**Chapter 6: The Subjective Feel of Moral Value Experience**

*Introduction*

In previous chapters we considered whether the moral antirealist can offer the best explanation of those psychological states involving moral properties that we attribute to others. We have (or take ourselves to have) certain beliefs and thoughts about what is morally right and about what is morally wrong, and we have (or take ourselves to have) certain beliefs and thoughts about what *makes* something morally right or morally wrong. The antirealist claims that such psychological states can be best explained without assuming that moral properties exist independently of our evidence for them. When challenging the realist in this way, the antirealist is assuming that we ought to rely on an explanatory criterion of reality; that is, we should take a property to be real only if it is needed to give the best explanation of all our beliefs about what is so, and of all our responses to the world.[[1]](#footnote-1)1 It is incumbent upon the antirealist, then, to offer unmasking explanations for those of our beliefs which she claims to be false, and for those of our perceptions which she claims to be illusory. The antirealist has to explain, in other words, why it is that we come to have these false beliefs (or belief-like states) and illusory perceptions and how it is that we can make sense of their content.

We have seen reasons, however, for thinking that the moral antirealist cannot succeed with this unmasking project. The conclusions we arrived at are analogous to those which Stroud arrived at regarding the metaphysical status of colours, and we reached those conclusions for the same kinds of reasons. Stroud writes:

If [the colour antirealist cannot succeed with the unmasking], it is in part because of the conditions of our acknowledging certain psychological facts as part of the world [e.g., the sentences of SS-I in Chapter 3]. We must admit some such facts to carry out the unmasking strategy. But if we cannot attribute perceptions of and beliefs about the colours of things to anyone without ourselves having beliefs about the colours of objects, then the psychological facts that the project of unmasking the colours of things needs to explain cannot be acknowledged without our also accepting some nonpsychological truths about the colours of things that the project means to deny. Accepting the relevant *explananda* violates a necessary condition of the project’s success. Fulfilling that condition would render the relevant *explananda* unavailable. Either way, the project cannot succeed. (Stroud 2000: 169)

The moral antirealist faces the same sort of dilemma. She has to acknowledge the kinds of facts that she is trying to unmask. Yet we have seen that in order for her to do so she herself must have some moral evaluative beliefs—beliefs which commit her to nonpsychological truths about the moral properties of things. And these are truths that she means to deny.

The dilemma might also be expressed as follows: it doesn’t seem that the moral antirealist will be able to rid herself of a moral vocabulary and the concepts associated with that vocabulary if she is to adequately explain our moral beliefs and moral responses to the world. And if she cannot rid herself of a moral vocabulary, she cannot dismiss the reality of moral properties, for at least some of the concepts associated with moral terms involve the thought that things like actions and character traits have the moral properties they do partly in virtue of certain objectively real, natural properties.

Where does this leave the debate over the metaphysical status of moral properties? As in the case of colours, we cannot conclude that moral properties are real simply because the antirealist’s unmasking explanatory strategies have failed. Perhaps there are ways to be an antirealist other than those we’ve considered. Even if this is not the case, the fact that one must have some moral evaluative beliefs in order to attribute to others the kinds of beliefs and thoughts involving moral properties that we do in fact attribute does not entail that moral properties are part of an external reality. If the moral realist is to come out on top in this debate, he needs to offer genuinely *positive reasons* for thinking that moral properties exist independently of our evidence for them. It is not enough to show that the antirealist fails to adequately explain the variety of psychological states we have involving moral properties (i.e., those states we would describe using moral predicates and which we would understand in terms of moral concepts). The moral realist needs to show, if we are still employing the explanatory criterion of reality, that he can *best explain* our moral practices and beliefs.

We should recall that the moral realist I am referring to is committed to two core tenets. The first is that there are moral facts or truths; the second, that these facts or truths are independent of our evidence for them.[[2]](#footnote-2)2 The second core tenet claims that moral truths are not a function of our beliefs regarding what is morally right and wrong, nor are these truths dependent on the nature of our affective (moral) responses toward the object being judged; moral facts or truths exist prior to such responses and beliefs. We saw in Chapter 2 that the moral realist is predominantly characterized in terms of these two core commitments. We also saw in Chapter 2 that moral realism is more likely to be a viable thesis if it denies that we can properly understand moral properties simply in terms of the base properties upon which they supervene. The moral realist, in other words, should insist that our moral vocabulary is not reducible to a nonmoral vocabulary and that moral properties are not identical to certain configurations of natural properties. We further saw in Chapter 2 why the moral realist ought to maintain that the connection between moral properties and their subvenient natural properties is one that is metaphysically necessary, not logically necessary. Our working assumption, then, has been that if there is a viable form of moral realism, it must be a kind of nonreductive ethical naturalism.

What are the positive reasons for thinking that a moral realism of this sort might give us the best explanation of our moral practices and beliefs? Or, given the difficulties of answering such a question directly, we might ask instead: what aspects of morality make this sort of realism plausible? One would think there would be some such aspects given the appeal moral realism has had, or the difficulties and discomforts philosophers have had rejecting it. I listed a number of these aspects, or features, in Chapter 1, but it will be helpful to briefly review them.

We can start with the fact that so many of us believe that some actions are clearly wrong and other actions clearly right. Hardly anyone doubts that torturing small children is morally wrong, or that it is morally wrong to convict a person of a crime when one knows they are innocent. Nor do we doubt that it is wrong to save several individuals’ lives if the only way of doing so is by sacrificing the life of some other person and harvesting their organs. We can go on in this vein (e.g., imprisoning a person without charging them of a crime is unjust; kicking a dog for gratuitous fun is wrong; etc.). The point is that we do think that there are ethical beliefs of “fairly high reliability” (cf. Griffin 1996, esp. pp. 125 ff.). Furthermore, if we didn’t think that there are correct answers to at least some moral questions, we would never think that we could be mistaken in our moral beliefs; we would never find ourselves morally perplexed or seeking advice from others about moral issues. Nor would we be as concerned as we are to give our children a moral education. The notion that there are correct answers to moral questions is also implicit in several other beliefs and actions. We typically believe, for instance, that some people are more morally perceptive than others, and that we ourselves can improve in making moral judgments (given enough time and experience). We also think it makes sense to question certain moral judgments and disagree with others regarding moral matters. If there are no correct answers to moral questions, and hence no way to justify that some answers are indeed better than others, what is the point of such disagreements? What is the point of making assessments at all?

Other features which might seem to favor a realist view include the following: we don’t believe that some moral judgment, or an entire moral outlook, is correct simply because a majority of people say so; we firmly resist the idea that there is no basis whatsoever for criticizing the moral views of those living in other cultures; we believe that genuine moral disagreements exist and that it makes sense to attempt to resolve these disagreements through rational discourse; we believe that moral requirements hold categorically, i.e., that their authority, or reason-giving force, holds regardless of our individual preferences and desires; the fact that we appear to assert moral judgments suggests that we take them to be truth-apt; indeed, as I argued in Chapter 4, it seems clear that we have to accept moral cognitivism; we also don’t believe that actions, character traits, and ways of life are valuable merely because we have chosen them; rather, we see them as having value prior to this decision, and this is why we choose them; in fact, as we saw in Chapter 5, it seems that we must refer to natural features of situations if we are to have a way of distinguishing between, say, cruelty and rudeness; finally, we believe that we can be systematically mistaken in our moral beliefs.

If we accept the arguments set out in Chapter 4 and also allow that moral facts or truths exist in one way or another, we will conclude that moral realism’s vulnerabilities, if there be any, must lie with the second core tenet. Our realist will surely argue, though, that several of the features just mentioned should be seen as giving a kind of nondeductive inferential support to the claim that moral truths are independent of our evidence for them.[[3]](#footnote-3)3 The thinking would be as follows: If this claim—the second core tenet—is true, we are certainly justified in thinking that the validity of a moral outlook does not hinge on a majority’s opinions. Similarly, if the second core tenet is true, we have a good explanation for our belief that the moral value of an action is not a function of our choosing it. The second tenet being true would also explain our inability to have a proper grasp of moral terms like ‘cruelty’ and ‘rudeness’ without making reference to descriptions of the situations to which they apply. And the truth of the second tenet would justify our belief that we can be systematically mistaken in our moral beliefs; for if it were the case that moral facts and truths were even partly dependent on our choices and beliefs, it is hard to see how we could be truly mistaken in a systematic fashion. Besides, (the realist could add), would we be so committed to our moral convictions and outlook on life, as if there weren’t other options, if we thought that the demands of morality hinged on our choices and beliefs?

In arguing that realist beliefs provide the best explanation for the above kinds of features,[[4]](#footnote-4)4 the realist aims to show that the case for realism doesn’t rest solely on the antirealist’s inability to consistently acknowledge the facts she aims to unmask. In addition, the realist will emphasize what Brink calls “the important cumulative character” of such a defense (1989: 12). While there may never be some one aspect of morality which guarantees the truth of realism, we have another reason to espouse the thesis if all or most of the realist’s commitments (the two core tenets, and what I have been referring to as the necessary ‘further commitments’[[5]](#footnote-5)5) are not only individually plausible, but also mutually supporting (Brink 1989: ix). The realist insists that the *overall* story he offers is the most appealing in the cumulative sense; if this is true, it maybe doesn’t matter so much if there is some aspect or feature of morality for which the antirealist has the better explanation. Whether it does matter will largely depend on the significance of this aspect or feature and on the plausibility of the realist’s explanation of it.

Unfortunately for our realist, there do happen to be at least three important features of morality which directly conflict with the second core tenet. And the conflict is such that it doesn’t seem the realist can offer any account of them. Yet, since it also doesn’t seem that the realist can plausibly deny their existence or importance, these features pose a genuine problem for the realist.

One such feature is what I will call ‘the subjective feel’ of our moral value experience—the feature of morality that has given noncognitivist views their strong appeal. This subjective feel is evident in at least three important ways. First, when forming moral judgments we often do consider how the “object” we are judging strikes us emotionally. Indeed, because our affective nature is such a central part of our being, we assume that how things typically affect us and others *should* often carry great weight in our moral evaluations. So it doesn’t seem right to say, as the realist does, that all moral properties exist prior to our perception of them. Second, we think that there is a place in ethics for feelings of disgust, contempt, resentment, guilt, anger, happiness, admiration, etc. in the sense that we actually expect certain kinds of emotional reactions in people and judge them to be ethically lacking if they fail to have the proper emotional response. Thus we don’t think that a person has correctly *judged* the rightness or wrongness of a situation unless they have the appropriate emotional response.[[6]](#footnote-6)6 Third, we take our reasoned value judgments to be just that—judgments or evaluations. We don’t take ourselves to be unthinkingly applying rules, or to be merely having a cognitive response to the morally relevant features of a situation. Morality is too complex to be codifiable, and features do not carry some external mark on them which signals their moral relevance. Considerations such as these lead us to believe that moral judgments are evaluative, and in such a way that the criteria of evaluation are not independent of our evidence for them. Altogether these three elements provide us with a subjective feel to our moral valuations that is something for which the moral realist, I shall argue, cannot give an adequate account.

The second feature that poses problems for the moral realist is that part of our conception of morality that I briefly discussed at the end of Chapter 3. We conceive of morality as largely aiming at human well-being, meaning that we generally take morally correct actions to be those which promote rather than detract from human well-being. But if human well-being has this role in our conception of morality, it becomes impossible to satisfy the realist’s second core tenet. For what constitutes human well-being will have to be at least in part decided upon by us.[[7]](#footnote-7)7 So there is no completely mind-independent, non-normative foundation upon which to base morality.

The third feature is the thesis of internalism. It seems that if an agent sincerely believes that doing X is morally required—that she ought, morally-speaking, to do X—, then she necessarily believes that she has a reason for doing X. And if an agent takes herself to have a reason to do X, it is correct to say that she is motivated to do X. Realism of the sort we are considering looks to be incompatible with this thesis; there doesn’t seem to be any way that the two can be reconciled. Our moral realist, because he is committed to the second core tenet, must also be committed to an externalist moral psychology. But externalism, as we will see, is untenable.

In this chapter, and the two that follow, I shall argue that the preponderance of evidence is, in the end, clearly against the moral realist. For it is not simply that each of the three features just described is important enough on its own to provide us with a strong reason for rejecting realism. It is the case that the combined weight of their presence and importance should lead us to conclude that any form of moral realism committed to the second core tenet is indefensible. This commitment is the moral realist’s Achilles’ heel,[[8]](#footnote-8)8 for its incompatibility with the three features prevents the realist from giving any plausible explanation of phenomena too central to morality to be ignored. Although I do not give a complete argument for it here, there is a more viable alternative to either realism or noncognitivism; it would be some form of constructivism, a view that accepts the realist’s first core tenet but rejects the second. Here I have in mind a view along the lines of what John McDowell sets out in his 1979, 1981, 1987, and 1995b papers. So in saying that we ought to reject realism, I also offer reasons for thinking that there is a better alternative to it.[[9]](#footnote-9)9 Thus, I believe that the realist cannot respond by arguing that, although he is unable to account for the three features, he still has the best story in the cumulative sense.

In all of this we should not forget the overriding aim of this dissertation—that of learning more about the kind of objectivity, if any, that we can justfiably attribute to our moral judgments. The nature of the three arguments I will make is such that we learn something both positive and negative regarding this objectivity. On the negative side, we learn about one kind of objectivity we cannot have; that is, we learn that whatever the standard of correctness for moral judgments is, it cannot be completely objective; the correctness of moral judgments somehow hinges on our evaluative beliefs and/or our subjective responses to the world. Positively, we learn more about what the nature of this connection would seem to have to be. I shall say more about the kind of objectivity we can or cannot have in the Conclusion to this dissertation. Meanwhile, the focus of this chapter and the next two is simply on why we ought to reject forms of moral realism committed to the two core tenets. The present chapter discusses the subjective feel of our moral value experience. Chapter 7 addresses the connection between morality and human well-being. Chapter 8 offers arguments against externalism and looks at why the realist must be an externalist.

*The Subjective Feel of our Moral Value Experience*

Although we have seen strong reasons for rejecting noncognitivist understandings of our moral value judgments, it would be a mistake to ignore those features of morality for which, in the opinion of some, the noncognitivist has the best explanation. The presence and perceived importance of these features, along with the ability to explain them, is I think what gives noncognitivist views their continued appeal in spite of the difficulties facing such views. If the noncognitivist has anything right, it is that the phenomena that he seems most capable of explaining—certain subjective aspects of our moral value experience—are indeed important.1[[10]](#footnote-10)0 In this chapter I look at three such aspects and argue for their importance. Since it is safe to assume that the degree of their importance is directly proportional to the degree that we take them to be present in the formation of our moral value judgments and in our understanding of the nature of such judgments, I aim to show that these subjective elements are strongly present. Once we see these elements in some detail, it should be obvious why the realist who is wedded to the second core tenet cannot account for them. This inability is especially problematic for the defensibility of realist views if there is a non-realist, *cognitivist* view that is highly plausible and that can satisfactorily explain the features. Therefore I will also argue that McDowell’s view of moral properties can account for the ways in which our moral value experience has a subjective feel without running into the problems of the antirealist positions considered in Chapters 4 and 5.

Some of the questions that will guide my discussion in this chapter are the following: How important are the affective responses we happen to have (e.g., to actions and character traits) to our understanding of what is going on when we make moral judgments? (The expressivist, recall, says that a moral judgment just is the expression of a sentiment, or attitude, that the speaker has.) Should we take these affective responses into account1[[11]](#footnote-11)1 when deliberating about what we ought to do, morally-speaking, or when we are morally judging actions, character traits, and lives? If we have good reasons for thinking that moral judgments can be correct and incorrect, should we also think that these affective responses have a role to play in what makes a moral judgment correct or incorrect?

One further remark on organization is in order. Because the three aspects or features that I shall focus on are so closely related, I treat them in a somewhat holistic manner. The interrelatedness is such that each of the features either gives support to, or strongly coheres with, the other two. For example, if we take our reasoned value judgments to be evaluations, we are more likely to agree that we often do, and should, consider how the objects we are judging strike us emotionally. Or, if we find that the thesis of internalism is plausible, we will also likely want to say that how things typically affect us and others should be taken into consideration in our moral evaluations. (It will be much more difficult to defend the belief that we should take our affective responses into account when forming our moral judgments if the realist can make a good case for externalism.) Unfortunately, this partially holistic approach is also somewhat circuitous. If the reader feels lost in terms of the overall argument, they may want to refer to Appendix A. There I present in outline form all of the points I am trying to make in this chapter.

As noted in the introduction, there are at least three ways in which our moral value experience has a subjective feel to it. I am claiming that (a) when making moral judgments we often do consider how the object we are judging strikes us emotionally; indeed, we assume that how things typically affect us and others should be taken into consideration in our moral evaluations. I am also claiming that (b) we judge people to be ethically lacking if they fail to have the proper emotional response; in particular, we deny that a person truly believes that they morally ought to do X if they fail to be motivated to do X. Third, I am claiming that (c) we take our reasoned value judgments to be evaluations; moral judgment often requires perception, and moral perception isn’t simply a matter of what is there but of what we bring to it. Let’s start by looking mainly at just the first two features—feature (a) and feature (b).

No one will deny, I think, that we do typically have a variety of affective responses to situations, actions, and character traits. We typically get angry when we read of social injustices. We can be resentful when we are treated indifferently or with disrespect. Many of us feel guilty when we fail to keep a promise. We often feel great pleasure when we are able to help others in need. Nor do I think anyone will dispute the fact that we hold certain kinds of attitudes, or evaluative stances, toward various (kinds of) actions, and (kinds of) situations and character traits. For example, we admire and approve of (i.e., look favorably upon) honesty and integrity, and disapprove of (i.e., look unfavorably upon) laziness and disloyalty. We typically view cooperation and peace favorably, but discord and war unfavorably.

The arguments in Chapter 4 have led us to dismiss the idea that such emotions, feelings, and attitudes are all we need to look to in order to fully understand the meaning and nature of our moral judgments. Yet it remains to be seen whether they are connected to those judgments in a way that presents a problem for the realist. Potential for a problem certainly exists given that the realist understands a moral judgment as the expression of a belief. If moral beliefs are like other realist beliefs, we should be able to take any attitude we want toward them. However this doesn’t appear to be so, as people tend to care strongly about their moral convictions and values. Also, although a person may say they have such convictions and values, we doubt their veracity (or self-understanding) if we find that they are indifferent regarding whether or not those convictions and values are upheld. We take this person to be ethically lacking, for instance, if they fail to be angry upon hearing of an easily preventable injustice, or if they are in a position to prevent the injustice from occurring but fail to do so. The realist therefore needs to explain this connection that makes moral beliefs different from other realist beliefs. An explanation is especially needed if reasons emerge for thinking that a *necessary* connection exists between our moral judgments and the emotions, feelings, and attitudes that (almost?) invariably accompany them. The latter are thought to be quite different from either beliefs or belief-like states.1[[12]](#footnote-12)2 If a necessary connection exists, it appears that the realist’s understanding of moral judgments as merely expressions of beliefs is inadequate. A problem for the realist also potentially exists if we think that our moral judgments partly reflect how things strike us, and if we think that they should take into account how things strike us. For then it seems we almost surely have to reject the realist’s claim that moral right and wrong can be understood solely in terms of features of the world that exist prior to our perception of them.

It will be instructive to look at two arguments antirealists have offered with the aim of persuading us that the realist gets things wrong regarding what is going on when we express moral judgments. The arguments are instructive in two ways. First, they will aid our discussion of features (a), (b), and (c), for behind each is a valuable insight—what gives the arguments their force, if we think they have any force at all. Second, they also help to illustrate what I think is *not* going on in the making of our moral judgments. This is important because we are looking for a kind of middle ground between the realist and the noncognitivist or projectivist. The first argument is made by Hume, who espouses a form of projectivism. Hume’s argument is useful to the discussion of features (a) and (b). The second argument is by Simon Blackburn, a noncognitivist projectivist. Blackburn’s argument is worth looking at not only because it is relevant to features (a) and (c), but also because it aims to undermine McDowell’s view of moral judgments, the view that I will be suggesting we ought to subscribe to.

Hume is confident that the realist fails to adequately account for things:

But can there be any difficulty in proving, that vice and virtue are not matters of fact, whose existence we can infer by reason? Take any action allowed to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never find it till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. (Bk III, Part I, sect. 1)

On its own this argument certainly isn’t enough to settle the issue of realism’s defensibility. Still, I think it is one the realist needs to take seriously. Hume is right in not ignoring the subjective element involved in our moral judgments; as we have already noted, when we pronounce any action or character to be vicious, we typically do have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. While we don’t want to say, as Hume does, that this is all that is involved in the evaluation or judgment, the presence of these affective responses places a burden on the realist to show that they are not involved in our judgments in some essential way, in a way that tells against the idea that moral properties exist in the world independently of us.

Are there reasons for thinking that certain sentiments of approbation and disapprobation have an essential role to play in either the meaning of our moral judgments or in our correctly applying moral terms (i.e., in our correct use of moral concepts)? We might try to answer this question by thinking about what things would be like if a sentiment of blame towards wilful murder were not typically present in us. What if human nature was such that the typical person wasn’t outraged by wilful murder, or by the strong taking advantage of the weak, or by company executives defrauding their investors, and so forth? Without this sentiment of blame, would we even think that these kinds of actions are morally wrong? (If we are already inclined to be internalists, the answer is surely ‘no’ because the meaning of ‘morally wrong’, from the internalist’s viewpoint, already presupposes an internal connection between an agent’s moral judgments and the agent’s attitudes toward them.) Suppose we did still think that the actions in question were wrong. Then we would have a world in which people say that wilful murder is morally wrong and yet not care one way or another that this is so. Since this would obviously be problematic for us as agents, most everyone would agree that these moral sentiments are important for the practical import they can have. Nonetheless, this fact poses a problem for the realist only if the connection between our moral judgments and these motivationally important affective responses is a necessary one.

The realist who is an externalist (Brink, e.g.) holds that the connection is only contingent. The externalist claims that it so happens, fortunately, that we typically do care about right and wrong. We are thus typically moved to act according to our beliefs about what is right and wrong. This is simply a fact about us, albeit a contingent one. Accordingly, this externalist will deny that realism is threatened in any way by the presence of the affective responses that are so crucial to motivation. For if there is only a contingent connection between our moral judgments and our caring about them, the realist can maintain that these moral sentiments are not what *make* something right or wrong, nor do they have any relevance to what is in fact right or wrong. Further, if there is no necessary connection between the sentiments and our *beliefs* about what is right and wrong, then it would seem that there is also no necessary connection between the sentiments and our ability to recognize morality’s requirements. The externalist will therefore insist that the amoralist, although very much atypical, is a real possibility: one can know right from wrong but not care about morality’s requirements.

The realist can also point to two potential problems for his opponent: first, internalism appears to conflict with our belief that moral requirements apply categorically to agents, i.e., regardless of the elements in an agent’s subjective motivational set (see (Williams 1980)) and regardless of the practical reasons an agent takes herself to have. If moral right and wrong depend in part on the affective responses agents have when making moral valuations, it seems we will have to give up our intuition that moral requirements have the normative authority of categorical requirements. Second, people can surely be wrong in the responses they have to things. We overreact at times, or are sometimes indifferent when the situation calls for action. At other times we have the wrong *kind* of response; we get angry when we shouldn’t be; we fail to be empathetic when we should be. In addition, we know that agents’ affective natures can be shaped by their experiences, and in ways that would lead them to have morally inappropriate responses. A person who has seen a great deal of cruelty and brutality may unconsciously become hardened to such “realities”, as a protective measure. (While sensitivity to cruelty and brutality is not particularly helpful to a soldier, we generally want a person to be aware of them when they are present.) The second problem then is that if we can be wrong in the kinds of responses we have, the thought that moral right and wrong does or should depend on our moral responses to situations seems problematic. We will return to these potential problems once we see some of the details of McDowell’s position.

If externalism *is* a plausible thesis, the antirealist will be hard-pressed to justify her belief that there is something vitally missing from the realist’s story insofar as that story doesn’t treat the affective responses in question in the way she thinks they ought to be treated. There are at least three ways the affective responses can be vitally important: (a) they are needed to motivate us; (b) they partly constitute right and wrong; and (c) both of the above. If externalism is plausible, the antirealist will have to say why we ought to think that the affective responses in question partly constitute right and wrong.1[[13]](#footnote-13)3 Now, even though in what immediately follows and in Chapter 8 I present reasons for thinking that externalism is implausible, I also think that certain sentiments of approbation and disapprobation do have an essential role to play in what makes our moral judgments correct or incorrect. So we also want to see some of the reasons for thinking this. Unfortunately, I know of no straightforward, knock-down argument in support of this claim. Nor can I offer such an argument against externalism.

In order to show that something vitally important is missing from the realist’s story, I can only draw the reader’s attention to certain phenomena and suggest that they are not only elements of our moral value experience which cannot be ignored, but are such that the realist cannot explain them. Of course this won’t decisively undermine the defensibility of realism unless the *antirealist* can adequately explain these features. Not only that, the antirealist will still need to persuade us that her overall story is in the end the best explanation for the moral phenomena at hand. The main reason the overall story should be the ultimate test has to do with the number of elements of that story that are in play (i.e., open to dispute), and the interdependence of those elements. For example, part of the difficulty of determining whether moral right and wrong depends in some way on our moral sentiments has to do with the other gaps in our understanding of moral judgments. Those who believe that it doesn’t make sense to talk about correct and incorrect moral judgments will likely argue that these judgments should be understood in purely noncognitive terms. Whereas those who believe that our moral judgments are capable of the same kind of correctness as, say, our scientific beliefs, will likely argue that these judgments are entirely cognitive in nature. In other words, if we had firmer intuitions regarding the kind of objectivity we should attribute to our moral judgments, we would be in a much better position to decide whether our moral responses have a role to play in what makes a moral judgment correct or incorrect. Thus, the number of elements open to dispute, the interdependence of the elements, and the shortage of firm intuitions all mean that a knock-down argument for any particular view regarding the metaphysical status of moral properties is almost surely not to be found. Even so, that doesn’t mean that one can’t provide something substantive in favor of (or against) one view rather than another.

Let’s return to Hume’s argument. I think we can agree that the one thing Hume has right is that these moral sentiments—these attitudes of approval and disapproval toward certain actions and character traits—are present in us when we make moral judgments. What is not so clear is whether these sentiments are important to our understanding those judgments. Contrary to what the externalist says, I would suggest that intuition strongly favors some form of internalism. We think that our moral judgments have practical import, and necessarily so. For (the thinking goes): (i) if a person sincerely believes that, morally-speaking, she ought to do X, then necessarily she takes herself to have a reason to do X. And (ii) if she takes herself to have a reason to do X, she is motivated to do X.1[[14]](#footnote-14)4 To my mind, the plausibility of (i) largely comes from our sense of the meaning of ‘ought’: to think that someone ought to do something is just to take them to have a reason for doing it. Regarding (ii), some will say that taking oneself to have a practical reason in general is not enough to get one to a state of motivation, although taking oneself to have a *moral* reason is sufficient for motivation if you also believe that moral reasons are overriding. That we do generally understand moral reasons to be overriding adds to the credibility of the internalist thesis under consideration. But I think the thesis is plausible even without this understanding of moral reasons. The step to motivation is plausible as long as we assume that when an agent takes herself to have a reason to do X, she arrives at this view at the conclusion of her practical deliberations for the situation at hand. In this case, the agent who takes herself to have a reason to do X is no longer weighing this reason against reasons for not doing X. (So under the interpretation I am offering, ‘taking oneself to have a reason’ should be distinguished from ‘seeing something as a consideration’.)

Now it is also reasonable to think that if attitudes of approval and disapproval didn’t accompany our moral judgments, these judgments wouldn’t have any practical import for us. Such sentiments are a reflection of the fact that we care about our moral convictions, and presumably care enough to act on them. Absent any coercion, it is in fact plausible to think that we are motivated to do X just in case we approve of doing X, and that we are motivated to avoid Y just in case we disapprove of doing Y. This fits what we see of human behavior: the greater our anger regarding some injustice, the more likely we are to attempt to rectify it; whereas if we are totally indifferent regarding the injustice, we almost certainly won’t take any action at all to fix it. (Here we might think the degree of disapproval is reflected in the degree of anger aroused by the injustice.) More importantly,1[[15]](#footnote-15)5 it is hard for us to make sense of the person who thinks or says that she ought to do something and yet doesn’t actually care about doing it. If she doesn’t in any way value or approve of doing what she thinks she ought to do, what would lead her to think that she nevertheless ought to do it? It seems that her behavior is intelligible only if we conclude that she is using the word ‘ought’ incorrectly. Thus, we also have reason to think that a necessary connection exists between the moral sentiments that Hume speaks of and the intended meaning of our moral judgments.

More reasons for rejecting externalism are found in Chapter 8. There I also argue that the realist who is committed to the two core tenets has to be an externalist. If the two arguments are persuasive, we will conclude that what I am calling feature (b) is present in our moral thinking but the realist is unable to account for it. Although the externalist realist may claim to be able to account for the fact that we judge people to be ethically lacking if they fail to have the proper emotional response, and in a way that is consistent with the second core tenet, externalism itself is implausible.

As the reader will have noticed, the original description of feature (b) involves something even stronger than the belief in internalism. We don’t just think that agents who have correctly judged a situation will be motivated to do the right thing; we think they will be motivated to do the right thing in the right way. That is, we expect them to also have the appropriate emotional response in a deeper sense. I haven’t focused on this aspect of (b) because it wasn’t necessary. The realist runs into problems with (b) well before this.

This basically concludes our discussion of feature (b). We should note, however, that a problem remains for the antirealist who accepts the above form of internalism but rejects all brands of noncognitivism. This antirealist cannot simply equate “taking oneself to have a reason to do X” with some kind of pro-attitude toward X. For that would mean that the antirealist is an expressivist. This follows from the fact that I am understanding the connection between “I ought to do X” and “I have a reason to do X” as a logically necessary one. (So if to express a moral judgment is to express a belief that one has a reason to act, but believing that one has a reason to act is really having a pro-attitude, then to express a moral judgment is to express an attitude.) Yet our antirealist also cannot understand “taking oneself to have a reason to do X” as nothing more than a belief state. This is the realist’s position, and if the attitudes referred to are thought to be non-belief states, or if the motivation entailed by “I have a reason to do X” is thought to be a non-belief state, then it is no longer clear how there can be a necessary connection between these attitudes or this motivation and taking oneself to have a reason to do something. This is another problem we will return to once we have seen some of the specifics of McDowell’s antirealist position.

We can move in the direction of seeing what that position involves by considering an argument against two of its elements. This argument, made by Simon Blackburn, is like the argument from Hume in that it gets something right while also getting something wrong. (We saw that Hume was right to emphasize the subjective element involved in our moral judgments, but wrong to insist that we need look only to that element for a complete understanding of those judgments.) We should keep in mind that we are also looking at Blackburn’s argument in order to further the argument that features (a) and (c) have a significant presence in our moral practice. Blackburn asks us to . . .

Consider a culture in which . . . there are people (slim, active, lithe teenagers, perhaps) who begin to find fat people disgusting. Suppose they register this by a characteristic sneering tone of voice: ‘What is your brother like?’, ‘Oh, he is *fat*’—which I shall write as ‘he is fat↓’. Only people who share the disgust will ever be heard using the term with that tone. Others will not typically register dissent by saying ‘No, he is not really fat↓’, repeating the tone, for that is what to say when you share disgust at fat, but deny that X is so. People who want to reject the sensibility will say things like ‘Don’t say that!’

Now, ‘fat↓’ is a term that can be used, and people who share the disgust will use it similarly. . . . the shared use of the term depends upon features shared by the users: here their capacity to detect fat, and their disgust. But do we have a distinctive concept here, and a distinctive proposition, capable of truth and falsity? Are those who use the term ‘receptive’ to a property that is there independently? On the face of it, nothing of this sort is true. We would not credit the teenagers with a *conceptual* advance when they come to share this disgust. We certainly would not be likely to say, for example, that there is a distinctive property of fat↓ness, and that the teenagers’ shared reactions now enable them to detect it, discovering a new kind of truth. On the face of it, there are just fat people, and the teenagers’ expression of their disgust at them. (Blackburn 1998: 94-95)

Here Blackburn’s primary aim is to show that the realist can’t be right in saying that moral judgments are distinctively cognitive in nature, i.e., that moral predicates refer to properties that have an entirely cognitive status. When people make moral judgments, according to Blackburn, they are associating attitudes with descriptions,1[[16]](#footnote-16)6 not discerning moral properties (1998: 96-97); when moralizing, we are “reacting to a reality which contains nothing in the way of values, duties, rights, and so forth” (Blackburn 1981: 164); we are projecting attitudes and values on to the world, or expressing our commitments, not responding to values existing in the world independently of us.

The above passage specifically attempts to undermine McDowell’s claim that what distinguishes *the virtuous agent* is a *special* cognitive sensitivity, a receptiveness to certain features of situations that the nonvirtuous agent lacks. This perceptual capacity is what enables the virtuous agent to competently apply moral concepts, including to new cases.1[[17]](#footnote-17)7 McDowell also claims that this sensitivity involves a sensibility, or affective capacity: in order to be cognizant of moral properties the virtuous person needs to be affected in the right way. A person’s affective nature must be shaped appropriately (say, through the process that Aristotle refers to as ‘habituation’) if they are to be able to recognize the demands of morality. Because moral perception has these objective and subjective aspects to it, McDowell likens moral properties to colour properties. Like colour properties, we should understand moral properties to be both objective and subjective in nature. And according to McDowell, if we are to get our story about the moral phenomena right we have to conclude that these objective and subjective elements of moral properties cannot be disentangled. This entanglement of the two elements means that (or explains why) moral properties are perceptible only “from within the practices, or forms of life, or ‘whirls of organism’ that constitute moral . . . practice” (Blackburn 1998: 92).1[[18]](#footnote-18)8 In the above passage Blackburn also aims to convince us that we should reject this thesis of entanglement.1[[19]](#footnote-19)9

I find Blackburn’s example of the teenagers instructive because they are clearly making an evaluation that takes into account their affective responses to fat people. Perhaps the teenagers’ feeling of disgust reflects prior evaluative beliefs they hold regarding fat people (e.g., “fat people lack self-control with respect to food and this is a bad thing”, or “that person has values which differ from mine in an important way, otherwise they wouldn’t be fat”). Or perhaps the teenagers will say that the reaction of disgust is prior to any such evaluative beliefs. Whatever the analysis, it seems correct to say that the teenagers *believe that* fat people are disgusting; their reactions and behavior indicate that they have settled on this view. Blackburn is right to emphasize that the ingredients that went into the making of this evaluative judgment are not the same as those involved in perceiving that the lemon in front of you is ovoid and then believing that this is so. An additional ingredient is involved in the teenagers’ evaluation. I think the same can be said for our moral judgments. The making of these judgments seems to involve an evaluative framework, or point of view, and in such a way that our moral judgments are distinctly different from perceptions of the ovoidness of lemons.2[[20]](#footnote-20)0

Even so, the example does nothing to undermine McDowell’s claim that the virtuous agent has “a sort of perceptual capacity”, one involving “an ability to recognize requirements which situations impose on one’s behavior” (McDowell 1979: 332-33). In order for the example to have force against McDowell’s view, or even against the realist who is committed to the second core tenet, it has to give us reason for thinking that moral judgments or perceptions actually involve the sort of *two-step* process that the teenagers are engaged in when they perceive fat people and then register their disgust with a characteristic sneering tone of voice. The noncognitivist insists that a sharp line can always be drawn between facts and values, between descriptions and evaluations, and between beliefs and attitudes (or desires). Blackburn has tailored his example to support this view. If we grant these sharp distinctions, we have to reject McDowell’s claim that the subjective cannot always be disentangled from the objective in all of our perceptions.

Rejecting this claim outright, however, is surely a mistake. One only needs to consider what is involved in our perception of colours. Our best understanding of colour perception says that there are both subjective and objective elements present, elements which are inextricably bound together and not simply combined or associated as, supposedly, the teenagers’ disgust is with their perception of fat people. Colours are objective insofar as the colours of objects depend on properties existing in the world prior to our perception of them; the colour of an object depends on the physical conditions under which we perceive the object and on the physical surface properties of the object. We would not attempt to explain why an object has the colour it does without referring to surface reflectances, lighting conditions, and the like. At the same time, the colour we perceive an object to have also partly depends on features about us, the perceiver.2[[21]](#footnote-21)1 An object that looks blue to one person may look green to another; this is perfectly intelligible to us given the subjectiveness of colours: we say that the first person has a perception of blue and the second a perception of green. Even if the object is in fact green for normal perceivers under normal lighting conditions and who are not too distant from the object, it would simply be false to say that the first person had a perception of green in spite of their report that the object looked blue to them.

There is also good reason for thinking that the subjective and objective elements of colours are inextricably linked. The colours we perceive result from the eye and brain processing various wavelengths of light, light often reflecting off of surfaces. Because colours are a *product* of these two things (wavelengths of light and the way we process them), we cannot reduce them to one or the other; nor can we think of a colour perception as simply the sum of two inputs. A good analogy, perhaps, is that of a chemical compound. Water is quite different from either oxygen or hydrogen, and it is quite different from a *mixture* of oxygen and hydrogen. In the same way, colour perceptions are quite different from the contribution made by the perceiver’s eyes and brain and from the contribution made by surface reflectances, etc.

Moreover, the nonseparability of the subjective and objective aspects of colours is already part of our conception of colours. We take there to be a conceptual connection between being a certain colour and being such as to look that colour (see (McDowell 1985; 111-12) and (Smith 1994: 29, 32, 52-53)). We take it as a conceptual truth that “red things look red to normal perceivers under standard conditions” (Smith 1994: 32). And “an object’s being red is understood as obtaining in virtue of the object’s being such as (in certain circumstances) to look, precisely, red” (McDowell 1985: 111-12). This conception of colours takes into account the fact that (i) we cannot fully understand our colour attributions without saying how the objects said to be coloured look; and that (ii) when we experience something as coloured, we understand the experience as that of “being presented with a property that is there anyway” (ibid., 112)—again, the thought being that if an object looks red, say, it is such as to look red. The objectivity lies in the fact that “An object’s being such as to look red is independent of its actually looking red to anyone on any particular occasion” (ibid., 112). The subjectivity lies in the fact that we cannot adequately conceive of colours except in terms of our subjective experience of them.2[[22]](#footnote-22)2

Colour phenomena suggest, then, that there are properties that are both objective and subjective in nature, and in such a way that the two aspects cannot be disentangled. But why think that these features of colour properties are also features of moral properties? Should we think that moral properties have both subjective and objective aspects to them? And if so, should we think these aspects are nonseparable?

In Chapters 4 and 5 we have already seen the kinds of problems we run into if we try to understand moral properties in purely subjective or noncognitivist terms. If the arguments of this chapter are successful, we will have reasons for rejecting the idea that moral properties are purely objective, or mind-independent.2[[23]](#footnote-23)3 Given the arguments of Chapters 4 and 5, we are mainly concerned—as we continue to respond to Blackburn—not so much with defending some form of cognitivism but with saying more about the subjective aspect of our moral judgments and with lending support to the thesis of entanglement. So in what immediately follows I will say just a bit more about the objective nature of moral properties and then focus on their subjective nature and the matter of entanglement. Doing so will also be what helps us to complete the arguments for features (a) and (c).

In first-order morality, moral questions are often questions about how we ought to live our lives. One way the objectiveness of our moral value experiences is apparent is from the fact that we think it makes sense to ask how we ought to live our lives. I take it that we think it makes sense to engage in such an inquiry because we believe that some kinds of lives are better for us *qua* human beings than other kinds of lives. (Presumably this is a belief we have arrived at through experience.) Thus, if we engage in moral inquiry we are assuming that we have to find out, or discover, what is morally valuable, i.e., what makes one kind of life better for us than another kind of life. But to the extent that this is true, we don’t think that things are morally valuable because we desire them, but that we desire them because they are in fact morally valuable.2[[24]](#footnote-24)4

Our “experience of moral properties”2[[25]](#footnote-25)5 confirms this belief insofar as it leads us to believe that moral properties supervene on natural features in the world. Determining whether an action is rude rather than cruel depends in part on the features of the action being judged. 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” (McDowell 1985: 110). We believe, in other words, that there is an objective aspect to our moral experience. This is why we think that McDowell’s description of the kind person is on the mark:

A kind person can be relied on to behave kindly when that is what the situation requires. Moreover, his reliably kind behaviour is not the outcome of a blind, non-rational habit or instinct . . . . Rather, that the situation requires a certain sort of behaviour is (one way of formulating) his reason for behaving in that way, on each of the relevant occasions. So it must be something of which, on each of the relevant occasions, he is aware. A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behaviour. (McDowell 1979: 331-32)

Contra Blackburn, it seems right to say that the virtuous agent *perceives* something that the non-virtuous agent cannot.2[[26]](#footnote-26)6

At the same time, it is also right to say that “[v]alues are not brutely there—not there independently of our sensibility—any more than colors are” (McDowell 1985: 120). We don’t think, for example, that we can properly understand moral properties independently of our experience of them. We view cruelty and rudeness in a negative way, as undesirable features of actions, but *this negative attitude is nowhere to be found in the natural descriptions of the actions in question*, those descriptions which refer only to the non-normative features of situations. These are the features upon which we take moral properties to supervene, and they are what agents can be cognizant of in the same way we perceive ovoidness. Yet they fail to give us a complete understanding of moral properties since they fail to include the kind of noncognitive element just referred to.

Our understanding of a judgment like “That action was very cruel” is crucially lacking if we don’t know that a negative attitude accompanies it. Unless we are externalists, we take the judgment to entail something like “That action shouldn’t have been done”; but it won’t entail this without the negative attitude that is already implicated in the meaning of cruel. (We say that ‘cruel’ has an *evaluative* meaning in addition to a *descriptive* one. The distinction is described in more detail below.) True, it is possible for a person to sincerely utter the words used to express such a judgment without having a negative view of the action being judged; one might say that an action is very cruel, but be indifferent to the fact that it occurred. But in that case we charge them of misusing the term ‘cruel’, and we say this even if it is universally agreed that the action this person judges to be cruel is indeed so.2[[27]](#footnote-27)7 They are misusing the term because they are not viewing the action in the way that ‘cruel’ implies; they are saying something other than what they mean.

If this understanding of our use of moral terms is correct, it would seem to be because, in the process of arriving at a moral judgment we just do consider, not only the features of the object being judged, but how those features strike us.2[[28]](#footnote-28)8 And “How things strike someone as being is, in a clear sense, a subjective matter: there is no conceiving it in abstraction from the subject of the experience” (McDowell 1985: 116). Moreover, if this understanding of moral terms is correct, we *ought to* consider how things strike us—ought to, that is, if we want to correctly use moral terms in our moral judgments (and are not interested in deception). This is something that we clearly recognize (see, e.g., paragraph 2 of Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste”). That moral terms have evaluative meanings (in the contexts under consideration) is then one good reason for thinking that moral properties are partly subjective in nature.2[[29]](#footnote-29)9

In what follows, I look at several more reasons for drawing this conclusion. The reasons that immediately follow are reasons why we *ought* to consider how things strike us. The more reasons there are for thinking that we ought to take our affective responses into account when forming our moral judgments, the harder it will be for the realist to defend the mind-independence claim. However, it is worth emphasizing from the start that this claim about affective responses (that they ought to factor into our moral conclusions) has to be understood in a qualified sense. It is not as if all affective responses are on an equal footing. We want to be able to talk about correct and incorrect affective responses to circumstances.

With this in mind, it is worth pausing a moment to take a closer look at what is or is not implied by the reason just discussed—the fact that correctly using moral terms requires us to take our affective responses into account when making moral judgments.

One way moral properties might be subjective is if our affective responses to the objects of our moral judgments must somehow be taken into consideration in order for those judgments to be correct; suppose, for instance, that moral right and wrong are determined in part by the affective responses in question. In this case one would think that, at some point or other, our affective responses need to be taken at face value.3[[30]](#footnote-30)0 However, if the aim is to correctly use moral terms, can we grant even this qualified degree of authority to our affective responses?

Correctly using moral terms seems to put very sharp constraints on whether or not the affective response that an agent has to the object being judged ought to be taken into account (in some positive way; see footnote 11) in the judgment of that object. According to the view under consideration, moral terms have both a descriptive and an evaluative meaning. Correct and sincere usage of such terms (in simple assertoric contexts like “Kicking the dog for fun is a cruel thing to do”) thus seems to require the satisfaction of four conditions: (i) the descriptive meaning of the term has to fit the natural features of the object to which it is being applied; (ii) the descriptive meaning of the term has to express the contents of a belief that the speaker holds; (iii) the evaluative meaning of the term has to express the attitude that the speaker holds toward the object; and (iv) the evaluative meaning of the term must be appropriate to the object to which the term is applied.

Arriving at a moral judgment is deciding what moral terms apply to the object being judged. Assuming we can justifiably talk about moral judgments being correct or incorrect, we can say that correct moral judgments employ moral terms correctly. Correctly using moral terms then entails correctly identifying right and wrong. If an important part of the meaning of a moral term in an assertoric context is evaluative, and if, as I am claiming, our affective responses have a role to play in what makes something right or wrong, then choosing the right moral term is also a matter of choosing a term that fits the affective response that one has (thus, condition (iii)). But that affective response should be taken into consideration only if it is appropriate to the natural features upon which the moral judgment supervenes. This condition is fulfilled, though, if we have indeed chosen the right moral term; it follows from condition (iv). (Perhaps settling upon the right moral term is also a matter of settling upon what our affective response is, or should be.) We can see then how correctly using moral terms would constrain the appropriateness of our affective responses. An affective response should be taken at face value only if it is appropriate to the object being judged. If we have the wrong affective response vis-a-vis this object, it will in fact be impossible to choose the correct moral term, since condition (iv) will never be satisfied. But then the correct use of moral terms does not prevent us from granting the proper degree of authority to our affective responses; it actually ensures that we grant them this authority and nothing more.

A number of questions remain to be answered though. What if the correct moral term is not to be found? Why think that the evaluative meanings of moral terms fit the objects to which these terms are applied? Something more also needs to be said about why our affective responses ought to be taken at face value, even in a qualified sense. For if we can determine the appropriateness of an affective response without relying on our affective natures, then (given the story told thus far) it is hard to see why our affective responses should factor into our moral evaluations at all. I shall briefly respond to each of these questions in turn.

If the correct moral term—one having a fairly specific descriptive meaning and relatively specific evaluative meaning—is not to be found, we can often make use of the “thin” (as opposed to “thick”) moral terms—terms like “right” and “wrong”. The latter are more generic in their descriptive and evaluative meanings than terms like “cruel” and “rude”.3[[31]](#footnote-31)1 One answer to the first question, then, is to deal with the problem of not having the right specific moral term by making use of moral terms that are more generic in nature. We face a deeper problem though if the absence of the right moral term reveals a gap in our set of moral concepts. The problem is especially deep if we fail to be aware of the gap. If our conceptual apparatus is lacking for purposes of moral judgment, our moral perception itself won’t always be what it ought to be. When that is the case, it will be much more difficult to critically assess our affective responses to the objects we are trying to judge. Our initial affective responses will also probably need to be viewed *more* skeptically, not less so. For if our moral perception isn’t what it ought to be, then our initial, and subsequent, affective responses are almost certainly less informative regarding what is in fact right and wrong. As we will see, however, this doesn’t mean that we should (or can) completely ignore our affective responses in the making of moral judgments.

Why think that the evaluative meanings of moral terms fit the objects to which these terms are applied? We might try to answer this second question by thinking about how (and why) moral terms have come to have the evaluative meanings they have. My sense is that these evaluative meanings reflect the affective responses human beings *characteristically* have to the situations to which the moral terms apply (where we understand “characteristic” itself to be both a descriptive and a normative notion, something related to, but importantly distinct from, “statistical average”). Let’s say that a response to circumstances C is characteristic of human beings if it is a dispositional response which it makes sense for human beings to have to C and which all, or nearly all, adult human beings in full possession of their faculties *can* be disposed to have to C, or would have been disposed to have to C if they had had the proper upbringing (the last two clauses give us the connection to statistical average). We can then say that a person has the correct affective response to C if and only if it is the response that human beings would characteristically have to C. I leave further development of this line of thought for another time and place. I mention it here only because it seems to be one way to explain why our moral terms have their respective evaluative meanings. Knowing this would give us a better understanding of when our affective responses ought to factor into our moral conclusions; the notion put forth here is that those responses most inform us about right and wrong when they are the responses that human beings would characteristically have under the circumstances.

The third concern is about the need to rely on our affective responses, and whether there isn’t a way to rid our moral judgments of this dependence. Particularly when it comes to “hard cases” or unfamiliar situations, we expect agents who are engaged in moral judgment to stand back from their initial affective response and ask themselves whether that response still makes sense after they are confident that they have come to know and understand all the relevant facts. One of the relevant facts will be this initial, pre-critical affective response; its relevance may disappear entirely, however, if a new attitude emerges after reflection. We take, or should take, an affective response at face value only if it survives critical scrutiny. But this should not lead us to think that our affective natures are other than crucial to our moral evaluations. For part of the critical apparatus used to determine the appropriateness of an affective response (i.e., satisfaction of condition (iv)) is one’s affective nature itself. When we judge that a person has overreacted to some situation, for example, this judgment is made from a certain evaluative perspective.3[[32]](#footnote-32)2 We cannot escape our affective natures; they will always have a role in how it is that we see things, and even in what it is that we see. This is why I say that at some point we have to take our affective responses at face value. (It turns out, then, that one of the main reasons why we ought to take our affective responses into account when forming moral value judgments is because we have to. I say more about this below.)

Let’s return now to where we were at before digressing. Further evidence can be offered in support of the second part of feature (a)—our belief that we ought to consider how things strike us. But since the realist can deny that we *should* hold such a belief, I will present some of this further evidence in the form of reasons why we ought to take our affective responses into account when forming our moral judgments (the assumption being that on some level we are aware of these reasons). Reasons for thinking that we ought to take our affective responses into account are reasons for thinking that moral properties are partly subjective in nature.

In the area of morality we evaluate (among other things) actions and character traits. Now it makes sense to take into account how these objects *ought to* strike us3[[33]](#footnote-33)3 because our inquiry is into how we ought to live our lives. Because we are sentient creatures with certain affective capacities, creatures who are also capable of giving shape to our affective natures, moral inquiry involves considering what shape our affective natures ought to take. Surely this is part of what we do, though, when we morally evaluate character traits. We expect the virtuous agent to have the right kinds of dispositions, to be affected in the right way—e.g., to have a sense of pleasure from doing the morally right thing. So in this sense at least, it is clear that we do not, and should not, ignore our affective capacities.

Still, aside from properly using moral terms, the realist might ask why else our affective responses should be taken into account when judging the rightness or wrongness of an action, or the value of some character trait. The realist might insist that we can best determine the shape our affective natures ought to take using criteria *not* based on the kinds of responses we characteristically have. (The thought may be that we should look only to our rational natures for such criteria.)3[[34]](#footnote-34)4

We recognize, I think, that ignoring our affective natures in moral inquiry won’t be sensible or wise because how we are affected informs us about the kinds of creatures we are and can be, and about the kinds of relations in which we stand, or might stand, to the world. It is because this is so, and because our moral judgments largely have to do with the kind of life that is best for us as human beings (a concern that will lead us to consider the kinds of relations in which we ought to stand to the world to the extent that we have a choice in the matter), that it not only makes sense, but seems necessary, that these judgments take into account our affective responses. It is problematic for us, for example, if we find ourselves viewing a particular action in a very negative light but at the same time cannot deny the “rational” force of arguments used to justify the action. We want our beliefs and judgments to be in alignment with our affective responses, and for several reasons. One such reason is the following: how we feel about some action—whether we approve or disapprove of it being done—has much to do with whether we are motivated to do it. If the affective response that you have to some situation motivates you in one direction, but your beliefs and judgments present a conflicting motivation (via internalism), there is a problem—unless you are willing to deny that “[o]ne mark of a good life is harmony between one’s motives and one’s reasons, values, justifications” (Stocker 1976: 453). The importance of this harmony seems hard to deny, though, given the prominence in our lives of both our affective and rational natures.3[[35]](#footnote-35)5

We can get a concrete sense of such disharmony if we consider the case of Jim in Bernard Williams’ well-known example (Williams 1973: 98-99). Jim is a botanist who chances upon a small South American town in which government troops are about to execute twenty Indians—“a random group of the inhabitants who, after recent acts of protest against the government, are just about to be killed to remind other possible protesters of the advantages of not protesting” (99). Jim is offered a guest’s privilege of killing one of the Indians himself; if he accepts the offer, the other nineteen Indians are spared and allowed to go free; if he refuses the offer, all twenty Indians will be killed. The example assumes that Jim has a strong aversion to killing another human being. It is something that he is viscerally opposed to. Let’s suppose, too (something that is not part of Williams’ example), that Jim has recently been reading up on utilitarian theory and has found the arguments for utilitarianism quite persuasive. The arguments persuade his intellect, but not his emotions—and he is aware of this, but he is not able to think of any actual *argument* to oppose the utilitarians. It is reason against instinct, or gut reaction, and Jim, being the scientist he is, believes that reason and logic should always prevail. The situation described is one in which Jim’s beliefs are out of alignment with the affective responses he will have if he kills the one Indian; his beliefs are out of alignment too with the affective responses he has just from the thought of killing that Indian.

There is a genuine problem here, even more so if we believe that our affective responses can be correct in some sense.3[[36]](#footnote-36)6 Most of us will agree, I think, that Jim is having the correct emotional response to killing. We hope anyway, unless we are training soldiers, that people will react negatively to killing. Indeed we hope that rational argument does not have the power to persuade people to lose this negative response to killing. Generally it doesn’t. In any case, what are we to make of this affective response? Do we think that Jim has it because he unconsciously believes that killing is wrong (even in the case before him), or on some level consciously believes that killing is wrong no matter the circumstances but isn’t able to articulate the reasons? For those who are already predisposed against utilitarianism, the thought might be that Jim isn’t emotionally moved by the utilitarian arguments for a reason, one that doesn’t rest simply on the fact that he reacts as he does. Opponents of utilitarianism might think: if only he took his emotional response more seriously, he might be able to uncover the rational argument he needs in order to rid himself of his utilitarian beliefs.

I would suggest that something like this is right. It does seem that the affective responses we have to situations are often indicative of other beliefs we hold relevant to the matter at hand, beliefs that can provide us with reasons of some sort.3[[37]](#footnote-37)7 This is especially true for those individuals who have made efforts to shape their affective natures in the right way. A second reason, then, for why we have to worry about our affective responses not being in alignment with our beliefs is that those responses likely signal the existence of reasons (other beliefs, say) that have yet to be uncovered and are inconsistent with the beliefs that don’t align with our responses.3[[38]](#footnote-38)8 This is also a reason that I think we are clearly aware of (and thus could be presented as evidence of our belief that we ought to consider how things strike us). Of course, we are also concerned with whether there are reasons for thinking that our affective moral responses ought to be taken *directly* into account when we are making moral judgments, i.e., reasons for thinking that these responses ought to be taken at face value.

Hume thought of our affective responses as “original existences” (*Treatise* Bk II, Pt III, §3), what we need to treat as purely raw data about ourselves.3[[39]](#footnote-39)9 On some level it may be right to understand at least some of our affective responses in this way.4[[40]](#footnote-40)0 While we wouldn’t want to say that our affective responses so understood are by themselves ever enough to justify our moral judgments, it does seem that we should take them into account in the making of our moral judgments. These responses have importance as original existences if they are characteristic of human beings *and* if they are not at odds with some other characteristic aspect of our natures.4[[41]](#footnote-41)1 Again, the thought here is that it would be a mistake to ignore the kinds of creatures we are, or the constraints on what we can be, when our inquiry concerns the kind of life we ought to live. We want morality to be something that we, as human beings, can live by. This won’t be the case, however, if our moral beliefs and judgments are often out of alignment with our affective responses. The internal conflict that Jim faces is problematic, then, even if his aversion to killing doesn’t indicate the existence of beliefs that are inconsistent with his utilitarian conclusion. The problem isn’t resolved by asking Jim to simply ignore his affective nature. Of course, we wouldn’t want him to ignore his rational nature either.

A possible objection to the point just made might be the following: human history seems to suggest that characteristic features of human societies include rape, murder, pillaging, war, etc. It is undeniable that these are activities human beings engage in, and always have. So despite our negative visceral reactions to these activities, if they have always been present in human societies, shouldn’t we resign ourselves to this fact and pay less heed to our visceral reactions? This objection only gets off the ground, however, if we believe that human beings cannot act voluntarily. But anyone who thinks it makes sense to raise the question of how one ought to live rejects such a belief. Also, to not pay heed to our reactions to these violent actions is inconsistent with too many other characteristic aspects of our natures, e.g., our desires for security, health, lack of stress, the chance to see our projects to fruition. A more pressing objection can be raised, though.

I am suggesting that how things strike us makes a difference not only to how we do live our lives, but to how we ought to live our lives. It ought to matter to me as a moral agent, for instance, if a certain kind of behaviour typically offends others. What may largely justify our calling some form of behaviour rude is that the behaviour happens to offend most people. Yet, we noted earlier an obvious rebuttal to this suggestion: why should we take into account how things strike us when we can be affected by things in the wrong way? The way we respond to things is very much a product of the previous experiences we have had. As Richard Hellie and others have observed in some detail,4[[42]](#footnote-42)2 for example, violence begets violence: children who have grown up in the midst of a great deal of violence, social and/or domestic, are far more likely to resort to violence as a means of solving problems later in life. More generally, the individual who has had one or more traumatic experiences in their youth, or a long series of bad experiences in their formative years, is likely to have dispositions which won’t be helpful to success later in life. For example, the foster child who has never had a stable home situation, but has been placed in the hands of many different adults, may never learn to fully trust others, or may have a persistent feeling of insecurity in later years. As for the matter of being offended, the downside to the wave of political correctness that has been sweeping through the United States for the last generation or so is that people take offense when they shouldn’t. So if we can overreact, or underreact, or have the wrong affective response altogether, one might still worry about the suggestion that our moral judgments—judgments that we want to be correct—ought to take into account how things strike us. Such a worry might persist in spite of what has already been said in support of this idea. (This is one of the two concerns raised on pp. 274-75.)

There is a two-part response to this worry. We can point out, first of all, that our moral judgments ought to take our affective responses into account because there is an important sense in which they have to. We have noted two reasons for this already. First, because they have evaluative meanings, correct and sincere use of moral terms requires that the appropriate attitude accompany them. Second, if internalism is true, it isn’t enough to identify what the right thing to do is. We also have to see the action in a favorable light. But it doesn’t seem that this will occur unless our affective natures already have a certain shape. In fact, I think McDowell is right to say that we won’t be able to reliably recognize morality’s demands without having the right sort of dispositions. (I give more support to this claim below when I discuss McDowell’s view in greater detail.) This fact shouldn’t surprise us. If it is the case that our previous experiences can greatly influence how we perceive and hence respond to things for the worse, it is certainly the case that our previous experiences can influence our moral sensitivity in a positive way. Indeed, we cannot escape the fact that *our affective natures play an important role in how we perceive things and even in what we are apt to perceive*. The sense in which we can say that we don’t have to take into account how things strike us is then simply the following: We can refuse to give importance to any particular reaction we want; what we cannot do is arrive at judgments about how we ought to live or about what we ought to do, judgments we are willing to live by, that haven’t been influenced in some way by the dispositions and affective responses that we have. Even if a person decides that his life needs to be completely reformed, that his affective nature has become grossly malformed due to a bad upbringing, etc., and so his decisions about how he will live in the immediate future should not take into account his current dispositions and affective responses, this decision itself is still not free from the affective response he has to his own current set of dispositions. The judgment is that his own affective nature needs an overhaul; but this judgment itself will be based upon a second-order affective response.

There is, then, a very clear sense in which we cannot escape our affective natures. But we needn’t fear that our moral judgments have little chance of being correct if they depend on our affective responses because it is not as if we don’t have some idea of the kinds of dispositions needed in order to have a good life, or in order to improve our chances of having a good life. This can be the second part of our two-part response. Consider, for instance, how we treat other kinds of input: we don’t think that just because we can be fallible in our beliefs we should entirely ignore them in decisions about what we ought to believe or do, or that just because we can misperceive things we should no longer rely on our perceptions. We would have nothing else to rely on to make many of the judgments we do if we discounted all of our beliefs and perceptions. The threat of error is also lessened by the fact that we are creatures with a fairly good sense of self-awareness; we are aware enough to know that we cannot always take our own personal experience to be the final word on matters; we are aware enough to know when others might be in a better position to judge the issue before us. Furthermore, because we do have some idea of the kinds of dispositions needed in order to have a good life, or in order to improve our chances of having a good life, we are quite confident regarding the correct- or incorrectness of some of our responses, and such cases help us shed light on the harder cases.

The fallibility that appears so worrisome thus poses no special problem for our antirealist. We have some confidence regarding whether one is having the correct affective response, and rightly so. Granted, there is no external vantage point from which to critique those affective responses; our criticism must always rely on the affective natures we currently have. But we are in an analogous situation when it comes to judging the credibility of our beliefs. As we saw in Chapter 3, we have no direct connection to reality by which we can judge the correctness or incorrectness of our beliefs regarding what is so. We have reason to believe nonetheless that some of our beliefs are highly reliable. Similarly, we have reason to believe that some of our affective responses are highly reliable.

In addition to the reasons just given, we have already noted three other reasons for taking our affective responses into account when making moral judgments: (a) these responses might be characteristic of us and we want our moral judgments to take proper account of the kind of creatures we are; (b) the responses might indicate the existence of practical reasons of which we are not yet fully conscious, or not quite able to articulate at the moment the response occurs; and (c) we face a motivational problem if our moral judgments are out of alignment with our affective responses.

These reasons lead me to conclude that if we are inquiring into how we ought to live our lives, we ought to take into account how actions and character traits strike us when we are judging their rightness and wrongness. If we ignore the input from our affective natures, we are ignoring a central part of ourselves—something it doesn’t make sense to do if we are sincerely inquiring into how we ought to live a good human life (rather than a life suited to a creature who has no affective nature).

Saying this, however, doesn’t tell us how to resolve problems like the one Jim faces. However Jim acts on the choice he is presented with, his beliefs will be out of joint with his affective responses. If the problem is to be resolved (to the extent that the misalignment doesn’t arise on future occasions, and to the extent that Jim, at some future date, at least has an idea of what he should have done), either his beliefs need to be changed or the appropriate parts of his affective nature. How do we know which needs to be changed? Here I think we have only experience to guide us.4[[43]](#footnote-43)3 We can only look to our beliefs, values, and affective responses. We judge the correctness or incorrectness of a person’s affective response to some situation partly by consulting our own sentiments and thinking about how we ourselves might react to the situation, or how we should react. We also consider our opinions about the value and purpose of these responses. Admittedly, our experience and beliefs may not be enough to lead us to a comfortable resolution if we find ourselves in Jim’s circumstances, but for most situations that we face they will be enough.4[[44]](#footnote-44)4

This about concludes our discussion of feature (a). We have been considering reasons for saying that values are not brutely there independent of our sensibilities. The suggestion is that moral properties are both subjective and objective in nature. One reason for thinking this comes from the phenomenology of our moral value experience: it seems that when we make moral judgments we consider both the features of the object being judged and how those features strike us. It also seems that we believe we ought to, in some qualified sense, take our affective responses into account when forming our moral judgments. If this is true, it means that our moral judgments not only tell us something about the world, but also about ourselves, even if only indirectly.4[[45]](#footnote-45)5 But this too seems to fit the phenomenology. It makes some sense of the tension described at the beginning of Chapter 1, the tension that lies behind the debate between the realist and the noncognitivist. The noncognitivist says that our moral responses or judgments reveal something about *us*, whereas the realist says they reveal something about the world as it is independently of us. If moral properties have both objective and subjective aspects to them, we can see how support can be found for both of these views.

The aim of this chapter is to consider three ways in which the subjective feel of our moral value experience is evident to us. The element of subjectivity just discussed—that in making moral judgments it seems we often do consider how the object we are judging strikes us emotionally, and we believe that we should take our affective responses into account (feature (a) in other words)—is supported by Hume’s description of what is going on when we judge wilful murder to be vicious. In our discussion of Hume’s example we in fact saw that attitudes of approval and disapproval (or something that amounts to them) *must* accompany our moral judgments if those judgments are to have practical import. And since, if our moral judgments lack practical import they won’t mean what we take them to mean, it follows that sentiments of approbation and disapprobation have an essential role to play in the meaning of our moral judgments. This brings us to the second way in which our moral value experience has a subjective feel to it. We judge people to be ethically lacking if they fail to have the proper emotional response to actions, character traits, or other objects of our moral judgments; e.g., although they might say that environmental destruction is a bad thing, if their actions demonstrate a lack of concern for the environment, we doubt that they really believe that environmental destruction is a bad thing. Because they don’t mean what they say, we take them to be speaking either incorrectly or insincerely.

In addition, we deny that a person has correctly *judged* the rightness or wrongness of a situation unless they have the appropriate emotional response. Moral beliefs are different from other beliefs in having this connection to motivation. This brings us back to the thesis of entanglement, Blackburn’s example with the teenagers, and the third way in which the subjective feel of our moral value experience is evident—the fact that our moral judgments clearly seem to be evaluative in nature (i.e., feature (c)). Let’s turn our attention now to this third feature and the matter of entanglement.

When making moral judgments (or any other kind of judgment) it seems right to say that we are evaluating things and that this involves something more than what is going on when we are perceiving, say, the ovoidness of a lemon. In the case of moral judgments we are asking about, or concerned with, the kinds of reasons that exist for acting a certain way or, say, for admiring a certain character trait. More precisely, we are often asking about, or concerned with, which actions agents have most reason to do, or which character traits agents have most reason to develop. (We might say then that the existence of a moral property signals the existence of a certain kind of normative practical reason.) But in order for something to be seen by us as constituting a reason, we have to see it in a certain light. Whether a certain feature or concern is seen as a reason for acting depends on the point of view of the agent who perceives it. This dependence seems to be even stronger when the issue at hand is what we have *most* reason to do. The claim then is that moral judgments are evaluative in the sense that they rely on normative frameworks, or sets of evaluative beliefs. The realist will of course say that this poses no threat to his mind-independence claim unless it can be shown that these normative frameworks are somehow subjective. In the next chapter I offer some specific reasons for thinking that this is the case. The argument there is that many of the norms or criteria we rely on when making moral judgments are in a sense chosen by us, and they have to be. If this is so, then moral truths (assuming they exist) cannot be truly independent of our evidence for them. Here I offer more general reasons for thinking that our moral judgments are evaluative in a way that contradicts the realist’s mind-independence claim. These reasons are drawn from McDowell’s understanding of the virtuous agent.

Before looking at what McDowell has to say about the virtuous agent, it will be useful to say more about what distinguishes an evaluative judgment or term from a nonevaluative one, since I am emphasizing a distinguishing feature different from what is usually emphasized. How do evaluative judgments like “fat people are disgusting” differ from nonevaluative judgments like “the lemon on the table is ovoid in shape”?

When we judge that a lemon’s shape is more ovoid than spherical or cubical, we are judging that the three-dimensional shape of the lemon comes closest to fitting the criteria for ovoidness rather than some other common shape. The shape of the lemon is classified under the concept ‘ovoidness’ and correctly so, since the shape closely approximates the necessary criteria. (I have in mind the variety of lemon most often found in grocery stores in the United States.) We generally see this as a nonevaluative judgment that expresses a fact, for it is not as if our beliefs or perceptions affect the actual shape of the lemon in any way, and it is not as if there is any disagreement over the criteria for ovoidness or the criteria for a lemon to belong to the variety referred to. What people might rationally disagree about is whether it *always* makes sense to classify such lemons as ovoid. Imagine a botanist who describes the shape of the fruit to people who have never seen it before and who have no access to any representation of it, and suppose this botanist has no ability to draw. Under such special circumstances ‘ovoid’ by itself is unsatisfactory. For the purposes of most discussions, however, ‘ovoid’ will do. We say that the sentence “lemons (of a commonly grown variety) are ovoid in shape” is a fact in the same way that the sentence “dogs typically have four legs” is a fact.4[[46]](#footnote-46)6 Perceivers needn’t take up any particular perspective to recognize these facts.

We might also observe that these sentences don’t imply any particular attitude on the speaker’s part. We can fully grasp their meaning without knowing how the speaker feels about the facts referred to. In contrast, the evaluative judgments, “destroying the natural environment is bad” and “fat people are disgusting”, express attitudes. We haven’t grasped their full meaning if we fail to recognize that, in the one case, the speaker looks unfavorably upon environmental destruction, and in the other case, the speaker looks unfavorably upon fat people. This is one important, and perhaps the most common, way of distinguishing between evaluative and nonevaluative judgments. The understanding is that nonevaluative judgments have only *descriptive meaning* whereas evaluative ones, which may or may not have descriptive meaning, express an attitude of the speaker (see McNaughton 1988: 25-28). We can say that nonevaluative judgments employ terms which have only descriptive meaning, whereas evaluative judgments employ one or more terms with *evaluative meaning*. “To understand the descriptive meaning of a term is to grasp the range of things that it picks out. I understand the descriptive meaning of ‘panda’ when I know that it picks out an animal of a certain kind . . . We have fully grasped the meaning of the word ‘panda’ when we have grasped what an animal must be like in order for it to have that term correctly applied to it. A word has evaluative meaning if its use implies a favorable or unfavorable attitude on the part of the speaker” (McNaughton 1988: 25-26). Another way of putting the distinction is to say that our nonevaluative judgments offer descriptions of things, and in describing we are expressing our beliefs about how things are. But evaluative judgments go beyond describing; they also say something about how we react to the things being described or referred to; as such, they express both beliefs and attitudes (or in some cases perhaps, just attitudes4[[47]](#footnote-47)7).

I am not sure that this is always the best way of distinguishing between the two kinds of judgments. (My sense is that noncognitivists will say that a judgment is evaluative just in case it expresses a pro- or con- attitude.) While it seems right to say that any judgment which expresses a pro- or con- attitude is evaluative, whether it is wise to say that all evaluative judgments express one or the other kind of attitude will partly depend on how broad our concept of an attitudinal state is.4[[48]](#footnote-48)8 In any case, since I have already tried to show how it is that our moral judgments are subjective due to having a necessary connection with such attitudes, my claim that the evaluative nature of moral judgments is evidence for a third aspect of subjectivity aims at drawing our attention to something other than that connection.

As noted, we also take moral judgments to be evaluative in the sense that they seem to involve a perspective or point of view that others might rationally reject. This is part of the phenomenology of our moral value experience. Moral inquiry is an inquiry into the existence of certain kinds of reasons; but an agent won’t take something to count as a reason unless they see it in a certain light. We thus think that there is room for disagreement surrounding many moral matters. (At least this is so if we are looking at morality from a philosopher’s standpoint. From the “inside” of our own moral perspective, we may be disinclined to concede that there is much room for disagreement.) Similarly, we think that there are many reasons to disagree with the teenagers of Blackburn’s example if they indeed believe that fat people are disgusting. On the other hand, we think there is little room for disagreement on the matter of whether dogs typically have four legs.

Support for the claim that our moral judgments rely on normative frameworks (in such a way that we have to reject the realist’s mind-independence claim) comes from the plausibility of McDowell’s description of the virtuous agent.4[[49]](#footnote-49)9 How do we explain the virtuous agent taking certain features of a situation to be morally relevant but not others? By definition, the virtuous agent is able to reliably determine what situations morally require of us, and whether or not a particular action ought to be done; the thought is that “virtue issues in nothing but right conduct” (McDowell 1979: 332). This means, for example, that the virtuous agent must be able to see when a situation actually calls for fairness rather than kindness even though acting fairly under the circumstances will result in someone’s feelings getting hurt (ibid., 333). If we suppose that kindness and fairness are both virtues, and that possessing the virtue of kindness involves being sensitive to others’ feelings, how do we explain the virtuous agent’s acting fairly in the circumstances in question? That is, how do we explain the virtuous person seeing on this particular occasion that fairness is the morally relevant fact and not kindness?

Philosophers have often found *practical syllogisms* helpful when explaining practical reasoning, and hence action. Since it is often thought that a complete explanation for any action must refer to one or more of the agent’s beliefs as well as some desire-like state of the agent, practical reasoning in syllogistic form usually appears with the major premise stating a desire of the agent and the minor premise stating the agent’s belief of how that desire can be met. The conclusion, stating the course of action the agent thinks she ought to take, might be seen as deductively following from the two premises.5[[50]](#footnote-50)0 An example:

major premise: I would like to stay fit.

minor premise: Exercise is key to staying fit.

conclusion: I ought to exercise.

McDowell thinks that syllogisms of this form can be used to help us understand the virtuous agent’s actions (ibid. 342-43). Since actions are explained by reasons, we are interested in those “psychological states [of the agent] in the light of which we can see how acting in the way explained would have struck the agent as in some way rational” (ibid. 342). But a complete explanation for an action, McDowell argues, might actually require two stages of syllogistic reasoning. One stage he refers to as the “core explanation”; it is a syllogism of the above sort. The virtuous agent might, for example, reason as follows:

major premise: I aim to be fair in my dealings with others.

minor premise: It would be unfair to person B if I made an exception for person A.

conclusion: Therefore, I won’t make an exception for A (even though under most circumstances this would be an act of unkindness toward A since if I don’t make an exception for A, A’s feelings will be hurt).

This core explanation explains the virtuous agent’s action, but only up to a point. A second level of explanation is needed if we are to know why, on this particular occasion, she takes fairness rather than kindness to be morally relevant. We might also understand this second stage in syllogistic form, although the major premise (and perhaps the minor) “cannot be definitively written down” (ibid., 343):

major premise: (the virtuous person’s conception of how a human life should be lived)

minor premise: (knowledge of the particular situation at hand)

conclusion: For the situation at hand, the right concern to act on is that of fairness.

If we are to get a full sense of what motivates the virtuous agent, we have to look to her conception of how to live. McDowell is assuming, as I have been, that ethical reflection centers around the question, “How should one live?” McDowell writes:

A conception of how one should live is not simply an unorganized collection of propensities to act, on this or that occasion, in pursuit of this or that concern. Sometimes there are several concerns, fulfilment of any one of which might, on a suitable occasion, constitute acting as a certain conception of how to live would dictate, and each of which, on the occasion at hand, is capable of engaging with a known fact about the situation and issuing in action. Acting in the light of a conception of how to live requires selecting and acting on the right concern . . . So if an action whose motivation is spelled out in our core explanation is a manifestation of virtue, more must be true of its agent than just that on this occasion he acted with that motivation. The core explanation must at least be seen against the background of the agent’s conception of how to live; and if the situation is one of those on which any of several concerns might impinge, the conception of how to live must be capable of actually entering our understanding of the action, explaining why it was this concern rather than any other which was drawn into operation. (1979: 343-44)

The virtuous agent’s conception of how to live is the normative framework she employs when determining what she has most reason to do. In order to have a satisfactory explanation of why this agent does what she does, we may have to look to her entire conception of how to live. We should see the latter as an “orectic psychological state: something we might conceive as providing the motivating energy for the actions explained” (ibid., 343). (So if we understand attitudinal states broadly enough, we can see how understanding an evaluation as something dependent on the normative framework just described amounts to the more common way of distinguishing between evaluative and nonevaluative judgments.)

What remains to be addressed is why we ought to think that the virtuous agent’s conception of how to live is subjective in a way that forces us to reject the realist’s second core tenet. McDowell thinks (or gives the impression) that there are single, correct answers to moral questions; so in what way is the virtuous agent’s normative framework a subjective point of view?5[[51]](#footnote-51)1

One way to begin addressing this question is by thinking about what moral truths would be like if they were completely mind-independent. If mind-independent, moral truths wouldn’t depend on the beliefs or attitudes we have, whether as individuals or groups of individuals; they would exist prior to our perception of them. Moral truths would thus appear to be such that they could be recognized *as moral truths* independently of any particular point of view. But if that were the case, it would be possible to demonstrate the rationality of virtue from an external standpoint (ibid., 346). That is, it would always be possible, in principle at least, for the virtuous agent to get others (who aim at being practically rational) to see the reasons for acting that she sees5[[52]](#footnote-52)2 through rational argumentation alone—argumentation that doesn’t depend in any way on the virtuous agent’s particular point of view, i.e., on a virtuous agent’s conception of how to live. Yet, we don’t think that this is possible. If we did, we would worry less about the claim that moral judgments might be nothing more than personal opinions, or that moral judgments might be subjective in some lesser, but still problematic, way. In order to recognize something as a moral truth, we have to recognize certain reasons for acting. But if something counts as a reason in the mind of the virtuous agent, it is only because of its relation to other beliefs and attitudes she holds—those beliefs and attitudes that constitute what I am calling the virtuous agent’s normative framework. We wouldn’t expect others to see the reasons for acting that the virtuous agent sees unless they also have, or come to have, the normative framework that the virtuous agent relies on, or that part of the framework relevant to the question at hand. (These reasons for rejecting the mind-independence claim complement what has already been said in favor of internalism. Moral beliefs differ from other non-moral realist beliefs in that they seem to have a necessary connection with human motivation.)

The rationality of virtue might be demonstrable from an external standpoint if the psychological states motivating the virtuous agent could be disentangled in the way the noncognitivist thinks beliefs and desires can be disentangled. Suppose our realist who is committed to the second core tenet is of the view that beliefs and desires are distinct in this way. Because of the commitment to the second core tenet, this realist is almost surely an externalist (—a claim I argue for in Chapter 8). As an externalist, this realist will argue that rational argumentation is by itself sufficient to get people to converge in their moral beliefs, for a moral belief, *because* it can be disentangled from our desire states, is no different, epistemically-speaking, than any other realist belief. However, there are two strikes against such a view. First, as already stated, I think that it conflicts with the moral phenomenology. Second, externalism itself seems implausible (more on this below; here, too, we can look to the phenomenology).

So one way in which the virtuous agent’s normative framework is subjective is in the sense that the rationality of virtue is not demonstrable from an external standpoint. (In other words, the normative framework is subjective because it is evaluative in just the way that I have claimed.) It is reasonable to think that this non-demonstrability is due to the entanglement of the objective and subjective aspects of moral properties. But why should we think these two aspects cannot be disentangled?5[[53]](#footnote-53)3

The thesis of entanglement is very plausible if we accept the idea that the combined shape of our affective and rational natures partly determines what we take to be reasons for acting; that is, if we accept the idea that perception isn’t simply a matter of what is there but of what we bring to it. This idea, in turn, seems plausible for many reasons—one being that it enables us to explain why virtuous agents perceive some features of situations, but not others, as morally relevant. An important determinant of the virtuous agent’s distinctive perceptual capacity is the set of concerns and interests she has come to acquire—what McDowell calls the virtuous agent’s ‘second nature’ (in “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” 1995). This ‘second nature’ will obviously have a close connection with the agent’s conception of how to live a human life; perhaps these are two ways of talking about the same thing and can both be seen as the normative framework (or parts of it) through which agents view the world in their practical deliberations.5[[54]](#footnote-54)4 Like one’s conception of how to live, an agent’s second nature will be crucial in determining the moral relevance of a feature because “In acquiring one’s second nature . . . one acquired conceptual equipment suited to characterize a distinctive worthwhileness one learned to see in [the] actions [one does], that is, a distinctive range of reasons one learned to see for acting in those ways” (McDowell 1995b: 170). This is one sense in which what we are apt to perceive depends on the concerns and interests we have.

Relatedly, we might also observe, in support of this notion about perception, that if we don’t care that actions might be, say, cruel or unjust, it is highly unlikely that we will be reliable perceivers of cruelty and injustice. I will say more about this idea in Chapter 8 when I discuss the amoralist.

It follows from this understanding of the virtuous agent’s perceptual capacity that the subjective and objective aspects of moral properties (or equally, of moral judgments) are nonseparable. Moral judgments will be like colour judgments in that the subjective element finds its way into the final product by way of the processing of input from an external reality. (We should understand this processing to include the kind of receptivity to the world that one comes to have due to their affective nature and their set of concerns and interests.) This is something quite different from the two-step process of perceiving objects in the world and then projecting emotions or attitudes onto them, as in Blackburn’s description of the teenagers’ evaluative judgments of fat people.

The thesis of entanglement acquires further plausibility when we consider the weaknesses of what are often seen as the main alternatives. Those alternatives are: either be a projectivist or what McDowell and Blackburn call an “intuitionistic realist” (McDowell 1987: 218); this is a realist committed to the second core tenet.5[[55]](#footnote-55)5 At the beginning of Chapter 2 we saw one way of framing the debate between the moral realist and the moral noncognitivist. We can say that they disagree in terms of how they understand “the connection between certain *features* we attribute to objects and certain mental *responses* that somehow or other provide a basis for these attributions” (Quinn 1978: 1). For example: Do we morally approve of honesty because it is good, or is honesty morally good because we approve of it? The projectivist says that the response (in this case, approval) is noncognitive in nature and has conceptual priority; honesty is morally good because we approve of it. The feature of goodness that we take honesty to have is thus a feature constructed out of our response. The intuitionistic realist, on the other hand, says that the feature of the object (i.e., goodness) has conceptual priority; the response is actually cognitive in nature and a response *to* the feature; that is, goodness is a feature of honesty prior to our perception of it. McDowell’s view is that neither feature nor response has priority.

This chapter as a whole is an argument against intuitionistic realism (the problem for the realist being the inability to adequately account for the phenomenology), and we saw in Chapters 4 and 5 why Blackburn’s projectivist account is an unacceptable alternative. If giving priority to the feature doesn’t work and giving priority to the response doesn’t work, we are left with a no-priority view. If neither feature nor response has priority, it is reasonable to think that this is because the two cannot be disentangled.

Finally, the thesis of entanglement gains even more plausibility when we look at the nature of our moral concepts and our understanding of their correct usage. There is reason to think that the subjective and objective aspects of moral properties (or equally, moral judgments) are entangled because a corresponding kind of entanglement appears to exist in our moral concepts.5[[56]](#footnote-56)6 Consider the idea of an action being cruel, or the idea of an action being rude. The terms ‘cruel’ and ‘rude’ have both descriptive and evaluative meanings. If we are to use these terms correctly in a sentence of the form “That action was cruel”, we must look unfavorably upon the action *and* the action itself must possess certain features. Both conditions must be met. If disentanglement were possible, one would expect there to be well-known terms which do simply the descriptive work that terms like ‘cruel’ and ‘rude’ do.5[[57]](#footnote-57)7 One has to ask at the very least why so many of our moral terms do both descriptive and evaluative work. Further, in addition to the two conditions just mentioned, it must also be the case that the nonevaluative properties of the object being judged *merit* the negative affective response. It is not always true that an action is (say) cruel simply in virtue of having the set of nonevaluative features which all cruel actions have. There are what we call exceptions: this is what we see in the practical syllogism set out above, where the virtuous agent is not acting unkindly to A even though in acting fairly to B A’s feelings get hurt. Whether we talk in terms of exceptions, moral relevance, or meriting a certain affective response, the problem is the same: how do we explain the virtuous agent’s competence with moral concepts? It seems that determining whether a certain set of nonevaluative features merit a negative affective response is a matter of judgment, not a matter of mechanically (i.e., unthinkingly) applying a rule.5[[58]](#footnote-58)8

If we accept the thesis of entanglement, we will be inclined to agree that the rationality of virtue is not demonstrable from an external standpoint—or, in other words, that the virtuous agent’s normative framework is subjective. Altogether I take McDowell to be offering four closely related reasons for thinking that the virtuous agent’s normative framework is subjective: (i) the conception of how to live is not codifiable in universal principles; it depends intimately on the particular; (ii) the normative framework employed in moral thinking reflects the form of life in which one lives; that is, one’s thinking employs concepts grounded in a set of shared practices; but different groups of human beings might have different sets of shared practices (i.e., it isn’t as if there is just one form of life available to human beings); (iii) the conception of how to live is an orectic state, intimately involving the dispositions of the agent; and (iv) the rationality of virtue is not demonstrable from an external standpoint. I’ll leave discussion of (i) - (iii) for another time and place, and focus instead on what is at the present moment a more pressing concern.

Suppose that the virtuous agent’s normative framework is in fact subjective in all of the ways just mentioned. Why should we think that under McDowell’s view our moral judgments still have a kind of objectivity to them?

McDowell’s claim is that moral concepts are genuine concepts. As such, we can misapply them; our moral judgments, in other words, can be correct or incorrect. According to McDowell, properly applying moral terms is a perceptual matter, one which actually requires a *special* cognitive sensitivity; for competence in the use of such terms is not simply a matter of seeing the external features that might make an action cruel or rude; it is a matter of knowing when these features do in fact make an action cruel or rude; that is, it is a matter of knowing when the features are morally relevant. The non-virtuous agent can perceive such features, but fails to recognize their relevance, or fails to do so reliably. Let’s pause for a moment to look again at Blackburn’s argument against this element of McDowell’s view.

Blackburn’s example with the teenagers aims to persuade us that ethical concepts are not genuine concepts (1998: 94), and that to be a competent user of ethical concepts one does not need any special cognitive sensitivity; one can be a virtuous agent without having developed a perceptual capacity over and above what the non-virtuous agent has. Blackburn tries to meet this aim by convincing us that the thesis of entanglement fails to fit the phenomena. If the discussion of ‘fat↓’ gives a correct picture of what is happening when we arrive at moral judgments or express our moral opinions, it should be possible to disentangle the evaluative element from the descriptive and understand cruelty and rudeness *solely as reactions to, rather than cognitions of, certain sets of nonevaluative properties* in the same way that we take the teenagers to be reacting with disgust to excess body fat.5[[59]](#footnote-59)9 So just as we should not credit the teenagers of Blackburn’s example with a conceptual advance when they come to share this disgust of fat people, we should not credit agents with a conceptual advance if they come to use the terms ‘cruel’ and ‘rude’ correctly in their moral judgments. To credit agents with a conceptual advance due to reliably applying these terms correctly is to say that competence with these terms requires some form of cognitive sensitivity not already possessed by agents who fail to use the terms correctly.

Blackburn is right to say that we do not, and should not, credit the teenagers with a conceptual advance, but he is wrong to suggest that his example gives us a reason to think that moral judgments are not distinctively cognitive in nature. Why is it that the teenagers have not made a conceptual advance? For fat↓ness to be a concept, we seem to need a way of seeing how when using the term ‘fat↓’ the teenagers can be mistaken in their judgments. Or conversely, we need to be able to see how judgments employing this term can be correct. (Recall that the judgments are along the lines of “fat people are disgusting” or “that person, being fat, is disgusting”; the judgments are *not* “obesity is disgusting” or “morbid obesity disgusts me”.) I think the only plausible way of doing this, while still adhering to the supervenience claim that Blackburn espouses, is to say that a moral judgment is correct if the attitude it expresses somehow “fits” the nonevaluative properties one is reacting to. In what way might the reaction of disgust fit the percept one has upon seeing an overweight person? It won’t—not unless one has certain beliefs about overweight persons. For example, one would need to hold one or more beliefs of the following sort: that person is to be avoided because they are fat; or, that person is not worth my time because they are fat; or, that person has values which differ from mine in an important way, otherwise they wouldn’t be fat. One doesn’t need much experience, though, to see that all of these beliefs are unsound. Indeed, within any commonly held normative framework they are all *non sequiturs*. For these evaluative beliefs do not cohere with our understanding of the kinds of creatures we are, the purposes and concerns we think we ought to have. I would submit that there is no evaluative perspective acceptable to us which would give sense to the idea that ‘fat↓’ can be correctly applied. So ‘fat↓’ is not at all like ‘cruel’ or ‘rude’. We believe that we can be wrong in applying terms like ‘cruel’ and ‘rude’ to actions. Further, we believe that what makes an action cruel does not necessarily make it rude, and vice versa. (We saw in Chapter 5 that under Blackburn’s analysis of moral evaluations it is unclear what would allow us to distinguish a reaction to cruelty from a reaction to rudeness.) We distinguish between the two largely by way of external features.

Of course, the fact that Blackburn’s example with the teenagers fails to explain what is going on when we make moral judgments doesn’t mean that he isn’t right in saying that moral concepts are not genuine concepts. Nonetheless, if we accept his conclusion, how do we explain the virtuous agent reliably determining what situations morally require of us? What enables the virtuous agent to conclude for some particular occasion that the morally relevant feature is that of fairness even though acting fairly results in hurting someone’s feelings? Blackburn is claiming that no special perspective, or understanding, is needed to see what is morally relevant. Furthermore, if ethical concepts are not genuine concepts, what allows the expressivist to talk about *correct* application of terms like ‘cruel’ and ‘rude’? How does the expressivist make sense of our beliefs that these terms can be used correctly and incorrectly?

Being quasi-realist, Blackburn’s position is supposed to get us an important kind of objectivity for our moral judgments. Expressivism is supposed to give us a way of talking about moral judgments being correct or incorrect. The expressivist thus needs a way to say whether some expressed moral sentiment fits the situation that it is a reaction to. For Blackburn, moral claims supervene on descriptions of the situations to which they apply. In order to critically assess the fit between reaction and feature, or feature and response, we will have to be able to disentangle the feature from the response in the way that “there are just fat people, and the teenagers’ expression of their disgust at them” (1998: 95). Only then can we determine whether the response fits the feature. However, disentanglement is problematic for the expressivist because it forces him to accept the possibility of the amoralist—someone who doesn’t care about the demands of morality but is still capable of reliably applying moral concepts.6[[60]](#footnote-60)0 And the possibility of the amoralist conflicts with the expressivist’s commitment to internalism. This is a devastating result, one that should make us think that the expressivist won’t be able to get us the objectivity we often claim for our moral judgments.

More can be said about the objective component of McDowell’s view. McDowell relies (in his1979 paper) on the thesis of entanglement to argue that virtue is knowledge (while still allowing that there is a subjective aspect to our moral evaluations.) As I understand McDowell, the virtuous agent has (i) knowledge of the particulars of the situation one is judging; (ii) knowledge of the form of life in which one is living, or the sets of practices which constitute that form of life, particularly the practices surrounding use of moral concepts; and (iii) knowledge of how a human being should live (within the given form of life?). Since it may not be evident in (i) - (iii), we should add that correct application of moral concepts also requires (iv) having the right set of dispositions. Only then will we be able to know, for example, which particulars of a situation are morally relevant. The claim that virtue is knowledge is plausible if we find the syllogistic description of the virtuous agent’s practical reasoning to be plausible, and if we think that understanding virtue in this way plausibly explains how the virtuous agent correctly determines what is morally relevant. If virtue is knowledge, McDowell has a way to argue that our moral judgments can be objective in some important sense (for then it makes sense to talk about discovering moral truths, etc.).6[[61]](#footnote-61)1 We can understand moral judgments to be correct or incorrect within a given form of life.

Yet because there might be different forms of life for human beings, I don’t see how McDowell’s view can get us one kind of objectivity often sought for moral requirements: that they apply with equal force to all adult human beings in full possession of their faculties and just in virtue of being such an adult human being. This is something about which I will have more to say in the Conclusion to this dissertation. In any case, it is worth noting that under McDowell’s view moral requirements will still be categorical in the sense that they won’t depend in any direct way on the desires of individual agents. The necessity that moral requirements impose upon us is internal to the form of life in which we are immersed (see (McDowell 1981: 151)). This answers the other problem raised for the internalist on page 275.

One final issue to be discussed is how McDowell’s view might handle the “third problem” for the position that I am trying to defend, the problem raised on page 280. What is the nature of the psychological state or states that McDowell’s view associates with taking oneself to have a reason to do X? It will be best to address this issue when we return to the discussion of internalism in Chapter 8.

This concludes our discussion of the three ways in which our moral value experience has a subjective feel to it. We have seen a number of reasons for thinking that features (a), (b), and (c) have important roles to play in the formation of our moral judgments and in our understanding of the nature of these judgments. The subjectivity of these features conflicts with the realist’s second core tenet, thereby preventing the realist from giving an adequate account of them. Since the realist cannot account for the three features, but McDowell’s view can, we have reason to conclude that any form of moral realism characterized by the two core tenets is indefensible.

1. 1 It is assumed here that a best explanation satisfies a principle of parsimony—the idea being that something does not qualify as a best explanation if it commits one to the existence of metaphysical properties which one needn’t be committed to in order to adequately explain the phenomena in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 The kind of independence the realist has in mind is metaphysical or conceptual independence; more precisely, the moral realist holds that moral facts are “metaphysically or conceptually independent of the beliefs or propositions which are our evidence that those facts obtain” (Brink 1989: 15). This is not to say that moral facts or truths would exist if human beings didn’t exist (the realist may argue that moral properties can only be properties of actions performed by agents, or of character traits that agents might possess, etc., and insist that only human beings can be agents). But it does mean that *what makes* a moral judgment true is something other than the beliefs or attitudes we have—whether as individuals or as groups of individuals—regarding the object of the judgment. The moral realist is claiming, rather, that what makes a moral judgment true, if it is true, are properties existing in the world prior to our coming to have any beliefs about them. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 The evidential support thought to exist here is that of inference to the best explanation (Harman 1965, 1968). This involves the idea that if the truth of some candidate belief provides the best explanation of a set of facts all of which are believed to be true, then we can view these facts as evidence for the candidate belief being true. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4 Here I don’t mean to suggest that I think the realist does have the best explanation for any or all of the features mentioned. There are metaethical views which we haven’t considered yet, and these would need to be looked at before we could say whether the realist can best explain the above features. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5 ‘Necessary’ because the issues involved are interdependent. For example, the realist may need to be committed to an intuitionist epistemology given a certain understanding of the nature of moral properties. See pp. 1-2 of Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6 This response needn’t be expressed overtly in terms of emotions. I have in mind here what Simon Blackburn calls a “scale of emotional ascent”. He writes: “The scale is not *only* emotional, in the sense that it is measured by strength of feeling . . . But in this sense strength of feeling is also a matter of the degree to which things capture our attention, our degree of engagement, and our readiness to deploy pressures on other people to conform or to change” (1998: 9-10). This aspect of subjectivity has a close connection with the thesis of internalism discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 7 This is not to say that we can decide what our basic interests and needs are. What we ultimately decide is whether these basic interests and needs, or anything else, should enter as considerations in our practical deliberations, or into our conception of what constitutes a good human life. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 8 I will also refer to this commitment as the mind-independence claim. Given what I have done in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, my reader will want to have a better sense of why we can suddenly be so certain that moral realism is untenable. Here is a quick sketch: Chapters 4 and 5 focused on the explanatory inadequacies of leading antirealist accounts. We saw that noncognitivist approaches won’t do, projectivist and dispositionalist approaches won’t do, and that an error theory account won’t do. What we haven’t considered yet is an account of moral properties which holds that these properties have both a subjective and an objective aspect to them, aspects which cannot be disentangled. This is the kind of view that John McDowell espouses. It is one that I think is right on many counts, and it is the direction in which future research should go if we want a deeper understanding of the nature of morality and of the kind of objectivity that we can justifiably attribute to our moral judgments. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 9 ‘Internal realism’ is the label often given to McDowell’s view. I have described the moral realist as someone who is committed to the two core tenets stated above. Since McDowell’s view denies that moral properties exist prior to our perception of them, it is a view that rejects the realist’s second core tenet. I am therefore inclined to describe his view as antirealist. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 10 David Wiggins calls attention to the differences between “*valuations*” (such as “x is good” or “x is ugly”) and “*directive* or *deliberative* (or *practical*) *judgments* (e.g., ‘I must ψ’, ‘I ought to ψ’ . . .)” (Wiggins 1976: 95). Valuations attempt to “accurately delineate the values that are to be found in their subject matter” (McDowell 1987: 215). The three subjective aspects that I discuss in this chapter I see as mainly features of our valuations. But I also assume that these subjective aspects will often be implicitly involved in our practical moral judgments because I think these practical judgments will often take our moral valuations into account. I am using the expressions “moral judgment” and “moral value judgment” to refer sometimes only to our moral valuations, sometimes only to our practical moral judgments, and sometimes to both valuations and practical judgments. I abuse the distinction in this way only because I take there to be a close connection between our moral valuations and our practical moral judgments; I assume that agents would want their practical judgments to strongly cohere with their valuations, and vice versa. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 11 I use this expression “taking into account” even though it can be interpreted in two ways. In asking whether we ought to take our affective responses into account, I am asking if those responses can inform our practical deliberations in some positive way. This is my primary concern here. We might also consider the opposite though: that our affective responses might distort our moral judgments. Taking our affective responses into account in this sense obviously requires something quite different than the sense that I primarily have in mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 12 Emotions, feelings, and attitudes are often seen as noncognitive states, whereas beliefs are often seen as entirely cognitive in nature. In the discussion that follows, I will say more about what are thought to be the differences between these kinds of states. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 13 This position is available to the antirealist only if the affective responses which are said to constitute right and wrong do not have the practical import that the externalist says is a contingent feature of our moral judgments. For if the affective responses factor into what makes something right or wrong, then they certainly have a necessary connection to our moral judgments. Since it is unlikely that the antirealist will want to argue for the importance of affective responses which have no practical import, we might want to say that the position envisioned is not actually available to her. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 14 One reason I understand motivation in this way has to do with the fact that a person can be motivated to do something and yet not end up doing it. In *The Moral Problem* (1994) Michael Smith claims that there is an important gap between taking oneself to have a reason to do X and being motivated to do X. Evidence for such a gap, he says, is found in the depressed agent (135). He sees the depressed agent as one who finds herself having a reason to do X but lacks any desire to do X; Smith suggests that it is the lack of this desire that *explains* why she doesn’t actually end up doing X. But this can’t be the full story, for if it were, it would mean that believing that one ought to do X and having a desire to do X are *sufficient* conditions for doing X; it would mean, in other words, that any agent who is motivated to do X actually does X. Not even Smith believes this. In any case, I don’t think that the empirical evidence supports Smith’s view. The depressed agent’s story is more complicated; she will say, “yes, I know that I should have done X two months ago; I clearly saw the reason for doing it and I desired to do it; I just didn’t do it, and that is (also) what is so depressing.” Geoffrey Sayre-McCord offers a similar criticism of Smith’s position: “Smith thinks the examples of depression and weakness of the will he mentions put the lie to stronger forms of internalism . . . [but] I think the examples Smith cites are not fully compelling, especially once one embraces a dispositional account of motivation, as Smith does. For then, the complete failure actually to be moved to pursue something is compatible with having a desire to pursue it, as long as the disposition that constitutes the desire doesn’t require always being moved to pursue it” (1997: 61, n. 8). Finally, it is also worth noting that this way of understanding the sufficient conditions for motivation does not force us to give up Smith’s distinction between normative reasons for action and motivating reasons for action, for it is one thing to have a normative reason and another thing to take oneself to have a normative reason. (More will be said about this distinction and its connection to motivation and internalism in Chapter 8.) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 15 ‘More importantly’ because the former consideration, as we have seen, does not entail a necessary connection. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 16 More precisely, Blackburn says that we should view ethical propositions as an association of an attitude with a description. Recall from Chapter 2 that Blackburn understands moral claims to supervene on descriptions of the situations to which those claims apply. Blackburn prefers to describe the person making a moral judgment as someone who is expressing an attitude, or projecting an attitude onto some object or situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 17 Blackburn wants to deny that ethical concepts are “genuine concepts” (1998: 94, 96). Here a genuine concept, presumably, is something whose correct application requires only an awareness of the particulars of the situation to which it is applied (and not an understanding of some particular evaluative outlook). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 18 As we will see, the entanglement of the objective and subjective aspects is what allows McDowell to say that a necessary, or internal, connection exists between believing or saying that one ought to do X and being motivated to do X. Under McDowell’s view, the reliable amoralist is not possible. Blackburn himself is a proponent of internalism, and perhaps this is why he doesn’t quarrel with the idea that we have to be on the inside of moral practice in order to be fully competent in our application of moral terms (although Blackburn would say: “in order for us to reliably have the moral responses that those who are on the inside of the moral practice have; see (Blackburn 1998: 96-97)). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 19 I will tend to use the less cumbersome words ‘entanglement’ or ‘nonseparability’ instead of ‘nondisentanglability’ even though the latter gives a more accurate description of the thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 20 Below I say more about this. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 21 Consider, for example, the phenomenon known as “chromatic induction from grouping”. See Steven Shevell’s and Patrick Monnier’s article on this phenomenon in the August 2003 issue of *Nature Neuroscience*, or Megan Lisagor’s article, “More Than Meets the Eye,” in *University of Chicago Magazine*, June 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 22 Conceptually-speaking, then, the biconditionalist whom we saw in Chapter 3 was right to claim that we take there to be an R and a C such that “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”. This biconditional is true; it is just not necessarily true. What Stroud’s arguments showed is that this part of our conception of colours cannot by itself adequately account for certain of our beliefs about colours, nor for the psychological facts about colours that we readily attribute to others. The right hand side of the biconditional is not a sufficient condition for an object’s being yellow in all possible worlds. See (Stroud 2000: 124-126). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 23 We might also think that the tension described in the first pages of Chapter One—the tension between intuitions suggesting that our moral judgments can be objectively correct and intutions suggesting that our moral beliefs are very much subjective in nature—is evidence for the idea that moral properties have both objective and subjective aspects to them, for the tension wouldn’t exist at all if we were willing to give up either set of intuitions. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 24 In Chapter 7 I argue as follows: we conceive of morality as largely aiming at human well-being; but human well-being is partly determined by us (it is an evaluative matter); therefore, moral properties are not objective in the way the realist claims. I take the belief about morality and human well-being to be closely tied to our belief that some kinds of lives are better for us, *qua* human beings, than other kinds of lives. So it may appear that I am relying on the same set of facts about morality to support opposite claims: that moral properties are objective, and that moral properties are subjective. This worry can be alleviated in the present instance if we see what I am doing here as offering only a single reason in support of objectivity: when we consider our belief that moral properties supervene on natural, non-normative properties in conjunction with our belief that some kinds of lives are better for us than other kinds of lives, then we have good reason to think that moral properties are objective.

    What constitutes human well-being is complex, complex enough that the connection between morality and human well-being is, I think, conducive to arguing for both the objective and subjective nature of moral properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 25 That is, what we take ourselves to be doing when applying moral concepts, or making moral judgments, or attaching moral value to something; or we might also say, what we take to be happening when we are having a moral response to something. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 26 In addition, we saw a number of reasons for rejecting noncognitivism in Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. 27 For more on this, see Chapter 8 where I quote paragraph 2 of Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste” when arguing against Brink’s claim that the amoralist can competently apply moral terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 28 This would explain why ‘cruel’ and other such terms have both a descriptive and an evaluative meaning in assertoric contexts. I take it that the evaluative meanings of moral terms like ‘cruel’ and ‘rude’ reflect affective responses that are characteristic of us.

    The reader should not infer from the rough sketch that I am giving here that I take the subvenient natural features to have a kind of epistemological priority over the affective responses. If we think the natural features clearly have priority, we will want to be moral realists. If we think the affective responses have priority, we will want to be noncognitivists. See the paragraph quoted from Warren Quinn in my Chapter 2. Like McDowell, I think we ought to espouse a no-priority view. See McDowell’s 1987 paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 29 We might want to see this as the second reason of this kind offered thus far. The first reason would then be the presence of the negative attitude spoken of earlier, the sentiment of disapprobation that we find toward Wilful Murder, etc.

    The claim that moral terms have evaluative meanings in assertoric contexts is compatible with the arguments in Chapter 4 claiming that the noncognitivist is unable to adequately explain moral terms found in embedded contexts. The noncognitivist runs into problems interpreting moral terms in embedded contexts because he rejects the idea that the clauses containing the moral terms should be interpreted as truth-apt. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 30 I add a qualification here because things are complicated by the fact that we can shape our affective natures. Since the way we think we ought to shape our affective natures is partly informed by the affective responses we have to our affective responses, maybe it will only be some higher-order affective response that ever gets taken at face value. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 31 Our moral terms are not often very specific in their evaluative meanings. But there are differences in the degrees of moral approval and disapproval expressed by such terms. For example, ‘rude’ typically carries less negative weight than ‘cruel’, and ‘cruel’ typically carries less negative weight than ‘horrific’. See also footnote 6 above and what Blackburn says about a “scale of emotional ascent”. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. 32 Bernard Williams writes, for example, that “an ethical disposition is not simply a personal pattern of behavior . . . It is a kind of disposition that itself structures one’s reactions to others” (1985: 37). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. 33 Here I am distinguishing between the claim that we ought to consider how things strike us and the claim that we ought to consider how things *ought* to strike us. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. 34 The realist will raise this question in spite of what has already been said because (a) he will deny that moral terms have evaluative meanings in any crucial sense; and (b) he will deny that our affective natures are involved in perception in the way I am suggesting. The realist can claim that thus far I have simply begged the question. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. 35 In saying that we value a lack of internal conflict, I am not saying that by itself such harmony is ethically valuable. It is possible for agents to possess such harmony but be morally repugnant. In fact, judged from a moral perspective, immoral agents are even more repugnant if they are not troubled by their actions. It is almost always the case, however, that from the agent’s perspective the internal conflict referred to will be undesirable. The conflict doesn’t disappear by ignoring our affective natures, since this is a part of ourselves that is too central to our being to be ignored. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. 36 It is not as if the conflict prevents Jim from being an agent. But it does prevent Jim from being the kind of agent we would expect him to want to be—one without this internal conflict. The problem from the agent’s perspective is largely the conflict itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. 37 For it is not as if our affective natures exist in isolation from the rest of the contents of our minds. I would think that our affective responses can inform our beliefs, while the beliefs we hold can also over time give shape to our dispositions, or can lead immediately to a certain affective response—as in becoming angry because one believes that an injustice has been committed. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. 38 It may be that the beliefs whose presence is indicated by the affective response are incorrect. Maybe Jim’s aversion to killing shouldn’t prohibit him from killing the one Indian; maybe the right thing to do is to limit the damage. If the only reason Jim has the affective response he has is due to prior beliefs, and these beliefs are incorrect, then it would be right to say that Jim shouldn’t have the response he does. I think few people would say, though, that a person’s aversion to killing is simply due to prior beliefs. For this reason, we don’t actually expect Jim to not be averse to killing the one Indian even if we think that this is the right thing to do given the circumstances he is in. The example of Jim is complex then because, even if we think he ought to kill the one Indian—say, because in doing so he would be limiting the damage—, we don’t expect his emotions to be fully in line with his actions. Even so, this does not undermine my claim that such a misalignment is problematic. There are many war veterans who have experienced such a misalignment and have suffered quite a bit later in life because of it (one condition being what psychiatrists have labeled “post-traumatic stress syndrome”). They might believe that they did the right thing during the war but not be able to bring their emotions into line with this belief. I think that what cases like those of Jim and the war veterans tell us is, not that we should ignore our affective natures, but that it is possible for us to find ourselves in some very difficult situtations from which we cannot extricate ourselves and still be free of harm. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. 39 In saying that the “passions” are original existences, Hume mainly wanted to deny that they represent anything in the external world. He thought, therefore, that we cannot talk about them as being true or false, correct or incorrect, or even reasonable or unreasonable. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. 40 As Norman Dahl points out, it may be that certain attitudinal or emotional states involve cognitive content. Feelings of pride and mistrust, for example, require having certain kinds of beliefs. Perhaps we might say, though, that the *feeling* of pride is an affective response to the belief or beliefs necessary in order for the pride to exist, and that the *feeling* of mistrust is an affective response to the belief or beliefs necessary in order for the mistrust to exist. I am inclined to say that the noncognitive state that is constitutive of pride (or mistrust, etc.) should be seen as a kind of raw data about ourselves. I find something insightful in Hume’s observation even though I reject his view that beliefs and desires are distinct existences. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. 41 Much will have to be said in defense of this claim. I leave much of that defense for another time. There are three main concerns which need to be dealt with: (i) how do we determine when a particular affective response is characteristic of human beings?; (ii) why should it matter that a response is characteristic when we are capable of shaping our affective natures?; and (iii) if affective responses are original existences in the Humean sense, isn’t it inconsistent to talk as if these responses can be correct and incorrect? Regarding (i): the difficulty here is that characteristic responses might be hard to identify given that we can shape our affective natures. Because we can shape our affective natures, identifying a response as characteristic is (partly) an evaluative matter. Regarding (ii): my short answer is that there is a limit to how we can shape our affective natures, at least through habituation. It is much easier for us to be averse to killing another human being than to have a predilection for it. Regarding (iii): even if our affective responses are entirely noncognitive, I think most people would agree that it still makes sense to talk about these responses being correct or incorrect. An affective response is correct when we think it fits the occasion that gave rise to it. We don’t think it is nonsense, for example, to say that we can overreact at times. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. 42 For example, see Russell Banks’ novel, *Affliction*. I don’t have a citation for Hellie’s work in this area, but am drawing on my memory of an interview of him done in the 1990s by *University of Chicago Magazine*. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. 43 In Jim’s case, one might ask: if his aversion to killing isn’t largely a product of other beliefs he holds, why give any authority to his affective responses as original existences? For we can give shape to our affective natures, and what is at issue here is not the kind of creatures we are but the kind of creatures we ought to be. So if Jim’s aversion is nothing more than an original existence, and what needs to be resolved is the misalignment between this affective response and Jim’s utilitarian beliefs, should it not be the affective response that gets changed? After all, it would seem that original existences are not nearly as informative about the world and our relation to it as our beliefs are (perhaps in part because the latter can be corrected more quickly). I think there are two ways to respond. First, we don’t want to ignore an affective response that is characteristic of us; for if it is truly characteristic of us, we would be going against our natures in trying to educate it out of existence. We would be saying that morality is really designed for creatures other than us. Second, our affective responses as original existences are the product of our dispositions and dispositions sometimes should carry more weight than beliefs we have only recently arrived at. This will be so if in living our lives we have all along aimed at properly educating our affective natures. In this case those natures will have been shaped by beliefs that have undergone some scrutiny, beliefs which we have continued to hold onto over time because we have found good reason for doing so. (In saying this, I am also saying that our affective responses are never just original existences; I think they are also always partly a product of the beliefs we hold.) [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. 44 I suppose we could say that there is a third way to try to ensure that Jim does not in the future face this kind of internal conflict. This third solution would be to try to change the world so that agent’s don’t find themselves in circumstances that pose ethical dilemmas for agents. See (Williams 1985: 47). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. 45 They would tell us something about ourselves in the sense that correct moral judgments would tell us about what is constitutive of human well-being, or about what contributes to human well-being; or about the affective responses that are characteristic of us, or that we can justifiably say are characteristic of us. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. 46 We can think of a fact as “what is said to be so by a sentence that is true” (Stroud 2000: 51). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. 47 Since noncognitivists are the ones who emphasize this distinction, I am giving a noncognitivist view of it. The view I am advocating in this chapter is one in which moral judgments will always be both descriptive and evaluative in nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. 48 I am inclined toward this view because it seems right to say that under certain contexts a judgment like “the lemons are ovoid” is evaluative. While a lemon’s shape does not depend on our perceptions of it, our attitudes towards it, or our beliefs about it, our understanding of its shape does depend on our perceptions of it and our other interests and needs. The purposes for which we take note of the shape of the lemon will make a difference as to how we want to describe that shape. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. 49 In his paper, “Virtue and Reason” (1979). For the present discussion, I am interested mostly in sections 5 and 6 of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. 50 The entry for ‘practical reasoning’ in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (1995) explains why we want to be careful about saying that the conclusion deductively follows from the premises. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. 51 When evaluating McDowell’s views, we should keep in mind that he is not trying to offer a knock-down argument against the mind-independence claim. His project rather is to offer a view of the virtuous agent that is more plausible than the ones held either by realists committed to the two core tenets or by expressivists. We might see him as occupying a sort of middle ground between the expressivist and the realist. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. 52 That is, to see the reasons that the virtuous agent acts on as reasons for oneself to act on. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. 53 The argument in support of entanglement that follows is to my mind much stronger than the one offered by Griffin in his *Well-Being* book (1986: 26-30). It is not clear to me why Griffin’s informed desire account must be subjective. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. 54 McDowell writes: “. . . practical intellect’s coming to be as it ought to be is the acquisition of a second nature, involving the moulding of motivational and evaluative propensities” (1995b: 167). I would think that a virtuous agent’s second nature informs their conception of how to live, and vice versa. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. 55 Recall from Chapter 2 that this realist is generally thought to have to subscribe to some form of intuitionism. The main objection against moral intuitionism is that it cannot satisfactorily explain how the virtuous agent knows what situations require of him or her, or how the virtuous agent knows what is morally relevant. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. 56 See also what McDowell says in this regard in his 1987 paper, pp. 218-19 and in §2 of his 1981 paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. 57 McDowell makes a related point, one that has far more cogency. He points out that if disentanglement were always possible, then it will always be the case that (\*) “the set of items to which a supervening [moral] term is correctly applied need constitute a kind recognizable as such at the level supervened upon” (1981: 145). This would mean, in turn, that “evaluative classifications [would] correspond to kinds into which things can in principle be seen to fall independently of an evaluative outlook” (ibid., 157). McDowell argues that this is something we should be skeptical of because “Understanding why just those things belong together may essentially require understanding the supervening term” (ibid., 145), something which requires appeal to the evaluative outlook in which the term is employed. He also has a very forceful reply to Blackburn (1981), who claims that rejecting the thesis of entanglement does not entail (\*). While it is true that there isn’t actual entailment, the noncognitivist who distances himself from (\*) has the problem of explaining why it is that moral thinking, and the making of moral judgments, appears to be “a matter of the genuine application of concepts”; the noncognitivist who rejects (\*) seems committed to the view that expressing a moral opinion is simply a kind of “sounding off” (McDowell 1981: 157-58). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. 58 McDowell is committed to the thesis of entanglement because it seems to get the phenomenology right. It gives him a way of finding a middle ground between the realist and the expressivist by allowing him to explain the subjective feel to our moral judgments while still holding that they can aspire to a kind of objectivity. More specifically, I think there are three reasons why the thesis of entanglement is important for McDowell: (a) it coheres with the idea that there is an internal, necessary connection between believing or saying that one ought to do X and being motivated to do X; (b) it provides him a way to argue that virtue is knowledge (one of the main aims of the 1979 paper), and thereby claim a kind of objectivity for our moral judgments; and (c) it provides him a way to explain the subjective feel to our moral judgments without resorting to a form of projectivism. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. 59 To my mind this image of reacting to a set of nonevaluative properties doesn’t fit well with noncognitivist projective accounts in which the feature responded to is understood as something that is constructed out of the response. As I say in Chapter 4, it is not clear to me what justifies the noncognitivist-projectivist’s commitment to the kind of supervenience that Blackburn espouses. Why think there would be a logically necessary connection between our moral claims and nonevaluative descriptions of the situations to which those claims are supposed to apply when the unmasking explanation of the feature responded to is supposed to be entirely in terms of the noncognitive response? To accept this logically necessary connection is to accept the idea that the meanings of moral terms like ‘cruel’ have an objective aspect to them. It is to say exactly what the noncognitivist denies, i.e., that moral claims have a descriptive meaning in a very important sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. 60 In other words, it will be possible—contrary to what Blackburn claims (1981: 166)—for an outsider, “someone who has no tendency to share the community’s reaction [to say, cruel actions], . . . to see the things which the community reacts to as genuinely forming a kind”—something for which a description can be given that would allow one to “reliably go on to classify new cases” (Blackburn 1981: 166). In his 1981 paper, McDowell points out that if Blackburn’s expressivist denies this possibility, expressing moral opinions becomes nothing more than a “sounding off” (pp. 157-58; see also footnote 57 above). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. 61 As Bernard Williams writes: “if knowledge is what it claims to be, then knowledge is of a reality which exists independently of that knowledge” (*Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Harmondsworth, 1978, p. 64.) [↑](#footnote-ref-61)