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**MORAL EDUCATION AND THE NATURE  
OF MORAL JUDGMENT**

by

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# MORAL EDUCATION AND THE NATURE OF MORAL JUDGMENT

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## SUMMARY

A vigorous debate is taking place about whether school pupils should be morally educated. Opinion appears to be sharply divided both about whether this is possible, and even if it is, what it would be. Some claim that schools have a duty to teach pupils 'universal' values. Others reject this, claiming that this is based on a misconception of what a moral judgment is. This school of thought takes moral judgment to be in a broad sense subjective or relative, and bases its doubts about the enterprise of moral education on these conceptions. Such scepticism about moral education, I suggest, is indicative of a more general view that unless claims made in a subject or activity can be objective and objectively assessed, they are not a fit vehicle for educational activity. Subjective or relativistic conceptions about moral judgment are ways of doubting whether claims made in morality can be objective and so can be a proper domain of educational activity.

These claims about how we understand the concept of moral judgment, are philosophical claims. To get to grips with these positions, I use the resources of metaethics to examine them. I suggest that any metaethical theory about the nature of moral judgment can be assessed by four tests, which are laid out in chapter 1. These are whether a theory (a) accounts for our basic moral convictions, (b) explains how we should understand the nature of moral disagreement, (c) explains what kind of knowledge is moral knowledge or what kind of justification is moral justification, and (d) explains the connection between moral judgment and moral action.

In chapters, 2-7, I examine the claims of emotivism, universal prescriptivism, two versions of subjectivism, relativism, moral realism and, more briefly, ethical naturalism to provide a satisfactory philosophical account of the nature of moral judgment.

In the concluding chapter, I draw out the implications of these different metaethical theories for moral education. I argue that emotivism, standard subjectivism, and relativism, the metaethical theories upon which sceptical views about the possibility of moral education are based, do not do justice to those aspects of our moral experience which form the basis for my four tests, and do not support the case that moral education is not possible. I go on to argue that we can deepen our understanding of what it is to be morally educated and what it is to engage in moral education, by making judicious selections from the ideas and claims in universal prescriptivism and moral realism.

# CHAPTER ONE

## METAETHICAL DISPUTES ABOUT MORAL EDUCATION

### 1.0 A Lively Debate about Moral Education

The moral development of young people, and the role of schools in such development, have been the subject of official discussion in the UK over the past twenty years, both from the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and its predecessors, and other official bodies such as the National Curriculum Council (NCC) and its successor the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA). The Education Reform Act of 1988 (ERA) stated in Section 1 that schools had a statutory responsibility to promote, inter alia, the moral development of pupils. As this dissertation is written up, the topic of morality and the young has once more been the subject of public debate, with a SCAA Discussion Paper on Spiritual and Moral Development (SCAA, 1995), a follow-up SCAA conference 'Education for Adult Life' and a promised National Forum on Values and Society (The Times, 15/1/96).

Can we get any idea from the published output of these various official bodies what schools are supposed to be doing with regard to pupils' moral development, and why they ought to be doing it? In 'The Curriculum from 5 to 16' (DES, 1985), there are statements which lay out what moral values or moral concepts are to be taught by schools. These include 'instilling respect for religions and moral values, and tolerance of other races, religions and ways of life' (para 1), 'fairness and justice' (para.59) and 'widely shared values like tolerance, honesty, fidelity and openness to the truth' (para 64). Indeed paragraph 64 tells the reader that 'schools have a clear duty to ground their pupils in those widely shared values'. The author(s) of 'Spiritual and Moral Development' say that 'school values should include telling the truth, keeping promises, respecting the rights and property of others, acting considerately towards others, helping those less fortunate and weaker than oneself, taking personal responsibility for one's actions, self-discipline.....'

and that 'school values should reject bullying, cheating, deceit, cruelty, irresponsibility, dishonesty' (SCAA, 1995, p 5). At the aforementioned conference, Nicholas Tate, the Chief Executive of the SCAA is reported as wanting the forthcoming National Forum on Values and Society to produce a new Ten Commandments which would give schools a framework of 'universal moral values' (The Times, 15/1/96). Tate is said to hold that the new Ten Commandments would reflect the values of 'honesty, respect for others, politeness, a sense of fair play, forgiveness, punctuality, non-violent behaviour, patience, faithfulness, self-discipline'. At the same conference Sir Ron Dearing, the chairman of the SCAA, is reported as holding that schools should teach that certain things such as violence, rape and mugging are 'evil' (The Times, 16/1/96).

Besides statements about which moral values to teach and which values to decry, it is also possible to find from some of these official sources some more general ideas about morality. Thus HMI (HMSO, 1985, para 59) says that 'The Moral' is concerned with 'actions and the principles which underlie them'. Pupils have to 'come to terms with the fact that the views and feelings of others must be taken into account'. In institutions such as schools and the family, moreover, moral considerations require 'that the interests of the institution must be weighed against those of individuals'. Further, though the moral is a domain in which disagreement is found, 'the rational resolution of disagreement is possible and desirable', though a few paragraphs later this view appears to be qualified when HMI concedes that 'there are moral questions on which people of equal integrity and thoughtfulness may reach quite different conclusions' (para 64). Notwithstanding this, we are told that moral disagreement 'does not make moral education impossible, still less unnecessary'. Indeed the moral curriculum 'should help pupils to recognise and explore differences of view both about what people accept as moral obligations and about what ultimately leads them to do so' (para 64). The point of these explorations, moreover, is not just to get to know what others think about moral questions and why but to contribute 'to the formation of pupils' own moral convictions', though as we have already noted there is an insistence in the same document that there are some moral

values which the school itself has a moral obligation to insist that pupils hold.

According to these official sources, then, there is an identifiable group of moral values and vices and these should be the subject matter of moral education in schools. Now one question which faces anyone who puts forward a view about what should be taught in schools is: why should this be taught? One answer to that question can be found in what appears to be a more general theory about what the young should learn in schools. In 'The Curriculum from 5 to 16', the idea is proposed that there are 'areas of learning and experience' and these 'embody a point of view about the broad lines of development which should feature in a rounded education' (para 32). Further, 'the curriculum of all schools should involve pupils in each of the following areas of learning and experience', and a list of such areas is then provided which includes the 'moral' (para 33). Here HMI appears to be agreeing that it is possible to categorise all, or at least some, learning and experience into a number of conceptually different areas, and that each area must be present in the school learning of all pupils for them to have a rounded education. If any area is omitted, a pupil's education would be incomplete because it would lack an important dimension. This is similar to the well-known view once held by P H Hirst and R S Peters (Hirst and Peters, 1970, pp 63-64), that it is possible to categorise knowledge into a number of different forms, and that these forms provide the basis of any programme of liberal education. These two authors also held that 'moral judgment' occurred in one such form, this form being a domain which is logically irreducible to other forms of knowledge. Indeed they go on to say that 'sustained attempts to show the objectivity of morals' have revealed that morality is a domain which 'must be recognised as having serious claims to independent status'. HMI agree about the conceptual irreducibility of 'the moral' to other areas of learning and experience, though they are at pains to point out that this does not mean that the moral has to be taught separately from any other area of learning and experience (HMSO, 1985, para 26), a view also held by Hirst and Peters (Hirst and Peters, 1970, p 65).

One objection to this claim is sometimes voiced by those who think either that the moral and the religious are identical or that the moral is a sub-set of the religious or depends in some way upon it. In contrast to the view voiced by both HMI and Hirst and Peters that morality is a conceptually separate domain or area, irreducible to other areas, this objection tells us that moral thought has to be grounded in religious belief. The authors of the NCC guide to the National Curriculum (NCC, 1992, p57) appear to be undecided about this. They cite typical questions to be addressed in RE. These include 'Who am I? Why am I here? Why did the universe begin? What is the purpose of life? Do human beings have a soul? What happens after death?' One might read this as saying that moral questions, as exemplified perhaps in the fourth question, can only properly be addressed if they are construed as questions in religious ethics. Perhaps the thesis is even stronger: non-ethical religious questions must be addressed logically prior to addressing moral questions. Both these propositions stand in sharp contrast to the view, supported by HMI, that 'morality and religion are not the same thing' (1985, para 61), though HMI also accepted that 'religious education is one of the subject areas which can contribute to moral development'. This ambivalence in officialdom's thinking is also revealed in Tate's remarks that 'although religious education is not the only vehicle, or indeed the main vehicle, for moral and spiritual education in schools, its role is crucial' (Tate, 1996, p 8). One might wonder how something can both be not a main vehicle for something and yet crucial to it. In its comment of the January 1996 conference on Spiritual and Moral Development, the Guardian leader writer (The Guardian, 16/1/96) appears to favour the HMI view, recommending Tate and Dearing to reread Plato (presumably the Euthyphro) as authoritative in establishing the autonomy of morals from religion.

It does seem clear, however, that these 'official' authors at least recognise that they need to say why morality is worth teaching, indeed why it must be taught in schools. As we have just seen, for some, the answer to that question lies in a more general philosophical claim that the moral is one of the ultimate categories of leaning and experience, a lack of understanding of which will in some way unbalance the individual. For others, the thought

seems to be something like this: the reason why we must keep our promises, be open to the truth etc. is that failure to do these things contravenes what God tells us is good and requires of us, or, at least, conflicts with some divine purpose. So once religious belief is accepted, moral belief and moral action will follow, in both a logical and a practical sense of 'follow'. Morality, it appears, can be shown to be grounded and thus justified in some type of thought which is deeper, more fundamental than moral thinking.

From these extracts from official sources, we can piece together the outlines of a theory about moral education. These reports tell us a number of things about the substance of what is to be taught. Teaching which follows these ideas will stress that 'the moral' is essentially a practical domain, meaning that its purpose is to guide what we ought to do. The moral point of view is one in which persons consider whether what is done is right or good, and that question is considered in the light of how an action affects or would affect others. The moral quality of actions is connected to more specific, identifiable and describable sorts of value (honesty, openness to the truth and so on), indeed these form the moral principles which are to guide action. These specific moral values have an important property. They are 'universal' or 'absolute' values. Even though the moral rightness of principled moral actions is often a matter of dispute and disagreement, for rational people do not always draw the same conclusions, it is still possible for there to be rational agreement in morals.

The 'official' theory also tells us why the above ought to be taught. Indeed, in urging that these things should be taught, the theory emphatically states that schools have a moral duty to try to get pupils to hold certain moral values. With respect to justifying the teaching of morality, as thus conceived, two arguments seem to be being offered. One, as we have seen, is a general philosophical theory, based on the categorisation of learning and experience, the other is that morality itself is grounded in religious belief. Either way, this theory of moral education appears committed to the view that the reason for teaching morality is to be found in some other, deeper, philosophical truth.

This theory of moral education is not without its critics, a state of affairs acknowledged by Tate (Tate, 1996). According to Tate, there once was a moral education framework, 'the transmission of a set of rules, precepts and principles...the Ten Commandments, the seven deadly sins, the seven principal virtues' (p 3). But this has been undermined by 'the spread of an all pervasive relativism'. Relativism, we are told, has even insinuated itself into the old way of moral thinking, the evidence for this being the claimed fact that when people of the older generation give a moral judgment based on the old rules, even they qualify it by saying things like 'but that's only my opinion', 'I don't wish to be judgmental' (p 4). Tate understands relativism to be:

'the view that morality is largely a matter of taste or opinion, that there is no such thing as moral error, and that there is no point therefore in searching for the truth about moral matters or in arguing and reasoning about it'.

Evidently, relativism as thus understood has got its grip on students, even trainee teachers. Tate quotes two pieces of research, by Talbot and by Arnot, to support this claim. Arnot's research is of interest. Tate reports Arnot as finding that (p 4):

'trainee teachers are deeply reluctant to do anything which might suggest that they are imposing ethnocentric, class or gender values on their pupils, as if the truth of a value were always relative to its subject and never universal'.

Relativism, as here presented, is doing quite a lot of work. It encompasses the positions that (1) moral judgment is like expressing a preference for tea over coffee, (2) that moral judgment is only a matter of opinion (doxa rather than episteme or nous), (3) that moral judgment cannot be the sort of judgment in which it is possible to make an error, (4) that moral judgments cannot bear truth values, (5) that it is wrong for one person to impose their race, class or gender values on another. 'Relativism' appears to be doing duty for all sorts of positions.

Why are we in such a state of affairs, a state which both Tate and Dearing deplore? Tate speculates that we may have become so reticent about our moral views because in the past there has been too much moralising, too many easy moral condemnations of the actions and practices of others, especially those found in other cultures. There has also been uncertainty about what our moral standards are. This, Tate speculates, is associated with the decline in religious faith. But the decline is also a cultural one, due to the rise of relativism itself as a predominant philosophical theory (Tate, 1996, pp.5-6).

It might be thought that liberalism should be added to this list of philosophical theories, adherence to which threatens to undermine traditional morality and any moral education based on the latter. This appears to be the view of at least one contemporary philosopher of education who has traced connections between liberalism and moral education (Jonathan, 1995). Jonathan takes liberalism to be that political philosophy which holds that there are many versions of the good life, that no particular version can be shown to be superior to any other and that people ought to be allowed live their lives according to their own views of the good life, with the one proviso that in so doing one person does not prevent another person from living their version of the good life. Clearly, liberalism so understood is not bereft of support for moral value. For one, the freedom of the individual to live his or her life according to their own lights is of moral value. For another, each individual has a moral obligation to refrain from stopping others living their version of the good life. This seems to be a way of stating either a principle of toleration and/or a principle of respect. Granted those qualifications, Jonathan goes on to suggest that the most one can expect for moral learners in any moral education programme in such liberal societies is that it 'pass on.....the requisite skills for making a [moral] map of their own' (p 338). For if people in a liberal society cannot pass on a moral map of their own to the young, since to do so would be to infringe the liberal principle that one ought not to impose one's own version of the good life on another person, the most that one can do is to enable the young to work out for themselves their own morality, albeit within the framework of the negative duties just noted. As Jonathan puts it (Jonathan, 1995, p 333):

'In moral matters, liberal educators therefore aim not to inculcate the values of tradition or of any particular creed or ideology, but to equip the young to reflect critically on the values which they encounter, and to develop and exercise a capacity for autonomous moral judgement which will enable them to lead their own lives authentically and to contribute to the progressive refashioning of the social world'.

Like moral educators of a relativistic turn of mind, liberal moral educators apparently will not find it justifiable to pass on a moral code, certainly not one which has any pretensions to contain universal values, though this general statement of liberal philosophy will have to be qualified, since liberal moral educators would be committed to supporting the fundamental principles of liberalism. However, one might have some doubts about whether philosophical liberalism, as thus presented, is as restrictive of traditional morality as this appears to suggest. We have just noted that people in liberal societies have a duty not to interfere with others' pursuit of the good life except when that pursuit itself leads to interference in the pursuit of the good life by some people. This qualification gives room, though, for quite a lot of what one might call typical moral values or typical moral principles. Take 'generally speaking one ought not to break one's promises'. If X breaks a promise made to Y and there are no circumstances which make this justified, then X's promise-breaking can be construed as interfering in Y's expectations and hence with Y's life, thus interfering in Y's living his or her life according to Y's version of the good life. No doubt, this might not be true of all promises made by some X to some Y, as when X promises Y to waggle his ears three times daily even though this is not of the slightest interest or moment to Y. That sort of thing aside, we might well construe promise breaking as typical of those actions which do have the effect of interfering in the lives of those who are on the receiving end of the breaking of the promise. After all, promising is saying you will do something. Mostly, others depend on a person doing what they say they will do. If you do not keep your promise, you have interfered with the pattern of someone else's life and so altered their living of what they hold to be good in their life.

So whether philosophical liberalism is to be added to the list of philosophical theories which undermine the sort of morality which we ought to live by, and ought to teach to

the young, is a moot point. It remains true, nevertheless, that the nature and justification of moral education are matters of disagreement. This surfaces in the unease expressed by the student teachers surveyed by Arnot. They seem to think that moral education is undesirable because it inescapably or inevitably or necessarily leads to teachers forcing their moral views on learners. One wonders what conception of moral education lies behind this. Must moral education inevitably result in the moral views of some being forced down the throats of others? Can a conception of moral education be articulated which overcomes these worries?

It is clear, though, that there is a deeper vein of unease about the nature and desirability of moral education, and this is connected in the minds of those who have these doubts with their views about what kind of judgment a moral judgment is. Here, several sceptical positions seem to be at work. One of these is about the proposed properties of moral values noted above, their 'absolute' and 'universal' character. These are tricky terms, with a variety of meanings, but the contrast which might be being struck here is between the view that moral values transcend cultural values and the view that moral values cannot but be rooted in particular cultural settings. There are echoes in this of the claim made in classical thought that the laws of the state can be assessed by a higher, moral, law, one we might say of universal status. Translating this idea to the present day, we can say that one source of scepticism, or at any rate disagreement with the 'Tate' view about moral education, lies in the claim that what is morally right can only be determined by reference to the morals of a particular culture, such that any culture's position on a moral question cannot have its moral worth independently assessed. This is how moral relativism is sometimes articulated. So far as moral education is concerned, a possible result of this position is that it becomes impossible for those who belong to one moral culture to have their views assessed by those who belong to another culture. As a result, one ends up saying things like: 'that way of slaughtering animals prior to consumption is right so far as that culture's view of things goes, it's different from the way we do these things, but that is all that can be said'; and, 'I cannot teach the adherents of that culture that what they are doing is morally wrong'.

Another disagreement about moral education arises from the claim that moral judgment is a matter of taste. How do we take this? One way might be to follow the suggestion made by the physicist Paul Davies, (Davies, 1984) that belief in God is a matter of taste, meaning that there are no or cannot be any arguments which would compel one to hold such a belief. Similarly, moral judgments would be judgments for which there are not and cannot be any compelling arguments. So far as moral education is concerned, an assumption made by those who hold this position would seem to be that unless any moral belief can be shown to be the sort of belief for which there can be compelling arguments, one cannot engage in educational activity concerning it. This would appear to rule out rather a lot in education. Even in science, theories might not be compelling for often scientific data underdetermines a scientific theory.

Another interpretation of the view that moral judgments are a matter of taste might be to take the idea much more literally, regarding moral judgments as akin to the sort of judgments which one does make when one has tasted something. 'It tastes sweet' depends on a certain sort of sensory experience. Similarly, moral judgment might be held to be the sort of judgment which one makes as a result of some analogue to sensory experience. In keeping with this approach, it might be claimed that people have a moral sense. If they do, and if we could explain what this involves, we would need to know whether it is amenable to development along educational lines.

A possible third interpretation of the idea that moral judgments are a matter of taste might be that a person's moral views are just statements of what they prefer or like. Rather like the second interpretation, this too might be a way of denying that when we make moral judgments, it is possible to justify them by appeal to the things which make something right or wrong, good or bad.

Close to the first of these three interpretations of moral judgment as a matter of taste, is the view that moral judgment is a matter of opinion. It is, I think, true from time to time

that people advance reasons for the opinions which they hold. Nevertheless, 'opinion' is often contrasted with knowledge. We put down what a person believes by saying 'that's only your opinion' but we do not put down what a person claims to know by saying 'that's only what you know'. Even if opinions are backed by reasons, opinions are not thought of as decisive. They lack something. Perhaps, then, there are 'relativists' whose theory of the nature of moral judgment is that moral judgments are the sorts of judgment which can never obtain the status of knowledge, even though they may be supported by reasons. Thus, according to this view, whilst 'the train left at 3.30; I saw it' may be thought by most to be a statement of knowledge, 'he made her cry and that's why what he did was wrong' will be held to be a statement of the speaker's moral opinion but not of his or her moral knowledge. If this view prevailed, moral education might be thought of as a sort of activity where it is possible to hold reasons for one's moral opinions, but where in spite of this the status of these moral judgments is epistemically inadequate. That would, I think, be a way of undermining a moral judgment.

In addition to those who assimilate moral judgment to taste or to opinion, Tate discerns a yet further attack on the position he wants to hold. This is the objection that moral judgments cannot be said to be true. Tate thinks not only that this is mistaken as a view about morality, but that there are some moral truths, for example that one ought to keep one's promises, one ought to be open to the truth, and one ought to help those less fortunate than oneself. Those who think that it is not possible for there to be moral truths are also, according to Tate, committed to the view that 'there is no such thing as moral error, and that there is no point therefore in searching for the truth about moral matters or in arguing and reasoning about it' (Tate, 1996, p 4). For Tate, it seems, making a moral mistake, and arguing and reasoning about moral matters are all normal parts of human experience, all to be understood as part and parcel of the general task of establishing what is true and false in morals. On this view, the point of moral education would be to enable moral learners to know what is morally true, rather as the point of science education might be said to be to learn truths about what the physical world is made of and why events in the physical world occur.

But is Tate right when he claims that if one rejects the view that there are moral truths, then one has to accept that argument and reasoning are without point in morality? Does moral education depend upon it being the case that moral beliefs take truth values? Further questions present themselves about Tate's position. If he is correct that there are certain values which are universal or absolute, and we can give these terms a clear meaning, how do we know what they are? Do we just intuitively know them, for example? And if there are such values, how does knowing what they are help us when we face complex, difficult moral controversies which are often a source of moral conflict and dilemma? In short, Tate's view seems to lack any account of how we gain moral knowledge or how we deal with moral conflicts.

It is clear, then, from the preceding paragraphs that there are some pronounced disagreements about moral education. Indeed, we can detect two levels of disagreement. One level seems to be about what ought to go on in moral education. For example, some educationalists want to say that moral education should consist of the teaching of certain universal or absolute moral values, whilst others reject this in favour of moral education being essentially concerned with teaching the moral values of different cultural groups or societies. Another level of disagreement is connected with the question of what exactly a moral judgment is. On this matter, there are those who think moral education consists of the teaching of certain moral truths, a view which assumes that in morality we can say what is morally true. Teaching moral truths will be teaching the moral standards to which individuals' moral judgments have to conform. People, moreover, can make mistakes in their moral judgments. In the same way that a person can make, say, a mistake over the height or colour of something, so too in morals, it appears, people can make mistakes over what is right and wrong.

But this is clearly a contested position. Ranged against it there are a variety of views, but they all seem to share in common the thought that moral education cannot be like this because moral judgments cannot state moral truths. There are no moral truths to provide

the moral standards for moral judgments to conform to. This line of thinking is variously expressed. For some, moral judgments are just matters of taste, for others they are matters of opinion, for others the expression of our likes and dislikes. These all, in their different ways, indicate a much more radical disagreement than that taking place at the first level, for this second area of disagreement is one which is sceptical about the enterprise of moral education itself. If moral judgment is merely a matter of taste, or opinion, or an expression of likes and dislikes, then one might begin to wonder whether there is any room for educational activity at all here. If any of these theories about moral judgment are correct, then how does the reasoning, argument and truth-seeking which typifies education in other domains such as science and history, even get a purchase in morality? The sceptical argument here might be something like this. For any inquiry or activity to count as 'educational', it must be capable of yielding claims or judgments which are objective, that is to say true or right or correct. Further, claims put forward as objective in that sense, must also have the evidence or the grounds for their being true, right or correct both stated and subject to assessment, in order to see whether they are justified. This conveys another sense in which we might say that moral judgments are objective. The unease about proposals for moral education, then, would be that moral judgments, the expressions of people's opinions, likes and so on, cannot yield claims which attain objective status, and cannot be assessed and justified in an objective way. When someone says that  $\phi$ -ing is right, this is not a claim which can be true or false, cannot be a claim which is provable or shown to be justified, and so cannot be a claim which is objectively assessable. Because of this, morality is not a fit and proper subject for education. It is, as people sometimes say, a purely private matter.

There seem to be two interrelated problems to sort out. First, is moral education impossible, as these sceptical arguments seem to suggest? Second, if it is not impossible, what account can be given of the concept of moral education?

In this dissertation, these are the problems I address.

## 1.1 The Concept of Moral Education: some preliminary thoughts

Perhaps the way to tackle these problems is to give two definitions, one of morality, the other of education. Once we have these two definitions, we can then go back to the debate and make a decision on it.

What might we be looking for when we ask 'what is morality?' One suggestion might be that we are trying to find a list of moral values, or a list of moral principles, which together constitute what morality is. However, this approach would not be without difficulties. How do we produce such a list? What do we do if different people put different values or principles on their lists? How do we decide whether any item on the list is a moral value or principle, as opposed to some other sort of value such as a religious value, or some other sort of principle such as one which guides us prudentially?

If we were to persist with list-making, what we really want to know is what is it which makes whatever is on the list a moral value or a moral principle, and what is it which enables us to exclude others items from the list as not belonging to moral values. In recent philosophical discussions of these questions (Frankena, 1970: Thomas, 1993), two approaches to them seem to have been adopted. There are those who propose to answer the question, 'what is morality?' by denying that morality has a subject matter, and then going on to say that morality is whatever values and principles emerge from the application of certain formal principles. On the other hand, there are those who propose to answer the question, 'what is morality?' by saying that morality has a subject matter, and then going on to say what this is.

The former approach faces some well-known and formidable difficulties. Kant's first formulation of the moral law is often taken as an example of this approach, and its difficulties. 'Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' seems to make 'everyone: face the moon each

night', and 'everyone ought to pursue their own interests' into moral laws. Kant gives a number of different versions of the Categorical Imperative, amongst which is 'act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only', and whether or not this is an entailment of the first version, this appears to go beyond being a formal principle, giving a content to morality. R M Hare's universal prescriptivism (see chapter 3) is also taken as an example of this first approach, in that it suggests that moral judgments are distinguished by their having two logical properties, namely prescriptivity and universalisability. The first is the suggestion that for a judgment to be a moral judgment, it must be such that it entails an imperative, the second is the suggestion that for a judgment to be a moral judgment is for it to be applied with consistency. Yet these two properties appear to allow both trivial and immoral prescription to count as moral prescriptions. For example, 'always kill Jews, even if it turns out that the utterer of the prescription is a Jew' is in the form of a universalised prescription.

Hare does not want to rule out any judgments which possess universalised prescriptivity as moral judgments. He does not think that we can answer the question; 'what is morality?' just by giving a definition of morality. But an objection to Hare's view is that it flies in the face of how we ordinarily think of morals. Not just any customs and conventions which govern lives, will do as part of morality, otherwise we would have to say that slave-owning plantation mores, and apartheid systems, were within morality. We reject these as wrong, and wrong in the sense that they lie outside morality altogether. We do seem prepared to draw boundaries around the moral domain, leaving outside it a variety of practices, for example the cruel and the pitiless, the selfish and the self-centred.

When we appeal to the moral point of view, we assess actions and people in terms of how these affect others. 'Think about others, don't just think of yourself' seems a common enough utterance, one which adults use to admonish children. This seems to give a minimum content to morality. It is interesting to recall that the writers of 'The Curriculum

from 5 to 16' agree with this, when they say that 'pupils have to come to terms with the fact that the views and feelings of others must be taken into account.' (HMSO, 1985, para 59). Moreover, can we not give a more detailed spelling out of this basic thought? Keeping a promise, telling the truth, not hurting or harming others, these and other types of act are specific ways in which we take account of the views and thoughts of others in our dealings with them.

That is the way I shall understand what at the least is required when a person is said to look at things from the moral point of view. What of 'education'?

In his many discussions on the concept of education, Peters draws attention to the fact that the word 'education' has different meanings (see, for example Peters, 1966, pp.23-25; Peters, 1970, pp.5-7 and pp 10-12). He then sets out what he takes to be the conditions for the use of the term 'education' and its cognate phrases in the central uses of these words. My concern here is not to enter the very wide debate which Peters' work has initiated, for example whether 'education' has a paradigm usage or whether it is a conceptual truth that 'education is of the whole man'. It is, rather, to get some purchase on the notion of education, so that we can see what work 'education' is doing when it is attached to 'moral'. One way of putting this is to ask how a person who is morally educated is different from someone who is just a moral person.

Peters draws a connection between an educated person and a person who possesses knowledge. He suggests, following Plato, that an educated person is someone who in obtaining knowledge is committed to the standards which are intrinsic to a pursuit or a project, and he then fills out this idea (Peters, 1970, p15):

"This notion of sensitization to standards, which are connected with the point of the activity, provides a common element in both theoretical and practical pursuits. For to engage in a theoretical pursuit is not just to engage in idle or sporadic curiosity; it is rather to have regard to standards of clarity, relevance, consistency, and correctness, which are intimately connected with the pursuit of truth. Practical

pursuits involve such standards as well, in so far as they are transformed by theoretical understanding; but they also involve additional standards derivative from the practical purposes which they embody”.

Given that moral thinking is a practical pursuit in the sense that its point is to shape people’s action, I think we can safely say that Peters saw the difference between the moral person and the morally educated person as residing in the ways in which the latter seeks clarity, relevance, consistency and correctness in their moral views. These are all, in another of Peters’ phrases, ‘rational virtues’, features of any thinking which is aimed at getting something correct, true or right. One can paint in some of the details of the contrast which is implicit in Peters’ idea. Morally educated people generally do not form their moral opinions on whim or impulse, nor will the moral beliefs they hold be held just because they have adopted traditional ways of thinking. They will be people who have given careful thought to their moral judgments. They will have an understanding of concepts used in morality. They will be able, in giving moral judgments, to offer justifications for them. They will be able to assess moral judgments, their own and others, for example by seeing whether empirical claims made in them are backed by evidence, and by removing inconsistencies between moral judgments.

These preliminary remarks suggest, then, that a morally educated person would be someone who has a moral point of view. This is a point of view which has moral substance, that is one which rejects selfish behaviour and emphasises the importance, when thinking about what one ought to do, of taking account of the concerns of others. The difference between a morally good person and a morally educated person lies in the latter being able to use their powers of reason to justify and critically assess the judgments which are made from the moral point of view.

## **1.2 Philosophy and the Lively Debate about Moral Education**

These preliminary thoughts about the concept of moral education only give an idea of what sort of conditions would need to be fulfilled for a person to count as morally educated. They do not touch the arguments described towards the end of 1.0, between sceptics and non-sceptics over whether moral education is possible. It is quite possible for someone to hold that whilst the above gives us some understanding of the concept of a morally educated person, the point of view and the rational virtues cited in it have no application. For moral judgments are just matters of personal taste or opinion, not capable of being rationally justified and assessed.

How can we set assess these conflicting claims about the nature of moral judgment? Fortunately, there is a valuable resource to hand. The problem of whether moral thinking can be objective, and questions about what sort of judgment a moral judgment is, provide the subject matter of moral philosophy, or more accurately the inquiries undertaken in metaethics. In metaethics, typical questions are: is moral judgment best understood as a form of belief or does the practical nature of morality force us to give a different account of it? Can moral judgments be true? If so, what makes them true? Can one obtain objectivity in moral judgment, and if so what account can be given of this? How do moral judgments connect with moral action? It seems reasonable to try to assess these varying positions on the possibility and nature of moral education, by examining the philosophical theories from whence they come. This, in fact, will take up the bulk of the dissertation, as I set out and examine various metaethical theories on the nature of moral judgment in chapters 2-7.

Moral philosophy also consists of inquiries into normative ethics. Typical questions here are: what ought I to do? What ought to be done? What is right? What sort of person should I be? What sort of life should I live? Often, attempts to answer these general questions are provided by general normative theories such as utilitarianism or contractarianism. Increasingly, such general normative theories are used to address

particular moral problems, such as whether it is right to execute a person who has committed murder.

There is widespread agreement that metaethics and general normative theories address different kinds of questions. The latter address the question: what is of moral value? The former raise questions about what sorts of things moral values are, how they take their place, if at all, in a non-value material universe, and whether their nature either allows or prevents us from gaining knowledge of them. General normative theories, it is claimed, attempt to say why some moral judgment is right or wrong, in contradistinction to metaethical investigations which cannot engage in value issues in that way. Hence, metaethical investigations are said to be value-neutral inquiries. These alleged differences between metaethical questions and normative questions, then, might provide the basis of an objection against the investigations which I propose to conduct. This is that since any metaethical inquiry cannot address questions of what is right or wrong, they cannot have any practical consequences. Metaethics, so the argument might develop, is a purely theoretical type of inquiry and so it cannot have anything to say about practices in moral education. Far better to abort this from the start and admit that if one wants to conduct a philosophical inquiry about moral education which has any point, this has to be directed to practical questions, and so ought to take the form of general normative theorising. After all, so the objection proceeds, school pupils should be required to grapple with questions such as 'what ought I to do?', 'what sort of person should I be?' and so on, not 'what is a moral judgment?'. Indeed, if we want to turn out citizens whose outlook is a moral one, far better to work out what the general features of a moral person's character are and then try to arrange matters in schools and homes and society at large so as to allow these to develop, rather than engage in what, by the nature of the activity, will be idle metaethical speculations.

There are a number of replies to make to this objection. First, these two sorts of inquiry are not mutually exclusive of one another. Examining the implications for moral education

of different theories about the nature of moral judgment, does not mean that there are not also worthwhile philosophical inquiries into moral education to be conducted from other areas of moral philosophy. Still, this reply might be vulnerable to the counter that the priority has to be to stress the importance of encouraging rigorous general normative theorising. Second, even granted that it is important to encourage the young to engage in general moral theorising, and even granted that it is important for moral educators to have some clear notion of what moral characteristics to develop in the young, it is more than likely that when pupils commence their normative theorising, they will start to make remarks such as 'that's just your opinion', 'no moral opinion can be shown to be correct, so one opinion is as good as another'. To leave these remarks unaddressed is to risk undermining any further progress which might be made in a pupil's normative moral thinking, since these sceptical remarks are often used to block any further discussion. 'You have your view, and I have mine. What more can be said?', or 'No one is justified in forcing their opinions onto someone else', would be not untypical ways in which an embryonic metaethical position would impinge on attempts to get people to do more normative thinking. As has already been noted, from the research quoted by Tate (Tate, 1996), there is some evidence that the latter kind of remark is one which student teachers are apt to make. So, whether or not there are to be programmes of moral education which would involve general normative theorising, depends on what is said about these prior questions. Teachers and pupils need to address these questions too.

This is not to suggest that attempts to address these embryonic metaethical positions must have the result of showing that views about moral judgment as matters of taste, or as just reflections of cultural standards, and so on, are flawed from the outset. Whether this is so depends on the results of a good deal of argument. At least, if someone comes to hold a generally sceptical view about morality, their metaethical investigations should enable them to see more clearly the assumptions and implications of their position, and will enable them to put forward arguments against possible objections to it. Their theory will have a sounder basis.

A third move against the objection questions the claim that the distinction between metaethics and moral theory rests on the claim that since metaethics is a non-normative form of inquiry, it follows that it cannot have any bearing on what we ought to do and so must be a non-practical type of inquiry. The claim appears to hold that just as, say, a moral theory such as utilitarianism properly aims at saying why right action is right, but goes off course if it starts telling us things about what sort of judgment a moral judgment is, so a metaethical theory properly addresses itself to questions such as whether moral judgment is a form of belief, but goes beyond its brief if it tries to say something of a practical, normative, nature.

It is true that metaethical and normative philosophy, understood in this way, pose different sorts of question, some would say operate at different levels of thinking about ethics. But doubt can be cast on whether any distinction between them is a one which rests upon the one but not the other having normative consequences. For a start, there seem to be examples of moral philosophers whose work throws some doubt on this being the way one should distinguish between metaethics and moral theory. For instance, an ethical naturalist such as Hart (Hart, 1961, p 189) holds that there are 'universally recognised principles of conduct which have a basis in elementary truths concerning human beings'. The former 'provide the minimum content of Natural Law'. For example, from the fact that human beings are vulnerable, we can ground moral principles and legal frameworks which enjoin the forbearance of the use of violence to others. Hart, then, is an example of someone who both offers a metaethical theory, namely that that it is possible to base moral principles upon some general non-moral facts, and thinks that one can show that certain general moral principles actually arise from certain general non-moral facts.

On the other side of the naturalistic fence, R.M Hare in his later work (Hare 1981) provides an example of someone who thinks that we can, by an analysis of the language of morality, both explain what sorts of judgments moral judgments are, and once these features of moral judgments are understood, proceed to use this understanding to establish what is morally right and wrong.

Remember, too, the judgment which Ross makes against logical positivism's account of ethics: 'the latest attempt to discredit ethics' (Ross, 1939, p 38). Ross thinks that this piece of metaethical theorising has practical consequences, disastrous ones at that.

These examples should at least make us pause before accepting the non-practical/practical distinction as the basis for the difference between metaethics and normative moral theory. But there are still other, and more powerful, arguments to undermine the general objection that metaethical inquiry cannot have any bearing on what we ought to do. The objection that it cannot be in that sense practical rests upon a view that some types of inquiry are 'purely' theoretical, as we say, and others are not. Included in the ones which are not might be 'purely' practical inquiries. But they might also include, as we have seen, general normative theories. I shall use the phrase 'practical inquiry' to cover both these latter two types. What, then, does the pure theory/practical inquiry distinction rest upon?

One can see some point in the distinction between pure theory and practical inquiry, as when we think of those theories which are both aimed at getting at what is true and are never intended to have practical application. Theories of the big bang might be examples. It is, however, far from certain that all scientific theories of which that description is true, continue to be without practical application. It is often the case that a 'purely' scientific theory, in the sense just indicated, turns out to have practical applications, often in quite unexpected ways. Nor are scientific theories per se plausibly construed as without practical application. There are plenty of branches of science where the development of theories takes place pari passu with inquiries into practical problems. Metallurgy, and seismic theories are examples.

Often the pure theory/practical inquiry distinction is drawn around the concept of truth. Some theories, especially empirical theories, aim to state what is true. A good theory here will be one which gives us the best grounds, via evidence and argument, for holding some set of propositions to be true. In contrast, in practical inquiry it is said that the

point is not to say what is true but to give us the best justifications for what we ought to do. Indeed, even if, in practical inquiry, any justification for what we ought to do involves propositions which say what is true, the latter, it is claimed, do not determine judgments about what we ought to do. This leans on a principle of logic, which insists that no conclusion of an evaluative sort can be deduced from premises which are entirely non-evaluative. So, following this line of argument, someone might agree that metaethics seeks to establish the true nature of moral judgments, but might disagree that any conclusions concerning what we ought to do, can follow from it.

Yet this way of drawing the theory/practical inquiry divide, and so denying the practicality of metaethics, is open to question. First, some might say that the point of practical theorising is to get at what counts as true in the practical spheres of life. Some thinkers about morality maintain this position, regarding terms like 'right', and 'wrong' as the equivalents in morality of terms such as 'true' and 'false' in empirical claims. Second, others reject the argument that you cannot get an 'ought' out of an 'is'. They will say that non-evaluative statements, whether these be straightforward factual statements or non-evaluative theoretical statements, can provide the basis for drawing evaluative conclusions. For example, suppose we were to grant that moral judgments can only be correct if they conform to the prevailing conventions of a person's culture. This is a non-evaluative theoretical statement about what it is to make a correct moral judgment. It might then be held that we ought not to say things like 'telling lies is wrong, no matter what culture a person comes from'. From these two considerations, then, one might argue that the point of practical theorising is to get at what is correct, an aim which may be achieved by using non-evaluative theoretical premises to arrive at evaluative conclusions.

Another way in which metaethics might be dismissed as a practical kind of inquiry is by upholding the theory/practical inquiry distinction via an argument which comes from Hume's distinction between reason and passion. Reason, he says, aims at the discovery of

what is true and what is false, and this is delivered by virtue of 'real relations of ideas, or real existence and matters of fact' (Hume, 1888, p 488). Whatever does not fall into the categories of real relations of ideas and real existence is outside the ring of reason and can never gain entry. Hume goes on to suggest that moral judgments are those expressions which move us to act. Since passions and actions are not part of reason, they cannot be rationally held. Actions can only arise from psychological states like attitudes, desires and passions, though Hume accepts that the directions which actions take are amenable to reason, which functions like the executive arm of a person. Crudely, passions move us to do things, reason tells us how to do them. From this Humean line of thought, we can see the outlines of a theory/practical inquiry distinction, where theoretical reasoning, the sort of reason directed towards establishing what is true, cannot occupy the commanding heights of determining our aims and objectives, cannot tell us what we ought to do, and so cannot be practical in that sense. From this, the Humean will draw the conclusion that metaethical theorising, because it is thinking which aims at establishing what the true nature of a moral judgment is, cannot tell us what we ought to do, and so cannot have any practical implications.

It might be thought that one difficulty with this position is that it now appears to rule out all theorising in ethics, as having no practical import. For surely the sort of general normative theorising that one finds in, say, utilitarianism, is a prime example of the use of reason in ethics. If theorising cannot tell us what we ought to do, and so cannot have any practical impact, then has not the Humean put metaethical theorising and general normative theorising in the same boat? Neither can have practical implications.

A Humean reply to this might be to say that the riposte is based on a misunderstanding of what moral judgments are. They certainly are expressions of our emotions. But that is also true of normative theorising, since normative theorising is itself a way of expressing one's passions. When Humeans reject the view that reason can determine our aims and objectives, this does not mean that they reject the view that normative theorising expresses

what moves us to act. What they reject is the view that any non-normative statements, whose truths are discovered by reason, are expressions of our emotions. But this move still has the air of implausibility about it. One might agree that just as, say, 'stealing is wrong' expresses what we feel about stealing, so too 'everyone has certain basic rights' expresses what we feel about people's treatment of one another. However, when we move beyond such vague generalisations, when we start to ask questions such as: 'which rights are basic?'; 'what makes them basic?'; 'who counts as possessing these rights?', we are using our powers of reason to construct a theory. The Humean, then, ends up saying that in any normative theory, there will be some parts which owe their provenance to the passions and so have practical implications, and other parts which owe their provenance to reason but which can have no practical implications. If one concluded, then, that only conscious beings could have rights, it would appear that this would be a deliverance of reason which could have no practical impact. It is not easy to see why anyone would want to say this.

These points would appear to suggest that the sort of theorising in which one tries to sort out the underlying ideas, beliefs and assumptions of a normative position in ethics, can have practical implications. But suppose that hard-nosed Humeans just stuck to their guns and insisted that no exercise of reason could have practical implications. Only the passions can be practical, in the senses of expressing what we ought to do and moving us to act accordingly. Their position is, then, that the question: 'what ought to be done?' is one which is impervious to whatever reason can deliver. Yet that too seems now to be a theory about moral judgment, one which has the practical implication that anyone who puts forward a reason for taking some moral action, is doing something which cannot be done.

The root of the difficulties which Humeans get themselves into, lies in their distinction between reason and the passions. 'Reason' aims at saying what is true with regard to real relations of ideas and real existences. 'Real' here appears to refer to anything, external

to people, which exists. So far as morality is concerned, there are no such real, existent, moral objects and properties, so we have to discover what morality is by inspecting our own psychological states. '....when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing but that from the constitution of your nature, you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it' (Hume, 1888, p.469). But, as Edgely points out (Edgely, 1972 pp. 153-169), in that case we will have to say that all sorts of other psychological states cannot be rational. Believing, considering, thinking, all these are, in Humean terms, not real existences, their status being on a par with feeling and desiring. No such mental state can ever be a rational state. Even the psychological state of knowing some empirical fact is not a rational state.

But this just flies in the face of what we know to be true. The fact is that we talk of the reasons for knowing something to be true and believing something to be true. We also talk of the reason for doing something. 'Reasons for' applies both to actions and propositional attitudes. Theoretical reasons can be reasons for knowing something to be true, and for believing something to be true. They can be reasons for doing something too, as well as reasons why we ought to do one thing rather than another.

This does not mean that we have to say that both reasons and actions are parts of arguments. Reasons are parts of arguments, and conclusions are parts of arguments. Actions are not parts of arguments. Yet even though actions are not parts of arguments, not even the conclusions of arguments, that does not show that we cannot give reasons, in the form of premises and conclusions, for doing something. And among the reasons we can have for doing something are theoretical reasons.

In sum, the suggestion that metaethical thinking cannot have practical implications is not a secure one. Certainly, there are moral philosophers who would contest the suggestion. One way of rejecting it, is to question one assumption on which it is based, namely that thinking whose point is to set out what we ought to do, is not thinking aimed

at saying what is true in morality. Another way of rejecting it is to accept the Humean distinctions between reason and the passions on which it is based, but then to argue that it leads to unacceptable conclusions for it makes much normative theorising into activity which can have no practical application. More damning still is the reductio ad absurdam argument, that if one's view is that moral judgments are just expressions of one's feelings, that too is a metathetical theory with practical implications. The source of these Humean difficulties, it was suggested, lay in the view that only the passions, not reason, can have practical force. Once we see what the implications of this view are, namely that we cannot be said to have any reasons for any propositional attitudes, the way is cleared for accepting that reasons, including reasons from theories, can inform practice.

Metaethics is theorising, disciplined thinking, the attempt to address certain questions in as systematic and rigorous a way as one can muster. But the fact that it is theoretical thinking of a certain kind is no more a disqualification from it being capable of yielding reasons for action than is that other sort of rigorous theorising in moral philosophy which one finds in normative theories such as utilitarianism.

### **1.3 A Conceptual Framework**

Several times in the preceding sections, I have suggested that the key to the issue of whether moral education is even possible, lies in examining whether claims made in moral discourse can be objective and objectively assessed. This follows a popular way of looking at the issue of the nature of moral belief and moral judgment, which is to present us with a choice of seeing these either as subjective or objective. One might even say that the popular choice is that moral judgment is subjective. In this section, I want to suggest that these are not very helpful terms and that we will make more progress in these inquiries by remembering their limited usefulness and by getting underneath their surface.

Matters are not helped by the variety of use of these terms even among moral philosophers. Bamborough (Bamborough, 1979, ch.2) reflects, and reflects on, this variety of use about 'objectivity'. He first suggests that much 20th century moral philosophy, denying that there can be any moral truths and any moral knowledge, has rejected objectivist accounts of morality. Since the contrast drawn here is with those forms of thought such as maths and the sciences which philosophers in the 20th century have accepted as objective, we can presume that 'objective' is a way of referring to what can be true and what can be known to be true. Yet in the same chapter he appears to equate 'ethical objectivity' with the possibility of stating unexceptionally correct moral rules or moral principles, a view which other writers regard not as objectivism but as absolutism. In his main discussion of the meaning of objectivity (Bamborough, 1979, ch 5), he suggests a further meaning of 'objectivity', where objectivity is contrasted with subjectivity, and the latter means 'biased'. So 'objectivity' can mean 'unbiased'. But he also notes that there is a sense of objectivity, one used by teachers, where to give an objective assessment of a student's work is to be, not unbiased, but making judgments about the work in the light of certain agreed criteria. One could think, for example, of criteria such as 'the student must produce evidence for empirical claims which are made in the text', 'the student must show signs that his argument is marshalled coherently' and so on. Bamborough notes a yet further use, again one found in education though it need not be confined to such a context, where someone might regard an answer as unobjective because it is lacking in precision. So here we have one writer who mentions the following uses of 'objectivity':,

1. indicating the possibility or otherwise of there being moral truths and moral knowledge;
2. indicating the notion of unexceptionless moral rules or principles;
3. indicating lack of bias;
4. indicating judgments of something in the light of agreed criteria;
5. indicating precision.

Hare (Hare, 1963, ch 12) notes that there is a sense of 'objective', which suggests that when claims are advanced, there are facts against which it can be checked. This seems close to Bamborough's first sense. Hare notes the third of Bamborough's senses, that is 'unbiased'. Hare also notes that 'objective' can mean 'impartial'. Both 'unbiased' and 'impartial' mean not leaning in any way which shows undue favour towards one side. There is a difference, though, between being impartial and being unbiased in the sense of being neutral, for the impartial person can still support one side over another, whereas the neutral person shows no leaning towards one side or another. A referee ought to be neutral and cannot support one side over another. So we can add to our list of the senses of 'objective':

6. indicating neutrality.

Goldman (Goldman, 1988, ch 1), in a discussion on moral realism, contrasts moral realism with ethical objectivism and suggests that the ethical objectivist is someone who holds that the truth of moral judgments is independent of the existence of any subjective state, meaning by the latter a mental state. This suggests that 'objectivity' will only be predicated of those moral judgments which are made true by some sort of non-mental state. Goldman thinks this is exemplified in the views of some environmentalists who hold that value resides in Mother Earth, given that Mother Earth has no mental states. Goldman's use of 'objectivity' is not incompatible with usage 1 above, in so far as the states of Mother Earth are facts which can be checked. What Goldman introduces is a further distinction about the sorts of facts which are admissible as making some moral judgment 'objective'.

'Subjective' is also an elastic term. Rachels (Rachels in Singer, 1993, p 432) tells us that 'ethical subjectivism is a theory which says that, in making moral judgements, people are doing nothing more than expressing their personal desires or feelings', and quotes Hume's view that morality is a matter of 'feeling, not reason' in support of this. But later in his article, Rachels draws a distinction between what he calls 'simple subjectivism' and an improved version of subjectivism, a product of 20th century moral philosophy,

namely 'emotivism'. The difference between these two lies in 'the difference between *reporting* an attitude and *expressing* an attitude' (p 437). Simple subjectivists, in saying that something x is wrong or ought not to be done report the fact that they disagree with x. Emotivists, in uttering words such as 'x ought not to be done' express their disfavoured attitude towards x.

Here is a further account, this time a definition of 'subjectivism', from Snare (Snare, 1992, p 112):

'Meta-Ethical Subjectivism: Judgement J is subjective IFF the proposition that one person claims (or thinks) that j while another 'disagrees' (as we say) with him (denying j) does not entail that some party to this dispute is mistaken'.

So now we have one version of subjectivism, Rachels' simple subjectivist, which consists of people reporting their attitudes. Here it would seem, a person can make a mistake, in so far as a person can mistakenly report what their attitude is. A second version of subjectivism is that a person expresses their attitude to something. Here, the idea of making a mistake seems alien. What would it be to make a mistake in expressing an attitude? Snare, it would seem, now extends the implication of these two versions. Assuming that a person correctly reports their attitude, then whether reporting or expressing an attitude, if a person is involved in an apparent dispute with someone else, neither side in the dispute can be mistaken. One would like to know whether this also means that when a person internally disputes, as it were, two alternative moral propositions, neither proposition can be mistaken. Does it also mean that, misreporting aside, in cases where there is no dispute, when a person reports or expresses their attitude and this report consists of the proposition which they think, this cannot be mistaken? The clearest reading of Snare, I think, is that for him subjectivism in morals is the view that, misreporting aside, when a person claims or thinks that something is the case, this cannot be in error. The fact that error-freeness is a function of apparent disputes, is a contingent matter, otherwise Snare would be committed to the view that in the absence of a dispute a moral judgment, misreporting aside, could be in error whilst the

same judgment, now in the context of an apparent dispute, cannot be in error.

My 'clear' reading of Snare would echo the line taken by some of the 'relativists' who are opposed to Tate (1.0). Interestingly, though, what the above discussion reveals is that there are three senses of being error-free, all giving different versions of subjectivism. First there is the sense with which we are all familiar, the opposite of there being any mistakes, in the sense of slips or inaccuracies. If someone reported their attitude correctly, their report would be error-free in that sense. Then there is a sense where a judgment, that I think so and so is wrong, is an example of a type of judgment which cannot be in error. Here, the sense of error-free is close to the idea of infallibility. For example, unless I was deliberately trying to deceive you, my saying that I am in pain, is an error-free statement. One cannot be in error over saying one is in pain when one has the pain. But third, there is a sense of being error-free where the view is that moral judgments, being expressions rather than reports, cannot be in error because they are not propositional. Here, the idea of error-freeness does not even make sense.

We need to be aware that these terms 'subjective' and 'objective' are coarse-grained terms, prone to different interpretations. I have much sympathy with the following comment from Hare (Hare, 1976, p 13) : 'if anybody says that values are subjective or that they are objective there is a very high probability that he is deeply confused about the whole matter'. Greater understanding of what is meant when these terms are applied to moral thought, will be gained by getting underneath their surface. In that spirit, I propose, instead, that we commence our inquiries into metaethical theories on the nature of moral judgment by first distinguishing between cognitive and non-cognitive accounts of moral judgment. A cognitivist will hold the view that moral judgments are a type of belief, and will also hold a widely agreed view that to have a belief is to be in a mental state which takes the content of the belief to be true. To believe that there are elves at the bottom of the garden is to have that mental state which has it that 'elves are at the bottom of the garden' is true. Non-cognitivists, then, will be those who hold that moral judgments

and what some might call moral beliefs, are not beliefs in the sense just indicated but are some other mental state which do not have the predicates 'true' or 'false' applicable to them. Non-cognitivists typically have held that moral judgments are instantiations of mental states such as desires, preferences, attitudes, and that in all these cases, the question of the truth or falsity of the desire etc. does not arise because they are not the sort of mental state which can be true or false. Within non-cognitivism, there is an important distinction to be made. Emotivism, as we have seen, is the view that moral judgments are expressions of our emotions, these being, it is claimed, non-cognitive states. These are not states of mind, the emotivist holds, which themselves can be justified rationally. Perhaps the purest form in which this was ever held was that proposed by Ayer (Ayer 1946, ch 6) where, as is well known, Ayer held that saying that some action ought to be done was like saying 'hurrah' to the action. It does seem pointless to ask for the reason justifying a shout of hurrah. Versions of non-cognitivism which have or could underpin approaches to moral education, will be discussed in chapter 2.

Hare's universal prescriptivism (Hare, 1963; 1981; and Hare in Singer, P.,1993) rejects this version of what he calls non-descriptivism on the grounds that it does not adequately account for the use of reason in ethics. Hare claims that reasoning enters into our moral thinking in a number of ways. According to Hare's latest statement of his position, the important moral judgments are those which use deontic terms such as ought or must. These terms prescribe action and thus entail imperatives. My judgment 'I ought to shut the door' entails the imperative 'shut the door'. There is no reason why deontic utterances cannot enter into logical relations with other utterances. From 'one ought to shut all doors' and 'this is a door', one can derive 'I ought to shut this door' and the entailed imperative 'shut this door'. So it is clear that reasoning is possible here and that it conforms to some simple logical rules. Hare also holds that moral judgments, as prescriptions, possess the property of universalisability, that is that when a person assents to prescription, for example 'I judge that X ought to do Y' then this commits a person to agreeing that anyone in X's position ought to do Y. This requires us to be consistent in the application

of our moral judgments, and indicates a further way in which reasoning occurs in moral thinking. Finally, Hare holds that reasoning occurs in working out which moral principles to assent to.

Hare allows (Hare in Singer P, 1993) that there is a sense in which universalised prescriptions can have the predicates 'true' and 'false' applied to them. For, he says, in any moderately stable society, anyone who says that someone did what he ought to do in the circumstances, is saying that in that society, the ought-prescription truly applies. However, Hare resists the notion that the meaning of any ought-prescription is wholly given by its conditions of application. To use Hare's example, if it were said that women ought to obey their husbands, this ought-prescription applying in some moderately stable society, it does not follow that this exhausts the meaning of that ought-prescription. For if it did, it would be irrational of a feminist to protest that she ought not to obey her husband. But it is not irrational to say this.

So here we have, in universal prescriptivism, a position which is non-cognitivist in the sense that it holds that moral utterances are unlike beliefs in that their meaning is not totally given by the conditions of their application. It is, however, different from the emotivist version of non-cognitivism in that it shows how we might move, in our reasoning, from premises containing a prescription to an imperatival conclusion. It also allows the use of reason in deciding which principles to support in making our moral judgments. Hare's theory will be further discussed in chapter 3, when I examine one approach to moral education which is founded on his ideas.

Turning to cognitive accounts of moral judgment, these, it will be recalled, all hold that moral judgments are forms of belief to which the predicates 'true', 'false', 'correct' 'incorrect' apply. There are different cognitive theories.

There is, first, subjectivism. Subjectivism, I think, captures some popular ideas about

moral judgments. These are that in morals, our judgments are just up to us. There is nothing to which we can appeal which will show the judgment to be correct. More strongly, moral judgments are up to us because there is nothing external to us which can act as a proof that our moral judgments are correct. Moral judgments become a matter of the person's own opinion. Moreover, each opinion is as good as any other opinion.

Subjectivists can hold that moral judgment is a form of belief, and so place their theory within cognitivism. Some subjectivists may hold that that is all that needs to be said: moral judgments are a form of belief. Others, perhaps struck by a tendency for some people to say that their judgment is 'true for them', hold that the truth or correctness of a moral belief is established by virtue of some mental state of the person with the moral belief. Maybe holding the belief is sufficient for its correctness. Maybe it is some other mental state such as the approval or disapproval of some action or state of affairs. So thinking that something is right, or approving of something as right is, according to this position, what makes it true.

Rachel's simple subjectivists, reporting what their attitudes are, are subjectivists because they say that they have an attitude towards something. The attitude is that this (followed by a description) is wrong, or right. Waiving incorrect reportings of one's attitude, such attitudes cannot be in error. Snare's account concentrates upon the nature of subjectivism in the context of apparent disputes. As we saw above, for Snare a subjectivist will be someone who holds that in those circumstances, people in the dispute cannot be mistaken in what they believe. I noted that it is unclear whether Snare thought that in the absence of an apparent dispute, a person's moral beliefs, misreporting aside, could be mistaken.

If these accounts of subjectivism are that a person's moral beliefs, misreporting aside, cannot be mistaken, then this does not exhaust the possibilities for subjectivism. As we shall see in chapter 4, one contemporary philosopher, Wiggins, makes a case for a kind of subjectivism which allows that errors can be made over one's moral beliefs. This

position might be attractive to some moral educators. It would allow that reason can be used to sort out the correct from the mistaken moral belief. It would also offer the possibility of preserving the popular notion that moral judgment is in some sense still up to us.

It is tempting to contrast the cognitive subjectivist with the cognitive objectivist. Snare, for one, defines meta-ethical objectivism thus (Snare 1992, p 122):

‘Judgment j is objective IFF the proposition that one person claims (or thinks) that j while another ‘disagrees’ (as we say) with him (denying j) does entail that some party to this dispute is mistaken’.

But could there be positions which claim to be objective but which deny the possibility of a mistake? Suppose that ethics was done by consulting The Oracle. That would make it not a subjectivist approach to ethics because now people’s moral judgments would have some external standard by which to measure the correctness of their moral judgments. The Oracle, I take it, is the fount of moral wisdom in all matters. So this would appear to be an error-free objectivist position.

So we need some better way of drawing the contrast between the cognitive subjectivist and the cognitive non-subjectivist. One proposal is that the latter accept that there are states of affairs, independent of any mental states of the person making a moral judgment, which make that judgment true. Different theories will then give different accounts of the sorts of things which make moral judgments true or false, correct or incorrect.

One highly influential position here is that of the metaethical moral relativist. This holds that what makes a person’s moral judgments correct or incorrect is their correspondence to or coherence with the social conventions of the society or culture in which a person is living. As Thomas puts it (Thomas, 1993, p.114), the moral relativist holds that:

‘Moral Judgements are nothing but statements of socially accepted norms of conduct (the truth of moral judgements is relative to the norms they report)’.

The moral relativist holds that there are some facts, facts picking out the moral norms of a culture, which makes the moral beliefs of a person true or false, correct or incorrect. The moral relativist is a conventionalist. Since there can be different conventions in different societies or cultures or ages, the moral relativist holds that there can be different moral truths, not only in a sense which records the fact that moral norms alter over time or differ in differing circumstances, but also in the sense that if two moral cultures support different and contradictory moral propositions, each can be true: true for that culture. Metaethical relativism tries to use a relativised concept of moral truth. Moral truths, then, can be relative to the specific truth conditions of particular societies. This is a highly influential position in the philosophy of moral education, and both it and its metaethical underpinning will be discussed in chapter 4.

The position which started off moral philosophy in the 20th century in Britain, and which appears to be ending the 20th century in the eyes of many moral philosophers, is that of moral realism. This too is cognitivist, but unlike the moral relativist, the moral realist does not have to hold that the conditions which make moral judgments true are culture-relative. According to Thomas (Thomas, 1993, p. 111):

“Moral realism is precisely a view on which moral judgements can be literally true or false, and in some moral judgments are literally true-and are known to be true by virtue of an independently existing moral reality’.

The key point that the moral realist insists on is that moral statements state moral truths and that these statements are made true by virtue of there being moral states of affairs. Of late, there has been renewed interest in moral realism. Different versions of it have been advanced. Moral realism will be discussed in chapters 5 ,6 and 7. One of the interesting facts about some contemporary moral realists is that they argue that their position has implications for moral education.

Another cognitivist non-subjectivist position is that of the ethical naturalist. This position differs from that of the moral realist over the latter's claim that there are moral states of affairs and so moral facts which are not reducible to natural states of affairs and natural facts. This position will also be discussed in chapters 5, 6 and 7 as part of the general discussion of moral realism.

This completes the survey of the main metaethical positions to be investigated.

#### **1.4 'Testing' Metaethical Theories**

It is apparent from the previous section that there are a number of metaethical theories about moral judgment. I have sketched the outlines of seven of these theories, emotivism, universal prescriptivism, simple subjectivism, rational subjectivism (Wiggins calls this 'sensible' subjectivism), relativism, realism and ethical naturalism. Authors of textbooks on moral philosophy often content themselves with laying out the features of such theories, leaving it up to the reader to make his or her mind up about which one is the most satisfactory. But how do we decide between different theories like these?

There seem to me to be two ways of doing this. The first is to examine a theory for the clarity of its concepts, and the consistency and coherence of its arguments. This is what one typically looks for in philosophical discussion. For example, moral realists propose that there are moral facts and that these facts are what make moral judgments correct or incorrect. Moral realists then have the task of explaining what sort of fact a moral fact is. They might also venture a theory about our access to these facts. These are tasks internal to the theory. For each of the theories which I discuss I shall seek these kinds of clarification.

I want to suggest also that there are other kinds of test, external tests, which can be employed in evaluating these theories, and I shall spend the rest of this chapter outlining

what these external tests are and why I think they are helpful in evaluating these metaethical theories.

Snare (Snare, 1992, ch 1) makes the useful point that in asking how one might justify one's moral judgment, one is asking a question which is the result of reflecting upon what we do and say in everyday life. Reflection here takes the form of asking what it is we are doing when we ask for and give moral justifications. These questions are asked, I am inclined to think, because we are struck by a contrast between justifications offered in moral discourse and justifications offered in empirical judgments. In the latter, we hold that we can appeal to the way the world is, as the final arbiter of whether some empirical theory or hypothesis is correct. What is to do this sort of job in moral discourse? It is clear too that we have doubts about whether this is possible. It is not unusual to hear the sorts of sceptical remarks noted by Tate, that in morality one person's opinion is as good as the next person's or that each moral opinion is as 'valid' as the next. We would not say this in science. But counterposed to these sorts of remarks, we also think that some moral judgments just are correct, and the claim that one person's moral opinions are as good as the next person's, is an idle remark. Who could seriously disagree with the proposition that rape is morally wrong?

These remarks of Snare's suggest to me the following line of thought. Any metaethical theory about the concept of moral judgment, since it must be constructed to enhance our understanding of what sorts of judgments moral judgments are, must take our ordinary moral judgments as the data about which the theory is constructed. So any metaethical theory which strains our understanding of what our ordinary moral judgments are, has to produce extremely convincing reasons as to why we should revise these ordinary moral judgments. Suppose, for example, that someone proposed a theory that our ordinary moral judgments were really aesthetic judgments, and that the rightness and wrongness of killing depended on the extent to which such acts enhance beauty. We do not normally think that when we object that killing is wrong, we are making a judgment about the

impact of killing on the beauty of the world. The theory would be straining our understanding of what our ordinary moral judgments are. Now it is unlikely that the matter will be as black and white as this. On the one hand, we have our pretheoretical understandings of moral judgments for which metaethical accounts are proposed as accounts which will help us to understand the nature of such judgments in some illuminating way. On the other hand, we could have a metaethical account which makes us reject entirely our ordinary moral judgments. But the more we find ourselves in the latter position, the more we will have left behind the very thing we are trying to understand. Dancy (Dancy, 1993, p.67) makes this point in this way: 'It is the job of the philosopher, so far as possible, to give an account of our practice rather than to tell us that we all ought to be doing something else'. It is consistent with this to say that sometimes what we understanding our practice to be is in need of correction, but it would be an odd result to say that none of our understandings of our practice are correct.

In this spirit, then, I suggest that any metaethical account, in seeking to illuminate our understanding of our moral judgments, has first of all to stay true to what are incontestably part of the corpus of our moral judgments. I do not mean by this that there is some fixed and unchangeable body of moral judgments, only that there are some judgments in the ones which are made which one could not in any sensible way contest as moral judgments. One can only give examples here: 'it is wrong to rape'; 'it is wrong to abuse children'; 'it is right to keep a promise which one has made'; 'it is wrong to steal'; 'it is wrong deliberately to hurt people'; 'it is wrong to abuse someone on account of their race, colour or sex'. Nor are such examples overturned when there are occasions in which these judgments have to be set aside. One can without much difficulty construct a case in which the promise ought not to be kept, and there can be times when some hurting is justified. I find it much more difficult to imagine cases where rape is justified (the terrorist who forces X to rape Y as the price for not letting off the weapon of mass destruction?), and child abuse is to be celebrated. I call this test of any metaethical theory, the normativity test and by it I mean that any metaethical theory must stay true to some collection of

moral judgments which are incontestable. Any theory which throws doubt over these as part of some corpus of morally acceptable judgment, is one which has a lot of work to do to convince us of its perspective.

A second feature to stay true to is the practicality of moral judgments. Moral judgments are our views about what is right and wrong. We act on these judgments, that is we do what we think is right and we avoid doing what we think is wrong. There may be people who behave well because they are near-enough programmed to do so. If there are such cases, they do not undermine the claim that we behave in moral ways because that is the way we judge that we ought to behave. It might be a contested claim, however, that all moral judgments are directed towards the occurrence of the requisite moral behaviour. Some would say that there are some moral judgments which just give a moral assessment without thereby suggesting that any appropriate moral behaviour is indicated. A person might, for example, say that someone took the right course of action for them at that time and in those circumstances. They might even admire a person for their choice, but then add that that would not have been their choice.

What also is contested is whether our views about what is morally right and wrong by themselves bring about our moral behaviour. Weak-willed people and wicked people seem to attest to knowledge of the good not being sufficient for moral action. How do metaethical theories explain this? But pulling against that thought, that knowledge of the good is not sufficient for moral action, is the view that there is a class of moral judgments, judgments that x is right, or wrong, or ought, or ought not to be done, where to make such judgments and then not act on them is to be, on the surface, doing something very odd. Many philosophers hold that moral judgments convey the necessity, in some sense, of doing x.

The second test, the practicality test, seeks an explanation from a metaethical theory about the nature of moral judgment, of the connection between moral judgment and moral action.

In the first test, I suggested that any metaethical theory needs to explain the fact that there are some moral judgments which are incontestably correct. The third test highlights a feature of morality, that some moral judgments are contestable. It is undeniable that people differ with each other from time to time in the moral judgments which they make. It appears as though they do not just differ, they have moral disagreements. There is nothing special about people having disagreements. People disagree with each other over all sorts of things, the best way to grow lettuce, the best soccer team, what one should wear on a particular occasion. Some of these disputes are capable of being resolved. If method X is claimed to be the best way of growing lettuce, we can conduct a controlled experiment to see whether it is. If Team Y is put forward as the best soccer team, we need to sort out the criteria for what a best team would be, and then apply these to the teams in question. One might look to some particular social situation and decide what clothes this rules out and what clothes are appropriate to that situation, as a means of at least narrowing down the last sort of dispute.

Moral conflicts occur when there are moral disagreements between individuals over which moral judgment is right. But there are times when an individual sees that there are two conflicting courses of action, each of which appears to be right, yet one cannot do both. And some times, an individual has to choose between two courses of action, each of which is wrong, yet some action has to be taken. That has the makings of a moral tragedy. Now what do the different metaethical theories make of moral conflict, moral dilemmas and moral tragedies? This is not a question about how humans respond to moral conflicts, dilemmas and tragedies. That requires psychological investigation. Of philosophical interest is the question of whether they are resolvable. Is morality like some other forms of discourse where in spite of the fact that questions generate conflicting answers and conflicting theories, these are held to be resolvable, or do we say that there is an essential difference between moral discourse and other forms of thought, because moral conflicts and dilemmas are not in principle resolvable?

This gives us the third test. What does a metaethical theory say about moral conflicts and dilemmas? The test seeks to discover what a metaethical theory says about the resolvability of moral conflicts etc, and then asks whether this is plausible. What does 'resolvability' mean? There is a sense in which a moral conflict could be resolved by someone just exercising power and choosing one of the alternatives. This is not the sense of 'resolvability' which is intended, for this ignores the question of whether the choice is the morally correct one. This moral test seeks to discover whether moral conflicts are morally resolvable by dint of there being a correct alternative to choose. Does a metaethical theory say this is possible or impossible, and on what grounds?

One could say that the third test is a metaethical test, asking what is the truth status of moral judgments in cases of moral conflict, moral dilemmas and moral tragedies. The fourth test is an epistemological test, concerned with the question of our access to moral values. How do we get to know what is morally right? Is talk of knowledge out of place here? If we do have moral knowledge, is this innate? Learned? How, if it is learned, do we learn what is right? Is this just a matter of being told? What happens, then, when we are on our own, faced with a moral issue which we have to resolve? Our ordinary moral experience seems sometimes to be of discussion, argument, reason-giving and reasoning, especially when we are faced with conflicting views, not all of which can be held. How far can reason-giving and reasoning take us in morality?

The fourth test is the access to moral values test. What does a metaethical theory say about the sources and scope of our moral knowledge and understanding?

The suggestion is, then, that there are four features of our moral experience which provide tests for assessing various metaethical theories. Does a theory strain our moral convictions? Does a theory satisfactorily explain the connection between moral judgments and moral actions? Does a theory agree or disagree that there are morally correct solutions in moral conflicts, dilemmas and tragedies, and is what it says convincing? What account

does a theory give about our access to moral values?

The point of raising these questions, though, is not primarily to find some way of adjudicating between various metaethical theories. It is, rather, to address certain questions about moral education. From earlier in the chapter, we have seen that there are some who appear to doubt whether moral education is even possible, basing their doubts on their views about the nature of moral judgment. Others, with a different metaethical stance, think that moral education is a possible activity. Some think that moral education is possible but should be grounded in a metaethical relativism. Others contest that position in favour of teaching universal values. By examining the underlying metaethical theories of these positions, we should be in a better position to draw some conclusions about these various claims.

### **1.5 Summary**

I drew attention to a debate taking place about moral education. On the one hand there are some who think that this should at the least consist of the teaching of some moral values which have the status of being universal or absolute. This appears to be linked to the view that saying what these values are would be stating some moral truths, important ones at that. But ranged against this position are critics who think that moral education cannot be like that. Some want to make moral education tied to the teaching and learning of culture-relative values. Other, more radical, voices appear to question the basic idea that in morality there can be any moral truths. Moral judgments, they say, are up to us, the expressions of our tastes, likes and dislikes, or the statements of our moral opinions. Here, proof or verification or justification are not possible. Since, the argument goes on, any activity, in order to count as an educational activity, must be capable of producing claims which are objective and capable of objective assessment, morality cannot be included as a part of education. Its nature is such that the claims made in it are neither objective nor objectively assessable.

Two questions emerge out of this debate. Is moral education impossible? If it is not impossible, what account can be given of the concept of moral education? These are the two questions with which this dissertation is concerned.

Launching my inquiries with some preliminary remarks about the nature of morality and the nature of education, I then suggested that in order to investigate these questions, I would need to explore a number of metaethical theories which seem to underpin the various positions taken up in the debate about moral education. This then led me to consider an objection which might be raised against the whole programme of investigation. If, the objection goes, one wants to use moral philosophy in order to illuminate what moral education is, far better to get pupils to address normative moral questions, for example 'what sort of person is a moral person?', or even more generally 'what sort of person ought I to be?'. Far better also to use the resources of normative moral theory to get pupils to address complex moral issues. The last thing to do is to conduct a metaethical inquiry into the nature of moral judgment, for the reason that these inquiries, by their nature, cannot have any implications for practice.

I replied to this objection, attempting to defend metaethics against the charge that it cannot have anything to say about what we ought to do from the moral point of view. The charge is not one which commands universal acceptance among moral philosophers. It rests, moreover, on the disputable assumption that moral judgments, being judgments about what ought to be done, are not judgments which attempt to say what is true in morality. Finally, the objection to conducting metaethical inquiry as a way of understanding moral practice is one, it was suggested, which rests on a distinction from Hume between reason and passion. On this account, only the emotions could have any bearing on questions of value. Reason, in practical matters, is passion's handmaiden. But against this, I argued that if we accepted this distinction, it would be just as possible to hold that a good deal of normative theorising would have to be excluded as having any practical relevance. Moreover, the metaethical theory which Humeans propose, itself

appears to have practical implications. The root of these problems, I suggested, lies in the distinction between reason and passion, for it implies that no psychological states, not even knowing something, could be said to be ones for which reasons could be given. This contradicts what we know to be true. We can give reasons for knowing something, reasons for wanting something, and reasons for feeling something. We can also give reasons for doing something. And this allows it to be said that theories, including metaethical theories, notwithstanding their special nature as reasons, can offer reasons for action.

I then returned to the main issues with which I am concerned, that is whether moral education is impossible, and, if it is not impossible what account we can give of the concept of moral education. Since these issues seem to turn on what we are to think of the metaethical claims which underpin them, I suggested that the terms in which this debate are usually conducted, namely whether moral judgments are subjective or objective, are coarse-grained and of limited usefulness. Better, then, to get underneath these and to look at various theories about the nature of moral judgment in terms of whether they are non-cognitive or cognitive theories. This then led me to a description of the features of a number of these theories, emotivism, universal prescriptivism, standard subjectivism, 'sensible' subjectivism, relativism, moral realism and ethical naturalism.

I then turned to the question of how one might assess these theories, and I suggested that in addition to examining the clarity and consistency of their concepts and arguments, they should be subject to a number of tests. Does a theory strain our moral convictions? What does it say on the question of whether moral conflicts and dilemmas are resolvable? What account can it give of our access to moral values? Finally, what account does a theory give of the relationship between moral judgments and moral behaviour? By assessing in these ways the metaethical theories which underpin these theories about moral education, we will be in a better position to draw conclusions about whether or

not moral education is impossible, and whether we can give an account of the concept of moral education.

The next six chapters are devoted to a philosophical examination of a number of metaethical theories. How convincing are their claims as explanations of the nature of our moral judgments? In the next chapter, I examine emotivism.

## CHAPTER 2

### EMOTIVISM AND MORAL JUDGMENT

#### 2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine emotivism as a theory of moral judgment to see what basis, if any, it can provide for moral education. Emotivism is a non-cognitive theory of moral judgment. In the first part of the chapter, I explain both what makes emotivism a non-cognitivist theory and what makes emotivism distinct from other non-cognitivist theories. I then discuss emotivism in the light of the four tests outlined in 1.4.

Rather like subjectivism, emotivism seems to capture a popular idea about morality, that moral judgment is in some way up to us and is not subject to external verification. This popular idea has had little impact on the writings about moral education by philosophers of education. My own survey of recent writings reveals that there are very few who take up an emotivist position. There are hints that this is the view held by Bridges (Bridges in Wellington, 1986 p 21), who when discussing the teaching of controversial issues which can occur in moral, social and political education, suggests that such issues cannot be resolved by recourse to evidence or factual information:

“The bitter controversies about beliefs are not resolvable by reference to more factual information or more evidence. Nor will they ever be so, for they are rooted in personal or social values.”

Moreover (p22),

“Feeling is logically entailed by the notion of valuing, so that to value freedom or justice or order is to have one’s feelings engaged in a way which is quite different from having a belief about the causes of the Civil War.....”

These remarks seem to suggest that although moral judgment is properly characterised as a matter of ‘belief’, such beliefs are not the sort to be justified empirically. They are

'rooted' in valuing, valuing logically entails feeling and feeling is utterly different from believing. There is some looseness in these claims. 'Entailment' is a relationship between statements, not a relationships between different types of state of mind. Nor is it clear what is meant by being 'rooted'. Is this the same as being justified, or does it suggest a causal account of reasoning? But the main thrust of Bridges' remarks seems to be this. Whenever something is valued, the judgment that it is valued is not a judgment which consists of a belief backed by empirical evidence. It is, rather, a judgment which exhibits what one values, and what one values must involve what one feels. If that is the position, it is an emotivist one.

Whether or not Bridges holds an emotivist position, emotivism has a philosophical pedigree, and it is to a consideration of this that I now turn.

## **2.1 Non-Cognitivism and Emotivism**

In my outline of metaethical theories in chapter one, I suggested that all such theories were basically of two types, the non-cognitive and the cognitive. Modern non-cognitive theories are traceable to a development in the philosophy of language during the earlier part of the 20th century. Reacting against the philosophical claim found in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, that all language is fact-stating, there developed a view that this could not be true of all language. How, it was asked, do utterances such as commands or pieces of advice state facts? Surely, it was claimed, we fail to understand a command if we think it tells us what some state of affairs is. Commands are pieces of language whose function is to get us to do a certain action. 'Shut the door' tells us what to do, not what is the case.

It was a swift step from agreeing with this to holding that moral judgments do not state facts. To say 'you ought to give to charity' is not to state or describe some state of affairs, not to say something which is true. It is, rather, to use language to get us to behave in the way indicated in the moral judgment. Moral judgments function as producers of moral actions.

There are different accounts of the ways in which moral judgment is thought to perform this function. As we will see in the following chapter, Hare's universal prescriptivism tells us that moral judgments have a prescribing function, giving commands to those who sincerely assent to them. Emotivism, then, is not the only theory to occupy the category 'non-cognitive'.

What account of moral judgment do emotivists give? I shall start with Hume's position and then set out the version held in the mid-20th century and associated with Ayer and Stevenson. Further discussion will reveal a third version, generally called the ideal-observer version.

Imagine the case of a person who is knowledgeable about the details, the character and the causes of certain types of suffering. He or she knows, for example, how many people are starving in a given area of Africa, what sorts of diseases the people there are suffering from, what the transport difficulties are which hinder the movement of food-aid to those in need, what the indigeneous government's attitude is towards outside assistance, why the famine has occurred etc. Yet all this knowledge does not move this spectator to render assistance or even to support the efforts of others in giving assistance. How can this be? Hume remarks (Hume, 1888, pp. 413-414) that "reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will", and "reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition." Our observer is using reason to discover facts, but, according to Hume, the acquisition of this knowledge is incapable of providing him with a motivation to act. For Hume, reasoning has its tasks but also its limitations (p 488):

"Reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood. Truth or falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the real relations of ideas, or to real existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true or false, and can never be the object of our reason. "

Now someone may point out that that it is unsurprising that people are not moved by the

above sorts of facts. Who can be moved by statistics, or by geographical and economic explanations of the causes of famine? Are these the only sorts of facts to consider? Suppose our observer sees pictures of famine victims, or sees and hears, via the television, their cries of anguish. Suppose our observer is there in Africa, and hears and sees these things himself. Can a person be unmoved when confronted with the sights and sounds of suffering? Evidently a Humean must think so, for these are still matters of fact picking out 'real existences'. The observer must still be using his or her reason to know what people are experiencing. So why is it impossible to be moved by one's knowledge, even of this latter kind? Hume ( pp 468-9) provides us with this answer:

"Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find this matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact, but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature, you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it."

Moral judgments express one's feeling. They are not the articulation of statements produced by one's reason. In "pronouncing any action...to be vicious", one is giving verbal vent to one's feelings of disapproval. Our observer evidently lacks these feelings. What feelings are we talking about? Hume again (1902, p 172):

"Extinguish all the warm feelings and prepossessions in favour of virtue, and all disgust or aversion to vice: render men totally indifferent towards these distinctions; and morality is not longer a practical study, nor has any tendency to regulate our lives and actions".

Hume underlines the felt quality of feelings. Warm feelings favour virtue, feelings of disgust deplore vice. Warm feelings express our approval, feelings of disgust our

disapproval. Moreover, what stimulates these feelings are those virtuous character traits or those vicious character traits which we observe in others.

From these remarks, it appears that Hume holds the following. It is a philosophical error to suppose that moral judgment consists of stating what the moral facts are. The reason for this is that there are no such facts to be picked out. Hume here seems to be adopting the same position with regard to the objects of moral judgment as he adopts when he talks about what it is that justifies our causal judgments. We cannot see what causal property it is which makes this billiard ball move that one, because there is no such property to observe. So too with moral judgment. There are no moral states of affairs, and so no moral facts, to observe. Moral judgment is to be understood, rather, as the expression of those feelings of approval or disapproval which are aroused in us through our observations of the actions of others, given their character traits.

Why is it that certain feelings are aroused in us when we observe the virtuous or the vicious actions of others? It is possible, after all, that we could observe the kindness with which a person treats someone else without this arousing our feelings in any way. Hume relies here on the claim that it is part of our nature so to be moved. Indeed, he gives us an idea of how this is done. When we see kindly acts, we ourselves either feel or have the imaginative capacity to feel, the pleasure which the act of kindness arouses in those to whom the kindness was done. This is a natural feeling, one which is not learned. When we pronounce the kind act to be a good one, or one which ought to be emulated, we are doing nothing more than expressing the pleasure we feel. We are showing our pleased approval of the kindness.

In expressing what we feel, we are also doing something practical. The last quotation from Hume gives us Hume's view that without these warm feelings or these feelings of disgust, morality will not regulate our actions. In other words, our feelings of approval and disapproval are not just what we express when we observe virtuous or vicious actions.

They are what motivate us to act. Moreover, Hume thinks that since “reason alone can never be the motive to any action of the will” (Hume 1888, p 413), these feelings are essential to moral action. Reason by itself cannot move people to moral action. Such actions can only occur when people are moved to act, and what moves people to act are our feelings of approval or disapproval, the ones we express in our moral judgments.

This line of thought recurs in the views of 20th century emotivists such as Ayer and Stevenson. Both philosophers hold that moral judgments express how we feel towards something. ‘Stealing is wrong’ is a way of expressing one’s disapproval of stealing. One’s attitude towards stealing is one of disapproval; ‘stealing; boo!’. Expressing one’s feelings also has the function of getting others to have similar feelings. Stevenson calls this the magnetic function of moral judgment.

Ayer holds this view mainly because of his agreement with logical positivism. Ayer (Ayer, 1946, ch.6) suggests that there is a distinction to be observed over the sorts of things which it makes sense to quarrel about and the sorts of things which it does not make sense to quarrel about. It makes sense to quarrel over matters of fact because there can be ways of settling factual disputes. We cannot make sense of a quarrel over moral values because these are not settleable by empirical means, and so, Ayer thinks, not settleable at all. If we were to take ‘stealing is wrong’ as an assertion of some state of affairs, we would be committed to the view that with regard to actions like stealing, there is some method available which will settle any dispute which might arise over whether stealing is right or wrong. Since, Ayer thinks, there cannot be any way of showing this, ‘stealing is wrong’ although it looks like an assertion, is not an assertion. It is an emotional remark.

Both Ayer and Stevenson (Stevenson, 1938) support emotivism because they think that our moral judgments express our feelings about something and serve to arouse those feelings in others. There is, Stevenson avers, a dynamic use of words. A word’s meaning

is to be identified with those causes and effects with which the word is associated. To say 'stealing is wrong' is to both evince one's own feelings towards stealing and to try to bring about the same feelings in others towards stealing. The point of doing this is not just to bring about emotional states per se. It is to 'create an influence' and to bring about action, consequent to experiencing the feelings, which is in some way against stealing (or for it if one approves of it).

Stevenson notes that one consequence of emotivism will be that it is possible for there to be different attitudes towards the same action or state of affairs. Some may approve of a particular action and manifest their approval by saying it is good whereas others may disapprove of the same action and manifest their disapproval by saying it is bad. Stevenson is prepared to allow that this may carry over into whole communities. One community may disapprove of x whilst another community may approve of x. So Stevenson thinks that emotivism can explain differences of moral judgment. Both individuals and whole communities may just have different attitudes towards some action or state of affairs which form the object of our moral utterances.

Another consequence of emotivism, noted by Ayer, is that it is impossible for one person to contradict another over a moral attitude. Any attempt by an emotivist to preserve the notion that there can be contradictions between moral judgments will come to grief. This is because it will require the emotivist to admit the possibility that one such judgment can be right and the other wrong. This, incidentally, explains why Ayer rejects the view that emotivism is the same as subjectivism. Ayer holds subjectivism to say that moral judgments consist of reports of one's attitudes towards some action or some other object of appraisal. On this account, 'stealing is wrong' reports the utterer's feelings towards stealing. Since such reports can be true or false, this makes moral judgments into claims with a factual content. By contrast, Ayer holds, emotivists claim that moral judgments are ways of indicating how one feels towards something rather than statements which say something true or false.

Will Ayer and Stevenson be able to give any room for the use of reason in the formation of moral judgment? It seems clear that if your view of moral judgment is that it is an emotional utterance, and if your view of the emotions involved is that they are essentially feelings of approval and disapproval which lie outside the reach of reason and so cannot be verified, then the question of whether one's feelings are justified makes little sense. To give reasons for one's emotions would be a strange thing to try to do. This leaves emotivists with the task of saying what is going on when people apparently offer reasons for their moral judgment. Emotivists might say that offering reasons is without point. They might, however, regard the offering of reasons as one of a range of useful rhetorical devices, aimed at getting people who hold different moral attitudes from oneself to replace these with the ones which one holds oneself. Reasoning would then take its place with other devices such as the deliberate lowering of one's voice for effect, as part of a person's array of tricks to get people to come round to his or her point of view.

Perhaps this is not fair to emotivists. It could be argued that they have not removed reasons entirely from the ambit of moral discourse. Here is one way in which giving reasons and reasoning might have a role to play. If a person responds in a certain emotional way to some set of circumstances, and if these circumstances recur, then the person would be inconsistent if she or he responded differently in the second case. Emotivists might, then, be able to make room for consistency between moral judgment in relevantly similar circumstances, and this would appear to give some scope for reasoning to be employed.

Are there any important differences between Hume on the one hand, and Ayer and Stevenson on the other? The main one seems to be over the latter two's, and especially Stevenson's, thought that there can be variation between individuals and between communities over the attitudes which are displayed in response to actions and other manifestations of character traits. Hume thinks that the fact that our moral judgment consists of expressions of our feelings does not show that there will be variation in the

feelings which are expressed. This is, he thinks, because we share a common human nature which makes us sensitive to the displays of virtue and vice which we observe around us. Our common human nature makes for much common ground in what we feel to be right and wrong.

We can speculate on what sort of moral education there would be if one understood moral judgments as expressions of our feelings of approval and disapproval. It would seem to be consistent with this to allow various events, character traits and states of affairs to be presented to pupils, and for pupils to be encouraged to express what they felt about these. These need not just be confined to real life examples. Teachers could use the arts to this end. It could be that emotions are not immediately forthcoming as responses. Emotions are not turned on like water from a tap. Perhaps, then, teachers might encourage pupils to imagine what it would feel like to be in certain situations, in something like the way found in modern approaches to the teaching of history, which require pupils to empathise with the characters they study. Moral educationalists following emotivism, then, could give scope for imaginative exercises designed to release feelings which might otherwise not be experienced. There are current examples of this, those racial awareness exercises which have the objective of putting those who do not normally experience feelings of anger as a result of having been discriminated against, into positions where they are discriminated against. This would be done, it should be noted, not (or not just) to get pupils to report what their feelings are, but to have certain feelings, feelings which are made known in their moral judgments. Moreover, this approach would seem to require that some scope be given for pupils to act on what they feel.

Would there be any scope for giving reasons and for reasoning in making moral judgment, over and above those involved in the requirement of being consistent? One might think that there could be scope for analysis of the factors which gave rise to our feelings. Suppose, for example, that people felt horror and disgust at the use of animals in testing drugs for medical use because their perception was that the animals suffered pain. Suppose

that closer inspection of some of these practices revealed that the animals did not suffer pain, indeed that great care was taken over the welfare of the animals. Then one might ask whether the original feelings of disgust were appropriate. That appears to give some scope for reason-giving and reasoning. However, it seems also to be true that emotivists do not think that factual beliefs determine what one's feelings would be. One's feelings of disgust might not evaporate even if one now held a different factual belief. So it would appear to be not at all clear what the point would be of analysing the factors which give rise to our feelings of approval and disapproval.

Emotivist moral educators would, it seems, also lay emphasis on developing in the moral learner a mastery over those persuasive techniques such as rhetorical devices which seem to move people to either hold or alter a moral judgment. Moral knowledge would, in this respect be know-how, with a compendium of moral skills to be mastered.

In sum, emotivists hold that moral judgment consists of expressions of our feelings of approval and disapproval. These indicate our attitudes towards those things which are the objects of our moral judgments. They hold that moral judgment has a function, that of attempting to influence the feelings and thus the judgments of others. Moral judgments, being the expressions of feeling, are held to be necessary for moral action. There is some scope for giving reasons and reasoning. Reason can be used to obtain consistency in moral judgment. Reason also may have a rhetorical role in getting others to share one's moral feelings. It appears to be consistent with emotivism that one can appraise the objects of one's emotional responses, though the role of such appraisals in forming one's moral judgments is not clear.

## **2.2 Testing Emotivism**

Emotivism is a metaethical theory which is dismissed in most modern textbooks of moral philosophy. Well-known criticisms are often voiced against it. For example Brandt

(Brandt, 1959, ch.9) denies that it is true that people are merely giving voice to their feelings when they make a moral judgment. He also thinks that emotivism can give no account of what it is to make a mistake in moral judgment, for emotivists have to regard cases where a person switches from one moral judgment to another as the removal of one attitude and its replacement by another attitude. This does not capture the notion of what it is to make a mistake, for what is missing is any sense that what one once held was wrong. Brandt also criticises Stevenson's account of emotivism, that all moral judgments have 'magnetic' force. Some moral judgments, Brandt urges, are not intended to influence others into abandoning their attitudes. Finally, Brandt objects to emotivism on the grounds that it produces a distortion in our understanding of what our moral judgments mean. If A thinks that x is wrong, having an attitude of disapproval towards x, whilst B thinks that x is right, having an attitude of approval towards x, then the emotivist must hold that what A and B mean by 'x is wrong' or 'x is right' must be different, this difference being established by their differing feelings towards 'x'. Against this, Brandt wants to say that each of these phrases means the same thing, regardless of whose voice they are coming from.

Yet Brandt goes on to defend an amended version of emotivism, the Qualified Attitude Method. Some 34 years later, we find Smith (Smith in Singer, 1993) doing pretty much the same thing. Smith, in the course of a discussion about moral realism, arrives at this position (p 407):

“According to the account on offer [i.e.the one Smith supports] it is right that I give to famine relief just in case I have a reason to give to famine relief, and I have such a reason just in case, if I were in idealised conditions of reflection-well informed, cool, calm and collected-I would desire to give to famine relief. And the same is true of you. If our circumstances are the same then, supposedly, we should both have such a reason or both lack such a reason”.

Smith goes on to argue that by engaging in rational argument, there is likely to be a convergence of desires amongst those who engage in such argument. He also thinks that such converging desires will shift towards the kind of desire which would be held in the

idealised conditions of reflection. Smith too, then, adopts the position of the Ideal Observer, a position which Harman (Harman, 1977, p.44) sets out thus:

“According to this analysis [i.e. impartial spectator or ideal observer theory], something is wrong if and only if an impartial spectator or ideal observer would disapprove of it; an ideal observer is defined to be disinterested, well-informed, vividly aware of the relevant facts, and so forth”.

There are, then, philosophers who think that in spite of its standard difficulties, emotivism can retain its original insight, that moral judgments are judgments of approval and disapproval. These, though, would be the approvals and disapprovals of the well-informed and impartial spectator. How well does emotivism fare, in its old and new forms, when it is subjected to the four tests?

### **Practicality**

Many would agree that the point of making most, if not all, moral judgments is to bring about those moral actions which are indicated in the judgments. ‘One ought to keep one’s promises’ tells us what to do and what not to do. It would appear to be a strong suit for emotivism that it tells us how this occurs. Are not our emotions just the sorts of things in our mental make-up which bring about our actions? They move us to act.

Emotivists rely on a general account of the explanation of actions, one which covers all actions, not just those concerned with doing what is morally right. The general account is the ‘belief-desire theory’, owed to Hume. The following is an admirable description of it (Dancy, 1993, p13):

“Hume’s belief/desire thesis has it that every complete motivating state is a combination of belief and desire. Neither belief nor desire alone can be sufficient for action. If this were all there was to it, the belief/desire thesis would be symmetrical; all we have so far is that belief needs desire and desire needs belief. But the relation between belief and desire in motivation is hardly symmetrical, in Hume’s view. The difference between the two is that desire is active in a way that belief is not. I take this to mean that a belief is not a reason for action unless joined to the relevant desire. Add the desire and what was not a reason for action becomes one. Belief is intrinsically inert. But desires are always reasons for action. A desire without relevant belief is like a hydraulic thrust which has no means of escape. So desires are essentially ‘ert’, and beliefs can become ‘ert’ when combined with suitable desires. It is in this way that Hume tries to do justice to the common feeling that it is the desires that really do the motivating. The thrust comes really from the desire, not from the belief, despite the need for a belief in a complete motivating state”.

According to this Humean position, no action is possible without some desire. The desire is for that goal or objective for the sake of which the action is performed. One has to desire the goal, to feel approval for it. Beliefs are important. Beliefs tell us how things are and beliefs also tell us what we need to do in order to get to the desired state of affairs. But no belief by itself will motivate action. Some goal has to be desired before action can occur.

Is this unassailable?

How does the Humean theory account for our sense that we must do our duty? Doing one’s duty is an important feature of morality, but what is intriguing about it is that oftentimes we have this sense of duty when we do not want to do what such obligations require us to do. Indeed, even if we find discharging our duties disagreeable, our moral experience is of an obligatory force which almost pulls actions out of us against our wishes and in spite of their being disagreeable. So if we do not desire to do x, and yet do x because we are obliged to do x, must not the belief-desire theory be at the very least incomplete for it appears not to be capable of explaining this important feature of our moral life?

An emotivist might respond by saying that it is the feeling of fear which motivates us to do our duty. We fear the consequences of not doing our duty. We fear disapproval. But suppose

we do our duty when we are in situations where sanctions or other actions which we would fear were they to be deployed against us, are not available. Suppose we do our duty in spite of the fact that there are sanctions employed against us for doing our duty. Then fear will not explain why we do our duty in these cases. A better emotivist reply is required. Why not say that we will only do our duty if we desire to do one's duty? 'Desiring to do our duty' must be a necessary feature of doing our duty.

It is worth noting that Hume thought that it was fear which got us to do our duty, for he agreed that doing one's duty was not a natural inclination. He writes (1888, p 522):

"A resolution is the natural act of the mind, which promises express: But were there no more than a resolution in the case, promises wou'd only declare our former motives, and wou'd not create any new motive or obligation. They are the conventions of men, which create a new motive, when experience has taught us, that humans affairs wou'd be conducted much more for mutual advantage, were there certain symbols or signs instituted, by which we might give each other security of our conduct in any particular incident. After these signs are instituted, whoever uses them is immediately bound by his interest to execute his engagements, and must never expect to be trusted any more, if he refuse to perform what he promis'd."

According to this, it is the fear of never again being trusted which spurs men to keep their promises, and which generally constitutes the motive to keep one's obligations. Fear of not being trusted generates the desire to do one's duty. But Hume is still in difficulty in explaining why people do their duty both when they do not fear the consequences of not doing it, and when they do their duty in spite of being fearful of the consequences.

Leaving Hume to one side, the emotivist appears to be taking the following line. In cases where a person does their duty but does not fear the consequences of doing their duty, or in cases where a person does their duty even though they do not desire to do their duty, there must nevertheless be a desire to do their duty, otherwise the duty would not be discharged. But an objection to this is that emotivism succeeds only because of an equivocation over the sense of 'desire'. In one sense, any action performed is one which

a person desires to perform, if by 'desire' is meant something like 'voluntarily or intentionally'. But in another sense of 'desire', where to desire something is to see the object of the desire as worth having or worth doing, a person can do something voluntarily even though they do not think the action worth doing. And this is the position of the reluctant doer of duties. Their action is voluntary but it is one they do not desire to do, in the second sense of 'desire'.

So emotivists have problems in explaining why we do our duties when we do not desire to do them. I turn next to another problem. The emotivist or, as some contemporary philosophers now say, the 'Humean,' tells us that in any explanation of action, including moral action, two utterly different mental states have to be present, namely belief and desire. Furthermore, no action can ever be performed without there being some desire so to act. A recent explanation and defence of the theory has been mounted by Smith (Smith, 1987, pp.36-61). Smith does clarify some points about the state of desire. He rejects the view that all desires must be felt. His reason for this seem to be sound. If it were true that all desires had to be felt, then one would know from a felt experience, that one was in a given state of desire. However, it is possible that a person can believe, on the basis of some felt experience, that he or she desires to  $\emptyset$ , yet this can turn out to be a mistaken belief. Smith offers in support of this a case in which a person S regularly buys a newspaper from a newspaper stand, behind which is a mirror at which S looks each time S buys a paper. The mirror is eventually taken away and S no longer buys the paper from the newspaper stand. Yet S denies that he buys the paper from the newspaper stand because he desires to look into the mirror. Smith argues that this is a case where S has a desire, the desire to look into the mirror, yet does not have the belief that he has the desire because S does not have the requisite felt experience. S's desire is independent of his beliefs. In short, one does not have to know, from experience, that one has a desire in order for it to be said correctly that one has that desire.

Smith also agrees that desires can have propositional content. Again, a phenomenological account of desire might incline one to deny this. Pain being a paradigm example of a feeling that is felt, nevertheless if one is in pain, it is unintelligible to say 'I pain that p'. However, it is intelligible to say 'I desire that p', as in 'I desire that there be peace'.

Yet though desires do not have to be felt, and though desires can have propositional content, Smith insists that desire is a non-cognitive state. To bolster up this position, Smith relies on the well-known 'direction of fit' argument originating from Anscombe (Smith, 1987 p.51):

"Miss Anscombe, in her work on intention, has drawn a broad distinction between two kinds of mental state, factual belief being the prime exemplar of one kind and desire a prime exemplar of the other.....The distinction is in terms of the direction of fit of mental states with the world. Beliefs aim at the true, and their being true is their fitting the world; falsity is a decisive failing in a belief, and false beliefs should be discarded; beliefs should be changed to fit the world, not vice-versa. Desires aim at realization, and their realization is the world fitting them; the fact that the indicative content of a desire is not yet realised in the world is not yet a failing in the desire, and not yet any reason to discard the desire; the world, crudely, should be changed to fit with our desires, not vice-versa. "

Similar points are made by Williams who adds (Williams, 1973, p.169-70) that "the discovery that two of my beliefs cannot both be true is itself a step on the way to my not holding at least one of them". By contrast "a rejected desire....can, if not survive the point of decision, at least reappear on the other side of it on one or another guise". Upon deciding that one of the desires is not to be acted upon, this can linger on in some form. For example, one might feel regret over the unsatisfied desire; or, one might, if the desire involved action which damaged the interests of someone else, seek to compensate the latter.

The direction of fit argument is meant to convince us of some essential difference between the nature of belief and the nature of desire. Beliefs have to fit the world, the world has to fit desires. This difference, it is claimed, emerges when one considers what would be

the case when, respectively, the world does not fit a belief and the world does not fit a desire. In the former case, it is the belief which is dropped. If A believes that p, and p is false, and A realises that p is false, then were A to continue to believe that p, A would be irrational. The rational thing to do is for A to abandon A's belief that p. By contrast, A's desire that  $\phi$ , or to  $\phi$ , faced with it not being the case that the world is in a  $\phi$ -state, can continue and can dispose A to bring it about that the world be in a  $\phi$ -state. Here the perception that the world is not in a  $\phi$ -state does not bring it about that it is rational that A's desire that  $\phi$  be dropped.

Armed with these points, Smith goes on to propose that a person's having a motivating state is having a goal, having a goal is being in the mental state, 'the world must fit this mental state', and being in that state with which the world must fit is the state of desiring.

This part of the emotivist's theory, then, depends upon the claim that 'desire' is a totally different mental state from 'belief'. But one objection to this arises from the point that desires have 'objects'. A desire is always a desire for something. Because of this, desires have some content. Moreover, it is at least possible for some desires that the desire is subject to rational constraints. I might desire to spend my life in the sun eating fruit, only to find that this is injurious to my health and boring. These facts lead to a revision of what I desire. In such cases, how things are in the world is something which affects what I desire. In such cases desires behave just like beliefs. Some desires, then, are subject to rational constraints.

A further objection to the belief-desire theory is voiced by a number of Smith's critics (McNaughton, 1988; Pettit, b, 1987; Wallace, 1990; Schueler 1991) who have concentrated on the way in which desires are supposed to operate in bringing about action. The 'Humean' theory gives us a clean and simple picture of action. Rather like my example of the observer of famine in Africa, a person can know all sorts of things but unless and until a person is moved by what she or he knows, the knowledge is inert.

But, point out the above critics, the considerations leading to action are rarely as straightforward as this. In particular, in accounting for what motivates action, a special class of beliefs can play their part. These are beliefs, the propositional contents of which themselves entail propositional desires. This view is particularly supported by Pettit (Pettit, 1987 b) and McNaughton (McNaughton, 1988, ch 7). Pettit calls this class of belief 'desiderative belief', and offers by way of illustration 'a belief... that it is good, or appropriate or useful that p'. Pettit claims that in holding such a belief, the agent's desire that p is entailed by the belief; that is, if A believes that p is worthwhile, A necessarily desires that p. If A believes that improving the water supply to the drought-stricken region is good, A desires that this happen. Pettit suggests that we should 'regard the desire...as inheriting the cognitive or discursive status of the desiderative belief' (p 531). In effect, what Pettit's suggestion amounts to is that there is a class of beliefs, desiderative belief, which is the source of a desire to act on the content of the belief. This contrasts with the 'Humean' position that it must always be desires which act as the driving force behind any contribution which beliefs make to some action.

Wallace reaches a similar conclusion. He points out that a simple desire such as the desire to go shopping, is itself often but one of a collection of other beliefs and desires, which together make up the set of considerations which brings about the action. It is possible that the desire to go shopping is itself produced by beliefs such as the belief that shopping is desirable. This in turn could arise out of some other consideration such as the fact that a person has run out of food, and the shop to which one goes is one which is appropriate for buying the food one wants. Such beliefs lead to 'motivated desires'. Wallace sets this idea out as follows: (Wallace, 1990, p365):

“Thus if Wotan wants to shop for groceries, it will—in the normal case, at least—be legitimate to ascribe to him an evaluative belief, to the effect that shopping for groceries is (prima facie) desirable. The content of this evaluative belief, however, can straightforwardly enter into relations of rationalization and justification with other contents of propositional attitudes. For example, we might deploy the schema of the practical syllogism to explain the belief that shopping for groceries is (prima facie) desirable in terms of the following, further propositional attitudes: the evaluative belief that eating is (prima facie) desirable; and the belief that in order to eat it is necessary to go shopping for groceries. The content of these propositional attitudes justifies or provides a reason for the conclusion that shopping for groceries is (prima facie) desirable. And a person might have reached this conclusion because that person holds these further, rationalising beliefs”.

Wallace acknowledges one move left to the ‘Humean’. The latter might accept that much of our detailed reasoning consists of mixtures of desires, straightforward beliefs and desiderative beliefs, and that in such mixtures, there is no necessity that specific desires have to start off any action. But, the Humean might say, this ignores the point that all practical action and the reasoning which leads to it arises from a set of foundational desires which cannot be given any explanation. They are the ‘givens’ of all action. Dancy (Dancy, 1993, ch.3) calls these the four Fs (feeding, fighting etc.). How persuasive is this? Why should we accept that there are non-rational desires at the root of all action? To be persuasive, this has to be a better explanation of action than any rival. Now one alternative explanation could be that all human action arises from some basic principles, whether moral or prudential or any other kind. Such principles have a content; for example, ‘keep to the ways of the tribe’, or ‘honour thy father and thy mother’. To insist that such canons must be accompanied by desires, whether felt or not, is to face us with this choice. We either accept that human action must be based on non-rational desires, or we accept that human action is based on some contentful canons, or rules or customs. Here, there seem to be two metaphysical pictures of mankind competing with each other. But it is not at all obvious that we have to choose the Humean metaphysical picture of us being driven by the non-rational forces of desire. Indeed, its competing, cognitive alternative has the merit of telling us that our actions are motivated by thoughts which have a content, and that because of this, when we act, we act out of reasons which we recognise as telling us why we do what we do.

To summarise, the emotivist/Humean view of human action, including moral action, goes through some unconvincing manoeuvres when it tries to explain why we do our duty in spite of our not desiring to. The Humean account is based on the different roles of desire and belief. Desire is essential in this story, for without it there can be no motivation. Some contemporary philosophers have given this a 'direction of fit' gloss in order to point up the differences between these two states, belief and desire. I have argued that this aspect of emotivism is also weak. It ignores the cognitive content of some desires. It ignores the fact that desires can exist in networks of beliefs and desires and that desires can just as easily arise out of beliefs as the other way round. Indeed, in the case of 'desiderative beliefs,' there is an entailment between the belief that x is good and A wanting x to occur. Nor is the emotivist's claim, that all human action is rooted in non-cognitive desires, one which is compelling in view of the alternative cognitive account of action.

### **Moral conflicts and dilemmas**

We saw that a second feature of emotivism which some have found convincing is concerned with the moral conflicts between individuals and between communities, and the moral dilemmas which individuals face. Emotivists accept that moral conflicts and dilemmas just mark differences of attitude, and are not things about which it makes sense to quarrel. Unlike disputes over factual matters, moral conflicts and dilemmas cannot be resolved rationally.

I noted that emotivists differ over the extent of moral differences between people. Those who agree with Hume hold that we all have a natural sympathy for the plight of others. So, once we observe what these plights are, we will naturally be moved to disapprove of what has brought them about and naturally moved to approve of actions which will lead to their being eased. We will tend to approve and disapprove of the same things. 20th

century emotivists, in contrast to Hume, are inclined to hold that we are likely to respond in different ways to any set of facts.

Over this difference between Humeans and the Ayer-Stevenson view, I am inclined to think that there are problems with what Hume says about human nature. We have to take Hume as saying that there are features of our character which are not owed to acculturation and which shape our responses to the virtues and vices of others. Since this actually admits that people can be 'vicious', it is clear that natural sympathy, the acultural given of our character, is not strong enough to prevent us from going wrong, morally speaking.

Given that the world is a place in which vicious actions occur, why is this? Hume's explanation is that our natural sympathy is weak. It tends to be displayed towards those who are nearest to us geographically or as family/tribe members. Those outside these circles are more inclined to be the recipients of either our moral indifference or of our active hostility. And even if we overcome these latter feelings, our natural sympathy towards these others is still inclined to be weak. But how can one know that one has any natural sympathy, whether weak or strong? Hume's answer to this is that there is evidence that people do help those who are in distress but that is unconvincing as evidence for the existence of natural sympathy. Helping those in distress might be explained as a prudential action. Moreover, it seems undeniable that some people do not help those in distress, indeed do not care a fig about the distress of others even when to do so would be a prudential act.

So I am inclined to think that human beings do not have a tendency to be naturally sympathetic to the plight of others. Moreover, Hume would appear to be committed to the view that our natural sympathy for others is what brings about a large measure of agreement in our moral judgments. Here too the evidence seems to be against him. We do differ over moral matters, nor am I here thinking principally about the moral controversies which occupy us in the late 20th century. MacIntyre (MacIntyre 1981) in

charting the history of ethics from Homeric times to the late 20th century managerial revolution, points out throughout his book that different communities have regarded different sets of character traits as worthy or unworthy, and have even differed over what they count as a virtue or a vice. MacIntyre seems to me to be correct in these claims, taken as historical claims.

The emotivists of the 20th century in effect invite us to agree that moral conflicts and moral dilemmas are irresolvable. They think this because of their view that any particular moral judgment must rest upon our feelings of approval and disapproval towards given states of affairs, and that such feelings are beyond rational scrutiny. Their reason for thinking this is that moral judgment arises from that part of the human mind which is not concerned with the rational examination of belief. For emotivists, the human mind has both a desiring, affective part, and a cognitive part, and it is in the former that one's attitudes arise whilst it is in the latter that one's beliefs arise. What are the consequences of holding this position? If a person changes his or her moral opinion, the emotivist will take this as the replacement of one attitude with another. It would be incorrect to regard what has occurred as one moral judgment being mistaken and being replaced by another one which avoids the mistake. Similarly, if there is a moral difference between A and B, and if 'argument' takes place between the two which results in A coming round to B's moral point of view, A cannot be said to have jettisoned a mistaken moral judgment. Indeed for the emotivist, a change of mind on some moral question will take on the character of a conversion.

There seem to me to be two points against this position. First, in wanting us to agree that these are judgments where it is not possible to make a mistake, they want us to jettison a rich way we have of understanding one aspect of our moral thinking. We do think that sometimes we have made a mistake. We might, for example, have debated whether or not to keep a promise, have decided to set it aside, and then on reflection come to the view that this was a mistake. But there are other concepts which, on the emotivist view,

come under the hammer. We would have to say that we now just have a different moral belief from before. Out would go giving apologies, feeling remorse and being full of regret. These only make sense if a judgment which we had previously reached was now seen by us as wrong, a moral mistake. Second, with regard to moving from one moral judgment to another, emotivists, wanting us to construe these as conversions, assimilating this aspect of morality to matters of faith. But we have good reason for resisting this. Conversions have the hallmark of total changes in our outlook, and this seems to be an implausible way of describing a change of mind about a moral issue. I may have debated whether or not to keep a promise, and then decided to set my obligation to keep the promise to one side, without this being anything like a conversion experience.

Emotivism shows signs of strain when we try to apply it to moral dilemmas. We normally think of moral dilemmas as internal conflicts in an individual who is struggling to decide between alternative moral obligations. People in these circumstances struggle to discover which is the right course of action to take, or which is the least wrong action to take. Often we agonise over such choices. When we have decided, moreover, the unfavoured moral obligation can still exercise its pull on us. Emotivists seem not to be able to make any sense of this. Their description of these matters will be that there is some state of affairs to which different emotional responses are made. For example, someone contemplating whether or not to tell a lie might both approve and disapprove of doing this. One can, of course, have conflicting emotions. But the question of which of the conflicting emotions is the right one to have and act upon, seems to be a question which it does not make any sense to ask. The idea of choosing which of the two emotional response is to be the ground for moral choice, seems to betray a lack of understanding about emotions. One does not choose them. They happen to a person.

There seem, then, to be a number of reasons against accepting the emotivists' view that the best way to understand the nature of moral conflicts and moral dilemmas is that they just mark moral differences and that, qua differences, these are not the sorts of items

which can be the subject of attempts to resolve them. This forces unacceptable revisions in our moral thinking. We would have to regard changes of mind as conversions, and we would have to give up the idea that we can make moral mistakes. Little sense, further, can be given to what a moral dilemma is.

### **Our Access to Moral Values**

We have already seen that Humeans think we come to have our moral values because we have natural sympathies with others. 20th century emotivists are generally silent on the question of how we learn what is right and wrong. Emotivists, we have noted, do not offer a lot of scope for reason-giving as a way of establishing what our moral beliefs are.

Emotivists do, however, have a position on the form in which reasoning takes place in morality. They are ready to accept that whilst individuals and communities may agree on whatever non-moral facts are pertinent to a moral judgment, it will not follow from any such agreement that people will then agree in the attitudes to be taken towards any matter which requires a moral judgment. For example, A and B may agree that the fetus at twelve weeks has the beginnings of a brain, but over the moral issue of whether it is right to abort fetuses at or over 12 weeks of age, emotivists will hold that it is quite possible for A to have one moral opinion and B to have another, different, moral opinion. Neither A's nor B's moral opinion is determined by any facts, nor determined by any agreement on what the facts are.

What the implications are of accepting this view? Using this well known example from Emmet, if the emotivists are right, one cannot derive 'you ought to help her' from 'she is old' and 'she is lonely' (Emmet, quoted in Thomas, 1993, p154). We can grant that this conclusion does not follow as a logical deduction from the premises. But why think that this is the way we have to argue in morality? The emotivist appears to be making an assumption, that any moral judgment which is a conclusion in a moral argument, is only

a proper conclusion if it is derived from some premise such as 'one ought to help the old and lonely'. However, this assumes that something like the deductive model of reasoning is the only one available in moral discourse. It remains to be seen whether there has to be, in any proper moral argument, some principle which acts as a major premise, a minor premise which tells us what the non-moral facts are, and a validly derived conclusion. And one doubt that we must so argue is provided by the following consideration of Emmet's example. A person can well make a moral mistake if they agree that she is old and lonely but then reject the conclusion that she ought to be helped. What other reason does one need to form the moral judgment that she ought to be given help? These facts seem to be just the sort of considerations that act as the reasons which justify one's moral judgment in such a case.

It is difficult to resist pointing out that emotivists too appear to be arguing that the fact that we argue in a certain way, the way just outlined, justifies the conclusion that we ought not to use that way in moral arguments.

Apart from the reasoning involved in deriving conclusions from premises in this deductivist form of moral reasoning, what other scope does the emotivist give for the use of reason in morality? There seems to be no reason why the emotivist could not make room for rational considerations of the details of the minor premises of arguments. Clearly, in the deductivist model, the second premise will be fact-stating, and emotivists can accept here the need for reasoning in order to establish whether a claimed fact is a fact. Emotivists can also give further scope to the need for reasoning due to the requirement of consistency. If a person disapproves of *x*, then whenever *x* occurs, *S* is required on pain of inconsistency to disapprove of *x*.

However there is one problem with this model of moral reasoning, a problem brought out when it is applied in moral conflicts and dilemmas. Following emotivist thinking, let us talk about different approvals or disapprovals. Suppose I disapprove of war, and

suppose I also disapprove of totalitarian bullies who threaten war on others. How might I accommodate this into the deductivist model? One way might be to concentrate on the major premise and make it something like 'one disapproves of war except where war is to be prosecuted against totalitarian bullies'. But the trouble with this move is that it invites ever further complications. Suppose the only way to get the totalitarian bully out of office is through a long and bloody war involving the death of thousands. Do we then qualify the already qualified premise in some further way? If we do, there is no guarantee that there is not some further qualification which might need to be made. This leaves the emotivist with the potential problem of not ever being able to complete a statement of the major premise of any moral argument which involves the need to state conflicting points of view.

### **The 'Normativity' Test**

I now turn to the 'normativity' test. A criticism of emotivism is that it gives no reason why we should not approve of the vicious and disapprove of the virtuous. To see whether this charge is justified, let us return to a previous point from Hume about the pervasiveness of natural sympathy. Hume remarks: (Hume, 1888, p 316):

"No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that the propensity we have to sympathize with others...."

For Hume, the feelings of approval and disapproval are, as we have seen, rooted in our natural sympathy for others. This enables us to experience the same sorts of feelings as others experience. When, for example, someone is hurt by a cruel rebuff, we can experience the same sorts of feelings which they experience and this makes us similarly disapprove of the cruel rebuff. However, Hume makes a distinction between 'natural' and 'artificial' virtues. There will be times when natural sympathy is not felt. Perhaps our own interests sometimes blot this out. At these times, we still need to be virtuous but we cannot count on our natural feelings. Then, we have to call on those virtues which

have been instilled into us. We need 'artificial virtues'. Further, we need some mechanism to make sure that we behave in the ways which are required of those who possess artificial virtues. What shores up artificial virtues? Various devices such as social sanctions, our upbringing, our sense of self-interest.

But now an objection surfaces. Take the artificial virtue of being just. This is not the be all and end all of moral rectitude. This too may be subject to moral criticism. Harrison (Harrison, 1984, p 298) captures this point thus:

“..individuals often arrive, by independent moral reflection at conclusions at variance with the moral pieties current in the society in which they have been brought up”.

Indeed, the same point can be made against the exercise of natural virtue. Harrison constructs a case of a person who has become a domestic tyrant and whose wife eventually leaves him, much to his distress. Notwithstanding any feelings of sympathy with him in his distress, this does not dictate moral judgment on the matter. One can still conclude, Harrison suggests, that what the man wants to happen, namely the relief of his distress via the return of his wife, is not what ought to happen.

So the first difficulty amounts to this. The emotivist bases all moral judgment in our natural feelings of sympathy for others, yet this does not of itself establish what is right and wrong. Our moral judgments can work against what our sympathy-based judgments incline us to hold. Further, given that all virtues are not natural virtues and that we need some artificial virtues, it can still be questioned whether these yield correct moral judgments.

So the emotivist is still saddled with the charge that the account is one which permits the approval of vice and the disapproval of virtue. Can emotivism be amended to deal with this objection? One way of doing this leads to the ideal-observer version of emotivism, so we need to see both how this position is established and whether it is successful.

To see how the ideal-observer position emerges, consider a possible similarity between moral judgments and perceptual judgments. It has been held that some perceptual judgments are grounded in the way the world is. These are perceptual judgments of primary qualities. Other perceptual judgments are not so grounded. These are judgments of secondary qualities. Primary qualities of objects are held to be those which do not depend upon how objects appear to perceivers. Secondary qualities of objects do depend on how objects appear to perceivers. McDowell (McDowell in Honderich, 1985) puts the distinction thus (McDowell is discussing Mackie's view on the nature of moral judgment):

“A subjective property, in the relevant sense, is one such that no adequate conception of what it is for a thing to possess it is available except in terms of how the thing would, in suitable circumstances, affect a subject-a sentient being.....What is objective, in the relevant sense, is what is not subjective. Thus Mackie's implied doctrine that whatever is part of the fabric of the world is objective.....amounts to the doctrine that the world is fully describable in terms of properties that can be understood without essential reference to their effects on sentient beings”.

According to this, some perceptual judgments, for example that this object is square, do not depend for their truth on how the object looks. Other perceptual judgments, for example, that this object is red, do depend for their truth on how the object looks.

However, the odd thing about secondary qualities, such as colours, is that they appear to us to be part of the fabric of the world. Their phenomenal quality is as of objects and properties which have real existence. This makes them distinct from, say, dream-images whose phenomenal qualities retain their status of being just mental events, however vivid they are. In contrast to dream-images, in our colour perceptions it is the world which strikes us as coloured. The colour of objects strikes us as being in the objects themselves. But notwithstanding that this is how things seem to be, the argument goes, when we look at the world, it is actually a world which is only constituted by those objects whose character is such as not to depend upon how things look. It is a world which is occupied by objects and their primary qualities. The phenomenon of colour

accordingly is really a matter of how objects and their primary qualities cause us to see them as coloured. Colour is to be explained as nothing other than surfaces absorbing wavelengths of light and photons striking our retinas. We can now explain away colour perception and other secondary quality phenomena which make it appear that the world is a certain way. The explanation is that the world is constituted by objects and their primary qualities, and these have the effect, given our own physical constitution, of making it seem as if the world is full of coloured objects no way dissimilar from primary qualities.

How does this throw light on the nature of values? Mackie (Mackie, 1977, ch.1) draws attention to similar phenomena in moral experience. Moral qualities too appear to us to exist in the world. For example, we say that we saw how cruel an action was. But this is misleading in just the same way that colour perception is. What is in the world is an action, but to say that it is cruel is to overlook that this is how the action strikes us, equipped as we are with our moral sensibilities. Just as a person will not see the world as coloured unless they have a certain sort of sensory apparatus, so too a person will not see the world as containing cruel actions unless they are equipped with a certain sort of moral sensitivity. Nevertheless, just as it is the non property-coloured world which, via our sense apparatus makes it appear as if the world is coloured, so too the non-moral qualities of the world are what, via our moral apparatus, makes it appear as if the world contains moral properties.

We are now in a position to grasp what the ideal observer theory is getting at. For a person to make the right moral judgments, he or she has to possess moral sensitivity, just as a person needs a certain perceptual apparatus in order to make correct perceptual judgments. We can gain insight into this by reflecting on what sorts of things make us insensitive, morally speaking. Among these we may list our biases and our prejudices. We may also include for good measure our propensity to ignore facts because it does not suit our purpose to notice them, especially facts about what others' desires are which we

might deliberately ignore or just not bother to find out. The ideal moral person will not have these faults. He or she will be the perfect moral agent, the ideal observer of moral theory.

Is this amended version of emotivism one which can show that we approve of and only of what is morally right and disapprove of and only of what is morally wrong? Does the amended version now pass the normativity test? For the position now is that moral approvals and disapprovals will be those forthcoming from the morally sensitive person, with 'moral sensitivity' having the sort of content just outlined. It is worth noting that this sort of emotivist has changed their position somewhat in the course of this defence. The ideal moral agent is no longer a person who rests morality on the responses drawn out from the base of natural sympathy. The new moral figure is someone whose moral responses emerge from careful discovery and sifting of a variety of facts, for the ideal moral agent looks at how actions will affect others and then takes care to reflect on their own responses in order to exclude from them all taint of bias and prejudice. The ideal moral agent is someone who will be doing much thinking about whether their initial responses to actions and states of affairs are tainted with distorting factors.

Does this new defence work? McDowell (McDowell in Honderich, 1985) questions the argument upon which this whole position stands. If we uphold the primary/secondary distinction generally, then what view of the world does it leave us with? It seems to suggest that the world as it really is, is a world whose objects do not depend upon how the world appears to us. Such a world has no longer any room for colours and other secondary properties. The subjective properties which populate the commonsense view of reality stand revealed as projections onto the world of our subjective experience. Once we know that colour experience is really a matter of surfaces absorbing wavelengths of light and photons striking our retinas, can our understanding of the world, as really coloured, survive? McDowell suggests that one problem with this account is that even to think of producing a reducing account of this kind itself depends upon our acceptance

of those phenomenal qualities which the account is intended to explain away. In that sense, we cannot do without them. Further, does the reducing account really succeed? Does it, in its scientific account, simply lose its capacity to explain the quality of those objects and properties which figure in our perceptual experience?

McDowell's criticisms apply equally to the ideal observer account of our moral experience. If we regard our experiences of moral features such as an act's cruelty or a person's kindness, as projections of our own sensitivity onto actions and characters which are shorn of any moral qualities, we make 'cruelty', 'kindness', 'generosity' and other moral qualities entirely a matter of how we, with our sophisticated moral sensitivities, see whatever reality survives these exclusions. It is we who write in, as it were, the moral qualities onto an essentially non-moral world. But by what warrant do we do this? If we were to assess an action as cruel, how do we know that this assessment is merited? For the only resources we have permitted ourselves to make these judgments are our own. By so doing, we have cut ourselves off from any justification for our judgments which will stand up to examination. If we say 'that was cruel', and we were asked to justify our judgment, we could only say, in the end and notwithstanding our developed moral sensibilities, that this was how it, whatever it was, struck us. So in the end the new variety of emotivism, buttressed though it may be by a good deal of thinking and reasoning, still leaves our own approvals and disapprovals as the final arbiter of what is right and wrong. And this still leaves the position open to the objection that since it is in the end up to us, we can approve of vice and disapprove of virtue.

Perhaps supporters of the new version will protest that we are forgetting what qualities the ideal spectator has. He or she is factually not at fault, and has an unbiased viewpoint. Nevertheless, this still will not do. No doubt the new approver is a better model than the old, sympathy-driven model, but lack of bias and possession of full factual information are still consistent with someone approving of something on the basis of morally dubious principles and reasons. The torturer knows full well what the facts are about the effects

of torture, and we can conceive of a torturer who puts his own preferences and prejudices aside. He may personally like Jews and not want to torture them. Nevertheless duty calls.

The problem which this discussion reveals is that whilst from the moral point of view, we may well applaud the lack of bias and prejudice in our moral judgments, these are not enough by themselves to make such unbiased and unprejudiced judgments morally correct. Nor should we allow ourselves to think, as the ideal observer model would have us think, that bias, prejudice etc. prevent a person from making correct moral judgments. Suppose that there is a call for an alteration in the way we treat animals and suppose this emanates from groups whose lifestyle I cannot stand. I have biases against those who live that way. Yet my prejudices do not prevent my own moral judgments about the treatment of animals from being correct. The fact that I am biased against the lifestyles of animal rights' activists does not show that my moral judgment here is incorrect, or that my moral judgment is not fully justified.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have outlined the emotivist account of the nature of moral judgment. The emotivist holds that moral judgments consist of our feelings of approval and disapproval towards 'objects' such as actions and character traits. I noted that 20th century emotivism differs from Humean emotivism over the issue of whether the position lends itself to the further view that there are irresolvable differences both between individuals and between communities. The 18th century view is that, with a particular assumption about human nature, this was not so, whereas the 20th century view is that such differences are irresolvable.

I then subjected this theory to my four tests. The emotivists' claim to explain that we act morally because our moral judgment consists of our expressions of our feelings, or our

desires, can be questioned. Emotivism works with a disputable view of desire as empty of cognitive content. Further, the view that all action must flow from having a desire as the 'ert' factor was argued to be too simple a view of what is a very complex matter. Cognitive states, affective states and desiderative states all mingle together to produce motivations.

With regard to the claim of some emotivists that moral differences are irresolvable, it was countered that we do not have to accept the implications of this view, that it makes moral mistakes impossible and turns moral changes of view into moral conversions. The emotivist, it was also suggested, has a particularly hard time in trying to explain moral dilemmas.

Over the question of how we get to know moral values, emotivists seem thrust back on some theory of the unfolding of human nature as a condition of this occurring. Within that framework, emotivists have been thought to be only able to give limited scope for reason-giving and reasoning in morality. They can make room for the requirement that moral judgments be consistent. They appear to allow that rational inquiry can be conducted into the facts which surround the 'objects' of moral judgments. Their main thrust, though, is a negative one, in that they deny that agreement on the non-moral facts can determine what our moral judgments are. An assumption here is that moral reasoning can only proceed on a deductivist model of reasoning, a view open to challenge.

Finally, I suggested that there was a basic problem with the theory over whether the judgments which arise from it can be held to be always moral in content, nor was this problem dealt with satisfactorily by the device of the ideal observer.

There are, therefore, doubts about whether emotivism is adequate as a theory of the nature of moral judgment. In chapter 8, I shall examine the educational implications of this theory.

Emotivism is not the only form of non-cognitivism. I now turn to universal prescriptivism. This is of interest not just because it is a theory which has held centre stage in much metaethical discussion in the past 30 years. Its chief proponent, Richard Hare, has also suggested that there are certain implications from it for moral education.

## CHAPTER THREE.

### MORAL EDUCATION BASED ON UNIVERSAL PRESCRIPTIVISM

#### **3.0 Introduction**

In this chapter, I examine the credentials of universal prescriptivism as a sound basis for moral education. R.M. Hare, the originator and main proponent of universal prescriptivism, has himself suggested that his position has implications for moral education. He has given support to one of the few large-scale projects in the development of moral education in the UK, the Humanities Curriculum Project. It is, I think, also clear that universal prescriptivism provides part of the philosophical grounding for the views of J. Wilson, a philosopher who has written extensively on moral education.

I suggested in the opening chapter that universal prescriptivism fell within the category of non-cognitivist metaethical theory and thus within the same category as emotivism. Hare regards his theory as distinct from emotivism on the grounds that the latter is 'irrationalist'. Emotivism earns this brickbat because of its suggestion that moral judgments cannot be given rational justifications. Hare rejects this claim. But Hare also resists the suggestion that his is a non-cognitivist theory (Hare in Singer, 1993). Hare prefers to cut metaethical theories concerned with the nature of moral judgment into the categories of the descriptive and the non-descriptive. For Hare, the question of the nature of moral judgment is an issue in semantics, and I think he means by this that it is an issue in philosophical logic. It is an issue, that is, about what sort of meaning is contained in those utterances found in moral discourse. Descriptive theories of morality, according to Hare, are theories which hold that the meaning of all sentences used in morality is given wholly by the truth-conditions of these sentence. Non-descriptive theories of morality, to which type universal prescriptivism belongs, regard some sentences in morality, the ones using deontic terms, as having their meaning partly given by the truth conditions of

some of the terms used in these sentences and partly given by the logical properties of the deontic terms used. It is because of the part which truth conditions contribute to the meaning of sentences used in morality that Hare wants to resist having universal prescriptivism categorised as non-cognitive. His reason for this is that if part of the meaning of a sentence used in morality is given by the truth conditions of terms found in that sentence, any moral judgment which is made in such sentence will contain terms which can be judged true or false, and this is sufficient to make the judgment not non-cognitive. As we saw in chapter 2, non-cognitivists hold that terms such as 'true' and 'false' do not apply to moral judgment. Hare thinks there is a sense in which they do. But we will see more of this in due course.

The authors of two textbooks on moral philosophy (Brandt, ch.9, 1959; Thomas, ch 2, 1993), the former written towards the start of Hare's writings on these matters and the latter written over 40 years later, both regard Hare's position as non-cognitivist. I think there is good reason for agreeing with Brandt and Thomas, and I shall explain why I agree with them later in the chapter.

### **3.1 Universal Prescriptivism**

What account does universal prescriptivism give of moral judgment? Some insight into this philosophical theory can actually be obtained by seeing what Wilson and Hare consider to be an incorrect approach to moral education. Wilson (1990, p27) tells us:

“But the view [about moral education] which may be expressed as ‘First we find out the right answers, and then we tell them to children, and that’s moral education’ is plainly inadequate”.

Wilson continues:

“Hence any basis for moral education should consist of imparting those skills which are necessary to make good or reasonable moral decisions and to act on them. We are not out to impart any specific content, but to give other people facility in a method”.

and then concludes:

“Such an approach does not deny that we have moral knowledge now, any more than we would deny that the Middle Ages has scientific knowledge; but it does involve trying first to reach agreement about the second-order principles governing morality, rather than about what should be the (first-order) content of particular moral beliefs”.

From this, it can be seen that Wilson rejects any approach to moral education which consists of the teaching and learning of some specific moral content. We ought, instead, to be teaching pupils some method, some second-order principles. When they have acquired these, then they may use them to gain moral knowledge.

These ideas on moral education are echoed in Hare’s discussion of the Humanities Curriculum Project (Hare, 1976). This project was an attempt to introduce moral education into the classroom through debate. These debates were to be chaired by teachers who were to stay silent on the substantive issues being debated. Teachers were, though, to insist on a debate being carried on in conformity with certain procedural principles. Pupils were, for example, required to back up points with evidence where evidence was appropriate. Also, teachers were to insist on freedom of expression and on orderliness in debate.

In his paper Hare supports this approach. At one point he writes (Hare, 1976, p 16):

“If questions of value are just one kind of questions of fact, then there is a right answer to them, and a teacher can say authoritatively, sometimes, what it is. He can, that is to say, not merely teach authoritatively the method to be used in discussing them (for I agree that he can and should do that), but teach authoritatively the right answers to the questions. We are here up against one of the deepest disputes in moral philosophy. On one side of it are those who say that if we understood what morality is and what the moral words mean, we can derive from this knowledge, in conjunction with factual data about particular situations, answers to every moral question. On the other side are those like me who think that, although the nature of morality and the meanings of the moral words establish the canons of moral argument, they do not by themselves uniquely determine its conclusions, given the facts”.

It is clear from this passage that Hare, like Wilson, thinks that moral educators should not be transmitting a moral culture of right answers to their pupils. Hare emphasises instead the importance of getting moral learners to acquire the ‘canons of moral argument’.

This prompts the question: what are these skills, these second-order principles, these canons of moral argument? Wilson tells us (Wilson, 1990, p.123):

“briefly they are:

- 1 That we should stick to the laws of logic.
- 2 That we should use language correctly”.

This needs to be explained, and to do this takes us into Hare’s account of universal prescriptivism. I rely here on Hare (1963: 1981: 1989) and Hare’s recent summary of his position (Hare in Singer, 1993). I shall summarise Hare’s position based on these sources.

Hare thinks that the model for moral reasoning is the deductive model, so the following example would conform to this:

1. One ought to refuse to eat meat from animals reared in factory farms.
2. This meat has been cut from animals reared in factory farms.
3. So, I ought to refuse to eat this piece of factory-farm meat.
4. Me: do not eat this piece of meat.
5. You: do not eat this piece of meat.
6. He or she: do not eat this piece of meat.

Hare claims that most moral judgments possess two logical properties.

The first of the two logical properties is the prescriptivity of a moral judgment. This property is the one through which Hare offers his account of the connection between a moral judgment and a moral action. If a person makes a moral judgment such as the one stated as 3 above, this entails, Hare says, an imperative, a command and in the above example, the entailed command is addressed to 'me', 'you', and 'he or she'.

So the imperative is an entailment from a moral judgment. What does Hare mean by this and how is this logical relation possible? Hare points to there being something odd about someone making a moral judgment and then saying that the moral judgment does not give the person who assents to it a reason for acting. Thus if a person sincerely assents to what is said in a moral judgment, then this commits the person to that action which the moral judgment says is right or is the one which ought to be done. Suppose, though, that a person makes a moral judgment such as the one stated in 3 but does not agree that this is what ought to be done. Hare says either that such a person did not assent sincerely, or did not understand what she or he was assenting to. Suppose, further, that such a person did not act in accordance with the content of the moral judgment. Hare says that in such cases the person must be in some physical or psychological condition which prevents him or her from so acting. So if, having agreed to premises 1 and 2, I then say that I do not think that I ought to refrain from eating meat, either I was being insincere, or I was ignorant of what I was saying. If I do not refrain from eating

meat taken from factory-farmed animals, I am under some physical threat perhaps or I am disabled psychologically from doing what I judge to be right. In other words, unless these latter conditions obtain, my action of not-refraining from eating meat taken from factory-farmed animals must show that I did not sincerely assent to the argument in 1 through 3, or I did not understand what I was saying.

How is it possible to have a relation of entailment between 3 and 4, 3 and 5, 3 and 6? One difficulty might be thought to lie in entailments having to be relationships between statements in truth-functional arguments, that is between statements which take truth values. Hare does not hold that 3, or 4, 5, and 6 are statements. They are respectively an ought-judgment and imperatives. Hare holds that it does not make sense to hold that either 'I ought to refuse to eat this piece of factory-farm meat', or 'do not eat this piece of meat' are statements which are either true or false. What would it be, Hare would ask, to say 'it is true: do not eat this piece of factory-farm meat' or 'it is true: I ought to refuse to eat this piece of factory-farm meat'? However, this supposed difficulty seems to rest on an assumption that only arguments containing statements can have logical relations. This is a questionable assumption. We can argue:

7. Keep all doors shut for safety
8. This door is not shut.
9. Shut this door for safety.

This shows that imperatives can enter into arguments together with factual statements in such a way that an imperatival conclusion can follow from imperatival and factual premises. Hare however requires that there be logical relations between an ought-judgment and an imperative. One way to do this would be to regard 3 as a kind of imperative, so that 3 and then 4 through 6 become imperatives related logically in just the same way as 7 and 9 are with the help of 8. The trouble with this suggestion is that an ought-judgment does not mean the same as an imperative. There is a difference between

being told what we ought to do and being told to do it, for being told to do something is consistent with it being not what one ought to do. It does not appear, anyway, to be the way which Hare wants to deal with the issue. Hare remarks (Hare in Singer, p.457): 'Universal prescriptivists hold, then, that 'ought'-judgments are prescriptive like plain imperatives...'. The basic category here is 'the prescriptive'. This seems to suggest that it is prescriptivity which is the feature which both ought-judgments and imperatives possess. This being so, this enables both imperatives and ought-judgments to be put in whatever form prescriptive sentences can take.

One suggestion here to illuminate this idea is that we construe prescriptions as those sentences whose content contains some recommended action. The difference then will be over the way in which the action is recommended. One could be a recommendation in the form of an imperative, the other a recommendation in the form of some utterance telling us what our responsibility is. 'Prescription' will be the category which covers both of these. We could also distinguish other sorts of recommendations, for example, pieces of advice ('I really think this is the best course of action'), and sentences saying what our duty is ('You must do that'). All of these could then be put in the deductive mode of reasoning, in just the same way as in 1-6 and 7-9. All would be forms of prescription.

The other logical property of moral judgment is its universalisability. In addition to ought-judgments having some property in common with imperatives, Hare holds that there is some other property which distinguishes ought-judgments from imperatives. Hare says (Hare in Singer, 1993, p.456) "In any case some differentia is needed to distinguish the rules [of reasoning] common to all prescriptions, which govern imperatives as well as 'ought'-statements, from those which are peculiar to 'ought'-statements". What distinguishes ought-judgments from imperatives, Hare claims, is that whereas the latter does not require a person to act in the same way if relevantly similar circumstances occur, the former does have this requirement. If the imperative I issue, whether to myself

or some other person is 'shut the door' it is not the case that were relevantly similar circumstances to reoccur, I am bound by virtue of having uttered 'shut the door' in the first case to utter the same imperative in the second case. With ought-judgments, however, matters are different. It is just part of what is meant by deontic terms such as 'ought' or 'must' that when a person makes an ought-or must-judgment, he or she is committed on pain of inconsistency to making the same judgment in relevantly similar circumstances. As Hare says, quoting his own, earlier, work (Hare in Singer, 1993, p 456):

"This is because in any 'ought'-statement there is implicit a principle which says that the statement applies to all precisely similar situations. This means that if I say 'That is what ought to be done; but there could be a situation exactly like this one in its non-moral properties, but in which the corresponding person, who is exactly like the one who ought to do it in this situation, ought not to do it', I contradict myself".

According to this, when a person makes a particular moral judgment, as in the judgment 'I ought not to eat this piece of meat,' the term 'ought' commits the utterer to making the same judgments in relevantly similar circumstances. If the judgment is 'you ought not to eat this piece of meat' then here too 'ought' implies that when 'you' are in relevantly similar circumstances, the same judgment applies. If the judgment is 'one ought not to eat meat', 'ought' implies that all covered by 'one' in relevantly similar circumstances ought not to eat meat. In short, this is the requirement of consistency in judgments.

Which particular ought-judgments should we make, and which implied principles should we be espousing? What Hare's argument has so far amounted to is that when we use ought-judgments, such judgments commit us both to action and to principled and consistent action in the ways he suggests. These points arise, Hare claims, from reflection on the logical properties of ought-judgments, that is from this analysis of the nature of moral judgment. But Hare also thinks that there is some connection between this thesis of universal prescriptivity and the question of what we morally ought to do. When a person judges that she or he, or you, or they, ought to do something, that person invites the question 'why?'. 'Ought'-language implies the giving of reasons for one's prescription.

How, then, do we arrive at what are moral reasons for one's prescriptions? A problem here is that not every reason given for one's ought-judgment will make it into a moral judgment. I may say: 'one ought to scratch one's head three times daily'. This is both action-guiding and in universalised form, but it does not look like a moral judgment, not that is unless some other features are brought to light.

Hare's move here is to exploit the point that to say that one ought to  $\phi$ , is to say that one has a preference for  $\phi$ -ing. How, then, are we to decide whether one's preference for  $\phi$ -ing is a moral preference?

Hare deals with this by invoking his version of the Golden Rule argument.(Hare, 1981, ch 5) Suppose we are faced with a decision about what we ought to do and we come to some judgment on that. This ought-judgment must indicate an action which we prefer to happen. How, then, can we tell whether what we prefer to happen i.e. that action which is the object of our ought-judgment, is the one which ought to happen from the moral point of view? To decide this, Hare argues, we place ourselves in the position of others who are likely to be affected by the action, and we then consider what would be our response, were we to be in their shoes, with their concerns. If I am contemplating stealing a car and contemplating whether I ought to steal that car, I ought, according to this procedure, to put myself in the shoes of the car owner, and then see what I would prefer, were I to be on the receiving end of my proposed action rather than its instigator. When this process has been gone through, the agent will have a broader knowledge base, composed of the initial preferences together with those preferences which they would have were they to occupy the positions of those who would be affected by the action. This broader knowledge base will enable the agent to decide what she or he ought to do. But how will the agent decide? The agent will find that action which is most preferred, and do that. If it turns out to be the case that were I in the position of the car owner and any others affected by the theft of the car, my preference for retaining the car is greater than my preference for taking it (now, qua potential car thief), then I ought to leave the

car where it is. Following this procedure, then, will yield the correct moral judgment.

Thus Hare holds that the action which ought to be done from the moral point of view is the one which we would prefer to happen, after we have gone through this process of putting oneself in the position of those who would be affected by the proposed action. Now in effect what Hare is suggesting is that a person's own preferences cannot be decisive in deciding what one ought to do morally. A person is to ask: how would I like it, what would be my preference, if the same action which I am proposing to do to Y is the one which, were I to be Y, would be done? Only if a person is willing to have others do to him what he is proposing to do to others, would it turn out to be the case that that action is morally correct.

Hare calls this the method of critical thinking. It has something in common with the property of universalisability. The latter makes a person's preferences subservient to what is indicated in the judgment to which they have assented. If I subscribe to the principle that one ought not to eat factory-farm meat, I cannot without contradiction allow my own particular preferences for eating factory-farmed meat to hold sway, given relevantly similar circumstances. The former requires a person's preferences to be, not subservient, but weighed with the preferences of others. Both universalisability and critical thinking make an individual's preferences not the be-all and end-all of moral thinking, but they do this in different ways.

So Hare thinks that moral judgments have the properties of being universal and prescriptive. To prescribe what ought to be done is to have a preference that that be done, and this entails an imperative addressed to those indicated in the ought-judgment. Ought-judgments are judgments whose terms apply to all those picked out in the judgment when in relevantly similar circumstances. To discover what ought to be done is to engage in the process of critical thinking. This latter aspect of Hare's account is, however, controversial because it connects universal prescriptivism up in a strong way with

utilitarianism. What we ought to do morally is what is most preferred. It remains a possibility, though, that one could universalise some particular moral judgment without this committing the agent to utilitarianism. Suppose my particular ought-judgment is 'I ought to keep this promise'. Universalised, this might be 'one ought to keep promises' or perhaps 'one ought to keep promises of such and such a type made in such and such circumstances'. One might argue that it is morally right to do this, even if there is not some overall preference-satisfaction from so doing. Thus Hare's position, that the person using the method of critical thinking will think as an utilitarian does, is open to challenge (Pettit, 1987).

Hare acknowledges, though, that it is impossible for people to do all their thinking at the critical level all the time. Thinking at the critical level is capable of producing complex solutions to moral problems, but the exigencies of ordinary everyday life are such that we often do not have the time or the opportunity to engage in such thinking. Critical thinking is thinking to be engaged in 'in a cool hour'. What we need rather are some simple rules to guide us in our everyday moral decision-taking. Indeed, were we to shape all our actions by the moral principles which are the product of critical thinking, this would make it difficult for us in another way. For we would seem to have to remember all the critically derived moral principles we have made, and since these are likely to be complex, human beings may find this a task of such impossible complication as to be beyond the reach of all but archangels. For these reasons, then, critical thinking itself reaches the conclusion that much of our moral decision making has to be done in conformity with a few simple moral rules, for this is most optimistic. Much of our moral decision-taking, then, will be done at this other, intuitive, level of moral thinking.

There are rich pickings here for the moral educator. If the latter uses Hare's theory of the nature of moral judgment as the philosophical basis for moral education programmes, then there will perforce be much emphasis laid on reason-giving and reasoning in morality. If A judges that X ought to  $\emptyset$ , then anyone in X's position ought to  $\emptyset$ . Here, reasoning

must conform to the requirement of consistency. Moral judgments are judgments derived from a moral principle, and the method of critical thinking will lead us to justifiable moral principles. Such thinking, indeed, yields simple, general moral rules which act as the moral framework for our everyday moral lives, and which the young must learn. Hare's method of critical thinking also will be put to use in arriving at moral decisions in complex moral cases, where the ordinary everyday simple rules are not equipped to deal with the complexities of such problems. Moral judgments require us to get the facts right so our powers of reason are needed for this along, no doubt, with other powers concerned with factual inquiry. Finally, reason in the form of the prescriptions to which we assent are reasons for acting in the ways indicated in the prescription. This emphasises another sort of consistency, between word and deed.

### **3.2 Hare's theory under scrutiny**

How well does this impressive metaethical theory stand up to my four tests?

#### **Practicality**

Hare makes a tight connection between moral ought-judgments and action. This is done through his claim that a particular moral judgment, derived from a moral premise and a factual premise, entails an imperative. This has two results. Anyone who assents to the moral conclusion but then rejects this as the moral reason for acting is either insincere or ignorant of what they are saying when they make the moral judgment. Anyone who, having assented to the moral conclusion, fails to act in accordance with it, can only have failed to act because they are gripped by some physical or psychological power beyond their control. This makes the typical morally weak-willed person into someone who 'ought but can't' (Hare, p 80, 1963).

Hare takes an internalist position on moral motivation. Internalists hold that the content of the moral judgment itself is what motivates moral action. The contrary position, externalism, arises because of an alleged problem which internalists face. Externalists are apt to point to cases where a person assents to or knows what he or she ought to do, but does not do the required action. There can be various types of case. The weak-willed person, according to externalists, would know what is right but not do it, being deflected by other considerations which they know are wrong. The wicked person would know what is right and know what is wrong, but would do the wrong thing not the right thing, because doing what is wrong is what they want to do. The morally indifferent person would know what is right but not be moved by this. Such a person might not do the wrong act but still would not do the right act. Right acts leave them cold. As we have previously noted, Dancy (Dancy, 1993, chs 1-3) draws attention to the accidic person, someone who knows what is right but, suffering from some temporary malaise, does not do what is right. This sort of case may well overlap with Hare's cases of people not acting in accordance with what they have assented to because they are physically or psychologically incapable of doing so. In all these cases, the externalist argues that unless someone is moved by what they know is right or wrong or what they assent to, they will not do what is right and they will not eschew doing what is wrong. Further, the externalist holds that this extra motivational ingredient cannot be provided by what one knows is right or what one assents to, for if it did we could not have cases of moral weakness, wickedness, indifference and accidie. The extra ingredient must come from outside the moral judgment to which one assents, in the form of a separate desire to do that to which one has morally assented. Externalists, therefore, subscribe to the belief-desire theory of action. For them, a person must desire to do what is right in order to do what is right, given that a person knows what is right, or at any rate has assented to some moral judgment that something ought to be done.

Hare is an internalist because he thinks that it is odd both for a person to assent to a moral judgment and yet not consider the moral judgment to be the reason for acting and,

blockages apart, not act on it. But has Hare drawn the connection too tightly? Hare makes the akratic into someone who is gripped by some physical or psychological power which prevents them from doing what they assent to. How plausible is this? Suppose a person S assents to the moral judgment that S ought to give 10% of their net income to charity, yet fails to do this because S finds reason to spend this money on goods which give S pleasure. S knew what it was that they were assenting to, and was sincere at the time of giving the assent. Hare says that this must be a case of physical or psychological powerlessness. If that is right, one would look for features in the case such as acting under duress, being unable to deliver the money for physical reasons, being psychologically paralysed by having to do the moral act. But suppose one did not find anything like these features. According to Hare, we have to keep on looking because some such features must be present. But that begins to look like a theory which has to be true even if there is no evidence for it.

Hare's analysis of the akratic also seems not to be capable of making much sense of the struggle which the akratic goes through, struggles which result in their experiencing such emotions as shame and remorse for the actions which they failed to do. Someone powerless to do as they have judged they ought to do would not experience shame or remorse at their lack of action. That would make as little sense as it would were there to be a sea captain gripped by remorse when his ship's rudder had been broken in a storm and his boat had finished up on the rocks. The sea captain might of course feel sad at what had happened, but some emotions such as remorse and shame would be out of place in such a case because they presuppose that one knows that what one has done is wrong. Akratics can feel remorse and guilt because they know that the action which they did not do was one they ought to have done.

Thus Hare makes an interesting and at first sight plausible case for internalism in drawing the connection between moral judgment and action, but looks to have over-drawn the connection in a way which makes his account of the akratic implausible.

There is, I think, another problem for Hare over the question of motivation on morality. This stems not from the tight connection he draws between ought-judgments and imperatives but from his method of critical thinking. Hare suggests that the person who wants to know what morally they ought to do, will gain this knowledge by finding out which action would be the one which was overall most preferred. It will be recalled that Hare offers a method for finding out what is most optimific. A person is to ask whether they would prefer that action done to them as well as doing that to others. Now this procedure starts by the person asking whether they ought, morally, to do the proposed action which they prefer to do. Suppose that there is an action such that it can be shown to benefit me, with my interests. That gives me a good reason for agreeing to this action. If it can be shown that this same action would harm me, were I to be in the position of someone else, then the question arises as to why I, with my actual interests, might agree to refrain from doing the act, even though I know that were I to be on the receiving end of the action, I would be harmed.

There is one sort of case where I would agree to refrain from acting. This is where I act out of enlightened self interest. Knowing that my proposed act would harm the interests of others, I can reason that in so far as the harm which they suffer from my act leads back to my being harmed, then I have good reason to refrain from my proposed action. However, suppose there is no coincidence of interests. If I follow Hare's procedure, then I can reason as follows. I know what my self-centred interests are. I would get to know that were I to be in the position of some other I would be harmed by my action. But why should I do this imaginative exercise, because what it will achieve will be to give me information which is inimical to my own interests. My interests lie in being unimaginative in this instance, so that I can get on with my activity which may lead to me harming you.

## Moral Conflicts and Dilemmas

The key issue here, it will be recalled, is whether or not a theory regards moral conflicts and moral dilemmas as resolvable. There could be different reasons for holding them to be irresolvable. One might be that they are just cases where moral differences show through. Emotivism seems committed to this view. Hare thinks that the main rival to his theory, descriptivism, is also committed to this position, and that this is a mark against it. He thinks that the reason that descriptivism is deficient in this respect is due to its incipient relativism.

Why does Hare think this is true of descriptivism? The descriptivist holds that moral judgments can be true or false, correct or incorrect. Something external to any moral judgment makes such judgments true or false. What this external something is, will vary according to the particular form of descriptivism on offer. Those descriptivists who are naturalists will, according to Hare, hold that the meanings of terms like 'ought' as they appear in moral judgments are determined by the truth of some set of non-moral statements, their truth being independent of the psychological states of those making the judgment. So, using Hare's own example (Hare in Singer, 1993, p 453) 'wives ought to obey their husbands' is given its meaning by something like the claimed truth 'obedience to husbands brings social stability'. Descriptivists who are intuitionists hold that what gives moral judgments their meaning is their correspondence with the moral intuitions of morally educated people (Hare 1963, ch.1; 1981, ch 4; Hare in Singer pp.451-454).

How does Hare think that descriptive naturalism leads to moral relativism? A naturalist gets into difficulties just because it can be objected that 'ought', as in 'wives ought to obey their husbands' does not mean 'obedient wives bring social stability'. Someone could deny that this is what 'ought' means. If it did mean that, then someone (a feminist perhaps), in objecting that wives ought not to obey their husbands, would be making a self-contradictory statement. Naturalists make 'wives ought to obey their husbands' into

statements like 'a triangle has three side', the truth of which, if denied, would produce a self-contradictory statement. But 'wives ought not to obey their husbands' is not, if denied, a self-contradictory statement. By making moral statements into analytic truths, the descriptive naturalist prevents the argument from turning into a question about what we ought to do. But the objection is not about what 'ought' means. It is about the justification of a proposed principle.

How does this become a relativist position? Hare claims that descriptive naturalists can only salvage their position if they agree that different non-moral conditions give different meanings to moral judgments. For the naturalist still wants to say that moral judgments using terms such as 'ought' mean what they mean by virtue of referring to some non-moral states of affairs. It is an easy step from this to hold that there can be moral judgments which are made by all or most members of specific communities and which are such that what gives them their meaning is some non-moral states of affairs which obtains in that culture. For example, some cultures will hold that 'wives ought to obey their husbands' means what it means by virtue of the resulting social stability of such societies, whilst others will hold, say, that 'wives ought not to obey their husbands' means what it means by virtue of the greater opportunities for women consequent to that moral principle being acted upon. Ethical naturalism leads to moral conventionalism and since there will be different moral conventions for different societies, ethical naturalism leads to moral relativism.

Hare's further point is that the account of moral judgment given by ethical naturalists then prevents the question being raised of whether or not some proposed moral principle is justified. For all that can be said is that for this society, this is what 'ought' means, and for that society, that is what 'ought' means. Differences between societies will be differences in the meanings of their words, not differences of moral principle. So ethical naturalism leads to metaethical relativism because moral principles are not causes of moral dispute, they are just differences in the meanings of words.

Does Hare's own theory escape the censure offered to the relativism lurking in descriptivism? How might he try to avoid this? One way is to accept his derivation of utilitarianism from the theory of universal prescriptivism, and then argue that the normative moral theorising which follows does not force it into a relativist position, and so is able to defeat the metaethical claim that moral conflicts are irresolvable. Utilitarians may attempt to do this do by holding that there is only one supreme value. All decisions about the right thing to do will turn on judgments of the extent to which proposed alternatives bring about as much of this value as is possible. That just bypasses as irrelevant the question of which culture such questions happen to be located in. The method of critical thinking will be one of the ways in which a person can assess whether some action is the most optimific. For utilitarians, then, irresolvability through relativism may be avoided both by not admitting that there can be more than one type of value and by having some method or methods to estimate which actions bring about the maximization of what is held to be the sole value.

This would plunge the argument into the merits or demerits of utilitarianism as a convincing theory about the resolvability of moral conflicts. One objection to this is that utilitarianism, and for that matter any other monist moral theory, distorts morality by making every moral choice into a choice about how best to bring about the maximisation of the proposed single value. The objection here is that issues such as the abortion issue are not to be seen just a problem of choosing the action which maximises happiness, or preference-satisfaction. There are other moral values to be taken into account which cannot be reduced to the currency of utility. The objection therefore is based on the view that morality is inescapably plural in the sense that there is more than one moral value, and that the different moral values cannot be reduced to some lowest common denominator. It has to be admitted that these are controversial matters in normative moral theory. Anyway, the argument here might only be about the best way of showing how moral conflicts are resolvable, for the moral pluralist position is compatible with the view that they are.

A more pressing worry is that in so far universal prescriptivism leads to utilitarianism, it cannot avoid the result that moral conflicts are irresolvable, though not for any reason to do with relativism. One way in which this criticism can be made is to point out that even if it were agreed that pleasure or happiness is the sole worthwhile end of all action, it is possible that there is an incomparability between those goods which bring such ends. Following J.S. Mill's well-known worry about Benthamite utilitarianism, we might ask how, for example, one could compare the pleasure of listening to Beethoven with the pleasure of watching a boxing match. Though they are both pleasures, they are of such different orders that they are beyond comparison. Any moral conflict about which one should be favoured, for example in the allocation of scarce resources, cannot be resolved just on utilitarian grounds because utilitarianism cannot resolve the conflict.

Suppose, following Pettit (above), we prise universal prescriptivism apart from utilitarianism. How would this deal with moral conflicts and dilemmas? Universalisability tells us that when someone makes the moral judgment that X ought to  $\phi$ , they judge that anyone else in X's position ought to  $\phi$  too, on pain of inconsistency. But it seems as though universalisability, by itself, cannot make moral conflicts resolvable. For it would be consistent with it for someone else to say that their moral judgment is that X ought not to  $\phi$ . All that universalisability commits someone to is the claim that, granted that A thinks that X ought to  $\phi$ , then A thinks that anyone like X also ought not to  $\phi$ . There seems to be nothing in that which would even address the question of whether or not moral conflicts are resolvable.

If, then, universal prescriptivism were shorn of utilitarianism, moral conflicts would, as it were, occur outside the ring drawn round universalised moral judgments. But is even that true? One challenge to it seems to be mounted by Winch, in his discussion of universalisability (Winch1972, ch.8). Winch considers the case of the execution of Midshipman Billy Budd who, after having been unmercifully bullied by the officer Claggart, wards off one of Claggart's blows only to see the officer fall to the deck, hit his

head on a piece of iron and die. Vere, the captain, knows that Budd acted in self defence and was anyway sorely provoked. But there is a war on against the French, and naval rules are very strict about the killing of officers by ratings. Vere agonises over the decision but decides that Budd must be executed. Naval rules must be upheld. Winch questions whether moral ought-judgments must possess the property of universalisability. Hare would want to say that, given anyone's assent to the judgment which Vere made, that commits that person to holding that anyone else in relevantly similar circumstances must make the same judgment. As against this, however, Winch argues that he, Winch, can assent to the proposition that Vere made the right judgment, but that this does not commit Winch to holding that were he to have been in Vere's position, he, Winch, would have made the same moral judgment as Vere made. For Vere and Winch see moral life differently from each other.

If Winch is right, we will have to clarify the thesis of universalisability still further. It will become the thesis that if A makes the moral judgment that X ought to  $\emptyset$ , then A judges that anyone in X's position ought to  $\emptyset$  when the circumstances are the same, except when anyone in X's position has a deep down different moral outlook from X. If this stands, then in the absence of any further argument that such deep-down differences can be resolved, universal prescriptivism is consistent with the thesis that moral conflicts of this nature are irresolvable. Indeed, it might be added, is not that what deep down differences are, and are there not quite a lot of them? A close reading of Hare seems, moreover, to suggest that this is what he thinks. Earlier in the chapter, I quoted this from Hare (Hare in Singer, 1993, p 456):

“This is because in any ‘ought’-statement there is implicit a principle which says that the statement applies to all precisely similar situations. This means that if I say ‘That is what ought to be done; but there could be a situation exactly like this one in its non-moral properties, but in which the corresponding person, who is exactly like the one who ought to do it in this situation, ought not to do it’, I contradict myself”  
(my underlining).

It appears from this, then, that granted that Winch is not like Vere, if Winch were to have been in Vere's situation, even though Winch had agreed that what Vere had decided was right, this would not be sufficient to commit Winch to making the same moral judgment as Vere's. If this argument stands, then some might say that this is a Pyrrhic victory for universal prescriptivism since universalisability will only apply to those exactly like Vere.

However it seems to me that Winch has overlooked a point with regard to the moral judgments of the kind he is discussing. If my moral judgment is that some action is wrong, why should the fact that some other person has deep-down moral values different from mine, make it the case that I have to think that they are exempt from acting in the same way? At the least, the requirement of universalisability is a way of making the point that if a person, A, thinks that X ought not to  $\emptyset$ , then A must think that this applies again to the same X, when the same X is again in the same circumstances. Who X is and what X thinks in the second set of circumstances is of no relevance. Unless that was accepted, universalisability would not mean anything, because it is always possible to find some difference, however small, between two sets of seemingly very similar circumstances. Furthermore, when A judges that X ought not to  $\emptyset$ , then A thinks that this applies to some B or C or anyone else who is in X's position. It does not matter to A that C has deep-down commitments which may differ from whoever is picked out by 'X'. So it seems to me that the universal prescriptivist can still hold that anyone who makes the moral judgment, X ought not to  $\emptyset$ , is committed to the view that anyone else in relevantly similar circumstances similarly ought not to  $\emptyset$ , notwithstanding the latter's different deep down moral values.

Of course, the fact that my moral judgment is universalised in this way does not show that others have to make the same moral judgment as I do. All that universalisability shows is that, given that I think that X ought to  $\emptyset$ , I must think that anyone else in X's position ought to  $\emptyset$  too. But this is consistent with the position that there are moral conflicts, and nothing in this version of universal prescriptivism shows that they are resolvable.

## **Our Access to Moral Values**

How do we get to know what our moral values are, according to universal prescriptivism?

It is, I think, clear that given the distinction which Hare makes between the intuitively held and the critical levels of moral thinking, the former not only provides the moral framework for society, but is the one which is to be taught and communicated to the younger generation by a wide variety of agencies such as parents, teachers and other people generally in the community. These simple moral principles will be communicated in a variety of ways too, for example by telling, by learning from the examples set by others, by reflection on tales from books and so on.

It is also clear that when we have to go beyond what these simple and general rules tell us, we have to use our critical powers. Sometimes, for example, moral rules clash. Sometimes, a situation arises which does not seem to fall under any of the rules and principles which we live by. At this level of moral thinking, universal prescriptivism gives much scope for reason-giving and reasoning in order that we may come to know what moral judgments to make. Recall Hare's deductive model of moral reasoning. Reason is used in this model in different ways. The particular ought-judgment which constitutes the conclusion is held to have an implicit justifying reason, and it is this which appears as the major premise. The minor premise requires the use of reason together with our other fact-finding powers, in order to establish what the facts are. The major premise itself becomes formed after a further use of reason. For the major premise represents the moral principle supported by the agent and is to be formed through using the method of critical thought in order to discover what would overall be most optimific.

There is, though, still a limit to what reason can achieve in morality, so far as universal prescriptivists are concerned. It will be recalled from earlier in the chapter that authors such as Brandt and Thomas still regard universal prescriptivism as a form of non-

cognitivism. Why is this? Even though, on Hare's account, putative moral principles are subject to the method of critical thinking, requiring the moral agent to establish what is the most preferred alternative course of action by putting the agent in the position of those who are to be affected by the proposed course of action, this still leaves the question of what is morally right to be decided by the litmus test of what yields maximum preference-satisfaction. Preferences are the bedrock upon which the moral edifice rests. What is preferred the most is what is morally right. The emotivist roots of the theory show through here.

This leads to an interesting implication for universal prescriptivism. Like its forbear, emotivism, universal prescriptivism accepts the fact/value distinction, that one cannot derive ought-judgments from statement of non-moral facts. One cannot, for example, argue that from the fact, if it is a fact, that the murder rate is not affected by the use of capital punishment, capital punishment ought not to be available to the courts. This rejection of deriving moral judgments from non-moral statements of fact extends to any attempt to show that if people agree on any non-moral facts, this determines what their moral judgment is to be. For it is possible for people to agree on such facts and yet come to different moral conclusions.

However, for universal prescriptivists, there are some facts which apparently do have a role in the formation of moral principles and moral judgment. Universal prescriptivists are sensitive to a certain sort of fact, namely those facts which tell us which preferences are the ones which are held to promise maximum satisfaction. These facts about what people most prefer are facts about what people hold to be of value. If, for example, what is most preferred is the eating of factory-farmed meat, then this tells us what our moral principle is to be, namely that one ought to eat such meat. We move from the preferred to the preferable. But does not this infringe the principle that one cannot derive ought-judgments from factual statements?

The universal prescriptivist's claim that we cannot derive moral ought-judgments from non-moral facts, is one which is only partly true. One cannot make such derivations from the sorts of facts that make up minor premises of arguments, but one can find other sorts of facts, to do with people's preferences, which then ground a moral principle. Ultimately, according to universal prescriptivism, what is most preferred is what is of most value, so it does seem that at the level of the formation of a moral principle, there is a move from facts about preferences to judgments about what one ought to do. That, too, becomes the way we access our moral values.

### **The 'normativity' test**

Does universal prescriptivism strain or conform to our moral convictions?

It has to be admitted at the outset that this question would most likely be ruled out of court by Hare, for he would regard it as making the theory constrained by our moral intuitions. Many times (for example, Hare, 1963, ch 2: Hare, 1989, ch 7) Hare rejects the view that moral intuitions make moral judgments correct, so it seems safe to assume that he will also reject the move to make moral intuitions the touchstone of a theory about the nature of moral judgment. The reason, presumably, would be that moral intuitions cannot be the be-all and end-all of any theory because it is always possible to ask whether our moral intuitions are correct. I am not, however, deterred by this possible assault since it seems to me, as I indicated in ch.1, that there are some moral judgments which people hold which are unassailable. What would it be to doubt that rape is morally wrong? Nor am I content to regard these convictions as intuitions, if we mean by the latter some beliefs which just come to us as self-evidently correct. For moral convictions can be reasonable, in the sense that reasons can be given for them, a point taken up again in chapters 5-7.

There seems to me to be one reason in favour of agreeing that universal prescriptivism picks out our moral convictions, but three reasons for thinking that it does more than

this, and will include judgments which are doubtfully moral. The reason for thinking that it picks out our moral convictions is that it allows that there is an intuitive level of moral thinking which provides the framework for our ordinary, everyday lives. For the most part, our moral thinking conforms to the requirements of the moral rules and principles in the framework.

The first of the doubts emerges from the last point in the discussion about the use of reason in moral judgment, where we saw the universal prescriptivist committed to the view that what is held to give most preference-satisfaction is identified with what is of most value. Thus this difficulty arises because of the derivation from universal prescriptivism of the normative moral theory of utilitarianism. This, however, yields questionable moral results. Suppose there were a society of slave owners who kept their slaves contented. On the theory, we would have to say that the moral principle(s) guiding conduct in that society would be morally right. But such a society would be morally suspect because of the freedoms which it denied to a proportion of its population. The difficulty here stems from the universal prescriptivist's view that the content of one's preferences are not what is at issue, morally. The fact that some actions are thought to bring about the maximum preference-satisfaction is consistent with these actions being morally wrong. We saw the same difficulty with emotivism. That we approve of some things and disapprove of others, is consistent with our approvals and disapprovals being morally misplaced.

Second, is not universal prescriptivity consistent with holding trivial principles and trivial ought-judgments (Locke, 1968)? The point here is that the requirement of universalisability can be satisfied by specifying in close detail the sort of person and the sort of act which ought to be done. To adapt Locke's example, there seems to be no reason why one should not have the following as a universalised principle: 'all those who score goals at soccer ought to refrain from kissing their team mates'.

Third, there is the case of the fanatic. Donagan (Donagan, 1965) criticises Hare by pointing out that universal prescriptivism does not exclude the actions of the fanatic from the domain of the moral. This, it should be noted, is not a criticism about the utilitarian implications of universal prescriptivism but about what follows from the claim that most moral judgments possess these two logical properties (Hare, 1981, p 21). Suppose someone, A, holds that all Jews should be exterminated. A is committed to the view that all those who have the characteristics of Jews should be exterminated. Suppose A discovers that A is a Jew. Then A's judgment applies to A, via universalisability. This ought-judgment possesses both properties, yet we would question whether it falls within the moral domain.

### **Summary**

Hare's universal prescriptivism is rightly held to be a major metaethical theory. As a philosophical theory, it seems to provide an explanation of motivation in morality which is in tune with commonsense. For we ordinarily think that if a reason is held to be a good reason for some moral action, there is something strange about then rejecting this as providing us with the reason to act. Universal prescriptivism agrees that our moral principles and our moral judgments do provide us with reason to act, though we did see that there was reason to think that Hare's notion of prescriptions entailing imperatives overstates this connection. I also argued that if we followed Hare's method of critical thinking in our moral reasoning, we might well conclude that the results of such thinking were against our interests. Using this method to discover what is morally right does not necessarily motivate a person to do what is morally right.

On moral conflicts and dilemmas, we noted Hare's charge that descriptivism, the rival to his theory, ended in a relativist position and so had to accept that moral conflicts between cultures were just differences of opinion, and not resolvable. Hare's own way of resisting this charge seems to lie in arguing that universal prescriptivism leads to utilitarianism and that this theory both held that moral conflicts could be resolved in terms

of what maximises utility and provided a decision-procedure for achieving this. I speculated about whether utilitarianism was the most satisfactory moral theory in terms of its claims about resolvability in moral conflicts. If the normative moral theory is prised away from universal prescriptivism, as Pettit suggests it can be, then the most which it can now do is to show that there will be a range of moral judgments where conflict over what is the right thing to do does not arise. This turned into a discussion of how far down the requirement of consistency went, but however that it, universal prescriptivism, per se, seems not to say anything about resolvability in moral conflicts.

In terms of the question of how we gain access to our moral values, in some respects the theory closely follows common sense. We learn our morals by being told what they are, by following examples and so on. In terms of what it is to reason well in morality, the theory gives a full and rich account of the ways in which reason-giving and reasoning occurs. It emphasises the logical requirement of consistency in moral thinking; it shows the role of using reason and our other investigative powers to get the facts right; it traces the connection between particular moral judgments and the use of moral principles from which such judgments are derived; and it holds that there are ways of thinking which allow us to arrive at what are the most justified moral principles. These features offer interesting ideas for moral educators, and will be further discussed in chapter 8.

The theory partly passes the normativity test, in its acceptance that there are intuitively held, or prima facie moral principles which guide our ordinary everyday lives and make life workable. But there was some criticism that the theory was too broad. In its utilitarian aspect, it is vulnerable to the charge that just because its litmus test is whatever maximises preference-satisfaction, it allows morally dubious beliefs. Shorn of the normative moral theory, it allows both trivial judgments as moral judgments and it allows morally dubious judgments.

This completes my investigations into non-cognitivist theories of moral judgment. I next turn to two forms of cognitive theory, subjectivism and relativism.

## CHAPTER 4

### SUBJECTIVISM, RELATIVISM AND MORAL EDUCATION

#### 4.0 Introduction

In the next four chapters I examine cognitivist theories of moral judgment to see whether any of them provide a satisfactory basis for moral education. Any cognitivist theory of moral judgment takes moral judgment to be a form of belief. Believing that something is the case is to be in that mental state whose content has to fit how the world is. Many also hold that how the world is, plays some role in the formation of a belief, though what this role is, and what the nature of this connection is, are contentious issues. Some say, for example, that, granted that the world consists of coloured objects, the fact that some object is, say, red, is causally effective in making a person's belief that the object is red, a true belief. To avoid stepping into this controversy, I shall say that when beliefs are held, people are in the mental state appropriate to the world being a certain way. When the world is the way a person believes it to be, the belief is true. When the world is not the way a person believes it to be, the belief is false.

Moral cognitivists take moral judgments to be moral beliefs whose content has to fit something. What this something is, varies with different cognitivist theories. In this chapter, I shall look first at the cognitivist theory which takes it that what this something is, is something within the person holding the moral belief. This is metaethical subjectivism, and I shall look at two versions of this, standard subjectivism and 'sensible' subjectivism. Then I shall look at the cognitivist theory which proposes that the something is cultural. This is metaethical relativism. The latter is influential in both the philosophy of moral education and in the practice of moral education. Then in chapters 5-7, I shall look at the cognitivist theory that proposes that there are moral properties which make moral beliefs true. This is moral realism, and there are moral realists who have interesting

things to say about moral education. In all these theories, a common feature is that all regard moral belief as being capable of being true or false, and as such capable of telling us what is morally right or wrong, good or bad.

#### 4.1 Standard Subjectivism

There are different versions of metaethical subjectivism, but the most well known is the one which proposes that when a person holds a moral belief, what makes the moral belief correct will be some mental state of the person holding the moral belief. Suppose that my moral belief is that capital punishment should be restored to the statute book. Subjectivists hold that the sorts of things which makes this moral belief correct are such things as my attitudes towards or my desires concerning capital punishment. Snare calls this 'subjectivist naturalism' (Snare, ch5, 1992) to capture the idea that the A's moral belief that  $\phi$ -ing is right or wrong is justified by some non-moral mental state of the believer. A variant on this would be the position of a theological naturalist who held that the relevant attitudes or desires had been implanted in the believer by God. Here, the theological naturalist holds that what makes the person's moral beliefs correct would be these divinely-inspired or created desires or attitudes.

According to standard subjectivism, then, what makes a moral belief correct is some mental state of the person holding the moral belief. This is different from the way in which subjectivism is sometimes presented. Rachels (Rachels in Singer 1993, p435) tells us that, to pick just one of his examples, 'X is right' means 'I (the speaker) approve of X' (my underlining). This is clearly vulnerable to the objection that 'X is right' does not mean 'I approve of X', for a person could approve of something even though it was not right, and this would not be possible if the two phrases meant the same thing. Subjectivism need not be a claim about the meanings of our words. Nor should subjectivism be presented as a theory which tells us that a person's moral beliefs are made correct by reports of the person's attitudes towards something. The subjectivist

need only say that what makes the person's moral belief correct are certain psychological states of the person holding the moral belief. Of course, for others to know what the person's moral beliefs are, it may be necessary to have some evidence, some report of what the person's psychological state is. But that is about evidence, not about what the evidence is evidence of.

In the opening chapter, I noted Snare's definition of metaethical subjectivism (Snare, 1992, p 112):

'Meta-Ethical Subjectivism: Judgement J is subjective IFF the proposition that one person claims (or thinks) that j while another 'disagrees' (as we say) with him (denying j) does not entail that some party to this dispute is mistaken'.

This led to a discussion about whether subjectivism was only committed to the view that moral beliefs could not be error-free in the context of moral conflicts, a view which was suggested led to the somewhat odd result that if a moral judgment could only be held to be error-free when in a moral conflict, the same judgment could be held to be mistaken when not involved in a moral conflict. This, it was added, was not an issue about whether a person's report of their moral belief could be mistaken. It seems reasonable to say that reports of one's state of mind can be mistaken, are not immune from error. The issue, rather, is whether we say that, misreporting aside, subjectivism is the view that moral beliefs are error-free beliefs, or whether we say that subjectivism is the view that moral beliefs are error-free beliefs only when such beliefs are involved in moral conflicts. The oddity of saying the latter, for the reason just stated, makes subjectivism more plausibly the former thesis, that moral beliefs are those beliefs whose correctness is a function just of the mental states of the person making the judgment, and that, misreporting aside, these cannot be in error. In Tate's list, referred to in 1.0, of those 'relativists' who oppose his view of moral education as the teaching of universal values, there are some who think that moral beliefs are the sort of beliefs whose content cannot be erroneous. The popular notion of subjectivism, that in morals our beliefs are up to us, somewhat loosely captures this idea.

Subjectivism is different from emotivism. The latter rejects the view that moral beliefs, or rather moral judgments, are made correct by virtue of the holding of some psychological state towards something, which can be given a correct report. The emotivist, as we saw in chapter 2, holds that moral judgments do not report anything. They are expressions of desires or attitudes, and being such, are expressions of that type of psychological state which cannot be a representation of what the world is like. Rachels, for one, (Rachels in Singer, 1993, pp 432-442) makes this mistake, making emotivism into ‘an improved version of the theory [of subjectivism]’ (p436).

There are standard objections to standard subjectivism, some of which are applications to it of some of the tests which I suggest we should use in assessing metaethical theories. In terms of its practicality one objection has been that it is difficult to see how a report of what one’s desires or attitudes or thoughts are, can motivate one to action. But this trades on the confusion, just noted, between reports and what the reports are about. It seems to me that if I hold that some action is wrong, and I back this belief up by saying that I disapprove of it, my disapproving of it would seem to be just what is required to motivate me to do something about it. Nor, anyway, should the subjectivist be put off by the objection that reports cannot be motivating. Why cannot a report motivate people to action? The Taylor Report on the state of soccer grounds in the UK has brought about substantial changes to football stadia. It has motivated people to act. The Warnock Report on Embryology motivated Parliament to set up a Licensing Authority to regulate IVF treatments.

Thus, it seems that subjectivists can say that a people’s psychological states such as the state of approval or disapproval of something, are not just what it is which makes their moral belief correct. They are also what motivates them or at any rate can motivate them to action. Of course, the fact that I approve of X, which is motivating to me, does not of itself motivate you, not unless you too share my approval of X. But subjectivism need not be phased by this for it is trying to tell us what it is which motivates the individual.

Subjectivism here nails its colours to the mast of the belief-desire theory of the explanation of actions and in an interesting way. For whilst states like my feelings of approval or disapproval motivate me to act, these feelings operate through a person's beliefs. It is as if, when a person feels approval or disapproval for something, these feelings and their associated beliefs form an organic whole which produces action. For this reason, subjectivists can claim that moral beliefs are motivating.

Does subjectivism make moral differences irresolvable? Subjectivists presumably must hold that all moral conflicts must be explained as conflicts between individuals. Cultural moral conflicts are explicable at the level of person-to person disagreements. Any collective difference between different moral cultures will just be the summation of individual differences. Moral dilemmas will be, as it were, person-to person disagreements played out within the individual. So in moral conflicts, where disagreement takes place between individuals, what can subjectivism say about the nature of such disagreements?

One move which a subjectivist might make is to say that we all have pretty much the same attitudes or desires towards at least some actions or states of affairs, and that differences of belief and feeling are more apparent than real. Closer inspection of any differences of attitude will reveal the underlying commonality of attitudes. But this seems to me to be unconvincing, just because the facts seem so plain that people do, as a matter of fact, differ in their moral beliefs and attitudes in a way which resists this reductive move.

Given the claim in standard subjectivism that a person's moral beliefs are, misreporting apart, error-free beliefs, beliefs whose correctness is an entirely internal matter, what sense can it make of cases where two moral beliefs are in evident disagreement? It cannot say that one or the other or both are mistaken. Evidently contrary beliefs will have to be construed as beliefs that just sit in coexistence with one another. They are beyond resolution. This is not because standard subjectivism has not come up with some

mechanism or procedure for resolving differences of belief. It is rather that it construes moral beliefs as a type of belief which, so to speak, stands above (or below) the disputes and argumentation which one finds in other beliefs. Moral beliefs have something of the flavour of the way that some people hold religious beliefs. Those who hold them think they are true. Nothing that anyone can say will shift a person out of their opinion. No evident clashes of belief can lead to one belief giving way to another.

What account can subjectivists give of how we get to know what to believe, what our access is to moral values? It seems clear that they want to say that these are matters which are up to us. We have to rely upon our own resources in deciding what to believe. There are reasons for thinking that this is a somewhat naive view, which underplays the extent to which what we believe is influenced by all sorts of people who play significant roles in our life. I take this point up in chapter 8. Nevertheless, what subjectivists might be trying to do is to highlight the importance of people making up their own minds about what they think is morally right or wrong. How might people do this, according to subjectivists? Can they give an account of how thinking and reasoning might enable a person to achieve this? Suppose a person is attempting to decide whether capital punishment for first-degree murder is justified. It would seem that, in keeping with subjectivism, they would arrive at what to believe by checking what they approve of or what their desires are about this matter. Does this suggest that reason-giving and reasoning have no role to play? Suppose the person approves of executing murderers. What could they say to the question 'why do you approve of this?' Approvals can be justified by reasons. They might say that they feel approval because they think this would deter would-be murders. However, it would seem that, to stay true to standard subjectivist thinking, there would have to be a further approval of this, that is an approval of actions which deter would-be murderers. So any reason has to meet with the person's approval, the contrast here being with any theory which suggests that any approval has to be grounded in a set of reasons. Reason-giving and reasoning play a subordinate role to a persons' psychological states.

Further, the role of giving reasons can only be to fit in with the individual's psychology. For reason-giving and reasoning cannot determine a person's moral beliefs. To admit this would be to admit that a person's moral beliefs could be in error. If, for example, I believe that capital punishment for first-degree murder is morally justified for the reason that such actions deter, to some significant extent, would-be murderers, and it turns out that the facts show that this punishment does not have this effect, then that ground for my moral belief falls away and in the absence of any alternative argument, my moral belief is one which I cannot hold any longer on rational grounds. Yet subjectivists would appear not to be able to hold that position, on pain of giving up their view that moral beliefs cannot be mistaken.

The normative test also provides a problem for subjectivism. This stems from the anchor role which is played by the attitudes or desires or other psychological states of the person holding the moral belief. Given that the correctness of a moral belief is made dependent on the person having or being in these states of mind, then it is evident that a person may approve of something which is morally wrong and disapprove of something which is morally right. Nor, as we saw in the discussion on Humean emotivism, will this problem be resolved by talking of the ideal spectator. Subjectivism, by putting all the weight on the person's own psychological responses, prevents itself from using sources other than these to play their part in the formation of correct moral beliefs. But why should someone's attitudes be the touchstone of moral correctness?

#### **4.2 A Sensible Subjectivism?**

Can there be a version of subjectivism which gets round these problems, especially the last one? In two essays Wiggins (Wiggins 1991, a and b) sets out a case for what he calls 'sensible subjectivism'. This is intended to be distinct both from standard subjectivism and also from moral cognitivism. The latter, according to Wiggins (Wiggins, 1991 a, p140-1) is 'the doctrine that, where a moral judgment is found worthy of being affirmed,

(a) the judgment is a candidate to be known and a candidate for plain truth, and (b) the judgment stands or falls for acceptance according as it attains that status.'

In the first of these two essays (Wiggins, 1991 a), Wiggins sets out what he calls the marks of truth. These are (1) truth is the primary dimension of assessment for beliefs and for sentences which can express or report belief: (2) if a sentence  $x$  is true, then under favourable conditions  $x$  will command convergence, the best explanation for this convergence being the actual truth of  $x$ : (3) for any  $x$ , if  $x$  is a true statement, then  $x$  has content and this makes it the case that  $x$ 's truth cannot just consist of  $x$  being someone's belief or  $x$  being willed: (4) every true  $x$ ,  $x$  is true in virtue of something: (5) if  $x'$  is true and  $x''$  is true, then their conjunction is true.

Wiggins then asks whether moral judgments can have all these marks of truth, a question he discusses by considering the position taken by Harman (Harman 1977, ch 1). Harman constructs a case of a gang of hoodlums setting fire to a cat and invites the following understanding of this (p 7):

"it would be reasonable to assume, perhaps, that the children really are pouring gasoline on a cat and you are seeing them do it. But in neither case [Harman is also discussing the moral issues involved in priorities in medicine] is there any obvious reason to assume anything about 'moral facts', such as that it really is wrong to set the cat on fire..... Indeed an assumption about moral facts would seem to be totally irrelevant to the explanation of your making the judgment you make. It would seem that all we need assume is that you have certain more or less articulated moral principles that are reflected in the judgments you make, based on your moral sensibility".

Moreover, Harman goes on, a contrast can be drawn between moral belief and scientific belief. Suppose a scientist sees a vapour trail in a Wilson cloud chamber and says 'there goes a proton'. Here, the scientist can be said to have observed a proton because that is the best explanation of him seeing a vapour trail. The scientific fact that a proton has passed by does explain his judgment. In the case of the cat being set on fire, the so-called moral fact of its being wrong does not explain the moral judgment. For Harman, we do not need and can quite easily dispense with any so-called moral facts in explaining

why people make their moral judgments. All we do need are the non-moral facts, which we discover through observation in quite normal ways, and the application to these of whatever moral principles we have been brought up with.

Wiggins finds this implausible for, he claims, it does not satisfactorily explain such observational judgments as 'that was callously cruel'. Such sentences show that we use predicates to pick out features of the world. Wiggins' point here is that any appeal such as Harman makes to our moral sensibility as a complete explanation of our moral judgments, fails to explain the basis of the discriminations which are made by morally sensitive people.

So Wiggins at this juncture does seem to be supporting the view that there are properties such as callousness and cruelty which are features of certain actions, and which we pick out when we make evaluative judgments. This alone would be sufficient to distinguish Wiggins' position from that of the standard subjectivist, for the latter does not entertain the possibility of there being moral properties such as callousness and cruelty. Yet Wiggins also wants to resist moral cognitivism. The moral cognitivist, Wiggins claims, is committed to the view that moral judgments pass the second test for truth, namely that the truth of any statement commands convergence on it, and the best explanation for this convergence is the statement's truth. There is indeed a version of this, 'strong moral cognitivism' which has it that whenever a moral judgment is found worthy of being affirmed, it is a candidate for being known and a candidate for plain truth. Whichever version of moral cognitivism is accepted, there will be a significant number of such moral truths. And this is where Wiggins' disagreement with the moral cognitivist surfaces. First, there are the facts of moral disagreement to contend with, which if the moral cognitivist's theory were correct ought to be much less than they are. Wiggins points out that such disagreement is widespread, nor should we be surprised that it is, given the variety of human interests and concerns. Nor can all such disagreements be explained away by holding that the disagreement is on the surface, masking agreement

in underlying moral principles. Second, the moral cognitivist is committed to the view that in specific, particular moral conflicts, there is a determinate right and wrong answer. Wiggins recalls Winch's discussion of the story of Billy Budd's execution (Winch 1972, to which reference has already been made in ch.3). Such cases, on the one hand, throw into doubt the notion that we can expect moral consensus. But on the other hand, do not such cases at least show that, as Winch wants to argue, there is a right answer, for Vere? We might add, following Hare, 'and for anyone else similar to Vere in those circumstances'. But Wiggins rejects this attempt to make some sort of a case for moral cognitivism on grounds which found a sympathetic hearing in ch.3. For is that not to give special privilege to Vere's deep-down values? Why, Wiggins asks, can these also not be subject to moral scrutiny? Indeed, Wiggins goes on, to take the view that a person such as Vere, with his deep-down values and historically situated as he was, is to be accorded moral privilege over his moral decision, is to head back towards subjectivism, for it makes Vere the final arbiter of the correctness of his moral belief.

The import, then, of Wiggins' discussion in this first essay is that standard subjectivism is to be avoided for it cannot make sense of our moral talk with its objectifying features. Nevertheless, Wiggins suggests that we should not expect moral discourse to deliver moral consensus on what is morally true, in spite of the fact that in particular cases such as the Billy Budd case, we may find good reason to reject what turns out to be a subjectivist way of looking at them.

In the second essay (Wiggins, 1991 b), these themes are further explored. Wiggins again rejects subjectivism, using some of the well known arguments which I have just discussed in 4.1. For example, Wiggins attributes to the subjectivist the view that a moral judgment such as 'x is good' means 'S approves of x', and then denies that this is what 'x is good' means. I commented earlier that subjectivists need not make this semantic claim. Wiggins is not impressed either by Hume's device of the ideal spectator in order to get round the objection that we can approve of vice and disapprove of virtue.

The notion of sensible subjectivism begins to emerge (p195):

“There is no object-independent and property-independent, ‘purely phenomenological’ or ‘purely introspective’ account of amusement. And equally there is no saying what exactly the funny is without reference to laughter or amusement or kindred reactions”.

From this, it looks as though a sensible aesthetic subjectivism is going both to allow that there are objects and properties which are funny and to hold that our response of amusement to such objects and properties cannot be excluded from any account of what it is to make an aesthetic judgment of that kind. This leads Wiggins to the thought that a sensible moral subjectivism will permit ‘{property, response} pairs. Objects that harm us will be classified together ‘because they are such as to .....harm us’ (p195). Wiggins stresses, however, that (p 195)

“There will be then no saying, very often, what properties these names [of what harms us] stand for independently of the reactions they provoke”.

Here Wiggins reintroduces a form of subjectivism by his suggestion that that our moral judgments of what is morally right or wrong cannot be said to be correct independently of how we have responded to whatever properties there are. We cannot exclude our moral reactions from any account of what it is to make a correct moral judgment.

Wiggins now builds on this idea. Civilizations develop their moral cultures on the basis of such {property, response} pairings. It can also happen that there will be a response to something but there will be argument and disagreement over what it is a response to. For example, there could be the response, ‘human rights must be protected’ and yet disagreement over which sorts of activity or what sorts of need actually merit having the protection of human rights extended to them. Further, Wiggins goes on, there can be different responses to the same property, because the different circumstances in which people live have their effect on the sort of responses people have to given properties Thus, there might be much inequality in the world, which is acknowledged as such, yet

the response of one culture may be to think that the best way to eradicate this is via the operations of the free market, whilst another may think that this is better achieved by progressive tax policies.

One of the merits of Wiggins' account of moral judgment is that, unlike the standard version of subjectivism, he does allow that there are moral properties in the world which make whatever responses there are to them into moral responses. These properties 'will be primitive, sui generis, incurably anthropocentric, and as unmysterious as any properties ever will be to us' (p 197). He has in mind both particular properties such as the quality of an action being cruel, and more general properties such as are referred to in saying that an action is right. So by this move, Wiggins can meet the objection made against standard subjectivism that it selects as the criterion of moral correctness the attitudes which people have towards objects of appraisal, and in so doing allows a variation of response which has no constraint. Any response has to take account of moral properties.

Yet the new version of subjectivism still leaves the way people respond to actions etc. as a part of what makes a moral judgment correct. Does this still make the new version too much like the old version? Wiggins is alert to this problem He replies (p206):

"The objection would be dead right if the subjectivist were saying that 'x is good' may be paraphrased as 'x is such as to arouse or make appropriate [a certain] sentiment of approbation, and if he were saying that this paraphrase could then be intersubstitutable with 'good' salvo sensu (or more or less salvo sensu). But the subjectivist need not be saying that. His distinctive claim is rather that x is good if and only if x is the sort of thing that calls forth or makes appropriate a certain sentiment of approbation, given the range of propensities that we actually have to respond in this way or that way",

(Wiggins' emphasis).

and again

“for each value predicate  $\phi$  (or for a very large range of such), there is an attitude or response of subjects belonging to a range of propensities that we actually have such that an object has a property  $\phi$  stands for if and only if the object is fitted by its characteristics to bring down that extant attitude or response upon it and bring it down precisely because it has those characteristics”,

(Wiggins' emphasis).

Again, these remarks indicate Wiggins' view that moral responses owe their character in part to their being responses to moral properties. The other element which he holds to be important in shaping our moral responses is to be traced to the sort and range of propensities that 'we' actually have. This is where some questions need to be asked. Who are 'we'? Those with the right moral sensibilities? But one cannot explain what makes a judgment into a moral judgment by appealing to its being determined by those with moral sensibilities. This is manifestly circular. That this is Wiggins' view is confirmed by this remark ( p 205) 'x is only really  $\phi$  if it is such as to evoke and make appropriate the response A among those who are sensitive to  $\phi$ -ness' (My emphasis). Since that reply is not available, Wiggins has to rely on the actual propensities which the human race has to respond in certain ways to certain actions, events and so on. This is confirmed at the end of the essay (p 210):

“What is wrong with cruelty.....is ....that it is not such as to call forth liking given our actual collectively scrutinised responses”,

(Wiggins' emphasis).

This, however, draws down the objection that whilst it may be true that there may be some cultures where there are or have been actual collective responses of dislike to acts of cruelty, there have been other cultures of which this is not true, nor are these arcane societies of long ago. The 20th century is replete with examples. It might even be the case that sometimes more or less systematic acts of cruelty have been perpetrated without 'liking', but that has not stopped them from occurring.

Since Wiggins' subjectivism appeals to actual responses, this does make the fact that there has been a certain sort of response the mark of moral rectitude. If it turned out that there was a general liking for acts of cruelty, on Wiggins' account this would be a morally correct response. For it would be a value predicate with its corresponding attitude or response belonging to a range of propensities that we actually have and it would have been 'brought down' by and because of some object with some property.

Is this problem met by the idea of a collective scrutiny of responses which will be such as to screen out likings of cruelty? There seems to be no guarantee that collective scrutiny would rule out acts of cruelty. What is missing from the account is the idea that, in regard to properties such as 'cruel', there is an appropriate response, namely moral repugnance. In trying to explain moral divergence in terms of the varied interests and concerns which people have even when responding to the same situations, Wiggins' sensible subjectivism allows the possibility that this variety will creep into every corner of our moral experience. This falls foul of some basic moral convictions. Where rape and child abuse and deliberate cruelty to animals are concerned, moral variety is out of place. Our convictions are that these things are wrong, and we make our moral judgments of those who perpetrate such acts unequivocally. In this respect, even the new subjectivism does not capture our moral convictions.

Wiggins' version of subjectivism, as we have seen, is fuelled in part by his being struck by the evident moral diversity of the world, both at the broad cultural level and when it appears in moral conflicts over what is right and wrong in particular issues, as with the example of Billy Budd. Because of this, Wiggins rejects moral cognitivism for he thinks that it must hold that there can be and are determinate moral answers to a significant range of moral problems, and he is doubtful of the truth of this claim. Moreover he thinks that if moral cognitivism is correct, there will be a moral consensus due to people's moral beliefs converging on the body of moral truths and converging because they are true. He doubts that this would be the explanation of any consensus.

On these points, though, the moral cognitivist can offer replies which could go some way to assuaging Wiggins' doubts. As a matter of fact, if we take a broad enough perspective on the history of morals we can see that there have been some significant advances in moral belief. The moral consensus now is that it is wrong to execute people in public, that slavery is to be condemned, that it is wrong to discriminate against people on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, colour, race, religion and so on. There were, and maybe still are, cultures where these things were or are in dispute. But the fact that there has been and still is divergence of opinion about the rights and wrongs of such matters is consistent with some opinions on these matters being right and other opinions being wrong. Further, the moral cognitivist can suggest that it is not because of, say, a collective feeling for security that we outlaw these actions. Not all of them can be explained in that way. The consensus is due to people thinking that these actions are wrong.

### Summary.

Subjectivism is a metaethical theory which proposes that what makes a moral belief correct is some internal psychological state of the person holding the moral belief. The status of moral beliefs is that, misreporting aside, they are error-free. We saw the need to state this position carefully in order to fend off some standard criticisms of subjectivism which were shown to be misplaced. With regard to the four tests, it was suggested that standard subjectivism contains a theory of moral motivation based on an interesting version of the belief-desire theory of human action. On moral conflicts and dilemmas, subjectivists have to maintain that these are beyond resolution. No moral belief can be shifted by any fact or argument, all moral beliefs being mistake-proof.

In terms of its account on how we gain knowledge of our moral values and principles, subjectivism appears to lay much emphasis on people using their own resources to do this. If morals are up to us, then people also have autonomy in how they gain their

understanding of morality. Reason-giving and reasoning, moreover, would appear to have little or no role to play in this. Finally, it was argued that the theory is weak in accounting for our moral convictions, allowing too much licence to psychological states such as our approvals and disapprovals.

Wiggins' sensible subjectivism has a clear advantage over standard subjectivism because it does allow that moral responses are grounded in quite usual moral properties obtaining in actions, events and so forth. Nevertheless we saw that the subjectivism retained in Wiggins' writings attracts the criticism that it too does not adequately capture moral convictions. This is a serious problem for any moral education programme based on subjectivist theory, whether standard or sensible.

#### **4.3 Metaethical Relativism and Moral Education in a Multicultural Society**

Should the moral education of pupils be altered in order to take account of both the existence of societies which harbour many cultures, and the fact that the world is one in which there are many, varied cultures? The fact that pupils live in a multicultural society and a multicultural world seems to have had its impact already on moral education. It is not unusual to find programmes of study in which pupils learn about the moralities of different cultures. Additionally, an overtly prescriptive aspect of moral education has been developed. Pupils are taught that certain racist ways of thinking and behaving are morally wrong. This teaching addresses the fact that in most, if not all, societies where there are cultural differences between different groups, there is a tendency for some people to hold prejudicial beliefs, to stereotype individuals and to engage in morally dubious discriminatory behaviour. Some moral educators, then, make it clear to pupils that prejudice, stereotyping and certain forms of discriminatory behaviour are wrong and ought to be opposed. Following this line of thought, a number of schools have policies which make it clear that racism is unacceptable.

Pupils are also taught to that it is right to tolerate the views and ways of life different from their own. This sort of teaching takes seriously the threat to law and order and to peace itself if antagonisms are allowed to develop between different cultural groups. Often, pupils are taught about the cultures of others in the hope that knowing something of these other cultures will help to make pupils more tolerant, by dispelling the prejudices etc. which individuals hold about those from other cultures.

From these brief remarks, it can be seen that moral education might take certain directions in so far as it is required to respond to the existence of multicultural societies. But does the notion that societies are multicultural contain another idea, namely that the morals of any identifiable cultural group are correct just by virtue of being the morals of that group? If that idea can be made to stand up, then there would be obvious implications for moral education. Since any cultural group's morality would be correct, the cultural group to which a pupil belonged would provide the yardsticks of moral correctness for that pupil. Any moral criticism of beliefs or of behaviour could only be made by reference to the criteria of moral correctness held by the group to which the individual belonged. It would be impossible for the morality of any one group to be criticised externally by reference to the moral standards of some other group. Under pressure from this idea, it would seem not to be possible for the moral beliefs of, say, an Asian teenager to be criticised by those held by his or her white teacher, and vice-versa.

To adopt this position is to adopt the position of the metaethical relativist. We have already noted in chapter 1 Thomas' proposal that the metaethical relativist holds that (Thomas, 1993, p 114):

“Moral Judgements are nothing but statements of socially accepted norms of conduct (the truth of moral judgements is relative to the norms they report)”

It is important to distinguish metaethical relativism from other forms of relativism. It differs from descriptive relativism. The latter is an empirical thesis to the effect that

there are culture-bound variations and differences in morality. Even if this claim is factually correct, nothing follows from it about the moral beliefs of any one culture-group being correct or incorrect. One can agree a particular cultural group has such and such a morality, and also hold that the group's morality is wrong.

Metaethical relativism also differs from normative relativism. Whereas the former tells us that what makes some belief morally right or wrong is its conformity to the cultural code of some group, the latter proposes a substantive moral principle or principles to govern the relationships between different cultural groups. Often this is held to be the principle of toleration. Apart from difficulties in deciding which principle of toleration to adopt (Snare 1992, ch 10), this seems to me to be a step which is too easily made. It is conceivable that faced with real differences in moral belief between different cultures, a person might hold that the right moral judgment to make is the one which rejects all moral codes other than the one which provides the moral cultural norms of that individual. So whether the right moral judgment to adopt would be some version of the principle of toleration, would be a normative position which would have to be argued for, not just assumed to be the correct, normative, relativistic moral judgment to make.

Is metaethical subjectivism similar to metaethical relativism? As we have seen in 4.1, the former tells us that what makes a moral belief correct is some mental state of the person holding the moral belief. The latter tells us that what makes a moral judgment correct or incorrect is its conformity or lack of conformity to the codes of practice of some cultural group. If such codes of practice are the creations of those individuals who together comprise or have comprised the group in question, it might be thought that all the relativist is saying is that each moral code is made up out of those moral beliefs which get high approval-ratings from the members of the group. Does this capture the essence of metaethical relativism? One reason for doubting this might be that this need not be the only or the main thing which makes some belief morally right, according to relativists. One might think that some moral belief is correct because it assists the social

cohesiveness and integrity of the group, even if this is not accompanied by feelings of approval. However that is, the relativist will stress that the moral code, one presumably which emerges through some historical process, consists of a set of moral beliefs and practices which then takes on the mantle of being the standards of morality by which to judge the particular beliefs and actions held and performed by individual members of the group. These beliefs and codes of practice become moral standards external to the beliefs and actions of the individual.

Metaethical relativism appears to be proposed as a form of moral cognitivism. Thomas (above) records that it is part of the relativist's position that moral judgments are true judgments, their truth being 'relative to the norms they report'. Rather like the subjectivist who holds that the correct way of putting a moral claim is that it is 'true for me', so for relativists the correct way of putting a moral claim is that it is true 'for our society'. But the relativising of truth in this way brings sharp and well known difficulties. If 'X ought to  $\phi$ ' is held to be true relative to society A, and 'X ought not to  $\phi$ ' is held to be true relative to society B, then it is true both that X ought to  $\phi$  and that X ought not to  $\phi$ . If contradictory statements can both be true, then the concept of truth is empty. Moreover, it is difficult for relativists to avoid accepting some claims as true or false. Presumably, their own metaethical claims are advanced as true, not just 'true relative to our society'. They can then be charged with the arbitrary selection of what they are going to allow as truths and what not. Further there seem to be some moral beliefs which they have to accept as true or false. If a member of society A agrees that it is true for society A that any member X of society A ought to  $\phi$ , then it would seem that they have to accept that the moral belief, X ought not to  $\phi$ , is false. That is, they seem to have to accept that that the belief held in society B, that X ought not to  $\phi$ , is false.

What, then, are metaethical relativists really trying to say? One well known attempt to explicate this is proposed by Williams (Williams 1981a) who holds that there is a 'truth in relativism'. He takes the relativist to be someone who, faced with an intelligible and

alternative system of belief S2 to that of his or her own system of belief S1, finds that there is some question to which a yes/no answer can be given in S2 which is not the same as the one given in S1, but which does not constrain the S1 believer to abandon his or her own answer. Williams makes it clear that he is not talking of cases where the alternative system produces only a 'notional' confrontation over what is the right thing to do, meaning by this the sort of case where moving from S1 to S2 would be at the cost of losing one's grip on reality. Relativists are not talking about choosing between stone age cultures and the culture of late 20th century liberal societies, for example. For the relativist, the confrontations between alternative systems of belief have to be 'real', and so choices of the right thing to do have to be options which someone from within any one system of belief, S1, can sanely make, i.e some alternative choice arising from within some other system of belief, S2, is one which could be selected without one losing one's grip on reality.

Williams denies that this relativises moral truth to systems of belief. The moral relativist does not have to say that some belief B1 is true relative to the system of moral belief S1. A person X who knows that B2, within the system of beliefs S2, is a real option for him or her, can still choose B1 within the system of beliefs S1, without being forced into the position of saying that B2 is right for some person Y because B2 is true relative to the system of beliefs S2, and B1 is similarly right for X. This echoes another position which Williams takes (Williams 1981b) that where there are two ought-judgments which are such that both cannot be satisfied, the unsatisfied ought-judgment can linger on but not in a way which constrains a person to adopt the ought-judgment.

Is Williams' argument convincing? This turns on what we build into the phrase 'a real option'. It is one thing to say that it is possible for a person sanely to make a moral judgment which lives, as it were, in another system of morality, but which is not the moral judgment with which he or she presently agrees. It is another thing to claim that if a person sees that some moral judgment B2, different from his or her own moral judgment

B1, is correct, this does not constrain him or her to abandon B1 in favour of B2. This would leave the person holding a moral judgment which he or she knows is incorrect.

These points suggest that metaethical relativism faces formidable difficulties if it is held to be an account of what it is for a moral belief to be true. Perhaps it is in the light of such difficulties that one contemporary philosopher of education, M. Leicester, has sought to modify relativism and make it a less problematic basis for moral education in a multicultural society. Leicester (Leicester, 1986; 1988; 1989) attempts to establish a position which she calls 'limited relativism'.

This is reached in the following steps (Leicester, 1989, ch 2):

In step one, Leicester agrees that there are certain aims of education which are distinctive of a liberal education. These consist of the development of autonomy, of cognitive perspective and of certain desirable qualities in pupils. These three features are summarised thus (p.21):

“Education broadly conceived is about developing rational beliefs rather than prejudices, about developing critical faculties and moral qualities and commitments in our pupils and about developing their autonomy”.

Step two consists of drawing out an implication of the first step. Such a conception of liberal education leads to the suggestion that:

“It is surely not possible to seriously work towards these kinds of liberal education ends and to choose a monocultural and ethnocentric approach. They (the liberal ends) must involve unbiased knowledge and understanding of the various cultural traditions and ethnic groups within our own society and in the world of which it is a part”.

Step three takes us to a consideration of what a monocultural and ethnocentric approach would be, and what is objectionable to it. Such an approach is based on an absolutist philosophy. This is summarised as follows (p.28):

“The absolutist believes that there are principles of thought (and value judgements) which any group of human beings must use if they are to be fully rational (and fully moral)”.

Leicester claims that there are three consequences of accepting these absolutist tenets. First, since a monocultural education could introduce pupils to all the principles of rationality, this would render a multicultural education superfluous. We may take it from this that a multicultural education will be one which denies what the absolutist asserts. Confirmation of this point is given (p. 30):

“The cultural relativist believes that there could be, and are, different and yet equally valid principles of thought for different groups of human beings”.

The second consequence is that absolutists tends to assume that it is their own cultural laws of thought and value judgment which are the valid laws and the valid value judgments. A third consequence is that absolutist educators, though they might illustrate what is to be learned in a liberal education by reference to several cultures, nevertheless will not see any case for ‘plural development’ of ‘culture relative key concepts, truth criteria and values’ (p.29).

Notwithstanding this last point, Leicester takes issue with cultural relativism so step four consists of a criticism of the cultural relativist (p. 31):

“The disadvantage with relativism lies in its implication of the lack of any shared criteria for curriculum selection across cultural boundaries and the similar lack of shared values”.

This is repaired in the notion of limited relativism. Step five tells us (p.31):

“For the limited relativist there are some shared principles of rational thought and some shared values which co-exist with and are influenced (and influence) many (sic) unshared, culture specific but nevertheless valid ones”.

It is worth noting also that, according to Leicester, the limited relativist holds that a person will have 'an affective commitment' to the cultural framework he or she supports.

We can summarise Leicester as holding the following position. Absolutism in philosophy tells us that there must be the same principles of thought and the same value judgments which are a condition of anyone being rational and anyone being moral. The cultural relativist denies this philosophical claim, holding that there can be different principles of thought and different value judgements, each such set of principles and each such set of value judgments being correct, both rationally and morally, for the group to which it applies. Liberal education as a form of education is distinctive in its pursuit of certain goals such as the development of autonomy and the development of certain desirable qualities in pupils. Liberal education cannot achieve its goals by a monocultural and ethnocentric approach, one which is derived from philosophical absolutism. However, liberal education cannot achieve its goals by a cultural relativist approach either. Liberal education can achieve its goals by embracing the ideas of the limited relativist. This requires the liberal educator to follow those shared principles of thought and those shared values which are to be found in different cultures, whilst also taking account of those unshared principles and values specific to particular cultures. As far as moral education is concerned, we can take Leicester to be arguing that since there cannot be a set of moral values which act as a condition of anyone's being moral, any moral education organised around such an erroneous metaethical theory of morality will be fatally flawed. The aims of moral education as a part of liberal education must be, instead, to provide an education both in the shared values and/or principles held in common between different cultures, and in the unshared values and/or principles which different cultures possess. The latter will give a moral learner knowledge of the moral values of different cultures. This knowledge will not be decisive in forming the learner's own moral attachments, since the latter requires not cognitive but affective commitment. A person is likely to give this to his own moral culture, though there would, presumably, be no reason why a person might not switch attachments.

In assessing limited relativism, I shall as with the other metaethical positions subject it to my four tests. Before turning to these, I want to make a comment on a lack of clarity in Leicester's presentation of the position which she opposes. Leicester's position arises from a discontent with philosophical absolutism, but it is not at all clear what she takes this philosophical position to be, and this detracts from any case she makes for limited relativism because one cannot see what it is she wishes moral educators to avoid. One way of understanding absolutism in morality is to think of it as the claim that certain moral rules are always true or correct and should always be followed, admitting of no exceptions irrespective of circumstances. A well-known problem for this version of absolutism arises when one has to deal with situations in which there are two moral rules or principles, both of which apply, but where it is not possible for both moral rules or principles to be followed. In that case, if absolutists insist on not infringing any principle, and there is no way in which to choose between them, the only course of action left open to them (since they cannot take both courses of action) is to do neither. This would seem not to be not so much a solution to the difficulty as refusal to face it. However, some absolutists might try to deal with the problem by prioritising moral rules and principles in such a way that it is always clear which moral action to choose. That also has its difficulties, not the least of which is that it is possible for a rule to be applied which has higher priority but which then produces a less morally desirable result. This gives us an interpretation of absolutism as the theory that there is a rigid hierarchy in any set of moral rules and principles.

It seems to me, however, that, given that Leicester is writing within the context of recent philosophy of education, the more likely reading of her position is that she is attacking a Kantian account of moral education. This has been of some influence in the philosophy of moral education, stemming from the work of R S Peters (Peters, 1966). Peters seeks to show that certain spheres of discourse or modes of reasoning presuppose particular principles and that to engage in a sphere of discourse or mode of reasoning is to be committed to its particular principles. Peters holds that there are such principles

presupposed to moral discourse. His view is that when one asks 'what ought I to do?', moral principles are presupposed by engaging in such discourse. Examples of such moral principles are: 'one ought to consider the interests of others'; 'one ought to treat people equally unless there can be good reason why one should treat people differently'; 'one ought to respect people's freedom and not interfere with it unless there is good reason'. Against this, it has been argued (Watts 1975) that whilst the asking of the question: 'what ought I to do?' commits a questioner to searching for a reason for acting, it does not commit the questioner to any particular moral principle. A rational egoist could ask and answer the question 'what ought I to do?' without being committed to some moral principle. A reply to Watts might be that the question, 'what ought I to do?', is ambiguous. It can be asked without prior commitment to moral discourse. However, if asked by someone whose prior commitment is to moral discourse, Peters' point is that these are the principles to which a person is committed as a moral person. Thus for any discourse to count as a moral discourse is for it to be grounded in the principles which Peters draws out.

If this is the version of philosophical absolutism which Leicester wants to reject, then it follows that she will reject any account of moral judgment which holds that there are certain principles presupposed to any particular culture being counted as a moral culture.

Some clarity over these matters would be welcome. Nor does Leicester provide much by way of argument to show why it is that a monocultural liberal education might not satisfactorily achieve the ends of liberal education. But I leave this latter issue to one side in order to concentrate on the central claims associated with the thesis of limited relativism, namely that there are two sorts of things which make a moral belief right. One is a value which, though a part of one's own cultural code of values, is shared with other cultural codes. The other is a value which is specific to one's own cultural code of values.

How does this account of limited relativism fare on my four tests? With regard to the practicality test, Leicester clearly rejects the view that knowledge of moral value is sufficient for motivating a person to moral action. Such knowledge is not a sufficient condition because knowledge of cultural values requires supplementation by affective commitment to one's cultural framework. Knowledge of the values of one's culture is, for the limited relativist, only a necessary condition of acting morally. This makes limited relativism, at least as presented by Leicester, into an externalist position so far as moral motivation is concerned. Knowledge of what makes a moral belief right is not itself motivating. The success of Leicester's position here, turns on the general success of the belief-desire theory of action. The reader is referred to the reservations expressed about this theory in ch 2, the central issue being, as I see it, whether moral knowledge has to be supplemented by affective commitment as a condition of moral action. This, though, is essentially a matter of filling out the details of Leicester's account. It leaves the central claims in that account undisturbed.

How does the limited relativist deal with the normativity requirement?

Leicester herself appeals to some normative moral principles to support her proposals for anti-racist education (Leicester 1988). Is limited relativism a theory which confirms or strains our moral convictions on such matters as racial abuse and racial discrimination? The limited relativist seems caught in some difficulties here. Suppose that anti-racist sentiment was not part of the cultural code of some group. The limited relativist would have to say that this was still morally correct, or permissible perhaps, just because this was in conformity with the accepted or approved standards of the group. The limited relativist would have to say the same thing if pro-racist sentiment was part of the cultural norms of a group. Nor will it avail the limited relativist to say that anti-racist sentiments are examples of those moral values and moral principles which are shared between differing cultural groups. This is manifestly false.

Limited relativists lands themselves in these difficulties because of the account they give of what it is for a moral belief to be correct. The theory is a proposal that whilst each culture has its own practices, including its own moral practices, and whilst each culture has its own criteria, internal to itself, by which to decide on the correctness or incorrectness of particular moral judgments, as a matter of fact we can discover that some moral criteria and some moral judgments are held in common by different cultures. So, it is to these that we can appeal when we protest against certain practices such as racial abuse, since these practices are ones which both this and that moral culture finds morally unacceptable. The unacceptability of certain practices is being made to turn on what we discover about actual moral practices, discovered by inspecting the moralities of specific cultural groups. The underlying argument seems to be that if we can discover some practice p which is shared by all (or some or many?) cultures, this makes the practice morally correct. But that argument is open to the obvious objection that just because some majoritarian set of practices is found, that does not make the practices morally correct. One might well object on moral grounds to practices, even though they are common to all, or many cultures.

Limited relativism, as a metaethical thesis, claims that for a belief to count as a moral belief it either has to be part of some culturally accepted norms or one of the set of inter-cultural shared values. Yet this makes it at least possible that there could be a state of affairs where moral principles concerned with the wrongness of racism in its various forms were neither part of some culture nor one of the shared inter-cultural values. So limited relativism would result in a culture being a moral culture, even though it did not condemn racism.

Limited relativism does not do well on the normativity test.

When it comes to moral conflicts, limited relativism faces further difficulties. First, if some moral belief is held to be correct or incorrect either because it conforms to or is in

conflict with the code of beliefs and practices specific to a culture or because it belongs to or does not belong to the corpus of beliefs and practices shared between some set of cultures, any other moral judgment falling outside this collection of moral beliefs can only be counted as different from them. But as we have seen in earlier discussions on emotivism and subjectivism, this way of construing apparent clashes of moral belief, that they are different from each other but not in disagreement with each other, makes these cases of moral conflict irresolvable. Their irresolvability, though, is due to their being just different beliefs, rather than being moral beliefs which come into genuine but irresolvable conflict. Limited relativists can admit the possibility that moral conflicts are resolvable only in that more limited range of cases where conflicting moral judgments are offered within a specific cultural setting. Even here it is far from clear whether they can be resolved. It would all depend on whether the moral criteria for deciding on the correctness or incorrectness of particular moral judgments also contained some system for adjudicating on moral grounds between moral beliefs and judgments when they did clash.

Second, how does limited relativism deal with cases where there are apparent clashes between those values which are shared in common with other cultures and those which are specific to some culture? Suppose that the shared value was one of anti-racist sentiment and the culture-specific value was one of racist sentiment? As far as I can see, the only way of dealing with this and other apparent clashes is for individuals to give their affective commitments one way or the other. But that only resolves the issue in a psychological sense. It does not show what grounds there are for the resolution of the conflict.

Third, an implication of limited relativism is that in so far as moral conflicts are internally solved by finding which moral judgments accord with the prevailing moral standards, this automatically makes anyone who insists that the prevailing moral standards are wrong into a moral non-conformist rather than someone who has a moral point of view which might be a serious contender for the moral truth.

On the issue of how we gain access to moral values, it appears to be consistent with the position of limited relativism that people, especially the young, learn the moral standards of their culture. One presumes that it is possible to identify their culture. But Leicester (1986, p.253) also claims that some moral values can be taught through a multicultural education where pupils get to know something of cultures other than their own.

“They [children] can develop an understanding, from direct experience, of the major languages, life styles and religions of multicultural Britain. They would learn the criteria for moral judgement internal to such systems, which would enable them to assess systems, other than by applying external criteria appropriate to their own culture”.

This will bring the following (p.254).

“Recognition of such relativism would provide the insight that alternative systems could be equally valid, and this insight could have a powerful effect on a pupil’s attitude to cultural diversity without in any way weakening the pupil’s affective commitment to those she chooses for her own”.

In turn, this can lead to the following result (p254)

“Children initiated into alternative systems will, on the whole, agree in judgement when making compromises in situations of clash”.

The suggestions here, I think, are that through multicultural programmes of study pupils will accept some principle of toleration and become more tolerant of the moral differences which exist between different cultures, and that this in turn will lead to a greater willingness to effect compromises when moral judgments, grounded in different cultural beliefs, conflict. So the claim seems to be that limited relativism provides the basis for the teaching of two specific principles, the principle of toleration and the principle that we ought to try to reach compromises. Regretably this might be over-sanguine, since knowledge of others’ cultural practices could as easily lead to continued disagreement and lack of toleration. A more pressing doubt is whether the principle of compromise is consistent with limited relativism. Looking from the perspective of those firmly rooted

in a specific cultural setting, they are taught the morals and customs of other cultures so that this will generate a disposition to reach compromises when moral conflicts occur between their own beliefs and the beliefs rooted in different cultures. However, according to the limited relativist, people can only judge what is right and wrong by reference to the criteria operating for making these decisions in their own culture. When A's judgment of what is right, according to A's own culture, is in conflict with the judgments of those from other cultures, which A now understands after having followed the programme of multicultural education, what further resources has A got to effect a compromise? The only resource available to A is whatever his or her own moral code says is right, together with the criteria by which such judgments are reached. Even if we can make sense of the idea, in such a situation, that anyone would see the point in putting forward some compromise solution to the conflict, the preferred compromise can only be judged by members of the different cultures in the light of their own culture-specific moral criteria. It is hard to see how compromise can be effected in such circumstances.

This point is recognised by another philosopher who grapples with the question of how to deal with moral differences. Haydon (Haydon, 1986, p 98) accepts that 'a pluralist society is characterised by the existence of competing traditions of thought and practice'. He is not optimistic about the chances of finding a philosophical account of the ultimate grounds upon which moral judgment can be based. So, given the pluralism of a multicultural society, Haydon recognises that when cultures clash (and a fortiori, when moral conflicts occur between different moral standards of different cultural groups), there can be no resolution of such clashes from within the resources of any particular tradition, since all are pari passu, so far as the justifiability of their moral claims is concerned. Haydon offers the following solution (p.98): "a society...could collectively set about constructing a theory which it will use".

One presumes that this means that it will use such a theory to resolve the above sorts of moral conflict. This, it is admitted, will lead us to abandon any notion that we seek to

find an ethical theory which is true. What we need is not ethical truth but ethical agreement. Ethical agreement suggests that we search for some set of principles to which we can give our actual consent, a 'second-tier level' of ethical theory. Haydon accepts that there could be sharp divergence between what a person thinks is right, *qua* his own ethical tradition, and that to which he gives his consent, at the second-tier level. Nevertheless he holds that this will be no bar to the possibility of people from differing moral traditions both being motivated to seek agreement, and being able to make and keep to an agreement.

Moral education in any pluralist society will follow the same path. In considering decisions about moral right and wrong, moral learners will firstly have to understand the moral position of the moral tradition to which they belongs. But then they will realise that not everyone shares their moral view, because there are people who come at particular moral practices and issues from different moral cultures. So a second level of moral education will take place in which people from different moral orientations seek to negotiate an agreement over what is right and wrong. Haydon even suggests that one aid to this process will be the teaching of moral philosophy to young children. Whilst this will not preclude learners from taking 'absolutist positions' in morals, it will make learners cautious about the possibility of converting others to different views, and would make them see that others who do not share their moral beliefs are not benighted.

Haydon's proposals suffer from the defect which infects Leicester's notion of compromise. Haydon's negotiators will know that their own moral culture says that one thing is right, and will then have to face the possibility of having to embrace another moral belief, the one suggested in the compromise, which will be at variance with their own. Which one, then, will be overriding, and why? It is hard to resist the conclusion that since people, on this account, approach any moral issue from within their own ethical tradition, they can only judge the rightness or wrongness of what is proposed by reference to their own tradition's standards of moral rightness. There are no other criteria available for judging the moral rightness of any proposed second-tier compromise.

Given Haydon's support for the notion that moral differences can be solved by compromise, this would seem to accept the philosophical claim that contractarianism is the basis of ethics. This, however, sits uneasily with his view he is not disposed to accept any ethical theory as correct. Moreover, Haydon's proposal could well lead to immoral consequences. If two cultures are in moral conflict with each other, and if a compromise is proposed to end the conflict, each culture could only judge the compromise in terms of what each might get out of it without itself compromising its own integrity as a cultural system. However, the results of negotiations are not a moral end in themselves. They can just as much be the subject of moral scrutiny as anything else. They could yield results which flout our moral convictions. Like other contractarians, Haydon faces but does not solve the problem of how to regard contracts from a moral point of view. That an agreement has been reached and that compromises have been made, may well be inescapable features of politics. But it does not stop us from morally evaluating agreements.

### Summary

Moral educators certainly face challenges in placing their programmes in the context of a multicultural society. I first drew attention to certain well known problems, which any metaethical relativist faces, connected with their theory of truth. I then went on to examine whether the limited relativist can provide a sound philosophical basis for moral education, by subjecting its claims to my four tests.

In terms of how it accords with our moral convictions, especially those which condemn racial abuse, racial stereotyping and racial discrimination, it is doubtful whether limited relativism can show that these practices are wrong. This failure stems from the limited relativist's view that the touchstone of moral correctness is the moral standard of the culture-group. The attempt to defuse the problems which this causes, by appealing to some set of shared values, is also not convincing because this depends on what is agreed,

and this need not be those moral principles which indicate our moral objections to racialism in its various forms. Limited relativism becomes, in effect, a form of majoritarianism.

On the question of the resolvability of moral conflicts, limited relativism does not give a clear and consistent position. Some apparent conflicts are treated just as moral differences, with all the difficulties which that brings. Others, especially those internal to a culture, might be regarded as solvable, but it all depends on whether a moral culture itself possesses devices for resolving moral conflicts. Quite what limited relativism makes of clashes between shared values and culture-specific values, is unclear. Do they seek compromises between the two? That issue leads into the question of what account limited relativism gives of how we gain access to moral values. It is clear that there is much emphasis given to learning the moral standards of one's own culture, provided this can be defined. But limited relativists also claim that their theory carries the implication that the principle of toleration and the principle of seeking compromises are particularly important moral principles to teach. However, the latter provides a problem for limited relativists, since it is far from clear that people who face a choice between culture-specific values and inter-cultural values can do anything other than choose the former.

Limited relativism does give an account of what it is to be motivated to act morally, but this depends on the belief-desire theory of motivation, and some doubts have been voiced about this in chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 5

### MORAL REALISM

#### 5.0 Introduction

Subjectivists and relativists agree that moral judgment is best understood as a form of belief. They differ about what it is which makes a moral judgment correct or incorrect. Within both subjectivism and relativism, there are varying shades of opinion on what it is which makes a moral judgment correct. Wiggins, arguing a subjectivist position, provides a link between this and the previous chapter because he accepts the claim that there are moral properties which make an important contribution to the content and correctness of moral judgments.

Moral realists agree with Wiggins that there are moral properties. For moral realists, moral properties are essential to our making correct moral judgments. Moral realism forms the subject matter of the next three chapters. In the present chapter, I examine the basic metaphysical claim which lies at the heart of any moral realist position. In chapter six I examine how moral realists tackle the questions of whether we can have moral knowledge, and if so how and in what form. It will become evident during the course of those discussions that moral realism has implications for moral education. Chapter 7 will consist of a critical assessment of moral realism using the four tests set out in chapter 1.

According to the moral realist, moral judgments can be true. Their truth arises from features of the world, and these are features which have moral content. This is a bold and interesting claim, one at which many philosophers have balked, denying that we live in a world which contains moral content. The debate which is set off by this claim and the replies to it, is central to the issue of whether moral realism is philosophically sound. But before turning to that debate, is there any initial plausibility to these claims

of the moral realist?

Moral realists attempt to enlist support for their position from features of our ordinary ways of thinking about morality. First, it seems evident that at least some of the time, we do say that certain actions are right and that certain actions are wrong, or that certain actions are demanded of us as a matter of duty or obligation, regardless of whether or not a person wants to do the morally right thing. Indeed, sometimes we think that an action is morally demanded of us even if we actively do not want to do it. The moral realist thinks this is evidence that there is something seriously wrong about those metaethical theories which make the ultimate test of moral correctness into what a person feels approval of, or what a person desires or thinks is right, or what a person likes. Clearly, the targets here are emotivism and standard subjectivism. The thought is that there is something about morality which is over and above our own personal likes and dislikes, feelings and desires. Morality, we feel inclined to say, is not just about a person's individual responses to something.

Second, the language we use in moral talk is held to be suggestive of the moral realist's position because of its epistemic character. We say things like 'you know you should not have done that' and 'you know that you had to do so and so' and 'this is what I believe is right'. Often, indeed, this sort of language is just the language used when bringing up children to be moral beings. Such terms are not used idly, claims the realist. This sort of language is indicative of the fact that there is knowledge to be gained and acted upon, in a quite normal sense of 'knowledge'. In just the same way as a person might say that he knows that the train leaves at 3.30 p.m., so also a person can be said to know that stealing is wrong. Other terms, also used in moral discourse, are held to back up this idea. Take the notion of a mistake. Acknowledging a mistake is a way of indicating that there is a right and a wrong to what one does and thinks. In moral discourse, we readily admit making mistakes. People can say that they were mistaken in telling a lie or in not keeping a promise or in the way in which they treated someone. Some South Africans have now

begun to admit that the system of apartheid was a morally mistaken system. In having the thoughts that there is right and wrong, and that we know what is right and wrong, people also have the thought that we can get things wrong in morality, just as we can get things wrong empirically.

Third, moral realists point to a typical phenomenon involved in moral talk, namely argument. People do argue in morality. Nor are such arguments confined to the great issues of abortion, euthanasia and so on. People also argue about the correctness or otherwise of keeping a specific promise, or whether they should or should not tell a particular lie. Now, in other forms of talk where argument takes place, the point of having an argument is to get at what is true and sound and to reject what is false and unsound. In morality, people argue about the premises which they hold. Are they true and are they expressing a clear thought? They argue about the conclusions drawn from premises. Does this follow from that? If you think this, are you not logically committed to thinking that? Does this fact warrant us doing that? Are these not all truth-conducive features of our moral discourse? The moral realist thinks they are.

So these points from our thought and talk about morality are held to give support to the claims of the moral realist.

What would be the impact on our thought and talk about morality if moral realism was found to give the best account of our moral judgment? One implication would be that in so far as there are moral truths which state what is morally right and morally wrong, we should be careful to distinguish between thinking that something is morally right or wrong and it being right or wrong. That there are moral truths, according to the moral realist, is not established by thinking that there are, just as the snow's being white is not established by its being thought that it is white. A second implication would be that we should look seriously at the possibility that not only are there moral truths but that we can get to know what they are. We have seen in chapter 3 that Hare agrees that there is a

sense in which it is proper to talk of moral knowledge, for example in 'moderately stable societies' there can be agreement about what is to count as morally correct. But Hare also resists the claim that non-moral facts determine what is right or what ought to be done. To think otherwise, would be to accept that the meaning of moral terms is given wholly by their descriptive content, and this marks the point of departure for Hare between descriptive theories of moral judgment and the prescriptive element of moral judgments. Hare goes on to argue that moral judgments are rationally defensible judgments. But he seems unwilling to say that they have same epistemic status as knowing a fact does. The moral realist parts company with Hare here, arguing that we can obtain moral knowledge, and arguing that such knowledge is strongly connected with knowing non-moral facts.

If the moral realist can show that moral discourse is one where truth and knowledge are possible, a third implication would be that there is much less scope for choice in making moral judgments than is commonly thought. The fact that the snow is white makes it absurd to hold that one has a choice over whether to believe that the snow is white. If the snow is white, this fact is what our beliefs have to conform to. To say that holding such a belief is up to us, something we can choose to do, would be to reveal a misunderstanding of what has to be involved in holding such a belief. Similarly, the fact that rape is morally wrong will, according to the moral realist, press itself upon our beliefs about rape. To say that it is up to us as to whether we choose to believe that, morally speaking, rape is wrong, will reveal a misunderstanding of what is involved in having a moral belief.

The present and the following chapter will reveal that there is a divergence of views within moral realism over the extent to which we can have moral knowledge. But most, if not all, moral realists hold that we can know some moral truths. Thinking this, they have views about what sort of knowledge this is and how it is gained. Is such knowledge, for example, held in the form of moral principles, or can it only be in the form of particular, non-principled, judgments? What moral realists have to say about this, carries implications for moral education. A most widespread view is that moral educators should teach moral

learners some moral principles. Indeed, some moral principles are often held to be basic to morality. But does this, as some moral realists hold, distort what is involved in making moral judgments?

Enough has been said for now to indicate that if moral realism can be successfully defended, there are important philosophical and educational ramifications to the theory. I now turn to a fuller characterisation of moral realism.

### **5.1 Moral Realism-the essential claims and issues**

The following two recent accounts will serve to introduce the moral realist's position. First we have the account provided by Boyd (Boyd in Sayre-McCord, 1988, p 182):

“According to moral realism:

1. Moral statements are the sorts of statements which are (or which express propositions which are) true or false (or approximately true, largely false etc.):
2. The truth or falsity (approximate truth etc.) of moral statements is largely independent of our moral opinions, theories etc.:
3. Ordinary canons of moral reasoning together with ordinary canons of scientific and everyday factual reasoning constitute, under many circumstances at least, a reliable method for obtaining and improving (approximate) moral knowledge”.

Boyd adds that a moral realist also holds that moral terms such as ‘good’, ‘just’ and so on ‘usually correspond to real properties and real relations’.

Another account is provided by Brink. Brink's account is of interest for the way in which he seeks to show what is distinctive about moral realism as a form of moral cognitivism (Brink, 1989, p14 ff):

“Moral Realism is a kind of metaphysical thesis about the nature and status of morality and moral claims. A realistic view about ethics presumably asserts the existence of moral facts and true moral propositions. But a moral relativist who thinks that moral facts are constituted by an individual’s or social group’s moral beliefs is able to agree with this. Moral realism, it seems, is committed to moral facts and truths that are objective in some way”  
(Brink’s emphasis).

Then, noting that realism is a philosophical position which can obtain in respect of a number of academic disciplines, Brink remarks:

“Realism about a discipline typically claims that there are facts of a certain kind that are in some way mind-independent or independent of human thought”.

Brink notes that if we say this, it seems to put in jeopardy any possibility of giving a realist account of psychology, for ‘psychological facts must be mind-dependent’ (p 15). Brink also notes that this would also jeopardise the possibility of holding hedonistic utilitarianism as an example of a normative moral theory which conforms to the requirements of moral realism, presumably because this normative moral theory will hold that the rightness and wrongness of actions is to be judged by how much pleasure certain actions give to people. The states of pleasure which result from actions inescapably requires reference to people’s mental states.

What is needed, according to Brink, is a formulation of moral realism which will prevent the moral relativist from claiming that he or she is a moral realist because such a position is not sufficiently ‘objective’, whilst allowing that mental states could be that which make a moral statement true, thus allowing a theory such as hedonistic utilitarianism to fall within the ambit of moral realism. These considerations lead Brink eventually to formulate Moral Realism (MR) as (p 17):

“MR: (1) There are moral facts or truths, and (2) these facts or truths are independent of the evidence for them”.

According to this formulation, if X believes that some action is wrong, and if the evidence for saying this is, say, that the action causes pain, it is the fact that pain is caused and experienced that makes the action wrong rather than any evidence we might have for saying that X's actions caused Y a good deal of pain.

From these two writers it would appear that there are two main clusters of issues to sort out, namely:

1. the moral realist contends that moral judgments can be true or correct or right (and their contraries). But what makes a moral judgment true etc. according to realists? How does moral realism differ here from other cognitivist accounts of moral judgment, and what gains are there from adopting the moral realist's account?
2. Since there are moral truths which tell us what is right and wrong, good and bad, can we get to know what these are, and if so, how do we acquire such knowledge, and in what form do we hold it? Boyd claims that 'ordinary canons of moral reasoning together with ordinary canons of scientific and everyday factual reasoning constitute, under many circumstances at least, a reliable method for obtaining and improving (approximate) moral knowledge'. Is this correct or are there other ways in which we gain moral knowledge?

These two groups of questions set the agenda for the rest of this and the whole of the next chapter.

## **5.2 Moral Facts: the Metaphysics of Moral Realism**

Boyd and Brink seem to agree that what is essential to any moral realist position is that there are moral facts and it is these which make moral judgments right or wrong. Brink says this overtly. Boyd remarks that moral terms such as 'good', 'just' and so on 'usually correspond to real properties and real relations'. I think we can take this as saying that a term like 'just' refers to some property of some action or state of affairs, and that because of this, the fact that some act is just is what makes some judgment on the justice on the said act or state of affairs correct.

What are moral facts?

The first point to make is that in proposing that there are moral facts, the moral realist is at odds with the ethical naturalist. Take the moral judgment 'he ought not to have done that. He hurt her feelings'. Here, we have a deontic judgment coupled with an empirical statement. The empirical statement is offered as the reason for the moral judgment. The empirical statement 'he hurt her feelings' is true to some state of affairs. It describes some action which has the property of hurting her feelings. So far as the ethical naturalist is concerned, all we need in a moral judgment is a moral utterance of some kind, usually but not always one which is deontic, coupled with a statement of the non-moral facts. The non-moral facts which ground it are usually held to be empirical facts. Of the relation between the non-moral facts and the moral judgment, some ethical naturalists will claim that the judgment is entailed by the statement of non-moral fact. Other ethical naturalists resist the relation being one of entailment and prefer to say that the empirical statement warrants the moral judgment.

The point which divides the empirical naturalist from the moral realist is that the former holds that that there is no need to invent a further category of 'moral fact' in order for us to understand what is being said in any moral judgment. Why do ethical naturalists object to the notion of a moral fact? One contemporary ethical naturalist (Railton, 1986) agrees that part of the reason for thinking that naturalism is the proper way to understand moral judgment is that it avoids having to agree that there are moral properties which are of a sort that can only be grasped by intuition. Here, exception is taken to moral facts because they impose an unacceptable approach to knowing what these facts are. This, however, is vulnerable to the reply that we do not need to resort to intuition in order to know what the moral facts are. We will see in the next chapter that moral realists are not short on ideas so far as this point is concerned.

Another advantage which Railton claims for naturalism is that it, rather than moral realism,

can account for alterations in moral practice. That is, if it is true that at a certain time and place certain practices are found to be morally acceptable, then the naturalist can allow that at different times and places other practices could be found to be morally acceptable. To illustrate his position, Railton offers hedonism as a form of naturalism. The hedonist identifies the good of a person with the experiential state of happiness. It would be quite possible for different practices to count as happiness-producing, depending on times and cultures. There is no a priori set of acceptable and unacceptable set of moral practices, according to Railton's version of naturalism. What morality then amounts to is some set of evaluational judgments which are paired up with what particular groups or cultures or societies find to be productive of happiness. This can vary in time and place, and thus will account for moral-cultural variations.

Railton seems to suggest that this is a position which the moral realist cannot embrace. There is a sense in which this is right and a sense in which it is not. It is right in the sense that moral realists will hold that certain actions or states of affairs are morally good or bad, right or wrong, and are so because of the moral properties of these actions or states of affairs. On that basis, a moral realist may well resist the suggestion that, given some set of socio-economic circumstances, slavery is a morally acceptable practice due to its utility. For moral realists, the question of the moral rectitude of the institution of slavery will turn on what moral features it displays. It could even be that moral realists will hold that certain things are right or wrong, whatever the circumstances, because of their moral properties. However, the sense in which Railton's suggestion is incorrect is that there is no reason why a moral realist cannot accept that a person's moral judgment can be sensitive to the moral details in particular circumstances, and that these vary with those circumstances.

So these two claimed advantages put forward by Railton for the ethical naturalist seem to be less convincing than he thinks. They leave untouched anyway the central issue between these two rival metaethical theories, the issue being whether it is intelligible to

talk about moral facts in addition to non-moral facts. For the ethical naturalist, to talk of some state of affairs being good or bad, right or wrong, is to talk only about the non-moral states of affairs which obtain. To talk of the wrongness of A's action is to talk only of the hurt to B's feelings which B experienced as a consequence of A's action. Why do ethical naturalists hold this view? One reason for the view is epistemological. When we ask how we know that some moral judgment is correct, one way of answering this is to hold that moral judgments, about the rightness or wrongness of some state of affairs, are judgments whose terms extend to just the same states of affairs as certain empirical statements. So, 'this is wrong', for example, refers to, say, 'that which brings pain'. For the ethical naturalist, this then allows us to show what makes ethical judgments right or wrong. For we can use whatever methods are available to us to get at the non-moral facts, and once we know what these are, we know what we need to know to substantiate our claim that moral judgments are correct or incorrect. If A's wrong act consists in the hurt which B experienced, then knowing that B was hurt by A's act is sufficient to show that A's act was wrong.

This position of the ethical naturalist is an attractive one. But the moral realist rejects it. The realist charges the naturalist with being a reductionist, in the sense that the latter does away with moral properties in favour of the non-moral properties of objects and states of affairs. Further, the realist argues that the ethical naturalist has confused epistemological issues with issues concerning the meanings of our utterances. The question of how we know what is morally right and wrong, may well involve reference to non-moral natural events, states of affairs and their properties. But that is not the same as saying that something is morally right or wrong. Whilst we know that A hurt B, that is evidence for the wrong, not a statement that the wrong was done. Finally, there are acute problems for the naturalist over what is to count as the relevant natural states of affairs and properties which constitute the grounds for moral judgments. Suppose, for example, as some naturalists urge, what is right is what is conducive to survival. Why should we accept that morality means that it is about what we ought to do to survive? Similar problems attend other naturalist accounts, for example, that what is good is what brings pleasure.

The moral realist, then, insists that the meaning of the terms used in moral judgments is not to be understood as given by the meanings of the non-moral language used to describe those non-moral states of affairs which are held to ground moral judgments. At this point, moral realists face a philosophical choice about the nature of their thesis. One alternative is to hold that the meanings of the terms used in moral judgments is given by the moral content of the world i.e. the moral qualities attaching to states of affairs. The other is to be agnostic about this thesis, and to hold that the important issue here is not one about what gives the terms used in moral judgment their meaning, but what makes such judgments true or false, correct or incorrect. Either way, this leads the moral realist to claim that there are moral facts. Moral facts are then either what give meaning to the terms used in moral judgments or that which make such judgments true.

Whatever is decided on the last point, it is the emphasis on moral facts which is of importance. It is this which distinguishes the moral realist from the ethical naturalist, the standard subjectivist and the relativist. All of these agree with the moral realist that moral judgment is best understood as a form of belief. This commits them to holding that there are things which make moral beliefs true or correct. But the standard subjectivist holds that these are psychological states, the relativist holds that these are cultural conventions, and the ethical naturalist holds that these are non-moral states of affairs. For the realist, what makes an action or state of affairs right or wrong has something to do with the features of the action or state of affairs, and these are right- and wrong-making properties, which are not tied to the particularities of mind and place which the standard subjectivist and the relativist favour.

But what are moral realists getting at when they say that it is moral facts which make moral judgments true or correct? To return to the example of A's act hurting B's feelings, the moral realist seems to be saying that in addition to the non-moral facts of B's feelings being hurt, there are also moral facts which ground some moral judgment about A's act. Moore put the point thus (Moore 1903, ch 1, para 15):

“Our first conclusion as to the subject-matter of Ethics [namely, to answer ‘what is good?’] is, then, that there is a simple, indefinable, unanalysable object of thought by reference to which it must be defined. By what name we call this unique object is a matter of indifference, so long as we clearly recognise what it is and that it does differ from other objects”

(My emphasis).

Leaving aside quite what Moore could have meant by talking of the indefinable by reference to which good must be defined, he at least makes the point that good is, besides being simple, and so unanalysable, and so indefinable, different from other objects. The entity or the property of goodness is sui generis. This must be the point which distinguishes the moral realist from the ethical naturalist. However, being sui generis and thus different from non-moral objects and properties does not make this unique object necessarily unrelated to other objects, though this inference is one which Warnock appears to have made (Warnock, 1967, p 14):

“On Moore’s showing, the fact that some item is morally good appears to be, not merely different from any other fact about it, but quite unconnected with, independent of, any other fact; for all that he says, the simple sui generis quality of goodness might quite well be detected as attaching to anything whatever-alighting, so to speak, inexplicably and at random upon anything, of whatever kind. The picture presented is that of a realm of moral qualities, sui generis, and indefinable, floating, as it were, quite free from anything else whatever, but cropping up here and there, quite contingently and for no reason, in bare conjunction with ordinary features of the world.’

However, that this is a view which Moore is forced to take, is contested by Cargile who remarks (Cargile, 1989, p 140):

“Warnock’s version of the ‘picture’ has moral ...qualities cropping up here and there quite contingently and for no good reason. Moore is committed to the consequence that, for example, a heroic rescue, in being good, has a non-natural property. But that certainly does not mean that there is no reason the rescue had that property. It was good for the reason that it saved a life, or some such”.

On this reading, Moore thought that what is good, though it cannot be defined, can when it occurs be given a reason for its occurring. The, or rather this, act of rescuing is good,

its goodness arising from the fact that it led to the saving of the life.

This strongly suggests that goodness is connected to non-moral states of affairs. As Thomas observes (Thomas, 1993, pp 121-2) about the claim 'Kim's action was unfair'..... 'Kim's action cannot barely have the moral property of being unfair'. So how do moral properties such as 'fairness', 'goodness' and the like become possessed by some action? One clue to this can be gleaned from this remark from Gay (Gay 1985, p 259):

“We know that ethical properties are resultant properties. ....We believe the colours things have to be properties that result from the microscopic textures of their surfaces”.

According to Gay, ethical properties result from the occurrence of non-moral properties (or events, states of affairs etc.) in just the same way that colours result from non-coloured properties. If this is correct, then this allows moral realists to reject the charge from Warnock that they are subscribing to a view of moral properties as free-floating qualities alighting in situations like leaves falling from the sky. This view of the relationship between moral and non-moral properties gets the relationship the wrong way round, according to the moral realist. Moral properties do not attach themselves to non-moral properties. Moral properties are the result of the occurrence of non-moral states of affairs and properties.

We need to delve more deeply into the claim that moral properties result from non-moral properties, for this is at the heart of the realist's claim that there are moral facts. I am in debt here to Dancy's illuminating discussion of these points (Dancy, 1993, ch.5). Dancy distinguishes between resultance and supervenience, claiming that the two are often not distinguished. First, resultance. Using Dancy's example, suppose we say that a cliff is dangerous. What makes it dangerous? It will be properties such as the steepness of the cliff face and the looseness of the rocks on it. There is no reason why we should also not say that these in turn are resultant properties of other properties of other objects.

That is, the looseness of the rocks, say, can itself be a resultant property dependent on yet further properties. Overall, the dangerousness of the cliff face results from some collection of properties, which are interrelated in various ways. These properties are the resultance base. Further, Dancy claims, it matters how the various properties of the resultance base are related to each other. There may be loose rocks and there may be a steep cliff face, but these may not make the cliff face dangerous, unless they are juxtaposed in some way. The dangerousness of the cliff face results from the way in which the steepness of the cliff is related to the looseness of the rocks. Dancy calls this the shape of the resultance base.

Dancy offers the view that resultance is an endemic feature of our conceptual schemes. It is certainly one we use in science. O'Hear (O'Hear, 1989, ch 8) provides the example of the fusion of hydrogen nuclei. Normally these are kept separate through mutually repulsive electrical forces, but in the special conditions of very high temperatures such as obtained in the big bang, they fuse to form helium. Here, the fusion of hydrogen nuclei is an emergent and resultant property of the hydrogen atom. Another example can be found from the philosophy of mind, in the view that mental properties are emergent, resultant, properties of brain states and events.

How does the idea of resultance have application in morality? Moral realists will say that A's action was wrong, had the moral property of being wrong, as a result of it being, say, a deliberate act of hurting B's feelings. Here we have a non-moral property of the act, its being hurtful to B's feelings, from which moral wrongness results. But we have to be careful not to overstate what is being said here. One thing to resist, claims Dancy, is the view that just because we have some collection of non-moral properties from which a moral property results, the same collection of non-moral properties in some other circumstance will yield the same moral property or that moral property to the same extent. An act of A's, done deliberately and resulting in B's feelings being hurt, might be a wrong act here, but not a wrong act there. For in the second case there may be

other properties which give the act another moral quality. Perhaps the act is a good act because though it hurts B's feelings, it also makes B reflect on what he has done and gets him to acknowledge that he acted foolishly. Putting all these non-moral properties together results this time in A's act being a good act.

How does resultance differ from supervenience? Dancy cites the following account of supervenience presented by Blackburn (Dancy, 1981; 1993, ch. 5):

“(S) If a property *M* is supervenient upon a class of properties *C*, then:- *M* is not identical with any member of *C* or with any truth-function of members of *C*, and if an object has *M* and *C*<sub>1</sub>....*C*<sub>*n*</sub> (where *C*<sub>1</sub>....*C*<sub>*n*</sub> are all the members of *C* which it has), then it is impossible that it should cease to be *M* or become more or less *M* than before without changing in respect of some member of *C*.

(S1) If a property *M* is supervenient on a class of properties *C*, then:- *M* is not identical with any member of *C* nor with any truth-function of members of *C*, and if an object has *M* and *C*<sub>1</sub>....*C*<sub>*n*</sub> (where *C*<sub>1</sub>....*C*<sub>*n*</sub> are all the members of *C* which it has), then necessarily any other object which possesses *C*<sub>1</sub>....*C*<sub>*n*</sub> to the same degree also possesses *M* to the same degree”.

According to this definition of supervenience from Blackburn, if some act *A* is a moral act *M* and has a set of non-moral properties *C*<sub>1</sub>....*C*<sub>*n*</sub>, then *A* cannot cease to be *M* unless there is some change in the set of non-moral properties *C*<sub>1</sub>....*C*<sub>*n*</sub>. Moreover, any other act which possesses and only possesses *C*<sub>1</sub>....*C*<sub>*n*</sub> must also have the same moral property *M*.

It is one thing to claim that a moral property results from some collection of non-moral properties. It is another to say that (a) if some act has a moral property, then it cannot cease to have that moral property without ceasing to alter with respect to its non-moral properties, and (b) any other act which is no whit different from the first act with regard to all and only its non-moral properties, must possess the same moral properties. What the second claim amounts to, Dancy suggests, is an explanation of what is meant by the term ‘the same’ in ‘the same moral act’. Resultance, on the other hand, tells us on what grounds an act possesses some moral property. It, rather than supervenience, he suggests, is the conceptual idea which gives us the explanation of how actions or states of affairs

with their non-moral properties come to possess moral properties. Resultance is the concept with which the moral realist works.

Moral realism, then, is a distinctive metaethical position because of its claim that moral rightness and wrongness can be properties of actions, events, states of affairs. In saying this, the moral realist denies that the rightness and the wrongness of actions are just a matter of how we respond to them, or what the social conventions are. Compare what a moral realist will say with what Harman says about his own example, already cited in chapter 4, (Harman, 1977, ch.1) of a gang of hoodlums pouring petrol over a cat and then setting the cat on fire. Harman says that all we need here to make a moral judgment are knowledge of the non-moral facts and moral sensitivity or a moral principle such as 'it's wrong to deliberately hurt sentient beings just for fun'. Moral realists will say that the act is wrong, its wrongness arising from non-moral facts such as the enjoyment which the arsonists experience, the pain to and loss of life of the cat. The resultant moral properties are features of the acts of the hoodlums, and are those which constitute the moral facts of the case. Here, the moral realist goes on, the badness of the act is independent of any feelings we may have or any conventions which might be around. Suppose, indeed, that there is no convention against setting fire to animals and suppose that it is a popular sport which meets with approval. The moral realist will say that notwithstanding these facts about people and cultures, the act is still wrong. It is wrong for reasons which can be set out in non-moral terms.

Harman's views will reappear in the discussions in the next chapter. For now, I want to discuss a well-known objection to what the moral realist says. Mackie (Mackie, 1977, ch 1, p 1) claims that 'there are no objective values' and then goes on:

"The claim that values are not objective, are not part of the fabric of the world, is meant to include not only moral goodness, which might be most naturally equated with moral value, but also other things that could be more loosely called values or disvalues—rightness and wrongness, duty, obligation, an act's being rotten and contemptible, and so on".

Mackie is at pains not to deny that 'there are certain kinds of value statements which undoubtedly can be true or false' (p25). These statements are made in the light of agreed standards. Thus to say 'this is a poor apple' will be true, relative to some standard of apples which reflects our desires for eating apples of that type. To say 'that is an unjust decision' can be a true statement, relative to the agreed standards of justice which reflect our desires for law and order. What Mackie says here is strongly reminiscent of Hare's point that we can know what is counted as right and wrong, especially in moderately stable societies, and in that sense and that sense alone we can have moral knowledge. However, when we consider the justice of the law itself, it is here that we find that our sense of the objectivity of values gives out. For whilst Mackie agrees that the standards which are constitutive of justice, do have some reference to what people want, nevertheless (p 27):

"The appropriateness of standards is neither fully determinate nor totally indeterminate in relation to independently specifiable aims or desires. But however determinate it is, the objective appropriateness of standards in relations to aims or desires is no more a threat to the denial of objective values than is the objectivity of evaluation relative to standards. ....Something may be called good simply in so far as it satisfies or is such as to satisfy a certain desire; but the objectivity of such relations of satisfaction does not constitute in our sense an objective value"

Here Mackie appears to suggest that whilst there is a sense in which a value judgment can be said to be objective when it is made relative to some agreed standards which encapsulate what we desire, the standards themselves cannot be said to be objective. Why, then, does Mackie reject the view that in the latter sense there are objective values? He offers a number of points in support of this contention. He is impressed by the facts of moral variability between moral codes (p36ff). He also holds that the same thing that some people call right 'would arouse radically and irresolvably different response in others' (p38). But the 'more important' reasons are to be found in 'the argument from queerness' (p 38 ). Mackie distinguishes here between epistemological and metaphysical issues, the former being concerned with the claim of some objectivists that one can intuit moral entities, qualities or relations. It is the latter claim, though, which is the key one. Mackie holds (p 38):

“If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe”.

A ‘way of bringing out this queerness’ (p 41), Mackie suggests, is to ask how something which ‘is supposed to have some objective moral quality .....is linked with its natural features’. Is some wrongness a higher order property belonging to certain natural properties? If so what would this be? Mackie thinks this cannot be satisfactorily answered, so he continues (p 41):

“How much simpler and more comprehensible the situation would be if we could replace the moral quality with some sort of subjective response which could be causally related to the detection of the natural features on which the supposed quality is said to be consequential”.

Yet, Mackie notes, in spite of the non-existence of values, it is the case that people believe that they exist. Why should it be thought that there are such objective values? Mackie avails himself of Hume’s remark about the mind’s ‘propensity to spread itself on external objects’ to explain this. His comment on this is interesting. What Mackie calls his moral scepticism must (p48-9):

“take the form of an error theory, admitting that a belief in objective values is built into ordinary moral thought and language, but holding that this ingrained belief is false”.

From these quotations, it seems to me that Mackie has offered four arguments against the moral realist’s claim that there are moral properties, or as he calls them ‘objective values’. First, since he favours a metaethical account of moral judgment as constituted by desire, he thinks that this is incompatible with what the moral realist says. Second, he is so struck by the differences between both individuals and groups that he thinks that this cannot be accommodated by any metaethical theory which claims that objective values i.e moral properties, exist. Third, he rejects the view that such properties can exist in the universe as we know it. We can take it that the universe as we know it is the material space-time causal universe. Objective values would be ‘queer entities’ if they existed in

this universe as we know it. Fourth, he thinks it impossible for a moral realist to show how natural properties, which of course are part of the universe as we know it, can be 'linked with' so-called moral properties.

But none of these is decisive against moral realism. With regard to the first argument, even if it is conceded that moral judgment is a reflection of what we desire, this does not show that there are no moral properties. We saw in chapter 4 that Wiggins, for one, thinks that there can be response/moral property pairings. Thomas (Thomas, pp.126-7) reports that one of the ways in which 18th century moral realists accounted for our having moral knowledge was via our emotional responses to moral properties. Thus, even if we agree that it is impossible to leave our reactions, responses and desires out of any account of what it is to make a moral judgment, this does not uphold Mackie's view that such responses can only be to whatever non-moral properties there are. Nor is the second argument compelling. It may be the case that there is widespread disagreement about what is right or wrong. Moral realists need not be unhinged by this. They may try to defuse this point by arguing that such disagreements are largely about matters of fact, or that behind the disagreements lie agreements over some fundamental moral principles. Moreover, even if there are moral disagreements which survive factual agreement or can be shown to be the result of holding different and incompatible principles, moral realists have other shots in their locker. One of these is to suggest that there are non-factual ways of resolving moral disagreements. Another might be to argue that moral disagreements are evidence of our limited capacities to resolve them rather than evidence that there is no moral truth of the matter when there is disagreement. These suggestions will be given more airing in chapter 7.

Mackie's last two points are metaphysical ones. We have seen how Dancy would answer them. Moral properties are no more queer than the dangerousness of a cliff face or the wryness of a smile. And even if this concedes that there is some degree of queerness about such properties, why would queerness rule something out as having a place in an

ontology? There are very queer entities in the material universe, according to the theories of modern particle physicists. What, anyway, does 'queer' mean? A departure from commonsense? If that was the touchstone of a theory, we would have made very little advance in modern science. On Mackie's last point, the moral realist will point to the ways in which the relation between moral and non-moral properties can be understood through the notion of resultance.

I conclude, then, that Mackie's objections can be dealt with by the moral realist. But the moral realist is not out of the wood yet. If there are resultant moral properties, how, if at all, can we get to know what they are? This forms the subject matter of chapter 6.

## CHAPTER SIX

### MORAL REALISM AND MORAL KNOWLEDGE

#### 6.0 Moral Knowledge: introduction

The moral realist holds that moral beliefs can be true, and that some of them are true. Is it possible to get to know what is morally true? This is a prize worth having, for to know that something is the case is to have settled some issue, to have moved it beyond being a matter of opinion. So if the moral realist can show that we can have moral knowledge, the possibility opens up of being able to say that in morality there are some actions, states of affairs, intentions etc. which we know are right or wrong. If that claim can be made good, we would be in the happy position of being able to say that there is little point in carrying on any dispute about whether such a moral judgment was correct, once we had got to know that it was.

Can we gain moral knowledge? If we can, how do we acquire this knowledge? In what form does this knowledge come? Is it, for example, knowledge of some basic moral principles? Or is the idea that moral knowledge is held in the form of moral principles a distortion in some way of the nature of morality?

The first question I consider is whether it is correct to say that there are some moral truths which lie beyond our capacities to know what they are. This will turn out to throw some light on our relationship, as persons making moral judgments, with the objects of those moral judgments. What moral realists say about this also has implications for how they deal with moral dilemmas and moral conflicts.

## 6.1 Are there some moral truths which we might not ever know?

Realism is a general philosophical theory, not one just found in moral discourse. There are realist accounts of science, mathematics, religion, and art. Realists advance a number of theses. The least controversial are that there can be truths in some given form of discourse, that some claims in a given form of discourse are true, and that what makes a claim true in a given form of discourse exists or occurs independently of the claims which are made about it. More controversial is the claim that what can be admitted as a possible truth in a form of discourse need not be tied to our capacities to know that such claims are true. Realists in science claim that there can be truths, for example about the far reaches of space and time, even though these transcend our capacities to make judgments about these remote regions. Realists in history hold that it is possible that there are states of affairs in the past which have left no trace in the present, and which lie beyond our powers of gaining knowledge about them. Nevertheless, realists claim, such states of affairs have occurred, and it is true that they have.

In morality, too, we can ask whether we can state moral truths even if such statements outstrip whatever epistemic capacities and powers we have for knowing moral truths. Cargile (Cargile, 1989) considers the possibility of there being a form of life in which recreational torture is held to be truly and deeply wonderful. In such a society, we may surmise, no one judges that recreational torture is bad, not even those who are tortured. We can even admit that there is no inherent reason why members of such a society could not condemn recreational torture. It is just that no one ever does. Of such a case, some moral realists would still hold that recreational torture is wrong, its wrongness coming about 'because it involves intentionally inflicting suffering for no reason other than you enjoy doing so' (p 147).

On this account, then, the wrongness of recreational torture is independent of anyone in such a society judging that recreational torture is wrong. This is consistent with someone.

external to such a society, judging that recreational torture is wrong. What, then, of the claim that it is possible to say that actions such as torturing others for recreation are wrong, even if no-one judges them to be wrong? If so, this would be similar to realist claims in science which propose that there can be scientific truths even if no one could ever know what they are. Do moral realists have to take the same view of such truths as apparently scientific realists do?

One doubt about whether moral realists are committed to the same position that realists in science are, arises through reflection on the notion that there are types of truth claim where it is doubtful whether we can separate a claim about what is true from how we know the claim to be true. Take the well-known example of a tree falling in the deepest part of the dense forest, where there are no hearers to hear it. Do we say that, though there are no hearers, it makes a sound as it falls to the earth, or do we say that it makes no sound because there is nothing to hear it fall? If we say the latter, the implication in saying it is that we think that something's hearing the sound of the tree fall is a condition of saying it is true that the falling tree made a sound. The same problem occurs with seeing colours. Do we say that an object has a colour even though no seeing being is looking at it, or do we say that if no seeing being is looking at it it has no colour? Again, if we say the latter, the implication of saying this is that we think it is true that something's seeing an object as having a certain colour is a condition of saying it is true that the object has that colour. In the case of sounds, it seems bizarre to hold that there can be sounds though no hearer hears them. Can it even make sense to say that the sound neither I nor you nor anyone nor anything can hear is too loud? Is it not part of what it is to be a sound that a hearer must hear it? Is this also true of colours? In the case of colours, it seems equally bizarre to think that we could say that some object is a certain colour, though no one or no thing could see it. Can it even make sense to say that the colour which neither I nor you nor anything nor anyone can see is too bright? Sounds and colours require both things making sounds or being coloured and beings hearing or seeing them.

Notice that this is a different problem from the question of whether something can be coloured or making a sound, though it is not being observed or heard by some individual here and now. It can be held that something is a certain colour or making a certain sound, though I do not see or hear it now, the contrast here being with the view that seeing something as a certain colour or hearing something in a certain way is what it is for something to be that colour or that sound. The issue which the moral realist closes in on, is the question of whether it makes sense to say that something has moral qualities in the absence of any being capable of moral sensitivities. The parallel for perception would be the claim that sounds and colours occur in the absence of anything that can perceive them.

What bearing do these matters have on moral realism? On the one hand, it is not an obviously hopeless thesis to hold that there can be moral truths which outstrip our capacities to know what they are. On the other hand, it seems attractive to say that whenever there are cases of moral goodness and moral badness, it cannot even make sense to say there are in the absence of any beings capable of making moral judgments. Suppose, for example, there were no human beings and no God and nothing else which could make a moral judgment. In such a world where moral judgments are never made, suppose (as I believe is the case) that there are whales whose sport it is to toss dolphins between each other prior to slaughtering them. If we take the view that, in spite of the fact that there are no beings who could have moral knowledge, there are moral truths, we will end up saying that there are moral wrongs, even in worlds where whales act as they do. If we take the view that the existence of beings who can make moral judgments is necessary to there being right and wrong, then the rightness and wrongness of actions requires not just resultant moral properties but beings capable of making moral judgments. The contrast being struck here is between those who hold that moral rightness and moral wrongness can occur in a judgment-free universe, and those who hold that it cannot.

Rather like colours and sounds, the moral realist's case is not undermined by having to

admit that beings capable of making moral judgments are required in order for it to be said that moral properties occur. It is consistent with this to hold that in a world in which there are persons capable of making moral judgments, there could be moral truths which we do not yet know. It is also consistent with this to hold that there could be a world where there are cases of moral right and moral wrong which outstrip any person's capacities and powers to know what they are. Assuming that God is not a person, perhaps some religious believers could hold that position. God alone, they might say, knows what is morally right and wrong. The most we persons can do is have a probable opinion about such matters.

These issues have a bearing on how moral realists might respond to moral conflicts and dilemmas, and will be discussed further in chapter 7. I now turn to consider how we can acquire moral knowledge, and in what form we hold this knowledge. We will see that these questions contain much that is of interest for moral educators.

## **6.2 Is moral knowledge gained by perception?**

We gain much of our knowledge of the world by perception. Is perception also the way in which we can know what is morally right and wrong? The ethical naturalist, it will be recalled, holds that moral subjects and predicates pick out non-moral objects and properties and that we can get to know these by whatever ways we get to know about non-moral objects and properties. Most ethical naturalists hold that the non-moral objects and properties which moral subjects and predicates pick out are empirically knowable, natural, properties, though there is room here for the possibility that the non-moral objects and properties are supernatural objects and properties. Concentrating on the former, the ethical naturalist is in the happy position of holding that we can discover the basis of our moral judgments by empirical means. If it is the fact that A hurt B which makes A's action one which ought not to have been done, we discover the grounds for such moral judgments in whatever ways we discover that someone has hurt someone else. Now it is

clear that the moral realist will agree that moral knowledge will require that we use these ordinary empirical ways of discovering what are the non-moral natural properties involved in any situation calling for moral judgment. For the moral realist accepts that moral properties arise from natural non-moral objects and properties. But if the moral realist leaves the account of how we gain moral knowledge at this, it is hard to see at the epistemological level what difference there is between the moral realist and the ethical naturalist. If the moral realist holds that moral properties can be known in much the same way as non-moral natural properties, then how are moral properties different from non-moral natural properties? Moral realism would be in danger of collapsing into ethical naturalism. So the moral realist must give an account of how we gain our knowledge of moral properties in order to avoid this.

The answer given to this question by some earlier 20th century moral philosophers was that we know moral properties by intuition. Thomas (Thomas, 1993, p. 127) interprets this to mean that this is non-observational knowledge, indeed knowledge which is self-evident in some way. Brandt (Brandt 1959, ch.8) adds that such knowledge was held to be possessed because of insight into or sensitivity towards the occurrence of moral properties. Both writers, along with many others, dismiss intuitionism as thus interpreted, mainly because it makes it impossible to understand how equally morally sensitive people could make different moral judgments over the same issue. If intuitionism were correct, equally morally sensitive people would make the same moral judgments in such circumstances. But they patently do not. This seems to me to be an unanswerable criticism.

A contemporary account of how we obtain moral knowledge through perception is given by McNaughton (McNaughton, 1988, pp. 56-7):

‘The realist must reply (to the non-cognitivist) that moral observation is not to be thought of as in a special category of its own, quite unlike any other kinds of observation. The belief that moral properties cannot be detected by ordinary methods of observation may, perhaps, be traced to an unduly restrictive view of what can be observed. We might suppose that the only properties that can be

observed are the 'proper objects' of the five senses....If we adopt this austere account of what can be perceived it is clear that not only moral properties but a great many of the things we normally take ourselves to perceive will be, strictly speaking, unobservable. If.....we are prepared to allow that I can see that this cliff is dangerous, that Smith is worried or that one thing is further away than another, then there seems to be no reason to be squeamish about letting in moral observation.'

On this account, moral judgment is a form of observation or perception. But in saying this, we do well to remember what is involved in perceiving something. In seeing something, a person sees it in a certain way. Looking at a rainbow, a person sees it coloured red, yellow and so on. Looking at a field, a person sees it full of cows and sheep. Perceptions, in short, involve having beliefs about what is being perceived.

Is moral knowledge a form of perception which involves having beliefs about what is being perceived? If so, it follows that a person, in order to perceive a particular act as having some moral property such as being evil or kind or dutiful, must understand already what these concepts mean prior to realising correctly in any particular instance that here is a case of an evil act or a kind deed or a dutiful action. But this just prompts the question of how we acquire these concepts. If all moral knowledge is acquired through perception, then we must acquire the moral concepts of kindness, duty etc. also through perception. But then these too require that we already have certain beliefs as a condition of obtaining this knowledge, and the argument becomes a vicious regress.

How are such concepts as 'evil', 'kindness' and 'duty' acquired? Typically a person comes to understand the notion of a duty by being exposed to, and perhaps engaging in, actions which are done from duty. For example, children can learn the moral concept of duty when it is pointed out to them that their own actions lack such a quality. They have examples of duty pointed out to them and, as Aristotle noted, they come to know what 'duty' is by being dutiful. In these various ways, they learn that actions done from duty are actions with a special characteristic. They are acts which must be done, even though it might be inconvenient to do them.

These points appear to suggest that a person will have to have some moral understanding before he or she can obtain specific moral knowledge through perception. To perceive an act as cruel requires that one already understands something of this concept. Given one's stock of moral concepts, then, is there anything mysterious in applying it in particular circumstances? Moral realists hold that there is nothing strange here because there is nothing strange in other non-moral cases. A person can see that the rocks are loose and that the cliff is steep. Because of this, a person can see how dangerous the cliff face is, can see, in other words, the resultant property of the dangerousness of the cliff. Another example: if we look closely, we can see the jaw line tighten and the face muscles move, and thus we see the worry in a person's face, the worried look being what emerges from the physical properties. If we are prepared to accept this, we can remove any strangeness thought to be resident in the notion that we can see the goodness in a person, arising, say, from the smiles and gestures made towards strangers. So why not say, the moral realist urges, that a person can know what the moral facts are, just as a person can say that they know what the mountaineering facts are?

However, this sort of account of how we obtain moral knowledge has been challenged by Harman, whose views have been noted in chapter 4. Harman makes his objection by comparing the ways in which we gain knowledge in science with the ways in which we come to make a moral judgment. He asks (Harman, 1977 chapter 1, p1) 'can moral principles be tested and confirmed in the way scientific principles can?'. (It should be noted that Harman assumes that moral understanding is held in the form of moral principles). How, then, are scientific principles confirmed? Taking his example of particle physics, the particle physicist conducts experiments in the laboratory, already knowing some theory about the properties of fundamental particles. The scientist wants to know whether this theory is true, so to do this, she or he shoots particles through special atmospheres at high speeds. This produces vapour trails which are observed. These observations provide evidence to the scientist that a proton has passed by, because the theory tells the scientist that when protons pass through such atmospheres at such speeds,

their properties produce those sorts of condensation in such super-saturated atmospheres. Thus there is a theory, and a set of observations of some natural events which provide evidence that a certain sort of particle, one which cannot be observed even by the most advanced microscopes, has passed by, having been seen via its effects. In this story, then, there is a theory (or rather a set of theories) about atoms and their constituents and what properties these have. The theory will provide predictions about the effects of the appearance of given sorts of particle in given sorts of conditions. There are also observational judgments made of what occurs in such conditions. Yet the latter are not what makes the theory true. What makes the theory true is that indeed a proton did pass by. It is this fact which has to play some part in confirming the theory.

Are moral principles established in the same way? Harman constructs a case, already alluded to, of a group of young people setting fire to a cat. This is obviously an event in the world, which can be empirically observed. The observer expresses the thought, 'that's wrong'. But, asks Harman, do so called moral facts have any role to play in explaining the moral judgment which the person makes? He continues (p7):

“[There is no] obvious reason to assume anything about ‘moral facts’ such as that it really is wrong to set the cat on fire....Indeed, an assumption about moral facts would seem to be totally irrelevant to the explanation of your making the judgment you make. It would seem that all we need assume is that you have certain more or less well articulated moral principles that are reflected in the judgments you make, based on your moral sensibility. It seems to be completely irrelevant to our explanation whether your intuitive immediate judgment is true or false”.

Harman further remarks:

“Facts about protons can affect what you observe, since a proton passing through the cloud chamber can cause a vapor trail that reflects light to your eye in a way that, given your scientific training and psychological set, leads you to judge that what you see is a proton. But there does not seem to be any way in which the actual rightness or wrongness of a given situation can have any effect on your perceptual apparatus. In this respect, ethics seems to differ from science”.

There seem to be two arguments here. The first is that even if there are any moral facts, such facts and the moral properties upon which they are based are irrelevant as explanations of our making the moral judgments which we make. All we need to explain this, are our observations of the non-moral facts and our subscription to some moral principle, for example that one ought not to cause unnecessary suffering. I think the implication here is that since moral facts and the properties upon which they are based are idle in giving explanations of the making of moral judgments, they should be cut out of our conceptual scheme. The second argument is that it is impossible for there to be any knowledge of such properties, and thus impossible to have moral knowledge which expresses the occurrence of such properties because even if moral properties such as rightness and wrongness are features of non-moral, natural properties, such properties could not impinge on our perceptual apparatus.

On the latter, epistemological, objection from Harman, there seem to be two ways in which this can be rebutted. The first is simply to deny it and hold that there is no reason why moral properties should not be perceived by us. This relies on the sort of argument put forward by McNaughton. We can perceive that the cliff face is dangerous. We can also tell that someone has evil intentions. What, then, is so puzzling about noticing some act's goodness or badness? The second move would be to reject the assumption which Harman makes here, namely that in order to explain the making of a moral judgment, there has to be a causal linkage between the occurrence of events with their moral properties, observations of these facts and some principle which is held by the agent concerned. Here the objection against Harman amounts to arguing that when we say that some act ought to be done because it is good, and good for reason R1, the reason why the act is good is not a cause of the judgment but the ground for the judgment. To say otherwise would be to say that reasons are causal factors bringing about effects. But reasons are parts of arguments which enter into relations with other bits of language to lead us to conclusions. Harman just assumes that moral judgments have to be items in some set of causally effective factors which lead to the judgments being made.

On Harman's first objection, that moral facts are irrelevant to a person's making a moral judgment, Sturgeon (Sturgeon, 1988) in his discussion of Harman's position makes the point that there is a quite normal way in which moral facts are relevant. Take Hitler's depravity. It is a moral fact that Hitler was depraved. Hitler's mind was of the sort to which the term 'depraved' properly applies. Being in a depraved state led Hitler to do the things he did. And this, in turn, leads us, though not in any causal way, to make moral judgments about those actions which resulted from Hitler's depraved state. So it seems that moral facts can be relevant in explaining the moral judgments which we make.

I conclude that Harman has not shown either that we cannot form moral judgments on the basis of perceptions of moral properties or that moral facts are irrelevant to making moral judgment.

Despite these criticisms, Harman has raised an important question for the moral realist, namely what the relation is between seeing the moral property of some act and making a moral judgment about that act. Given the moral realist's theory that we can recognise the occurrence of moral properties as resultant properties, arising out of normal non-moral, natural, objects and properties, the following suggestion would seem to be in keeping with the claims which the moral realist makes. In making our moral judgments, we notice the moral qualities of some act or some state of affairs and we can give reasons why the act or state of affairs possesses these moral qualities. These reasons cite the non-moral objects and properties upon which the moral properties are based. For example, we say that the act of setting fire to the cat was callously cruel and thus morally wrong because it consisted of the deliberate infliction of pain on a helpless creature, these being the wrong-making features of the act.

On the basis of these sorts of moral judgments, we can then make further moral judgments about what ought to be done. Sometimes, the fact that an act is right or good is all that is needed in making a moral judgment. This might be the case, for example, when passing

moral judgment on some figure from long ago in history, or someone in a novel. But at other times, and we might even be minded to do this about historical or fictional characters, we want to convey the idea that in saying that some act or state of affairs is right or good, we think there is some ground for doing something which is connected with the judgment we have made. There are differing types of prescription. We may think an act's being right or good is grounds for ordering some action as a matter of duty, or advising or strongly suggesting that some act ought to be performed. But we might think that holding that some act would be good, is not grounds for insisting that it must or ought to be done so much as saying, rather, that the act is one which would be good to perform but is one which is not wrong not to perform, namely it is to be regarded as a supererogatory act. What we decide ought to be done, may well turn in part on the weight we assign to the moral properties.

This gives us a moral realist analysis of those moral judgments which involve prescriptions for action. Such judgments are composed of two elements, namely an observational element which tells us what the moral facts are, based on the presence of moral properties, and a prescriptive element which tells us what to do, and what degree of urgency and necessity attend the proposed action. Sometimes both elements are involved, sometimes only the former.

### **6.3 In what form is moral knowledge held?**

For the sake of brevity, I will continue to talk of moral judgments as containing a prescriptive element, but the reader should bear in mind that I consider that 'moral judgment' is a wider class. The next issue to consider is the form in which moral judgments are made. This takes us into a dispute between particularists and generalists and this debate is of considerable importance to moral education. I will first outline the particularist's position, and then counterpose to it the position of the generalist, before considering where the balance of argument lies between them.

It is clear from the preceding section that the account given there makes moral judgment deictic. That is, it is in a form which is tied to what is good or bad about some specific state of affairs and what ought to be done about it. McNaughton's theory, that we gain moral knowledge by seeing what is morally there to be seen, gives us an account of moral knowledge as knowledge about these particular features of this situation.

Does the particularist leave any role for moral principles? A widely held view about moral judgment, one held by most if not all of the other metaethical theories so far canvassed in this work, is that we arrive at particular judgments via deductive reasoning. We hold a major moral premise which expresses a moral principle, for example that it is wrong to cause unnecessary suffering. We make observations which are expressed as a minor premise, for example, that this case here is a case of causing unnecessary suffering. We then conclude that it is wrong in this case to cause unnecessary suffering. On this model, the particular moral judgment is the conclusion of an argument which starts with the statement of a moral principle. McNaughton (McNaughton, 1988, p 61) describes this model as follows, and uses the opportunity to make a point about the way the model has been used in moral education:

“We traditionally think of moral teaching as the inculcation of moral principles in the young. It is natural to understand a moral principle as a rule which enables a child or adult to go on to make correct moral judgements in each new case he meets. Such a rule is thought of as singling out some non-moral feature that an action might possess and saying that any action which has that feature has a certain moral property. For example, the principle that one should not tell lies says that any action which is the intentional telling of an untruth is morally wrong. And it might reasonably be thought that whether someone was or was not deliberately telling an untruth was a factual matter which could be established by anyone, even if he did not accept the principle. We might then think of all the moral principles that forbid actions of one kind or another as together providing a check-list of those non-moral features that make an action wrong. If an action does not possess any of those features then it is permissible”.

But moral realists like McNaughton and Dancy (1981, 1983, 1993) are critical of this model. McNaughton further remarks (p 62):

“If however, as this [particularist] realist line of thought suggests, there is nothing that all wrong actions have in common, except that they are all wrong, then this account of the utility of moral principles must be mistaken. The only method of arriving at correct moral conclusions in new cases will be to develop a sensitivity in moral matters which enables one to see each particular case aright. Moral principles appear to drop out as, at best, redundant and, at worse, as a hindrance to moral vision”.

McNaughton points out the implications for moral education of the realist who is a particularist (McNaughton 1988, pp. 202-3)

“the need for precise moral principles is most clearly seen, it is said, in the teaching of children. Even this is doubtful. The role of moral principles in the proper education of the young can easily be exaggerated. Moral lessons are not usually taught by instilling lists of principles into the child’s mind. Rather, when the child does something, or witnesses some action, the parent draws attention to the morally important features of this particular action. But let it be admitted that we do teach a few simple rules to children, such as “don’t steal”..... Does this undermine the particularist’s case? Not in the least. It is often necessary, in matters of prudence as well as morality, to issue blanket rules for the good of the child- ‘Never talk to strangers’. It does not follow that, when they grow up, they cannot throw away the leading strings of moral principles, and learn to find their own way”.

McNaughton goes on to suggest that moral principles are like the ‘rudimentary rules of style’ in essay writing, necessary to get the young learner started in the business of essay writing, but dispensable when the time is right to go onto more sophisticated writing. ‘In the end, if they are not discarded, they prove a hindrance to good writing. And so it may be with moral principles’ (p 203).

This seems to be an unfortunate analogy. No doubt there are authors such as e.e.cummings who throw away some rules, but the idea that all rules can be dispensed with would produce unintelligibility. Nor is it at all obvious that keeping to the rules of grammar, syntax and punctuation is a hindrance to good writing. Can McNaughton nevertheless hold that even if the point about writing is overstated, it still holds good in morality? The point would be that even if some simple rules have to be inculcated into the young, the method of teaching morality to them which is true to the nature of morality is: ‘when the child does something, or witnesses some action, the parent draws attention to the morally

important features of this particular action'. Moreover, McNaughton suggests, when a person is morally mature, recourse to moral principles is idle, for the nature of moral judgment is to perceive what is there to be perceived.

Dancy too attacks the notion that holding moral principles is the form in which moral knowledge is held. Dancy gets to his position by way of considering and criticising Ross' notion of prima facie duties. It should be said that though Dancy is critical of Ross, his view is that Ross was on the way to understanding the nature of moral judgment. What is Ross' position and what is Dancy's sympathetic criticism of it?

Ross held that we gain our moral knowledge by our experiencing the occurrence of moral qualities in particular situations. When we find ourselves in situations which call for moral judgment, what we observe are natural events, states of affairs, actions and so forth with their natural properties. Thus, this act would have, say, the non-moral property of keeping a promise. This produces the further, moral, property of being a duty. So far, then, Ross espouses the theory of resultant moral properties with which Dancy and McNaughton concur. But the duty is a prima facie duty, and of a prima facie duty, one can say that it is (Ross, 1930, p 19):

“the characteristic (quite distinct from that of being a duty proper) which an act has, in virtue of being of a certain kind (e.g the keeping of a promise), of being an act which would be a duty proper if it were not at the same time of another kind which is morally significant”.

This suggests that with regard to a particular act, such as the act of keeping a promise, the act could be one which falls under one moral description, being a prima facie duty and thus being prima facie morally right, but could also fall under some other moral description, of not being prima facie a duty and thus being prima facie morally wrong. We might, I think, add the following point. There will be some situations in which one act is prima facie morally right and another act is also prima facie morally right and other situations in which each of the alternative acts could be prima facie morally wrong.

In other words, moral situations are wider than there being just one act which can be seen either as prima facie morally right or prima facie morally wrong.

For brevity, I will keep to Ross' consideration of the one act which has contrary prima facie properties. Now Ross held that given that we notice that some act has the prima facie characteristic or property of being prima facie a duty, possessing the prima facie property of rightness, these being resultant moral properties of some non-moral property or properties, we learn that its prima facie rightness here in this situation, makes it the case that it will be have prima facie rightness there in some other situation where it again results from the same collection of non-moral properties (Ross, op cit. p.33):

“...we see the prima facie rightness of an act which would be the fulfilment of a particular promise, and of another which would be the fulfilment of another promise, and when we have reached sufficient maturity to think in general terms, we apprehend prima facie rightness to belong to the nature of any fulfilment of promise. What comes first in time is the apprehension of the self-evident prima facie rightness of an individual act of a particular type. From this we come by reflection to apprehend the self-evident general principle of prima facie duty’.

On this view, there are steps in our moral learning. We start our moral learning by noticing non-moral properties of situations, states of affairs, actions and so forth, and we see the prima facie moral rightness or wrongness of some act, this being a resultant property, one which is self-evident. Its being self-evident presumably means that it does not stand in need of proof. It is consistent with this to hold that such properties are perceived. Just as seeing the cliff face is dangerous is not offering a proof that it is, so seeing the act to be callously cruel is not offering a proof that it is. Ross then suggests that we then find ourselves in other situations where the same moral property similarly results from the same non-moral properties, similarly perceived. At some point we realise that these non-moral properties, such as the the keeping of a promise, possess the general property of being prima facie right and so, prima facie, a duty. That is, we now know that ‘keeping a promise’ is not an act which possesses the particular prima facie property of morally rightness and dutifulness here only in this situation, but is an act which possesses a

general, but still prima facie, property of being right and being a duty. The point of this realisation is that an act like keeping a promise is such that its prima facie morally rightness is instantiated here, there, indeed everywhere it occurs.

Ross then goes on to offer the view that it is possible, by further reflection on our moral experience, to discover that there are six basic categories of prima facie general duties e.g duties which rest on previous acts of the agent, duties which rest on the previous acts of others, duties of beneficence and so on.

What, though, can be said about how we decide what our actual duty is in any moral situation? Ross gives two answers to this question. There can be cases where the prima facie moral property is the only property which results. This gives us our actual duty. Though Ross does not say so, it would seem that this is something which we can know to be our duty, for if we know that it is our prima facie duty, and since there is no other competing prima facie duty, we know that it is our actual duty. It would seem odd to say, in these cases, that the movement from prima facie to actual makes our moral judgment not a case of moral knowledge.

But Ross recognises that in moral life, there is complexity. For (p 28):

“If, as almost all moralists except Kant are agreed, and as most plain men think, it is sometimes right to tell a lie or to break a promise, it must be maintained that there is a difference between prima facie duty and actual or absolute duty”

In the normal several-moral-property cases, we have to decide what is our actual duty. How do we do this? Since we know that in one respect an act possesses prima facie rightness and in another respect prima facie wrongness, ‘we are well aware that we are not certain whether we ought or ought not to do it’ (p30), so ‘we come in the long run, after consideration, to think one duty more pressing than the other, but we do not feel

certain that it is so' (p 31). What we get in morality, then, is 'more or less probable opinion' (p 31). And then (p 41):

“...right acts can be distinguished from wrong acts only as being those which, of all those possible for the agent in the circumstances, have the greatest balance of prima facie rightness, in those respects in which they are prima facie right, over their prima facie wrongness, in those respects in which they are prima facie wrong....For the estimate of comparative stringency of these prima facie obligations no general rules can, so far as I can see, be laid down”.

It is worth noting from this last sentence that Ross does not hold the view that when it comes to deciding our actual duty, we intuit what that is. We have to engage in 'consideration', that is thinking about what we ought to do, yet when we have done that, we will only get to an opinion which is probably right. Why does Ross think that? He appears to think that when we have to decide where the balance of moral rightness lies, no rules can be constructed which will enable us to make this decision in a way which gets the answer right. By inference, he thinks that there is no other way either. It is interesting to note that this can be squared with the general realist position, in ethics as in other forms of discourse, that there may be truths which outstrip our capacities to know what they are.

Ross' view that there are no general rules for deciding what one ought to do in multi-property cases, leads him also to hold that when we do decide what we ought to do, the moral 'ought' which is not favoured in the decision, does not thereby disappear from view. This contrasts with those who hold that there are decision procedures, for they seem bound to think that when these have been operated successfully, the alternative courses of action are then discarded. For Rossians, the unfavoured obligation lives on in some way. One might feel regret at not having done what this unfavoured 'ought' was requiring of us. In deciding in this instance to break rather than keep the promise, 'we recognise, further, that it is our duty to make up somehow to the promisee for the breaking of the promise' (p 28).

There is much in this with which Dancy agrees, but one of his principal disagreements with Ross is over the latter's view that in recognising that some act has the moral property of prima facie rightness, a person is recognising the presence of a general, if prima facie, moral property of rightness, and thus a general, if prima facie, duty. Dancy (1981; 1983; and in Singer 1993 (a) and (b)) rejects the assumption which he claims Ross makes, of holding that if some moral property arises here, based on these non-moral properties, then it arises there where the same non-moral properties are to be found. Dancy's argument here depends on accepting that in general moral cases are complex. He suggests (Dancy, 1993, p 60):

“The leading thought behind particularism is the thought that the behaviour of a reason (or of a consideration that serves as a reason) in a new case cannot be predicted from its behaviour elsewhere. The way in which the consideration functions here either will or at least may be affected by other considerations here present. So there is no ground for the hope that we can find out here how that consideration functions in general, somehow, nor for the hope that we can move in any smooth way to how it will function in a different case”.

According to this, if some reason, grounded in particular considerations, in a particular case is what makes for moral goodness in that case, its reappearance even with the same considerations in some other case does not warrant us drawing the same moral conclusion in the second case. For there may be defeater reasons in the second case which do not apply in the first case. Using and slightly adapting Dancy's own example, suppose X borrows a book from Y. This action together with the action of returning the book results in the latter having the resultant moral property of being right. But suppose another case in which X borrows a book from Y and then discovers that Y has stolen the book from the library. Dancy suggests (Dancy in Singer, 1993, p 60) 'Normally the fact that I have borrowed the book from you would be a reason to return it to you, but in this situation it is not'. The normal reason that it is right to return the book to Y no longer applies. Nor is this to be understood as a case in which there is some reason to return the book and more reason to put it back in the library. The former reason is no longer operative. From this, Dancy draws the conclusion that in morality we have no warrant for saying that just

because some reason applies here, then it applies there, for all cases could be different. We cannot decide, in advance of looking at the details of the case, what is the right thing to do. Only inspection of the details will reveal what is morally right. Since Dancy thinks that most moral situations are complex in the above way, with sets of properties specific to particular circumstances, moral judgments about them can only be particular judgments and not judgments in which general principles are thought to be applicable. The following is Dancy's summary of his position (Dancy, 1983, p542):

“The right solution, it seems to me, is to cling to the particularist epistemology and abandon the generalist tendencies that are unable to be made consistent with it. The position is eventually forced on us because after the discovery that more than one property is morally relevant, we begin to admit a plethora of such properties without there being any way of ordering them”.

Does Dancy show that the most convincing form of moral realism is moral particularism? It cannot be denied that the particularist position has its attractions. It is a salutary reminder that in trying to make the right moral judgment, we have to leave no stone unturned. We are committed by seeking to make correct moral judgments to look at all those factors which are germane to it. Further, it is helpful to be reminded that even if one situation S2 looks like another S1 in which we have made a certain moral judgment M1, closer inspection may reveal differences which might justify us not deciding the S2 situation with an M1 judgment. But is Dancy correct in holding that moral judgments can owe nothing to moral principles?

It does seem that Dancy himself has doubts about this. In the library example, he talks of it normally being the case that it would be right to return the book. The word 'normally' should be cause for concern to the particularist, for is this not to say that there is a presumption in favour of a general principle that borrowed books ought to be returned? Saying that this is normally the case is a way of alluding to some generally right practice. It is also a signal to those of a rigourist or absolutist turn of mind that there can be circumstances in which the normally accepted moral practices can be overturned.

'Normally' hints that there may be abnormal circumstances.

Dancy's doubts may also be seen when he expresses a certain unease about Ross' theory of prima facie duties. Somewhat surprisingly, Dancy writes (Singer (a) 1993, p 226):

"...it [the theory of prima facie duties] leaves no room for thought about rights.....In the vexed question of abortion, we might think it quite unsuitable to decide the fate of the fetus solely on the question whether the world overall will be a happier place with or without it. We may feel that the fetus has a right to life which is independent of and should stand before any question of balancing the advantages and disadvantages of getting rid of it".

This sits oddly with a particularist view of moral judgment, for rights have a content and are supposed to be important, general, considerations in favour of one type of action over others. Indeed, for some, rights 'trump' other considerations, especially welfare considerations.

Perhaps the particularist needs to eschew talk of 'normally' and 'rights'. Suppose we have a full-blooded particularism with no concessions to what we would normally do or whether some act violates a right. Would this, with its implications for moral education, have gains as a theory of moral realism over its rival, Rossian, alternative? A moment's reflection will show that an important matter here is what each theory says about consistency between moral judgments. On the face of it, the particularist will treat each case on its merits. Only if one case is exactly like another, will a moral judgment made in one have to be the same as is to be made in the other. Most cases will not be like that. Dancy's view here (Dancy in Singer, 1993, p.70) is that:

"Although we are able to observe, in a given case, the importance that a property can have in suitable circumstances, the particularist can still insist that no notion is available of a sort of circumstance in which it must have that importance".

This will caution the moral agent against making too easy inferences of the sort 'because this was the right decision here, and since these same factors are evident there, it must be

the right decision to make there too'. However, that a consideration cannot be assumed to have to be applicable everywhere even when there are evidently similar circumstances, does not show that a consideration does not have general application. That I am obliged to return the book here, having borrowed it, does not entail that I am obliged to return the library book there, for there may be circumstances which defeat this as a moral obligation in the second case. But that borrowing a book yields a reason for the act of returning it being good (having that property, as the moral realist puts it), is a proposition whose very terms make it the case that its correctness cannot be confined just to the case in hand. 'Borrowing' involves returning what one has borrowed as a matter of obligation. This is one of the rules for the application of the concept of borrowing, and to deny that would be to deny that the concept means what it means. Nor is this rule for the meaning of 'to borrow' in any way undermined by cases where returning is not the morally right thing to do. Saying that a rule or condition for the application of the notion of 'borrowing' is that what is borrowed ought to be returned, is not put into any difficulty if there is a case where what has been borrowed ought not to be returned. The condition is a general one, but one which can admit of exceptions.

For this reason, we can reword Dancy's stricture (above): we are able to say that, in a given case, the importance that a property has in these circumstances is so by virtue of it having general applicability, though it does not follow from this that the property must have that importance everywhere in which there is a circumstance in which it could be applied.

A second area of concern for particularism is over moral conflicts and moral dilemmas. One might think that the particularist's case is strongest where there are moral conflicts, for in moral conflicts and dilemmas one often searches for some specific consideration which will tip the balance one way or another. Yet even here, it is questionable whether one can attempt to solve such problems without recourse to general considerations in the form of moral principles. In Satre's famous example of the young resistance fighter

who has to choose between looking after his aged mother or leaving France to fight for the Free French, looking after his mother would be a moral good as would be fighting for the Free French. What these apparently conflicting good actions are traceable to are respectively the young man's duty to free France from tyranny and the young man's duty to look after his mother. But these are duties which attach to him, qua young Frenchman, and qua son. They are not just his duties and no one else's. Here, there is a clash between duties which arise from conflicting moral principles, namely that one ought to free France from tyranny and one ought to look after one's aged parents.

A third difficulty with the particularist's theory is that if we did our moral thinking always on particularist lines, this would make it difficult to understand what a special case would be. If every circumstance has to be considered on its merits, there would be a loss of the notion of the very special justification, because all justifications would be special. Moreover, this would tend to encourage moral laxity. Consider lying. In taking each situation on its merits, the moral agent might be encouraged to look for factors which might show that the presence of the wrongness of lying in situations is one that can be overruled or outweighed in some way. But lying is one of those types of act for which there have to be very weighty reasons if it is to be set aside.

Finally, one of the implications of a particularist morality would presumably be that it would be made up out of myriad particular moral judgments of countless people. Could a morality survive like that? One problem would be that it is not at all obvious how any such morality could be passed on from one person to another. This is because the notion of passing on a moral culture is itself one which relies on a degree of generality in what one person tells another.

For these reasons, then, I conclude that the particularist version of moral realism is a flawed theory of what it is to have moral knowledge. Our moral knowledge includes knowledge of moral principles. Knowledge of moral principles is gained, it is true, on a

basis of noticing what is right and wrong in particular circumstances. But these moral features of actions, states of affairs and so forth, are general features, that is they occur when a type of act occurs. This keeping of a promise has right-making properties, and this is so for promise keeping when it occurs. These facts form the ground for the moral principle 'one ought to keep one's promises'.

As has been noted, Ross considers that it is possible to classify all duties which arise from prima facie moral principles into six categories. I am not so much concerned about whether this six-fold category of duties is the best typology of duties, as in Ross' suggestion that reflection will show that there is some such list of duties, into which all other duties can be fitted. Ross is advancing the claim that there are basic or foundational moral principles and duties. Is this correct or is it a misconceived notion? This is our next problem.

#### **6.4 Foundationalism or Coherence in Moral Judgment**

Are there some moral principles which are basic, or foundational? Moral foundationalists think so, but their claim is disputed by moral coherentists. If the former are correct, then any approach to moral education would be incomplete and confusing if the moral learner was not made aware both that there are basic moral principles and which ones they are. If the latter is correct, any attempt to teach that some morals are basic would be a distortion of morality.

##### Foundationalism

What does a foundationalist hold? According to Brink (Brink, 1989, p 101):

“Foundationalism holds that one's belief p is justified just in case p is either (a) foundational (i.e., noninferentially justified or self-justifying) or (b) based on the appropriate kind of inference from foundational beliefs”.

Self-justification is the mark of any foundational moral belief and it should be noted that on Brink's rendering of foundationalism, the foundationalist does hold that basic moral principles are justified for to say that they are self-justifying is to say that they are justified. This is clearly different from saying that they cannot be given a justification. We can presume that 'self-justifying' means that any justification can be found by inspection of the contents of the foundational belief. Suppose 'lying is wrong' is a foundational moral belief. Inspection of this principle will, according to the foundationalist, show us its moral correctness.

Brink sketches a claimed virtue of foundationalism. It will prevent an infinite regress of reasoning in morality. If we ask, of any particular moral judgment why we should think this is right, we will be seeking a reason for holding it. But does the reason itself not have to be justified? We may say, for example, that people ought to be punctual. Why is this important? Because it is wrong to keep people waiting, it wastes their time. Why ought we not to waste people's time? Because it is a more efficient use of people's talents and skills. Why is that morally important? And so it would go on. This is reminiscent of a more general philosophical form of argument, for example where one might ask why one should assent to the belief that there is a world of objects external to us as perceivers. Why not hold that we are all Brains-in-a-Vat? Well, we might say, we are presented in perception with a world which is external to us, and why would this be if it was not so? Then we get examples of various sorts of perception in which what we believe on the basis of perception has been shown not to be trustworthy. These examples are then used to suggest that we have to find some perceptions, or some sense experiences, of which we can be certain that they occur and that they are as they appear to be. These are then held to form the basis of all other perceptual beliefs. The epistemic foundationalist claims that our beliefs must have foundations otherwise we will never have good grounds for any of our empirical beliefs. The moral foundationalist argues likewise. Indeed, in both cases, the perceptual and the moral, the view is taken that unless some beliefs can be held as foundational, we will never be able to answer the sceptic who challenges us to

show that our beliefs are justified. The only way that the sceptic can be answered, it will be claimed, is by finding that some beliefs just are true and just are the basis of all other beliefs of the relevant sort.

One way of taking this is to say that any person's claim to know anything will be impugned unless that person can also show that he or she can know the basis of the knowledge he or she claims to have. But if this is what the foundationalist is saying, then a reasonable objection to it is that this sets impossibly high standards of knowledge for individuals. Most of us have some degree of competence in mathematics, but this competence is not somehow undermined by virtue of the fact that most of us cannot give an account of the foundations of the system which we operate.

However, the foundationalist is more likely advancing the claim that with regard to any moral judgment, there must be some principles which underpin all moral judgments, and these underpinning moral principles are self-justifying. But this position is one with which Brink finds fault. Taking foundationalism to be 'objective foundationalism', i.e. that a foundational belief is one which is both true, self-certifying and indefeasible, Brink suggests that even if there are such beliefs, we would not be justified in holding them (p 118):

"But even if there are infallible beliefs, they cannot be self-justifying. One cannot be justified in holding a belief *p*, even if *p* is in fact infallible, independently of any beliefs whatsoever about why *p* should be true. ....The mere fact that *p* must be true does not justify one holding *p*. To be justified in holding *p*, one must base *p* on second-order beliefs about what kind of belief *p* is and why *p*-type beliefs should be true. But this shows that infallible beliefs are not self-justifying".

(Brink's emphases).

According to this, even if a moral belief was infallible, its infallibility would not mean that it was self-justifying. Suppose it is an infallible belief that all and only morally right actions are those which are conducive to happiness. Even so, Brink would say, one would need to know what sort of belief that is, and why beliefs of that sort are true. One could not be justified in holding the infallible belief as true, even though it was infallible and true.

I shall defer discussion of these points till later in the chapter. Brink holds that they are decisive against foundationalism, and accordingly turns to construct an argument in favour of coherentism in morality. This, he considers, offers a better theory than foundationalism for explaining the nature of our moral knowledge.

### Coherentism

What is coherentism and why might it provide an attractive account of how we obtain moral knowledge?

We can find an example of coherentist thinking in morality in Young (Young, 1979) who considers different formulations of the prohibition against killing. Young considers Tooley's view (Tooley, 1972) that killing another human being is morally wrong because it violates the right to life. This prompts the question of what sort of being can possess such a right. Tooley holds that for this right to be possessed, a desire for life must be held by the right-holder. Tooley qualifies this by agreeing that the relevant desires need not be occurrent. Young objects to this on the grounds that it is arbitrary, for it rules out as possible right holders those beings who could be reasonably expected to come to have desires. Fetuses would fall into this latter category. Young then proposes that we adopt the principle that it is wrong to kill because it unjustly prevents the realization of an individual's life purposes or such life purposes as the individual may reasonably be expected to resume or come to have. Young notes that it will be consistent with this principle that we do not prohibit killing in those cases where a being has no life purposes, as for example when someone is in a permanently comatose condition with minimal brain activity and requires the permanent use of a life support machine. Another possible case might be someone such as the late Gary Gilmore, a convicted murderer in the United States, who announced after careful thought that he did not wish to go on living, and therefore wished that the death penalty be carried out on him. Young then brings a difficulty to his principle, for it entails that we do not take any action which completely

destroys someone's life purposes. What, then are we to make of 'fat man cases' where a group of cavers is trapped below ground and the only way to safety is through the hole in which the fat man is wedged? Where we have to make choices between lives, we are justified in taking the fat man's life, Young urges, but only if the principle we adhere to is that killing is wrong because it is the maximally unjust prevention of the life purposes, actual or potential, of the victim.

This example seems to suggest that moral thinking proceeds by a proposal being made for a moral principle which will cover some moral issue which we are thinking about. The implications of the moral principle are then teased out, revealing what someone will commit themselves to, if they adopt the principle. If the application of the moral principle seems to have unacceptable moral results, that becomes the reason for further reflection about the principle. Can it be amended to avoid the dubious moral implications? Or do we start again by considering a fresh moral principle? And so it goes on, until a moral principle is articulated which has no, or perhaps hardly any, dubious moral applications. In this procedure, there is a toing and froing between proposed moral principles and particular moral cases, testing principles by cases and seeing whether cases alter principles. This is similar to Rawls' method of reflective equilibrium, of which more will be said at the end of this chapter.

What are the implications of this idea for the proposal that we can gain moral knowledge? At the very least, it looks as if, were one to fashion one's moral thinking along these lines, one would be attempting to bring some order and unity to it. I may, for example, at a prereflective stage in my moral thinking, think both that it is morally acceptable, perhaps even obligatory, to execute a murderer but that it is morally wrong to abort a fetus. Then, having engaged in a bout of hard thinking about these matters along the above lines, I may come to see that I cannot hold both of these positions. My moral judgments cease to be contradictory, and start to cohere with one another. It may well be that order and unity is now brought to a much larger range of moral judgments than I had originally thought

about. In critically examining some proposed moral principle about the wrongness of killing, I may come to consider how I think this applies to war and peace issues, euthanasia, killing animals and so on. There may even be applications beyond the issues to do with direct killing, as it were. My moral thinking, for example, might now be taken onto issues to do with the arms trade.

In so far as we achieve coherence in our moral thinking, is that what it is to say that our moral judgments are true? Is that what it is to say that we have moral knowledge?

As a general philosophical theory, the coherence theory is offered both as a theory of truth and as a theory of knowledge. As a theory of truth, it is the claim that a belief *p* is true if and only if it is a member of a coherent set of beliefs. A belief *p*, qua member of a set of coherent beliefs, is part of the truth which the members of this set collectively state. *S*'s belief that *p* has to be seen as, not true per se, but as true relative to the members of the set of which it is a member. This makes *p* a part of the truth in two different ways. First, as a member of a given set, it contains some degree of whatever truth is gained by the whole set. Second, in so far as there could be different sets of statements purporting to say what is true, one set may be superior to some other set, the second set being more true than the first set.

As a theory of knowledge, coherentism is the position that one is justified in holding a belief *p* to the extent to which *p* is a member of some set of beliefs and *p* contributes to the overall justification of some range of beliefs.

A recent account of coherence is offered by Lehrer (Lehrer, 1990, p. 95):

“*S* is completely justified in accepting that *p* IFF the belief of *S* that *p* is consistent with that system *C* of beliefs having a maximum of explanatory coherence among those systems of beliefs understood by *S*, and the belief that *p* either explains something relative to *C* which is not explained better by anything which contradicts *p*, or the belief that *p* is explained by something relative to *C* and nothing which contradicts it is explained better relative to *C*”.

The emphasis on maximum explanatory coherence is important. This is composed of two ideas. First, any proposition, to be a member of a set of coherent propositions, must either explain, or help explain something better than any proposition which contradicts it, or be explained by some other proposition better than the latter proposition's contradictory. In this way coherentists attempt to secure adequacy of explanation. Second, any set of propositions must explain more than its rivals. In this way, coherentists seek to obtain comprehensiveness. Coherentists often face an objection that they cannot show why there should be a choice between two systems of belief, if each of them possesses internal coherence. The above gives the outlines of the coherentist's reply to this objection. The coherentist says that it is rational to believe that system which produces more explanations and deeper explanations of the phenomena it is dealing with than its rivals. If two such systems seem evenly balanced, research must go on to discover which has the greater explanatory power.

Coherentists also stress that no belief in a system of beliefs has privileged status. That is, there is no belief which cannot be challenged and could not be revised if this revision contributed to the greater overall explanation of the set of beliefs of which it was a member. An example of this might be our ordinary perceptual beliefs that we inhabit a world in which objects are coloured. We might be most reluctant to give up such a belief, but if by so doing, we made it possible for a more powerful set of explanations to be developed of these surface properties of objects, then the ordinary belief would have to be revised or somehow altered to accommodate the new system.

From these more general features of coherence as a theory of truth and/or a theory of knowledge, we might expect, then, in its application to ethics, to look out for an emphasis on removing contradictions between moral beliefs and making moral beliefs consistent with each other. More ambitiously, we might expect arguments which claim that it is possible in moral thinking to achieve some overall coherence such that some system of moral principles, moral beliefs, moral facts and natural facts, is the best system we can

get. This will be 'best' either as an account of what it is for there to be moral truth, or as an account of what it is to have moral knowledge. Dancy, in fact, thinks it would do both, for, with regard to coherence as a general theory, he says (Dancy 1985 p 117):

“Surely our theory [of coherence] ought somehow to show why justification is worth having, why justified beliefs ought to be sought and adopted, and unjustified ones discarded. An obvious way of showing this is to show how or that justified beliefs are more likely to be true. If we take coherence as a criterion both of truth and of justification, we have a good chance of being able to do this”.

Dancy suggest that the more a set of beliefs produces better explanations and irons out inconsistencies than its rivals, the more we can be justified in saying that we possess knowledge concerning those matters the beliefs are about, and the more justified we are in saying that our beliefs are true.

Does 'coherence' as thus outlined produce a more satisfactory account of moral truth and moral knowledge than its rival theory, foundationalism? In asking this question, I shall look specifically at Brink's arguments in favour of a coherentist epistemology in morality (Brink, 1989, ch 5)

### Coherentism versus Foundationalism

In the opening chapter of his book, Brink agrees with the 'commonsense view of the natural sciences.....and the social sciences...that these disciplines study real objects and events whose existence and nature are largely independent of our theorising about them' (p 5-6). He goes on to suggest that a possible position, and one he also wishes to support is that 'the commonsense view about the objectivity of the sciences [ i.e.the one just sketched] is roughly right' and 'ethics is or can be objective in the same way' (p6). This he calls 'realism about science and ethics' (p6).

This is recognisably a realist position in ethics, one which accords with the position sketched in the previous chapter. It suggests that the truths of moral judgment refer to

some moral reality which is independent of our moral judgments about this reality. That appears to be what is meant by 'objectivity' when employed to describe 'realism about science and ethics'.

Can we have moral knowledge? Brink expresses reservations about this, for he is doubtful whether, even when some such system of beliefs aspires to maximal coherence i.e. not only possesses a lack of contradiction and inconsistency but also is more comprehensive than its rivals in giving answers to specific moral questions, it can produce either moral truth or moral knowledge, as the following remarks show (Brink, 1989, p 126):

“Objectivism about justification starts from the simple and uncontroversial claim that justification in holding a belief is justification in holding that belief to be true and construes this as requiring that justification must ensure or guarantee truth ('contact with reality'). But objectivism about justification fails precisely because it overstates the connection between justification and truth. Knowledge implies truth, but justification does not. It is possible to be completely justified in holding beliefs which turn out to be false. Objectivism about justification, therefore, threatens to collapse the distinction between justification and knowledge”.

Brink appears to suggest here that our moral beliefs, when given a justification, are held as though they were true. However, we will find ourselves committing a philosophical error if we put forward these justifications as either ensuring or guaranteeing their truth. This is the failure of 'objectivism about justification'. What is the nature of this mistake? It is that even though we may think that our moral judgments have the best justifications they could have, it is still possible for our moral beliefs and judgments to be false. Put this another way. The search for moral knowledge is a mistake. The most we can get in morality is the best justified belief.

Brink amplifies the difficulty (Brink, p126):

“Like constructivism, objectivism about justification prevents us from representing the skeptical possibility that our justified beliefs might be false”.

It is the sceptical possibility that a moral belief could be false which prevents us from knowing that it is true and requires us instead to hold that our moral beliefs are at best those which are the most justified. But to hold a moral belief as the one most justified does not guarantee that it is true nor that it attains the status of knowledge.

However, in spite of having to allow for this possibility, Brink also thinks that we do not have to agree with the sceptic either, for (p. 126):

“A commitment to taking epistemological skepticism seriously does not mean accepting skepticism”.

If we do not have to agree with the sceptic, it would seem that we can have a justified belief after all. But, again, though we do not need to agree with a sceptic who seeks to undermine claims to moral knowledge by saying that moral belief could be false, we must not fall into the trap of thinking that justified belief is the same as knowledge, for (p 141):

“this sceptical possibility [that all our moral realist assumptions are mistaken]....threatens our claims to knowledge, not our claims to justification”.

One might wonder whether the sceptical possibility, that our moral beliefs could be false, is one which is allowed to prevent us not only from having moral knowledge but also knowledge in the natural and the social sciences, and indeed ordinary empirical knowledge generally. These areas of ‘knowledge’ too seem to be capable of having the sceptic’s position stated. Why, we might go on, does the possibility that we might have false beliefs in ethics show that we cannot state moral truths and have moral knowledge? Brink requires of us an impossibly high standard both in our empirical knowledge and in our ethical knowledge. Moreover, sceptical arguments are not good arguments for rejecting a specific epistemic theory such as coherentism. As I understand it, sceptical arguments are not directed towards specific theories of truth and knowledge, but against the possibility of there being any truths or any items of knowledge. What Brink, therefore, seems to be arguing for is a looser sense of ‘coherence’. This is not the sense of ‘coherence’

where a system of beliefs is offered as either or both what is true and what is known as true. The looser sense of 'coherence' is one in which we talk of some belief, being part of a system of beliefs, as the best belief we have, the one that is most justified. This second, looser, sense, loses all pretensions to making claims about moral truth and moral knowledge.

However, notwithstanding Brink's doubts about 'coherence', if it is to be rejected as a theory of moral knowledge, it ought to be on better arguments than the one Brink offers. The possibility of scepticism about moral beliefs, seems a weak ground for doing this. And there are well-known difficulties with coherence as a general theory of truth. If, for example, we say 'there is a cat on the mat', there is something implausible about being told that what makes this true is that this proposition coheres with some other proposition or propositions in a set of propositions. Our normal thought is that what makes the statement true is that there is some state of affairs of a cat sitting on the mat. Further, it is not plausible to be told that 'there is a cat on the mat' is a partial truth. For this would seem to suggest that only when we hold all the other beliefs in a system of beliefs can we be said to know that it is true that the cat is sitting on the mat. Indeed, this opens up the possibility that since we need to have all the beliefs in a system before we can know that it is true that the cat is sitting on the mat, we may never know that it is true that the cat is sitting on the mat, if we do not have all the other beliefs in the system.

These general points apply also to a coherence account of moral knowledge. When we say that the act of cruelty which we have just witnessed was wrong and something ought to be done about it, what makes this a correct moral judgment is the act's being an act of cruelty, not its role in some set of beliefs. Nor do we have to hold a whole system of moral beliefs in order to say correctly that the act was cruel. That judgment seems not to require that it has to be part of some overall most coherent set of beliefs. Many of our moral judgments are of this kind, singling our specific actions or aspects of a person's character, and making our moral comments about them.

Coherentists set out their stall in opposition to a foundationalist account of belief. This leads to a third problem. Can the coherentist avoid embracing some beliefs which have to be taken as correct as a condition of there being a coherent system of belief? To look at this, I turn aside from discussing this in relation to morality to try to glean some insight from problems which coherence faces over perception. Our perceptual belief that the grass is green seems to be true just by virtue of the fact that the grass is green. The difficulties brought about by avoiding or downplaying the connection between what we believe and how the world is, are well illustrated by Dancy's account of perceptual knowledge, which attempts to place this within a coherentist account of empirical knowledge (Dancy, 1985, chs 8 and 11).

Dancy notes that a criticism against coherentism has been that it assumes, so far as empirical beliefs are concerned, that there is a unique, most coherent, set of beliefs. Yet why should we not allow the possibility that there may be a plurality of sets of beliefs, each of equal coherence? To avoid this, some coherentists allow that sensory beliefs are grounded in 'data'. Dancy recognises that a complaint can be made against such a move because it introduces an alien strand into itself. To have recourse to 'data' is to cease to hold that the reason why some set of beliefs is true and forms our knowledge is that it forms part of an overall most coherent set, giving wider and deeper explanations than its rivals, and avoiding inconsistency and contradiction.

To stay a coherentist, one must avoid doing that. But nevertheless are there not some types of belief which have a special role in securing overall coherence? Dancy considers whether what he calls 'sensory beliefs' have this status. Such beliefs form the ground for non-sensory beliefs. Yet why do they do this? Dancy suggests that such beliefs have a 'security' which could be one of two sorts (Dancy, 1985, p 122):

“Antecedent security is security which a belief brings with it, which it has prior to any consideration of how well it fits with others or the coherence of the set. We could hold that sensory beliefs have a degree of antecedent security in being prima facie reliable or justified: there will be greater degrees of antecedent security up to

infallibility. Subsequent security is security which a belief acquires as a result of its contribution to the coherence of the set. All justified beliefs, on a coherent account, have a degree of subsequent security”.

Dancy calls the position of antecedent security ‘weak coherentism’ as distinct from ‘pure coherentism’, the latter being the position that ‘no belief has any greater antecedent security than any other’. ‘Pure coherentism’ will embrace ‘subsequent security’.

Which of the two sorts of coherentism is the one more suited to coherence? The obvious problem of holding some sort of belief to be antecedently secure is that it leads to the question: what gives such beliefs antecedent security?. Since they are antecedently secure, they cannot be given their security by some other sort of belief, since they are antecedent to these. So this consideration leads Dancy to reject the view that sensory beliefs have antecedent security, for this would be ‘just another name for a form of foundationalism’. This leaves Dancy favouring ‘pure coherentism’. No belief has antecedent security. Nevertheless, sensory beliefs form part of our overall set of empirical beliefs because to remove them from the set ‘will create greater disturbance and require more to justify it’ (p 125). Sensory beliefs, then, have ‘a greater degree of security, but it will be subsequent, not antecedent, security’.

Such are the manoeuvres which thoroughgoing pure coherence demands. But do they succeed? Dancy tells us that we are not to accord any special status to sensory beliefs. They could be revised if the overall coherence of our empirical beliefs would thereby be enhanced. That they are not so revised is due to the greater disturbance to the set of empirical beliefs which would result if they were revised. So a belief would be left in the system if its inclusion left the other beliefs in the system with the maximum lack of disturbance. But maintaining a lack of disturbance is a curious criterion for deciding which sort of belief to include in the overall set. We might include all sorts of bizarre beliefs in our set of beliefs provided that their inclusion did not produce greater disturbance. The pure coherentist’s criterion also would require us to include some belief

if its inclusion led to a diminution of disturbance in our overall set of beliefs. A good example of this is provided by medieval science. The earth-centred view of the universe was enhanced by the inclusion of beliefs which stated that the movements of some of the heavenly bodies which did not accord with this theory could be explained by regarding them as moving in epicycles. This gave more coherence to a well developed, coherent, but false, astronomy. And as a final point, there are times in our beliefs when what is required is not greater overall coherence and lack of disturbance but just the opposite. Sometimes introducing a discordant belief into a set of beliefs is a way of beginning to show that there is something wrong with the latter.

This excursus into a coherence account of perceptual beliefs has shown how difficult it is for coherentists to avoid giving some beliefs an importance because they are the conduit through which 'reality' filters through into our conceptual schemes. Now I want to see whether these general problems, and especially this third problem, infect 'coherence' in morality, whether it is offered as a theory of moral knowledge, or whether it is offered, as Brink does, as a theory of moral justification. Brink suggests that (Brink, 1989, p130):

“Most people’s moral beliefs largely concern particular people, particular actions, or kinds of actions. but it is unlikely that these beliefs are consistent, much less maximally coherent. ....explanatory coherence demands that we introduce more general, theoretical moral claims into our moral views in order to extend our moral views to new cases, to try to resolve internal inconsistencies in our moral views, to try to resolve disagreements with others over particular moral issues, and to try to unify and explain the more particular moral views we already hold”.

If we do this, how might we decide which is the best system of moral beliefs?

Brink claims that this is secured by the 'important role which second-order beliefs play in coherentism' (p 127). This is summarised as follows (p.132):

“...moral beliefs formed under conditions generally conducive to the formation of true belief will be more reliable than moral beliefs not formed under these conditions. A belief that is based on available (non-moral) evidence and is thus well informed, that results from good inference patterns, that is not distorted by

obvious forms of prejudice or self-interest, that is held with some confidence, and that is relatively stable over time is formed under conditions conducive to truth:.

A little later, we find that moral beliefs are considered 'more reliable' if they are formed in the following, second order, moral way:

“..on the basis of an impartial and imaginative consideration of the interests of the relevant parties”.

Why do we need such second-order beliefs? It is because we need to ensure that though we are working with a coherentist approach to moral knowledge or to moral justification, whatever moral belief we hold as part of some overall coherent set of moral beliefs has some other hurdle to jump over as a condition of staying in the set. Any moral belief we hold has to be formed with the impartial consideration of others' interests in mind, and has to be screened for prejudice etc. When Brink discusses 'considered moral beliefs' such as 'slavery is unjust', 'avoidable suffering is wrong' and 'promises in general should be kept', these, he suggests, 'though revisable, have initial credibility' (p 136). This seems to give them the sort of status which Dancy gave to those perceptual beliefs which have antecedent security. Similarly, moral beliefs such as slavery is wrong, have a privileged status in our set of overall maximally coherent moral beliefs, but this does not mean that they have the status of permanent beliefs, for they are in principle 'revisable'.

In spite of these moves, what this reveals is that coherence can lead even to such considered moral beliefs being revised. We could say, for example, that a coherent Nazi system of morality could lead to the revision of the moral belief that slavery is unjust, and a coherent business ethic system, which embraced as correct the practice of insider dealing, could well revise the moral practice of dealing fairly. It is an awareness of the possibility that such beliefs are revisable which leads coherentists to propose that we avoid being prejudiced and self-serving, and that we ought to be impartial in our treatment of others. These are inserted to stop unfortunate results which may occur if we find

maximal coherence requires that we ditch certain moral beliefs and their associated practices. But since they too can be in principle revised, the coherentist's device does not work.

Brink's version of coherentism attempts to head off these possible revisions to moral beliefs such as slavery is wrong, by making any possible member of the set of moral beliefs pass through the hoop of 'second-order beliefs'. But what does this mean? The beliefs themselves look for all the world like basic moral principles, tricked out as having some superior 'philosophical' status which enables them to provide the sought-for underpinning for morality. And even if we waive that point and accept the description of them as 'second-order', we do not avoid the difficulty which the coherentist has got into. For such second-order principles, if such they be, are still part of the overall set of maximally coherent moral beliefs. Being part of a coherent system, they will share the features of any belief within the system of coherence. They too can be revised, if revising them produces greater overall coherence or maximal diminution of disturbance. This is a disastrous result. One could easily imagine a supporter of slavery or a supporter of a Nazi system arguing that we ought to get rid of the second-order beliefs that we ought to deal with people impartially. To do so, he might go on, will produce a degree of harmony which is presently lacking in a moral system of beliefs which contained such a moral principle.

I am now in a position to pull together a number of threads from this extensive discussion of coherence and foundationalism. It will be recalled from earlier in the chapter that Brink criticised foundationalism because it requires us to hold that some beliefs are both basic and self-justifying. No beliefs, he claimed, are self-certifying, even if they were to be infallible. But it now looks as though the coherence theory, whether it is presented as being about justification in morality or about moral knowledge, itself finds it hard to resist the suggestion that it has to rely upon there being some beliefs which have 'privileged' status, in order to stop the revision of moral beliefs which coherence permits.

This therefore seems to accept the tenet of foundationalism, that some beliefs are basic and unreviseable. Moreover, foundationalists are in a better position to say this than coherentists for the latter find themselves in difficulty over the claim that any belief could be, in principle, reviseable if revision were to produce greater truth, improved knowledge or better justification. This makes it possible that some of our most deeply held moral beliefs could, in principle, be ejected from any system of moral belief if by so doing greater coherence was secured. Why, we might now begin to wonder, is coherence that important? Is it not more important to get our moral beliefs right?

These remarks seem to point us in the direction of saying that moral realists are better advised to support the foundationalist position that some moral beliefs are basic. Now it is tempting to ask: 'basic to what?' And one obvious answer to that would be 'basic to our way of life'. But that would lay the reply open to the objection that some ways of life, for which some beliefs are basic, are highly questionable from a moral point of view. This, after all, is the sort of objection voiced against relativists. To halt that slide, the moral foundationalist has to hold that there are some beliefs which are basic to morality itself. Nor is this to be construed as saying that there are some moral beliefs which are so important to our moral thinking that they cannot be given up. It is what makes them right which makes them so important that they cannot be given up. There will be some more discussion of this point in chapter 7.

Can anything be salvaged from coherentism? In view of the above criticisms, any value from coherentist thinking can only emerge if it is placed within a moral realist foundationalist framework. This might take coherentists towards agreeing that the second, looser, sense of 'coherence' (noted earlier) is the one to work with, typified in the sort of thinking which informed Young's articulation of the principle against killing. One other philosopher who has proposed a similar notion is Rawls with his well-known theory of reflective equilibrium (Rawls, 1973, pp48-51). Rawls suggests that the moral thinker will reflect on their intuitions and will seek to articulate the moral principle or principles

which provide the reasons for holding intuitively that some state of affairs is right or wrong. Other cases can then be sought about which questions can be asked as to what is the right or wrong thing to do, and such moral judgments can then be further used to reflect on the moral principles which have been articulated. In this way, there will be passages of thinking between what is held to be right about cases, and the moral principles which are held as the justifications for such judgments. Rawls takes the view that this can be done not only in order to see how one might apply one principle, such as the principle against killing, in a varied range of circumstances but also how this same process will enable us to decide between principles where only one moral principle can be applied.

#### **6.4 Moral Knowledge-a Summary**

In this chapter, I have tried to see which positions within moral realism are the most defensible when realists consider the questions of what form our moral knowledge takes, and how we obtain moral knowledge. I have agreed with the moral realist's view that we can have moral knowledge. But we must be careful about what this means and does not mean. Those who argue that we can obtain moral knowledge through perception of the moral properties in situations are correct, up to a point. For in the world, goodness and badness occur, and these properties are perceivable in just the same sort of way that a look of worry on a person's face, or a dangerous rock face can be seen. Moral properties are resultant properties of actions and states of affairs and can be noticed. But such knowledge of the particular moral realities of particular situations, itself depends on the moral agent already possessing a stock of moral concepts and principles, and to argue that these too are acquired by perception is to find oneself in a vicious regress. Many moral concepts and principles are acquired by having them pointed out to us, by us noticing examples of moral behaviour, and by us acting in moral ways.

I also challenged the view from particularists such as McNaughton and Dancy that our moral knowledge could only be in the form of particular judgments. This, I suggested, failed to take into account the ways in which general moral properties are instantiated in particular circumstances. So I found myself supporting a Rossian account which tells us that moral properties are general and regular features in the world. Causing hurt to someone is a wrong-making feature of an action, one which is generally the case where it occurs. Seeing it, we build up a knowledge that this is wrong, prima facie, and this gives us a duty, prima facie to refrain from so acting. This is so for many actions, and this gives us our moral framework of moral principles. But this does not mean that we cannot set a specific moral principle aside in certain circumstances, though why we would do this would have to be argued for.

This led me to consider whether such moral principles were best construed along the lines argued for by moral foundationalists, or whether the coherence theory, as applied to ethics, gave us the best account of our moral knowledge. Noting the doubts which a coherentist such as Brink has about whether coherence can yield a theory of moral knowledge, I examined some general difficulties which 'coherence' has as the theory of knowledge, before turning to consider whether it could give a satisfying account either of moral knowledge or of moral justification. Here, the issue turned on whether coherentists, whether in empirical knowledge or in ethics, could avoid recognising that some beliefs were basic. I argued that they could not avoid accepting this. But some room was made for a looser sense of 'coherence', one which is found in Rawls' notion of reflective equilibrium.

With both the metaphysics and the epistemology of moral realism now discussed, we can turn to an examination of moral realism to see how well it does with regard to our four tests. This provides the subject matter for chapter 7.

## CHAPTER SEVEN.

### TESTING MORAL REALISM

#### 7.0 Introduction

In the last two chapters, I have set out the claims which moral realists make about what sort of judgment a moral judgment is, and what ways we have for obtaining moral knowledge. Traditionally, moral realism has attracted some searching objections, and these are considered in the present chapter, where I examine how well the various versions of moral realism fare when subject to the four tests set out in the opening chapter.

#### 7.1 Our Access to Moral Values

It is clear from chapter 6 that moral realists have a number of claims to make about how we can obtain moral knowledge. With respect to the disagreement between particularists and Rossian generalists, I argued against the former and in favour of the latter. With regard to the disagreement between foundationalists and coherentists, I argued in favour of the former and against the latter. I now want to suggest a way in which all four of these positions, particularism, generalism, foundationalism and coherentism, can contribute towards a unified account of how we obtain moral knowledge.

The starting point for this unified account is the realist's position that the world has a moral content. For realists, this is not just a matter of us noticing that some actions possess certain natural features, as when A's action has the property of hurting B. For realists, A's hurtful action has the wrong-making property of hurting B, the wrong-making feature of A's action being a resultant property of A's action. Realists point out that something's having a resultant property is a quite usual feature of our world. The dangerousness of a cliff face, the look of worry that crosses a person's face, thoughts

which take place in brain states, the unfairness of Kim's action, the callous cruelty of the hooligans, all these are resultant properties of natural events, states of affairs, actions and so forth. Many of our moral judgments are about particular matters, the unfairness of this action, the kindness of that one, the rightness of keeping this promise. Our moral knowledge in these cases is born out of what we notice about particular situations, together with our background stock of moral principles. Judging the action to be unfair, requires that we notice what it is about the action which makes it unfair. Yet judgments like that cannot be made unless we have a notion of what unfairness amounts to. Likewise, we notice what it is about some action of breaking a promise which makes it a wrong action, say the extra trouble to which someone is put because the promise has been broken. But that kind of judgment too only can occur when 'one ought to keep promises' is part of our stock of moral principles.

How do we learn our moral principles? Ross (Ross, 1930, p 40) suggests that moral principles are 'what we really think', though he has a tendency to equate this with 'the moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people'. Whilst those features are clearly neither necessary nor sufficient for moral knowledge, since promise-keeping etc can be both a regular feature of the lives of moral but uneducated persons and promise-breaking can be a feature of the lives of educated people, perhaps one can read Ross here as gesturing towards the point that we learn our moral principles at our parents' knees, from teachers, from friends, from what is communicated to us in the media, and so forth. But we also learn our moral principles in the course of our everyday transactions with other people. Our own thoughts about what we see and experience, play their part in forming us as moral people. I am sure that the growth of moral learning is a very complicated matter. Our grasp of moral principles and our willingness to keep to them, emerge from what we learn from others and what we teach ourselves.

We can say, then, that we obtain our general moral knowledge in these ways, and we apply it to particular circumstances. But moral life is more complex than this, and these

complexities often surface in moral conflicts and moral dilemmas. Particularists and coherentists can both contribute to an explanation of what it is to make a moral judgment in conflicts and dilemmas, whether we construe this as coming to know what is right or wrong, or coming to hold the best justified moral beliefs. Particularists teach us to lay out all the details of a moral problem before we attempt to form a moral judgment about it. When we do try to make that moral judgment, coherentists teach us to engage in a process of trial and error, articulating the moral principle which lies behind some prereflective judgment, examining the implications of such a judgment to see if there are unacceptable moral results, amending the moral principle in the light of them or even starting afresh with a different moral principle, until we arrive at a judgment, backed by a moral principle which is troubled least by its implications. Reverting to Young's treatment of the moral principle, 'one ought not to kill', we may have to agree, for example, that in very special circumstances we have no choice but to blow up the trapped fat caver.

But there is an argument which, if sound, would raise considerable philosophical problems for all parts of this mixed account of how we obtain moral knowledge. The problem arises if it is true that moral reasoning can only proceed by deductive reasoning. Hare, for one, thinks this is so. Hare's reason for this is related to his support for the view that one cannot deduce moral conclusions from non-moral factual premises alone, a view the implications of which were explored in chapter 3. The realist theories examined in chapters 5-7, however, appear to violate this rule. I here follow Thomas (Thomas, 1993, ch 5).

Particularism seems to be a theory in which the form of moral argument is that one passes from statements of natural fact, to statements of moral fact, to statements in which the moral facts are weighted and thence, eventually, to a moral judgment. For example,

1. It is a fact that I borrowed this book from you.
2. It is a fact that I agreed to return the book to you.
3. It is a moral fact that agreeing to return the book has a right-making property.
4. It is a fact that you stole this book from the library.
5. It is a moral fact that your stealing the book is a wrong-making feature of your act.
6. In these circumstances, I weight the wrong-making feature of your act as having more moral salience than the right-making feature of my agreement to return the book to you.
7. So, I ought to return the book to the library, not to you.

Generalists of Ross' persuasion also appear not to conform to the strict requirement of the deductive model. For example,

1. One ought, prima facie, to keep one's promises.
2. I have promise such and such to B.
3. I ought to keep my promise to B, other things being equal.
4. Other things are not equal, for it is a fact that my act of promise keeping will have the consequence that A's life will be put in jeopardy.
5. One ought, prima facie, not to act so as to put people's lives in jeopardy.
6. The balance of moral rightness lies with actions which will not jeopardise A's life.
7. So, I ought to break my promise to B.

Coherentism, too, does not conform. For example:

1. My prereflective moral judgment is that the murderer ought to be executed.
2. One ought to kill all those who break the law and kill others.
3. The implication of 2 is that I would have to agree that if the plotters had killed Hitler, they ought to have been executed.
4. I do not think that those who kill tyrants like Hitler ought to be executed.
5. So, the moral principle ought to be 'one ought to kill all those who break the law and kill others except where the person killed is a vicious and murderous political tyrant'.
6. Suppose A kills B because A, who is B's wife, wants to end his debilitating, degrading and painful terminal cancer.

And so this debate would go on, till eventually a moral principle which indicates which moral judgments are correct, is arrived at.

In all these cases, the passages of argument are not in the deductive mode. In all of them, too, the setting down of natural facts plays some role in forming what the eventual moral judgment is, in a way which does not make the moral judgment just a deduction from major and minor premises. So is moral realism undone by the charge that it permits moral conclusions to be arrived at in a non-deductive way either just from statements of fact, or from collections of statements which include statements of moral principles, suppositional statements, statements of non-moral fact, and possibly other sorts of statement?

There has been some discussion of aspects of this problem in other chapters. It is worth recalling Hume's formulation of the problem (Hume, 1888, p 469):

“In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark’d, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not.....tis necessary that ....a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from the others, which are entirely different from it”.

One reading of this passage is that Hume thinks that it is impossible to argue to non-factual moral conclusions from non-moral factual statements because this tries to establish what one’s emotional expressions are from what one believes. Since, Hume thinks, the former is unlike belief in not being propositional, it cannot be derived from a proposition. Propositions can only be derived from other propositions. Beliefs and emotional states are just utterly different mental states, and one cannot move in reasoning from the one to the other.

Arguments which can be used against this position were deployed in chapter 2. Briefly, Hume assumes that one’s emotional expressions are non-propositional because he thinks that they lack cognitive content. This can be challenged. Further, as both Smith (Smith 1987) and Platts (Platts 1988 a) point out, at least some emotions can be rendered in propositional form. Suppose I hate war, and express this by saying ‘I want war to end’. For the purposes of logic, this can be rendered propositionally as ‘I desire that war ends’, and this can enter into logical relations with other statements.

There is, though, a logical problem in any attempt to derive a moral conclusion containing terms such as ‘ought,’ from non-moral factual premises. Suppose we say that there are statements in the premises of arguments which are entirely of a factual kind, and there is a conclusion which says what we ought to do, using a term like ‘ought’. Then, it is said, such reasoning must fail to establish sound conclusions because the reasoning is logically invalid. For any conclusion to be validly derived, the terms used to express it must be present in the premises of the argument. Any attempt to derive moral conclusions from

non-moral premises must fail because it falls foul of this principle of logic.

This is the reason why some have held that ethical naturalism must fail. The ethical naturalist points out certain non-moral, natural, facts, and then holds that these warrant certain moral conclusions. Some ethical naturalists think that the conclusions follow from the premises because of a meaning rule. Thus, for example, if someone is described as rude, since 'rude' is held to be both a description and an evaluation, these naturalists think that the descriptive statement entails an evaluative statement. To describe someone as rude is, on this view, also to say that they are morally reprehensible. Other ethical naturalists draw a less tight connection between description and evaluation but still hold that describing someone as rude warrants one in holding that such behaviour is morally reprehensible. So whichever way ethical naturalists argue it, the criticism is voiced that this is to reach a moral conclusion invalidly from non-moral premises.

This difficulty rests on the acceptability of the principle of logic that it is not possible for any conclusion in any argument, whether moral or non-moral, to contain terms in the conclusion which are not present in the premises. But there are doubts about this principle. Following Pigden (Pigden in Singer, 1993, ch 37), consider this argument:

1. Tea drinking is common in England
2. Either tea drinking is common in England or all New Zealanders ought to be shot.

The conclusion is a valid entailment containing the term 'ought' though this term is not stated in the premise.

One might think, though, that this attempt to avoid the is/ought gap is a bit of a trick, for the counter-example succeeds whatever one puts in the second disjunct. The latter does not have to contain the term 'ought'. One could just as easily put in 'or all New Zealanders are liars'.

Ethical naturalists have tried to counter the objection that any naturalistic argument moves invalidly to moral conclusions from non-moral premises, by holding that the problem can be avoided if some terms in the premise of an argument mean the same, in some sense of that phrase, as some terms in the conclusion. Snare illustrates this possibility (Snare, 1992 p.85):

“suppose Aquinas is right that ‘good for species S’ just means ‘being naturally sought after by species S’. Then we could produce the following as a counter-example [to not deriving ought from is]:

(a) Living in society is something humans (by their nature) seek after.

Therefore

(b) Living in society is a good thing for humans’.

If it is analytically true that ‘good’ means ‘being naturally sought after by humans, then statement (b) follows from statement (a).

This move attracted Moore’s objection that to argue in this way was to commit the naturalistic fallacy. The error which Moore thought was made by ethical naturalists, consisted of trying to define a moral term in non-moral terms. Moore held that the fundamental term in ethics was ‘good’ and any attempt to define this fundamental ethical term would come to grief because with regard to the definiens, it would always be intelligible to ask ‘but is it good?’. By this ‘open question argument’, Moore thought he had defeated any attempt to define ethical terms by non-ethical terms. Suppose we attempt to define ‘good’ as ‘maximising pleasure’. Since it is intelligible to ask ‘but is maximising pleasure “good”?’’, Moore held that he had shown that the so-called definition could not be a definition. If it had been a proper definition, then the open question would not be a sensible question to ask. In any genuine definition, to ask of the definiens Y, ‘but is X Y?’ would be not to ask a genuine or sensible question. Thus, if the definition of ‘bachelor’ is ‘an unmarried person’, it is not a genuine question to ask ‘but is an unmarried person

a bachelor?'. In contrast, Moore thinks that to ask whether 'good' is defined as a certain state of affairs, is to ask a genuine question.

Moore thought he had also shown by this argument that 'good' cannot ever be defined because of any attempted definition, the same question can be asked: 'but is it i.e. the definiens, good?'. If this objection from Moore is sound, then any attempt to argue to an evaluative conclusion from a combination of factual and analytic, that is definitional, premises will come to grief, not because of a fault in logic but because the analytic premise cannot ever be safe in so far as it purports to offer a definition of good. We can ask, for example, of the utilitarian premise that 'good' means 'maximising happiness', 'but is maximising happiness good?' and we can ask of Aquinas 'but is living in society good?'

How incisive is Moore's argument? First, it only succeeds provided that the argument to which it is an objection contains attempts at producing definitions of terms such as 'good'. We might be led into thinking that this is what is being offered by the language in which some statement is couched which purports to tell us what is good. The term 'is' is ambiguous. In one sense, whenever someone is telling us what goodness is, 'is' is a term which is used to establish a definitional identity, as in 'a vixen is a female fox'. But there is at least one other use of 'is' which is not the 'is' of definitional identity. Snare draws attention to the following examples (Snare, 1992, p 88):

- “(i) The morning star is the evening star.
- “(ii) Clouds are masses of water droplets.
- “(iii) Lightning is electric discharges in the atmosphere”.

The difference between these three examples and the vixen example emerges when we consider how we come to know the truth of these statements. In 'a vixen is a female fox' we establish this truth by holding that this is how we are going to understand the term

'vixen'. The truth is an analytic truth, a truth about the meanings of our words. In the latter three examples, we establish that they are true through scientific discoveries. What has been discovered is that some state of affairs is identical with some other state of affairs. It is an empirical identity in which two different terms are used to refer to the same phenomenon. The term 'clouds' and the term 'masses of water droplets' refer to the same thing. But these two terms do not mean the same thing. Any doubt about this ought to be dispelled when we reflect on what we do when we pay our water rates. In paying our water rates, we do not pay our H<sub>2</sub>O rates, for 'water' and 'H<sub>2</sub>O' do not mean the same thing. But in paying our water rates, we are paying for supplies of H<sub>2</sub>O. Putnam has called this sort of identity 'the synthetic identity of properties' (Putnam, 1981, p 206). This captures well, I think, the point that such pairs of terms in these sentences possess identity of extension. 'Water' and 'H<sub>2</sub>O' refer to and only to the same phenomena. They are extensionally equivalent, without it also being the case that they mean the same thing.

Accordingly, a person may, in saying what is good, be saying what properties or states of affairs possess goodness. This does not commit one to claiming that 'good' or whatever other term one uses to describe the properties or states of affairs, mean the same thing. A utilitarian, for example, can be taken to be saying, not what 'good' means but what sorts of things are good, namely actions which are conducive to happiness. 'Good' would not be synonymous with 'actions conducive to happiness'.

Second one can deny Moore's claim that it is not sensible to ask, of any non-moral definiens of a moral term, 'but is it i.e. the definiens, good?' A person may not know that some moral term means what it means, and so may be asking a genuine question in asking whether its definiens is what it means.

To return to the question of whether ethical naturalists argue invalidly, the following now appears able to escape this charge:

Such and such a type of act maximises happiness.

Good is maximising happiness.

Such and such a type of act is good.

Any objections to this position will be normative ones concerned with the second premise, not logical objections.

The point of this diversion into the problems which the ethical naturalist is held to face, that of deriving moral conclusions from non-moral natural premises, is to see whether the moral realist, who evidently faces similar difficulties, can offer similar solutions to the problem. From the above argument, it appears that the moral realist can hold that no attempt is being made to define deontic terms such as 'right', 'wrong' 'good' 'bad' in non-moral terms. Terms like 'right and 'wrong" when used in moral judgments describe what actions, states of affairs and so forth possess goodness. They do not attempt to define terms like 'good'. In the three examples, given earlier in this section, of particularist, generalist and coherentist thinking in ethics, this offers at least a part reply to the charge that they all seek to derive moral judgments from non-moral statements. The charge assumes that these forms of argument either explicitly employ or assume a natural definition of moral terms. That charge can now be met.

There is, also, another argument available to moral realists in reply to the charge that theirs is an invalid form of argument. This is to question whether argument in morality has to conform to the deductivist model where one deduces one's conclusion from premises in a logically valid way. Dancy contests this (Dancy, 1993, p.113):

“To justify one’s choice is to give the reasons one sees for making it, and to give those reasons is just to lay out how one sees the situation, starting in the right place and going on to display the various salient features in the right way; to do this is to fill in the moral horizon. In giving those reasons one is not arguing for one’s way of seeing the situation. One is rather appealing to others to see it.....the way one sees it oneself, and the appeal consists of laying out that way as persuasively as one can. The persuasiveness here is the persuasiveness of narrative; an internal coherence in the account which compels consent. We succeed in our aim when our story sounds right. Moral justification is therefore not subsumptive in nature, but narrative”.

Whether or not one agrees with Dancy here, turns partly on whether one agrees with his attempt, through particularism, to overturn the view that holding moral principles is essential to making moral judgments, a debate rehearsed in 6.3. But one can also see his account here as a counter-claim to the deductive model of moral reasoning. Dancy, in effect, suggests that inductive inference is the mode of reasoning (or narrative) in morality. In chapter 2, we also had occasion to note the example from Emmet (Thomas, 1993, p 15), that one can argue from the fact that she is old and lonely to the conclusion that she needs some help. What else do we need to say in order to reach that moral conclusion?

## **7.2 Moral Conflicts and Moral Dilemmas**

Whatever the merits of moral realism, many have held that it faces great difficulties when it comes to consider moral conflicts and moral dilemmas. The moral realist seems to have to say something like this: in any situation which calls for moral judgment, we must look for the moral qualities of some action or state of affairs; if they are there, when we ask ourselves what we ought to do or what it would be good to do, there must be a correct answer to our question. It is, of course, consistent with this to hold that we may not know what these moral truths are. Indeed, we have more than once noted that a moral realist could say that there may be some moral truths which may outstrip our capacity ever to know what they are. But the moral realist must be making the point that there are true answers to moral questions about what we ought to do, and this is so even when there are conflicting moral judgments.

However, if there are correct answers to at least some of the moral problems which we have to solve, we might reasonably expect there to be far more convergence in our moral views than is the case. We saw in chapter 4 that it was just this point which made Wiggins draw back from embracing what he called 'moral cognitivism', which is a close cousin, if not the identical twin, of moral realism. Moral convergence is just what we do not have, says the critic of moral realism. What we do have is evidence of moral disagreement, and this points strongly to the conclusion that there are many conflicts and dilemmas which are irresolvable. If the moral realists were right, we should expect there to be much more moral consensus than there is.

Somewhat ironically, if we accept the sort of analysis of the grounds of moral judgment which Dancy has provided, the critic of moral realism might use that analysis against moral realism. Moral realists hold that when we make moral judgments, we have to consider the factors which are at play in moral situations, and what we usually find is that there are all sorts of considerations which have a bearing on what is right and wrong, good and bad. Each of these can generate disagreement. We can have disagreements about which considerations are relevant, about the weight to give to specific considerations, and about how one consideration is connected to another one. This is so whether we are talking about a moral conflict between individuals or cultures, or whether we are talking of the internal conflicts which make for moral dilemmas. It is unsurprising, then, that we find ourselves in moral quandries so perplexing that the idea that there is a correct moral answer to them is one likely to be met with incredulity.

How might the moral realist respond to this? In what follows, I shall, first, briefly review what the nature of moral conflicts or dilemmas are and then consider how these might arise. Then, I will look at three moves which the moral realist might make on the question of whether moral conflicts and dilemmas are irresolvable. One is that the evidence is that they solvable. Another is that moral conflicts and dilemmas are unintelligible, so the problem does not arise. The third is that moral conflicts and dilemmas are resolvable.

To get some purchase on the problem, let us look in a little more detail at the nature of moral dilemmas, a standard account of which (Gowans, 1987, p 3) focusses on what it is for a single person S to be faced with two or more conflicting obligations. Gowans explains the features of a moral dilemma thus:

“A Moral Dilemma is a situation in which an agent S morally ought to do A, and morally ought to do B but cannot do both, either because B is just not-doing-A, or because some contingent feature of the world prevents doing both”.

Expanding this to moral conflicts between individuals and between groups of individuals (between X and Y), we can say that a moral conflict arises when X and Y each hold with regard to some situation calling for a moral judgment, (a) that some course of action is morally right but that (b) the one which the other individual or group chooses is not right, and is such that both courses of action indicated in the moral judgments cannot be taken.

Why do moral conflicts and dilemmas arise?

One reason might be that they arise where a moral code to which S subscribes is plural; that is, it contains more than one moral principle. However, this is not an adequate explanation as it stands because it is conceivable that there could be a moral code with a plurality of moral principles such that for each and every moral decision which had to be or would need to be made, some determinate moral principle applied to that decision. Here, the moral code would have been developed in such a way that for each situation to be resolved morally, there would be a specific moral principle designed for that situation and its exact replicas. The moral principle would have to be highly specific, something like ‘in situation K, this (followed by some description) ought to be done’.

So it is not the plurality of the principles of a moral code per se which explains the existence of moral conflicts and dilemmas, for in a plural moral code moral principles

will not compete with each other if they are tailor-made. This suggests that if moral conflicts and dilemmas occur in multi-principled moralities, it will be because two or more moral principles apply to the same situation such that both cannot be followed, and this fits well with Gowans' account. The conflict or dilemma is about which moral principle to apply.

But is this suggestion, that moral conflicts and dilemmas occur only when there is a clash of moral principles, too narrow? It has been argued (Marcus in Gowans, 1987) that moral conflicts and dilemmas can also occur when there is uncertainty about how to apply one moral principle. This is not a suggestion that moral conflicts and dilemmas can occur within a single-principle morality, but rather that a moral dilemma can occur when, whether within a multi-principled morality or a single-principle morality, a person finds him- or herself caught with the problem of how to apply the principle. Marcus suggests that this could occur with promises. Suppose that S has made a promise to take her husband to the cinema on Friday evening, and S has also promised to take her daughter to the theatre on Saturday evening. The advertisements on which she has based these promises have however misled her, and the film which she wants to see with her husband is only showing on the Saturday. Which promise should she uphold, since she cannot uphold both? It seems here that there is a dilemma about what she ought to do. Against this, Donagan (Donagan in Gowans, 1987) argues that S is clear about which moral principle she has to support, namely keeping a promise which has been made. Keeping some promise is what she ought to do. The question is 'which one?'. Donagan takes the view that there cannot be any doubt about which moral principle is to be applied. The problem is how to apply it. But it seems to me that Donagan has overlooked the fact that the wife/mother has two obligations, two things which she ought to do but only one of which she can do, and this seems to be just what a moral dilemma consists of i.e. having to choose between conflicting obligations.

Thus moral dilemmas can occur in multi-principled moral codes, or in single-principle

moral codes, and can occur when two or more moral obligations stemming from two or more principles or two or more obligations stemming from the same moral principle, compete to be the moral principle which will be adopted when a person comes to make their moral judgment about what ought to be done.

Given these explanations of what moral conflicts and dilemmas are, and why they arise, what might moral realists say about them?

A first move might be to deny on empirical grounds that they exist. On the evidence for widespread moral conflicts and dilemmas, the moral realist might suggest that if we look underneath the surface differences between cultures, or if we probe the apparent moral dilemmas we are in, we will find that there is some general moral principle to which appeal can be made to settle the conflict or the dilemma. But this move seems to me not to be a particularly successful one. The attempt by Humeans to argue a similar point was criticised in chapter 2. There might be some truth in it, but there is also some doubt about it being the whole truth. One can here point to examples and just ask what is the moral principle which is supposed to be held in common. What is the common moral principle which permits the practice in some cultures of requiring that adulterers are publicly flogged whilst in other cultures allowing adulterers freedom to carry on unmolested by the authorities? The onus would be on moral realists to prove the point, and they are going to have a hard time showing in detail how such apparently different moral judgments in moral conflicts and dilemmas come down to being different applications of the same principle.

It would, moreover, appear that the critic of moral realism can score solid and easy hits by contrasting moral discourse with scientific inquiry in terms of how they handle disagreements. Though there are disagreements in science about whether some theory is true, and whether evidence supports some theory, science has methods which enable such disagreements to be settled. The history of science also shows that there have been

theories which have been decisively rejected because they do not accurately describe or explain the physical world. Science, in other words, has ways of sifting out theories, in its pursuit of correct accounts of how the world is, and has displayed spectacular success in advancing our knowledge of the composition and workings of the physical world. Morality does not fare well by comparison. In morality, there do not seem to be established and systematic methods for settling questions of moral dispute. There seems to be little agreement over which moral theory or theories is or are correct. There seems to be little agreement in matters of moral controversy.

Thus, the realist's first move, of challenging the facts of moral disagreement, is one which is going to be hard to sustain.

The second move might be to question whether it makes sense to hold that there can be moral conflicts or dilemmas. On the surface, this seems an odd move to make. Do we not know that moral discourse is just shot through with conflicts and dilemmas? So what is the moral realist getting at?

Given Gowans' account of moral dilemmas, the moral realist might try to argue that it is irrational to say that one is in a moral dilemma. To see this, let us first take a non-moral pair of beliefs. From the fact that S believes that A, and the fact that S believes that B, it follows, according to the principle of agglomeration, that S believes that A and B. If we apply this principle to moral beliefs, and if S ought to do A and S ought to do B then S ought to do both A and B. Now, if a person ought to do something, this implies that the person can do it. It is false, in other words, to say that one morally ought to do something, if it is impossible to do it. This is the 'ought implies can' principle. If we apply this latter principle to 'S ought to do both A and B', then it follows that S can do A and B. Yet if S is in a moral dilemma, S cannot do both A and B and 'S ought to do both A and B' is false. Hence S's position is contradictory because, according to the principle of agglomeration S ought to do both A and B.

The force of this point is as follows. When a person is considering what they ought to do, it is not unusual to find that there are several obligations which one might have. However, if and when one accepts one obligation, then one cannot have any other obligation as well, if having the second obligation amounts to not accepting the first obligation. (One could, of course, have two non-conflicting obligations at the same time). To say that one has an obligation is to accept that that is what one ought to do. One cannot hold that one has an obligation to  $\emptyset$ , and that one has an obligation to  $\nexists$  where  $\nexists$ -ing amounts to not  $\emptyset$ -ing. One cannot have two such obligations at the same time. So those who hold that being in a moral dilemma is having two obligations at the same time, hold an incoherent position.

If this argument goes through, the moral realist can hold that, though people often find themselves with difficult moral choices, when they make their moral choices, they thereby accept some obligation, and thus have no other obligations on them. But to this, the objection has been made that it does not make sense of a well-known phenomenon in morality, namely the reluctance to do something, even though one also accepts that one is obliged to do it. What this shows, it is argued, is that though one accepts that one has an obligation, one also knows that to discharge it will be to do something which is not wholly right. Indeed, after one has done what one ought to do, one often feels regret at having done it. If we can only have one obligation which is not contradicted by some other obligation, then how can these moral feelings be explained?

A moral realist might try to suggest that such phenomena as feeling reluctant to do something which one knows is not wholly right but which one is obliged to do, are irrational, as are the regrets one feels after having done it. For having agreed that one has an obligation to do something, one cannot have any reason not to do it, nor can one have a reason to do that act indicated by the failed obligation.

This issue really turns on whether one is prepared to say that even though one has made one's moral choice and accepted a moral obligation, the unfavoured choice and the competing obligation somehow live on in the choice which one has made. Using Trigg's example (Trigg, 1971), suppose we have to make a choice between torturing an enemy, thereby obtaining information which will save lives, and not torturing the enemy, thereby risking substantial loss of life. The choice is between two moral oughts, namely that one ought not to torture and that one ought to save life. If we follow the argument being pressed by the moral realist, then an acceptance of one of these obligations as the right thing to do causes the other to cease to be an obligation. Regret would only be rational if the second obligation were somehow operative.

It seems to me that if moral realists stick to the view that once people have chosen what they ought to do they cannot be in a dilemma and there cannot be a moral conflict any longer, they run the risk of over-simplifying the nature of moral dilemmas and conflicts. For even if we accept the realist contention that there is a right thing to do and a wrong thing not to do, and that sometimes there is some action which we have an obligation to do, this does not show that it is irrational to accept that there is some respect in which what one must do is wrong. If we choose to save lives, and we can only do this through torturing the enemy, we know that the latter is wrong, though we also know here that this wrongfulness is outweighed by the benefits of saving lives. Knowing that torturing is wrong is a reason for not torturing the enemy, and this explains our reluctance to torture.

In moral dilemmas we feel the tug of competing and incompatible obligations even when we have made our moral choice and accepted a moral obligation. This gives a reason for not agreeing with those moral realists who deny that we can have more than one conflicting obligation at the same time. Yet how serious a problem is this for moral realism? Can the moral realist hold that it is right for a person to honour one moral obligation and at the same time acknowledge that some unchosen obligation still has

force as an obligation? The fact that some action will save lives makes it right, and the fact that the same action will consist of torturing the enemy agent makes it wrong, but we can allow that there are degrees of right and wrong. Indeed, this is not an unfamiliar moral experience, weighing up the pros and cons of some action and then making our decision on where the balance of moral rightness lies. Some states of affairs result in a degree of wrongness, namely the wrongness which results from torturing, and yet there are other properties of that same state of affairs which result in a (greater) degree of rightness, namely the rightness which is the result of saving lives.

Thus the moral realist need not deny that the unfavoured moral 'ought' lives on. This is consistent with holding that some action is right and the one we are obligated to do. 'Being in a moral dilemma', then, covers both being in a situation where one has to make choices between competing moral obligations which cannot all be honoured, and being in the situation where, having made one's moral choice, the unchosen obligation is still present. Acknowledging the latter is not an irrational thought. Moral realists can hold that there is a right thing to do, and that this consists of a balance of moral rightness over moral wrongness, the latter harbouring the lingering existence of the unchosen moral obligation.

The third realist response to moral dilemmas and conflicts is that moral realists are committed by their position to holding that moral conflicts and dilemmas are solvable. How plausible is this? We need to keep apart this question from another question which it threatens to become; the question of how we might get to know what the right answers are in moral conflicts and moral dilemmas. We might say that there are two senses of 'irresolvable' at work, logical irresolvability and epistemic irresolvability.

On what grounds, then, might it be said, as against the moral realist, that moral dilemmas are logically irresolvable? One suggestion has been that that this sort of irresolvability of moral dilemmas is due to the incommensurability of moral values. But if it is true that

moral values are incommensurable, does it follow that there are no right answers? Nagel resists this implication (Nagel, 1979, ch.9). He holds that there are five fundamental types of value, namely (1) those which arise because of specific obligations that some S has to some P; (2) those which arise because of general rights which are held by all, in virtue of which some S regards some action to be of value to some P; (3) those which arise because of considerations of utility; (4) those which arise because S has some perfectionist ends; (5) those which arise because S has a commitment to some projects of his own. It is not immediately obvious that all these are sources of moral value. The last two would seem to be more concerned with personal goals. The first three do seem to involve genuine moral values, since they are all concerned with how a person should treat someone else. It is conceivable that there could be conflicts and dilemmas generated by clashes of value between one of the first three values and one of the last two values.

Nagel thinks it implausible that there could be some common moral value into which evidently different types of value could be translated. That is his test for commensurability. Nevertheless, he also thinks that the irreducibility of types of moral value to some common denominator ought not to prevent attempts to reach moral solutions to moral problems. Nagel suggests two ways in which this could be done. First, in dealing with complex multi-valued moral problems, the component moral values of the problem should be teased out and use should be made of whatever theoretical understandings are available of that moral value in order to see how it might contribute to some solution. An example here would be using utilitarianism to explore how one might develop utility-seeking solutions to problems. Second, Nagel tells us that moral evaluators should use 'judgment'. But these two suggestions are somewhat opaque pieces of advice. Even if we clarify the contribution which a single value can make in the consideration of clashes between different sorts of value, this does not tell us how to deal with such clashes. Further, more needs to be said before we could see how 'judgment' is supposed to enable us to solve moral problems which arise from clashes of moral value.

To see how a Nagel-type position might be sustained, suppose it is proposed that moral dilemmas and moral conflicts are irresolvable because some values and obligations are incommensurable. What does 'incommensurable' mean? Raz (Raz, 1986, p.322), defines incommensurability thus:

“A and b are incommensurable if it is neither true that one is better than the other nor true that they are of equal value. ”

A number of things seem to follow from this. Raz would appear to make rational choice impossible between options which are incommensurable. For if X chooses one option over another, and chooses it for some reason, for example a reason which involves a statement of value A, X cannot then say that his choice was made because A is better than B. Nor, can X choose value A on the grounds that this is an indifferent choice between the equally-valued A and B. The implication of Raz's position seems to be that, if values are incommensurable, rational choice between such values is impossible. A further implication is that we will have to agree that, say, equality is just a different value from liberty, happiness is just a different object of value from the sanctity of life. It will also follow that when one value is chosen, it is impossible to compensate people for the loss sustained in not choosing the other. This is because the idea of compensation is that some more of one good will make up for the loss of some other good or some portion of the latter. But if goods cannot be compared, it is impossible for there to be any sort of accounting which compensation requires.

The view that values and obligations are irresolvable because they are incommensurable, would certainly be resisted by some moral theorists who in other respects differ from each other. Utilitarians, for example, hold that the principle of utility is the arbiter in case of moral conflict, nor is this view undermined by cases where the considerations of utility are so evenly balanced between competing alternatives that no action can be shown to be decisive. In such cases, the utilitarian may advise that the agent should wait longer if that is possible to see whether one option becomes more conducive to the good

than its rivals. Kantians also believe at least some moral conflicts to be resolvable not because of a calculation of the optimific outcomes of choices but because there are perfect duties whose requirements are necessarily binding on rational agents. No perfect duties can ever conflict, according to Kantians.

A similar view is taken by those Christian moralists who take their moral thinking from Aquinas. For Thomists, a moral system of rules can be worked out which handles conflict by such devices as qualifying a rule to deal with the conflict. Granted the rule, 'once a promise has been made, it should be kept', if after having made a promise to someone to give them back the knife you have borrowed, it turns out that the person is a homicidal maniac bent on killing some third party with the knife, Thomists would deal with this by amending the rule in some suitable way to allow of this exception. Needless to say, such rules become complex.

A further possibility is to put moral rules and principles in a lexical order, such that any rule or principle higher in the order takes precedent over any rule or principle lower in the order. Rawls employs this notion in his two principles of justice (Rawls, 1971), and the idea does have some appeal for we do think, for example, that saving life is more important morally than saving property. How well this idea stands up to detailed implementation is unclear.

Ross too holds that whilst conflicts between oughts can be admitted, this is only because such conflicts take place between prima facie obligations, these being obligations which one would have to put into effect were it not that there are other obligations which a person has which are pressing their claims. If an act is, for example, one of not saying what is true, then that gives it the moral property of prima facie wrongness. But the same act may have the moral property of prima facie rightness, if it has some other feature such as not telling a maniac whom you suspect of planning a killing where a knife is which you has borrowed from him. Faced with the moral dilemma of what one ought to

do, tell the lie or tell the truth, Ross holds that such dilemmas are resolvable in the sense that there is a balance of rightness to be struck (though Ross also thinks that when we weigh up the pros and cons, the most we can achieve is a 'probable opinion' about where the balance of moral rightness lies). This is close to the position held by Foot (Foot, 1983), for she too accepts that moral 'oughts' can in one sense conflict, but that when a person says that such and such is the action which ought to be taken, it being 'for the best', then a solution to the conflict has been found.

This line of thought has been recently explored by Day (Day, 1989; 1991; 1992), who suggests that there is a difference between what is morally right and what is morally for the best. The former, Day claims, is an absolute notion, whereas the latter is not. The difference can be expressed by saying that whereas to achieve the best might still not be good enough (and conversely to do one's worse may still fall short of being bad), to be right is a condition which cannot admit of degrees. Day goes on to suggest that moral dilemmas can be resolved, in the sense of obtaining the best moral result, in a number of ways. One might seek to strike a compromise between the two moral oughts, with something of each moral alternative saved and something lost in the compromise. Alternatively, one could choose one of the moral options but offer some compensation to those moral interests have not been favoured. A third possibility is to replace both the competing moral oughts with a new one. Day regards this as a synthesis of the two moral alternatives. All of these may, nevertheless, fall short of what is morally right. In all these ways, provided that it is recognised that what is morally for the best can fall short of what is morally right, the moral realist can hold that there is a goal, that of what is morally true, and it is this which is to be aimed at, even though one may have to admit that our best efforts falls short of it.

These points at least suggest that there are arguments which the moral realist can use to try to combat the views that moral conflicts are irresolvable because of clashes between incommensurable values and that one cannot say because of this that there are correct

answers to them. Let us suppose, though, that none of the above theories of moral conflict resolution were found to be satisfactory. Would this mean that we would have to accept that moral conflicts and moral dilemmas are irresolvable because they involve conflicting moral values or principles which are incommensurable? If so, that would appear to be a problem for moral realism. Note, again, that this is not to say that moral realism is in difficulties because moral conflicts and dilemmas are in principle epistemologically irresolvable. It is the thesis of logical irresolvability which provides the difficulty for it apparently urges on us that we cannot choose between different values and obligations because there are no points of comparison between them. But as against this, one might ask why the resolvability of moral conflicts and moral dilemmas has to depend upon there being commensurability of different values. If the clash is between choosing happiness or the sanctity of life, why must such choices be resolvable only if these values are commensurable? Is not the demand that they are commensurable a demand for something which does not obtain in ethics, a demand which assumes that ethical choices, to be correct, have to be quantifiable? Moral realists need not accept this assumption. They might save their position by a quite different approach to moral conflicts and moral dilemmas, one which urges that in these situations there are right and wrong choices, that we might have difficulty of finding out what these are, but that that difficulty does not stop us from making rational choices between competing obligations in conflicts and dilemmas. We might, for example, say that in an agonising case where one has to decide whether or not to abort a fetus, the baby's predicted quality of life would be very low and that it is that hypothesised fact which carries greatest moral significance.

### **7.3 Moral Motivation**

The moral realist holds we can know what is morally right. A traditional problem with this position is that a person can know what is morally right and yet not act on that knowledge. Is moral realism a theory which cannot provide an account of moral motivation?

From chapter 2, we noted the Humean view that no moral action is possible without a person being moved by their emotions. The Humean presents an internalist account of moral motivation in the sense that what the moral judgment expresses needs no other element, external to it, to move a person to action. However, the Humean position did not escape unscathed. Doubts were expressed about the sharp contrast which Humeans draw between the non-cognitive states of the emotions and the cognitive state of belief. One's passions, feelings and so forth often have cognitive content. Moreover, the way in which our emotions are related to beliefs is more complex than the Humean allows, for often they arise from a network of beliefs, especially desiderative beliefs.

Moral realists concur with these criticisms but still face the objection that theirs is a theory which is obviously false, since people can know what is morally right and still not do it. Indeed, this is part of a more general problem. People can know what is right and still not do it, as when people still know that smoking is bad for them, know why smoking is bad for them, and still smoke. Put this another way. The most plausible explanation for people taking up smoking or continuing to smoke is that they want to do this. They feel the urge, want to look well with their peer group and so on. For all its faults, the belief-desire theory of action does explain such matters. Further, it may be urged, in order to get people not to smoke, it is not enough for them to be knowledgeable about the facts of smoking. They have to feel the need to stop smoking. What is wrong with any cognitive theory of health education, it will be claimed, is that it cannot explain why knowledgeable people fail to act on that knowledge. What it omits is the necessary emotional state.

Similarly the moral realist, it will be alleged, cannot explain how it is that we can fail to act on our moral knowledge. Take, for example, moral weakness of will. Are not morally weak-willed people those who know what is right but, lacking the will power to do what they know is right, do what they know is wrong. Morally weak-willed people have a desire to do something other than what they know is morally right, though at least they

have a struggle before giving in to their stronger desires. There are, moreover, other cases which make the moral realist's claims implausible. The wicked person knows what is morally right but does what is morally wrong. There is a type of person who knows what is morally right but is indifferent to it, and this is a form of amorality. The accidic person knows what is morally right but due to personal pressure of various kinds such as depression, still does not do what is morally right. In all these cases, alleges the critic of moral realism, the moral knowledge a person possesses is inert by itself. It cannot get a person to do what is morally right unless it is harnessed to things like desires, wishes or feelings to do what is morally right.

How might the moral realist respond to this objection? One move might be just to accept that moral knowledge needs the stimulus of the desire to do what is morally right in order to 'translate', as it were, that knowledge into action. On this account, it would appear that the moral realist ought to accept the thesis that there cannot be an internalist moral realist position. Unlike the Humean who holds the internalist position that the expression of one's desires is motivational, this version of moral realism would seem prepared to accept that in order to activate one's moral knowledge, some external, non-cognitive, source of action is essential. This makes the moral realist have to hold an externalist theory of moral motivation, the external element being the desire for doing what is good. The moral realist, therefore, cannot escape the clutches of the belief-desire theory of motivation. This is the position which Brink accepts. Brink, a moral realist, is convinced that an internalist moral realist cannot explain phenomena such as the amoral person. This leads him to propose (Brink, 1989, p.49) that:

"Externalism provides a more plausible account of the connection between morality and motivation; it makes the motivational force of moral considerations a matter of contingent psychological fact. If, for example, sympathy is, as Hume held, a deeply seated and widely held psychological trait, then, as a matter of contingent (but 'deep') psychological fact, the vast majority of people will have at least some desire to comply with what they perceive to be their moral obligations".

If moral realists were to accept this view, they would have to conclude that moral realism cannot offer a complete account of moral action. Moral realism seems at least wedded to the thought that our moral judgments tell us what we ought to do, and so give us a reason for acting. But if the theory both proposes that we can have reasons for action and agrees that these are not enough for action, it appears to accept that it cannot be a complete theory of moral action, for it admits that something more than the reason for acting is required in order to get us to act. It will be a failing in a theory, not an advantage of it, if it cannot do this from its own resources.

Brink's acceptance of an externalist position is, I suggest, not an inviting one for the moral realist. Can moral realism take an internalist view of moral action? Its starting point would be its claim that moral knowledge gives a person reasons for some action. Care needs to be exercised over what this means. There is a difference between the case where A tells B that some act is wrong, and B does not acknowledge this, and the case where A tells B that some act is wrong and B acknowledges this. It is the latter sort of case under discussion, that is where a person acknowledges that some act is wrong. To say, for example, that you know that it is wrong to pour gasoline over a cat and set it alight is to hold a reason, which you acknowledge, for not acting in that way. If then you denied that you had a reason for refraining from doing these things to the cat, what sense could be made of what you said? What would it be to say that here is a reason why this act is wrong and I accept this but this does not give me reason not to act in that way? That teeters on the edge of intelligibility.

Moral realists can then explain what it is to give reasons for actions. Indeed one move here is to use the direction of fit argument, discussed in chapter 2. Humeans use this argument in favour of the belief-desire theory of action. Moral realists might be able to use the same argument in favour of their theory of cognitive action i.e the theory that moral knowledge can motivate. Let me quote again Smith's statement of the Humean analysis which depends on the different directions of fit of desire and belief (Smith, 1987 p.51):

“Miss Anscombe, in her work on intention, has drawn a broad distinction between two kinds of mental state, factual belief being the prime exemplar of one kind and desire a prime exemplar of the other.....The distinction is in terms of the direction of fit of mental states with the world. Beliefs aim at the true, and their being true is their fitting the world; falsity is a decisive failing in a belief, and false beliefs should be discarded; beliefs should be changed to fit the world, not vice-versa. Desires aim at realization, and their realization is the world fitting them; the fact that the indicative content of a desire is not yet realised in the world is not yet a failing in the desire, and not yet any reason to discard the desire; the world, crudely, should be changed to fit with our desires, not vice-versa”.

According to Smith and Anscombe, beliefs are of what is true, and their direction of fit is to adjust to the way the world is. Desires are of what the world is to be, or might have been (in the case of a backward-looking desire), and their direction of fit is that the world is to adjust to their content. So how might the moral realist use these ideas? In terms of the analysis of moral judgment which the moral realist provides (see chapter 5), the world is a world with a moral content. The non-moral, natural, facts, for example the fact that the cat is set alight by the hoodlums, is the basis for the resultant moral property of this act's being callous and cruel and so wrong. The moral judgment that this act is wrong is a judgment which has the form of a belief that this bit of the world has gone wrong. The belief is a morally true belief for it tells us what is wrong in the world as far as this state of affairs is concerned. Having judged the world to be morally wrong in this regard, we express in our moral judgments what ought to be done or what it would be good to do. In this aspect of moral judgment, we express our beliefs about such things as what needs to be done to put right a wrong, or what sort of features need to be removed from the world and what sort of features should replace them.

Given the moral features of the world, our moral judgments have to fit these facts. Moral judgments also tell us what ought to be the case in the world. Here, the world has to fit the content of the judgment. Each of these elements in our moral judgment provides a reason for acting.

Given this analysis of reasons for acting, how does the moral realist explain moral

weakness of the will, wickedness, amorality and accidie? The key point here is that the moral person normally does act in accordance with their moral knowledge of what is right and wrong. But it does not follow that in those cases where a person fails to act on such knowledge, this constitutes a proof that the cognitive account is false. Similarly, the fact that some people do not act on their knowledge about the harmful effects of smoking does not show that those who do act in accordance with such knowledge, do not act because of their knowledge. The person who is morally weak-willed is someone who knows what is morally right but fails to act on it, usually because they are driven by some desire which runs counter to what they know is morally right. But that there are such cases does not show that those who act in accordance with their moral knowledge, do not do so because of their moral knowledge but because they are motivated by having a felt desire for the good.

The problem cases, then, are exceptions to the general truth that we can and do act on our moral knowledge. The accidie person, like the weak willed person, knows what is morally good but does not act on it because he or she is gripped by feelings of depression or inadequacy. The wicked person can be accommodated to the moral realist's thesis, because the wicked person is someone who acts on knowledge. It is knowledge of what is bad. The wicked person knows what is morally good, and what is morally bad, and is motivated by the latter knowledge, not the former. Finally, there is that type of amorality where a person knows what is morally good but remains unmoved by this, indifferent to it. This sort of case is different from someone who is just ignorant of what morality requires, though the latter might also be described as amoral, the same word doing duty for these two types of case.

Does this analysis drive desires out of the motivational picture altogether? The moral realist need not be antagonistic to the notion of desires being a source of moral action. The realist can be conciliatory here, allowing desires some role in moral motivation. One can still hold that there are actions which are performed as means to those ends

which are constituted by desires. Many desires indeed are, if not cognitively empty, only thinly informed by cognitive content. Bond (Bond, 1983, chp 2,3) goes further than this and suggests that there are several types of motivational state which can bring about moral action. He lists simple inclinations, certain emotions, and certain unwilled desires. These all are capable, Bond suggests, of enabling a person to act morally, though none of them is a case where a person has thoughts which give the person reasons for acting. We can appeal to these motivational states, though, to give us explanations for the moral actions of people.

The moral realist need only claim that these do not exhaust the account which can be given of moral motivation. People can be motivated to act morally because they see some good to be achieved, some wrong to be avoided, in just the same way as someone can be motivated to give up smoking by believing that were they to continue to smoke, they will likely die a painful death. If the Humean continues to insist that there must be some felt desire in there somewhere, the realist can ask why this must be so. If a person does not feel a desire to give up smoking but nevertheless gives up smoking and offers the above belief as the reason for doing so, why add that there must be some desire even if this is not felt? We have a choice between saying that there must be a non-cognitive desire and saying that we can at least give some account of why a person does what they do in terms of the content of their beliefs. Dancy points to what we are choosing between (Dancy, 1993, p 39):

“We reach a point where we say that people are just motivated by this sort of consideration [i.e.basic desires], in a way which cannot be further explained (except in other ways, such as by appeal to evolution). We introduce a brute and inexplicable desire to make this point. But the pure theory [i.e.the cognitive theory of motivation] is in no worse position. It admits that at this stage all we can say is that people just are motivated by thoughts of food, safety etc. It merely claims that we make no advance in asserting that the motivation is generated by an inexplicable desiring rather than by something inexplicably desired. In this way the pure theory sticks to its view that it is the content of the relevant representations [i.e.beliefs] that explains the role they play in motivation”.

Dancy's point here is that the Humean gives us no reason to give up on advancing an explanation of what a person does by reference to their beliefs. What a person believes is right or wrong, and what a person believes ought to be done, both can motivate moral action.

To summarise: the moral realist can undermine the belief-desire theory of action by holding that the theory ignores the cognitive content of desires, and assumes that desires are always motivating of, rather than sometimes being motivated by beliefs. Some moral realists, however, try to cling to the belief-desire theory by accepting an externalist account of moral motivation. This attempt, it was argued, made moral realism an incomplete theory.

The moral realist has to explain the connection between having moral knowledge and being motivated to act morally. A problem here is to explain how any cognitive theory can deal with cases where people evidently do know what is morally right and wrong but do not act on such knowledge. This can best be achieved, it was argued, by reflecting on the implications of what it is to have good reasons for one's moral judgment. If reasons are acknowledged as good reasons for what we ought to do and then it is denied that they provide reasons for acting, this verges on the unintelligible. This basic point can be given assistance by using the ideas which lie behind the belief-desire theory of action. Moral judgments are true to the way the world is when the world contains moral features. Moral judgments can also be about what we ought to do to bring about a world containing some moral features it did not previously possess. Because moral judgments contain these features, they have a content which gives reasons for acting.

It does not follow that we have to exclude desires from any role in motivating moral action. Some desires can be morally motivating. All the moral realist need stick to is the view that moral action can and does occur when and because we know what is morally wrong and right. This enables the moral realist to argue that problem cases such as

moral weakness of will need not show that the realist's general thesis about moral motivation is incorrect. Moral realism explains this and other problem cases such as amorality, wickedness, and accidie, by holding that they are exceptions to the general truth that moral knowledge can and does motivate moral action.

#### **7.4 The normativity test**

In chapter one, I suggested that there are some moral judgments which one could not in any sensible way contest. I offered as examples of such judgments: it is wrong to rape, it is wrong to abuse children; it is right to keep a promise one has made; it is wrong to steal; it is wrong deliberately to hurt people; it is wrong to abuse someone on account of their race, colour or sex.

Does moral realism lead us to agree or disagree that these are incontestable? In ch 6, I argued that some versions of moral realism do not do well on the normativity test. Those moral realists such as Brink (Brink 1989) who think that realism should incorporate a coherentist theory of moral justification, face the objection that they have to be prepared to allow revisions to even our most cherished beliefs if such revisions produce more coherence to the overall set of moral beliefs.

Realists who are particularists, it was suggested, also do not do well on the normativity criterion. A particularist denies that moral judgments are made by applying moral principles to particular circumstances. Denying this amounts to denying that our moral convictions, held in the form of moral principles, are what we apply. This form of moral realism, I suggested, has been over-impressed by the point that it is important not to ignore the details of any case which calls for moral judgment. The ordinary facts can and ought to make a difference to what we think about cases. But to admit this is not to concede that one has to make every case which calls for moral judgment into a special case with its own special justification. To think this is to rob the notion of a special case

of any meaning. If every case is a special case, no case is. I also suggested that particularism, in making each case a special case, made it tempting for people to set aside moral convictions. It does this by encouraging the thought that a moral conviction, held in the form of a moral principle, was but one consideration to take into account, rather than a consideration which had to have the weightiest reasons against it for it not to be the consideration acted upon.

This leaves us with the version of moral realism which (a) accepts that there are moral properties consequent on the existence of non-moral states of affairs, (b) holds that such properties are regular features of our moral world, (c) agrees that the instantiation of such moral properties is the ground for moral beliefs which are held in the form of general moral principles, which form our framework of morality.

Does this latter position confirm or undermine our moral convictions?

One tempting route for moral realists is to say, following Wittgenstein's thought, that here we run out of explanations. This is the route which Lichtenberg takes (Lichtenberg, 1994). She quotes from Wittgenstein's 'On Certainty' with a qualified approval (p.185):

“Similarly, ‘If someone believes something, we needn’t always be able to answer the question “why he believes it”; but if he knows something, then the question “how does he know?” must be capable of being answered’ ” .

Lichtenberg remarks (p. 185) that though Wittgenstein did not employ examples of moral beliefs in 'On Certainty', his 'remarks fit the moral case strikingly well'. She goes on, referring to cases such as one where a man has sexual intercourse with his three-year old niece (p 186):

“for me to suppose that my response to such cases, or my natural belief in the goodness or heinousness of certain actions, can be called into doubt leaves me utterly adrift. What can I trust if not this?”

This could give us a version of moral realism which proposes that there are moral beliefs which are beyond question true, and which form the basis of all other moral beliefs, yet are not beliefs which can be given a justification, for here we have reached the point where justification gives out. This is Lichtenberg's position, though she disagrees with Wittgenstein over the latter's denial that such bedrock beliefs can be items of knowledge. For Wittgenstein, to know something is for it to be possible to entertain the doubt that one knows it. For Lichtenberg, a person can know something even if the idea of doubting it is not entertainable.

It seems to me that this essentially Wittgensteinian position is not one which moral realists should adopt. For it leads straight to moral relativism. In so far as there are ways of life which have bedrock beliefs upon which the rest of the cultural corpus of beliefs is erected, it is consistent with this to agree that there can be different ways of life, each with their bedrock of non-justifiable beliefs, but with no means of critically assessing them as to their moral acceptability, for the grounds of moral acceptability are internal to each specific way of life.

This suggests to me that the moral realist is better off saying that there is a possible world of a moral way of life, and it is the features of this which provides the reasons by which to judge the moral acceptability of specific actions, states of affairs and whole cultural ways of life. There is a moral way of life such that rape is wrong and keeping one's promises is right, to cite but two features of it. It is these moral properties, themselves grounded in empirical facts, which are the ground for our moral judgments about what we ought to do, or what it is good to do. It is a view which holds that morality does have an essential content which is reflected in our moral convictions, and that such convictions can be justified.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have assessed moral realism against the four tests. All versions of moral realism that I have considered, that is particularism, generalism, foundationalism and coherentism, give accounts of how we can get to know what our moral values are. Though each of these realist accounts are sometimes advanced as improvements on their realist rivals, I suggested that there was a way of reconciling many of the claims made in them. All of these accounts might be held to face the philosophical problem of violating the logical requirement that one cannot derive moral judgments from statements of non-moral fact. An examination of this problem via the supposed problems facing ethical naturalism, revealed that the central difficulty here is one which surrounds attempts to define ethical terms, and it was argued that this problem need not be the one which faces either ethical naturalism or these realist theories. Freed from this difficulty, moral realism offers an account of reason-giving and reasoning in morality, which allows inductive inferences in moral justification.

Moral realism faces tricky issues when it comes to dealing with moral conflicts and dilemmas. The realist looks to be committed to the view that there are determinate, correct, moral answers to dilemmas and conflicts, and this seems a difficult claim to uphold, faced with the facts of lack of moral consensus. The realist would be on thin ice if this was denied. Nor does the realist make much headway by trying to argue that the idea of moral dilemmas is unintelligible. But there are other moves available for moral realists. One is to reject the view that moral conflicts are irresolvable because they require judgments to be made about moral values which are incommensurable. Here the moral realist might try to find a moral theory which showed that moral values are commensurable. However, if this line of argument failed and we were left with the view that moral values are incommensurable, this need not lead to the conclusion that moral conflicts are irresolvable, since the claim that they are is based upon a questionable assumption that in ethics, values have to be comparable. Realists might subvert that by

sticking to their claim that moral conflicts are resolvable and then arguing that it is through making rational choices that moral conflicts and dilemmas are solvable.

The other traditional problem for the realist, that it cannot show how moral knowledge can be motivating, also presents a challenge which moral realists can rise to, nor do realists have to embrace an externalist position here. Moral realists can use the basic notion that reasons for holding a moral judgment to be correct provide reasons for action. This can be supported by suitable treatment of the basic ideas behind the direction of fit analysis of action. The realist can then use these ideas to explain that problematic cases such as weakness of will and wickedness can be explained within a moral realist framework. This, too, need not be in conflict with non-cognitive theories of moral motivation. Realists need only argue that moral knowledge itself can be motivating, accepting that there can be cases where moral action is motivated by cognitively-empty states.

Finally, it was argued that some versions of moral realism do not fare well on the normativity test, though generalism is the exception to this. But generalists ought not to rest their position, that there are basic moral principles, on the Wittgensteinian idea that here the spade hits the rock for this gives hostages to fortune. Better to argue that morality has an essential content which is unpacked into our moral principles. These are the ground for our moral convictions.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION: MORAL JUDGMENT AND MORAL EDUCATION

#### 8:0 Introduction

In the opening chapter I outlined a number of theories about moral education. All the theories contained proposals about the nature of moral judgment. I suggested that if some of these theories were accepted, a consequence would be that moral education was not possible. In this concluding chapter, I shall argue that this scepticism about moral education is unwarranted because of the problems which their various parent metaethical theories face. I will further argue that, based on what has been learned in chapters 2-7, a concept of moral education can be proposed which meets the requirements of objectivity which are necessary for any activity to count as educational. Morality, I shall suggest, is a fit and proper domain for educational activity.

The debate about whether or not moral education is possible revealed that views on this issue are split between those who hold that schools have a moral duty to pass on certain universal or absolute moral values to school pupils, and those who hold that this is based on untenable assumptions about morality. The former position, I suggested, is a way of saying that schools must teach certain moral values whose status is such that they transcend the morals of particular cultures. This position, supported by Tate, also seems to be connected to a metaethical theory to the effect that statements of what these universal values are, are statements of moral truths. It also appears to suggest that it is only by construing moral judgments, moral beliefs and statements of moral principles as bearers of moral truths that we can make sense of the fact that we reason and argue in morality.

Those who are sceptical about moral education reject this theory because they think that it is based on a misconception of what a moral judgment is. Opinions vary, though, on

what is the correct account of moral judgment which should replace this allegedly misconceived idea. A number of objections to Tate's theory of moral education are based on the idea that moral judgments are just matters of taste or opinion. Within this broad category, some hold that moral judgments are to be regarded as analogous to those expressions of taste which are based upon sense experiences or sensations. Others, whilst thinking that moral judgments are a matter of taste, mean by this that though reasons can be given for what one believes, these reasons do not compel a person to hold that belief. Close to this is a yet further position, that since the reasons which a person has for what they believe do not compel a person to hold that belief, this renders the epistemic status of that belief somehow suspect. One's moral beliefs are not proper beliefs, compared perhaps to scientific or mathematical beliefs. And a fourth position is that moral judgments simply state what we do and do not prefer, what we like and dislike. It is worth noting that at least the first and the last of these four views seem to say that when we make a moral judgment, we cannot justify it by pointing to anything other than what is in mind of the individual making the judgment.

This does not exhaust the strands of opposition to Tate's conception of moral education. Some suggest that his mistake lies in not seeing that moral judgments are the sorts of judgments over which it is not possible to be in error. Others, and this is a very influential view, suggest that a person's moral judgments are true or correct relative to the moral standards of the culture or society in which that person lives.

What significance do these claims and counter-claims have for moral education? I suggested that its importance can be seen once we understand a point about the nature of education. For any activity to count as educational, it must be capable of producing claims which are in some sense objective and objectively assessable. So if a theory of morality proposes that moral judgments are a matter of individual taste or individual opinion or error-immune beliefs, then it appears to make such judgments incapable of meeting these requirements of objectivity. What sense could be attached to the claim

that moral judgments can be plain truths? What room is left for advancing rational justifications for moral beliefs and judgments, let alone their critical assessment, if all they amount are expressions of how a person is moved by something, or what a person's tastes are or what their error-immune opinions are?

It seems clear, then, that, all these views about moral education are based on assumptions and beliefs about what a moral judgment is. Since a number of these views are sceptical about whether moral education is even possible, I proposed that a good way of deciding whether or not such scepticism is justified was to examine those metaethical theories which underpin these positions about moral education. I suggested, moreover, that there were four ways of assessing or testing these metaethical theories. Did the proposals in a theory mean that we could preserve our moral convictions, or did it require that we give up at least some of these moral judgments which seem to be basic to morality? Did a theory explain what, if any, is the connection between moral judgments and moral behaviour? Given the pervasive experience of moral conflicts and moral dilemmas, did a theory lead us to conclude that these were resolvable or beyond resolution? Finally, what account could a theory give us of how we could gain moral knowledge or moral understanding? Is this innate knowledge, or knowledge known intuitively or knowledge gained through experience?

The discussions of chapters 2-7 should now place us in a better position to assess these various views about moral education, each with their attendant metaethical underpinnings.

## **8:1 Underpinning Moral Education. Which Theories Survive the Tests Best?**

### **8.1.1 Moral Judgment as a Matter of Taste: Emotivism and Moral Education.**

If moral judgment is a matter of taste, one theory on which this view could be based is emotivism. Here, moral judgments are understood as expressions of our feelings of

approval and disapproval, and this might be thought to provide the analogue in morality of those sense experiences and sensations which provide us with the grounds of our taste judgments. We found, however, that emotivism faces considerable difficulties when my tests were applied to it. Take our moral convictions, such as murder is wrong, as are rape, torture, child abuse and many other things, and telling the truth, keeping promises and many other things are, right. These are moral beliefs which we just do not see any reason to give up and see every reason to keep. Emotivism, by making what is morally right identical with a person's feelings of approval and disapproval, makes it the case that someone will think that some thing is right or wrong just because they approve or disapprove of some action or some state of affairs. Against this, there can be cases where people give approval to what is wrong, disapproval to what is right, and approval and disapproval towards things which can be doubted to have much if anything to do with morality. Think, for example, of the person who thinks that someone's dress sense or choice of furniture is never anything other than a matter of moral appraisal.

Emotivists might try to meet this objection by arguing that the feelings of approval and disapproval which mark out moral responses, are those which an impartial person, not prey to their own prejudices, would have. Yet though it is true that the Ideal Observer version of emotivism might, by this device, rule out certain feelings of approval and disapproval as moral feelings, it is doubtful whether it would totally succeed in being coextensive with basic moral convictions. Lack of prejudice is still compatible with doing wrong things. Nor is it entirely clear how this still remains a version of emotivism, for now feelings of approval and disapproval are subject to non-emotive constraints.

The point about stressing our moral convictions as a good test of a moral theory is that they do not permit of any daylight to show through between what we feel to be right and what is right. Our basic moral convictions are that somethings are right or wrong. Making it a requirement that feeling that they are is what constitutes one's moral responses, allows a gap to open up between what we are convinced is right and what we feel is

right. Nor is this point set aside by cases where we might want to qualify a moral judgment. We might, for example, say that it is wrong to break a promise, but accept that in special circumstances, the promise should be set aside. Yet this sort of case shows only that basic moral convictions can be qualified in certain circumstances. It does not show that they can be set aside because they do not coincide with what people feel. The trouble with emotivism is that it permits too much liberality in what is to count as a moral judgment.

Further, even if a person's approvals and disapprovals coincided with moral rectitude, emotivism does not give a convincing reason as to why this is the case. Here, I think of those emotivists who share Hume's explanation of our moral sensibilities, namely that what we approve and disapprove of are the consequences of our natural sympathies for others. One reason for doubting this claim is that it asks us to accept that such moral qualities are inborn rather than learned, a point which moral educators might be especially reluctant to agree to. Educators have to proceed on the assumption that it cannot be generally true that changes to a person are just the growth of what is already there. This would make it impossible for changes to a person, say in their beliefs or their character, to be ones which take them beyond whatever they were born with. People are not like oak trees, whose development is fixed, stamped in by the properties of the acorns from which they grew. So far as young people are concerned, this is a particularly implausible way of understanding how they change. They are at the time of their life where they are open to all sorts of new possibilities, not the least in their moral dispositions.

Emotivism's reliance on our being naturally sympathetic to the plight of others, also attracts another objection to it. What it offers is a causal account of moral rectitude, making people's moral judgments, those expressions of our approvals and disapprovals, the effect of those aspects of their psyches which are in turn the outcomes of their natural selves. This severs the connections between a judgment that some action is right and the reasons for it being right. For this to be a strong criticism, of course, it would be necessary

to show that moral judgments are reasoned judgments, that is, that they can be said to be correct, and correct for the reasons which are advanced for their correctness. Perhaps emotivists can try to meet this point to an extent. Whilst they seem committed to saying that a person's moral judgment is an expression of their approval or disapproval of something, and that these responses are deeply embedded features of our natures, they might also be able to say that feeling approval or disapproval of something depends on the object of these feelings being as it is believed they are. Thus my disapproval of A's theft of B's property, depends on it being the case that A did steal from B. But even if we grant this point, which amounts to saying that for emotivists, a person's approvals and disapprovals involve beliefs which ought to be accurate, this hardly amounts to providing a justification for my moral disapproval of A's action. It tells us that moral approvals and disapprovals are to be properly directed, but that is not the same thing as saying that such approvals and disapprovals are identical with moral rightness and wrongness.

Still, emotivists might try to protect their position just by denying that one can justify one's moral views by giving reasons for them. But that does strain credulity. If I say that eating animals reared on factory farms is wrong for the reason that they suffer pain, or cannot live any kind of life, I appear to be giving reasons for my moral views. Emotivists seem driven either to deny that these can be reasons, or to explain them away as yet further expressions of how one feels about something. We can wonder, though, why we must accept their denial that we do use reasons in justifying our moral judgments, or why we must accept their reductive explanations.

There is no reason, then, to accept their attempts to sever moral judgments from any reasons we may have for them. Nor does emotivism give us any compelling reason to accept that our understanding of morality is a matter of the growth of some innately possessed natural dispositions nor to accept that our moral judgments are ones which we cannot use our powers of reason to arrive at. Moral educators need not be confined simply to drawing out what is already there nor to structuring learning in order to draw out emotional responses from pupils.

Emotivism is also in difficulty in the account it offers of moral disagreements in moral conflicts and moral dilemmas. Again, our moral experience seems to be that when the parties to a moral conflict think that a moral disagreement is taking place, this generally takes the form of each of the parties thinking that they are right and the other wrong. When a person is gripped by a moral dilemma, there is an internal disagreement, with the individual not able to make up her or his mind about which of two courses of action is the right one to follow. However, if moral judgments are held to be the equivalents in morals of our expressions of our sense experiences and our sensations, this gives us a completely different slant on the matter. When, in matters of taste, I express my liking for coffee, and you express your dislike of it, it does not look as though a disagreement is taking place, just two expressions of what two individuals like or dislike. In similar vein, if two people can only express their feelings of approval or disapproval for something, in what sense can they be said to be in disagreement with each other?

The educational significance of this point should not be underestimated. One might with confidence expect that moral controversies provide occasions for much argument, reason-giving and reasoning. They provide scope for pupils to develop their mental powers of thinking through what they believe about some issue. All this would be impossible if emotivism were accepted.

It might be thought that emotivism is on its strongest ground over its account of moral action, in the emphasis it puts on the necessary place of felt desires in the generation of moral behaviour. If these are absent, the emotivist warns, no moral action is possible. Regard moral judgments as similar to expressions of taste, and then we can understand how they move us to act. If I do not like coffee, I do not drink it. Exceptional cases where I am forced to drink it, do not show that this is incorrect. Similarly, only if I feel disapproval of drunken driving, will I refrain from drinking and driving.

Emotivism seems on strong ground because without doubt moral action can and

sometimes does come about because our emotions are involved. To feel moved by the plight of the starving millions of Africa, can shake a person out of their indolence and can get them collecting for Oxfam. But how strong a point is this? It appears to insist that the only way to bring about moral action is for people to have feelings which move them to action. As we noted in chapter 2, this appears to be not a way to teach people to act out of a sense of duty, since doing one's duty is often something people do in spite of their desire not to do it. Another cautionary note about that is that there can be cases where a person is so overcome by such feelings that not only is their moral judgment clouded but they also do the wrong thing. Perhaps, though, this only supports the earlier point that one's moral judgment is not coextensive with what one feels about something. Further, emotivism seems only to admit, as reasons for action, the feelings which are held to be constitutive of moral judgment. But this has the air of arbitrariness. Why simply rule out any ratiocination as capable of moving us to act? Again, this runs counter to our moral experience, for there are assuredly cases where a person decides to do something right or oppose something which is wrong just because they know what makes it right or wrong. A moral judgment that drinking and driving are wrong for the reason that they endanger lives, is often sufficient for a person to leave the car at home. Moreover, emotivism's stress on the necessity of feelings, has the effect of severing any connections between thought-out reasons for one's moral judgment and action.

These points too have their bearing on moral education. It is difficult to get people to feel the requisite emotions, for the reason that emotions usually just come over a person, unbidden. Anger, for instance, is not usually something which can be summoned. It just takes its grip on a person. A subtle teacher, though, can choose lesson materials which are apt to release feelings of a moral nature. Well-chosen literature can have this effect. What the pupil can then experience is the link between emotions, often powerful ones, and actions. But subtle teachers can also get their pupils to inspect their reasons for their moral views, to draw attention to the gap which often occurs between thought and deed and then get their charges to examine why they do not act in accordance with what they think is right.

Overall, then, should we accept the emotivist view of moral judgments as matters of taste, as expressions of the feelings of individuals which can have no reasoned justification? If so, we would be accepting the view that moral judgments cannot have objective status and cannot be objectively justified and assessed, and so accepting the view that morality cannot be a proper domain for educational activity. Accepting this theory, however, would be at a high cost. First, though it purports to be a theory about moral judgment, it makes the question of what is morally right and wrong into a matter of how we respond to certain states of affairs, rather than a matter of there being certain things which are right or wrong. This might lead us to accept as morally correct things which are not morally correct, and lead us not to accept as morally correct things which are morally correct. Indeed, it might lead us to abandon some of our basic moral convictions, if they do not coincide with our emotional responses. Next, so far as conflicting moral views are concerned, it would have us understand these as the expressions of our differences rather than as the occasions when we state our moral disagreements and try to resolve them through argument and discussion. Further, it offers an account of moral judgments as ones for which one can only give psychological, and thus causal, explanations rather than as judgments which can be justified by reasons. In all these ways, then, emotivism would leave us with a radically different understanding of morality and moral judgment, compared to the one we now have. Following emotivism, morality would consist of a content-less set of unreasoned attitudes. How, we might wonder, does this help us when we have to teach that certain things such as bullying are wrong, or where we are challenged to defend some moral view we hold?

Educationally, emotivism lends itself to a doubtful view of moral development as just a matter of growth, a theory which would force moral educators to embrace the view that pupils' moral qualities are determined by what they are born with. This would make it impossible to conceive of moral development as something to which non-innate factors could contribute. Further, in making moral conflicts just a matter of the expression of one's tastes, likes and dislikes, emotivism would lead to a loss of opportunity for

developing children's mental powers in grappling with issues of moral controversy.

Emotivism, then, is a theory which undermines our ideas about morality and moral judgment and has unattractive educational implications.

### **8.1.2 Moral Judgments as Subjective Beliefs.**

Do the same sorts of problems attend the next theory, standard subjectivism for, like emotivism, this too places great weight on the individual as the final arbiter of what is morally right or wrong? Is standard subjectivism another metaethical theory which, if accepted, would make it impossible for moral judgments to meet the standards of objectivity which are required for an activity to be educational, and if so, is its case a compelling one?

Standard subjectivism, in supporting the idea that moral judgments are just up to us, appears to deny that it is possible for there to be any way, other than an appeal to what is in the individual's mind, in which it can be shown that a moral judgment is right or wrong. If we cannot do this, we appear to have no alternative but to accept that what we think is the arbiter of what is right. It is a short step from saying this to saying that our moral judgments cannot be in error. We can grant that a person might be in error in reporting what their moral beliefs are. But, misreporting aside, the error-immunity of moral judgments seems to be one of the distinctive aspects of this theory. As we saw in chapters 1 and 4, Snare thinks that this is the central feature of any standard subjectivist position when there are apparent moral disagreements, but it looks as if the point is even wider in scope than Snare allows. Standard subjectivists, it seems, take the view that one's moral judgments, misreporting apart, cannot be in error. We have seen that this is a view held by some of those who are sceptical about moral education, so standard subjectivism appears to be the metaethical theory on which their views are based.

Yet standard subjectivists might protest that this distorts their position. It is true, they might say, that moral beliefs cannot be in error, but that is only one part of the theory. What has been omitted is the point that moral beliefs can be true. When a person makes up their mind on what moral belief to hold, that is what counts for moral truth. Since there cannot be errors in a person's moral judgment, misreporting apart, this leads the standard subjectivist on to say that when any moral judgment is held, it is true so far as that individual is concerned. It is, as they say, true for me, though that that does not mean that it is true for you. Moral truth, then, is relative to the individual. But this leads subjectivists into severe difficulties over this concept of truth, which were rehearsed in chapter 4. It appears to suggest that if two people A and B do not agree about the morality of some action X, this is expressed as 'A believes that X is wrong for A' and 'B believes that X is not wrong for B'. It follows that B must hold that 'X is not wrong for A', is false and A must hold that 'X is wrong for B' is false. So both A and B must hold some beliefs as plainly false. Why then rule out the application of the predicates 'true' and 'false' to the moral beliefs themselves?

A way for standard subjectivists to meet this difficulty would be to drop the claim that the predicates 'true' and 'false' can be applied to moral beliefs, substituting instead the thesis that so far as morals are concerned, we can hold beliefs but that these cannot attain the status of being claims to what is true. This would echo the views of some of those who base their opposition to Tate's theory of moral education on the idea that our moral beliefs have a lesser status than other sorts of beliefs which we hold. It will be recalled from chapter 1 that this seems to be one way of interpreting the claim that our moral beliefs are matters of taste, the idea being that though we can give reasons for our moral beliefs, these cannot ever be decisive in determining what we believe. The argument, however, needs to be filled out a little. Bona fide beliefs will be those beliefs for which we can offer grounds which cannot be reasonably doubted. It has to be acknowledged that a good deal more is said about that point in philosophical theories of knowledge (Dancy, 1985, ch 1-3) but we can safely sideline these attempts to nail down precisely

what 'good grounds' for a belief means. The 'matters of taste' school is not engaged in an argument about what constitutes good grounds for moral beliefs. It asserts there cannot be any. Its next step would be to argue that this shows that moral beliefs cannot be true. An assumption here is that the truth of a belief depends upon our being able to justify such a belief as true, again a matter of dispute in epistemology. If, however, we grant these moves to the standard subjectivist, this leaves them saying that moral judgments are a form of belief, though they are not capable of being rationally justified. Because of that, though, they cannot be rationally discounted either. They just are our moral opinions, beyond the reach of rational scrutiny. Little wonder then that they are compared to judgments made in matters of taste, and that they are said to be error-free sorts of belief.

If we allow all these manoeuvres and accept the standard subjectivist's thesis that moral beliefs are beliefs which cannot be decisively grounded in the reasons given for them nor can they be true, we get ourselves into strange educational waters. If we ever come across pupils who purport to offer reasons for their moral beliefs, or if teachers find themselves doing this, a sharp reminder will have to be issued, that no moral beliefs and judgments can be justified by appeal to the reasons they give for them, for no moral belief can be determined by the reasons offered for it. The reasons offered for moral beliefs occupy a sort of limbo. Pupils would, I think, be right to question what the point is of offering, and perhaps scrutinising, reasons for moral beliefs if reasons cannot play any role, whether decisive or not, in justifying such beliefs.

Imagine a teacher conducting a moral education lesson along these subjectivist lines. The teacher and the pupils consider some moral problem, one where there are a number of possible moral obligations but it is not clear which one ought to be adopted. The lesson proceeds. A proposal is put forward that a particular course of action is the right one to take and various considerations are put forward, some for and some against this action. Alternative actions are considered, and they too have their lists of considerations for and against. When this phase of the lesson is over, standard subjectivists would have

to say that there is no more progress can be made over what ought to be done because no set of reasons can ever decisively determine what our moral opinions should be. The teacher could only say something like this: 'you have looked at the various alternatives, each with their advantages and disadvantages. Now go and make up your own mind', Pupils will be left with the impression that their moral judgments, their judgments about what it is right to do, are judgments which will somehow emerge, but not in any way connected with any considerations for them.

Another result would be that a pupil could not make sense of a moral discussion. Discussion of the pros and cons of some proposed course of moral action, is a way of trying to sort out which judgment to make, and on what grounds it rests. But in the course of doing that, one would have to be prepared to reject some judgments, even those one holds most tenaciously, if it seems that they are not backed by sound reasons. None of that would make sense if errors were not possible. Moral beliefs are often beliefs which are the result of a sort of trial and error process. I think this is especially so for those who are at the beginnings of their serious consideration of moral issues. But if standard subjectivism were accepted as the metaethical theory of moral judgment, one would have to conclude that activities like discussing moral problems and testing out a moral belief by exposing it to counter-arguments, would all be idle. No reason could be decisive. Any moral belief, just by being held, would be, though not true, sufficient by itself.

A further result could be that standard subjectivism might encourage the development of certain rational vices. People often have fixed moral views. If we accepted standard subjectivism, this would prevent people from having their views exposed to the critical scrutiny of careful thinking. Protected by the theory that one's moral beliefs are error-free zones, standard subjectivism makes it impossible for some views to be rejected as wrong and others accepted as right on the basis of the reasons being advanced for or against them. One just sticks with the view one has. Dogmatism and arrogance will not

be far behind. Even if one changes one's mind, this cannot be because one sees that one's former view was in error. Changes of mind take on the hue of a conversion.

These all seem to be difficulties which arise from standard subjectivism's struggles with its concept of truth. These struggles help to determine the way this theory treats the role of reasons in justifying moral judgments, and so are relevant to the question of how we can get to know what is morally right and wrong, one of the ways in which, my suggestion has been, we can assess a metaethical theory. I turn next to assessing whether what standard subjectivism's claims are at variance with our moral convictions, and what account it gives about the issue of whether moral conflicts are resolvable.

We saw in chapter 4 that, like emotivism, standard subjectivism is difficult to square with our moral convictions. It, too, allows a gap to appear between what a person thinks is right (for that person) and our moral convictions. Standard subjectivism makes the wrongness of such actions turn on the presence or the existence in the evaluator's mind of those other mental states which act as the final court of appeal for moral correctness so far as the individual is concerned. This offers no guarantee of an exact fit between a person's moral beliefs and our moral convictions.

This too yields a point of interest for moral education. Suppose we were to waive the previous point and accept that a person's moral beliefs are the same as these unshakeable moral convictions. A natural question to ask is: where do these introspectable moral contents of a person's mind come from?. Generally speaking it is true that our parents or guardians, our friends, and those others with whom we come into contact, especially during our formative years, are major influences over us. Many of our beliefs, attitudes and values are taken from them. Some may describe this as conditioning, others as socialization, yet others as the development of character traits. So when standard subjectivism tells us that the moral correctness of people's moral beliefs is up to them, 'verified', so to speak, by some further introspectable contents of that person's mind,

this is only telling half the story. Unless we supplement that view with some further premise that what a person thinks cannot ever be influenced by the views of others, surely an implausible claim, standard subjectivism cannot avoid allowing that it is the moral beliefs of those significant others which provide in large measure the substance of the individual's morality, especially in the early years of belief formation. When a person makes a moral judgment that some action is right, that individual is to some extent bringing into play the beliefs of others as the touchstone of moral correctness, so far as she or he is concerned. So what a person believes is morally right and wrong, is to some degree influenced by the contingencies of time and place. This is apt to give a special authority to these external influences. Yet the fact that one's parents or the elders of one's tribe held such and such a belief, whilst this explains the source of one's moral outlook, does not constitute a moral justification of it. Moral educators will not be content with this. They will want to emphasise the fact that moral beliefs are ones for which reasons can be offered, and they will want to allow that a belief can be rejected, even if it is one which is held because it, in turn, was held by others who were significant for an individual. Of course, this is to tread into a very delicate and sensitive area, for often it will be true that what a person is brought up to believe is right, is something which they are very reluctant to give up. Teachers will need to be sensitive to that, but the fact that these are difficult matters does not detract from the point that a person's moral inheritance may itself be something which needs critical assessment.

Standard subjectivism also faces problems over its account of moral conflicts and moral dilemmas. When we get into moral disputes, we think that we are right in our moral opinion and that the other party is wrong in their moral opinion. At least that is what our moral experience seems to be like. Yet standard subjectivists will insist that when we make a moral judgment, this has to be in the form 'that is right, for me'. But against this, our moral judgments are not always, indeed not usually, about what is right for us as individuals. Our moral judgments usually are meant to have wider scope than that. If I think that voluntary euthanasia is morally permissible, and you think that it isn't, my

moral opinion is not just about what is right for me. It is about what is right for people generally. I want to have this facility available for others. People learning about morality along standard subjectivist lines will get a distorted understanding of moral judgments in the context of moral disputes.

Perhaps subjectivism's strongest suit, like emotivism's, lies in its ability to connect our moral beliefs and our moral behaviour. It may be that it is drawing attention to the fact that human beings find it difficult to be motivated to act morally if the source of moral motivation lies outside the individual. Our hackles are often raised when it is someone else telling us what is right and wrong and someone else telling us what we have to do. So perhaps it picks up on the point that before we will do what is right because it is right, we have to be convinced of this ourselves. Those who do the right thing reluctantly, just because some authority figure tells them to do it, are not morally motivated to act. No doubt, in institutions such as schools, the pressures on inducing morally correct behaviour can be at the cost of people just conforming to the demands of morality rather than seeing the point of so behaving. If standard subjectivism is pointing to the importance of individual convictions as a condition of moral motivation, it seems to have a good point. What philosophical account it then gives of this, however, is unclear. It seems to be consistent both with a belief-desire theory of moral motivation and a purely cognitive account of moral motivation, along the lines explained in chapters 2 and 7.

I conclude that standard subjectivism, like emotivism, both distorts our conception of morality and does not provide compelling reasons for abandoning the view that moral education is possible. If we were to accept the standard subjectivist theory of the nature of moral judgment, its insistence on these judgments being moral beliefs which are just up to us would remove all sense of a moral judgment being objectively correct. But, like emotivism, this is at too high a cost. First, it can licence, as moral, views which are morally dubious, and it can lead us to revise our firm moral convictions if these do not coincide with what an individual thinks is right. Second, in struggling with the concept

of truth, standard subjectivism comes to adopt the thesis that moral beliefs are error-free beliefs, beliefs which cannot be justified by any reasons which might be advanced for them, nor critically assessed by examining these reasons. This cuts moral beliefs off from any impact which reason-giving and reasoning might have. It seems in the end to have to say either that a person will come to hold their moral beliefs by dint of some mysterious non-rational process or that a person will come to hold their moral beliefs because of the influence of others through the socialization process. Either way, no scope is given for moral beliefs to emerge from any process of ratiocination, nor for the correctness of moral beliefs to be subject to the checks of reasoning. It even carries the danger that it might encourage arrogance and dogmatism in morality. Third, so far as moral conflicts and dilemmas are concerned, standard subjectivism has a very odd notion of what it is to solve these. A moral conflict is one where each person's moral belief is right, but only so far as that individual is concerned. This removes any sense that moral beliefs have general scope.

The educational implications of standard subjectivism, are also difficult to accept. A person's moral beliefs, being error-free beliefs, cannot be beliefs which come to be held because one acknowledges that previous beliefs were mistaken, nor can they emerge as a result of some process of trial and error. For young people, whose moral beliefs often have yet to be formed, making mistakes and trial-and-error thinking are not untypical ways in which they struggle towards a view about what is morally correct in matters of moral controversy. Moreover, young people, faced with evidently conflicting moral beliefs, will be left with the view that these cannot be rationally resolved, since to think that is to think that some moral beliefs are right and others wrong. If all moral beliefs are right for the individuals who hold them, no further progress can be made in trying to justify one moral belief over another. As with emotivism, this will make it difficult for pupils to get any grip on matters of moral controversy. All views will be equally right for those who hold them and no sense could emerge that in matters of moral conflict a moral judgment might be wrong.

### **8.1.3 Metaethical Relativism and Moral Education.**

It will be recalled that the central metaethical claim in metaethical relativism is that moral judgments, as forms of belief, can take truth values, and that what makes a particular moral judgment true is that it corresponds to or coheres with the general values which are manifest in the customs and practices of the society, group or culture to which the individual belongs. Given that different cultures have their own standards of moral correctness, what is morally correct for one culture need not be morally correct for another culture. Relativism denies the claim, which seems to be part of Tate's theory of moral education, that there can be criteria of moral correctness or moral truth which are independent of specific cultures, or which can be used to make judgments on the moral correctness of particular moral codes. If the relativist thesis is granted, an interesting question arises as to what should be the attitudes taken by one culture towards another culture. Some say that people should be left to live their lives in accordance with the moral standards of their own cultures. Others, whose culture might not embrace this live-and-let-live attitude, might say that it is incumbent on their culture to interfere with the cultural norms and practices of other cultures.

I have rehearsed some of the general philosophical difficulties which face this theory in chapter 3. They occur because of the problematic notion of truth which the theory uses and these problems are essentially the ones faced by standard subjectivism.

I think it is true to say that metaethical relativism and its associated substantive moral principle of tolerance for others' moralities, enjoy widespread support among educationalists, whether they be teachers or theorists. Relativism is held to offer a defensible basis for moral education. One practical implication of it would appear to be that teachers have to instruct pupils in the moral standards of the latter's culture in order that these become the moral standards which shape the individual's moral thinking and behaviour. This is consistent with moral upbringing being a matter of conditioning or

habit forming and could even be consistent with indoctrination. It is also consistent with developing critical thinking about the moral standards one has to live by, if it happens to be the case that critical thinking about morality is itself a part of the moral culture to which the individual belongs. This is, however, by no means true of all cultures with moral standards, so the theory and practice of moral education based on metaethical relativism could be one which excluded any critical engagement with morality.

A particular difficulty with relativism arises when an educand belongs to more than one culture. This increasingly is and will be the case with second, third and future generations of immigrants. These young people face difficulties which arise when the different cultures in which they find themselves living, operate with different moral standards. How does the educand's moral education, run on the above lines, help such a person to choose which standards to conform to? Unless there are rational ways of dealing with inter-cultural differences over how to live and what ought to be done, such young people will be just the focal point of conflicting and apparently irreconcilable moral pressures.

One move to try to escape these problems is to modify the metaethical theory and make it into the sort of descriptive theory with relativist overtones which Leicester has constructed. Her limited relativism enjoins us to discover which values are held in common between different cultures. These commonly held values are the ones which are to be taught. The fact that a moral value has secured inter-cultural agreement becomes the reason for accepting and behaving in accordance with a moral value. This would not be tolerated in other parts of the curriculum. One could not countenance that approach in science, for it would make the truth of a scientific theory subject to what is agreed to be true rather than the truth of a scientific theory being the grounds for agreement on it. Similarly, if Leicester's proposal was adopted, it would teach pupils that the reason why some moral value was worth keeping lay in its having secured agreement, rather than its moral correctness being the grounds for general agreement about it. Furthermore, it is possible that a value can secure general, even inter-cultural, agreement and yet still be

suspect on moral grounds, as is shown by the once widespread agreement about the moral acceptability of slavery.

This last example also shows that limited relativism as well as 'pure' metaethical relativism, is deficient as a theory about ethics because what it implies about moral correctness can be at variance with our moral convictions. Limited relativism faces this general problem because it is at heart a majoritarian theory, holding that what is agreed is what is right, and this, as we have just seen, can produce morally dubious results. But there is a particularly acute problem for those limited relativists who also want to say that there are some normative implications of their theory. Here, their argument is that in those cases where cultures have their own values, it is wrong to discriminate in various ways against those who are just different from 'us'. Strongly anti-racist moral principles are often held as essential moral principles to teach. However, if what is right is determined by the prevailing values in some culture, there is no guarantee that these will yield anti-racist sentiments. Indeed, they may even yield pro-racist sentiments. So limited relativism, coupled with its normative implications, carries an internal inconsistency which puts it at odds with the moral conviction that racism in its various forms is wrong.

Leicester also proposes that each pupil learns about the moral cultures of others, in the expectation that this will lead to a greater respect for these different moral cultures. Here, limited relativism generates this moral virtue in something like the same way that full-blooded metaethical relativism does. One cannot say that some moral cultures are superior to or inferior to other cultures in terms of their moral standing, so when called on to adopt a position on others' moralities, the only other possible attitude is respect. It is worth noting that strictly speaking, relativism cannot be used to argue that we ought to be tolerant of others' moralities, since 'toleration' means that we put up with those beliefs and practices which we think are wrong, or which we do not like. There may be other moral values which we cannot hold for this reason. For example, it will be conceptually impossible to forgive those from other cultures who have said or done something which

others judge to be wrong, since forgiveness means that one resumes relationships with others even though one thinks they have done wrong.

But the principle that we ought to respect the values of others, also faces difficulties. If respect is the only attitude, consistent with relativism, which we can adopt towards cultural values of others, does this mean that all other cultural values are to be respected? Some cultural values, even those which are advanced as moral values, are not worthy of respect. Indeed, in some cases the lack of respect towards a cultural value may well be the best attitude to take towards it, morally speaking. This will be particularly so of any culture whose hallmark is that it is intolerant of those who are black, jews, women etc.

If we were to adopt limited relativism, and its attached moral principle of respect for cultures, pupils would be taught to respect but not to examine critically the moral standing of the claimed moral standards of other cultures. Relativists think it impossible that the moral correctness of the standards of one culture can be assessed independently of those standards. This is because, they claim, one would be searching for the impossible, a moral standpoint which stands outside all cultures, and which is then used to assess the moral probity of particular cultures. We end up, relativists claim, just by one culture using its own moral standards to assess the moral standards of another culture. This cannot be, they urge, the basis for making judgments on the moral standing of a culture's values. In effect, then, metaethical relativism makes inter-cultural conflicts of value irresolvable.

Yet this line of argument misstates the problem. One does not need to look for a culture-free zone of moral thought and moral values. Morality is just as much a cultural phenomenon as is the scientific study of the natural world. Yet no one seriously argues that we cannot assess the scientific credentials of one culture's empirical claims just because it happens that those who are critically examining those claims belong to another culture. We now know, for example, that storms at sea are caused by variations in pressure.

We would reject any cultural explanation that this was due to the anger of the gods. In similar vein, the fact that one culture's moral standards are critically scrutinised by those from another culture, does not show that the criticisms cannot be to the point. The moral assessment of the values of particular cultures, itself a cultural phenomenon, does not have its critical teeth drawn just by virtue of the fact that it takes place within some particular cultural setting. Otherwise, no outsider could have criticised, from a moral point of view, the appalling beliefs and actions of the Nazis.

Unlike standard subjectivism or emotivism, metaethical relativism does not generate a completely sceptical position on the possibility of moral education. Relativists want to argue for a particular way in which the young should be morally educated, and this is essentially to be concerned with learning and accepting the moral standards of one's own culture and learning about the moralities of other cultures. Nevertheless, metaethical relativism is still a flawed basis for moral education and these flaws are exposed by seeing what it says in answer to the tests I have proposed for assessing metaethical theories. It allows some beliefs to be accepted as moral beliefs, even though they are at variance with some of our moral convictions, and this is especially so, and ironically so, over moral convictions about the heinousness of racism. Relativism also runs counter to an essential feature of the educated mind, that it can critically examine beliefs, and is not content to accept that a moral belief is right just because it reflects the conventions of a culture. Indeed, as young people cease to be first-generation migrants, limited relativism would actually make moral choices even more difficult for them than they already are. Such young people are often at the sharp end of conflicting moral values, and to be told that moral rightness is a function of the agreed values of one's culture, is to be given little assistance. That problem is, in fact, part of a wider problem for relativists. Their theory of moral judgment is that such judgments are right in so far as they have secured agreement as the culture's values. This reverses the usual way in which beliefs and judgments are held, namely that a belief is right or correct because it is true. It is its truth which can secure agreement. Why, we might ask, are matters so different in morality?

By insisting that the only attitude to take towards others' cultures is to respect them, relativism surprisingly generates some unfortunate results. One cannot criticise the values of those living in other cultures, unless, of course, one moves to being on the inside of these cultures, so one respects them. But this is not taking them seriously, and not subjecting them to the sort of critical scrutiny which when done well enables us to decide the rational grounds for either agreeing with or disagreeing with another's morality. Further, making 'respect' the principal attitude to take towards the values of other cultures, makes moral conflicts between them irresolvable, and relativists hold this view because they think that resolvability requires some extra-cultural moral point of view from which to judge different cultural value claims. Yet no such standpoint is available nor is it necessary in order to make moral assessments of cultural value conflicts. Thus the relativist's grounds for holding moral conflicts between cultural values to be irresolvable, are not convincing. Finally, their view results in people being left with no intellectual resources to make moral evaluations of other cultures, and this seems a great pity for it may well be the case that one can learn a good deal from other moral standpoints. Indeed, is not that a good way to come to appreciate what is of value in others' cultures?

#### **8.1.4 Teaching Pupils to Reason Well in Morality.**

I turn now to the approach to moral education which is based on Hare's universal prescriptivism. As we saw in chapter 3, Hare supported the Schools Council Humanities Curriculum Project as a vehicle for moral education. That project eschewed the direct teaching of moral right and wrong in favour of a procedural approach to teaching morality. Hare's views have also been supported by Wilson in the latter's writings on moral education. Both stress the importance of teaching the young to reason well in morality.

At first sight, this approach may fall foul of my first test, in so far as its account of the nature of moral judgment carries implications which can be at variance with our moral convictions. The verdict on this question, though, is a mixed one. On the one hand,

Hare's theory does seem to support the idea that we should teach simple and general principles to the young. Hare reaches this conclusion by way of the distinction he makes between two levels of moral thinking, the critical and the intuitive. For Hare, moral thinking is principled thinking, since our moral judgments, judgments which appeal to reasons, thereby are judgments which appeal to principles. Our reasons state what our principles are. Hare thinks that we have to do some critical thinking in order to sort out which are the principles which govern our moral judgments. However, he also thinks that we cannot, for a variety of practical reasons, constantly do this, so he accepts that for most of our daily lives we live by some simple and general principles, which he is content to describe, following Ross, as 'prima facie principles' (Hare, 1981, p 38). These principles are the ones which critical thinking yields, but they do not have to be constantly thought out by individuals. Hare appears, then, to accept that there will be a collection of moral principles which are essential for our living with each other, and it would be odd therefore not to insist that these are taught to the young.

However, as we also saw in chapter 3, one line of argument against universal prescriptivism stems from asking whether there are judgments which possess the properties of prescriptivity and universalizability but which are doubtful as moral judgments (Thomas, 1993, ch 2). Hare seems to accept this point in his admission that a fanatical Nazi would count as holding a moral judgment, since the fanatic's judgments are universalised prescriptions. Trivial judgments also count as moral on these criteria. Hare's response to this criticism would be to say that trivial and fanatical judgments would be corrected by critical moral thinking. Since it is the fruits of critical moral thinking which constitute the principles held at the first, intuitive, level of moral principles, no morally doubtful moral principles would appear in the core morality held at the intuitive level. However, this reply is less than convincing. Critical moral thinking is thinking as an act-utilitarian. As a normative moral theory, that attracts the well-known objection that it would permit, say, a small minority to be enslaved if this was optimific. Is the principle permitting slavery in such circumstances to be a part of those moral principles,

held intuitively, and constituting the core morality? If we reject this as a moral principle, then looking at moral principles from the perspective of critical moral thinking, the right principle is being excluded from the core morality (McDonough, 1992). Hare's account, then, is vulnerable to the charge that a morality, being founded on critical moral thinking, is ambivalent in what it permits as a moral principle and could permit some dubious principles as moral principles. This is a point of some importance so far as moral learners are concerned, for they, at their impressionable early stage of learning, might be encouraged to think that codes such as the Nazi code are moral codes, if moral education programmes were constructed on the basis of universal prescriptivism.

But it is when we turn to the way Hare accounts for the use of reason in morality that we get the full educational force of the theory. The reader will recall that one of the criticisms I levelled against Tate's theory of moral education is that it lacked an epistemology or a theory of moral justification. One could not level that charge against Hare. I think it is true to say that Hare's theory of moral judgment as reasoned judgment is what marked it out as offering a distinct theory of moral judgment from those presented in earlier 20th century metaethical discussions. Hare rejected the view, prevalent in these earlier theories in moral philosophy, that it is only in questions of fact or logic that we can exercise our capacity for reason. Moral judgments, he urges, are also justifiable by reasons. It is this general position which provides the underpinning for the recommendation that in moral education we should teach pupils to reason well in morality. But what does this amount to?

Our understanding of what it is to reason well in morality has to be spun out of Hare's claim that all moral judgments possess the logical property of universalizability. This tells us that for any ought-judgment to be a moral judgment, it must appeal to a reason for holding it, and this reason cannot avoid being couched in general terms, in that it cannot contain proper names or definite descriptions. So, 'I ought not to eat this meat' might appeal to a principle such as 'one ought not to eat meat from animals reared in factory farms'. Granted this point, we can work out a number of features of reasoning

well. First, those who assent to such a principle cannot then make an exception in their own case if, for example, it turns out that it is not convenient for them to keep to the principle. This tells us that consistency, as a way of ruling out partiality, is a requirement of a moral judgment and so a requirement of reasoning well. Second, as well as the sort of consistency which rules out partiality, the fact that moral judgments are reasoned judgments introduces another facet of consistency. This is the requirement that a person who judges some action to be right in circumstances C, is committed to making the same judgment were there to be the same circumstances. Third, moral judgments involve factual matters. We need to know that the meat is indeed from factory farms, and not from other sorts of farms. Indeed, we need a definition of what a factory farm is, and this is a question of definitional fact. Often legal definitions are helpful in these cases. So reasoning well in morality will involve getting one's facts right. Fourth, granted that good reasoning in morality amounts to appealing to principles as reasons, we need to know which principles we are to appeal to. In the current example, it is 'one ought not to eat meat from animals reared in factory farms', but it could easily have been 'one ought not to eat meat from animals reared in factory farms except where such animals have happy lives', or 'all those except the poor ought not to eat meat reared in factory farms'. All of these, it should be noted, are universal in the sense that they apply to all those in the categories described. So can we choose the best principle, the one which give the most justified position, and can this be done rationally? As is well-known, Hare suggests that it is by becoming utilitarians that we can do this. However, some non-utilitarians could still endorse the general idea that the best moral judgments will have to be justified by some general moral principle or principles.

It is of interest too that Hare offers a formal way by means of which we can decide which moral principle to abide by. This is the principle which comes into operation when people put themselves in the position of others who are to be affected by some proposed course of action. 'Do to others what you are willing to have them do to you'. It is worth noting that there are other formal rules, not all of them of a utilitarian cast,

which might also be used for moral decision-making, for example, Kant's categorical imperative. Reflection on our moral experience shows us that we do appeal to some principles which appear to be not principles of moral substance but formal principles for helping us to decide what we ought to do. We ask 'how would it be if everyone acted in that way?', and 'how would you like it if others do to you what you intend to do to them?', the latter being, of course, close to Hare's formal principle. Sometimes these formal principles provide us with a way of getting people to reflect upon the selfish nature of their actions, or on their propensity not to have thought through the consequences of an action. These are all traits which are not unusual in those who are at the early stages in learning the requirements of morality. Hare's emphasis on the use of a formal principle in moral thinking, then, gives us a further insight into what it is to reason well in morality.

It should be clear from these remarks that Hare's universal prescriptivism will also give us an idea of how we might deal rationally with moral conflicts or moral dilemmas. Again Hare uses the derivation of utilitarianism from universal prescriptivism to achieve this. One's evaluative judgment, that is what one prescribes, is also what one prefers would happen. To decide which preferences to pursue when faced with a conflict or a dilemma, requires a person to take into account all relevant preferences, that is all preferences which might be affected by some proposed course of action. The most optimistic preference in terms of preference-satisfaction, is the one which ought to be followed. Clearly, this might require a good deal of investigation into what people prefer would happen, and the results of such inquiries give a person the reasons for opting, morally, for one course of action over another.

This is, however, a controversial approach. There are those who agree with universal prescriptivism but deny that one can or must derive utilitarianism from it. There are those who, rejecting the analysis of moral judgment as universal prescriptivism in the first place, would still agree with Hare that there can be decision procedures for settling

matters of moral conflict, and there are those who would reject both his analysis and also the claim that we can resolve moral conflicts rationally. So, with respect to Hare's theory, whether one accepts that maximum preference-satisfaction provides the criterion for settling matters of moral dispute depends on whether one is a utilitarian. Interestingly, Hare's version of this has a subjectivist tinge. The litmus test of moral correctness is still whatever it is which an individual judges to be what yields optimum preference-satisfaction, and the latter is composed of the net aggregate of individual preference-satisfaction schedules.

With respect to the practicality test, Hare's view of moral judgment as reasoned judgment also has something to offer the moral educator, over the way it connects moral judgments with moral behaviour. This emerges from the other logical property of moral judgments, their prescriptivity. As we saw in chapter 3, Hare draws a tight connection between on the one hand assent to a moral judgment and assent to the prescription which, he claims, is entailed by it. For example, if my moral judgment is that it is wrong for me to eat this piece of meat because it has been taken from an animal reared in a factory farm, that entails an imperative along the lines of 'do not eat this piece of meat'. If I sincerely assent to the judgment, I must assent to the entailed imperative. I will do what it enjoins, providing, of course, that I am physically and psychologically able to do so. The moral judgment, moreover, provides the reason for my action of refraining from eating the meat. To deny this is to say something strange, to say that such and such is the reason I assent to, but that it does not provide me with a reason for so acting.

Hare's theory, then, offers much to the moral educator. First and foremost, of all the theories so far considered, it alone will satisfy the requirements of objectivity, which, it is being argued, are the *sine qua non* of an activity being educational. Hare, though he draws back from saying that moral judgments can take truth values, appears ready to agree that we can get our moral judgments right, even in matters of moral controversy. It is, though, in the account he gives of what it is to reason well that one sees the way in

which this theory explains how we can use reasons in the justification of our moral judgments. We do this by reasoning consistently, by using principles as reasons, by using one's powers of reason to establish what the facts are which are relevant to the case in hand, by critically searching for the best reason or reasons, and by applying formal principles to our moral thinking. Moreover, the reasons we have for thinking something right, commit us to actions because of the entailed imperatives in moral judgments.

There is, however, a criticism of this impressive metaethical account, which lessens its force as a basis for moral education. The criticism echoes the complaint made by Tate against those who see the adoption of moral values as a matter of taste, and who mean by this that moral values, though they are the sorts of values for which one can give reasons, are such that the reasons given for holding them can never be decisive reasons for holding them.

Hare writes (Hare 1963, p 2):

“For one of the most important constituents of our freedom, as moral agents, is the freedom to form our own opinions about moral questions, even if that involves changing our language.

It might be objected that moral questions are not peculiar in this respect—that we are also free to form our opinions about such matters as whether the world is round. In a sense this is true; but we are free to form our own moral opinions in a much stronger sense than this. For if we say that the world is flat, we can in principle be shown certain facts such that, once we have admitted them, we cannot go on saying that the world is flat without being guilty of self-contradiction or of a misuse of language. That nothing can be done of this sort is a thesis which must have the support of all those who reject naturalism.”

A few lines further on, Hare continues:

“But for the moment let us assume that there can be no logical deduction of moral judgments from statements of fact. If this be once granted, it follows that we are free to form our moral opinions in a much stronger sense than we are free to form our own opinions as to what the facts are”.

Hare goes on to point out that he rejects both the view, held by emotivists and subjectivists, that our moral judgments cannot be rational, and the view, held by descriptivists, that since 'moral thought can be a rational activity' one has to deny that we have 'freedom to form our moral opinions' (p 3).

This point is restated in Hare's later work (Hare, 1981, p 16):

"The first point to get clear is that there is no question of a logical deduction of moral conclusions from factual premises of any kind".

Then, later in attacking descriptivists, Hare writes (Hare, 1981, p 70):

"Descriptivists.....often find it hard to see the point that you and I can be using the word "wrong" in the same sense but disagree fundamentally on what properties of actions make them wrong. This is possible because "wrong", unlike descriptive words, does not have its meaning fixed for it by descriptive criteria".

In these remarks, Hare attempts to protect the autonomy of morals. The theory which threatens this autonomy is descriptivism, but as against it, Hare urges that moral judgments do not have the same meaning as descriptive statements, and so are not tied to what is said in descriptive statements. Hare then suggests that certain other claims follow from this. First, the only form of moral argument is deductive argument, that is moral conclusions can only be deduced from moral premises and minor factual premises, not from non-moral premises alone. Second, no 'ought' judgments can be derived from 'is' statements, otherwise again the autonomy of morals would be compromised by making them in thrall to descriptive statements. Third, even if two people agree on the non-moral facts, that does not determine that their moral judgments will be the same, for we are free to form our moral judgments in a way in which we are not free to form our empirical beliefs.

Suppose the thesis that moral thinking is an autonomous type of thinking is accepted. Moral thinking is sui generis, not reducible to any other sort of thinking. It need not follow

that the way to protect the autonomy of morals is by accepting that the only form of argument in morality is deductive reasoning. A parallel case can illustrate this. Suppose an evolutionary biologist wants to preserve the autonomy of biology against creation scientists. This can be done by drawing attention to certain facts and then inductively inferring an explanation of them which uses the theory of evolution as a better explanation than one provided by the theory of creationism. The fact that inductive inference is used is not a threat to the autonomy of biology. In similar vein, a moral realist can preserve the autonomy of moral thought by arguing that the occurrence of moral properties is a resultant property of natural facts, and that moral judgments are inductive inferences made on this basis. Certain ethical naturalists, as we saw in 7.1, can hold both that moral language is not reducible to other forms of language, and that the grounds of moral judgments are provided by inductive inferences from the non-moral facts.

As to the the second claim, that no 'ought'-judgments can be derived from an 'is'-statement, the autonomy-of-morals thesis does not depend on this either. We might grant that it is not possible to derive normative conclusions from non-normative factual premises, though, as we saw in 7.1, there has been some doubt cast on that claim. But even if we waive this point and disallow such attempted derivations, it does not follow that any conclusions of a normative kind, based solely on premises of a factual kind, will destroy the autonomy of morals. The reason for this becomes clear when we consider other examples where claims of one kind are derived from claims of another kind. Pain occurs when the C-fibres are excited, yet statements about the properties of C-fibre stimulation do not threaten the autonomy of pain language, though the latter statements are grounded in the former (Brink, 1989, ch 6). Similarly, the fact that X broke a promise to Y is the reason why X's actions was wrong, but that factual statement, being the ground for the moral judgment, does not thereby compromise the autonomy of that moral judgment.

Hare's third claim is, of course, one that would be contested by all those who hold a cognitive theory of moral judgment. Any cognitive theory accepts that moral judgments are forms of moral belief, and as such are responsive to how things are, whether this is a matter of the values of the society, or natural states of affairs or the occurrence of moral properties. Again, none of these need be threatening of moral autonomy, and moral relativists and moral realists in particular would protest that theirs are theories which seek explicitly to preserve the autonomy of morals.

There are points here of relevance for moral education. Hare, along with many others, emphasises the autonomy of moral thinking from other sorts of thinking. I remarked in chapter one on a tendency in some schools for morality to be subsumed within religious thought, so we can take Hare to be among those who would resist that tendency. It is not, however, necessary to hold that the autonomy of morality will be compromised if we allow forms of argument other than the deductive into moral thinking. So moral educators have wider scope here in teaching the logic of moral argument than Hare allows, and some of these have been sketched in 7.1.

### **8.1.5 Moral Education and Moral Realism.**

Is moral realism a satisfactory basis for moral education?

How well does moral realism's account of moral judgment preserve our moral convictions? It will be clear from the discussions in chapters 5-7 that I agree that moral realism gives a convincing explanation of the grounds for our moral judgments. For a long time, it was thought that moral realism took a lot of swallowing because it required one to believe in the existence of 'queer' moral properties, properties which had a kind of 'free-floating' existence, only accessible through acts of intuition. Whether this was ever a fair representation of moral realist thinking is a question which can be safely left to the historian of ideas. More recent exponents of moral realism have given a different

account. This is based on accepting that moral judgments are forms of belief, and that this makes them capable of taking those truth values which operate in morality, namely that moral judgments can be correct or incorrect, right or wrong. Further, the correctness of a moral judgment is based not on any introspectable contents of the individual judger's mind nor on what custom and convention dictate but on facts which have moral significance. Moral realists hold, for example, that the moral judgment that breaking promises is wrong is not an intuitively obvious truth, nor is it one which is true by virtue of the fact that we approve of such actions or whose correctness lies in its getting high preference-ratings. Its being true or correct lies in the reason or reasons which attach to the features of promise-keeping and promise-breaking. We might say, for example, that the reason why promise-breaking is wrong lies in the way such acts mislead promisees and cause them to use up their time in ways they had not intended in order to get their lives back onto the track they had planned it to go along before the promise was broken. It is this sort of consideration which makes the act of promise-breaking possess a wrong-making feature. Moreover, the facts which are appealed to in making our moral judgments, are discoverable facts, facts which we can get to know in ways with which we are familiar. We all know how we go about getting to know whether some act misleads people and wastes their time. And this is a quite crucial point for moral educators. Moral realism gives a simple, straightforward, empirically-based epistemology for getting to know what the facts are upon which our moral judgments are based.

I have noted that Wiggins' 'sensible subjectivism' is close to being a moral realist theory, since it accepts that moral properties occur. Why, then, prefer moral realism to it? When we look at the ways the two theories deal with our moral convictions, my suggestion was that the latter allowed too much of a gap between moral properties and our responses to them. If Wiggins were to reject this criticism, he would need to show why it is that some property/response pairings are merely contingent whilst others are not. Wiggins, it will be recalled, thinks that moral cognitivism, realism by another name, cannot be a correct account of moral judgment because if it were, we would have far more

convergence than we do in the moral judgments we make. This appears to support the notion that though moral properties occur, moral judgments need not be tied to them in any tight way. Hence there is room for divergence of moral beliefs over those moral properties which do occur. One moral realist response to this is to point out that there is a wider measure of agreement in morality than Wiggins allows. Another is to suggest that actions, states of affairs and so forth, are in many cases so tied in to their right-and-wrong-making properties, that different people, seeking to make moral judgments about some event or action, cannot but make the same judgment. The pain caused by deliberate acts of cruelty, for example, is what makes such acts wrong, and judgments that such acts are wrong, though they are not logical deductions from the facts, are nevertheless the judgments which are drawn out of moral people consistently.

In the discussions of the various accounts of moral realism in chapters 5-7, I concluded that Ross' version best accounts for our moral convictions. Particularists tells us to take each situation calling for a moral judgment on its merits and to eschew the use of moral principles in making moral judgments. According to them, this is what mature moral thinkers do. To do otherwise, they say, is to distort the nature of morality. Even if moral principles are taught to the young, they should be thrown away like crutches when people reach the age of moral maturity. Yet the emphasis of taking each situation on its merits, I suggested, has drawbacks. It would make every case a special case and so rob the notion of a special case of any significance. It also would make for special pleading. In these two ways, then, particularism could overturn the regular application of our moral convictions.

Our moral convictions are not safe either in the hands of the moral coherentist, for, occupied with finding a theory of moral epistemology or moral justification which will enable us to arrive at the best moral judgments, coherentism makes it possible to revise even our most firmly held moral convictions in the interests of maximum coherence.

The generalist moral realist protects our moral convictions from special pleading and from revision. Ross reminds us that when we commence our thinking about morality, we do not do this in a vacuum. We have a wealth of ordinary moral experience to call upon. Members of the younger generation already live lives which brush up against moral experience, whether this is from home, with friends, at school, from the media and so on. And what is this an experience of? Of telling lies and telling the truth, of insulting and bullying, of kindness and generosity, of courage in the face of difficult odds and of cowardice, and all the other myriad ways in which morality makes its impact on people's lives. One would have to be a Simon Stylites or a Rousseauian wolf-child to escape being touched by this, though it is of course true that people are touched in different ways by these experiences. Moreover, this ordinary experience of morality includes people making moral judgments. It is wrong to do this and that, right to do so and so. Such judgments, moreover, have a pattern. Our moral experience is not the sort which particularism tells us it is. The rightness of promise-keeping is a general feature of our lives. Indeed, it is only by virtue of having a stock of moral concepts and moral principles that we can then operate in the ways which particularists say we do.

Once we refresh ourselves with these generalist realist reminders, those in charge of moral education and those whose moral learning remains to be developed can both see that there is nothing suspect about what they are to learn. The hesitations about morality to which Tate refers, which Midgely has described (Midgely, 1991), and which sometimes result in moral scepticism, will have their force undermined when attention is drawn to these features of our experience. Scepticism in the form of remarks like 'morality is up to the individual', 'no-one has a right to impose their morality on someone else', can have its teeth drawn by asking 'is this true of rape? of child abuse?' For moral educators, the impact of these sorts of reminders will be reassure them that they are right to insist upon the acceptability of a moral framework which consists of the general moral principles which are such an endemic feature of our lives. Much moral learning will be a mixture of reminders of what people already know and a persistent insistence that these must be

adhered to. So here it seems clear that generalist moral realism supports the view proposed by Tate that moral educators should teach those basic and general moral principles whose contents state what is morally true.

This does not mean that the moral judgments which lie at the core of our morality and which constitute our moral convictions are unreasoned judgments. The fact that we do not often give the reasons for saying that rape is wrong or that one ought to keep one's promises, does not show that these are not reason-backed judgments. Educationally, it is important to get pupils to realise this, and to get them to grasp what these reasons are. Our moral convictions, which express our basic moral principles, can still be reasoned convictions.

Why do we overlook these obvious points? No doubt the answer to that is complex, but I suspect that one reason is that we know that many moral problems are bafflingly complex, and we jump to the conclusion that this is true of all situations calling for a moral judgment. It is as if in the face of these complexities, we lose sight of the simple and plain moral truths which will all know.

Does moral realism help the moral educator when the latter attempts to construct programmes of moral education which deal with moral conflicts and moral dilemmas? It seems to me that it is over questions of moral controversy that we generally find moral educators in some difficulties. A common approach is for teachers, perhaps made uneasy by parental pressure and religious pressure groups, to opt for a sort of descriptive ethics, contenting themselves with laying out the ethical positions of various standpoints, often only religious standpoints, but never coming to grips with a critical examination of these ethical stances. If that is a common approach, little wonder that school pupils quickly become baffled when they are asked to state and argue their own moral opinions on these controversies. They would have no experience of doing so, no idea of what to do.

I suggest that moral educators can learn two things from moral realism when discussing moral conflicts and moral dilemmas with their pupils. One concerns the goal of such discussions, the other concerns the question of how we might attempt to resolve them.

In confronting issues of moral complexity where there is moral disagreement, if pupils think they cannot get anywhere, cannot make any progress in thinking about them, and think they will only finish up dogmatically exchanging views with each other, then they will quickly become discouraged and cease to see the point of such discussions. Notwithstanding the complexities, moral realism proposes that there can be solutions to morally difficult questions. Those who seriously engage in arguing a point of view, are doing so because they think their view is right and their opponents' views are wrong. This is not to say, of course, that the former is right and the latter is wrong. Where right and wrong lie, have to be established. But unless there is the possibility that there is some morally correct solution to moral problems, however complex, there would be little point in arguing over the matter. The point of argument and discussion is to try to sort out where the morally right course of action lies. I call this a bold claim in moral realism. It seems to me that if the moral realist only advances the cautious claim that there are moral truths just in matters where there are no moral conflicts and dilemmas, it loses some of its interest.

The boldness of this claim can be seen from the following example. I remember once watching a television documentary about a premature baby. She had to be kept on a respirator. A severe haemorrhage developed in the baby's brain and the prognosis for her future quality of life, if she survived, was not good. The question arose as to what ought to be done. Should the treatment be discontinued or not? The family were poor, living in a high-rise block of flats, and there were already two children to look after. The mother had been brought up in a family with a severely handicapped brother, and she claimed that the resulting strains had destroyed the family life. For her, the issue was clear cut: withdraw medical support for the baby. For the Catholic theologian who

discussed the case in the television studios, the issue turned on whether the baby was an already dying baby, in which case it was morally permissible to take the baby off the respirator. If there was a chance that the baby could survive, it was morally impermissible to take the baby off the respirator.

Over cases such as that one, the moral realist's claim is that there are correct moral solutions to them. The opposite case is that such cases are irresolvable because the values brought into play by them are incommensurable. In the discussion of that issue in 7.2, my suggestion was that the claim that clashes of moral principles are irresolvable, is based on the assumption the only way in which they could be resolved is by them being commensurable. Finding that moral values are not like other sorts of value which are commensurable, the conclusion is drawn that moral conflicts must be irresolvable. But why accept, I argued, that commensurability is the mark of resolvability? Indeed, if we accepted the claim that moral conflicts are irresolvable, then rational choice in matters of moral conflict becomes impossible. Against that, it seems possible to say that in cases of moral conflict, one moral obligation, which has reason Q to justify it, is nevertheless less binding than another moral obligation, which has reason R to justify, without it being the case that reason R is commensurable with reason Q.

In this way, then, moral realists can argue that there is a point to grappling with moral conflicts and dilemmas. The point is to resolve them by establishing what is morally right. This takes us to the next question: what guidance is available from moral realists about how one might go about resolving them?

It has to be granted that moral realists are themselves not in agreement over how this is to be done. Some want to say that the correct answer can only emerge when all the detail of the case has been laid out so that the various facts can be morally weighed until the correct answer emerges. Others want to say that this downgrades the role of moral principles in making moral judgments in such cases. Both schools of thought, though,

agree that there can be correct answers to such moral problems.

The latter school is found in Ross' work. Ross holds that when prima facie moral obligations clash, the most we can achieve is a probable opinion about where the balance of moral rightness lies. Ross is not optimistic about our getting to know what the balance of rightness is. This is because he thinks that there cannot be any general rules for deciding what is right in cases where prima facie obligations clash, and he concludes from that that there cannot be any other way of achieving this result. The former school is found in the work of particularists such as Dancy and McNaughton, who say that much of morality is complex, that the seemingly simple and plain truths with which we are brought up, have to give way to complex decision making in most cases. So the goal of developing moral maturity will be to appreciate the complexities of the moral life. This will in turn discourage us from giving easy answers for we will have no alternative but to treat each case on its merits, weighing up the considerations for and against a moral judgment, until we see where the balance of moral rightness lies.

It seems to me that moral realists can offer a theory of moral justification which can be used in tackling moral problems which give rise to moral conflicts and dilemmas. This unites a number of separate accounts in realist epistemology.

In spite of the above criticisms of particularism, the account does have merit. It warns us against making too easy inferences in our moral thinking. The fact that this promise ought to have been kept in these circumstances does not make it the case that a promise should be kept in all circumstances, even when the circumstances are very similar to the preceding set. There may be factors in the second case which outweigh the moral weight of the promise. Particularism also has merit in suggesting that we inspect cases in detail to reveal as many of the facts which could be relevant to making a moral decision. This, it seems to me, is an especially useful starting point for those coming to grips in a serious way with moral issues. It counsels them to set out a moral issue in all its complexity

before even starting to think about where the balance of moral rightness lies. Literature and other forms of the arts can often provide a rich detailing of the many factors we have to consider before making a moral assessment of someone's character or of some event or of some state of affairs.

Yet particularism's weakness is, I have claimed, that it gives insufficient weight to the role which moral principles play as reasons when we have to think about morally complex cases which give rise to moral conflicts and dilemmas. If, then, particularism is rejected in favour of a Rossian account, does the latter advance our thinking in cases of moral complexity? Ross, we have just seen, thought that in cases where we had to decide between competing prima facie moral obligations, there could not be any general rules by which to assess their comparative stringency. This view is rejected by coherentist moral realists.

According to them, our starting point for thinking about hard cases will be our moral intuitions. This, it seems to me, ought to be amended in the light of the point, emphasised by particularists, that the first move to take is carefully to lay out all the facts which might be thought to be of relevance to a moral consideration of a moral problem. After that, one can then give an as yet unconsidered moral judgment as the next step in one's moral thinking. And then, as the third step, one should attempt to state what the principle is which lies behind the intuition. This then takes us to a fourth step, one which bears its coherentist credentials. For now, one wants to know what the scope is of the moral principle which is held to underpin one's moral intuition. For example, as I write this, I learn that the Catholic Church in France has announced that it agrees that artificial contraceptives are morally acceptable when natural intercourse threatens to spread the HIV virus, and thus threatens lives. Does this imply that the French Catholic Church also agrees that whenever natural intercourse threatens life, the use of artificial contraceptives is justified?

Given that there could be competing moral intuitions, coherentism would seem to require as part of this fourth stage that the process of articulating the moral principle behind each moral intuition be repeated, together with an examination of the implications of holding these different moral principles. Can any further progress be made in our moral thinking after doing this? We have got a person to think out what are the moral principles and the moral implications which lie behind different intuitions about some morally hard case. Can a choice be made about which moral principle to accept? It seems to me that coherentism can say something useful here, for a choice can be made by comparing different moral principles in terms of which one has the least moral disadvantages. Suppose, for example, that one intuition is to be against capital punishment and another is to be for it. The former position is underpinned by the principle that one ought not to take life deliberately, the latter by the principle that one ought to protect life when actions threaten it. Examining the implications of each principle will show how they apply across a range of cases which were not thought of up till then. One might then be able to decide between them on the basis of which principle has the least moral disadvantages and the most moral advantages.

This gives us, then, a fifth stage in the evolution of our moral thinking. It seems to me that coherentism can take even take us to a sixth stage by requiring that we move away from the case from which we started and consider a quite different case which involves the same or similar moral principle or principles. Thus one might move away from questions of capital punishment to questions to do with, say, the morality of euthanasia. A range of such cases, each treated along the above coherentist lines, will enable a person to work out what are the moral principles which cover a wide range of what seemed at first sight to be disparate issues. Here, different hard cases make good law. Coherentism opens up the possibility of bringing a more unified structure to a person's moral judgments.

In brief, then, I would suggest that moral realism can give moral educators and moral

learners an account of how we can apply our powers of reason giving and reasoning in controversial moral issues which generate moral conflicts and dilemmas.

Finally, some versions of moral realism help us to a fuller understanding of the sources of moral action. There is a traditional problem for realists who hold that moral knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for moral action. It is one thing for a person to be in the position of holding 'this is right' or 'this is what ought to be done'. It is another for a person to behave morally in accordance with, and because of, those moral thoughts. But a way of tackling this can emerge from those moral realists who are internalists. When we know what is morally right, that gives us a reason for acting in the ways pointed to in the moral judgment. I say 'a' reason in order to allow for cases where one moral judgment is outweighed by another moral judgment. Leaving that complication to one side, internalists moral realists provide an answer to the question 'why should I do what is morally right?' In so far as the person asking this is already on the inside of morality, the question is an odd one to ask, for it would be tantamount to saying 'I know that this is the right thing to do for reason R, but give me a reason why I should do it'. The reason is already there.

Sometimes, however, when the question 'why should I do what is morally right?' is asked, something else lies behind it. If it is asked by someone who is not impressed by moral behaviour and moral reasons, though they know what these are, what they say is that moral considerations can have no pull with them. If someone resolutely refuses to entertain the adoption of a moral point of view, perhaps the most one can do is, as Williams suggests, (Williams 1972, ch 2) to point out to such a person the consequences of rejecting morality. They will not be able to lodge a moral complaint against those who do them down, for example.

On occasions, the question: 'why should I do what is morally right?', is asked by those who have no inclination to act morally, though they know what morality requires. Yet

while they do not acknowledge that moral obligations have a force for them, they have not set their face against them doing so. Moral thinking is not part of their actual motivation, yet. For them, the way forward is to keep appealing to what they know is morally right, and then pursuing why they do not think this gives them a reason for behaving in accordance with it. This can be done by asking them questions like 'how would you like it if that was done to you?' and thus continuing to treat them as being within the circle of rational beings. The internalist moral realist holds that if a person knows what is right and wrong, and then denies that they have a reason for acting morally, they are saying something puzzling. Moral educators, seeking to make their pupils into rational moral beings, can point to the irrationality of this.

Moral realism does not have all of the truth about moral motivation. Following Bond's analysis of reasons for acting (Bond, 1983, chp 2-3), there are motivational states which can bring about moral action but which are not states in which thinking one has a reason for moral action, plays any role. Among such states are simple inclinations such as the impulse to help someone, certain emotions such as sympathy for others, and unwilled desires, such as the sudden desire to help someone who is in difficulties.

I have, however, resisted the suggestion, found in some theories, that for there to be a morally motivating state, it is essential that non-cognitive states be present. I have argued instead that moral motivations come in different forms. Sometimes, non-cognitive states do, by themselves, motivate moral action. Sometimes they take their place in a network of other, cognitive, states as altogether producing motivations. Sometimes, a person can be motivated to act morally because they assent to a moral principle or possess some moral knowledge.

To summarise, of all the metathical theories so far considered, moral realism stays truest to those facets of our moral experience which formed the basis for my four tests. We have just seen how it preserves the link between reasons for a moral judgment and our

moral behaviour in accordance with these reasons. So far as our moral convictions are concerned, these fit in well with the general thesis of moral realism that there are moral truths. Our moral convictions, that rape is wrong, promise-keeping is right and so forth, are those basic moral judgments which we know are true, come what may. This does not mean that they are convictions which one can only assert. There are reasons for them and these can be stated. Indeed, the reasons which justify our moral judgments, including our basic moral judgments, explain why we can hold that these judgments say what is morally true. With regard, then, to basic moral convictions, moral realism provides a theoretical account of them as statements of what is morally true. They are basic moral truths, in the sense that these are truths which we cannot but accept and have every reason to accept.

Moral realism, then, meets one of the requirements for an activity to be an educational activity, which is that claims made in an activity have to be capable of having objective status, that is having the status of saying what is true, or correct, or right. A moral realist account of moral judgment does this, in the ways summarised in the previous paragraph. Given then that there are moral truths and that some of them are basic moral truths, moral realism can be used to justify the position of those who want to insist that whatever else moral educators attempt, they are right to teach pupils to understand and to accept that some things are right and others are wrong, morally speaking.

Moral realism also preserves this notion of objectivity in cases of moral conflict and moral dilemmas. Here too, moral realists say, one can strive for what is morally correct, even in the face of daunting complexity. From the perspective of moral realism, discussion and debate about matters of moral controversy make sense, for their point it to try to reject some putative moral judgments as incorrect and to try to see whether other moral judgments might be worth supporting because they are backed by sound reasons, which survive the fire of critical inquiry. Moral realism, unlike some metaethical theories, treats differences of moral opinion as expressions of moral disagreement, not just as

statements of where different individuals and cultures stand on some issue. The point of treating differences as disagreements is that in principle one can treat them as candidates for moral truth. Even in cases of moral conflict and moral dilemma, there are right and wrong answers, even though we may have the greatest difficulty in coming to know what these are.

When we turn to the question of how we might gain knowledge of basic moral principles, I suggested that the best account here is the generalist version of moral realism. As with all versions of moral realism, this is based on the claim that there are right- and wrong-making properties of natural states of affairs, actions and so forth. Generalists think that these are general moral features of natural states of affairs etc. These provide the grounds for our moral principles and our moral duties. We get to know what our moral principles and duties are and what they are based on, in a variety of quite normal ways, for example by having the wrong-making properties of some action pointed out to us, or by ourselves noticing the recurrent pattern of those features of life which make something right or wrong. In these ways we build up a stock of moral concepts and principles which enable us to apply them to particular circumstances.

Moral realists also offer us an account of how we can best justify our moral judgments in cases of moral complexity where there are competing moral judgments to choose between. Moral conflicts and dilemmas, then, are not the occasion for giving up in despair. Both particularism, generalism and coherentism can be combined to give an account of what it is to justify a moral judgment in complex moral cases. In this way moral realism shows how claims in morality, even in complex cases, can meet the requirement that for an activity to count as an educational activity, it must be capable of showing how claims made in it can be justified and assessed.

## 8.2 Conclusion

Should teachers in schools teach their pupils universal or absolute moral values, or should they instead take heed of those who, holding a broadly subjectivist or relativistic view of the nature of moral judgment, reject this approach to moral education? Should teachers in schools accept the radical argument that moral education is not even possible because moral claims cannot be objective claims and cannot be objectively assessed, or should teachers accept that plain truth and rational justification are logical properties of moral judgments, and that because of this morality is a fit and proper domain for educational activity?

All the metaethical theories which underpin the view that moral education is not possible, bring with them other claims about morality which are difficult to accept. None of the theories have stood up well to all four of the tests I devised for assessing metaethical theories. None of them, that is, do justice to all those facets of our moral experience which provided the bases for the four tests. All seem to licence views which are doubtfully moral and so would strain our moral convictions. All fail to do justice to the fact that when we grapple with conflicting moral obligations, what we are trying to do, through argument and the assessment of reasons, is to solve a moral problem, even if that goal often eludes us. All fail to give a convincing explanation of how we are to understand the activities of reason-giving and reasoning which appear to be what we are engaged in when we try to justify our moral judgments. Indeed, some of the theories have very dubious accounts of how we come to have moral knowledge. The one strength of some of these theories lay, I suggested, more in what they might contribute to a more general theory of moral motivation than in anything else.

If moral education is to be a possible activity, moral claims made in moral judgments have to have objective status and be capable of objective justification. Theories which deny that this is possible in morality, do so because they have a particular understanding

of what a moral judgment is. What my investigations have shown, though, is that these theories, sceptical as they are about the possibility of moral education, also have deeper veins of scepticism running through them. The scepticism does not stop short at moral education. It extends to our core moral convictions; to what we think we are doing in when we try to sort out complex moral problems which give rise to moral conflicts; and to any attempts to justify moral judgment. If scepticism about moral education leads to these sorts of doubts, they threaten our central understandings of morality itself. They threaten, in other words, our understanding that there are certain things which are right and wrong, that moral beliefs are beliefs for which we can give reasoned defences, and that when we try to sort out what to believe in cases of moral complexity which give rise to conflicts and dilemmas, we are trying to solve moral problems. Acceptance of these theories amounts to an abandonment of some very basic ideas about morality. Advanced as theories about moral judgments, they finish up being theories which so dismember morality that what one is left with is barely recognisable as morality. For anyone who both wants to affirm that there is a moral point of view, and that this possesses features which can be the object of educational activity, these theories are Trojan horses.

What of the concept of moral education? What does it mean to say that a person is a morally educated person, and how would such a person differ from someone who was just morally good? I suggested in 1.1 that in order for there to be a full answer to these questions, there would need to be account of the concept of morality. Though not my primary concern in this work, I sketched some of the problems of doing this, and suggested that morality must have a content in order to differentiate it from selfishness, cruelty, politics, religion and art. I accepted the view put forward by HMI in 1985, that morality requires that we take account of the views and feelings of others in deciding what we ought to do, a view which has a philosophical pedigree.

So far as the concept of moral education is concerned, though, my main task was to examine how 'education' and its cognate terms apply in morality. In 1.1, I cited Peters'

view on the concept of education, namely that to be educated is 'to have regard to standards of clarity, relevance, consistency, and correctness, which are intimately connected with the pursuit of truth' (Peters, 1970, p 15). We can now see more clearly and in greater detail how these ideas apply in moral education, and for this we can use Hare's theory of universal prescriptivism and the work of moral realists. These together can yield a concept of what it is to be morally educated, and what it is to try to morally educate others.

Morally educated people will be brought up with a stock of moral concepts and principles, and some of these will constitute their basic moral convictions. When people express their basic moral convictions, and when they use them to make particular moral judgments, they are saying what they know to be right and wrong. In saying these things, they are not merely giving their opinion or expressing their likes or dislikes or their approvals or disapprovals of something. Nor are they just appealing to the prevailing cultural values. They are expressing something basic about the right and wrong ways of treating people, convictions which, though a cultural phenomenon, transcend the particular times and places of their utterance. Nor, in describing them as basic moral convictions, does this mean that they are just unreasoned assertions or error-immune beliefs. They are judgments which people have every reason to keep and no reason to give up. Reasons can be given for them, and these reasons will cite facts which have moral significance. Thus, promises ought to be kept, and the reasons why this is so, lie in facts such as the way in which the promisee will be misled and her life consequently disrupted.

Sometimes it is objected that if we put the learning of moral principles at the forefront of the moral upbringing of individuals, this will introduce a rigidity into their moral thinking. Accepting that promises ought to be kept, the danger is that this will be taken to mean that each and every promise made ought to be kept. But both moral realists and universal prescriptivists acknowledge that moral judgments sometimes have to be made about moral problems which possess a degree of complexity. In these situations, giving simple, straightforward moral responses, based on simple moral principles, does not address the

complexities. For universal prescriptivists, this requires us to engage in critical moral thinking along act-utilitarian lines. For moral realists, I suggested that it was possible to combine the features of generalism, particularism and coherentism to deal with the problems of making moral judgments in cases of moral complexity.

From my criticisms earlier in this chapter of the way universal prescriptivism handles the interplay between intuitive and critical levels of moral thinking, it seems to me that it is wiser here to follow the generalist strain in moral realism. For generalists, moral principles, rather than moral principles arrives at through critical thinking, are the base from which to depart. The morally educated person, then, will see that there are occasions where a moral principle, part of one's stock of basic moral principles, may have to be set aside. But there have to be weighty reasons for doing this. Generally it is true that one ought to keep one's promises, and this will often still be the case even when there are facts to be considered which might lead one to conclude otherwise. One breaks the promise with reluctance and only after there is good reason to do so. This does not force us to agree, either, that moral principles have been somehow 'invalidated' by there being cases where the promise has to be set aside by other, stronger moral obligations.

But in morality, sometimes even this is not enough. We have our stock of basic moral concepts and principles, but we find ourselves facing moral conflicts and dilemmas which go beyond being cases where all we have to decide is whether we should reluctantly give up one moral principle, which we would normally adhere to, in favour of another moral principle. We have to sort out morally complex questions which by their nature require us to some hard moral thinking because all sorts of considerations seem to be in play, pulling us in quite diverse directions and threatening to give us a sort of mental cramp. On cases like these, which are often considered not only in secondary schools but increasingly in the upper reaches of primary schools, my suggestion is that we can learn how to reason well about them by listening to what both particularists and coherentists say. We need to lay out the details of the moral complexities. But then, we

need to use this information in order to start working out what we should be thinking about the case, morally speaking, remembering all the while that we already have a stock of moral principles to call upon for doing this. And this will take us into the sort of thinking which coherentists propose, the statement of one's unconsidered opinion, the articulation of the moral principle behind it, the examination of the implications of applying that principle to other cases, the replication of this process of thinking springing out of other intuitions about the case in hand, the attempt to come to some overall judgment about which principle is the one which commands most support from the moral point of view, and the spread of this sort of thinking to an ever wider range of cases. In this way we can build up a stock of considered and defensible moral judgments, where we examine whether what we say about one sort of case fits in with or strains against what we think in another sort of case. Done well, this will bring a structure to our moral thinking, brought about by the drive to avoid contradiction, to produce consistency, to get the facts correct, and in these ways to give an overall coherence to our moral outlook.

This is close to what Hare suggests in his views about the critical level of moral thinking. Hare's universal prescriptivism contributes in other ways to our understanding of what it is to reason well in morality. Morally educated people will exercise care over establishing the factual content relevant to one's moral judgments. The morally educated person will also become aware of the formal requirements of consistency in moral judgments. Other formal principles too help us to ground moral judgments. If someone is considering breaking a promise, we might try to get them to see what is wrong about this, by asking them, following Hare, how they would like it if that was done to them. We can call on other formal principles. We might ask someone what we would mean by our words of promise-making if every time a person made a promise, it was broken. We might ask a person to reflect on how things would be if everyone broke a promise they had made.

These are all, then, features of what it is to reason well in ethics, and what it is to be

morally educated. Those taught to reason in these ways will provide ample demonstration that in morality, moral claims can be rationally justified, criticised and defended. They will be living proof that morality is a fit and proper subject for education.

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