

Objectivity in Law and Morals

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Embracing Objectivity in Ethics

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This chapter is written in support of an objectivist position in ethics. The first part of the chapter attempts to characterize the objectivism defended. And the second presents some arguments that should help to make the objectivism in question appealing.

I characterize ethical objectivism by three claims. First, semantic objectivism: the claim that ethical evaluations posit values — including, of course, disvalues — and do not serve just to express feelings or anything of that kind. Second, ontological objectivism: the claim that there really are ethical values available for evaluations to posit, so that evaluations are not undercut by massive error.¹ And third, justificatory objectivism: the claim that, though ethical justification may not dictate a unique verdict in every case, the verdicts it delivers are equally relevant for every person; they are based on neutral values that have the same significance for all.

Having characterized ethical objectivism in this way, I go on to present some arguments in its defense. With each of the first two claims, I argue that the claim is inherently plausible and bolster this by showing that the main reason why opponents reject it is not compelling. In the case of the third claim, justificatory objectivism, I take a more direct approach. I present considerations that tend to undermine the opposing position, spending only a little time in defending the objectivistic alternative against attack.

Before coming to the main parts of my discussion, however, I should say something on what I have in mind when I speak of ethical values. Ethical values provide grounds for the assessment of the things that people individually and collectively do. What distinguishes them from other grounds of assessment is that they underpin a sort of assessment that has a characteristically authoritative standing. The criticism of an option on grounds of manners or prudence or law may be endorsed by an agent, even someone who is perfectly sincere, without having an effect on their choice; the agent may justify indifference to that criticism by arguing that in the case on hand it would be wrong of them — ethically wrong of them — to honor the demands of etiquette or

prudence or law. But the criticism of an option by reference to ethical values does not leave the same leeway. Under a more or less shared sense of priorities, agents cannot expect to be able to justify indifference to such a criticism by arguing that it would be wrong of them in terms of etiquette or prudence or law, or indeed in any other terms, to honor the demands of ethics. Ethical values are grounds of assessment that are distinguished from other practical criteria of evaluation by the enjoyment of a certain priority.

Systems of justification connect in any society with distinct sets of more or less conventionally recognized norms: norms of etiquette and prudence and law, of course, but also norms of an ethical kind. But doesn't that mean that there is no need to accord any system of justification a priority over others? Doesn't it mean that we should be open as theorists to the discovery that even if our society gives priority to ethical norms and ethical justification, it is perfectly possible that different norms and different forms of justification have priority in other societies? Doesn't it mean that we cannot use the priority claim as a general way of distinguishing ethical values from other criteria of practical evaluation?

Not from my point of view. The challenge just presented supposes that as etiquette and prudence and law are descriptively demarcated realms of norm and assessment, so too with ethics; as there is a descriptively identifiable point of view, and in the nature of the case a limited point of view, associated with the other realms, so there is a similarly limited ethical point of view. But those of us who believe in the priority of ethical justification will reject this supposition. We will say that what distinguishes ethical justification is not the particular norms it invokes but rather the role it plays in relation to justification of the other sorts. We will say that the criterion of ethical as distinct from other kinds of assessment is precisely the fact that it enjoys a certain sort of priority in people's justificatory practices.²

People may sometimes speak of what is ethically required or permitted, of course, with implicit scare quotes around the word "ethical" or "moral." In this case they refer to what accords with the ethical norms recognized in their culture, not necessarily with the norms that they themselves would uphold; the point of the scare quotes is to mark that distance. But in its primary, committed form, talk of ethical justifiability refers to justifiability in the ultimate currency of justification: justifiability by criteria that cannot be suspended in the manner of the criteria associated with etiquette and other systems.

You want to know, then, whether those in another society are arguing in ethical terms about the justifiability of an action? Ask whether or not they regard the assessment at issue as the sort that can be set aside in the way that most of us are occasionally willing to set aside assessments by reference to etiquette or prudence or legality. If the assessment sought is not susceptible to that sort of suspension, then what is sought is precisely an ethical evaluation of the act. Or so at any rate I shall assume. Ethical values are those values that

people invoke in the sort of assessment that they do not treat as suspendable in the relevant sense. Ethical values provide the ultimate or reserve currency in which people seek to gauge the justifiability of what they and others do.

One final comment. A number of contemporary philosophers are antimoralists and reject the view that moral considerations override all competing reasons.³ Is my characterization of ethical values inconsistent with their point of view? Not necessarily. I say that within our justificatory practices ethical values are distinguished by the priority they enjoy. Antimoralists can be cast, perhaps with a little regimentation, as rejecting the universal relevance of such justificatory practices; they can be taken to say that people should not always be required to justify themselves in the manner that would introduce ethical considerations. I return to their point of view at the end of this essay.

I. A Characterization of Ethical Objectivism

To say that ethical values are objective is, by my lights, to defend three distinct, objectivistic claims: semantic, ontological, and justificatory. I shall approach the characterization of objectivism by discussing these doctrines and explaining why each, in its particular realm, looks to be a natural part of an overall objectivist position.

A. Semantic Objectivism

To be a semantic objectivist about any area of discourse is to hold that the sentences in that area are regularly used with the intention of expressing or communicating states of belief and knowledge—cognitive attitudes—as to how things are in the relevant domain. It is to defend a cognitivist picture of the purpose—the purpose as revealed in common practice—for which participants in the discourse resort to those sentences. They resort to those sentences in order to report on how things are, according to their own view of things. But though the primary account of semantic objectivism refers us to the belief-expressing intention of speakers, that account also connects with other, perhaps more familiar characterizations. These generally associate cognitivism about any discourse with the claim that relevant utterances are assertoric and truth-conditional in character.

It is common since Frege to distinguish between the different forces with which a sentence may be uttered or used. Take a sentence like "James is going to town." This sentence, despite the indicative mood, may be uttered with interrogative or imperative or optative or exclamatory force, not just with assertoric. It may be uttered in a tone of voice that indicates that the speaker is asking a question or giving an order or making a wish or expressing amazement as distinct from simply reporting a matter of fact. It may be used so that it is equivalent in usage to "Is James going to town?" or "Let James go to town" or "Would that James would go to town" or "James, in town!"

Semantic objectivists about any area of discourse, under our initial account, are bound to hold that sentences in the discourse can be used with assertoric force. This is because only sentences with assertoric force can be used with the intention of expressing cognitive attitudes. Sentences that lack all assertoric force can register the intentions or wishes or feelings of speakers but not—at least, in a direct fashion—their beliefs. Thus semantic objectivism entails the claim that the utterances in the discourse under consideration include assertions.

When a sentence is used assertorically to report a matter of fact, not just to formulate a question or a command, and not just to express a wish or a feeling or anything of that kind, then the utterance—the sentence in use—is presumptively truth-conditional. It directs us to a condition, presumptively well defined, such that it is true if that condition obtains, false if it does not obtain. The condition may turn out to be not well defined; it may be like the condition answering to "That is a dagger," where there is nothing for the demonstrative to pick out. In that case the sentence is presumptively truth-conditional but not actually so. It is presumptively apt to be true or false but, because of not managing to pick out a condition by which its truth-value can be determined, it is not actually so.

We began with a characterization under which semantic objectivism about any discourse holds that the sentences are regularly used with the intention of expressing cognitive attitudes. We saw that that entails the claim that in such employment the sentences are used with assertoric force. And we now see that it therefore entails the claim that in such employment the sentences are presumptively truth-conditional or truth-apt. Do those entailments exhaust the content of semantic objectivism? Does semantic objectivism amount to a doctrine that we might describe as truth-conditionalism or, more pedantically, presumptive truth-conditionalism?

I think that this is indeed what semantic objectivism amounts to, at least in the ethical case. There may be a concept of truth or truth-aptness that allows us to say that a discourse is assertoric and truth-conditional, yet not fit to express belief.⁴ But that is not the concept with which we ordinarily work, since any sentences that are allowed to be true or false raise a question for us as to whether we should believe them.⁵ Semantic objectivism in ethics amounts to nothing more or less than truth-conditionalism. Or so at any rate I shall assume.⁶

Expressivism

But if that is what semantic objectivism amounts to in ethics, then what do opponents say? They must deny that the sentences in the area are used with the intention of expressing beliefs or, equivalently, that they are presumptively truth-conditional. Perhaps some sentences wear the surface appearance of

assertions, and perhaps there is even an honorific sense in which they can pass as true or false, but semantic nonobjectivists must hold that proper analysis will reveal them to be nonassertoric expressions of noncognitive attitudes. The view taken of the would-be assertions will be that they are expressions of such attitudes, not attempts to say anything about the world: not even attempts to say that the speaker has the attitudes expressed.

The attitude allegedly expressed in ethical assessments may be an emotion or sentiment, for example, so that saying that something is good or right or whatever amounts, at least in significant part, to a positive exclamation on a par with "Wow!" or "Bravo!"⁷ Or it may be a prescriptive attitude, most plausibly an attitude of prescribing something universally, so that saying that something is right amounts to enjoining or commanding that anyone in the relevant situation should perform that act.⁸ Expressivism, as it is often called, represents a broad family of alternatives to semantic objectivism.

My own belief is that expressivism, characterized in this more or less standard manner, is much more problematic than is generally believed. The sentences that allegedly express emotive or prescriptive attitudes are intentionally produced in ordinary, sincere usage — they are not like reflexes of approval or disapproval — and so they must be the product of a belief on the agent's part that he or she does indeed have those attitudes. Why don't they serve to express that belief, then, at the same time that they serve to express the attitude in question? Why don't they serve in the double role — the role of simultaneously expressing an attitude and the belief that one has that attitude — exemplified by a sentence like "I approve"? If these questions cannot be satisfactorily answered, then expressivism collapses into something like the subjectivist doctrine described by G. E. Moore.⁹ According to this doctrine, ethical evaluations have truth-conditions but all that it takes to make them true is that the subject has the attitudes they allegedly report. This is not the place to develop that criticism, however, and I shall proceed on the assumption that expressivism is not an inherently problematic alternative to semantic objectivism.¹⁰

Semantic objectivists about ethics deny that ethical sentences are used only with the intention of expressing emotional or prescriptive attitudes or anything of that kind; they reject all forms of the expressivism just characterized. They say that when people speak of things being fair or just, when they condemn certain actions as being cruel or intemperate, or when they settle on a choice as the desirable or right one to take, then they mean to be identifying and ascribing properties that answer to the names of fairness and justice, cruelty and intemperance, desirability and rightness. Semantic objectivists hold that when people provide ethical assessments in such terms, then they mean to posit the reality of the values and disvalues in question and to pronounce on the distribution of those properties across different arrangements and actions and choices. The ethical assessments are used with the intention of expressing beliefs in

those distributions, so the view goes; they are used in a way that supposes that they are truth-conditional and truth-apt and so fitted to the expression of such beliefs.

One caveat, however. While semantic objectivists deny that ethical utterances are used only with the intention of expressing emotional or prescriptive attitudes and the like, they can still recognize a place for such noncognitive attitudes. Suppose that the property that is ascribed in an ethical assertion, according to their view, is identified as the property in virtue of which an option evokes a certain response under certain conditions: this, in the way that the property of being admirable is identified by reference to the response of admiration. In that case someone who uses an ethical assertion to express a belief in the presence of the property will often express also the presence of the noncognitive attitude. Someone who says that some choice was admirable will not only express a belief that it was admirable but also a feeling of admiration for the act. Semantic objectivists about ethics do not have to say that ethical utterances express beliefs and nothing but beliefs; they need only say that beliefs figure crucially among the attitudes that the utterances express.

Ethical Objectivity and Semantic Objectivity

How reasonable is it to tie a belief in ethical objectivity to a semantic objectivism — a cognitivism — about ethical assessments? When we consider traditional emotivist positions as exemplars of expressivism, it may seem entirely compelling, for those positions give ethical evaluations a decidedly particularistic, even capricious, cast: they make evaluations look like affective hiccups that have no objective significance. But I should stress that not all expressivist views of ethics are of this kind and that tying ethical objectivism to a semantic objectivism about evaluation is not quite as uncontroversial as might be thought.

Take the expressivist view that ethical evaluations express universal prescriptions. Someone who defends such a view, like R. M. Hare,¹¹ may think that human beings are similar enough for it to be the case that what is universally prescribable for one will be universally prescribable for others. Thus they may think that there is room for debate about what is right — what is right by anyone's lights — and that sustained debate should identify the right choice in any decision. That sort of prescriptivism is objectivist in the perfectly ordinary sense that it sees ethical evaluation as an enterprise in which people can expect to be rationally brought to a common mind. While it does not posit objective values — that is, objective properties that can be a matter of cognition — it does represent ethical assessment as bearing on rationally and commonly resolvable questions. While not semantically objectivist it is, as we might say, intersubjectivist; it does not allow ethics to sink in a quagmire of individually variable and more or less capricious responses.

Prescriptivism is not the only expressivist position that is intersubjectivist, even rationalist, in this sense. Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard have argued, for example, that even if ethical evaluations express sentiments, it does not follow that just about anything goes in the realm of those emotions.¹² Someone can find themselves in trouble with others – perhaps also in trouble with their more reflective self – for the sentiments they express in ethical evaluation. And taking their stand on the side of their present sentiments, someone can say here and now that even were their present sentiments different – even if their sentiments about cruelly teasing a child were different – it would be wrong to act in a manner allowed by those changed feelings: it would be wrong to tease a child cruelly.¹³ Under this sort of view, as under prescriptivism, we may expect the task of ethical assessment to present itself as a more or less rationally resolvable challenge.

Notwithstanding the capacity of various expressivist positions to vindicate intersubjectivism, however, I am going to assume here that ethical objectivism is committed to a nonexpressivist view: that is, in effect, to semantic objectivism. In fairness to the opposition it is important to recognize that expressivism does not necessarily give us a deflationary or debunking view of ethical debate: that it can sustain an intersubjectivist attitude. But still the expressivist position, even in its intersubjectivist forms, falls well short of what I shall take here to represent an objectivist approach.¹⁴

B. *Ontological Objectivism*

Consistently with being a semantic objectivist about any area of discourse, however, it is possible to take a fairly dim view of that discourse. In particular, it is possible to hold that while participants do indeed use sentences with the intention of expressing beliefs, and while the sentences are presumptively truth-conditional, actually the entities characteristically posited by those sentences and beliefs – the entities distinctive of the domain of discourse in question – are a chimera. Thus the idea would be that notwithstanding the cognitivist aspirations of participants, the discourse in question is undercut by massive error.

What would be the effect of such massive error on the status of a discourse? What in particular would be the effect of such error about values? Suppose we were to conclude that people are mistaken in thinking that there are values and disvalues answering to terms like “just” and “inequitable,” “right” and “wrong,” and that their beliefs in the distribution of such properties fail for the reason that there are no properties available to be distributed. What in that case should we say about the status of ethical discourse?

We might say either of two things. We might maintain that while ethical assessments are presumptively truth-conditional, the truth-conditions that they aspire to pick out are not well defined; they are like the truth-condition of a sentence such as “That is a dagger,” where there is nothing for the demonstra-

tive to refer to. In that case we would say that though presumptively truth-conditional, the assessments are not actually so; they are neither true nor false, because they do not successfully pick out conditions by which their truth or falsehood is determined.

Alternatively, however, we might have a view of the truth-conditions that the assessments aspire to pick out such that though there are no values or disvalues, still the truth-conditions are well-defined. We might deny that in saying an action is fair, for example, people are ascribing that property, presumptively available for demonstration, which goes by the name of “fairness”; if that is how things were, then the nonreality of the property would leave the truth-condition of the sentence ill-defined. We might hold instead that in saying such a thing people are asserting, first, that there is a property that deserves to go by the name of “fairness” and, second, that the action has the property in question. If we held that view, then the nonreality of the property would not mean that the truth-condition was ill-defined; it would just mean that the condition was unfulfilled and that the sentence was false.

On this second view, then, error about the reality of values would impact, not on the truth-conditional or truth-aptness of ethical assessments, but on their truth-value. It would entail that any sentence of the form “X is fair,” “X is right,” “X is cruel,” “X is unjust” – assuming these are ethical assessments – is false. It is false, not for the contingent reason that X lacks the property ascribed, but for the deeper reason that there is no property for X to have or lack. More generally, this second view would mean that ethical assessments that are not subject to external negation – as in “It is not the case that X is fair,” “It is not the case that X is wrong” – all come out as false.

We need not judge on which of these views would be the more compelling one to take in the case of there being no values and disvalues of the kind that ethical discourse, according to semantic objectivism, posits. Under either view the participants in the discourse would suffer from massive error: in the first case, from error about the availability of truth-conditions for their assessments; in the second case, from error about the fulfillment of the truth-conditions available. Someone who defends either view maintains that ordinary people are deceived about values and disvalues; each amounts to a form of eliminativism about such entities.

It is a striking feature of moral philosophy that the possibility of being ontologically (as distinct from semantically) nonobjectivist about ethical discourse – the possibility of ethical eliminativism – has only recently been identified.¹⁵ But once the possibility is identified, it is clear that anyone who aspires to defend ethical objectivism must reject it. That is my second claim in characterization of an objectivist position in ethics. Ethical objectivism, so I say, is bound to uphold not just semantic objectivism about ethical discourse but also ontological. It is bound to maintain that not only do ethical assessments posit values and disvalues, those properties are rightly posited: they are, as we say, objective realities.

There is unlikely to be any challenge to the claim that if semantic objectivists about ethics are to count as full-blown ethical objectivists, then they must embrace ontological objectivism too. We saw that expressivism can make some claim to be consistent with objectivism; if it does not cast ethical evaluations as purporting to say how things objectively are, it can at least give support to an intersubjectivist view of ethical debate. But eliminativism can make no claims of this kind. On the ontological issue of the reality of values and disvalues it epitomizes the attitude of someone who wants to reject ethical objectivism.

Objective but Not Transcendent Values

But if ontological objectivism is a necessary part of an overall objectivist position, there may be a question as to whether it needs strengthening. The suggestion would be that ethical objectivists may have to claim more on the ontological front than just that values are objective realities. They may have to claim that values are objective realities that enjoy a certain independence of human beings, even a certain lack of connection with them. They may have to claim that values, as I shall say, are transcendent realities.

Before considering this suggestion, it will be useful to make a minor concession. It is possible to imagine someone who is a semantic and ontological objectivist about ethical discourse, but only because they maintain a very debunking construal of that discourse. They interpret ethical assessments in such a manner that their truth-conditions fall well short of what they intuitively seem to be. Consider the subjectivism described by G. E. Moore,¹⁶ for example; I suggested earlier that expressivism may collapse into such a doctrine. According to subjectivism all that is said in the claim that something is good or right is that the speaker approves of it — or, in a more plausible version, that it satisfies (the speaker's) presupposed standards¹⁷ — and all that is required for there to be ethical values, then, is that the speaker does indeed have such attitudes of approval or such standards. The subjectivist construal of ethical assessments is counterintuitively debunking, running against our sense that ethical evaluations have the same truth-conditions as they are uttered now by one person, now another, and running against our assumption that we approve of things because they have certain values, not the other way around.¹⁸ It would be misleading to say that someone who held by such a position — someone who defended semantic and ontological objectivism relative to such an interpretation of ethical assessments — was an ethical objectivist. Or so at any rate I am happy to concede.¹⁹

But let us assume, reasonably, that semantic and ontological objectivism are upheld relative to an interpretation of ethical assessments that is not debunking in this way. The question then is whether something more than the objectivist commitment is required at the ontological level for a full-blown ethical objec-

tivism. Do values and disvalues have to be, not just objective realities, but realities of transcendent significance?

What would it be for ethical values to be transcendent? There are two salient possibilities. The first is that there are many different conceptions of what it is to be truth-apt or truth-conditional and that the values posited in ethical discourse are transcendent so far as ethical sentences are truth-conditional in a heavyweight rather than a lightweight sense.²⁰ The other possibility is that there is only one conception of truth-aptness or truth-conditionality for sentences and that the values posited in ethical discourse are transcendent so far as the truth-conditions of ethical sentences, like the truth-conditions of sentences in physics and theology, bear on how things are in the world at large — the natural and perhaps nonnatural world — and not on how things are related to us human beings.²¹

I prefer to think of the transcendence issue in the second manner. There is only one way for sentences to be truth-conditional, I believe: by being used in ordinary circumstances with the intention of expressing beliefs, as I suggested earlier. But there are many varieties in which truth-conditions may come. Some conditions may bear on how things are with us human beings, for example, or with our responses to things, and others may bear on how things are in realms and in respects that have little or no special connection to our species. The transcendence issue is whether the truth-conditions of ethical sentences bear primarily on us and the relations that things have to us or whether they bear primarily on the nature of the nonhuman world. When we speak of what is amusing or disgusting or colored, we speak of things as they relate to us. When we speak of what has positive electrical charge, or what weighs heavier than what, or of the creation of the universe by a benevolent god, then we speak of things as they are independently of us. The transcendence issue is whether ethical sentences belong with sentences in the former or with sentences in the latter category.²²

My reason for preferring this way of formulating the question is that it provides a perfectly good account of it, without running into the sorts of problems that are bound to go with letting the conception of truth-aptness — and therefore truth — go plural and ambiguous.²³ The conception of what it is to be wealthy may be the same for different societies consistently with wealth requiring many more possessions and capabilities in an advanced society than it would require in a traditional community.²⁴ And similarly the conception of what it is to be truth-apt and the conception of what it is to be true may be the same for different discourses consistently with truth-aptness and truth making very different requirements in different domains; in some domains truth may require the nonhuman world to assume a distinctive configuration, in others it may require little more than the availability of a certain pattern in human responses to things.²⁵

We can return finally to the question raised earlier. Do ethical objec-

ivists have to think about values and disvalues in a transcendent way? Do they have to think that the truth-conditions of ethical sentences bear primarily on how the nonhuman world is and that the things that make such sentences true may have no special connection to the human species? Do they have to think of ethical values and disvalues as comets that streak into the atmosphere of human thought, imposing on us demands that come truly from without? Or can ethical objectivists cast values and disvalues in a more anthropocentric light? Can they see them, for example, as features of the world that assume shape and salience, and that attract our attention, only in virtue of producing certain responses in us? Can they see them in the way most of us see colors: as properties of things, and perhaps independently describable properties of things, that are unified and important only in virtue of their association with our color sensations?

I propose that we should not associate ethical objectivism with a belief in transcendent values, for two reasons. One is that it is hard to see how there could be transcendent values consistently with a naturalistic picture of the universe: consistently with a picture, roughly, under which all that there is in the empirical world is composed of microphysical elements and is governed by microphysical laws.²⁶ Only the presence of Platonic properties breaking in upon our attention from a nonnatural sphere – only the reality of things like Plato's form of the good – would seem to be capable of vindicating ethical transcendence. Many of us will want to reject such properties and it would seem to be a good idea to construe ethical objectivism so that it stands some chance of being true in the purely naturalistic world that we countenance.

The other reason for not associating ethical objectivism with transcendence is nicely complementary to the first consideration. By traditional lights it would be an important win for those who believe in the objectivity of ethics to be able to argue that values and disvalues are on a par, for example, with colors.²⁷ After all, color appearances are remarkably constant as between different lights and different observers and where there are divergences, we readily account for them by reference to factors that are reasonably cast as perturbances.²⁸ Moreover this convergence on the colors of things is produced in the context of a semantically and ontologically objectivist framework; it is not just the intersubjectivist sort of convergence for which certain expressivists might look. If values and disvalues could be made out to have a status like that which colors enjoy, then intuitively that would be a big win for those who believe in the objectivity of ethics.

I think that these considerations ought to persuade us to dissociate objectivism from a belief in transcendent values. If the two seem to be connected, that may only be because objectivity is often contrasted, not with nonobjectivity, but with subjectivity.²⁹ The construal of objectivity as the opposite of subjectivity may suggest that someone who espouses ethical objectivism in any full sense of the term must be opposed to a broadly subjective or anthropocentric view of the values and disvalues countenanced. But this consideration ought to

have no hold on us. For the sense of objectivity that is at issue in our discussion, of course, is the sense in which the antonym is nonobjectivity, not subjectivity. Ontological objectivism will be vindicated by the reality of any ethical values, even values that are decidedly immanent to human life: even values that do not have a quasi-religious transcendence.³⁰

In suggesting that subjectivism was a counterintuitive account of the content of ethical evaluation, I argued that it offended against the common assumption that we approve of things because they have certain values, not the other way around.³¹ It should be noticed in this connection that taking values to be immanent to human life does not mean rejecting that assumption. Colors are immanent to human life in the intended sense and yet we have no hesitation in thinking that when we see something as red, and conditions are normal, then we do so because it is red. Perhaps there is a sense in which red things are red because we see them as red: it is because we see them that way that they are not some other class of things are called by the word "red." But in the primary causal sense, it is clear that we see things as red because they are red, and not the other way around.³²

C. *Justificatory Objectivism*

We have argued so far that on the issues surveyed ethical objectivism requires no less and no more than semantic and ontological objectivism. No less, because it must reject both expressivism and eliminativism. No more, because it need not embrace such further doctrines as a belief in transcendent values and disvalues. But the issues surveyed are not all the issues there are in this realm. For besides the question of whether ethical evaluations are presumptively truth-conditional, and besides the question of whether the values and disvalues postulated are objective realities, there is a question as to how ethical values and disvalues serve in people's attempts to assess what they do: ultimately, in people's attempts to justify their choices to one another.

The question here is whether there is a single set of values and disvalues such that each person is required to invoke those properties in any bedrock justification of choice or action. Consistently with semantic and ontological objectivism, there may be no such single pool of justificatory values and disvalues. There may be no single currency of justification, and no exchange system that might enable us to construct one. Each individual, or each among a certain set of groups or cultures or societies, may have to draw on a different set of values as the ultimate justifiers by which to assess choice. Values and disvalues may vary from individual to individual or from group to group, so that assessment and justification are always relative to the position of the valuer and a certain relativism is vindicated.

As ethical objectivism is opposed to expressivism and eliminativism, so it is

naturally opposed to any such form of relativism. Consider the theist who says that there is a god. We do not ask such a person whether they think that there is one god or many, for the presupposition of avowing that there is a god is that there is at most one; the existence claim is normally tied to a uniqueness assumption. What goes for the theist goes, in parallel, for the ethical objectivist. When the objectivist says that there are objective values and disvalues, we naturally presume that they are expressing a belief in a single set of such entities. It would be downright Pickwickian of someone to say that there are objective values and disvalues and then to add that not only are there objective values and disvalues, there are as many sets of values and disvalues as there are valuational positions.

There is another way of bringing out the natural opposition between anything that deserves the name of ethical objectivism and the belief that values and disvalues vary between individuals or groups, so that justification is relativized to the valuer's position. This is to draw attention to the fact that the word "objective" has a dual connotation in ordinary usage. Under the first connotation, anything that is described as objective belongs with the world that we human beings confront; it is not part of our imagining or invention. Under the second, anything that is described as objective belongs equally to all of us human beings; it is common, intersubjective property. To argue that ethical objectivism is consistent with some form of relativization would be to work against the grain of this second connotation.

Justification, Substantive and Isomorphic

There may be a difficulty in seeing, not that objectivism must reject any form of relativism, but that there is any serious position there for objectivism to reject. By the account given earlier, ethics has to do essentially with assessment and justification. And if two people belong to different valuational positions, acknowledging different values and disvalues, doesn't that mean that neither will be able to justify to the other those choices that are supported by unshared values?

Ethical relativism would certainly mean that neither will be able to justify such choices to the other in the straightforward or substantive sense of pointing to commonly recognized values that support it. Neither will be able to display the choice as one that is compelling from both perspectives. But there is a weaker sense of justification available even in everyday life and the relativist can argue that such justification is consistent with a relativity of values and disvalues.

Even if my values and disvalues are different from yours and justify different things from yours, it may be a matter of common belief between us that were you in my valuational position then you would value the things that I currently value and justify the things that I currently justify. With some of my

current choices, then, I won't be able to present them as substantively justifiable from your point of view. But I will be able to present them as isomorphically justifiable, so to speak. I will be able to argue that these are choices that you would condone were you in my position, even if they are choices you currently criticize. And what I am able to do in relation to you, you may be able to do in relation to me. We can each justify ourselves to the other, if not in terms of substantive justifiability, at least in terms of isomorphic.

The isomorphic sort of justification that relativism could continue to permit is already familiar from everyday life. Often we are unable to persuade one another of the truth of our respective beliefs – say, beliefs of a religious character – and of the choices that they lead us to make. But in such cases we still have resort, quite naturally, to a second-grade way of justifying those choices. I argue with you that were you in my position – did you have my upbringing, or whatever – then you would accept what I believe and condone what I choose. This practice shows that isomorphic justifiability has a place in everyday life and that the relativist need not be cast as revising our notions of justification.

Relativism, Idiolectical and Indexical

We have argued that relativism is a possible position and that ethical objectivists are required to reject it. A last question, however, bears on what might be involved in embracing a relativist view and, by implication, what is involved in upholding the objectivist position.

The classical form of relativism would say that while people in different positions employ the same evaluative terms or concepts, and employ them to express the same beliefs, an evaluation can be true at one valuational position and false at another; there is truth-for-this-position and truth-for-that but no such thing as truth, period. This relativism about truth is hard to square with the fact that in asserting the doctrine in question, we must assume that it is true: and presumably assume that it is true, period. And besides, relativism about truth does not fit with what we have been assuming up to this point about truth-aptness and truth. Thus I propose not to consider such a form of relativism here. In any case neglecting it should not make for much of a loss, since there are two other forms of relativism that may capture much of what relativists about truth have wanted to maintain about ethics.

Where the relativist about truth assumes that people in different positions employ the same ethical terms or concepts, and employ them to express the same beliefs, the other two sorts of relativists deny those respective assumptions. The first sort argues that in different positions people employ different terms or concepts; the second argues that in different positions people employ the same terms or concepts but to express different beliefs. The first relativist says that each position offers an idiolectical language that those in other posi-

tions may not understand. The second says that while there are not different evaluative idiolects — while our languages of evaluation are identical or intertranslatable — the common terms used in fundamental assessments include terms that are indexical in the manner of “I,” “you,” “here” and “now” and serve to formulate different beliefs, different bedrock evaluations. The beliefs will be different in the way in which my belief that I am hungry is different from your belief that you are hungry: they will have different truth-conditions.

Idiolectal relativism may take the radical but practically not very relevant form of arguing that some cultures are so distant from one another that there is no translating the evaluative terms of either into the terms of the other; they are, as it is often said, incommensurable. Alternatively it may take the more domestic, and more threatening form of saying that while we use lexemes like “kind” and “fair” and “right” in common, these do not always function in the same way within our different perspectives; what we mean by them may vary between speakers. Whether in exotic or domestic form, however, idiolectal relativism will be objectionable to anyone who believes in the objectivity of ethical values. The objectivist will say that there are values and disvalues available such that they offer the right referents for the terms in question and that while there may be differences in how people use the terms, there ought to be a permanent possibility of resolving those differences, or of explaining the failure of resolution in a way that keeps meaning and reference common.³³

Indexical relativism comes in two main varieties, one analytical, the other normative. Analytical indexicalism argues, in a debunking account of evaluative content, that what “That is V” means in my mouth, where “V” is “desirable” or “right” or whatever, is that I approve in some way — or for a group to which I belong, that we approve in some way — of the option or proposal in question. When I say that something is desirable, or right, I mean that it satisfies my or our standards.³⁴ I may think that everyone ought to satisfy my standards but if the indexicalism is truly relativist in spirit, I will think that everyone ought to satisfy their own standards: they ought to do what is desirable-by-their-lights or right-by-their-lights. I agreed in the last section to assume that ethical assessments were not to be interpreted in such a counterintuitive, debunking way and I shall concentrate here on the normative version of indexical relativism.

What the normative indexicalist holds is that the expressions that identify the ultimate justifiers of choice are indexical expressions that refer us explicitly to concerns like, in my own case: preserving my integrity, keeping my promises, and furthering my long-term interests, the welfare of my children, the happiness of my friends, or the good of my country. The claim will be, in relativist spirit, that everyone’s choices have to be justified by reference to some ultimate set of values, and while we may use the same evaluative language to express those values, there need be no one ultimate set of values by reference to which the choices have to be justified. This is because index-

icalized values like the welfare of my children or my friends may figure among my ultimate justifiers, the welfare of your children and your friends among yours. All justifications end somewhere but there will be nowhere that all justifications end.

Normative indexicalism is a common creed, because it is implicit in every form of nonconsequentialism. Consequentialists say, roughly, that the right option in any choice is that which maximizes expected, neutral value: that which best promotes the realization of nonindexical goods. Opponents of consequentialism say that, no, the right option is not that which best promotes such neutral goods.³⁵ They say that the right option may often be a function of an agent-relative value such as the preservation of the agent’s integrity, the keeping of their promises, or the nurture of their children. In effect they defend normative indexicalism.³⁶ The varieties of nonconsequentialism are endless. The right option may be that which manifests virtue, for example, as virtue ethicists say, where manifesting virtue does not require promoting virtue more generally.³⁷ Or that which conforms to what would be supported in a moral contract, as contractualists hold, where conformity does not enjoin promoting conformity more generally.³⁸ Or that which is universally prescribable, where performing the prescribable does not mean promoting its general performance.³⁹ Or anything of the kind.

To sum up, then, the rejection of relativism has deep implications. It involves not just the belief that truth is not relative to position, and not just the belief that our terms of evaluation and justification can in principle be rendered commensurable; it also involves a belief in the soundness of a broadly consequentialist position. While ethical objectivism is quite intuitively linked with justificatory as well as with semantic and ontological objectivism, it may be surprising that the justifications linkage involves a consequentialist commitment.

II. A Defense of Ethical Objectivism

My characterization of ethical objectivism may or may not be found intuitive. It may be regarded as a fair analysis of the sort of doctrine that deserves to be called by that name. Or it may be taken as an entirely stipulative account of what the name shall be used to mean in these discussions. But however it is understood, it gives us the questions with which we shall be concerned in the remainder of the paper. I want to reveal the strength of the argument for ethical objectivism. And so I need to look in turn at the case for semantic objectivism, the case for ontological objectivism, and the case for justificatory objectivism.

A. Semantic Objectivism

Semantic objectivists hold that ethical sentences are often used with the intention of expressing beliefs and that they are therefore presumptively truth-

conditional. Thus the first issue is whether semantic objectivists are right in making this claim.

There are three distinctive ways in which we treat ordinary assertions. First, of course, we stand over them or, precisely, assert them. Second, we treat them as capable of being denied, as when someone asserts the counterpart sentence that begins with words like "It is not the case that . . ." And third, we regard them as capable of being, not denied, but supposed: in particular, capable of being used within the antecedent of a conditional that tells us what would follow in some sense from the truth of the assertion.

The most distinctive form of treatment among these three is the embedding of the asserted sentence in the antecedent place of a conditional. For whatever may be said about standing over and denying other utterances, it seems fairly clear that we embed only assertions in the antecedents of conditionals. Take any assertion of the form "It is the case that *p*." We can always imagine usages – sensible, straightforward, and indeed assertoric usages – for words of the form "If it is the case that *p*, then *q*." And we can easily make sense of the point of such usages, even if we disagree on details. Given that the sentence "It is the case that *p*" can serve to express a belief, the conditional "If it is the case that *p*, then *q*" may serve to reveal what follows according to my beliefs when those beliefs are minimally revised to include the belief that *p*. Or it may serve to describe what would follow in the objective world in the event of that world retaining its current history and/or laws and yet – perhaps impossibly, according to my current beliefs – being a *p*-world. It may serve to reveal the implications, in any such sense, of the world's being of a *p*-character.

But while this is so with assertions, it does not appear to be the case with sentences that have nonassertoric force. Take any straightforward question or prescription or wish or exclamation: "Is it the case that *p*?", "Make it the case that *p*," "Would that *p*," "Wow: *p*!" It appears that we cannot retain the marker of nonassertoric force and embed the sentence in the antecedent of a conditional. We cannot say "If it is the case that *p*, then *q*"; or "If make it the case that *p*, then *q*"; or "If would that *p*, then *q*"; or "If wow: *p*, then *q*." But more important even than this consideration is the fact that we cannot readily identify a point for such nonassertoric conditionals. The conditionals cannot elucidate the implications of the world being of a *p*-character, since the antecedent clauses do not correspond to assertions that express a belief that it is of that character. So what on earth could they be used to do?

In view of the sorts of considerations just rehearsed, Peter Geach⁴⁰ proposed that we use the antecedent-place test to determine whether or not evaluations are assertoric, presumptively truth-conditional, and intended to express belief contents. And, as he himself argued, the antecedent-place test strongly suggests that evaluations are of an assertoric kind. Take any evaluation such as "it is cruel to torture cats," or "an equal distribution of benefits would be fair," or "it is always right to insist on honesty among public officials." Any of those

sentences can be fitted readily into the antecedent of a conditional and in each case it is easy to give a straightforward gloss on why the conditional makes sense. We can readily say, for example, that if it is always right to insist on honesty among public officials, then it must always be feasible for such officials to behave honestly. And we can easily explain what is going on in such a conditional, or so at least it seems. Plausibly, the conditional displays what follows according to our beliefs from the world being such that insistence on honesty is always right; revise that belief set so that it includes the belief about the rightness of insisting on honesty and, at least under a minimal revision, it is going to include the belief in the feasibility of honesty.

I had said that the first issue in defending semantic objectivists is whether their claim that we treat evaluations as ordinary truth-apt assertions is borne out in everyday practice. We certainly assert and deny evaluations in the ordinary manner and, so it now appears, we embed them in the antecedent places of conditionals in the manner that is particularly characteristic of asserted sentences. The evidence, on the face of it, is that semantic objectivism is correct. Evaluations are presumptively truth-conditional assertions that are intended to express the contents of beliefs. They are of a kind with all of the other sorts of sentences in which we aspire to say how the world is and not just to raise questions, give orders, make wishes, or express feelings.

But of course that is not the end of the matter. For, unsurprisingly, there have been a number of theoretical attempts to explain how evaluations can pass the antecedent-place test while not counting as assertions proper: while only counting, in Michael Dummett's phrase, as quasi-assertions.⁴¹ The idea, roughly, is that even if I only mean to prescribe or exclaim in saying that something is right, the conditional that begins "If it is right that such and such" can serve to express what would have to be the case, under certain constraints, were the choice to write prescription or exclamation from me. This may look like an ad hoc response to the argument for semantic objectivism: an epicycle designed for the preservation of a less and less compelling position.⁴² But we cannot dismiss it out of hand and we cannot say that the evidence of our evaluative performance is straightforwardly inconsistent with an expressivist, nonobjectivist position.

What we can say, however, is that since semantic objectivism makes more straightforward sense of our evaluative performance – of the way we treat ethical evaluations – then the onus of proof lies with expressivists. It is up to them to tell us why semantic objectivism is so repellent and why we should be driven to a position that requires a nonstraightforward account of our evaluative performance: in particular, a nonstraightforward account of the point in embedding evaluations in the antecedent places of conditionals.

The main reason why many expressivists shy away from semantic objectivism is that in their view semantic objectivism leads to an eliminativism about values. They think that ontological objectivism cannot be defended, on the

grounds that values and disvalues would be mysterious entities to countenance. And so they reason that if they take evaluations to be intended as expressions of belief – if they go along with semantic objectivism – they will have to say that ordinary evaluators are subject to massive error: that the world does not provide the sorts of values and disvalues that people posit.⁴³ This reason for rejecting semantic objectivism may or may not be an appropriate one. But we need not consider it in any case at this point in our discussion. It will come up when we look at what there is to be said against ontological objectivism and when we consider, in effect, whether semantic objectivism has to lead to ethical eliminativism.

The Argument from No-Fault Disagreement

Is there any other, more independent reason why expressivists might think that semantic objectivism is untenable? There is one argument that appears, more or less tangentially, in many discussions and I will devote the remainder of this defense of semantic objectivism to examining it. Let us suppose that we ordinary speakers do take ethical evaluations as truth-conditional expressions of beliefs; let us suppose that semantic objectivism is true. The argument I have in mind holds that that supposition has implications – in particular, implications to do with the quantity and quality of agreement available on ethical questions – that are not borne out in practice. The hypothesis of semantic objectivism may be reduced, if not to absurdity, at least to implausibility; it supports expectations that are not fulfilled.

Fully fleshed out, the argument needs not just the supposition that we ordinary speakers treat evaluations as the expressions of beliefs but also some ancillary assumptions. It supposes that we ordinary speakers are conversationalists who speak to one another, not just to ourselves. It supposes that in speaking to one another, we often differ in what we assert and deny: we address sentences with the same truth-conditions and we express belief and disbelief, respectively, in their fulfillment. And it supposes that when we differ in this way, we each manage to sustain the belief that, marginal indeterminacies or vaguenesses aside, the difference can in principle be resolved on the basis of evidence: on the basis, ultimately, of how the world appears to be. We may actually resolve the difference, so that resolvability in principle is established by resolution in practice. Or we may find reason to explain the lack of resolution in practice, consistently with resolvability in principle. We may explain the nonresolution by orthogonal differences of belief, for example, or by differences in the credible evidence at one another's disposal, or by the intrusion of some inappropriate influences – some incompetence or inattention or partiality – on the belief-forming practice of the other.⁴⁴

I am happy to go along with all of these suppositions, for I believe that we ordinary speakers do indeed conform to the conversational or dialogical image

described.⁴⁵ So what now is the argument I mentioned against semantic objectivism? The argument holds that under these extra suppositions semantic objectivism would lead us to expect, if not more actual agreement on ethical matters than we actually get, at least a higher level of discontent with disagreement.

It is certainly accurate to say that under the suppositions given, there ought to be a certain discontent among ordinary speakers about disagreement in matters ethical. There ought to be a pervasive assumption that, marginal indeterminacies apart, someone is wrong in the case of disagreement and that the disagreement must be explicable in a way that does not dismiss some parties to the debate in an ad hoc way. It must be explicable by differences in the evidence available, or in the vividness with which evidence is available, on the different sides; or by differences in matters of orthogonal belief, for example, differences of a religious or ideological character; or by more or less restricted differences in susceptibility or exposure to influences that warp our belief-forming capacities: for example, by the presence of a certain bias or illogic.

The claim of those who rely on this argument, then, will be that actually we everyday evaluators take a much more *laissez-faire* attitude to ethical disagreement than semantic objectivism would predict. Ethical disagreement is a common-or-garden-variety phenomenon – this part of the claim can be readily admitted – and, so it is alleged, we are in the habit of treating many instances of disagreement, in Huw Price's⁴⁶ phrase, as no-fault disagreements. We may fight about what is actually to be done in this or that situation but we will not bother debating about the disagreement, as if the sharing of evidence, or the sharing of inferential intuition, would establish consensus. And we do not suppose that the disagreement is in need of some special explanation. We treat ethical disagreement, so it is maintained, as not having any particular significance for what there is; we do not see it as a disagreement about a matter of fact.

If this argument is sound in alleging that we regularly treat ethical disagreement as fault-free, then that will provide some support for an expressivist reading of ethical evaluation. We ordinary folk may admit certain limited indeterminacies in ethical matters, consistently with treating ethical utterances as intentionally expressing beliefs; after all, we standardly treat vague utterances as expressive of belief: more on this in the last section. But we can hardly admit wholesale indeterminacy – we can hardly treat all disagreements as fault-free – consistently with regarding evaluations as truth-conditional expressions of belief. Or at least we cannot do so, short of embracing something like the counterintuitive doctrine that G. E. Moore⁴⁷ described as subjectivism; according to this doctrine, as we saw earlier, each of us self-ascribes an attitude of approval or disapproval in making an evaluation and so we do not contradict one another in making what look like conflicting evaluations.

Does this argument give a good reason for rejecting semantic objectivism

and, subjectivism aside, for embracing some form of expressivism? I do not think so. For the fact is that we do not generally treat ethical disagreement in the laid-back, tolerant manner alleged. Suppose you say that a particular way of dealing with the examination of students is fair and I say that it is not; suppose you say, for example, that teachers should have the right to determine, without appeal, ten percent of the overall mark allocated. Assume that neither of us has power to determine what actually happens in any examinations, so that there is no practical matter at issue. Are we likely to treat one another's claims in the way that we might treat expressions of taste about such a question? Are we each likely to regard the claim of the other as a confession of feeling or inclination or whatever, not as something that challenges our own view of the world? Surely not.

We are much more likely to open up an argument about the two claims, looking at what each would imply in practice, looking at the parallel claims to which it would give countenance, invoking the values and disvalues that we see in play, and so on. You will argue that teachers have special knowledge of their students' abilities, I will argue that giving teachers the power claimed would enable them to exercise favoritism and would induce an ingratiating mentality in students. We may then go on to debate the importance of special knowledge among assessors and the danger of giving discretion to those with power over others. And, pushing further, we may well find ourselves in deeper and deeper waters, as we examine the merits and the demerits of the larger schemes that would seem to sink or swim with the rival proposals for teacher involvement. There is no point, however, at which it is plausible to forecast that we will call it a day and recognize that there is fault on neither side of our disagreement. We may call it a day for reasons of exhaustion or despair, but those are reasons that may weigh with us in debates on the most objective and tractable of issues.

But can this be right? One of the most common themes in contemporary circles is precisely that ethical value, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder — or at least of the beholder's reference group — and that we ought to rejoice in this diversity, not deny it. I say in response that while that metacomment certainly offers supporting testimony in favor of expressivism, it does not constitute supporting evidence. For what we need to look at is not what people say about ethical evaluation but what they show in their practices of negotiating the ethical differences that matter to them. And what they show, so I have been arguing, is that they regard ethical divergence as significant and troubling; they do not take it lightly, and certainly they do not celebrate it.

My line against the argument from no-fault disagreement will be supported, not just by those inclined toward semantic objectivism, but also by all of those who are attracted toward what I described as intersubjectivist forms of expressivism. Such thinkers suggest that resolution on ethical matters ought to be attainable in principle and that disagreements ought never to be taken lightly.

They see ethical debate as a continuing conversation and they give little countenance to the no-fault disagreements that are allegedly acknowledged among people who differ in their ethical evaluations.

The belief that ethical disagreements have a no-fault character and argue for a lack of semantic objectivity in evaluations may derive a spurious plausibility from the high level of disagreements that actually obtain in the ethical realm: that is, from what is described by John Mackie as "the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community."⁴⁸ But the disagreements that actually obtain are probably no more marked than the differences we find on undoubtedly factual issues such as the origin of our species, the existence of god, and the performance of various political systems. We may disagree across cultural and other boundaries about the justifiability of treating women in a certain fashion and about the desirability of capital punishment. But such disagreements are quite consistent with agreement on deeper matters like the justice of treating similar cases similarly or of allowing no one arbitrary, unchallengeable discretion over the destiny of another.

Even if ethical disagreements were decidedly more marked than disagreements in nonethical matters, however, this ought not to persuade us that people treat evaluations as nonassertoric. For in most cases the disagreements can be explained in a manner that is consistent with their status as assertions and people regularly resort to such explanations. Thus they quote differences in religious belief, or differences in beliefs about relevant empirical matters, in accounting for why they take varying views of the morality of abortion or artificial contraception. And where no such differences are in evidence, people have resort, however reluctantly, to seeing those with whom they differ as being unduly influenced by irrelevant pressures: by a wish to remain faithful to a certain tradition, for example, or by the desire to be able to rationalize an independently appealing course of action, or by a commitment to a certain posture in politics. The point is that conversation on ethical matters goes on and on, and that people show no sign of declaring the exercise void or pointless; they display a sustained belief in the assertoric and truth-conditional character of their contributions.⁴⁹

B. *Ontological Objectivism*

So much by way of arguing that semantic objectivism about ethical discourse is plausible and that the main, independent argument against it — the argument from no-fault disagreement — is not persuasive; we ordinary folk do not often countenance no-fault disagreements and we do not display a willingness to treat ethical evaluations as less than properly assertoric. But it is one thing to hold that participants in ethical discourse regard their claims and counterclaims

as truth-conditional assertions about how things are. It is another to maintain that there really are values and disvalues of the sort invoked and that there is a fact of the matter as to whether their distribution conforms to this or that alleged pattern. To maintain this is to espouse ontological as well as semantic objectivism — it is to reject not just ethical expressivism but also ethical eliminativism — and I turn now to argue for the plausibility of such a thesis.

The fact that people practice ethical conversation suggests, if semantic objectivism is correct, that they succeed in finding something to talk about. If there were no such thing as ethical values and disvalues, then we would expect ordinary people to have tumbled to their unreality: the fact that they continue in discussion as if such values remained steadfastly available would certainly require special explanation. This means, then, that just as the onus on the issue of semantic objectivism lies squarely with those of an expressivist outlook, so the onus on the issue of ontological objectivism lies on the side of eliminativists. Expressivists and eliminativists are alike in denying the ethical appearances: in holding that things in the ethical domain are not what they seem to be. It is up to them rather than their opponents, therefore, to say why they maintain their particular position.

The Arguments from the Queerness of Values

So what is the main argument that moves eliminativists to claim that ordinary people are massively mistaken in the values and disvalues they countenance? It has been, and I think that it still is, what John Mackie described as the argument from queerness.⁵⁰ Values and disvalues are properties such that to recognize their presence is, *eo ipso*, to have at least a reason of some sort for choosing or not choosing the bearer; they display what Mackie describes as intrinsic prescriptivity. But what in the world — what in the ordinary, empirical world — could such intrinsically prescriptive properties be? They seem entirely out of keeping with the features to which science and common sense otherwise direct us; they are one of a kind and to that extent they are dubious or suspect posits.

The problem that Mackie finds with values — and, by extension, disvalues — comes out in the conception that he entertains of what values would have to be. “Plato’s Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be. The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something’s being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it.”⁵¹ Something’s being good wrecks this magic, indeed, independently of contingent dispositions and desires; “the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it.”

In presenting this conception of objective values, Mackie shows that he thinks such values would have to be like comets, in our earlier metaphor, that streak into the atmosphere of the moral world and that command attention and

attraction in a wholly mysterious fashion. I agree that if the intrinsic prescriptivity of values meant that they had to have this unfamiliar character, then it would be hard to countenance values. But I believe that we can make sense of that prescriptivity, and combat the argument from queerness, under a very different account of what values are. Under this account values turn out to be, not realities of purely transcendent significance, but realities that have a markedly immanent, anthropocentric character.

There are two distinct aspects to the intrinsic prescriptivity that bothers Mackie and others. The first problem that such eliminativists find with values is that the identification of a value in an option provides a justifying reason, other things being equal, for concluding that the option is right or, if rightness is the value in question, for choosing the option. There is an inferential, albeit defeasible, linkage between the ascription of other values to an option and the ascription of rightness and between the ascription of rightness and the choice of that option. Or so it is, at any rate, according to people’s ordinary practices. As my reason for judging that *q* may be that *p* and that if *p* then *q*, so my reason for choosing an option may be that it is right and my reason for judging that it is right may be that it is the only fair choice, or the only loyal choice, or whatever. Values are inherently reason-giving; they are, to stick with Mackie’s terminology, intrinsic justifiers.

If the first problem that eliminativists associate with the intrinsic prescriptivity of value is its capacity to provide justificatory reason for choice, the second problem is its capacity to provide motivational reason. Not only do we generally assume that values can provide grounds of justification, we also conduct ethical conversation on the assumption that if someone sees a certain value in one or another option, then they will generally tend to choose that option. We assume that there is an intimate, not merely inductive, association between evaluation and desire. Holding by a positive evaluative belief goes naturally with attraction, holding by a negative one with aversion. The linkage holds most saliently at the level of *pro tanto* evaluation, for we expect that anything that is thought in a certain regard desirable will tend to be desired under that aspect. But we also generally expect a linkage between the option that is finally judged to be right and the option that is effectively desired or preferred. If either linkage fails, then we think that there must be a special explanation: say, an explanation by reference to weakness of will or some such form of practical unreason.⁵²

It may seem that the motivational problem is not really distinct from the justificatory one. There is no parallel problem, after all, about how the beliefs in certain premises are noninductively associated with a belief in the conclusion. But the parallel between the theoretical and practical cases is only partial. For by many lights the beliefs in certain premises are not really distinct from the belief in any conclusion that they more or less immediately support. The existence conditions for the beliefs in the premises require the presence of the

belief in the conclusion; or if the existence conditions do not require the presence of that belief, the conditions under which someone counts as properly and rationally believing in the premises do. But by most lights any beliefs, even beliefs that are evaluative in nature, are separated by a gulf from desire. Beliefs are ways of registering what is the case and, being of a receptive or passive character, are bound to be distinct from something as action-centered as a desire or disposition to choose.⁵³

The distinction between the two problems of queerness comes out in the fact that they each have a distinct Humean origin. The first problem is that if there were objective values, then there would be no is-ought gap: facts about values would entail oughts. The second problem is that if there were objective values, then beliefs and desires would not be distinct existences: the belief that an option is valuable in some way would be associated in more than an inductive fashion with a desire for that option; reason would sometimes be the master, not the slave, of the passions.

Moral Functionalism

In order to combat these arguments, I first need to set out a positive view of the content and character of ethical judgments. The only way of establishing that ontological objectivity is proof against the arguments is to show that there is a plausible, semantically objectivist construal of ethical assertions such that no one can complain on either count of queerness about the values and disvalues countenanced: no one can say that the entities in question are too queer to be taken seriously. My own favored position on the character and content of ethical judgments is moral or ethical functionalism.⁵⁴ I will describe and defend this view in outline before coming back to Mackie's two arguments.

The first thing to say in introduction to moral functionalism is that it is a generalization of a better-known position that is sometimes described as moral dispositionalism.⁵⁵ Think of the way we learn to use a color term like "red" of things that are disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions. Moral dispositionalism argues, in parallel, that we learn to use a value term like "desirable" of things that are disposed to look attractive under specifications that also require a normal and even ideal perspective: in this case, one characterized by the absence of bias and partisanship, a unified and coherent set of desires, full and vivid information about alternatives and consequences, and the like. The term picks out the property that plays or realizes the dispositional role of making things look attractive under relevant conditions, as "red" picks out the property that plays or realizes the dispositional role of making things look red in normal circumstances. (Or so at least I shall assume: I put aside, as orthogonal to my discussion, the possibility of taking the term to pick out the higher-order property of having a property that makes things look suitably

attractive: that is, of taking the term to refer to the role-property, not the realizer-property.)

Moral functionalism holds that a value term like "desirable" refers, not to the realizer of a simple dispositional role—not to the property that makes things look attractive under certain conditions—but to the realizer of a more encompassing role. That is the sense in which it generalizes dispositionalism. It holds that a term like "desirable" refers to the property that not only makes things look attractive under certain conditions but that also satisfies a number of other connections.⁵⁶ What sorts of other connections? Briefly, those that prove to be taken for granted—and it may not be immediately clear what these are—among people who understand the word.

Consider the range of ethical terms that stretch from thick terms like "fair" and "generous" and "sympathetic" to terms like "ought" and "should" and "right" and that include also terms like "praise" and "blame" and "justify." When we come to master any such term, when we come to understand its meaning and its reference—assuming that we agree in the meaning and reference assigned—we do so in virtue of coming to accept certain shared working assumptions. We come to share assumptions about the sorts of things that are fair or right or praiseworthy, for example; about the sorts of connections that hold between the properties that these terms pick out; and about the sorts of responses we expect in people who come to assign such properties to the options they contemplate.

According to moral functionalism, these shared assumptions will guide us in our usage of the terms, will enable us to use the terms to a communicative purpose, and will provide us with a common basis on which to debate differences in particular assessments. In judging that an option is fair I will be influenced by the fact that it is importantly similar to certain paradigm cases of fairness, that it appeals to me as soon as I adopt an impartial, detached stance on the alternatives, that it thereby presents itself as a candidate for being the right thing to choose, and so on. In saying that it is fair I will communicate to others who understand the word that the option has the presumptively unique property that makes it look similar to certain paradigms, that makes it impartially appealing, that gives grounds for regarding it as the right option to choose, and the like. And in going on to argue with you the case for its being fair I will draw on such shared assumptions about the marks of fairness—or I may work my way toward a shared revision of those assumptions—trying to show that it does indeed have those marks.

The moral functionalist picture is that each of the terms in our shared moral vocabulary—and I am continuing to assume that this is shared—picks out a presumptively unique property by the fact of that property's satisfying the sorts of working assumptions mentioned. The term picks out that property that realizes the role described in those assumptions. The role may be causal, as in the expectation that something that is fair will arouse the desire of the impar-

tial. Or the role may be inferential, as in the expectation that something that is fair will be a candidate for being the right choice.

The terms in our moral vocabulary will not pick out corresponding role-playing properties one by one, of course, in an atomistic fashion. If the functionalist picture is to be plausible, then it must involve the assumption that moral terms are networked with one another.⁵⁷ I learn the meaning of "fair" by seeing the connections of the property, not just with paradigms, but also with the properties picked out by other moral terms: with rightness, as in learning that fairness is a reason why something may be right; with politeness, as in learning that fairness is a more important rightness-maker than politeness; with impartiality, as in learning that impartial people tend to desire fair outcomes; with justification, as in learning that the fairness of an option chosen may enable me to justify myself to others in making that choice; and so on. And if I learn the meaning of "fair" by seeing the connections between fairness and the properties picked out by other moral terms, then I at the same time learn the meanings of those other terms by seeing the connections of the properties they pick out with one another. Mastering the vocabulary of morality has to be a holistic matter: it has to involve casing oneself simultaneously into the meanings of a whole range of terms, not building up an understanding of those terms one by one. In learning the terms, to invoke a Wittgensteinian phrase, light dawns slowly over the whole.

We can sum up these comments by saying that according to moral functionalism mastering a shared moral vocabulary amounts to endorsing a shared moral theory: a shared view of how moral properties connect with one another and with certain nonmoral properties. Moral functionalism amounts to a theory-theory of moral vocabulary: a theory according to which competence in moral reasoning itself involves commitment to a theory. Moral reasoners are, inevitably, moral theorists.

But it would be quite misleading to complete the exposition of moral functionalism at this point. For there are three distinctive claims that it will maintain in regard to the shared moral theory that it imputes to ordinary folk. And it is important that we understand these before we return to Mackie's arguments against ethical objectivism. The claims are, respectively, that the theory ascribed to participants in moral discourse is an evolving theory, that it is a modest theory, and, perhaps most important of all, that it is a practice-based or practical theory.

An Evolving Theory

The theory ascribed to ordinary people by moral functionalism is evolving or developmental or dynamic in character. While ethical debate starts from the assumption that participants share enough of a background theory to be able to talk to one another — they do not pass one another in the night, each pursuing

quite different questions — still there is always a possibility, in the course of the debate, that one or more of them will come to amend the theory from which they began: the theory that debate forces them to articulate. That theory is never fixed in finished form; it is never proof against revision. On the contrary, ethical debate is inherently and systematically open to the possibility of theoretical reform.

The reason that the background theory espoused in moral debate is evolving in this way is that ethical reasoning proceeds via what John Rawls⁵⁸ has described as the method of reflective equilibrium. According to Rawls, ethical reasoning always involves moving to and fro between background moral theory and foreground moral judgments in the search for an equilibrium: in particular, an equilibrium that can be shared among the different people who are party to the debate.⁵⁹ The idea is that any commitment or consensus in moral theory is always subject to destabilization as new issues for moral adjudication come on the agenda or indeed as old issues return to that agenda. Maybe it was taken for granted that such and such a general connection characterizes a certain moral property but if the assumption leads to moral judgments that prove difficult to endorse then it is liable to be amended in the search for a better equilibrium of theory and judgment.

It should not be surprising that the moral theory that permeates ethical reasoning and discussion has this provisional and evolving character. The purpose of ethical debate is to resolve live and open issues and it would be amazing if the theory that it presupposes — the theory that it has to presuppose if the terms of the debate are to enjoy an established meaning and reference — was immune to reconsideration. In this respect folk moral theory contrasts sharply with the folk psychological theory that is often said to shape our usage of terms that bear on perceptions and sensations, memories and expectations, judgments and beliefs, intentions and desires, and so on. While that folk psychology may have to be revised in order to be squared with new discoveries in cognitive and neural science, and even perhaps with novel and challenging cultures, it is not systematically exposed to reasons for reconsideration in the same fashion as our folk moral views.

A Modest Theory

The second thing to note about the moral theory that functionalism ascribes to ordinary folk is that it is modest in character. It does not commit the folk to the reality of values and disvalues that are radically discontinuous with the sorts of realities countenanced in common sense and in natural science. The posits of folk moral theory, so it turns out, can be seen as familiar, even humdrum in nature.

For all that we have said up to this point, admittedly, the properties picked out by moral terms — the properties that play the requisite moral roles — might

be of just about any character. But as a matter of fact the moral theory countenanced by the folk includes a principle that severely constrains the character they can have. In particular, the principle constrains the character of those properties in a manner that ensures the modesty of folk moral theory.

According to this principle, if two items differ in regard to a moral or more generally an evaluative property, then they also differ in a purely descriptive way. We ordinary folk endorse that presumption in countenancing the challenge to back up any evaluative discrimination – any discrimination to the effect that this is right and that is wrong, for example, this is just and that is unjust, he is virtuous and she unvirtuous – with a discrimination of a purely descriptive kind. Our legitimating that sort of challenge means that by our lights no evaluative difference is possible without a descriptive difference. No evaluative difference is possible even between whole possible worlds without some descriptive difference in those worlds.⁶⁰ Evaluative specifications, as it is now often put, supervene on descriptive specifications.

This supervenience of the evaluative on the descriptive has dramatic implications for the nature of those properties that play moral-theoretical roles. Any property that we identify as the realizer of such a role – the property that we identify as rightness, or fairness, or impartiality, for example – must be descriptively specifiable. There must be a descriptive way of marking every difference that the presence of such a property makes. And so, in principle, there must be a descriptive mode of picking out all and only the bearers of the property; the property must have a descriptive character.

What makes a specification evaluative, it may be asked, what descriptive? I assume that an evaluative specification, but not a descriptive specification, will connect with presumptions about justification and the like. Thus it will be true according to those presumptions that any evaluatively specified property, taken as such, can play a justificatory sort of role whereas nothing of the kind will be true according to the presumptions in relation to descriptively specified properties.⁶¹

Folk moral theory is modest, then, in the sense that the properties to which it is committed are all taken to be capable of descriptive specification. They are capable of specification in terms that are of a kind with the terms from common sense and natural science in which we describe the world around us. There is nothing mysterious, say, nothing intrinsically evaluative, about such properties; they are ontologically run-of-the-mill. What is the property of rightness, for example? It is that descriptive property – though we have no prospect of giving its descriptive specification – that plays the corresponding role in our folk moral theory. It is that descriptively specifiable property that makes an option imperative for the agent, that makes any similar option imperative for any similar agent, that is instantiated in virtue of such and such values, and that serves to make an option unobjectionable, to attract agents who are not weak of will, to connect reliably with virtue, and so on.

In discussing the requirements for ontological objectivism I said that while objectivists do not have to think that values are transcendent entities, they must think that values are such as to vindicate the common assumption that we approve of things because they have certain values, not the other way around.⁶² Not only must values be capable of descriptive specification, as is easily granted under the moral-functional picture, it is also necessary that the descriptive character of the values enable us to uphold this assumption.

What it is in descriptive terms that makes an option kind or cruel, then, must be independent of our approving or disapproving of such an option; it must not consist in the fact of eliciting approval or disapproval, as under a subjectivist view. And what it is that makes the option kind or cruel must be something that can register with us and lead us to approve or disapprove of the option. It must be a descriptive property, like the property that leads us to describe something as red or yellow, that is sufficiently unified and salient to make an impact upon us.

To require that this is so, however, is not to compromise in any serious way the modesty of the theory that functionalism ascribes to participants in moral discourse. For on the most intuitive reading of ethical discourse, as already noted, we participants do not intend just to record the fact that we approve or disapprove when we make ethical evaluations; we intend to ascribe independent properties to the things evaluated. And it is hard to see how we could target those properties semantically – how we could pick them out by the use of terms like “kind” and “cruel,” or “right” and “wrong”⁶³ – if they were not sufficiently unified or salient to make an impact upon us.⁶⁴

A Practical Theory

The third and last feature to notice about the participant theory ascribed by moral functionalism is that it is practice-based or practical in character; or, more exactly, that the mode in which ordinary folk believe it is practice-based or practical.⁶⁵ Two examples will make clear the sort of thing that I have in mind.

Consider the way that we reason in accordance with *modus ponens* or *modus tollens* in being disposed, whenever we think that all As are Bs, to argue our way from A to B; from not B to not A; from not A to possibly B, possibly not B; and from B to possibly A, possibly not A. We may instantiate those dispositions without having the logician’s ability to formulate the principle in question, and without even being aware that there is a principle. We certainly believe the principle but we do not believe it in intellectual or judgmental mode. And yet neither do we believe it just in the sense of behaving as if it were true, for we believe all necessary truths, and so all necessary principles of reasoning in this way, even ones that have no such presence in our ratiocinative

dispositions.⁶⁶ We believe the principle, so I shall say, in a practice-based or practical manner.

Consider again the way that we reason when we allow appearances of a color like red to dictate a judgment that things are red, at least when we have no evidence of perceptual abnormality; and when we allow the judgment that things are red to generate an expectation that, at least in the absence of abnormalities, they will look red. We may not be able to formulate the principle of reasoning according to which something is red if and only if it looks red to normal observers in normal conditions. We may not even have the word "normal" at our disposal. As used by theorists, "normal" observers and conditions may refer to such observers and conditions as are of a kind with those that pass muster in our practice of resolving discrepancies across time and people by discounting some of the discrepant responses. Thus we do not believe the principle in a judgmental way. As in the other case, however, neither do we believe it just in a behavioral manner: just in the sense of behaving as if it were true. We believe it in a practice-based or practical way.

These forms of practical belief in a principle of reasoning display the following characteristics. We focus on instances of the reasoning as items of attention. We are disposed, at least when we are relatively clear-minded, to treat just such instances as valid: that is, we are disposed to judge that the premises support the conclusion. And we can be said to believe in a case-by-case way of those instances that they are valid; we can be said to believe the principle that unifies the instances *in sensu diviso*, though not *in sensu composito*.⁶⁷ The practical belief makes itself felt in the fact that once we come to understand a sentence that formulates the principle, then we are in a position to see that our reasoning habits already committed us to that principle; we can see that we held by it even prior to having words in which to express it.

The theory that functionalism ascribes to participants in moral discourse is naturally represented as a matter of practical, not of judgmental, belief. How do people come to believe that there are paradigms of fairness: say, depending on context, a principle of equal allocation or a principle like "I cut, you choose"? Not necessarily by explicitly registering that such examples are paradigms but simply by treating them as more or less nonnegotiable instances. How do they come to hold that fairness is a *pro tanto* reason for thinking an option is the right one to choose? Not necessarily by spelling out that principle of inference but simply by being disposed to treat fairness, other things being equal, as a reason for ascribing rightness. How do they come to hold that fairness is descriptively supervenient? Not necessarily by giving their assent to a principle of supervenience but simply by being disposed to reason from the claim that two or more options differ in fairness to the conclusion that there is some descriptive difference between them. How do they subscribe to the claim that fairness makes an option attractive, at least for those who see things clearly and fully and are not subject to bias or ennuï or any such malaise?⁶⁸ at least for

those who are ideally situated? Not necessarily by adverting to that connection in so many words: they may not even have words available to describe what is required. Simply by treating attractiveness in the apparent absence of nonideal factors as a reason for predicating fairness and by expecting that of which fairness is predicated to prove attractive in the absence of those factors.

The functionalist idea, then, is that competence in moral vocabulary amounts to sharing in a lived theory — a *Lebenstheorie* — that shows up only occasionally in explicit, judgmental remarks. The theory permeates the patterns of perceptual and judgmental reasoning, even the patterns of motivation and attraction, that go with being able to tell fair from biased, kind from cruel, right from wrong and with being able to debate with others, and indeed with oneself, about how this or that option should be ethically characterized. The mode of existence of the theory is decidedly nonintellectual. It lives in the habits of reason, in the habits of perception and even in the habits of the heart.

In describing the moral theory postulated by functionalism I have had to speak of the nonideal factors that may affect the judgment of fairness or rightness or, more generally, of desirability in any regard. But how should we define nonideal factors? They cannot be defined, on pain of vacuity, just as those factors that block the inference from attractive to desirable. But neither can nonideal factors be defined just by a list of items, as when we are told that bias and passion and ennuï and lack of this or that sort of information are all nonideal. For the list of nonideal factors in the case of moral perception, like the list of nonideal factors in the case of color perception, is open in principle to further addition. Nonideal factors may be identified as factors of a kind that the list illustrates but they cannot be exhausted by any available list. Thus the question remains as to how that kind is to be specified.

The best account of the kind in question drives us back to people's natural habits and practices in negotiating questions of desirability. I call it an "ethocentric" account, because the Greek word "ethos" can mean either habit or practice. The account becomes available, even salient, once we recognize that ordinary people believe the moral theory that functionalism ascribes to them, only in a practice-based or practical mode.

Suppose that in comparing judgments on what is desirable in this or that way, people are guided in part by their own desiderative inclinations or lack of them: this, in the way that they are guided by their color sensations, or the lack of such sensations, in debating about matters of color. Suppose that they back away from the judgmental inclinations associated with their desire or lack of desire — they suspend the tendency to describe the apparently attractive as genuinely attractive, the apparently nonattractive as genuinely nonattractive — when their desires come apart, whether as between persons or times: this, in the way that they question their color sensations when their sensations come apart. And suppose, finally, that they seek the resolution of such discrepancy and the determination of what is genuinely attractive — of what is desirable — by

looking on one or the other side for factors that would suggest that the desire or lack of desire in that quarter signifies nothing: it is the product of irrelevant factors akin to the perturbations that may affect color sensation and is not a reliable index of something's being desirable or nondesirable.

These suppositions fit naturally with the sort of moral dispositionalism that functionalism generalizes, and they correspond with how ordinary people actually behave in discussing matters of desirability, whether with themselves or others. I shall assume, then, that they are fulfilled. People think of any variety of desirability, so the suppositions suggest, as a property that will generally show up in the way in which it makes things reliably attractive at different times and to different individuals. Where attractions come apart, then, people will look for a compelling basis on which to dismiss one or more of the desiderative responses. They will look for a noncollusive, objectively motivated basis for resolving the question as to whether a certain desirable property is or is not present.

Assuming the fulfillment of the suppositions described, we can offer a ready and plausible account of nonideal factors.⁶⁹ We can identify them as factors such that, at least among people who are not otherwise divided, their identification as grounds for dismissing discrepant responses would maximize noncollusive agreement on what is desirable, and what not. This definition assumes that the practices ascribed to people — the practices that involve taking certain desires as an index of a presumptive desirability — are sound. Nonideal factors, according to the definition, are those influences that a maximally satisfactory implementation of the practices would identify as grounds for dismissing the presence or the absence of a particular desire as an index of the presence or the absence of a corresponding desirable property.

This simple account avoids the problems with the approaches that resort to a whatever-it-takes line or to a finite list of examples. It is not definitionally vacuous, in the manner of the first approach, yet unlike the second approach, it manages to be open-ended. We are put in a position where it can be a matter of discovery that nonideal factors come into play with an interest as distinct from a disinterested perspective, an uninformed as distinct from a better-informed standpoint, a reflective as distinct from a passionate point of view. As we discover that color does not show up reliably in sodium lighting, so we discover that no one is a reliable judge in their own case. And so on.

Apart from enabling us theorists to identify and itemize nonideal factors, the ethocentric account also gives us a plausible account of how such factors will present themselves to people in the practice of moral judgment. Resolving this or that discrepancy, and thereby coming to a mind on how things really are in respect of desirability, people will see some such factors as obstacles or limitations that undermine the significance of their desires or nondesires as indices of desirability; they will see them, in a normative light, as things that get in the way of perceiving what is desirable. And generalizing from some such exam-

ples, they can see nonideal factors in general — if they ever give them a name — as those that are of a kind with the examples. The same sort of story that must apply in the color case will apply equally well here.

Against the Arguments from Queerness

We may return at last to Mackie's argument against ontological objectivism about ethics. The argument divides into an argument from the justificatory queerness of values and an argument from their motivational queerness. The justificatory argument goes as follows.

1. Objective values would have to be intrinsic justifiers.
2. No natural properties could serve in this role.
3. Therefore there are no values in the natural world.

I accept the first premise of this argument, believing that values are primarily distinguished by the ways in which they provide justificatory reason, other things being equal, for this or that judgment of rightness, or this or that actual choice. But I reject the second premise and so find the overall argument unsound. Our discussion of moral functionalism shows that certain natural properties can serve in the required role, where properties are understood as properties of the sort that are countenanced in common sense and in science.

What our discussion of functionalism shows, more precisely, is that there is a sense of "intrinsic justifier" such that natural properties can serve in an intrinsically justificatory role. If a natural property is identified as the bearer of a moral-theoretical role such as that which is ascribed to fairness, then it is a priori that any option that is distinguished by having that property, taken as such — taken under its role-playing aspect — will, other things equal, be the right option to choose and will represent the justified choice. We do not know which descriptive or natural property plays the fairness role, not knowing enough about the actual world. But no matter how the actual world is, and no matter which property plays the fairness role, fairness is guaranteed to connect with rightness. The way in which the term "fair" is mastered — the network of presumptions that govern its usage — ensures that an option that is distinguished by its fairness will, when other things are equal, be the right option to take. In that sense there will be an a priori connection between fairness — fairness, when other things are equal — and rightness.⁷⁰

The fact that there is an a priori connection of this kind between one or another moral property and justifiability shows that such properties can serve as intrinsic justifiers. If Mackie overlooked that possibility, I suspect that the reason is that he focused on moral properties in themselves, not under their aspect as deservers of the names given them in moral discourse. He did not see that no matter how morally inert a natural property is in itself, it can serve, qua realizer of a moral role, in a justificatory part.

Mackie's argument from motivational queerness runs on roughly parallel lines to the argument from justificatory queerness.

1. Objective values would have to be such that ascribing them is noninductively associated with the presence of a corresponding desire.
2. Natural properties are such that ascribing them cannot be noninductively associated with the presence of a corresponding desire.
3. Therefore there are no objective values in the natural world.

My complaint about this argument, like my complaint about the argument from justificatory queerness, is that the second premise is false. As I assume that values are intrinsic justifiers of choice, so I am happy to assume that there is a noninductive association between the ascription of *pro tanto* or final value to an option and the presence of a corresponding qualified or unqualified desire. But as I think that certain natural properties, taken as fulfilling a suitable role, can be intrinsic justifiers, so I believe that the ascription of such natural properties can be noninductively associated with the presence of desire.

As a generalized version of moral dispositionalism, functionalism assumes that folk theory posits a connection between something's being desirable and its looking attractive, at least under conditions where nonideal factors are absent; we discussed this above. According to folk theory, what it is to be desirable is, in part, to be ideally attractive in this way. When someone judges that an option is desirable, then, they imply that it is such that they would desire it — they would desire it, taking it as an option for their actual self and situation⁷¹ — were they free of such obstacles and limitations; they imply that it is the genuinely or ideally attractive option.

Suppose now that I come to judge that an option is desirable — or indeed not desirable — by partial reliance on the principle that links what is attractive in situations where nothing is amiss to what is desirable. Assuming that I believe that principle in practical mode, then, I will ordinarily form the judgment that an option is desirable through finding it attractive — through coming to desire it — in circumstances where nothing seems, rightly or wrongly, to be amiss: in circumstances where I do not believe that any nonideal factor is at work.⁷² And that means in turn that my evaluative judgments will generally have a desiderative character. The way in which the judgments are maintained will involve the presence of desires. And so the acts or states of judgment will not leave me cold. They will be noninductively associated with the presence of corresponding desires.⁷³

The argument from the motivational queerness of values assumes that as natural properties cannot be intrinsic justifiers, so the ascription of a natural property cannot be noninductively associated with the presence of a corresponding desire. But that premise in the argument is false, as this discussion of the ascription of desirability reveals. Thus the argument from motivational

queerness offers no more persuasive a case for ethical eliminativism than did the argument from justificatory queerness. Ontological objectivism about ethical values is not as vulnerable to criticism as Mackie and other eliminativists have assumed.

One concluding remark to this defense of ontological objectivism. Even if it is not vulnerable to eliminativist objections, ontological objectivism may still be false. The reality of objective values — and indeed disvalues — will be established to the extent that the practices of ordinary moral reasoners and discussants are vindicated. But it could prove that those practices break down. People might fail to identify agreed sources of perturbation and limitation, for example, and might fail to discriminate any single set of conditions that are favorable for the identification of value. Or an individual person might fail in that way over time. The only possible conclusion, then, would be that there are no values, or at least no complete set of values, of the kind adumbrated in ethical discourse. Indeed we might expect that conclusion to surface in ordinary practice, with a developing recognition of no-fault disagreements and with a drift away from seeing evaluations as assertoric and truth-conditional.⁷⁴

The upshot is that if we are to be ontological objectivists, if we are to hold that there are properties available to play the roles distinguished in folk moral theory, then our objectivism has to have a provisional character. We do not know what will emerge in the course of ethical discourse, any more than we know what will emerge in the course of scientific. We do not know whether that discourse will prove to be a fruitful conversational program or even whether it will sustain a fruitful one-person conversation across time. We may judge that so far the discourse is doing well and that its success bears witness to the reality of values, conceived in a functionalist way. But we should recognize that the issue of whether there really are values remains *sub judice*: it remains to be determined by the future career of ethical argument.⁷⁵

C. Justificatory Objectivism

I have tried to show why semantic and ontological objectivism about ethical values represents a plausible and coherent position: one that is not vulnerable to arguments from no-fault disagreement or from the justificatory or motivational queerness of values. I have done this, in particular, from within a functionalist account of what positing and ascribing values involves. This semantic-cum-ontological objectivism represents a form of moral realism, as that term is now generally used.⁷⁶

The objectivism that I sketched earlier, however, and the objectivism that I want to maintain here, amounts to more than just a realist position about ethical values. It also involves the claim that there is one and only one set of values on the basis of which ethical justification can be secured. It involves the rejection of relativism as well as the rejection of expressivism and eliminativism.

I distinguished two coherent forms of ethical relativism, one of which I described as idiolectical, the other as indexical. Idiolectical relativism holds that despite appearances – despite appearances of synonymy or translatability – different individuals or groups do not use moral terms with the same meanings in order to frame their ethical judgments; each has a more or less distinctive idiolect. Indexical relativism holds that they do use such terms with the same meanings but that they do not use them to express the same contents; the expressions that articulate their fundamental values include indexical terms like “I” or “we” and have different interpretations in different mouths.

In discussing expressivism and eliminativism I argued, first, that each doctrine ran against common presumptions and, second, that the main sort of argument used in its defense was not persuasive. In discussing relativism I will take a more direct approach. With relativism, or at least with indexical relativism, there is less profit in discussing where the onus of proof lies; and equally, in the space available, there is less prospect of providing an adequate response to the many arguments invoked in its defense.⁷⁷

Against Idiolectical Relativism

Why would anyone be an idiolectical relativist, arguing that even within the same linguistic community what people mean by the word “right,” to take the most central moral term, may differ from individual to individual, or group to group? The obvious answer is that such a difference of meaning would account for the extensive divergence in the use of the word “right.” It would cease to give that divergence the aspect of a disagreement, of course – and indeed it would give the lie to people’s sense of disagreeing with one another – but it would have the benefit of restoring conversational peace. It would reconcile people to one another, presenting what looked like substantial disagreements as merely terminological differences.

Assume that a number of people – at the limit this may be the same person at different times – use a term like “right” with the same meaning and reference. What are the factors that serve to determine that meaning and reference? According to the moral functionalism by which I hold, the things that those who use the term believe in common about its actual and possible instances are the things that they take for granted, though perhaps without thinking much about them and perhaps without being able to spell them out linguistically. The candidates for fixing meaning are, in a word, their shared working assumptions about right options, where many of those assumptions may have the status of practical, not judgmental, beliefs. They are things to which people commit themselves so far as they treat certain examples as paradigms of rightness, for example, so far as they recognize certain constraints on how to argue for the rightness of an option, so far as they give certain grounds in support of claims

of rightness, and so far as they countenance certain sorts of challenges to those claims.

Idiolectical relativists hold that the working presumptions surrounding a term like “right” vary from person to person, or group to group; the term is answerable in those different contexts of usage to different background principles. They need not say that as a matter of fact this difference in meaning is transparent to participants in moral discourse. They may hold that while everyone takes certain principles for granted in learning to apply the term “right,” and while most of those principles are common property, that is not a stable dispensation.

According to this instability claim, what people will find when they reflect on those principles and their implications for particular cases – what they will find when they look for a reflective equilibrium between their principles and the particular judgments that attract them – is that they differ in which principles they are disposed to treat as nonnegotiable: they differ in which principles they authorize as *a priori*. There may be a loose set of presumptions from which people all start in learning the use of “right” and other moral terms, then, but the theory adumbrated in the ways in which they come to apply those terms is liable to vary between individuals or groups. And as the theory varies, so too will the meaning. It will transpire that the individuals or groups use the term “right,” and perhaps other terms too, with different senses. It will transpire that much moral discourse is vitiated by ambiguity.

While it is certainly coherent, I do not think that this form of relativism is very plausible. There are two grounds of objection, one a general consideration against idiolectical relativism, the other a specific objection to relativism about rightness and other value properties.

As a general position, idiolectical relativism supposes that we are each guided in our usage of relevant terms by presumptions that we individually own: by presumptions that represent a sort of private property. It is this supposition that leaves room for the discovery – and the distinctively relativist claim – that, as it turns out, those guiding presumptions differ between individuals or groups. The lesson of ethical debate, so the relativist claim goes, is that the things that we treat as nonnegotiable and *a priori* in the domain of the relevant terms vary from person to person or at least from subculture to subculture. We each use the same terms, or we each use what are regarded as translational counterparts, but we do not use them with the same meanings and we do not use them to express the same belief contents.

The general problem that I find with this sort of idiolectical relativism is that it fails to allow for the extent to which we treat one another as more or less equal authorities, at least outside realms of scientific expertise, in debating about any area of discourse.⁷⁸ If we treated our guiding presumptions in the use of any term as private property, then there is no obvious reason why we should balk at discrepancy with how others apply the word and why we should work at

seeking to explain away the difference; there is no reason why we should authorize one another, holding open the possibility that it is us and not others who are mistaken. If our words are answerable only to our own, private presumptions, then why not treat discrepancies of application across individuals as signs of a difference in the guiding presumptions: signs of a difference in meaning?

I believe that the fact of conversational authorization argues for quite a different model from the one assumed by idiolectal relativists. This does not suppose that we each use our words under the guidance of private presumptions and then look to see if, as an empirical, contingent matter, others use the words in the same way. The model is that we each use our words on the assumption that there are guiding presumptions available in common to different people — they are common, not private, property — and that if the terms have the meaning and reference on which we presume then disagreements with others must be resolvable in principle. The condition on which the terms will prove to have their apparent meaning and their presumed reference — the condition on which ordinary users will treat the terms as possessed of such regular semantic credentials — is that disagreements between people in how the terms are applied never come to seem inherently irresolvable. Whatever disagreements remain in practice, after the best efforts at discussion, look from each side to be explicable by reference to different bodies of information or insight, or different perturbing factors, or something of that kind. People may have recourse, eventually, to a hypothesis of different, idiolectal meanings; but that will be a last recourse that they access only with reluctance.

My general problem with idiolectal relativism is that it fails to take account of the extent to which people authorize one another in conversation and give sustenance to this model of communication. Even in translation, when we seek to get in contact with those from a different linguistic community, the model of achieving understanding is that we can each make it a matter of shared belief that the translational counterparts identified are answerable to common presumptions. If a disagreement in usage appears between us, that is not treated as evidence in the first place of a translational mistake, but as something that should lend itself to resolution, or to the explanation of non-resolution, in the ordinary manner.

Where this first objection to idiolectal relativism is general in character, my second objection bears on idiolectal relativism about ethics in particular. Consistently with the line just argued, people in different subcultures or linguistic communities may agree that with a certain term or a certain set of translational counterparts there really is a difference — ideally, an independently intelligible difference — in the background presumptions to which they hold it answerable and that, at least in a limited range of cases, this makes for no-fault disagreements about application. One group uses “red” to cover a range that overlaps into a range for which the other group uses “orange.” Or whatever. But there is a special difficulty about imagining that this happens in

any large measure with the term “right” or with other moral terms; and that is my second objection to idiolectal relativism.

The special difficulty is that whereas a term like “red” is used only for purposes of discrimination and categorization, “right” and other moral terms are used for the purpose of assessment and justification. Were people to agree across different subcultures — or, by extension, across different linguistic communities — that “right” meant something different in each context then that would make for a major difficulty. It would mean that they could not begin to argue with one another about matters of justification. It would mean that they could not hope to use the term for the purpose for which it is primarily designed.

With a term like “right” perhaps the most important working presumption, upheld on all sides, is that if the parties in a particular debate appear to be using the term in accordance with different presumptions, then something has to change. Let the term be guided by different presumptions, let the term be declared systematically ambiguous, and it will cease to serve its primary role. Thus the condition on which the term should survive in our conversations — the condition on which we should remain committed to ethical discussions — is that we can succeed in avoiding a declaration of ambiguity.

It may be this point that influenced W. B. Gallie in his introduction of the notion of an essentially contested concept.⁷⁹ Gallie noticed that with a wide range of terms — evaluative terms, in particular — people appear unwilling to reconcile their differences by each agreeing that they use the terms in different, more or less idiolectal senses. They each go on claiming that in the one and only proper sense of the term, what they hold is true and what their opponents say is false; they are each unwilling to let the term go, allowing it to subdivide into different disambiguations. In maintaining that the purpose served by a term like “right” rules out reconciliation by disambiguation, I am saying in effect that it is an essentially contested concept.

The two objections mentioned should serve, I think, to undermine the attractions of the idiolectal form of ethical relativism. Perhaps such relativism holds out the prospect of peace, allowing the parties in ethical debate to think that they are each right and that only terminological differences are getting in the way. But the peace that is adumbrated is the peace of the sepulchre: the peace that comes with the expiry, not the consummation, of ethical debate.

Finally, however, a concession. Consistently with idiolectal relativism being unsound, what may indeed happen in ethical discourse is that certain limited indeterminacies are identified and insulated. While people may use moral terms with the same meaning and reference, they may use them in such a way that for certain limited cases there is no fact of the matter as to what is right and what is wrong; that may be essentially indeterminate. Being committed to the objectivity of moral theory in all of the senses explained so far is consistent with acknowledging this limited indeterminacy. It is consistent with thinking

that commitment to a version of the folk moral theory does not necessarily provide one with a complete ordering of the options that come up for decision.

Suppose that people all agree on the rightness-making power of fairness and kindness, for example, and on the other connections that we generally expect fairness and kindness and indeed rightness to satisfy. It may be, for all that agreement, that they are inclined to assign different degrees of right-making power to fairness and kindness. Some weight fairness very heavily in relation to kindness, others weight it less heavily — perhaps individuals differ between times — and the difference shows up in the different judgments of rightness that they are individually disposed to make of certain hypothetical, maybe even of certain actual, choices.

This sort of possibility can be internalized in people's ordinary practices, with the recognition that there is no fact of the matter as to what is right in the cases where their weighting inclinations lead them to differ. People may make a working presumption of the fact that their weighting inclinations with properties like fairness and kindness come apart at the margins and they may let that impact on the intended reference of "right" and indeed also of "fair" and "kind." The term "right" will not refer to the property that goes with any one individual's judgmental dispositions, even in the absence of nonideal factors; it will not go idiolectal. The term will be used to refer to what the different properties targeted in people's dispositions have in common; it will be used to refer, not to any unique property, but to the set of properties that coincide in those cases, and only those cases, where agreement is accessible.

On this account, then, "right" will have a marginal indeterminacy akin to the more systematic indeterminacy of vague terms like "bald" or "thin" or "hand-some." Different subjects will have marginally different tendencies to precisify the term and make judgments of rightness in particular cases. And in those marginal cases where precisifications come apart, it will be indeterminate whether any of the relevant options is right or wrong: this, in the way in which it may be indeterminate whether someone is bald. There will be a fact of the matter as to whether an option is right or not right only in cases where precisifications converge.

This concession is important, because it shows how the rejection of idiolectal relativism can be squared with intuitions of indeterminacy that many will find compelling in the ethical realm.⁸⁰ But this is not the place to develop the implications of that concession, nor indeed to deal with the difficult issues to which it gives rise.⁸¹ My ambition is to show how objectivism can be reasonably sustained, not to paint in the details of a plausible objectivistic outlook.

Against Indexical Relativism

Idiolectal relativism says that different individuals or groups use moral terms with different meanings and that evaluations, therefore, express different con-

tents across those differences. Indexical relativism allows that all individuals and groups use relevant terms with the same meanings or with roughly the same meanings. But it argues nonetheless that in virtue of the indexicality of some of the terms used, people's fundamental evaluations can express different contents in the mouths of different speakers.

I shall not say much about indexical relativism in the analytical form in which it claims that certain evaluative terms are covertly indexical. According to analytical indexicalism what I often mean by "right" or any such term is "right-for-me," and what you mean is "right-for-you," so that we may be speaking at cross-purposes in debating whether something is right or not. I have been assuming throughout this chapter that any such approach is countercritically debunking of our ordinary usage. And the considerations raised against idiolectal relativism show why. The considerations about our mutually authorizing one another in evaluative conversation argue against any such indexical variation in the reference of "right" and the like, as they argue against any idiolectal variation in meaning. I return to the point later.

We are mainly concerned with indexical relativism in the normative form in which it claims, in nonconsequentialist vein, that the basic justifiers of people's choices may involve a self-reflexive reference. They may involve a reference to the preservation of the agent's own virtue, or the doing of their own contractual part in some arrangement, or the advancement of the interests of their own children or friends, or whatever.

I am committed to the rejection of such nonconsequentialism and what I will do here in defense of the commitment is to present a serious problem that faces any nonconsequentialist view.⁸² As a consequentialist, I argue that when we try to identify the final, a priori presumptions about rightness — when we try to revise and regiment our received moral theory in this regard — we must recognize that the right option in any choice is the option that maximizes the expected realization of neutral values, where neutral values may include not just properties like fairness and kindness but also reflexive properties like that of parents looking after their children.⁸³ My argument will be that if we do not do this — if we espouse nonconsequentialism — then we shall find ourselves unable to give due weight to one of the most deeply seated presumptions that we make in moral reasoning: the principle that justifications should always be universalizable.⁸⁴ I shall assume that the universalizability constraint on justification is irresistible and I shall argue that nonconsequentialism cannot easily satisfy it.

The universalizability presumption holds that if two choice scenarios differ in regard only to particulars, then whatever option is right in one scenario, the counterpart option must be right in the other. If I face a choice between helping my friends or my country, and you face a choice between helping your friends and your country, and if the general features of our situations are indiscernible, then whatever is right for me, the corresponding option must be right for you. I

cannot be so relatively important, nor you so unimportant, that the sort of thing that is right for me is not right for you. Nor can our friends or countries differ in importance in a way that would make for a difference in rightness. If the situations contrast only in matters of individual identity, not in any non-individual or universal respects, then there can be no difference in matters of rightness. Any claim that it is right for individual A to help A's friends or to keep A's promises or whatever must be universalizable into a claim that applies to any individual of the relevant kind: any individual who is similar to A in relevant respects.

The tension between admitting universalizability and being a non-consequentialist can be best brought out by means of an example. Suppose that non-consequentialism is sound, so that the basic justifiers of choice include values that are relativized to different positions; they include agent-relative and group-relative values like the success of my country, the welfare of my children, the keeping of my promises, or the cultivation of my integrity. And suppose, to take a target case, that France's decision to test nuclear weapons in 1995 is to be justified in non-consequentialist fashion by reference to such a group-relative value; that decision was defended by President Chirac, after all, on the grounds that it was in the higher interest of his country. What then might a non-consequentialist President Chirac say, in response to the demand that he should be able to universalize the justification and show that it does not presuppose that his country is special?

One thing that he might say is that any nuclear power is permitted or obliged to test its weapons, subject to provisos that are allegedly met in the French case. But while this response would have the merit of being straightforward and nonchauvinistic – it does not treat France as special – it is not consistent with the assumption that the decision is justified in a non-consequentialist way by a group-relative value. The response says that whatever consideration makes it right for France to test its nuclear weapons, that same consideration makes it right for any nuclear power – or at least any nuclear power that satisfies the provisos – to do so. It is a consideration that requires or permits all nuclear powers, and not just France, to test their weapons. But the sort of thing that would justify all nuclear powers in testing their weapons has to be neutral as between those who identify with France and those who identify with other countries. It has to be a consideration that by President Chirac's lights would not only justify France in testing its weapons but also justify any other country in doing so.

This response to the universalizability challenge, then, gives the game away to the opposition. In making the response, President Chirac would represent himself as committed to justifying choice by reference to neutral reasons or values and as believing that those considerations require or at least permit the testing of nuclear weapons. And he would suggest that if those reasons lead him to test France's nuclear weapons, and not anyone else's, that is just because

he has the power of controlling nuclear tests only in relation to France. Suppose that he thinks there is a requirement involved, not just a permission. In this response to the universalizability challenge, then, he will imply that if he could best promote the testing of nuclear weapons by stopping France from testing its weapons – the scenario is unlikely but not impossible – then that is what he should do. He implies that he is the servant of the impersonal good.

Is there any other response that President Chirac might offer to the demand to show that his decision is universalizable? The question is a pressing one for non-consequentialists, because if no such response can be identified, then the universalizability constraint is going to make their position hard to maintain. In the absence of an alternative response, it will seem that the universalizability constraint is inconsistent with the non-consequentialist claim that the basic justifiers of choice may include nonneutral values.

But, as it turns out, there is another response that President Chirac might make to the universalizability challenge. He might say, not that it is right in his terms for any power to test its weapons, but rather that as it is right in his terms for France to test its weapons, so he is prepared to admit that it is right in the terms of other nuclear leaders to test the weapons that their individual countries possess. He might not endorse the universal claim that it is right for every nuclear power, or at least every power in France's position, to test its weapons. Rather he might defend the claim that for every nuclear power in France's position, it is going to be right in the terms of that power's leaders and citizens that it should test its weapons.

The sort of response envisaged here is the only alternative that I see to the response that plays into the hands of consequentialists. And the response can be readily generalized.

Take any particular claim that it is right for individual A to do something like helping their children, respecting the rights of those they deal with, or maintaining their integrity, where in each case the action advances a cause that falls particularly to them. Suppose that we challenge A, or A's champion, as to how far they are prepared to universalize this claim of rightness. One response will certainly be the familiar one that it is right for any agent, or any agent in similar circumstances, to try to advance their cause; this suggests that the rightness of A's \emptyset -ing is determined by something that equally determines the rightness of anyone's acting in the corresponding way and that it is determined therefore in the neutral, consequentialist manner. But there is also another response that will be available, in principle, in any such case.

This will be to say that for any X, where "X" varies over A and B and other possible agents, it is right-in-X's-terms for X to try to advance their cause. It may not be right, period, for A to advance their cause but, so it is suggested, that sense of rightness is irrelevant or nonexistent. The point is that it is right-in-A's-terms for A to try to advance their cause – it is A-right, as we may say – and the answer to the universalizability challenge is that for any X it is X-right

for them to try to advance their cause. As it is A-right for A to help their children, to keep their promises, to maintain their integrity, or whatever, so it is B-right for B, and C-right for C to take corresponding courses of action.

The first response to the universalizability challenge assumes that universalizability is to be understood in a neutral way, so far as it takes rightness to be a property that is common to all perspectives. The second response rejects this line, taking rightness itself, at least in certain contexts, to be a relativized property. If universalizability is taken in the neutral way, so it will be argued, it should be no surprise that taking up the challenge to universalize any judgment of rightness will mean endorsing neutral reasons and going over to a consequentialist point of view. But if universalizability is itself taken in a relativized way, so that X-rightness replaces rightness period, then it should equally be no surprise that the challenge can be handled without recourse to consequentialism.

The drift of my argument against nonconsequentialism should now be clear. In order to defend the normative indexicalist claim that basic justifiers may include relativized values such as the welfare of the agent's children, the fortune of the agent's country, the agent's own integrity, or something of the kind, it appears that nonconsequentialists must have resorted to the analytical thesis that the term "right," at least in some uses, is covertly indexical. If they are to make sense of the universalizability constraint, and stop it from driving them into the consequentialist camp, then they must embrace a counterintuitive and debunking analysis of the most central of all ethical terms.

The claim that "right" is covertly indexical is implausible in itself, as we have already mentioned, because it postulates a widespread and implausible failure of mutual comprehension among those involved in ethical debate. One person says that an action is right, another that it is wrong, but in many cases there is no issue at all between them; there is only the practical clash that goes with one saying "I approve" and the other "I disapprove." What the first person, A, means is that it is right-in-A's-terms; what the second person, B, means is that it is right-in-B's-terms. What were they arguing about, then? Nothing, it seems; or at least nothing distinctively ethical. They were confused by the nonindexical feel of a term like "right" into treating it as having a common meaning and reference for them both. This is an implausible view and a view that is deeply condescending in its attitude toward ordinary participants in ethical debate.

But apart from the inherent implausibility of taking "right" to be covertly indexical, the use of such a step in order to neutralize the effect of the universalizability challenge leaves nonconsequentialists in an unhappy position. One way of underlining that fact is to say that from their point of view morality is not going to look very different from prudence.

"Prudent" is covertly indexical so far as it always means "prudent-for-X." Moreover, "prudent-for-X" is typically used to justify actions that are in X's

interest; it is not as if the predicate is ever used to discern what is prudent-for-X among Y's actions. Something parallel holds for "right" in the position to which our argument drives the nonconsequentialist. 'Right' in suitable contexts has got to mean 'right-for-X' and if it is to be of use to nonconsequentialists in answering the universalizability challenge it has got to be fitted in particular for justifying actions that serve X in a way that they may not serve others. While serving X, indeed, the actions to be justified by reference to what is right-for-X may positively frustrate others: while preserving X's integrity they may make it very difficult for others to do so; or while promoting the interests of X's children, they may jeopardize the interests of other people's children.

But in ordinary moral thinking, we contrast the demands of rightness with the promptings of prudence, and in general with any self-interested promptings, and treat them as having a greater authority. And if we think that our acting in prudence's name is really the right thing to do — the right thing, and not just a sign of our moral failure — then we are willing to give this a neutral justification; we are prepared to think that what justifies us in doing so is the neutral sort of consideration that would justify anyone in our position taking that line. Those who relativize rightness and use relativized rightness to justify a person's preserving their integrity, helping their children, or whatever, lose this contrast between rightness and prudence. They make rightness out to be a sort of prudence that lies beyond the need or possibility of neutral justification.

When you are called upon to justify a choice to me, it will not be intuitively sufficient for you to show me how prudent the choice was from your point of view. So it was prudent. Fine. But was it right? Was it something that you can represent, to those of us who do not necessarily share your prudential interests, as a justifiable action? You may explain your action to us by citing its prudential character. You may even give us a perspective from which we can excuse your doing what you did, recognising that it is justifiable in an isomorphic way; we can recognize that in your situation perhaps we too would have been moved by the corresponding prudential consideration. But you cannot justify the action in the sense in which we asked for justification, simply by showing that you were prudent. What we are looking for, intuitively, is substantive justification, not justification of the isomorphic sort, and the problem on the relativized picture of rightness, as that is used by nonconsequentialists, is that there will often be no such justification available; the appeal to rightness will do no better in justificatory terms than the appeal to prudence.

These considerations show that in being driven to indexicalize and relativize rightness nonconsequentialism would require a deep revision in our ordinary ways of thinking and that we should not contemplate that revision without considerable reluctance. The relativization of rightness in question would make moral discourse and moral exchange radically incapable of unifying the different points of view of different people. It would give a philosophical basis

to despair about the prospect that people might reconcile their different interests and commitments by appealing to moral argument. Such despair may yet be borne out in the development of our species but it is surely inconsistent with the hope around which moral argument continues to be built. This is the hope that by weaning ourselves away from more partial perspectives, and by submitting ourselves to the demands of fairness and equality and rationality and the like, we may yet manage to see things from a common, moral point of view. It is the hope, in a word, that ethical objectivism is sound.

The Possibility of Justificatory Objectivism

A full defense of consequentialism would need, not just to establish the case for believing that the ultimate justifiers of choice must be neutral in character, but also to silence the general misgivings and the specific objections that prevent many thinkers from giving that case a proper hearing. The general misgivings stem from the belief that consequentialism has to recommend a mode of decision making in which our ordinary moral psychology is upturned and agents adopt a casuistical, detached profile: a profile in which they can countenance the claims of friends and family, for example, only to the extent that looking after them happens to be the best way of furthering the impersonal good. The specific objections are that consequentialism would support the intuitively wrong choices; or would support the right choices for the wrong reasons; or would represent supererogatory, often heroic, choices as the only right one to take; and so on.

I cannot address all such complaints here.⁸⁵ But it may be useful if I say something, in conclusion, on the reservation about consequentialism that is espoused by those I described in my introduction as antimoralists. They suggest that going over to the sort of justificatory objectivism defended here would make life exceedingly impoverished. It would undermine our particularistic attachment to family and friends, for example, as well as our single-minded commitment to the hobbies and projects that mark out our individuality. This thought leads them to counsel, in my formulation, that such attachments and commitments should be placed beyond the bounds of ethical assessment; people should not be exposed to the corrosive effects of having to justify those attachments and commitments in ethical terms.

What I want to say is that this reaction to impartial morality — in particular, to the brand of justificatory objectivism that I have defended here — is mistaken and unnecessary. It overlooks the fact that the objectivism in question is, precisely, justificatory. The position I adopt does not recommend that people conduct their lives under the explicit control of neutral values, only that they for the stipulation, itself inherently counterintuitive, that in certain areas of life moral assessment should be kept at bay.

The facts that antimoralists emphasize are, first, that we all care for certain other people in their own right, not for what they represent; second, that we are creatures of particularistic inclinations and enthusiasms whose very identity and sense of self is tied up with taking those promptings seriously; and, third, that in many contexts and connections acknowledging a requirement to check one's responses by reference to neutral values defies deeply laid instincts and intuitions.⁸⁶ But I am happy to admit these facts, consistently with embracing justificatory objectivism. For it is entirely likely that if the facts are indeed sound — as I take them to be — then people will be justified in giving themselves over, no doubt within certain limits, to the personal attachments and the particularistic projects in question. The demands of neutral value can scarcely call for a pattern of decision, or a mode of decision making, that would undermine love and affection and our individuating sense of self; after all, such a life would do very badly by way of furthering any plausible set of values.

Yet even this observation may not be sufficient to silence the complaints of antimoralists. For they may say that if I admit the requirement to do only that which is objectively justifiable, then I must admit the further requirement to check that that which I do is objectively justifiable. And if I admit that checking requirement, then I betray the personal ideal of a life in which certain personal attachments and particularistic commitments are more or less sacrosanct. I give myself over instead to a moralistic ideal in which I only help my friends, for example, when I have the extra thought — one thought too many, in Bernard Williams's⁸⁷ phrase — that this is the right thing to do. I deny myself the possibility of expressing the way I am and feel and think, without first doing an ethical quality-check.

I agree with antimoralists, not only that we should not undermine personal attachments and particularistic commitments, but also that doing such ethical quality-checks would have an undermining effect. But there is no difficulty for justificatory objectivism in this admission. For if quality-checks would undermine such attachments and commitments, then it will be objectively justifiable, indeed objectively obligatory, to avoid such checking. People should take enough thought, in occasional moments of reflection, to make sure that certain patterns of unchecked spontaneity do indeed promise to be objectively justifiable by the values they espouse. But they should not drive unchecked spontaneity out of their lives by constant recourse to quality-checks.

The agents I envisage, then, can be decidedly spontaneous consistently with embracing a justificatory form of objectivism. Their consequentialism will mean that they occasionally reflect on the justifiability of their lives — hardly an objectionable feature — and that otherwise they satisfy a purely counterfactual requirement, not a requirement that imposes a pattern of actual self-monitoring.⁸⁸ What counterfactual requirement, in particular? I suggest this: that for any pattern of behavior that the agents manifest, it will be the case that they think it was objectively unjustified then they would not manifest it.

Satisfying this requirement does not require any extra thought of the kind that Williams criticizes. What it requires is rather the absence of a thought: the absence of a thought that the pattern of action in question is objectively unjustified. Hardly an excessive requirement, that. And certainly not a requirement to embarrass us about embracing objectivity in ethics.⁸⁹

Notes

1. In terminology used by Ronald Dworkin ("Objectivity and Truth," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 25 (1996): 87–139), opponents of semantic objectivism claim to reject ethical objectivity in a way that is neutral as between different ethical claims – the status of those claims is reinterpreted but their validity is not necessarily challenged – while opponents of ontological objectivism acknowledge that their rejection of ethical objectivity means that ordinary ethical evaluators are subject to massive error. Dworkin denies that semantic nonobjectivists can be as neutral as they claim.
2. J. L. Mackie, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 27–30.
3. See Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982): 419–439; Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theory," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 453–466; Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985); and, for an overview, Brian Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics," *Ethics* 107 (1997): 250–285.
4. Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 35.
5. Frank Jackson, Graham Oppy, and Michael Smith, "Minimalism and Truth-Aptness," *Mind* 103 (1994): 287–302, at p. 295.
6. Others may say that truth-conditionalism is weaker than semantic objectivism without committing themselves to a novel concept of truth-aptness. They may hold that while truth-aptness in general connects with belief, the only issue for participants in certain discourses may be, not whether to believe the relevant truth-apt sentences, but whether to treat them for certain purposes as if they were true: whether to treat them as expressing useful fictions. Such a fictionalist view has been defended with regard to theoretical, scientific discourse, e.g., and discourse on possibilities and necessities (Bas Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980]; G. Rosen, "Modal Fictionalism," *Mind* 99 (1990): 327–354). It might in principle be explored in the case of ethics too.
7. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1946); C. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941).
8. R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).
9. See G. E. Moore, *Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912).
10. See Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit, "A Problem for Expressivists," *Analysis* 58 (1998): 39–51.
11. Hare, *Moral Thinking*.
12. Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) and *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

13. Martin Davies and Lloyd Humberstone, "Two Notions of Necessity," *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1981): 1–30, at pp. 22–25.
14. I should mention that I am ignoring one possible but very implausible position. This would hold that while expressivism in some form is true, so that people do not mean to posit values in making ethical assessments, actually there are such values in the world. This is implausible because it supposes that the entities in question can be identified as ethical values independently of any connection with the terms in which people make ethical assessments. My thanks to Christine Tappolet for drawing my attention to this possibility.
15. Mackie, *Ethics*.
16. Moore, *Ethics*.
17. James Dreier, "Internalism and Speaker Relativism," *Ethics* 101 (1990): 6–26.
18. Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
19. Philip Pettit, "Evaluative 'Realism' and Interpretation," in S. Holtzman and C. Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 225; Peter Railton, "Moral Realism: Prospects and Problems," in W. Sinnott-Armstrong and M. Timmons (eds.), *Moral Knowledge?: New Readings in Moral Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 55.
20. Paul Horwich (*Truth* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1990]) and Crispin Wright (*Truth and Objectivity*) would prefer to cast this view as bearing on the appropriate conception of truth: truth for sentences, taken as already interpreted, already possessed of truth-conditions. Jackson et al., "Minimalism and Truth-Aptness," p. 300. I follow Jackson, Oppy, and Smith in thinking that the more perspicuous way of casting it is as an issue about the conception of truth-conditional or truth-aptness that is appropriate for sentences.
21. Philip Pettit, "Realism and Truth: A Comment on Crispin Wright's *Truth and Objectivity*," *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 56 (1996): 883–890; see also Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "Introduction" to *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
22. This issue arises whether or not you think, as indeed I do, that the meaning and reference of basic, undefined terms is partly fixed on the basis of the primitive responses elicited by the referents: whether or not you believe in a global form of response-dependence. See Philip Pettit, "Realism and Response-Dependence," *Mind* 100 (1991): 587–626.
23. See Frank Jackson, "Realism, Truth, and Truth-Aptness," *Philosophical Books* 35 (1994): 162–169; Christine Tappolet, "Mixed Inferences: A Problem for Pluralism about Truth Predicates," *Analysis* 57 (1997).
24. Amartya Sen, "Poor, Relatively Speaking," *Oxford Economic Papers* 35 (1983): 153–168.
25. Pettit, "Realism and Truth."
26. Philip Pettit, "A Definition of Physicalism," *Analysis* 53 (1993): 213–223; Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
27. David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).
28. David R. Hilbert, *Color and Color Perception* (Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 1987).
29. David Wiggins, "Objective and Subjective Ethics, with Two Postscripts About Truth," *Ratio* 8 (1995): 243–258.

30. Particularists, as they are called, sometimes seem to imply that though evaluative predicates collect things into descriptive or natural classes, there need be no descriptive pattern common to members of such a class: there may be nothing about the class such that exposure to a subset would enable a person to extrapolate reliably to other members. See, e.g., Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); David McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); and Mark Timmons, "Outline of a Contextualist Moral Epistemology," in W. Sinnott-Armstrong and M. Timmons (eds.), *Moral Knowledge?*. I reject such a suggestion, believing that evaluative properties must have a descriptive salience sufficient to enable us – finite minds responsive to natural features of the world – to cotton on to those properties. See Frank Jackson, Philip Pettit, and Michael Smith, "Ethical Particularism and Patterns," in B. Hooker & M. Little (eds.), *Particularism* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). I do not get into the matter here, because it would take us too far afield.
31. Harman, *The Nature of Morality*.
32. Pettit, "Realism and Response-Dependence."
33. See Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*; Susan Hurley, *Natural Reasons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
34. Dreier, "Internalism and Speaker Relativism."
35. Philip Pettit, "The Consequentialist Perspective," in Marcia Baron, Philip Pettit, and Michael Slote, *Three Methods of Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).
36. Philip Pettit, "Consequentialism," in Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); "The Consequentialist Perspective."
37. Justin Oakley, "Varieties of Virtue Ethics," *Ratio* 9 (1996): 128–152.
38. T. M. Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism," in A. Sen and B. Williams (eds.), *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
39. Hare, *Moral Thinking*. For ease of presentation I am neglecting the fact that there is a second way of being a consequentialist apart from maintaining that the right option is identified in the first place as that which maximizes expected value. This would involve holding that while the right option is identified in the first place by reference to the manifestation of virtue, or the satisfaction of an ideal contract, or the performance of what is universally prescribable, it turns out that satisfying any such condition involves maximizing expected value. Hare defends such a downstream consequentialism in deriving utilitarianism from his universal prescriptivism (but see Philip Pettit, "Universalizability without Utilitarianism," *Mind* 96 [1987]: 74–82); he does so, incidentally, from within an expressivist approach. I defend consequentialism in its upstream variety in Pettit, "The Consequentialist Perspective."
40. Peter Geach, *Logic Matters* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), chap. 8.
41. Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London: Duckworth, 1973), chap. 10; Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word and Essays in Quasi-Realism*; see too Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*.
42. For a critique see M. Van Rooijen, "Expressivism and Irrationality," *Philosophical Review* 105 (1996): 311–335.
43. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, p. 154.
44. Why only, of the other? Because there is a pragmatic inconsistency in thinking that while I actually believe that p, I would believe that not p in the event of escaping this or that inappropriate limitation of evidence or competence or whatever. There is a contrast here, of course, with the case of desire since I may have to acknowledge that my actual desires

do not correspond, for reasons of weakness, to what I know I would desire if I were not subject to this or that bad influence.

45. Philip Pettit, *The Common Mind: An Essay on Psychology, Society, and Politics* (1993); reprint, with a new postscript, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Gerald Postema, "Public Practical Reasoning: An Archaeology," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 12 (1995): 43–86; Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, "Freedom in Belief and Desire," *Journal of Philosophy* 93 (1996): 429–449.
46. Huw Price, *Facts and the Function of Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).
47. Moore, *Ethics*, p. 36.
48. Mackie, *Ethics*, p. 36.
49. See Michelle M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), on related themes.
50. Mackie, *Ethics*, pp. 38–42.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
52. Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, "Practical Unreason," *Mind* 102 (1993): 53–80.
53. Michael Smith, "The Humean Theory of Motivation," *Mind* 96 (1987): 36–61.
54. Frank Jackson, "Critical Notice of Susan Hurley's 'Natural Reasons,'" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1992): 475–487; Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit, "Moral Functionalism," *Philosophical Quarterly* 45 (1995): 20–40, and "Moral Functionalism, Supervenience, and Reductionism," *Philosophical Quarterly* 46 (1996): 82–86; Pettit, "The Consequentialist Perspective"; Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*.
55. See Mark Johnston, "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 63 (1989): 139–174; David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 63 (1989): 113–137; John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Properties," in T. Honderich (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge, 1985); Michael Smith, "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 63 (1989): 89–111, and *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
56. See Hurley, *Natural Reasons*; cf. W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1953), and *The Roots of Reference* (La Salle: Open Court Publishers, 1974).
57. David Lewis, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), essay 6; Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, chap. 6.
58. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).
59. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 121.
60. Jackson and Pettit, "Moral Functionalism."
61. The claim that every evaluative property – every evaluatively specifiable property – is also descriptively specifiable is a very substantive thesis. An evaluative property will not be descriptively specifiable just because it can be indirectly identified, say as the property that so and so is thinking about, in descriptive terms. Such an indirect identification picks out the property only by means of its having the distinct descriptive property that so and so is thinking about it. A descriptive specification proper will pick out the property without relying on such further connections (see M. Van Rooijen, "Moral Functionalism and Moral Reduction," *Philosophical Quarterly* 46 [1996]: 77–81; and Jackson and Pettit, "Moral Functionalism, Supervenience, and Reductionism").
62. Harman, *The Nature of Morality*.
63. Pettit, "The Consequentialist Perspective," p. 117.

64. Jackson et al., "Ethical Particularism and Patterns."
65. Philip Pettit, "Practical Belief and Philosophical Theory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1998): 15–33.
66. Robert Stalnaker, *Inquiry* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).
67. David Lewis, *Convention* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 67.
68. Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theory."
69. Philip Pettit, "A Theory of Normal and Ideal Conditions," *Philosophical Studies* 66 (1999): 21–44.
70. Robert Stalnaker, "Assertion," in P. Cole (ed.), *Syntax and Semantics* (New York: Academic Press, 1978).
71. Pettit and Smith, "Practical Unreason."
72. Notice, for the record, that all that is required is an absence of belief in the presence of nonideal factors, not the presence of a belief in the absence of nonideal factors: this makes the account less demanding and more plausible.
73. Pettit, "Realism and Response-Dependence"; Jackson and Pettit, "Moral Functionalism."
74. See Price, *Facts and the Function of Truth*.
75. This slant may make my approach congenial to someone like Ronald Dworkin ("Objectivity and Truth") who wants to hold that the only grounds for debating skeptical issues about ethics are grounds internal to ethical debate.
76. Sayre-McCord, introduction to *Essays on Moral Realism*.
77. Pettit, "The Consequentialist Perspective."
78. Pettit, *The Common Mind*, chap. 4; Pettit and Smith, "Freedom in Belief and Desire."
79. W. B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955–56): 167–198; see also William Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
80. Pettit, "Evaluative 'Realism' and Interpretation."
81. See John Broome, "Incommensurable Values," in R. Crisp and B. Hooker (eds.), *Essays in Honour of James Griffin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
82. Pettit, "The Consequentialist Perspective," and, for a detailed presentation, "Non-consequentialism and Universalizability," *Philosophical Quarterly* 50(2000): 175–190.
83. The upstream consequentialist, to use an earlier description, will hold that this is an a priori and axiomatic assumption; the downstream consequentialist will maintain that it derives, perhaps a priori, perhaps not, from such an assumption: say, as in the case of Hare (*Moral Thinking*), from the assumption that the right option in any choice is that which is universally prescribable. The argument here supports consequentialism as such, whereas in "The Consequentialist Perspective" I argue in favor of upstream consequentialism in particular.
84. See Włodzimierz Rabinowitz, *Universalizability* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979).
85. See Pettit, "The Consequentialist Perspective."
86. Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics," Pettit, "The Consequentialist Perspective."
87. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 18.
88. Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984): 134–171.
89. In completing this essay I was greatly helped by detailed comments from Brian Leiter and his colleagues, Cory Juhl and Robert C. Koons, and by suggestions from Frank Jackson, Ellie Mason, Don Regan, and Michael Smith.

Pathetic Ethics

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The battle for territory between subjectivist and objectivist ideologies is ultimately global war: truth itself is under siege.¹ One theater in which the fighting has been elegantly fierce is ethics. But it is not always clear for whom or what the troops are fighting. If your flag is just realism, for example, you could be Swiss about the engagement. But realists are reasonably suspicious of the antirealist *tendencies* of subjectivism (however this is ultimately defined) – it introduces a significant discontinuity between ethics and, for example, physics (which can be taken as paradigmatically *real*). A different realist may worry rather that objectivity in ethics will commit us to "queer" properties and lead ultimately to an error theory or to eliminativism. So realists enter the fray, on either side.

So-called sensibility theories² seek to negotiate a cease-fire. They grow with the thought that ethics must have *something* important to do with agents and their sensibilities. And they develop on analogy with views of secondary qualities, proposing a variety of analytic connections between moral properties and subjective states. What the proposals have in common is that in them the instantiation of ethical properties is viewed as not entirely independent of human psychological reactions. Still, such instantiation, when it occurs, is there to be cognized. There is nothing queer about ethical properties: they are intelligibly rooted in ethical thought or feeling. An ethical reaction, however, is not itself merely the expression of preference or the issuance of an imperative. It is an essentially cognitive response to ethical properties.

I think there is something importantly wrong with sensibility theories. Ultimately, their flaw is that they are, in a word, pathetic.³ One way to bring this out is to review how these theories arise in response to John Mackie's error theory. Part of the problem, it seems to me, is that Mackie has been rejected for the wrong reasons. Though I too find his view problematic, sensibility theorists have been misled by an underappreciation of Mackie. Reviewing his contribution, we better understand and more effectively resist the appeal of the professed alternative.