Metaphysics of Morality

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To my brothers, Benjamin and Jonathan.

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Contents

1

Why Metaphysics and Morality?

1.1 The Epistemic Starting Point

"Philosophy begins in wonder," it is oft-times said. Plato, in fact, has Socrates say it in the *Theaetetus*:

> Theodorus was not wrong in his estimate of your nature [Theaetetus]. The *sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher*. Philosophy indeed has no other origin….[1]

And Aristotle says much the same in his *Metaphysics*: "For it is owing to their *wonder* that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize…."[2] Personally, I find myself more closely aligned with G. E. Moore in this as in so much else:

[1]Plato, *Theaetetus*, translated by F. M. Cornford, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961): 845–919; 155d; my insertion and emphasis.

[2]Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941): 681–926; 982b12; my emphasis.

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> I do not think that the world or the sciences would ever have suggested to me any philosophical problems. What has suggested philosophical problems to me is things which other philosophers have said about the world or the sciences."[3]

But whatever the origins of inquiry for individual philosophers, I suggest that John Dewey is fundamentally right regarding the general characterization of any type of human intellection: we start with a problem situation, with a feeling of unease at something perplexing or worrying. It may be vividly immediate or a mere musing puzzlement. It may be a matter of recondite and subtle theoretical speculation, involving only the most tenuous of practical implications, or it may be a matter of pressing importance demanding immediate resolution to which dire existential consequences are attached. But in any such situation the fact remains that something needs solving, and we set out to do so in all manner of ways, from snap judgments to application of highly refined scientific techniques.[4]

The great pragmatists—Dewey among them, but Charles S. Peirce perhaps most forcefully—also counsel that in philosophy, as in other forms of inquiry, we must "begin where we are," not with some trumped-up Cartesian indubitability, some incorrigible, infallible epistemic Archimedean point—some perspective motivated in response to what Peirce derisively refers to as mere "paper doubt."[5] Indeed, human inquiry begins in perplexity about something—for Moore and for me, very often what some other philosopher has had to say—and we start to work, sometimes in fits and starts, sometimes with concentrated assiduity, on resolving that perplexity. Often, we can't be sure what the

[3]G. E. Moore, "An Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1942): 3–39; 14.

[4]Dewey develops these matters in many places. See, for example, *How We Think*, in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, Vol. 6, 1910–1911; eds. J. Ann Boydston and Bridget W. Graubner (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983): 177–356.

[5]Peirce attacks "paper doubts" in a variety of places, but especially see "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 5, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–1935): 264–317, esp. 264–68; and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," Vol. 5: 388–410.

result of this inquiry will be, but in some cases what results is a philosophical theory which answers, in whole or in part, the question with which we began. This is the case, I think, with regard to the subject of this study, the *metaphysics of morality*: it is only philosophical inquiry that can tell us how properly to conceptualize the metaphysical foundations of morality. Indeed, philosophers have said the most surprising things about morality, some of which are totally at odds with our normal, everyday moral thinking. That, at any rate, is certainly what started me thinking about the nature of morality. I doubt my case is all that unusual.

But before going any further, we need to get a very important distinction before us. Moral inquiry, and moral matters generally, divide broadly into two categories familiar to the philosophical *cognoscenti*: the first-order moral, and the second-order moral. Examples of the former are inquiries into what one should and shouldn't do—into what acts, policies, intentions, etc., are morally right or wrong, permissible or impermissible, good or bad, courageous or cowardly. Other examples are questions of, say, which type of normative system—utilitarian, deontological, aretaic, etc.—is superior to another, and why. We might say, regarding all of these examples, and whether of the former or of the latter sort, that they have to do with matters "within" morality.[6] We might further say that, assuming morality is possible, these examples are all "morally relevant."

Second-order morality, "metaethics," deals with issues "about" morality—its nature, its ontological status, its truth conditions, etc. Examples are inquiries into whether there moral truths regarding the permissibility of a certain type of action; questions about whether there are *non-relative* first-order moral truths; questions about whether there are first-order moral truths of any sort; and questions of whether first-order moral locutions, such as 'Theft is *pro tanto* wrong', are propositional, i.e., propositional in the primary sense such that, when asserted, what is asserted is purported to express a moral truth.

[6]See David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 1.

This book is about the second-order moral, about *metaethics*: more specifically, it is about the nature of morality, its ground and metaphysical status. And although I certainly agree that there are a variety of things that may provoke people to philosophical inquiry, surely for most if not all of us, moral inquiry does not begin at the level of metaethics. On the contrary, it begins in early childhood when we are instructed by our parents to do this and not do that, that we should be good and not naughty, that we should not be mean to our siblings, etc., etc., etc. Initially we think about how to carry out these instructions—the "problem situation" is, How do I do this?—but not long into our moral development we begin to be told *why* we should do some things and not others. "Don't hit your sister, Johnny. That's not nice. How would you like it if someone did that to you?" We are at this point beginning to get not just elementary moral commands, but moral explanations—explanations of *why* we should do thus-and-so.

Thus far in our moral development, moral inquiry is first-order. And here it is likely to remain unless and until there is sufficient sophistication and intellectual maturity to reflect upon, for example, when faced with competing systems of moral belief, whether there is an objective moral standard that may be appealed to in order to adjudicate between competing standards. *Now* we are entering the realm of the second-order moral—a domain virtually exclusive to adult moral inquiry.[7] How far such inquiry will go is of course a matter of great variability. In the main, however, it is philosophers who have taken it the furthest.

I draw attention to these perhaps banal matters to make a point that will have anything but banal implications for this entire study: Inquiry into the most abstract and theoretical of metaethical issues grows out of the moral inquiries of everyday life—of what to do here and now, of how you or I should act if someone were to do *X* or fail to do *Y*. And this point in turn forms the basis of another animating conviction

[7]This isn't to deny that first-order moral inquiry, whether in "applied ethics" (e.g., questions regarding the defensibility of abortion or euthanasia), or in normative ethical theory (e.g., questions regarding the defensibility of deontology or consequentialism) can be highly sophisticated. The point is that second-order moral questions almost surely arise only for those of some moral sophistication and experience.

of this study: *A proper metaethics is charged with the* prima facie *obligation to preserve the contours of our ordinary, tutored moral thinking.* Why this charge? Because it is highly desirable that a theory about the nature of morality preserve the fundamental integrity of the *practice* of morality. But why is the charge only *prima facie*? The answer is, because it is a fundamental commitment of this project to let the chips fall where they may—or in terms to be developed in detail later, because of our commitment to *truth*. If a credible metaethics cannot be constructed—if our efforts come to naught; if our opponents clearly possess a more compelling account of how morality should be construed—then we are bound by the highest commitment of any philosopher, *commitment to the pursuit of truth*, to adopt that theory which has the best evidence in favor of it—or to at least refrain from embracing a view that does not. All of this, however, needs more explanation.

1.2 What We Know, Morally Speaking

I have just indicated that our ordinary, tutored moral thinking about first-order moral matters deserves to be taken seriously. But what do I mean by "ordinary, tutored moral thinking"? Well, it is difficult to point too fine a point on it, and would require a separate study of considerable length to try to do so, but in brief what I have in mind is the broad moral perspective, shared by informed people across many societies and cultures, and shared by such people for many decades if not centuries, that some types of actions, policies, or moral attitudes are simply unacceptable, and others are deserving of moral praise. It is far more easily illustrated by example than abstractly defined: our rejection of killing innocent persons, i.e., murder; our rejection of coercive sexual intercourse, i.e., rape; our admiration of personal sacrifice at great physical peril for the sake of a worthy cause, i.e., heroism; etc. I shall privilege contemporary informed opinion, and I shall privilege perspectives prevalent in western culture, though I emphatically do not rule out the possibility that non-contemporary or non-western perspectives may in important respects be better. Likely my opponents will fix on socioculturally based differences to dispute my view—I shall address

these objections in due course—but I here emphasize the pervasiveness of moral agreement, intra and inter-societal/cultural, which are often of remarkable depth, scope, and durability.

Such moral commitments, widely if not universally shared, serve as the very foundation of our moral lives. They bear heavily on how we order society—on its laws and institutions; on how we conduct affairs with foreign entities; on how we see ourselves and those with whom we are most intimately associated, as well as those with whom we are least connected; and on how we understand goals of personal improvement. Theorists shouldn't just brush these matters aside. Of course, this does not mean that our ordinary moral perspective is indefeasible—I will have much to say about this in later chapters—but recognition of its central importance is, I am convinced, the proper place to begin. Indeed, it seems that we virtually must begin here; for none of us is immune to thinking that there are some features of life that are nearly inviolable. None of us, for example, thinks that it is acceptable to be brutalized, or wantonly exploited or disrespected. Of course, how the term 'acceptable' is to be explicated will vary according to perspective and to theoretical commitments—and the philosopher may provide a very different account of this than the proverbial "man in the street." But the fact remains that none of us wants to be treated badly, at least as we understand the term, or to have bad treatment inflicted upon those about whom we care. This is a datum of human experience.

We commonly think we know all manner of things:

1. This is my hand in front of my face.
2. George Washington was the first president of the United States.
3. I am now thinking about the Matterhorn in Switzerland.
4. $3+4=7$.
5. I ate oatmeal for breakfast this morning.

In order of presentation, I know these propositions to be true perceptually, via testimony, introspectively, self-evidently, and memorially. And just as we are confident that we possess knowledge in the *non*-moral realm, we commonly think—*and perhaps with the same degree of conviction as with the examples just given*—that we know many moral truths. I claim to know the following to be true:

6. You should not be stabbed to death for someone's, *anyone's*, mere amusement.
7. Coercive sex with children is wrong.
8. It is almost always morally praiseworthy to return a kindness with a kindness.
9. Courage is more morally commendable than cowardice.
10. One has duties to others.

This second set of claims are all of the first-order moral—claims *within* morality in the minimal sense that they are properly moral claims, assuming that morality is possible. Were there no such thing as morality, were morality an impossibility, all would be false due to presupposition failure, or at the very least, would mean something very different than they are taken to mean by ordinary moral discourse.

For the most part and in most respects, we move very comfortably in this first-order moral realm. We usually know what to do, what is required of us in any given situation, what linguistic moves are licit and which are not—or at least we feel confident that we do. In cases where we do not feel on firm ground, at least the parameters of the problem are usually pretty clear, even if the relevant situational details are not. Moral judgments like these typify the normality of our valuational lives: we feel at sea if they don't function in this role. Some judgments may of course call for revision or even abandonment, especially if they are on what we might call our "valuational periphery"—those areas of judgment that we consider atypical, or in other ways not central to or moral thinking. But some moral judgments are remarkably stable, and if overturned would leave us in deep quandary. Imagine, for example, if we became convinced that proposition 6 above was false, that it is *not* the case that it is morally wrong for someone to stab you for their own amusement. Or that it is false that coercive sex with children (proposition 7)—*including your own child*—is morally wrong. Were we challenged on these matters, we might find it difficult, at least initially, even to come up with a defense, so central are they to our valuational *Weltanschauung*. But of course such judgments are only infrequently challenged, if ever. This may say as much about the sociocultural milieu in which we live as it does about the nature of

the moral beliefs themselves: members of homogeneous or otherwise highly stable societies do not often met challenges so fundamental to their system of moral valuations. But obviously this is not always the case. During times of existential threat, or rapid political change, or technological upheaval, even deeply held first-order moral beliefs may be subjected to sustained and careful scrutiny. Yet some of them endure nevertheless, perhaps longer and more robustly than we might imagine. I have given some examples above, and we would do well to look at them carefully; for they have much to teach us about the *nature* of morality—about second-order moral matters.

As we ordinarily think of these matters, what we know, or what we think we know, includes such things as these:

A. *Some acts, policies, valuational attitudes,* etc. *are morally right or wrong, praiseworthy or condemnable, or manifest some other such moral property(s), and some acts, policies, or valuational attitudes manifest no such property(s)*. For example, we think we know that John Wilkes Booth should not have assassinated President Lincoln, i.e., that Booth's act of assassinating Lincoln was morally wrong. By the same token, we think we know that Booth's act of putting on his cloths before going to Ford's Theater that fateful day in October, 1865, was not morally wrong—or we may prefer to say that it was neither morally right nor morally wrong; it was a morally neutral act.
B. *Some moral generalizations are true, and others false.* For example, we think we know that it is true that *ceteris paribus,* one should never inflict wanton cruelty upon another person, and we think we know that it is false that it is always morally permissible to have coercive sexual relations with young children.
C. *Some acts, policies, or moral attitudes are morally wrong or otherwise condemnable no matter when, where, or by whom they are manifested or performed.* For example, Adam Lanza should not have murdered the twenty school children, ages six to seven years, at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, on

December 14, 2012.[8] Nor should anyone else have murdered those children, or committed some other relevantly similar act, no matter whether committed in the U.S. or Canada or Uganda, or in any other society or culture, and no matter when (i.e., it would have been wrong if committed in the year 1812, and would be wrong if committed in the year 2212).

D. *Our believing an act, policy,* etc. *to be right or wrong, permissible or impermissible,* etc.*, does not* ipso facto *make it right or wrong, permissible or impermissible.* For example, I may believe that Jones should not have struck Smith, but my *belief* is not what makes it the case that Jones should not have struck Smith, *if* indeed Jones was wrong to have struck Smith. That is to say, belief regarding the absence or presence of moral properties M_1, M_2, M_3 in an act or situation is one thing, the *actual* absence or presence of these properties in an act or situation is another (I will put these matters much more carefully in subsequent chapters).

A corollary of D. is this:

E. *It is possible in principle for person (i.e., moral agent) S to believe something to be the case regarding the moral permissibility, rightness, goodness,* etc.*, of an act, policy, or what have you, but to be mistaken.* For example, *S* could believe that chattel slavery is morally permissible, but *S*'s belief would be wrong.

Now some would press that at least some of A.–E. is too sophisticated, too theoretical to properly attribute to commonsense moral thought.[9] And in certain respects I would agree: for example, the proverbial man in

[8]I make quite a point of this example in *Knowing Moral Truth: A Theory of Metaethics and Moral Knowledge* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield): see esp. §1.1. In this and similar cases, I assume that the perpetrator of the act possessed at least minimal moral agency. As a practical matter in the Sandy Hook case, this is difficult to establish, given that Lanza took his own life at the scene of the crime. In addition to the carnage inflicted upon the children, Lanza also murdered six of the school's personnel, as well as his mother (shot four times in the head, the police believe while she was sleeping).

[9]Mane Hajdin has argued this point forcefully in conversation and private correspondence.

the street rarely if ever talks about "valuational attitudes" or "moral properties." In Sect. 2.1, I will address these matters in much more detail; but for the present, let's simply regard A.–E. as what the commonsense moralist *would* plausibly be prepared to hold were she accorded appropriate Socratic questioning—that is to say, that commitment to A.–E. is implicit in her commonsense moral views. So my claim here—to be defended more fully in Chapter 2—is that A.–E. are fundamental to our ordinary moral thinking. If any one of them is proved wrong, we would be at a loss how to proceed, or at the very least, would find ourselves in a state of valuational disorientation. The key to seeing the real power of this point is to consider paradigm cases, a few examples of which I have already produced. But who could doubt the power of these examples? *Moral skeptics, that's who.*

1.3 The Skeptical Challenge: A General Account

There are many forms of moral skepticism. I will use the term in an atypical, provocative, some would say tendentious manner, to refer to all views that entail that there is something systematically wrong with our ordinary, tutored, "commonsense" moral perspective, which is typified by commitment to claims A.–E. in the previous section.[10] It will be useful, however, to subdivide these skepticisms into two broad categories: those which imply that our ordinary moral thinking is mistaken on *epistemological* grounds, and those which imply that our ordinary moral thinking is mistaken on *semantic* or *metaphysical* grounds, which we may term, albeit admittedly at the risk of misinterpretation, "metaethical" moral skepticism. Thus, the first type of skepticism implies that even if there are first-order moral truths such as those contemplated by commonsense morality, we have no good reason to think that we possess *knowledge* of them. The second type implies that commonsense morality is mistaken in its commitment to moral truths. We need to unpack all of this.

[10]This is how I use the term 'moral skepticism' throughout *Knowing Moral Truth*: see esp. Ch. 1.

Call adherents to the first type of skepticism *epistemological moral skeptics*. They hold some variation on the theme that moral knowledge, or perhaps even justified moral belief, is not possible. This may issue from a variety of sources: one may be a general epistemological skepticism. Perhaps they think that knowledge in general is impossible, because they think, for example, that the Argument from Uncertainty is correct—i.e., (roughly) given that knowledge requires both truth and certainty, because *S* can never be certain (however 'certainty' is understood—as indubitability, as incorrigibility, as infallibility) of the correctness of his belief that proposition *p* is true, that *S* cannot know that *p*. Or perhaps the skeptic believes that the Infinite Regress Argument is correct—i.e., (roughly) that knowledge that *p* requires justified belief that *p*, and that unless belief B_1 is justified by another belief B_2, and belief B_2 by still another belief B_3, and so on for any other belief B_n in the justificatory chain, that unless there is some belief B_{n+1} that can be produced which is self-justifying (or immediately justified, or self-evident, or for some other reason requires no other justifying belief), then *S* is not justified in believing that *p*. But there are no such self-justifying beliefs, says the skeptic, so *S* cannot possess knowledge. Or perhaps the skeptic, taking a tack more specific to moral knowledge per se, thinks that we have no appropriate mental faculty to grasp moral truths, even assuming that there is such a thing as moral truth. And there are many other grounds for epistemological moral skepticism.

Let's call adherents to the second type of skepticism *metaphysical moral skeptics*: they share the view that there are no first-order moral truths of the sort that commonsense supposes. That is to say, they think that we are mistaken to hold that some acts, policies, etc. are right or wrong, permissible or impermissible, *simpliciter*. In still other words, they think we are mistaken in claiming to know the kind of things contained in propositions A.–E. from Sect. 1.2 above, e.g., that Adam Lanza was morally wrong—no ifs, ands, or buts—to have killed those twenty children at Sandy Hook Elementary School. And the fundamental problem with these claims, say these skeptics, is that there is nothing of the sort to be known in the first place. This general skeptical stance takes different forms. *Moral relativists*—there are many

versions—agree that there are indeed first-order moral truths, but hold that any such truths are true only relative to some relativizer—to socioculturally constructed values, to conceptual schemes, to explicit or tacit agreements, to linguistic conventions, etc. There is no such first-order moral truth *simpliciter*: moral truth is relative. So, for example, the proposition 'Slavery is morally wrong' is true, *if* it is true, only relative to a specified set of sociocultural values, or optionally adopted conceptual schemes, etc. *Moral nihilists*, on the other hand, agree that first-order moral discourse is propositional, thus truth-bearing as far as it goes, but think that such discourse is false. The fundamental reason being that there are no such things as moral properties—no properties of moral rightness, moral wrongness, goodness or badness, etc. So, the proposition 'Slavery is morally wrong' is false, because nothing is morally wrong. Commonsense morality is mistaken to hold otherwise. *Moral non-cognitivists* embrace some variation on the theme that first-order moral locutions are not propositional, and therefore *neither true nor false*—at least not in a primary, valuational sense. So 'Slavery is morally wrong' is not true, but neither is it false, because the locution, appearances notwithstanding, is not propositional and therefore not a truth-bearer.

We will soon need to go through all of this much more carefully. But this will do for a start. For it usefully enables us to focus on what our primary concern throughout this entire study will be, namely, the metaphysical foundations of morality, *if there be any such foundations*, which is of course denied in one way or another by metaphysical moral skeptics. It is not necessarily denied by epistemological moral skeptics, however, for they may admit that there may be moral truths which could in principle be known—by an infinite mind, for example—even if we are unable to know them. *Our concern is with the metaphysical moral skeptics, with skeptics coming from the metaethical side of things.* That said, some would argue that the two categories of skepticism are not radically distinct. For they may hold that truth is an epistemic concept—that a theory of truth is properly part of epistemology. For these people, then, skepticism is ineluctably rooted in epistemology. They may further argue that metaphysical skeptics may be unaware of this, because they have the wrong conception of truth.

This last point too needs to get sorted out. Among other things, we will need to have a careful look at the nature of truth, the topic of Chapter 4. For now, however, where we are is this: There are two ways to think of skepticism about first-order moral claims: in terms of epistemology, and in terms of metaphysics. As already noted, our focus will be on the latter; but the credibility of this depends on the credibility of the distinction between metaphysics and epistemology—in particular, how this distinction bears on a proper conception of truth. I will defend this distinction as it bears on truth in Chapter 4; for if this distinction is illegitimate, the very premise of this study would be rendered nugatory.

1.4 The Anti-skeptical Response: A General Account

Let's suppose for the now that the distinction between epistemic moral skepticism and metaphysical moral skepticism is defensible. What, then, are the general features of our rebuttal to moral skepticism in its metaphysical form? In brief, and in the broadest of terms, it will be in the form of a defense of the claims typified by A.–E. in Sect. 1.2 above. That is to say, the defense will be a defense of the cogence of such closely associated claims as these:

A*. Some acts, policies, valuational attitudes, etc. are morally right or wrong, praiseworthy or condemnable, or manifest some other similar moral property(s); and some acts, policies, or valuational attitudes manifest no such property(s).
B*. Some moral generalizations are true, and others false.
C*. Some acts, policies, or moral attitudes are morally wrong or otherwise condemnable no matter when, where, or by whom they are manifested or performed.
D*. Believing that an act, policy, etc. to be right or wrong, permissible or impermissible, etc., does not *ipso facto* make it right or wrong, permissible or impermissible.
E*. It is possible in principle for *S* to believe something to be the case, morally speaking, but to be mistaken.

Note that all of these claims certainly appear to be to propositional, and therefore, assuming that the Law of Excluded Middle holds, either true or false. They are admittedly a bit abstract, and not the sort of thing a young child, whom we may nevertheless consider perfectly capable of discriminating between right and wrong in certain concrete cases, would readily say. But they surely are the sort of claim that any discerning adult is likely to make, or is readily capable of making, especially if guided by appropriate Socratic questioning. The ground of all of these claims, however, seems to me likely to be the conviction that attaches to elemental claims like these[11]:

i. You shouldn't hurt me.
ii. You shouldn't hurt people I love.
iii. That action is unfair to me.
iv. That kind of action is unfair to anyone.
v. You might think that I was wrong to do that, but you are mistaken.

All but the very young or cognitively impaired would be prepared to make these and similar claims, and we build up from there to subtler, more generalized first-order moral conceptualizations.

Of course, I speak only roughly here: the details of cognitive moral ascent are much more varied and rich than this simple accounting suggests. There is an enormous degree of variation, partly dependent on sociocultural or other exogenous variables, partly dependent on variables specific to the individual herself. But these details are not germane to our general claim, which is that according to the anti-skeptical position endorsed here, there is something deeply correct and important about our ordinary first-order moral thought. And further, that correctness in the moral realm is roughly on a par with other forms of correctness, such that to be correct is to "get it right," which is in turn *to state*

[11]I intend this as an empirical claim, and therefore as amenable to confirmation or disconfirmation by sophisticated developmental psychological investigation. But perhaps it would also be well-understood as a conceptual claim, as per the later Wittgenstein, for whom such elementary ordinary discourse is part and parcel of our more sophisticated moral language games.

that to be the case which really is the case. Another way to put this is to say that to be correct is to say what the world is really like in the relevant respect. And still another way to put it is to say that to be correct is *to say what is true, and to say what is true is to state a fact.*

All of this needs much more careful and rigorous expression. At this point, however, it is important to see that our anti-skeptical response turns on the claim that first-order moral discourse is not a matter of how we speak, or of how we think about things—about our concepts, for example—nor is it determined or constructed by society or culture. Our view, rather, is that moral claims are rooted in *moral reality*—a reality that our language or culture or agreements or what have you may get right, or may get wrong (possibly systematically, however unlikely that may be). In other words, our anti-skeptical response is based on the conviction that there is an independent moral reality that is not a reality of our own making. We might also put it by saying that we embrace morality *de re*, and reject any form of morality *de dicto*—a morality of "mere words."[12]

In the most general terms, our commonsense, anti-skeptical response to the various moral skepticisms comes to this: We possess an indefinitely large number of true first-order moral beliefs. Some of these are occurrent moral beliefs, e.g., we entertain at time t the belief that the moral proposition p is true (or is false). Some of them are dormant beliefs, e.g., we have thought about p at some time in the past, and at that time believed that p was true (or was false), but have since forgotten about this doxastic episode, but have nevertheless retained the belief in one's memory. And still others may be tacit moral beliefs, e.g., although one has never thought about whether p is true or false, p obviously follows from other beliefs that one has, whether occurrent or dormant, and one would occurrently believe that p (or that not-p) were the matter brought appropriately to one's attention.[13] The point I am

[12]We will have to refine this characterization somewhat in Chapter 3, when we discuss analytic moral propositions.

[13]This description of tacit belief closely follows Rik Peels, *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 34. For a very useful discussion of occurrent, dormant, and tacit belief, to which I am indebted, see Peels: 28–43.

making is that these moral beliefs, of whatever type, are beliefs regarding truths about the "way the world is, morally speaking." Such truths express *moral facts*—facts about whether an act or policy or what have you is morally right or wrong, morally permissible or impermissible, etc. These moral facts are not of our own making. On the uncontroversial assumption that our minds are finite and liable to error, we may be, and alas often are in fact, mistaken in our first-order moral claims. To overcome these errors and to hit upon or come closer to the moral mark is to make *moral progress*—a concept very difficult or impossible to make sense of from the perspective of many metaphysical moral skepticisms. On our commonsense moral view, the United States *really is morally better* in respect to the treatment of Black people in 2018 than it was in 1818, when slavery pervaded the Southern states, or than it was in 1900, before passage of the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote. Who thinks otherwise? KKK members? ISIS or other radical misogynists? Indeed, they may: *but who cares what they think?* No one reading these pages. Quite the contrary, we normally see these matters as settled, closed—as matters not of perspective or attitude or of sociocultural values, or of anything like that, but as matters of *objective moral fact.*

1.5 Why Care About Metaphysics of Morality?

Perhaps the foregoing very general, very rough rebuttal to moral skepticism may sound fine and good as far as it goes, but one might nevertheless ask why this should motivate interest in moral metaphysics? In one respect, the answer is obvious: it was the metaphysical moral skeptic to whom we have imagined the commonsense moralist replying; and so, ascertaining the cogence of the anti-skeptical response leads directly to a concern with the metaphysics of morality. In another respect, one closely associated with former, it appears, and will be the burden of this book to show, that any adequate defense of ordinary moral thinking ineluctably necessitates a defense located at the level of metaphysics—at the level of

moral ontology. And further, it will be the contention of this book that the proper conception of the metaphysics of morality is *realist*, specifically, *that there are first-order moral truths, first-order moral facts, and first-order moral properties that exist quite independently of human cognition.*

Putting this last point a bit more precisely, this of course isn't to say that all moral properties exist independent of the *capacity* for cognition; for some moral properties attach only to moral agents, which are in turn cognitive beings. We do not, for example, typically think of a dog or a bear as being "wrong" in a moral sense if it bites another dog or bear, or even if it bites you. Dogs and bears aren't moral agents; they lack the cognitive capacity which is a *sine qua non* of moral agency. Dogs and bears may well, and I am confident in fact do, possess some sort of moral status, difficult though it may be to specify precisely, yet a moral status utterly lacking in rocks or other inanimate objects. But moral agents dogs and bears are not, as is well illustrated by the ludicrousness of contemplating development of criminal law pertaining to canine or ursine violence (though certainly such law is applicable to moral agents who own or are otherwise responsible for the consequences of their animal's behavior). So, the concepts of moral wrongness or moral praiseworthiness et al. is inapplicable to animal behavior per se: moral properties of the relevant sort simply do not attach to them or to what they do.

Back to morality and metaphysics: Metaphysical moral skeptics hold, for one reason or another, that commonsense morality is systematically erroneous on metaphysical or ontological grounds. Thus, *moral nihilists* like J. L. Mackie[14] hold that there are no first-order moral properties like moral wrongness or badness. Commonsense morality erroneously supposes that there are such properties—even if the "man in the street" wouldn't put it quite this way—but the fact is that propositions like, 'It is wrong to torture people for amusement' are all false because they erroneously make moral property attributions. In short, commonsense morality wrongly supposes that actions, policies, etc. could in principle

[14]See J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

be right or wrong, morally praiseworthy or what have you, in the sense that they correctly predicate moral properties. *Metaethical moral relativists* of whatever strip ultimately locate their skepticism of commonsense morality in moral ontology, even if they fail to recognize it, for they hold that there are no mind-independent, "objective" moral properties like rightness and wrongness. Act *A* is only assessable "relative to *X*"—and here they instantiate '*X*' with their preferred relativizer. Sociocultural moral relativists replace '*X*' with societal or cultural moral beliefs. Gilbert Harman, an "implicit agreement" relativist, instantiates '*X*' with actual or tacit agreements between agents; thus, *A* is morally assessable only in terms of these agreements[15]—so this too is an ontic rejection of commonsense morality. *Radical moral subjectivists* hold that an act is right or wrong, etc. if and only if *S* asserts it to be so: then it is right/wrong *for S* by fiat: nothing "objective" here, thus again we have an ontically-based rejection of commonsense morality. *Pragmatists* too fall into the moral relativist camp, being committed to a relativist conception of truth—but explaining all of this must wait for now.[16]

But note that the views briefly canvassed here share in commonsense morality's cognitivism. Moral non-cognitivists, however, hold that first-order moral claims are not propositional—at least not in a primary "moral" sense. Whatever is expressed in locutions like 'It is wrong to torture people for amusement', it is not morally truth-apt, as is implicitly assumed to be the case by our usual moral thinking. There is a broad range of moral non-cognitivisms, some more radically non-cognitivist than others: we shall look at them carefully in later chapters. For now it is adequate to note three historically important versions: *Emotivism,*

[15]See Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 84 (1975): 3–22; *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); and "Moral Relativism," in *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996): 3–64. The brief sketch given here most closely follows the formulation in "Moral Relativism Defended." I will put these matters more carefully in Sects. 2.4 and 6.5.

[16]Richard Rorty, whom some call a "neo-pragmatist," has gone so far as to say that truth is what one's peers allow you to get away with asserting. See his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979): 176. Other pragmatists put these matters much differently, and much more plausibly, e.g., James, Dewey, and Peirce. We shall look much more carefully at these matters later, especially in Chapter 4.

according to the version championed by A. J. Ayer, holds that locutions like 'It is wrong to torture people for amusement' are actually expressions of negative emotion about torturing people.[17] R. M. Hares' version of *prescriptivism* holds that such locutions are directives not to perform such acts.[18] And Allan Gibbard's version of *expressivism* seeks to construct a systematic moral semantics relating moral sentiments to rationality.[19] These three versions of moral non-cognitivism are adequate to illustrate the central point that for non-cognitivists, first-order moral locutions of the sort at issue are ultimately the expression of moral sentiments, not attributions of objective moral properties to suitable moral objects. But all of this is quite unlike what is presupposed in our ordinary thinking. We certainly don't think that we are merely, or even primarily, expressing our moral sentiments when we say that that child should not have been raped and murdered.

There are of course other versions of metaphysical moral skepticism than those touched upon here. We will need to look at the versions just canvassed, as well as additional ones, much more carefully and in much greater depth. But I have said enough to get us started. On the view propounded throughout this book, defending commonsense morality requires not only defending against metaphysical moral skepticism, but also developing the metaphysical foundations of *moral realism*. Many disagree: some would have it that what we actually need in order to preserve the general contours of commonsense morality, as opposed to what we may *think* we need, can be supplied without the kind of heavy-duty moral metaphysics advocated here.[20] We shall see. What we now must turn to is a careful examination of the metaphysical underpinning of ordinary morality, and at the metaphysical underpinnings, or lack thereof, of competing theories. Only then will we possess a robust idea of what is at stake.

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[17]A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952).

[18]R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

[19]See Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). The remarks here more closely follow the earlier, perhaps better-known work.

[20]For example, Hilary Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).