

Is Moral Knowledge Possible?

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1. NON-COGNITIVISM

The view that there is no such thing as moral knowledge – that there is no place within evaluative discourse for terms such as fact, truth, reality and such like, is commonly referred to as moral non-cognitivism. Those who deny the possibility of achieving knowledge within the moral domain rely on a battery of arguments relying on the supposed distinction between facts and values, descriptive and evaluative language, appearance and reality, objective and subjective, as if the world about which we claim to know something can lend itself to such mutually exclusive classifications. Non-cognitivists point to the widespread extent of moral disagreement and conflict, tend to be ‘irrealist’ in respect of moral properties as well as relying on what is little more than Humean dogma in their account of moral motivation, whereby actions are inexplicable by reference to moral beliefs alone, requiring an additional element of desire, which itself is assumed to be a non-cognitive state. Moral non-cognitivists are not all members of the same club in the sense that they all subscribe to one set of beliefs or utilise one set of arguments, but it is fair to say that they are united in their conviction that those who claim to *know* that certain things are unjust, cruel or disloyal, for example, are profoundly mistaken. Most non-cognitivists interpret moral disagreement in terms of disagreement in *attitudes* towards non-moral facts, and refuse to concede the possibility of a moral reality that can be described.

The principal aim of this paper is to expose the errors of non-cognitivism, while at the same time providing an account of the nature of moral reality and the way in which our access to it requires the cultivation of a sensitivity associated with caring about others. Moral deliberation has both a cognitive and an affective dimension and for this reason moral knowledge cannot be reduced to something merely propositional. The quest for knowledge in the moral realm is more than an enquiry into what to believe, it is equally concerned with what is required of one in terms of feeling and action.

1.2 Emotivism and Prescriptivism

Those seduced by verificationist theories of truth were inclined to deny that moral claims asserted anything whatsoever, their being no more than simple expressions of approval and disapproval,¹ or attempts to evoke similar feelings in someone else, with perhaps the additional intention of persuading her to act accordingly.² More recent debates on non-cognitivism stem from two works published in 1977, namely John Mackie’s *Inventing Right and Wrong*, and Gilbert Harman’s *The Nature of Moral Reasoning*. Both are moral sceptics in doubting the very possibility of moral

¹ See, Ayer, (1946: 106), where he says that ‘... if I say to someone, “You acted wrongly in stealing that money”, I am not stating more than if I had simply said, “You stole that money.” In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said “You stole that money” in a particular tone of horror, or write it with the addition of some special exclamation marks.’

² See, e.g. Stevenson, (1937).

knowledge. Before confronting moral scepticism head on, it is appropriate to cast doubt on some of the distinctions on which non-cognitivism so uncritically relies.

Richard Hare consistently defends the view that moral language has a prescriptive, as opposed to a descriptive function. The statement 'X should be punished because he \emptyset -ed', entails the prescription (or first person imperative) 'Let X be punished', which is to say that anyone who is sincere about what he is saying would thereby be expressing the desire that X should be punished; and part of his theory of moral judgment requires that such moral imperatives involve principles such as 'Anyone \emptyset -ing in relevantly similar circumstances should also be punished.' According to Hare, a principle (in this case, 'Anyone found guilty of a serious offence should be punished') is a major premise in moral reasoning, and in combination with one or more factual premises (e.g. X was proven guilty of having inflicted grievous bodily harm) entails the moral judgment that 'X should be punished.' It is their universalizability that is their distinguishing feature, and is why the prescriptivism he enunciates is usually referred to as universal prescriptivism.³ But even if it were correct to suggest that the aim of moral judgments is to prescribe, it would not follow that they are necessarily lacking in truth value. When crossing the road, I may well alert you to hold back by announcing 'There's a car coming!' Here, as elsewhere, the meaning of the statement needs to be distinguished from its function, as John Austin recognised in his distinction between the locutionary act of fact stating and the possible perlocutionary force of such statements. (1962). The principal objection to expressivism as an account of moral utterances is that it commits the so-called 'speech act fallacy', whereby it is fallacious to conclude from the fact that a judgment is used to perform a speech act of a certain kind (such as expressing an attitude, or a value judgment) that it cannot, *pari passu*, state facts. When I make a moral judgment to the effect that Stalin was both cruel and depraved, I am making an assertion that is both evaluative and descriptive (fact-stating), and there is nothing mutually exclusive about them.

Before arguing for the possibility of moral knowledge, it will serve us well to try and dispose of the troublesome matter of the fact-value distinction, the *locus classicus* of which is to be found in David Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*, where he insists that we cannot validly derive an 'ought' from an 'is'.⁴ I might believe that Granny has recently been discharged from hospital, is frail and lonely, loves me and would be delighted to see me, but nothing of any moral import follows (at least directly) from such factual premises. Needless to say, the history of philosophy is replete with attempts to either defend or refute Hume's claim.⁵ Hare is at one with Hume in

³ See his *The Language of Morals*. (For an influential critique of this position see Winch, (1972).

⁴ '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 concerned with an *ought*, or *ought not*. The change is imperceptible: but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation of affirmation, 'tis necessary that it sho'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and I am persuaded, that this small attention wou'd subvert all the vulgar systems of morality.' (Hume, (1739/1978): 469-470).

⁵ Hare, for example, not only embraces the internalism associated with this position, to the effect that there are inbuilt motivational properties to a sincerely held moral judgment whereby the possibility of

maintaining that no moral judgment may be derived with any validity from non-moral premises. Any validity that might attach to the judgment that I ought to visit Granny requires the additional major premise (a principle) that all grandmothers in such circumstances should be visited. However, once it is acknowledged that assertions are neither exclusively descriptive on the one hand, nor prescriptive on the other, the foundation on which the distinction rests, appears to be far from firm. If I see you mocking someone who is afflicted in some way, or witness you tormenting an animal and say to you ‘That’s cruel’, I am drawing your attention to the fact that you are both cruel and wrong and for *that reason* you should desist. Such a reason, moreover, is not only categorical, but the moral judgment on which it is based does not require the existence of, or commitment to, a moral principle. In trying to persuade an obdurate and lazy adolescent that she ought to visit her grandmother on the grounds that not doing so – given her proximity, lack of other commitments and so on - would be selfish and uncaring, it would be simply crass, were she to protest that no ‘ought’ follows from an ‘is’, to invite her to appreciate what Hare calls a ‘way of life’ by reference to which the significance of the moral principle ‘All Grannies in circumstances $c_1 \dots c_n$ should be visited by their granddaughters who have no other pressing engagements’, gains significance. Even if she were convinced of the moral force of such a principle, her visit might well be the result of a grudging concession, undertaken with no feeling or affection towards her grandmother, leaving us in no doubt that she was, in important respects, morally underdeveloped.

There are also additional problems with the ultimately subjectivist implications of Hare’s argument to the effect that moral principles gain their force by reference to *self-chosen* ways of life. Not the least difficulty with subjectivism is that standards of correct judgment in moral matters originate within the individual. But as Wittgenstein succinctly observed, ‘[if] whatever is going to seem right to me is right...that only means that here we can’t talk about “right”’. (1953: 258). Judgment, in other words, presupposes certain public standards of correctness which is why it won’t do to reduce practical reasoning to a species of choice-making as we find in so much moral philosophy influenced by Hare.⁶ One is reminded of an essay by Iris

indifference as to what should be done about it, is excluded. As to whether any internalist assumptions are justified is a matter of dispute between contemporary moral realists. The issues surrounding the debate are often compounded by the all too frequent failure to distinguish between *motivational* and *justificatory* reasons for action. Internalism about motive holds that there is a conceptual connection between moral judgments and their motivational force; a view that is rejected by David Brink, for example, on the grounds that such a view seems to fly in the face of the amoralist challenge to the effect that it is possible to acknowledge the existence of moral considerations whilst remaining entirely unmoved by them. Brink adopts what he takes to be the preferable alternative of externalism, whereby ‘the motivational force of moral considerations is a matter of contingent psychological fact, depending on the beliefs and desires agents happen to have.’ (1989: 49). As far as the amoralist is concerned, David McNaughton believes that it is unclear that one *could* acknowledge a moral consideration as a requirement while at the same time fail to see why it should not count as a *reason* for acting on it. (1988: 139-140). His treatment of amoralism would be more persuasive were he able to demonstrate that the amoralist could not recognise a moral requirement as having *motivational* force.

⁶ The defects of Hare’s account of moral reasoning, as well as the serious implications for moral education, have been ably demonstrated by Grenville Wall (1974: 222-236 and 1975: 213-229). The antinomy or paradox in moral reasoning which Hare endeavours to solve in his *Freedom and Reason* arises, according to Wall, out of his conviction that (a) ‘one of the most important constituents of our freedom, as moral agents, is the freedom to form our opinions about moral questions’ and (b) ‘the answering of moral questions is, or ought to be, a rational activity’ (1963: 2). It is the apparent contradiction between freedom and reason that gives rise to paradox. And yet, Wall argues, such a paradox is incapable of resolution if its first term is taken to mean that the source of correct practical

Murdoch in which she is critical of reducing individuality to an abstract and lonely will. The result of which ‘makes no sense of [a person] as continually active, as making progress, or of her inner acts as belonging to her or forming part of a continuous fabric of being’. (1970: 39-40). And it is metaphors such as ‘fabric of being’ and ‘vision’ which are indispensable. What we desire is a function of what we can see, which means that we are not free in the way that Hare (and Sartre for that matter) would have us believe, because what we *see* is not entirely within our control. As Murdoch says, ‘Man is not a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will. He is a confined being who sees, and who desires, in accordance with what he sees, and who has some slight control over the direction and focus of his vision.’(*Ibid.*) The idea that we are able to desire anything whatsoever is one consequence of non-cognitivism as is the idea that *desirability* is contingent upon *desire* – all of which, if true, rules out the very possibility of objective value. But if Wittgenstein is correct, *intelligibility*, or meaning, is not a private affair but depends on the existence of public standards and norms which are themselves established by something more substantial than choice or fiat. As Richard Norman says: Not just any assertion of the form “I just want” can provide an ultimate reason for acting. If it does so, this will be because the description “X” characterises the thing in such a way that no further reason is necessary. And in that the case it is the fact that the thing is describable as “X” not the fact that the thing is wanted that constitutes the reason for acting. (1971: 63). In other words, for a desire to be intelligible, others must be capable in principle of appreciating what there is about the object or activity in question which anyone might have for wanting it.⁷

1.2 Reductionism and Projectivism

On the questionable assumption that there is indeed a clear distinction between facts and values, it would seem to follow that the relationship between factual premises and moral judgments is not one of strict entailment. The logic of the Humean position is that moral judgments require the adoption of an evaluative attitude, and this is

reasoning lies within the individual will. If this were indeed the case, it would necessitate abandoning the second term of the paradox – at least if by ‘rational activity’ Hare means that public standards of correctness are applied to moral reasoning. But it is clear that Hare means nothing of the sort, because reason, for him, is subservient to the will in moral judgment. (Cf. Hume, who asserts quite unjustifiably, that ‘Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.’ *Treatise* Book II pt. III Sec.3. There is no basis within Hume’s theory for the idea that desire itself should be subject to rational evaluation. The only place for reason in moral judgment is the extent to which it can render desires consistent with one another).

⁷ The requirement that a desire’s intelligibility rests on the desirability features of whatever is desired, with the result that not just *anything* may be intelligibly be desired was long ago made clear by Elizabeth Anscombe in her *Intention* (1957: 68). For related reasons, the formalist account of moral reasoning provided by Hare, in accordance with which prescriptivity and universalizability are the only requirements of moral judgment, leaves much to be desired. As Philippa Foot argues, this is seriously open to question. For in Hare’s account, an evaluative judgment could equally well be derived from any self-chosen principle whatsoever, however absurd. (Everyone should clap their hands three times before breakfast, it will shortly be time for breakfast, therefore you *ought* to clap your hands three times). What is missing in all this, according to Foot, is that reference to human good or harm is indispensable to the justification of a moral judgment and not just anything has relevance to this. This is why the moral features of a situation are intimately bound up with its descriptive features (though for reasons not entirely bound up with Foot’s ‘naturalism’. The metaethical issues to which this gives rise are complicated and problematic. There is a wealth of literature on the matter, with Foot’s views usefully bound together in her *Virtues and Vices*. (For a powerful critique of what she has to say, see e.g. Wallace, (1983).)

something not required in the acceptance of factual statements (or premises), hence the facts of the matter can never *entail* moral judgments.⁸ One way in which an entailment relation might succeed is if we were able to *reduce* moral judgments to facts about natural or social phenomena in a way that temperature might be reduced to mean kinetic energy, water to H₂O, or rightness to the maximization of happiness. If moral properties could be similarly reduced, even in principle, moral facts would be a species of natural facts, and the entailment relation might be seen to obtain.

Ethical naturalism, for example, might be thought to be reductionist in its apparent aim of assimilating moral knowledge to scientific knowledge whereby moral facts are no more than facts about the natural world. Nicholas Sturgeon, himself a naturalist, takes natural facts to be the only facts there are and that if one is prepared to recognize the existence of moral facts one must take them to be natural facts; yet he strongly denies that anything follows from the ontological status of moral facts as to their reducibility to something describable in non-moral terms. (1984). While the identification of a moral property with a natural property, or set of such properties, would indeed be reductionist, another well-known ethical naturalist, David Brink, is keen to resist the identification of moral with natural properties in virtue of the ‘multiple realizability’ of moral properties – there being any number of natural properties which may be required on the basis of which we take something to be cruel or kind. In order to retain his naturalist convictions, while at the same time refusing to subscribe to any form of reductionism, he attempts to square the circle by appealing to the distinction between the ‘is’ of identity and the ‘is’ of constitution, whereby moral properties may be said to be ‘constituted, composed or realized by different combinations of natural and social scientific properties’ (as opposed to being identified with them), in a way that tables are constituted by physical and chemical events causally related in certain ways. Such a position would mean that moral properties are no less ‘queer’ than any other (natural) facts and may be accounted for without recourse to any mysterious inbuilt property of ‘to-be-pursuedness’⁹. Suffice it to say here, however, that apart from the obvious implausibility of accounting for an action’s cruelty in entirely non-moral terms, or reducing wickedness and depravity to that of which a social group disapproves, the special *authority* attaching to *moral* claims would be undermined. Before we abandon the idea that moral terminology is inadequate as it stands, and needs to be reduced to something else, we need better reasons than those afforded by reductionism.

⁸ Relying on what he calls ‘institutional facts’, John Searle has defended the view, in contrast to both Hume and Hare, that normative conclusions may well follow from factual premises. As a result of the institutional fact of ‘promising’ (to repay the £5 borrowed), it follows, Searle maintains, that I am under an obligation to pay you. (1969). As to whether or not he succeeds in this endeavour need not detain us. (For a useful critique of Searle’s thesis, see Perry, (1974).

⁹ As he says: ‘F can be seen as G even if the property (or properties) designated by ‘F’ is not (or are not) the same as that (or those) designated by ‘G’. If G actually comprises or realizes F, but F can be, or could have been, realized differently, then G *constitutes but is not identical with* F.’ (1989: 157-159). While ethical naturalists are firmly located within the moral realist camp – which is why they refuse to hold truck with any form of reductionism on the grounds that to do so would be essentially *irrealist*, it being a key feature of irrealism that moral facts are no more than either a part of our psychological make-up or a social state of affairs of which most people happen to approve, there being no independent moral reality about which we may be said to know – the fact remains that not only is it far from clear why we should suppose that moral properties are constituted by natural properties and not simply co-extensive with them. It is still incumbent upon naturalists to show why it is that we are *justified* in believing that something is cruel (and therefore wrong), and not just that it causes pain.

Given the failure of reductionist analyses of moral terms, the resource bank of those who would wish to disabuse us of the view that moral properties are there to be observed, and that moral assertions have a truth value as opposed to mere expressions of attitude, is not entirely depleted. Modern day ‘projectivism’, drawing yet again on the philosophy of Hume, (though not a term used by Hume himself), has been characterised by Simon Blackburn, himself a noteworthy exponent, as follows:

Suppose we say we ‘*project*’ an attitude or habit or other commitment which is not descriptive onto the world when we speak or think as though there were a property of things which our sayings describe, which we can reason about, be wrong about, and so on....The projectivist holds that our nature as moralists is well explained by regarding us as reacting to a reality which contains nothing in the way of values, duties, rights, and so forth; a realist thinks it is well explained only by seeing us able to perceive, cognize, intuit an independent moral reality. He holds that the moral features of things are the parents of our sentiments, whereas the Humean holds that they are their children.¹⁰

The point of this, according to John McDowell, is to provide an alternative to what might appear to be the only, and unsatisfactory, alternative namely that of intuitionistic realism whereby reality is populated with unnecessary and utterly mysterious features. He makes the point as follows: ‘The image of projection is employed to explain certain seeming features of reality as reflections of our subjective responses to a world that really contains no such features.’ (1987: 218). McDowell’s alternative to projectivism is developed with considerable force and subtlety by the adoption of a kinship metaphor different from that of parent and child, namely that of sibling, as in the relationship between *amusement* and the *comic*. The amusement we feel on witnessing a comical situation is not something felt *subsequently* to seeing it as comical; not something felt quite independently of seeing the situation as funny. To deny that the extra feature is prior to the relevant sentiments would, he says, distance itself ‘from the idea that they belong, mysteriously, in a reality that is wholly independent of our subjectivity and set over against it....[But] it does not follow that the sentiments have a priority.’ (1987: 494).¹¹ If I see a group of children setting fire to a cat, it would be quite wrong to assume that the observation is the first part (the parent) of seeing *as* wicked (the child). Not only do I see their behaviour as immensely cruel, but on witnessing such a horrific scenario; I am, *at one and the same* time, justifiably appalled. Projectivism falls short of being the all-powerful weapon in the armoury of the non-cognitivist’s attempt to undermine cognitivism and moral realism.¹²

¹⁰ Blackburn, (1984: 107). Hume uses the expression ‘certain peculiar sentiments of pain or pleasure’ and talks of ‘gilding or staining all natural objects with colours, borrowed from internal sentiment.’ (*Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*).

¹¹ For a critique of McDowell’s position see, e.g. Sosa (2001).

¹² As Margaret Little forcefully reminds us: ‘...as moral concepts are shapeless [a term originally coined by Blackburn in 1981] with respect to natural concepts, there would be no explaining our moral categorisations as cohesive responses *to* anything as “patterns of going on in the same way [and] one cannot explain away moral concepts by appeal to the responses in question, for the responses cannot be identified independently of the moral concepts....This means that the very people trying to explain moral verdicts as projections will themselves have to use moral predicates in their explanation – which leaves them one step short of explaining moral concepts *away*.’ (1994: 278). When Hume asks us to consider any action considered to be vicious, such as that of wilful murder, he denies that there is anything in such considerations we might call *vice*. In considering the murder ‘the vice entirely

1.3 The argument from Disagreement and Queerness

John Mackie, denies that there is any such thing as moral reality, and deploys a twofold objection to the very idea of moral knowledge. The first rests on the all too frequent disagreement over moral judgments – something Mackie refers to as the ‘argument from relativity’ - while the latter depends on the apparent ‘queerness’ associated with the idea of objective moral values, Mackie formulates the former as follows:

The argument from relativity has as its premise the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community. Such variation is in itself merely a truth of descriptive morality, a fact of anthropology... [all of which makes it difficult to treat moral judgments] as apprehensions of objective truths. (*Op. cit.*: 36).

Moral disagreement may well suggest a *prima facie* reason to be sceptical about the possibility of moral realism and the existence of objective moral judgments, but before jumping to such a conclusion it is worth remembering that commitment to moral realism whilst not *entailing* the possibility that all moral disputes should be resolvable, it certainly allows for such a possibility; the mere existence of disagreement does nothing to invalidate moral realism. All that is required is that most such disputes are resolvable (in principle). The reasons for remaining optimistic about such a possibility are twofold. Firstly, a great deal of moral disagreement relates to the *facts* of the matter in dispute, that is to say *non-moral* facts. Racists, fundamentalists and flat-earthers all subscribe to factual beliefs about various aspects of the world which are very different from my own, but we should not conclude from this that disagreement over factual matters is never subject to resolution, and with it, a corresponding agreement over the moral dispute in question. In other words, the fact of moral disagreement should not be exaggerated while ever there is some level of consensus about what is to count as a relevant consideration in the settling of moral disputes, such as the nature and relevance of personal responsibility, for example. Secondly, moral disagreement is often the result of insufficient attention to the facts pertaining to the case, often due to inhibiting factors such as ignorance, insensitivity or lack of imagination, and that when these are overcome there is at least a measure of hope that the disputing parties stand a greater chance of reaching some kind of agreement. Nevertheless, it is frequently the case that much moral disagreement is never resolvable because of people’s opposing commitments to what is seen as having ultimate significance. Such lack of agreement is an inevitable consequence of moral pluralism but this need not force us into becoming moral sceptics, as will more readily be appreciated after the case for objective moral judgments has been made.

escapes you.....You can never find it till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you towards that action.’ (1751: 468-469), he is, I submit, simply mistaken.

When it comes to cross-cultural moral disagreement, McNaughton provides a convincing argument to show that disagreement between competing value systems is less damaging to moral realism than the sceptic, or relativist, would have us believe. Disputants from culturally different backgrounds will, he says, while being able to support their own moral opinions from within a specific outlook, be unable to 'provide any reason for believing that their moral opinion on any particular matter is superior to the other's, that does not beg the question; for any reason he provides will draw on a conception which is not shared by his opponent.' (1988: 148). On the assumption that we are able to *interpret* someone from a culture radically different from our own, we are justified in believing that his conceptual scheme is not entirely incommensurable with that with which we operate, and, moreover, the same can be said about his *moral* scheme. If his reasons are to count as moral, they must be reasons of a certain sort, without which the suggestion that we could be in moral disagreement would be incoherent. Invoking Bernard Williams's distinction between highly general terms of appraisal such as 'good' or 'bad' on the one hand, and 'thick' moral concepts such as 'honourable' or 'just' on the other, we might conclude from the fact that the ancient Greek aristocrat or the mediaeval Samurai warrior might well account for such things in ways very different from ourselves, that moral scepticism is inevitable on the grounds that there are no reasons for preferring one belief system to that of another. The mistake behind this is clearly exposed by MacNaughton when he says that in response to the question 'what gives us the right to claim that our particular set of concepts is the best one to use?', '...we cannot appeal to any considerations that make use of those concepts without begging the question. Once we have transcended our own conceptual scheme, and hence our own conception of what is a good reason for what, we have deprived ourselves of any means of answering the question. It looks then, as if our attachment to our own moral scheme is one that cannot be justified, except by using the very conceptual resources whose credentials are being questioned.' (*Ibid.*: 151). However, the fact that we have no genuine choice between conceptual schemes, combined with the impossibility of being able to justify the use of our moral concepts without reference to what is justified, (in that to do so would be like trying to repair Otto Neurath's raft by removing all the planks at once while still at sea), in no way supports the sceptical conclusion that we should abandon their use. This is not to pretend that the resolution of moral disagreement is either inevitable or easy; it is just to say that there is neither reason to believe that it is forever impossible, nor that an increased sensitivity towards the salient features will contribute nothing to such a resolution. If our moral opponent either fails, or is simply unable to make progress in this respect, it in no way follows that our confidence in our own moral views should in any way be undermined.

Mackie's metaphysical argument against moral realism rests on his belief that if there were any objective values then they would be unlike anything else in the universe and remain inescapably 'queer'. As far as he is concerned, only that which is part of the very fabric of physical reality is objectively 'real'. But this is a quite unnecessarily restrictive account of our moral phenomenology. While physical objects are causally responsible for those perceptual experiences resulting in our beliefs relating to their existence and properties, Mackie all too readily concludes that values are not genuinely real on the grounds that they are not similarly causally efficacious. Apart from the fact that this sort of explanatory necessity is the appropriate test of the reality of values is question begging, it presupposes that a perceptual model of values needs to be based on the model of awareness of primary qualities.

Just as we are in a position to see something as coloured red without reference to its underlying physical properties, so too may we directly observe a situation as cruel or courageous, even if such recognition requires knowledge of additional, non-moral, features of the situation such as the associated pain involved in the case of cruelty and the dangers or degree of risk involved in the case of courage. Yet *if* observation reveals only contingent connections, we are confronted with the problem of how we are expected to know that the gratuitous infliction of pain is *wrong*. Mackie expresses the problem as follows:

...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”? and how do we know the relation that it signifies, if this is something more than such actions being socially condemned....It is not even sufficient to postulate a faculty which “sees” the wrongness; something must be postulated which can see at once the natural features that constitute the cruelty, and the wrongness, and the mysterious consequential link between the two. (*Op. cit.*: 41).

It is, he believes, the supervenience of moral properties which leads him to the conclusion that they are ‘queer’ in being ‘utterly different from anything else in the universe’ (*Ibid.*: 38) The supervenience of a moral property on a natural property is characterised by Blackburn as follows:

A property *M* is supervenient upon properties $N_1 \dots N_n$ if *M* is not identical with any of $N_1 \dots N_n$ nor with any truth function of them, and it is logically impossible that a thing should become *m*, or cease to be *M*, or become more or less *M* than before, without changing in respect of some member of $N_1 \dots N_n$. (1971: 106).¹³

This means that ‘if someone claimed...that an action was absolutely identical in every respect with another, except that it was much worse...it would be a logical and not merely a moral mistake that had been made.’ (*Ibid.*)

However, those who refuse to concede that moral properties are ‘queer’, do not have to rely on tendentious claims relating to their constitution or supervenience. An alternative possibility is to take issue with that view of objective reality to which Mackie subscribes, whereby it is restricted to those features of the world capable of being understood without reference to the effect that they have on sentient creatures such as ourselves.¹⁴ We have already noted Mackie’s concerns relating to the

¹³ See also, his ‘Supervenience Revisited’ in Hacking, (1985). The fact that moral facts and properties supervene on natural facts and properties follows *from* naturalism, it does not, according to Brink (*Op. cit.*: 160), *establish* naturalism, because the supervening properties need be neither identical with, nor constituted by, base properties. And there is nothing about the supervenience of moral properties which implies a relationship of *entailment* between non-moral and moral properties; something may possess any number of non-moral properties without possessing any supervenient properties. Blackburn believes that supervenience poses a real threat to moral realism given that the relationship between the non-moral and the moral is one of non-entailment – a state of affairs which is, he suggests, is ‘very mysterious’.

¹⁴ See, McDowell, (1983: 13-16).

ontological dependency of moral facts and properties on non-natural facts and properties, and how ethical naturalism is wont to resort to the notion of supervenience in attempting to explain the respects in which moral properties are realized by natural properties, without recourse to reductionism. And we have had cause to doubt that appeals to the 'is' of constitution can deliver the goods which naturalists such as Brink would have us believe.

In order to retain the autonomy of moral judgments (which is to say that they are neither inferences from non-moral judgments nor reducible to non-moral claims) Platts invites us to note a certain parallel between the arrangement of black dots on a white card which 'fix' a face there pictured to be seen. In seeing the face we do not attend to the dot arrangement and *infer* that there is a head to be seen; we observe the face directly. Similarly, according to Platts, once all the non-moral facts about a situation are fixed, so are all the moral facts.¹⁵ Platts goes on to question the assumption that the distinction between the moral and the non-moral is as clear as some would have it. When someone performs a courageous action, how are we to characterise those features relating to his state of mind for example (which may be said to *fix* his courage) in morally *neutral* terms, until we have a defensible means of explicating the contrast between moral and non-moral facts. It is, Platts says, 'open to the realist to reply to the argument from moral reason in a simple way; if the giving of a reason intelligibly accounts for a difference in moral judgment, it is itself a *moral* reason. Such 'lower level, more concrete considerations' certainly do not *entail* that someone is courageous, rather they *merit* our attribution of courage. (*Ibid.*: 254).

Platts's other way of addressing the issue is shared by McDowell and has, in my view, considerable persuasive force. Various expressed as moral particularism, or the uncodifiability of moral judgments, it is a view which is profoundly sceptical of the role of moral principles in moral reasoning. The very idea of a set of subvenient properties entailing the moral features of a situation, presupposes the possibility of identifying the respects in which such a set are sufficiently similar to force some sort of logical connection between moral features and such similarities. When we attend to specific moral situations in all their complexity, we are doing more than applying a principle. 'In ordering moral life, determining our moral judgments about a particular case by means of some rules seizing upon non-moral aspects of that case will simply mean that we neglect the full complexity of that particular case.' (*Ibid.*). If true, we cannot know what is cruel or courageous in advance of a situationally specific state of affairs. As McDowell says, invoking Aristotle, 'the best generalisations about how one should behave hold only for the most part. If one attempted to reduce one's conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which

¹⁵ Platts, (1979: 244-245). Cf. p. 253 ff. '...while non-moral facts fix moral facts such that circumstances cannot differ in a moral respect while being alike in all non-moral respects, still moral judgments are not analyzable (or translatable) into non-moral terms; the making of a moral judgment is not an inference from non-moral facts. The problem now is that that picture appears to be in tension with the role usually accorded to non-moral differences in *accounting* for differences in moral judgment, accounting in a *reason-giving* way. If I make different moral judgments about situations that appear indistinguishable to you, then, the thought is I have to *justify* that difference by pointing to a non-moral difference; I have to give a non-moral *reason* for the difference in moral judgment. Indeed, this non-moral reason-giving is the foundation of moral *consistency*; such consistency precisely requires (because it is constituted by) the principle that if two situations are non-morally indistinguishable, we have to give the same moral judgment in each case, together with the principle that if a difference in moral judgment is given, it has to be justified by a non-moral reason.'

mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong.’ (1979: 336). Moreover, he is surely correct in supposing that we identify moral features for what they are by a kind of perceptual capacity which he calls ‘sensitivity’, without recourse to the questionable faculty of moral intuition so favoured by G.E. Moore. One has only to remember those occasions in one’s life when an initial encounter with a new work of art in an unfamiliar genre left one baffled and unmoved only to find, perhaps as a result of greater familiarity with it after discussing it with people whose reactions and responses were quite different, that one was able to see it in an altogether new and more meaningful light. All of this raises immensely complex issues relating to the nature of moral reasoning which cannot be pursued here but it does, I believe, serve to explain why the subvenient features of a situation do not entail moral judgments. It is precisely because moral judgments are situationally specific, that the existence of the necessary universal propositions required, if the connection between the non-moral and the moral features of a particular set of circumstances is to be one of entailment, is ruled out. Moral realism can accept the fact that the connection between the moral and the non-moral, while being one of non-entailment, is equally non-contingent.¹⁶

2. TOWARDS THE POSSIBILITY OF MORAL KNOWLEDGE

2.1 Appearance and Reality

The way the world appears to sentient beings is in virtue of their occupying a specific (or parochial) point of view. Because creatures such as ourselves, with our peculiar organs of perception, describe objects as coloured, it might be thought plausible to suggest that colour is not a feature of objects as they are, so to speak, ‘in themselves’. For this to be credible, however, there must be some coherence in the idea of an absolute conception of reality which is characterisable independently of any particular point of view and by reference to which appearances, in all their variety, are explicable.

There are several reasons why it is reasonable to doubt such a possibility, the first of which relates to the difficulties involved in trying to render coherent the idea of an ‘Archimedean point of view’ in terms of which the world could be described as it is really supposed to be, without reference to any representation of it. Such a point of view would have to be described in exceedingly abstract terms and would, of necessity, exclude much of what we would wish to claim to be the case, albeit from standpoints occupied by beings such as ourselves. There is also a mistaken assumption implicit in any such conception that an absolute conception of reality is somehow more accurate as a description of the world than any less austere and

¹⁶ As Robert Arrington reminds us, moral perception is complex. ‘A moral agent confronting a moral situation may perceive (a) various demands or values embodied in it; (b) the salient demand or value; and (c) the other dimensions as silenced by the salient one. Her knowledge of all these things is particular and specific, incapable of being guided by or articulated in general formula. She is able to see things and have this knowledge because...she is the kind of person she is, because she has a conception of how to live.’ (1989: 162). Cf. McDowell’s claim that when confronted by the competing and not necessarily reconcilable demands of a particular situation, we need to identify the salient fact about a situation so that we may be ‘moved to act by this concern rather than that one.’ (1979: 344), and ‘the relevant notion of salience cannot be understood except in terms of seeing something as a reason for acting which silences all others.’ (1979: 345).

inclusive a conception as that provided by sensory perception. The fact that the adoption of a particular *Weltanschauung* is unavoidable, does nothing to undermine the objectivity of a particular point of view. Scientific theories are retained or dismissed by reference to, amongst other things, the extent to which the beliefs they presuppose accord with other beliefs. Our conclusions relating to those features of the universe which provide us with knowledge, are themselves part of a conceptual scheme and set of beliefs about the sort of place it is. Any supposition that a scientific theory is superior to any other occurs within the context of beliefs which are no less parochial in virtue of being scientific beliefs. A degree of parochialism in the adoption of what is considered to be a good scientific theory is unavoidable. Similarly, according to Peter Strawson, 'Relative to the standpoint which we normally occupy as social beings... [some human actions] are morally toned and propertied in the diverse ways signified in our rich vocabulary of moral appraisal. (1985: 38).¹⁷

Questions relating to the intelligibility of an absolute conception of reality apart, such a conception would, on its own terms, have to explain and embrace rival conceptions. Competing conceptions would have to be shown to be defective to the extent that they are misleading or parochial. The failure of the absolute conception to demonstrate any such thing becomes apparent when trying to account for the way in which we experience things like colours. Within an absolute conception of reality, secondary qualities such as colours are relegated to the status of mere appearance, and thus not part of reality. For this to be acceptable, however, the absolutist must provide an explanation of how it is that we see coloured objects in the way we do – why we see grass as green and not pink. An absolutist wishing to explain how grass appears to be green would be faced with the unavoidable concession that it depended on a particular point of view, while at the same time having to provide some means or other by which that point of view might be transcended. The problem is how this could be done. If properties such as colours are 'projections' onto a description of the world and not, as it were, part of the furniture of that world, the absolutist has a problem.¹⁸

¹⁷ In the context of a discussion of behaviour, Strawson contrasts two possible standpoints from which human behaviour may be viewed which he calls 'participant' (or 'involved') on the one hand, and 'objective (or 'detached') on the other. If we ask: 'What is the correct standpoint?' or, 'From which standpoint do we see things as they really are?' it is natural to suggest that the answer cannot be from both. 'Viewed from one standpoint, the standpoint that we naturally occupy as social beings, human behaviour appears as the proper object of all those personal and moral reactions, judgments and attitudes to which, as social beings, we are naturally prone; or, to put the same point differently, human actions and human agents appear to be the bearers of objective moral properties. But if anyone consistently succeeded in viewing such behaviour in which I have called the "purely objective"...light, then to him such reactions, judgments and attitudes would be alien; the notion of "proper objects" of such reactions and attitudes, the notion of "objective moral properties", would for him lack significance....If it is the standpoint of participation and involvement to which we are so strongly committed by nature and society, which is correct, then some human actions really are more morally blameworthy and praiseworthy...even if the particular moral judgments we make in this area are more liable to error or distortion than those we make in others; and to refuse to recognise this is deliberately to blind oneself to a whole dimension of reality.' (1985: 35-36).

¹⁸ As McDowell puts it: To achieve the overarching account, one needs to transcend the point of view from which a given range of subjective concepts appears to be acquired in order to describe how things are, while nevertheless retaining as objectively factual the use of those concepts, or something close enough to them to serve as a basis for the supposed projection, in describing the context of the experience characteristic of that point of view.' (1983: 11). Bernard Williams admits to a degree of scepticism in this regard when it comes to colour; a scepticism which, according to McDowell, is not only justified but should not be restricted to colour. The problem of accounting for colour is, as Williams admits, 'part of a larger question, how the partial views and local experiences are themselves to be related to the world as conceived in independence of them.' (1978: 244). We have only to think

Our scepticism concerning the absolutist attempt to incorporate states of consciousness into an account of reality which is quite independent of any one point of view would thus appear to be perfectly justified. There are, quite simply, limits to the extent to which we are able to ignore those features of the world whose very existence requires those specific modes of perception peculiar to ourselves, and if we are to successfully defend the idea of something having objective value, we need an altogether less stringent account of reality than that associated with absolutism.

In a densely argued critique of Mackie's position, McDowell asks why he excludes secondary qualities from his model of reality and he goes on to contrast different senses of 'subjectivity' according to which secondary qualities may be both subjective and objective.¹⁹ If we grant that it is in virtue of our having a particular perceptual awareness which enables us to distinguish objects in respect of their colour we can, I believe, go along with McDowell in acknowledging some kind of analogy between colour perception and on the one hand and our ability to discern moral properties on the other. The fact that an object looks red to beings like us does nothing to undermine our confidence that it is a red object. From our (anthropocentric) viewpoint certain things are red, but it does not mean that their redness has been *created* by us. Similarly, we may admit that evaluative attitudes are analogous to the experience of colours in being unintelligible except as modifications of a sensitivity such as our own. If we did not possess a whole range of emotional responses which we share with our own kind, moral experience of any sort would be unintelligible. In being able to admit to a sensitivity to a world containing red objects we are in the equally comfortable position of being able to accept that as we grow towards maturity we become increasingly sensitive to moral reality. Such a reality is no more created by

of states of consciousness such as pains or other sensations to appreciate the difficulties encountered in by the absolutist attempt to account for our subjective responses to such sensations. The difficulties are admirably illustrated by Williams in the following passage: 'If I...try to form a conception... of just what is in the world when *A* is in pain, the temptation is to try to write into the world, in some hazy way, the appropriate context of *A*'s experience...the pain. But in taking the context of *A*'s experience, and putting it into the world as a thing we can conceive of as there, we are in effect trying to abstract from *how it is for A*, the *how it is* and leave it as fact on its own. [But] when *it is so for A* (e.g. *it hurts for A*), the only way of conceiving the appropriate *it is so* at all is that of adopting...*A*'s point of view and putting oneself imaginatively in a state which one expresses (if it can be verbally expressed) by saying, as *A*, *it is so* (e.g. *it hurts*). (*Ibid.*: 295).

¹⁹ 'Secondary quality experience presents itself as perceptual awareness of properties genuinely possessed by the objects that confront one. And there is no general obstacle to taking that appearance at face value. An object's being such and such as to look red is independent of its actually looking red to anyone on a particular occasion; so notwithstanding the conceptual connection between being red and being experienced as red, an experience of something red can count as a case of being presented with a property that is there anyway – there independently of the experience itself...[The] contrast between objective and subjective is not a contrast between veridical and illusory experience. But it is easily confused with a different contrast, in which to call a putative object of awareness "objective" is to say that it is there to be experienced, as opposed to being a mere figment of the subjective state that purports to be an experience of it...What is acceptable...is only that secondary qualities are subjective in the first sense, and it would be simply wrong to suppose that this gives any support to the idea that they are objective in the second.' (1972: 112-114). (The distinction between primary and secondary qualities is of course, Locke's who wrote: 'The ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves, but the ideas produced in us by the secondary qualities, have no resemblance of them at all. *There is nothing like our ideas* [of secondary qualities] *existing in the bodies themselves*'. (*Essay*, II, 8, 15, emphasis added). And Hume subsequently compared all evaluative concepts to 'sounds, colours, heat and cold, which according to modern philosophy *are not qualities in objects but properties in the mind*'. (*Treatise*, III, I, Sec. I, emphasis added).

the affective side of our natures than colours are subjective projections onto a description of the world as it really is – the mere by-products of a mode of perception peculiar to beings like us.

The analogy between colours and values is not perfect however, as McDowell concedes – ‘a virtue (say) is conceived to be not merely such as to elicit the appropriate ‘attitude’ (as colour is merely such as to cause the appropriate experiences) but rather such as to *merit* it.’ (*Ibid.*: 118, emphasis added). In order to see what colour something is, all I have to do is to look at it in optimal lighting conditions. Having identified it as red, it would be absurd to wonder whether I had got it right, and to worry that it might after all be green. When it comes to moral observation, not only is it far from obvious what is to count as optimal conditions; we have to *decide* how best to characterise the situation in question – as cruel, unfair or whatever. This is why the will is engaged in the case of determining how to evaluate a state of affairs and absent on those occasions when we experience something as coloured, bitter or loud; and our evaluations are open to revision. While one is not simply forced to see a situation in a particular moral light, the sense in which one is free to adopt an alternative moral point of view needs to be made explicit. In characterising a situation as ignoble or unworthy, I am not merely choosing so to do, nor is my decision not to perform an unworthy action simply a matter of choice. As Charles Taylor puts it:

Our [evaluations] are articulations of what is worthy, or higher, or more integrated, or more fulfilling, and so on. But as *articulations* they offer a purchase for the concept of responsibility. Much of our motivation – our decisions, aspirations, evaluations – is not simply given. We give it formulation in words or images...these articulations are not simply descriptions – (in the way that my characterisation of a table as brown is a simple description)...articulations are attempts to formulate what is initially inchoate, or confused, or badly formulated [which] does not leave its object unchanged. To give a certain articulation is to shape our sense of what we desire or what we hold important... (1985: 35-36).

When, in the moral sphere, we are forced to decide between competing actions, we frequently resort to considerations relating to self-description – who I am, and what is of ultimate significance in my scheme of things. The clarification involved is as much a process of discovery as one of choice. John Kekes draws our attention to the fact that a setting or tradition is required in order to provide human actions with intelligibility. While a composer is able to write down any note he chooses, for these notes to add up to anything remotely meaningful, he is restricted by the tradition of which he is but a small part, such as that of creating a string quartet. If he is fortunate, there will be a certain inevitability in his notation; and this is where ‘sensitive perception’ enters into the process of deliberation. In the moral context, one’s sensitivity to what is required depends on what he calls the ‘moral idioms’ available, and include such descriptive appraisals as considerate, honest, courageous, conscientious, cruel, selfish, obsequious and arrogant. Where one is able to employ moral idioms successfully, the requisite course of action is generally straightforward. This is why the choice of action is less problematic than the selection of idioms and thus where reflection is particularly important. Reflection enables one to make important discoveries; it is necessary if we are to develop a greater sensitivity so as to

be able to recognise that which we had hitherto taken to be a correct understanding of a situation was superficial and incomplete. The deeper comprehension, which is the outcome of reflection, is not itself a matter for individual choice. Discoveries of this kind, Kekes maintains, are not like those of a tone-deaf man suddenly acquiring musical appreciation; it is more akin to a musical person coming to appreciate a particularly difficult work. And McDowell is surely correct in supposing that we identify moral features for what they are, by a kind of perceptual capacity, which he calls ‘sensitivity’, without recourse to the questionable faculty of intuition.

In spite of the all too obvious disanalogy between secondary qualities and moral properties,²⁰ it is useful in so far as it enables us to ascribe a measure of objectivity to moral predicates in the sense that anyone in possession of the requisite concepts who failed to see that the gratuitous infliction of pain as wanton cruelty may be said to be suffering from a kind of moral myopia. This is not to suggest that those with whom one is in disagreement are necessarily morally blind, but the analogy does allow for such a possibility. Failure to see the moral import of gratuitous violence is a failure of moral sensitivity or moral vision. Reactions such as those of horror and disgust to such events are equally necessary conditions of moral knowledge. As Little says: ‘... a proper epistemic stance demands the presence of what we might call “appropriate affect” – a generic label for desires and emotions, albeit ones that are not necessarily felt.’ (1995: 118). She isolates what exactly it is about things like care, concern, love, anger, revulsion, and indignation that render them *necessary* conditions of seeing the moral landscape. Unless one *cares* about what one identifies as having particular moral salience, it is difficult to envisage how one could make sense of the idea of ‘merited response’. Thus:

Someone who discerns the painfulness of torture and someone who sees the *evil* of it is that the latter person has come to see the painfulness as a reason not to torture, to understand torture as meriting revulsion...Caring, being outraged, being moved to act – all these are part of discerning moral features clearly. The ideal epistemic agent...would have appropriate affect, for it is needed if one is to discern all that there is to see. (*Ibid.*: 126-127).

Moral knowledge is therefore anything but a purely dispassionate affair, which further serves to undermine the non-cognitivist claim that beliefs and attitudes as clearly distinguishable as they might appear. The relevance of the metaphor of vision is brilliantly illustrated in George Orwell’s Essay ‘A Hanging’, in which he witnesses the poignant gesture of the condemned man en route to the gallows of avoiding stepping into a puddle.

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle I *saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness*, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide.... (1965: 16, emphasis added).

²⁰ The difficulties associated with the analogy are highlighted by Jonathan Dancy (1986: 178) resulting in interesting responses by Christopher Hookway (1986) and Crispin Wright (1988).

2.2. Objectivism and Relativism

In attempting to defend the possibility of moral knowledge, it is incumbent upon us to account for the possibility of objective moral judgment. Restricting such a notion to things like intersubjective agreement, impartiality, or mind-independence would be either too weak or far too stringent for our purposes. Mere convergence between conflicting parties will not suffice, and the fact that people continue to disagree is no reason to despair about the possibility of ever arriving at objective moral judgments; disagreement is, after all, resolvable in principle. However, there are cases of disagreement that are so profound, arising as they do from irreconcilable commitments and world views, where we might still be prepared to acknowledge that conflicting judgments are nonetheless objective. Objectivism and relativism are not necessarily incompatible bedfellows. Opposing moral judgments may well have a certain ‘rightness’ about them and this need only trouble the moral realist who subscribes to a particular (naturalist) ontology of moral properties. It also makes sense that opposing courses of action may be equally ‘wrong’ in so far as they have equally disastrous consequences. This is, after all, the very stuff of tragedy and painful moral dilemmas.

Andrew Fisher and Simon Kirchin argue for the possibility of a position’s having standards of appropriateness of activity as well as truth and falsity while based on properties or standards that are ultimately mind-dependent. (2006: 15). In a similar vein, Joseph Raz approaches the problem by attempting to dispel sources of doubt relating to the objectivity of practical thought, the first of which turns on the possibility of parochial or ‘interest-related’ concepts such as ‘valuable’ or ‘duty’. In so doing, he takes issue with both Thomas Nagel’s position whereby ‘[a] form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of an individual’s makeup and position in the world, or the character of the particular type of creature he is.’ (1986: 5), as well as Bernard Williams’s demand to the effect that all moral knowledge should be capable of being expressed without recourse to parochial concepts, (the coherence of which we have already had cause to question).²¹ As Raz observes, the fact that the Inuits may well identify types of snow by reference to their parochial concepts does nothing to show that they are not identifying real features of the world.

The second source of doubt Raz attempts to dispel, stems from illusory beliefs relating to the ‘authority of the social’, whereby it is assumed that the inescapable dependency of value judgments on the fact that our shared view of the world is saturated with ‘thick’ concepts such as ‘ignoble’, ‘dignity’, ‘callous’, is sufficient in itself to cast doubt on the objectivity of judgments made in accordance with such categorisations. As he says, people cannot be blamed for not being guided by values they could not know about. For this reason we do not judge a baby’s behaviour to be morally wrong or praiseworthy; and this is perfectly consistent with the view that something may well *be* wrong long before the wrong-doer knew that it was wrong. The fact that only those in possession of ‘thick’ evaluative concepts are capable of discovering or coming to know the value of something, in no way poses a threat to objectivity. Neither should we be overly concerned by the fact that people from other cultures with a different moral outlook, employ concepts radically different from ours

²¹ For a powerful critique of this position, see Putnam, H. (1992: 80), a view, it should be stressed, Williams later rejected in *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy*.

in order to identify the moral features of the world they inhabit. The coherence of *incommensurable* conceptual schemes notwithstanding,²² Raz is correct to caution against exaggerating the conceptual insularity of different cultures.

All of this serves to provide room for the possibility of allowing a measure of relativism into what we take to be objectively the case. Raz distinguishes between two ways in which evaluative judgments may be thought to be incompatible. The first is when they are mutually inconsistent, the second relates to the ways in which certain ideals and values may well be mutually exclusive in the life of an individual person. Incompatibility of this kind, far from undermining the possibility of moral objectivity, simply serves to remind us of the *plurality* of values.²³ Value pluralism is an unavoidable condition of modernity. Exceptionless generalizations in the moral domain are all too rare, and this is in no small part due to the fact that our own lives, with their detailed and highly specific narratives, are part of the moral reality we confront when forming moral judgments or recognizing moral requirements. Knowing what is appropriate or ‘right’, while depending on being able to identify the relevant salient features of a situation, is equally dependent on knowing something about oneself as well as being able to appreciate which courses of action are most likely to accord with such knowledge; and this is more than a concern with true moral judgments. It is also a concern with living a life that seeks to avoid self-betrayal and the lack of integrity associated with it. For this reason alone, reasons for action are not universalizable; which means that what is right for me may well not be right for you. The truth of this is borne out in Peter Winch’s claim to the effect that:

if A says ‘X is the right thing for me to do’ and if B, in a situation not relevantly different, says, ‘X is the wrong thing for me to do’, it can be that both are correct. That is, it may be that neither what each says, nor anything entailed by what each says, contradicts anything said or implied by the other. (1972: 164-165).

In order to show how something may be right for me and not for you, Winch employs an example from fiction which, I would hope, serves to explain why a degree of relativism need pose no threat to objective moral judgments. Captain Vere, in Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd*, is confronted with having to decide between condemning Budd in the knowledge that he was ‘innocent before God’, or releasing him. Rather than decide in accordance with his conscience, Vere acts in accordance with what he believes is required in his role as Captain of Marines, to which Winch responds as follows:

I could not have acted as did Vere;...I should have found it morally impossible to condemn a man “innocent before God” under such circumstances. In reaching this decision I do not think that I should appeal to any considerations over and above those to which Vere himself appeals. It is just that I think I should find the considerations connected with Billy Budd’s peculiar innocence too powerful to be overridden by the appeal to military duty. (*Ibid.*: 196-197).

²² For an important and influential treatment of the issue, see Davidson (1984).

²³ For the difficulties associated with the indeterminacy of what might be considered right or wrong, see Broome (1998).

Winch is not saying here that Vere was *wrong* in deciding as he did, only that Winch himself would have found it *impossible* to do likewise; in such circumstances (the fact of Budd's innocence) the impossibility is not, (as Raz points out in a sensitive discussion of the example): '... a result of a belief that it is wrong. Nor is the belief that it is wrong a result of the feeling that one cannot perform the act. The two are one and the same. There is a belief about what is right for me which is an aspect of knowing what is...possible or impossible for me to do.' (2000: 72). This explains why we can allow that Vere's decision was right for him, and not for Winch. While it would have been impossible for Winch to convict, it would have been equally impossible for Vere not to convict without serious damage to what each considers essential to personal integrity. In certain circumstances one *discovers* (or realises), in the manner of Martin Luther, that one 'kann nicht anders' without fragmenting as a person. Moral decisions cannot always be made by reference to what is right for *everyone* (without exception), which is why Winch 'puts a certain class of *first person* moral judgments in a special position as not subject to the universalisability principle' (*Op. cit.*: 159). Moral character is in large part a matter of discovering what is of ultimate significance in one's scheme of things, and it is the possibility of discovery in this context which explains why it is not entirely self-chosen. Moreover, one's character is part of the moral reality confronting one, in that it has salience on a par with any other relevant feature, and is something about which we can acquire knowledge and understanding prior to the formation of objectively correct moral judgments.²⁴

2.3 Particularism and Generalism

It is the anthropocentric nature of moral properties combined with the fact that it is only possible to see morally salient features for what they are, if one is on the 'inside' of morality (in being not only able to comprehend and employ moral concepts, but also being disposed to *caring* about things like cruelty and injustice) which leaves them 'shapeless' in relation to the non-moral. There is no single non-moral feature in respect of which a situation may be judged cruel or kind, which is why we cannot identify the natural features of a situation and say that because it possesses whatever natural feature it has, that it is in virtue of this and this alone, that we are justified in calling it such. This is why moral knowledge requires judgment, or *phronesis*, as opposed to the application of an algorithm. It follows that we are unable to make any *pro tanto* claims about the *moral* significance of non-moral properties and why moral particularists are loathe to admit to the necessity, or even desirability, of appealing to moral principles when attempting to justify a moral judgment, on the grounds that to do so would be to ignore the respects in which moral reasons function holistically. What counts as a moral reason is not a function of its coherence or consistency with other moral judgments to which we might subscribe, such that *any* action possessing non-moral properties NMP_1, \dots, NMP_n is wrong for that reason and, in turn, warrants its universalizability. Moreover, there is more to 'coherence' than 'going on in the same way'. As Wittgenstein clearly demonstrates, there are real problems in

²⁴ Gerry Cohen believes that the citation of a role is never a *sufficient* reason for \emptyset -ing. 'when the individual is thought of as a set of roles, he may receive the callous treatment appropriate to a thing; he may be shifted from role to role, [his example is that of Pooh-Bah who, in the *Mikado*, occupies the dual role of Lord-Lieutenant and Chancellor of the Exchequer] without any regard to the impact change of station has on him. If the other direction of the assimilation is stressed, and sets of roles are conceived as persons, the social *status quo* is then protected: when roles constitute selfhood, to change society is to mangle human beings.' (1976: 66).

determining what this would amount to. Whatever counts as ‘doing the same thing’ it is not, he argues, fixed by rules or principles. His point is that any example of a rule could, logically, result from an infinite number of rules. If it is rational consistency we are looking for then we must, according to Wittgenstein, do more than search for a codifiable set of principles, but instead *look and see* how to go on, which itself presupposes the very kind of sensitivity we have been trying to articulate. (1953: §138-155).²⁶ Invoking Aristotle, McDowell makes the point as follows:

the best generalizations about how one should behave hold only for the most part. If one attempted to reduce one’s conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which an application of the rules would strike one as wrong – and not necessarily because one had changed one’s mind; rather one’s mind on the matter was not susceptible of capture in any universal formula’ (1979: 148).²⁷

As in the performance of a Mozart piano concerto, an interpretation strictly in accordance with a set of rules, with no concern for time and place, opportunity for spontaneous decoration, nuance and so on, would be a sign of musical insensitivity, so too in the moral sphere it is not possible to predict with the requisite degree of specificity the extent to which any one property is relevant from one case to another. The question is whether we have any reason to believe that there are any useful easily codifiable rules of the form ‘If *abc* then \emptyset ’. According to Jonathan Dancy, ‘no set of principles will succeed in generating answers to questions about what to do in particular cases.’ (1993: 56). One has only to appreciate the fact that something might well be fun on one occasion though not necessarily on another.

In a critical discussion of Onora O’Neill’s recent attempt to discredit McDowell’s reliance on the Wittgensteinian insight about rule-following in his defence of moral particularism, Jay Garfield shows that she is mistaken to conclude that he (McDowell) believes that there is no place for rule-following in our moral lives simply because they are incapable of *determining* action. Garfield argues in support of McDowell, on the grounds that his claim is the weaker one that ‘no conception of *virtue* could be *reduced* to any such set of rules, and that moral *knowledge* cannot consist of the mechanical application of a set of criterial rules’ (2000: 186-187).

Though moral principles are known by the virtuous, guide virtuous action, are non-arbitrary and are constitutive of the moral good, it does not follow that they can be finitely stated in terms of criteria of application. Moreover,

²⁶ According to Wittgenstein, even the context of arithmetic, the rule ‘add two’ is consistent with countless rules. His explanation of how we ‘get the picture’, is by sharing in a particular practice or way of looking at things. For a further discussion of the issue, see McDowell, (1981:141-162). (Roger Crisp is not so sure. He says: ‘If you ask me to continue a series of numbers by adding twenty-nine, the most effective way for me to do that is to apply the rule, ‘Add twenty-nine’. I do not just ‘see’ that 203 is 174 plus 29.’ (2000:26).

²⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.3 and V.10, esp. 1137b19-24.

learning them requires that one grasp their instantiation in paradigm cases, which cases are central to our grasp of the rules themselves, and that one grasp relevant, but not storable similarity dimensions determining correct and incorrect application of the rules. (*Ibid.*: 191).

It is to McDowell's credit, he believes, that he explains, in the same way as Aristotle, how virtue and moral knowledge are acquired and, following Wittgenstein, how the principles that we employ in trying to determine what to do, must be employed non-mechanistically.

The generalist might reply to the effect that that this neither undermines the possibility of inductive moral knowledge, nor supports Dancy's claim to the effect that '[possession of] the relevant sensitivities just is to be able to get things right case by case'. (1993: 64). Surely we are entitled to infer from the fact that the gratuitous infliction of pain is what makes an action wrong; not only on this occasion but on all and every other occasions, past present and future. While granting that this is undeniable, it is insufficient to substantiate the view that moral knowledge is inferential from a codifiable set of rules or principles. The importance we attach to moral knowledge is in virtue of its action guiding status and that is why rules or principles are insufficient in the absence of the skills of discernment and sensitivity towards the salient features peculiar to a specific context. Moral principles are not only motivationally inert in that they do not provide us with insufficient reasons for action in the absence of care and compassion, they are useless in helping one discern the intrinsic value of anything whatsoever. They are not the objects of moral knowledge, but at best serve as reminders or summaries of what we know. Their utility has more to do with determining what *not to do* (torture, murder, bully and such like), than with *what to do, be or become* (care about injustice, cultivate the dispositions related to compassion, live with integrity or whatever). They are rarely (and should never be taught as if they are) exceptionless, nor should they be applied without reference to care and sensitivity to context. Moral knowledge cannot be explained without reference to particular circumstances; and those with a wedded adherence to the foundational role of principles distort the whole enterprise. The upshot of all this is all too clear. As Little puts it:

If reason-giving considerations function holistically in the moral realm, we simply shouldn't expect to find rules that mark out in non-moral terms the sufficiency conditions for applying moral concepts....[But] it is often said that such principles must be lurking in the background if a moral conclusion is to count as the right one. After all, it is thought, if the reason for the conclusion is adequate – if it really operates as a reason – it must be an instance of a generality that holds through all circumstances....[But again] such an argument...has tacitly assumed that moral considerations function atomistically. If, as suggested here, they function holistically, then a set of considerations can function as a reason here – can truly function, and not simply be an incomplete rendition of a reason – and yet not count as a reason in another context (2000: 284-285).

The implications for moral education are obvious. There is altogether more to this endeavour than helping children justify their moral judgments by reference to moral

principles (as Lawrence Kohlberg, for one, would have us believe (1981) – the limitations of which having been exposed by people such as Carol Gilligan (1982) – on the grounds that it totally underplays the significance of care and concern in its account of moral maturity). The moral educator’s concern should be with sensitising children to the requirements and merits of specific situations rather than the mechanistic application of a universally applicable set of principles by reference to which a particular moral judgment gains credence and legitimacy. All of which, if true, serves to reinforce Aristotle’s point to the effect that while there are mathematical prodigies there are no moral prodigies on the grounds that moral knowledge requires exposure to numerous instances of particular cases. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a 10-20). We learn to recognise acts of cruelty *as* such, as a result of exposure (in life or through fiction) to the multifarious situations in which cruelty is instantiated, and not by reference to the application of a codifiable set of principles. In so doing we are improving our moral vision in bringing the morally salient features into sharper focus.

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