, for one, observes that our reliance on supervenience, perhaps more than anything, reflects our belief that “ordinary evaluative thought presents itself as a matter of sensitivity to aspects of the world” (1985: 110). I offer additional support for the above claim in Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 20 Perhaps what is really at issue here is whether one can offer a description of the consequences that makes no mention of natural features in the world, no mention of properties that we take to be completely mind-independent. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 21 If I could show for the sentences of SS-II the kind of holism in our understanding that Stroud shows for the sentences of SS-I, then I could maybe argue that the error theorist and dispositionalist would have to attempt to succeed with their unmasking projects without having any moral evaluative beliefs at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)