

Moral Realism

Moral realism is a metaethical view committed to robust objectivity in ethics. No single description is likely to capture all realist views, but a reasonably accurate rule is to understand moral realism as the conjunction of three theses:

The semantic thesis: The primary semantic role of moral predicates (such as “right” and “wrong”) is to refer to moral properties (such as rightness and wrongness), so that moral statements (such as “honesty is good” and “slavery is unjust”) purport to represent moral facts, and express propositions that are true or false (or approximately true, largely false, and so on).

The alethic thesis: Some moral propositions are in fact true.

The metaphysical thesis: Moral propositions are true when actions and other objects of moral assessment have the relevant moral properties (so that the relevant moral facts obtain), where these facts and properties are *robust*: their metaphysical status, whatever it is, is not relevantly different from that of (certain types of) ordinary non-moral facts and properties.

To deny any one of these three theses is to embrace some form of *moral irrealism*. Many philosophers consider moral realism the default position because it appears best to capture many central features of ordinary moral thought: the assertoric surface character of ordinary moral discourse, the phenomenology of moral experience, our claim to have moral knowledge, and the possibility (and nature) of genuine moral error, progress, and disagreement even among sincere, open-minded, and well-informed people (Dancy 1986; Brink 1989; Shafer-Landau 2003).

The semantic thesis is (for better or worse) often associated with the related psychological thesis called *cognitivism*, according to which the primary role of moral judgments is to express beliefs. One form of irrealism, *non-cognitivism*, holds that their primary role is to express motivational “non-cognitive” states of mind, such as approving, prescribing, commending, or planning, but can assign moral predicates and judgments a secondary role of referring to (non-moral) properties and expressing (non-moral) beliefs (Copp 2001). How well realists can explain the reliable connection between moral judgment and moral motivation is a matter of some dispute (Smith 1994).

The alethic thesis says that some moral propositions are robustly true only if we combine it with the realist’s metaphysical thesis. The irrealists’ attitude to the alethic thesis depends on their conception of truth. Error theory accepts a robust reading of the semantic thesis but rejects the alethic thesis on this robust reading. It holds that ordinary moral thought presupposes the existence of robust moral facts and properties but is systematically in error: every moral judgment with existential import is mistaken because there are no robust moral facts to make any such judgment true (Mackie 1977). Non-cognitivist irrealists can accept a non-robust reading of the alethic thesis if they endorse minimalism about truth (but see Dreier 2004). This move may eventually earn them the right to speak of moral facts and truths, and to say all the same things that any morally decent person would say about what is right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust, and so on, even though they reject the realist’s metaphysical thesis (Blackburn 1993).

The metaphysical thesis is central to moral realism because realism is primarily a view about metaphysics, not about truth or semantics. It holds that moral facts and properties are not metaphysically inferior in kind to many ordinary sorts of non-moral facts and properties. What is it for a fact or property to be metaphysically robust, though? One sense in which ordinary non-moral properties are robust is that they enter into explanations of real phenomena; water has its surface properties because it is H₂O, for example. In this sense, the realist’s metaphysical thesis says

that moral properties enter into explanations of phenomena that irrealists would explain by other means (Dreier 2004). An irrealist might take the fact that one believes that inequality is unjust to consist in some such fact as that one has decided to include the reduction of inequality among one's aims. A realist might instead say it consists in standing in a certain belief-like relation to the properties of inequality and injustice. Likewise, the realist might say, whether such a belief is correct or mistaken is just a matter of whether the two properties are related as the belief represents them as being related. The realist's explanation of the assertoric features of ordinary moral discourse, possession of moral knowledge, and nature of moral disagreement would be analogous.

Understanding the metaphysical thesis as above affords one (albeit not the only) way of capturing many realists' conviction that ethics concerns objective matters of fact whose existence and nature are independent of anyone's sentiments, opinions, evidence, or theories about what is right or wrong, obligatory, permissible, or impermissible, good or bad, and so on. So understood, the thesis also classifies as irrealist any view according to which explanations of moral phenomena involve no essential reference to moral facts or properties, but only to such factors as our individual tastes, cultural or social conventions and agreements, basic human sentiments, or the beliefs or plans we would have if we were fully informed and rational. Thus *ethical subjectivism*, *ethical relativism*, *projectivism*, and most forms of *constructivism* in ethics rightly count as irrealist even though they accept the realist's semantic and alethic theses.

Disputes within the realist camp concern primarily the nature of moral facts and properties. *Non-naturalist* realists hold that moral properties are robust properties that are distinct from but supervene (see below) on natural properties (Moore 1903; Shafer-Landau 2003). *Naturalist* realists hold that moral properties are robust natural properties. *Reductive* naturalists hold that moral properties are identical to natural properties that we can represent in austere non-moral terms (Railton 1986). *Non-reductive* naturalists hold that moral properties are an irreducible subclass of the class

of natural properties, which we may be unable to represent in austere non-moral terms (Boyd 1988; Brink 1989).

Arguments for and against different forms of moral realism differ also depending on whether we take true statements of property identity to be analytic (true in virtue of the meanings of their constituent terms) or synthetic, and what we think qualifies a property as natural. If, for example, natural properties are just those that we can investigate empirically, then naturalism will hold that knowledge of any synthetic moral proposition is answerable to empirical evidence, whereas non-naturalism will hold that knowledge of some synthetic moral propositions is empirically infeasible (Copp 2003; Shafer-Landau 2003). An issue for synthetic naturalists in particular is what determines the reference of moral predicates to the supposedly natural moral properties. Given their view of the matter, can they explain the intelligibility of such “open questions” as whether something that satisfies a given naturalistic non-moral predicate (such as “is pleasant”) also satisfies a given moral predicate (such as “is good”) (Moore 1903; Horgan and Timmons 1992)?

According to the supervenience argument against moral realism, we can distinguish between a weaker, true claim and a stronger, false claim about the supervenience of the moral on the natural. (“Supervenience” is a technical name for a relation of necessary covariance.) The alleged problem for the realist is that she cannot, but the irrealist can, explain why the weaker supervenience claim should be true, given that the stronger claim is false (Blackburn 1993). According to one clear version of the argument (Dreier 1992), the true claim is that it is analytically necessary that, for each moral property *M* that an object *O* has, there is a (possibly complex) natural property *N* that *O* has, and it is metaphysically necessary that *M* always accompanies *N*. The stronger, putatively false claim differs in saying that *M* always accompanies *N* as a matter of analytic necessity. (Variations of the argument concern predicates rather than properties and involve different types of necessity.) The objection is that if realists are committed to the thesis called “lack of entailment,” according to which no set of non-moral naturalistic truths entails any

particular moral truth, then they must admit (falsely) that it is possible for *M* sometimes not to accompany *N*.

Different forms of moral realism respond differently to the supervenience argument. Analytic naturalists may regard the argument as question-begging, for they deny that the stronger supervenience claim is false (Jackson 1998). Non-naturalists may accept a lack of analytical entailment but claim that duly specified sets of naturalistic truths metaphysically entail particular moral truths because the facts which the former concern exhaustively constitute (in some sense to be explained) the facts which the latter concern (Shafer-Landau 2003). Some synthetic naturalists may say that their theory explains why the weaker supervenience claim is true (since moral properties are natural ones), but entails that no set of non-moral naturalistic truths analytically entails any particular moral truth (since any connection between non-moral and moral truths is synthetic). Others may express doubts as to whether the relevant supervenience claims are formulated so as to make them both interesting and acceptable to synthetic naturalists.

According to the explanatory argument against moral realism, properties of a certain kind are metaphysically robust only if they make a distinctive contribution to our overall explanatory picture of the world (the “explanatory requirement”) but moral properties make no such contribution; therefore, moral properties are not metaphysically robust. A prominent version of this argument claims that mentioning moral properties such as wrongness makes no distinctive contribution to causal explanations of such occurrences as a person’s indignation or her judgment “that’s wrong” upon seeing some hoodlums set a cat on fire, above and beyond the contribution of mentioning the person’s prior beliefs, aversions, and moral principles (Harman 1977). If so, the causal version of the explanatory requirement gives us good reason to deny that there are robust moral facts.

One realist response is to argue that the causal requirement is dubious; for if it is, then it would be no objection to moral realism if moral properties violated that requirement (Shafer-Landau 2003). Moral properties could still play non-causal

explanatory roles. A very different response is to accept the causal requirement, but argue that mentioning moral properties can make a distinctive contribution to causal explanations of both intentional occurrences, such as moral judgments, and non-intentional ones (Sturgeon 1988; Brink 1989). On the latter score, one may argue that a person's kindness can cause her to help others or that injustice or oppression can provoke resistance, and that these properties can play such causal-explanatory roles only if they are real, and indeed natural, properties. Here the intricate question arises whether moral properties are *epiphenomenal*, in that they play no causal-explanatory role over and above the causal-explanatory role of the non-moral properties on which they supervene, or by which they are realized (Miller 2003; Sturgeon 2005).

What unites these debates about moral realism is the concern whether, and how, robust moral facts and properties enter into accounts of various phenomena that irrealists would explain by other means. One general moral may be that arguments in metaethics often are arguments about the best explanation of the phenomena in question. Other important debates between realists and irrealists and within the realist camp concern the rational authority of morality (see rationalism, in ethics), the extent to which moral realism affords a rational basis for resolving moral disagreements, the existence of an internal connection between moral judgment and moral motivation and whether such "motivational internalism" would make moral properties metaphysically strange, and questions about moral methodology and moral epistemology, such as the place of ethics in a naturalistic worldview and the parity or continuity of ethics with empirical inquiry and the sciences.

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