Australasian Journal of Philosophy

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Published online: 02 Jun 2006.

To cite this article: David O. Brink (1984) Moral realism and the sceptical arguments from disagreement and queerness, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 62:2, 111-125, DOI: 10.1080/00048408412341311

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048408412341311
MORAL REALISM AND THE SCEPTICAL ARGUMENTS FROM DISAGREEMENT AND QUEerness

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1. Introduction

The most important kind of challenge to moral realism or moral objectivism argues that there is a special problem with realism in ethics. I shall defend moral realism against two influential versions of this challenge recently formulated by J. L. Mackie in his book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong.* According to standards of argument which Mackie himself sets, neither his argument from disagreement nor his argument from queerness shows any special problem for moral realism. Let me explain why.

Moral realism is best explained as a special case of a global realist thesis. The general thesis common to realist claims about a variety of disciplines is a two part metaphysical claim:

\[ R: (a) \text{there are facts of kind } x, \text{ and} \\
(b) \text{these facts are logically independent of our evidence, i.e. those beliefs which are our evidence, for them.} \]

Moral realism is then obtained by substituting 'moral' for the variable 'x'.

\[ MR: (a) \text{there are moral facts, and} \\
(b) \text{these facts are logically independent of our evidence, i.e. those beliefs which are our evidence, for them.} \]

Moral realism claims that there are objective moral facts and implies that there are true moral propositions.

Moral scepticism is technically an epistemological doctrine and so is officially neutral with respect to the metaethical thesis of moral realism. Moral scepticism claims that we have no moral knowledge and this claim is compatible with the existence of objective moral facts and true moral propositions. But while moral realism and moral scepticism are compatible (we may just have no cognitive access to moral facts), the standard and most plausible reason for claiming that we have no moral knowledge is the belief that there are no moral facts. This must be why Mackie construes moral scepticism

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2. Cf. Michael Devitt, 'Dummett's Anti-Realism' *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983), pp. 75-6. For obvious reasons, the kind of dependence asserted in \( R \) is logical, not causal.
Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments

as an anti-realist thesis. I shall follow Mackie in this and treat moral scepticism
as a denial of the existence of objective values.3

There are two basic kinds of moral sceptic. The first kind applies general
sceptical considerations to the special case of morality. On his view, there
are no moral facts, but neither are there any other objective facts about the
world. Of course, this first sort of sceptic is quite radical and has not been
terribly influential as a source of moral scepticism. The second kind of moral
sceptic claims that there is a special problem about realism in ethics, a problem
which does not afflict realism about most other disciplines. This clearly has
been the more popular and philosophically influential version of moral scep-
ticism. Mackie is this second kind of moral sceptic.

As this second kind of moral sceptic, Mackie complains that belief in the
existence of objective values is no part of a plausible realist world-view.
(E: p. 17) Mackie's sceptical arguments, therefore, cannot turn on the appli-
cation of general sceptical considerations. If it can be shown that the moral
realist's metaphysical and epistemological commitments are no less plausible
than those of, say, the physical realist, then Mackie's sceptical arguments
will have been answered.

Although it is possible to defend moral realism against sceptical arguments
without establishing any kind of presumption in its favour, there are, as
Mackie recognises, general considerations which require the moral sceptic
to bear a certain burden of proof. First, this second version of moral scep-
ticism concedes a presumption in favour of moral realism. If, as this second
sort of scepticism assumes, realism is plausible about a wide range of disci-
plines, then there must be some special justification for taking a different
view about the existence and nature of moral facts. Of course, this establishes
only a very weak presumption in favour of moral realism, but it is one which
the moral sceptic must rebut.

Moreover, belief in moral realism is supported by certain features of our
moral practice. In moral deliberation and moral argument we search for
answers to our moral questions, answers whose correctness we assume to
be independent of our means of arriving at them.4 Of course, this presumption
too is defeasible, but this takes some argument. As Mackie claims, moral
scepticism must have the status of an error theory; it must explain how and
why our commitment to the objectivity of moral values is mistaken. (E: p. 35)

Mackie distinguishes two arguments for the second version of moral scepti-
cism. The first turns on the apparent unresolvability of many moral disputes
and so is best thought of as an argument from disagreement,5 while the second

3 The simple denial of the existence of moral facts, accompanied by no positive account of
the nature of moral values, is moral nihilism. But Mackie, like most moral sceptics, not only
denies the existence of objective values but also adopts a constructivist or subjectivist position
about the nature of value according to which we make or choose moral value.

4 See Thomas Nagel, 'The Limits of Objectivity' in S. McMurrin (ed), The Tanner Lectures
on Human Values I (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1980), p. 100. Cf. E: pp. 35,
48-9; HMT: pp. 34, 70-5, 136.

5 Mackie himself refers to this argument as 'the argument from relativity'. (E: p. 36) But this
label is at least misleading and on a natural reading of 'relativity' begs the question, since
David O. Brink

turns on the mysterious character objective values would seem to have to have and so represents an argument from queerness. Mackie presses both of these arguments against moral realism and in favour of moral scepticism and subjectivism. In what follows, I shall examine and rebut Mackie’s arguments from disagreement and queerness; I shall argue that neither argument establishes any special problem for moral realism. Although these two arguments may not exhaust the arguments for the second version of moral scepticism, they are sufficiently important both historically and philosophically that successfully rebutting them will go a long way towards defending moral realism.

2. Moral Objectivity

Before discussing the details of the arguments from disagreement and queerness, we need to establish just which version of moral realism is or need be in question. In section 1 I described moral realism as the metaethical view that there are objective moral facts. However, in pressing the arguments from disagreement and queerness, Mackie employs a stronger or more committal version of moral realism according to which not only are there moral facts but also these moral facts are objectively prescriptive. (E: pp. 23, 26-7, 29, 40, 42; HMT: pp. 22, 53, 55, 134, 146; MT: pp. 102, 104, 115-16) Indeed, although both the argument from disagreement and the argument from queerness apply to my formulation of moral realism, some of the special appeal of the argument from queerness derives from the assumption that moral facts would have to be objectively prescriptive. (E: pp. 40-1; HMT: p. 61)

In claiming that moral facts would have to be objectively prescriptive, Mackie is claiming that moral realism requires the truth of internalism. Internalism is the a priori thesis that the recognition of moral facts itself either necessarily motivates or necessarily provides reasons for action. Internalism is an a priori thesis, because its proponents claim that the recognition of moral facts necessarily motivates or provides reasons for action no matter what the moral facts turn out to be. We can distinguish motivational internalism (MI) and reasons internalism (RI): MI holds that it is a priori that the recognition of moral facts itself necessarily motivates the agent to perform the moral action, while RI claims that it is a priori that the recognition of moral facts itself necessarily provides the agent with reason to perform the moral action. Externalism, by contrast, denies both MI and RI.7

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6 There is some question about whether Mackie’s rejection of moral realism in chapter 1 of part I of E is consistent with his defence in part II of a mixed deontological/consequentialist ethical theory based on considerations of rational self-interest. I shall not pursue this issue here; it is the main topic of Jonathan Harrison, “Mackie’s Moral ‘Scepticism’” Philosophy 57 (1982), pp. 173-191.

7 The a priori character of the internalist thesis and the MI/RI distinction are often obscured. Cf. W. D. Falk, “Ought and Motivation” reprinted in W. Sellars and J. Hospers (eds), Readings in Ethical Theory (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1952); William Frankena,
Although Mackie is unclear as between MI and RI, he clearly thinks that some version of internalism is required by moral realism. Both MI and RI make exceptionally strong claims. MI claims that—whatever the moral facts turn out to be and regardless of the psychological make-up of the agent—the mere recognition of a moral fact necessarily provides some motivation to perform the moral action, while RI claims that—whatever the moral facts turn out to be and regardless of the agent's interests or desires—the mere recognition of a moral fact necessarily provides the agent with at least some reason to perform the moral action. These claims are quite implausible, and it is unclear why moral realism is committed to either of them.

It is unlikely that the recognition of moral facts necessarily motivates or provides reasons for action; it is very unlikely that the recognition of moral facts alone necessarily motivates or provides reasons for action; and the mere recognition of moral facts almost certainly does not necessarily motivate or provide reasons for action regardless of what the moral facts turn out to be. Whether the recognition of moral facts motivates certainly depends upon what the moral facts are, and, at least on most plausible moral theories, whether recognition of these facts motivates is a matter of contingent (even if deep) psychological fact about the agent. Whether the recognition of moral facts provides reasons for action depends upon whether the agent has reason to do what morality requires. But this, of course, depends upon what morality requires, i.e. upon what the moral facts are, and, at least on standard theories of reasons for action, whether recognition of these facts provides reason for action will depend upon contingent (even if deep) facts about the agent's desires or interests. So, internalism is false; it is not something which we can know a priori, i.e. whatever the moral facts turn out to be, that the recognition of moral facts alone either necessarily motivates or necessarily provides reasons for action.

It is hard to see why moral realism should be committed to the truth of internalism. Mackie claims both that moral realists have traditionally been internalists (E: p. 23) and that internalism is part of common sense moral thinking. (E: p. 35) But both claims seem false and would carry relatively little weight, even if true. Once we make clear the strength of the internalist claim—that we know a priori that mere recognition of moral facts necessarily motivates or provides reasons for action—it is less clear that the tradition of moral realism is a tradition of internalism. In particular, although I cannot argue the claims here, I doubt that Plato, Hume, or Sidgwick is, as Mackie claims, an internalist. And, of course, even if many moral philosophers have thought that internalism is true, it would not follow that they were right. Nor does common sense moral thinking seem to support belief in internalism;

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8 E: pp. 23, 40; HMT: pp. 22, 53; and MT: p. 102 require MI, while MT: p. 115 explicitly requires RI.

in fact, it seems extremely unlikely that any belief so recherché could be part of common sense moral thinking. Even if belief in internalism were part of common sense moral thinking, it would be revisable, especially if it could be shown that belief in internalism plays a social role such that it would persist even if mistaken.

So no good reason has been produced for thinking that internalism is true or for thinking that moral realism requires internalism. This means that the moral realist can defend externalism. In particular, determination of the motivational and reason-giving power of moral facts will have to await specifications of the moral facts and of the desires and interests of agents. In defending moral realism against the arguments from disagreement and queerness, I will offer what I call a functionalist theory of moral value according to which moral facts are facts about human well-being and flourishing as a model specification of moral realist claims. This account illustrates the kind of justification of morality which the externalist can provide, for this functionalist theory implies that moral facts will as a matter of fact at least typically provide agents with reasons to do the morally correct thing.

3. The Argument from Disagreement
Mackie claims that the best explanation of inter- and intra-societal ethical disagreement is that there simply are no moral facts, only differences of attitude, commitment, or decision. (E: pp. 36-7) Of course, disagreement does not entail scepticism. Mackie recognises that we do not infer from the fact that there are disagreements in the natural sciences that the natural sciences are not objective disciplines. Nor do we make what might appear to be the more modest inference from the fact that there is a specific dispute in some subject that there is no fact of the matter on the particular issue in question. For example, no one concluded from the apparently quite deep disagreement among astronomers a short while ago about the existence of black holes that there was no fact of the matter concerning the existence of black holes. Mackie's claim is that disagreement in ethics is somehow more fundamental than disagreement in other disciplines. In particular, realism about a discipline requires that its disputes be resolvable at least in principle, and, while most scientific disputes do seem resolvable, many moral disputes do not.

Mackie imagines the moral realist replying that moral disputes are resolvable, because deep moral disagreements are not really cases of disagreement. Rather, they are cases in which 'disputants' apply antecedently shared moral principles under different empirical conditions. (E: p. 37) The resulting moral judgments are about different action types, so the 'disagreements' in question are really only apparent.

Mackie issues two rejoinders to this realist reply. His first rejoinder is that this realist response commits the realist to (a) claiming that necessity can only attach to general moral principles and (b) accepting the following counterfactual: '... if things had been otherwise, quite different sorts of actions
would have been right’. (E: p. 37) (a) and (b), Mackie claims, imply that many action types will be right or wrong only contingently.

Although this rejoinder does raise some interesting questions about the modal status of moral facts, it in no way threatens moral realism. First, certainly some moral facts are contingent, and, even if this realist reply requires the contingency of some moral facts, this shows nothing about how many moral facts the realist must regard as contingent. But, secondly and more importantly, Mackie’s modal issue is a red herring. The truth of moral realism turns on the existence of moral facts, not their modal status.

Mackie’s second rejoinder to the realist reply is simply that some moral disputes are real disputes. Not all putative moral disagreements can be explained away as the application of antecedently shared moral principles in different circumstances. (E: p. 38)

Mackie is right that many moral disputes are genuine, and, if the realist had no account of these disputes, Mackie would have a strong argument against moral realism. But the realist can account for moral disputes.

As we have seen, not every apparent moral disagreement is a genuine dispute. But the realist need not maintain even that all genuine moral disputes are resolvable. He can maintain that some moral disputes have no uniquely correct answers. Moral ties are possible, and considerations, each of which is objectively valuable, may be incommensurable. So the moral realist need only maintain that most genuine moral disputes are resolvable.

Indeed, the realist can plausibly maintain that most genuine moral disputes are in principle resolvable. Mackie’s discussion of the realist’s reply shows that Mackie thinks moral disagreement is resolvable if and only if antecedent agreement on general moral principles obtains. This claim presupposes a one-way view of moral justification and argument according to which moral principles justify particular moral judgments but not vice versa. However, this view of moral justification is defective. As Goodman, Rawls, and other coherentists have argued, justification proceeds both from general principles to particular cases and from particular cases to general principles. Just as agreement about general moral principles may be exploited to resolve disagreement about particular moral cases, so agreement about particular moral cases may be exploited to resolve disagreement about general moral principles. Ideally, trade-offs among the various levels of generality of belief will be made in such a way as to maximise initial commitment, overall consistency, explanatory power, etc. A coherentist model of moral reasoning of this sort

10 Of course, the mere absence of a single fact or set of facts in virtue of which both considerations are valuable does not establish incommensurability.
11 A realist could maintain that most or even all genuine moral disputes are unresolvable, as long as he was willing to claim that moral ties and incommensurable values occurred frequently enough. Although these claims are compatible with his position, reliance on them would weaken his reply to the argument from disagreement.
makes it much less plausible that disagreements over moral principles are in principle unresolvable.\textsuperscript{13}

Moreover, a great many moral disagreements depend upon disagreements over the non-moral facts. First, many disagreements over the non-moral facts result from culpable forms of ignorance of fact. Often, for moral or non-moral reasons, at least one disputant culpably fails to assess the non-moral facts correctly by being insufficiently imaginative in weighing the consequences for the relevant people of alternative actions or policies. This sort of error is especially important in moral disputes, since thought experiments (as opposed to actual tests) play such an important part in the assessment of moral theories. Thought experiments play a larger role in moral methodology than they do in scientific methodology, at least partly because it is often (correctly) regarded as immoral to assess moral theories by realising the relevant counterfactuals.

Secondly, many moral disagreements result from reasonable but nonetheless resolvable disagreements over the non-moral facts. The correct answers to moot moral questions often turn on certain non-moral facts about which reasonable disagreement is possible and which may in fact be known by no one. Correct answers to moral questions can turn at least in part upon correct answers to non-moral questions such as ‘What (re)distribution of a certain class of goods would make the worst-off representative person in a particular society best-off?’, ‘Would public ownership of the means of production in the United States lead to an increase or decrease in the average standard of living?’, ‘What is the correct theory of human personality?’, and ‘What kind of life would my severely mentally retarded child lead (if I brought the pregnancy to term and raised the child), and how would caring for him affect my family and me?’. However difficult and controversial these questions are, the issues which they raise are in principle resolvable. Moral disputes commonly do turn on disagreement over issues such as these, and, insofar as they do, moral disputes are clearly resolvable in principle.

Mackie argues that if moral realism were true, all moral disputes should be resolvable, and since many seem irresolvable, he concludes that moral realism is false. But the moral realist need only claim that most genuine moral disputes are in principle resolvable. Not all apparent moral disagreements are genuine, because some apparent moral disputes merely reflect the application of antecedently shared moral principles under different circumstances. Not every genuine moral dispute need be even in principle resolvable, since moral ties are possible and some objective moral values may be incommensurable. Of those genuine moral disputes which the realist is committed to treating as in principle resolvable, some depend upon antecedent disagreement over moral principles, while others depend upon disagreement over the non-moral facts. The realist can claim that antecedent disagreement over moral principles is in principle resolvable by coherence arguments and that dis-

\textsuperscript{13} Although a coherentist theory of moral truth would be incompatible with moral realism, this part of the realist’s reply requires only a coherence theory of moral justification.
agreement over the non-moral facts is always in principle resolvable.\textsuperscript{14} The moral realist gives a plausible enough account of moral disagreement for us to say that Mackie has not shouldered the burden of proof for his claim that the falsity of moral realism is the best explanation of the nature of moral disagreement.

4. The Argument from Queerness

The rough idea behind the argument from queerness is that objective moral facts and properties would have to be so different from the sort of natural facts and properties for which we do have evidence that we have good \textit{a posteriori} reason to reject moral realism.\textsuperscript{15} (\textit{E}: pp. 38-42; \textit{MT}: pp. 115-16)

As I said in section 2, the argument from queerness is supposed to tell especially against the existence of moral facts conceived of as being objectively prescriptive. (\textit{E}: pp. 40-1; \textit{HMT}: p. 61) I claimed that in committing realism to objective prescriptivity Mackie is claiming that moral realism requires internalism. But I argued that internalism is implausible and that Mackie produces no good reason for committing realism to internalism. Instead, the realist can defend externalism; determination of whether agents have reason or motive to be moral will depend upon the content of morality and facts about agents. In explaining why objective values are not queer, I will offer a model specification of moral realism, which, together with plausible empirical assumptions, implies that agents generally do have reasons to be moral.

There are two limbs to the argument from queerness: one metaphysical, one epistemological. (\textit{E}: p. 38) I turn to the metaphysical branch of the argument first. Mackie thinks that moral realism is a metaphysically queer doctrine, because he believes that moral facts or properties would have to be ontologically simple or independent. (\textit{E}: p. 38) The assumption is that moral properties would have to be \textit{sui generis}, that is, ontologically independent of natural properties with which we are familiar. Although it is not inconceivable that there should be \textit{sui generis} moral properties, we have very good \textit{a posteriori} evidence for the truth of materialism and for the falsity of ontological pluralism.

However, Mackie's crucial assumption that moral facts and properties would have to be \textit{sui generis} is false; moral realism does not require ontological pluralism. The moral realist has at least two options on the assumption that materialism is true: he can claim that moral properties are identical with certain physical properties, or he can claim that moral properties supervene upon certain physical properties. Because moral properties and their instances could be realised in non-physical as well as a variety of physical ways, neither moral properties nor their instances should be identified with physical properties or their instances.\textsuperscript{16} For this reason, it is best for the moral realist to

\textsuperscript{14} Actually, the argument from disagreement presupposes that disagreement over non-moral facts is always in principle resolvable.

\textsuperscript{15} As Mackie himself observes (\textit{MT}: p. 116), the queerness argument is \textit{a posteriori} and not \textit{a priori} as R. M. Hare, \textit{Moral Thinking} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 82-6, insists.

\textsuperscript{16} Cf. Saul Kripke, 'Identity and Necessity' reprinted in S. Schwartz (ed), \textit{Naming, Necessity},
David O. Brink

claim that moral properties supervene upon physical properties.

Mackie recognises the realist's claim about the supervenience of moral facts and properties on physical facts and properties but claims that the alleged supervenient relation is also metaphysically queer:

Another way of bringing out this queerness is to ask about anything that is supposed to have some objective moral quality, how this is linked with its natural features. What is the connection between the natural fact that an action is a case of deliberate cruelty—say, causing pain just for fun—and the moral fact that it is wrong? It cannot be an entailment, a logical or semantic necessity. Yet it is not merely that the two features occur together. The wrongness must somehow be 'consequential' or 'supervenient'; it is wrong because it is a piece of deliberate cruelty. But just what in the world is signified by this 'because'? (E: p. 41)

Although I do not think that Mackie has really motivated a metaphysical worry about moral supervenience, I shall defend moral realism against the charge of metaphysical queerness by adopting the strategy which Mackie mentions of finding partners in guilt—although once it is clear what sort of company the realist is keeping it would only be perverse to regard them as partners in guilt. I shall argue that the supervenient relation which the realist claims obtains between moral properties and natural or physical properties is neither uncommon nor mysterious.

Although it is an interesting question what the precise relation is between property identity and supervenience, it is fairly clear that one property can supervene upon another without those two properties being identical. A supervenient relation obtains between two properties or sets of properties just in case the one property or set of properties is causally realised by the other property or set of properties; the former property or set of properties is the supervening property or set of properties, and the latter property or set of properties is the base property or set of properties. Supervenience implies that no change can occur in the supervening property without a change occurring in the base property, but it also asserts a claim of ontological dependence. Assuming, as Mackie does, that materialism is true, all proper-


Also, recall that Mackie advocates a selective and not a general kind of scepticism.


ties ultimately supervene on material or physical base properties. Physical properties are basic then in the sense that all other properties are nothing over and above physical properties. Biological, social, psychological, and moral properties are all realised physically; they are simply different kinds of combinations and arrangements of matter which hang together explanatorily.

Supervenience is a relation of causal constitution or dependence. There is nothing strange and certainly nothing unique about the supervenience of moral properties on physical properties. Assuming materialism is true, mental states supervene on physical states, yet few think that mental states are metaphysically queer (and those that do do not think that supervenience makes them queer). Social facts such as unemployment, inflation, and exploitation supervene upon physical facts, yet no one supposes that social facts are metaphysically queer. Biological states such as being an organism supervene on physical states, yet no one supposes that organisms are queer entities. Macroscopic material objects such as tables supervene on microscopical physical particles, yet no one supposes that tables are queer entities. In short, it is difficult to see how the realist's use of supervenience in explaining the relationship between moral and physical properties makes his position queer. Moral properties are not ontologically simple or independent; but then neither are mental states, social facts, biological states, or macroscopic material

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1980), p. 214. If, as these writers seem to suggest, the sufficiency of a change in the supervening property for a change in the base property were both a necessary and sufficient condition for supervenience, then supervenience would be compatible with epiphenomenalism. (An epiphenomenalist construal of supervenience might explain why Moore, Ross, and Broad, who are all non-naturalists and think that moral properties are sui generis, nonetheless claim that moral properties supervene on natural properties.) But the realist should construe supervenience as a relation of ontological dependence and so should count the sufficiency of a change in the supervening property for a change in the base property as only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for supervenience.

20 Supervenience is a transitive relation.

21 Although Mackie does not press Moore's open question argument or any of its cognates against moral realism, it is worth pointing out that property supervenience does not require any kind of syntactic or linguistic reductionism. Just as property identity does not require property predicate synonymy, so property supervenience does not require synonymy or meaning implications between supervening property predicates and base property predicates. For instance, whether or not human pains supervene on C-fiber firings, the truth of this claim does not depend upon whether there are synonymy relations or meaning implications between 'human pain' and 'C-fiber firing'. Thus, although biological, social, psychological, and moral properties all supervene on physical properties, biological, social, psychological, and moral terms need not be definable in the language of particle physics. This explains how moral realism can be true even if there are no reductive definitions of moral terms. Cf. Richard Boyd, 'Materialism without Reductionism: Non-Humean Causation and the Evidence for Physicalism' in Richard Boyd, The Physical Basis of Mind (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming); Jerry Fodor, 'The Special Sciences, or the Disunity of Science as a Working Hypothesis' reprinted in N. Block; Geoffrey Hellman and Frank Thompson, 'Physicalism: Ontology, Determination, and Reduction' Journal of Philosophy 72 (1975), pp. 551-564; and Hilary Putnam, 'On Properties' reprinted in Hilary Putnam, Mathematics, Matter, and Method (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 312, Realism, Truth, and History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 84-5, 207, 'Possibility and Necessity', pp. 53-5, and 'Beyond Historicism', p. 291, both in Hilary Putnam, Realism and Reason (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
David O. Brink

objects. It is unlikely that moral properties are identical with physical properties; moral properties could have been realised non-materially. But there is every reason to believe that in the actual world moral properties, like other natural properties, are realised materially.

This realist account of supervenience discharges any explanatory obligation which the argument from metaphysical queerness imposes. The details of the way in which moral properties supervene upon other natural properties are worked out differently by different moral theories. Determination of which account of moral supervenience is best will depend upon determination of which moral theory provides the best account of all our beliefs, both moral and non-moral. Although I obviously cannot do here what is needed to defend a particular account of moral supervenience, I will now offer a model specification of the moral realist's metaphysical claims.

When trying to determine the way in which moral properties supervene upon other natural properties, one might start by looking at plausible theories about other kinds of properties. Functional theories provide plausible accounts of a wide variety of kinds of properties; the nature of biological, psychological, social, and economic properties is profitably viewed in functional terms. Consider functionalist theories of mind as an example. Although functionalism is not without its critics, it is fair to say that there are no rival theories in the philosophy of mind today. What is essential to any particular mental state type, according to functionalism, is the causal role which that mental state plays in the activities which are characteristic of the organism as a whole. Mental states are identified and distinguished from other mental states in terms of the causally relevant relations which they bear to sensory inputs, behavioural outputs, and other mental states. To take a hoary example, functionalist theories of mind claim that pain is identified and distinguished from other mental states by virtue of its tendency to result from tissue damage, to produce an injury-avoidance desire, and to issue in the appropriate injury-avoidance behaviour. The physical states which realise this functional state are the physical states upon which pain supervenes.

Similarly, the moral realist might claim that moral properties are functional properties. He might claim that what is essential to moral properties is the causal role which they play in the characteristic activities of human organisms. In particular, the realist might claim that moral properties are

22 See, e.g., Ned Block, 'Troubles with Functionalism' reprinted in N. Block.
24 A functionalist moral realist might claim that moral properties are properties which play a certain role in the activities which are characteristic of sentient organisms.
those which bear upon the maintenance and flourishing of human organisms. Maintenance and flourishing presumably consist in necessary conditions for survival, other needs associated with basic well-being, wants of various sorts, and distinctively human capacities. People, actions, policies, states of affairs, etc. will bear good-making moral properties just insofar as they contribute to the satisfaction of these needs, wants, and capacities. People, actions, policies, states of affairs, etc. will bear bad-making moral properties just insofar as they fail to promote or interfere with the satisfaction of these needs, wants, and capacities. 25 The physical states which contribute to or interfere with the satisfaction of these needs, wants, and capacities are the physical states upon which, on this functionalist theory, moral properties ultimately supervene.

Although I cannot and do not need to defend here this functionalist model, it is worth pointing out how this model addresses two issues of concern to Mackie, namely, the justifiability of morality and the decidability of moral disputes. In section 2 I argued that internalism is implausible and that determination of whether agents have motivation or reason to be moral depends upon the content of morality and facts about agents. If this functionalist account of moral value which I have proposed as a realist model is plausible, then there is reason to think that moral facts will at least typically provide agents with reasons for action. Everyone has reason to promote his own well-being, and everyone has reason to promote the well-being of others at least to the extent that his own well-being is tied up with theirs. Presumably, any plausible theory of human needs, wants, and capacities will show that the satisfaction of these desiderata for any given individual will depend to a large extent on the well-being of others. People have needs and desires for friendship and love and for the benefits of cooperative activity; they also have capacities for sympathy, benevolence, and social intercourse. In order to satisfy these social needs, desires, and capacities, agents must develop and maintain stable social dispositions, and this means that they will often have reason to benefit others even when they do not otherwise benefit by their action. So, although there may be cases in which maintaining or promoting human well-being involves no benefit to the agent, there is good reason to suppose that human well-being and agent well-being will by and large coincide. As this functionalist theory of value illustrates, externalism allows a strong justification of morality.

This functionalist theory of moral value also helps to explain the nature of moral disagreement. Common sense and attention to the argument from disagreement tell us that moral disputes can be extremely difficult to resolve. This functionalist specification of moral realism explains why many moral disputes which are in principle resolvable are nonetheless so difficult to resolve even under favourable conditions. Because facts about human well-being and

25 When suitably developed, this functionalist theory of moral value might be quite similar in content to the moral theory which Mackie himself defends in part II of E. However, Mackie and I would still disagree about the status of this theory. I am suggesting that it might be true; he is presumably doing something like recommending the adoption of his theory.
flourishing depend at least in part upon facts in such complex and controversial empirical disciplines as economics, social theory, and psychology, even disputants who share something like the functionalist theory of value and are well informed will often disagree about what morality requires.

In addition to the metaphysical complaint about 'what in the world' a supervenient relation is, Mackie lodges an epistemological complaint about how we could know when the appropriate supervenient relation obtains. (E: p. 41) We may know that certain natural facts or facts under a non-moral description obtain, but how do we know or go about finding out whether these physical facts realise any moral facts and, if so, which? Mackie claims that we could gain this kind of moral knowledge only if we had special faculties for the perception of moral facts of the sort ethical intuitionism ensures. But, Mackie argues, although moral intuitionism could have been true, there are good a posteriori grounds for believing that no such faculties exist. Therefore, barring the cognitive inaccessibility of moral facts, moral realism must be false. (E: pp. 38-9)

The epistemological belief that moral realism is committed to intuitionism rests at least in Mackie's case on the mistaken metaphysical assumption that moral values would have to be ontologically sui generis. If and only if moral facts were queer kinds of entities would we need some special faculty for cognitive access to them. But the realist denies that moral facts are sui generis; moral facts supervene on natural facts. One goes about discovering which natural facts moral facts supervene on by appeal to moral theories. (Of course, appeal to a particular moral theory is justified only if that theory coheres well with other moral and non-moral beliefs we hold.) For example, if the functionalist account of moral value sketched above can be defended, then we do know how to set about ascertaining which if any moral facts supervene on a particular set of natural facts. We ascertain whether the natural facts in question contribute to, interfere with, or are neutral with respect to the maintenance and promotion of human well-being. Granted, in many cases this will be no easy task, since completion of the task will depend in part upon answers to controversial empirical questions in such fields as economics, social theory, and psychology. But all this shows is that moral knowledge is sometimes hard to come by, not that it is queer or mysterious.

Mackie might complain that both acceptance and application of moral theories must be guided by other moral commitments. Not only does acceptance of the functionalist theory of value depend upon its coherence with, among other things, other moral beliefs, but also the findings of such disciplines as economics, sociology, and psychology cannot fully determine the extension of 'human well-being and flourishing'. Even if the special sciences can tell us something about human needs, wants, and capacities, and the effective ways of realising them, these sciences cannot rank these components of the good or adjudicate conflicts among them. Some irreducibly normative questions must be answered in determining what constitutes human well-being and flourishing.

But if the fact that some or all of our moral judgments are theory-dependent
in this way is supposed to present a genuine epistemological problem for the moral realist which is not simply the result of applying general sceptical considerations to the case of morality, Mackie must claim that theory-dependence is a feature peculiar to moral methodology. Is this claim at all plausible?

Here, as before, the moral realist can find quite respectable partners 'in guilt'. It is a commonplace in the philosophy of science that scientific methodology is profoundly theory-dependent. Assessments of theoretical simplicity and theory confirmation as well as standards of experimental design and instrument improvement require appeal to the best available background theories in the relevant disciplines. For example, in theory confirmation there is an ineliminable comparative component. Theories count as well confirmed only if they have been tested against relevant rivals, and determination of which alternative theories are relevant or worth considering requires appeal to background bodies of accepted theory. Acceptance of normal scientific observations and judgments, as well as application of general methodological principles, is also theory-laden. For example, judgments about the acidity or alkalinity of a substance which are based on the results of litmus paper tests pre-suppose belief in the normality of the test conditions and acceptance of the relevant chemical theories explaining how litmus paper detects pH and how pH reflects acidity and alkalinity.

The fact that scientific method is heavily theory-dependent shows that science and ethics are on a par in being theory-dependent. Thus, the fact that moral commitments must be appealed to in the acceptance and application of moral theories poses no special epistemological problem for moral realism. Of course, although most of us do not draw non-realist conclusions from the theory-dependence of scientific method, one may wonder how the profoundly theory-dependent methodologies in science and ethics can be discovery procedures. The answer is that theory-dependent methodologies are discovery procedures just in case a sufficient number of background theories in the disciplines in question are approximately true. And I have been arguing that Mackie has provided no good reason for doubting that some of our moral background theories are approximately true.

Mackie might respond that the moral and scientific cases are not in fact on a par and that there is reason to doubt the approximate truth of our moral theories, because while there is a good deal of consensus about the truth of the scientific theories appealed to, say, in the making of pH judgments, there is a notable lack of consensus about which moral theories to appeal to in making moral judgments. There are at least three reasons, however, for dismissing this response. First, this response probably overstates both the degree of consensus about which scientific theories are correct and the degree of disagreement about which moral theories are correct. Secondly, the response

26 Boyd argues that because of the profound theory-dependence of scientific methodology, the instrumental reliability of scientific method can only be explained by assuming the truth of scientific realism. See Richard Boyd, 'Realism, Underdetermination, and a Causal Theory of Evidence' Nous 7 (1973), pp. 1-12 and 'Scientific Realism and Naturalistic Epistemology' PSA 1980 Volume 2 (East Lansing, MI: Philosophy of Science Association, 1981).

probably also overstates the amount of antecedent agreement necessary to reach eventual moral agreement. Finally, this response just raises from a different perspective the argument from disagreement, and we saw that the moral realist has a plausible account of moral disputes.

These considerations show that moral realism is committed to nothing metaphysically or epistemologically queer. The realist holds that moral facts supervene upon other natural facts and that moral knowledge is acquired in the same theory-dependent way that other knowledge is. Moral realism is plausible enough both metaphysically and epistemologically to allow us to say that Mackie has again failed to shoulder the burden of proof.

5. Conclusion
Mackie follows an important sceptical tradition in attempting to show that there is a special problem about realism in ethics. He recognises that it is the sceptic who bears the burden of proof but claims that his arguments from disagreement and queerness satisfy this burden. I argued, however, that neither argument provides good reason for disbelieving moral realism; certainly neither argument successfully bears the sceptic’s burden of proof. The moral realist has various resources with which to account for moral disputes, and neither his account of the supervenience of moral facts nor his account of the theory-dependence of moral knowledge is queer or uncommon. I also introduced and developed a functionalist theory of moral value according to which moral facts are facts about human well-being and flourishing. Although the truth of this functionalist theory is not essential to the defence of moral realism, it does provide a plausible model for a realist program in ethics. Mackie’s arguments from disagreement and queerness do not exhaust the sceptical challenges to moral realism. But both arguments are sufficiently important that by successfully rebutting them we have gone a long way towards defending moral realism. 28

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Received March 1983

28 I would like to thank Tom Arner, Richard Boyd, Norman Dahl, T. H. Irwin, David Lyons, John McDowell, Alan Sidelle, Nicholas Sturgeon, and readers for the Australasian Journal of Philosophy for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.