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Moral Fictionalism

Mark Eli Kalderon

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position of choosing between a plausible semantics wedded to an implausible cognitivism and an implausible semantics wedded to a plausible noncognitivism. This puzzle would be resolved if there were forms of noncognitivism that are not nonfactualist. Demonstrating that there are forms of noncognitivism that eschew nonfactualism is the task of the following chapter.

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Varieties of Moral Irrealism

Introduction

An important obstacle to standard noncognitivism has been its apparent commitment to an implausible expressivist form of nonfactualism. However, noncognitivism—the claim that moral acceptance is some attitude other than belief—is not the exclusive province of nonfactualism. A novel alternative to moral realism, moral fictionalism, can vindicate noncognitivism as well and can do so without claiming that moral sentences are nonrepresentational. And if the problems for an expressivist nonfactualism prove intractable, then an adequate defense of noncognitivism necessarily involves the development of moral fictionalism. This involves rethinking the standard taxonomy of alternatives to moral realism.

The Standard Conception

It is remarkable that the current debate about moral realism is, to a large extent, framed as a debate about moral language. The

label suggests that the proper topic of the debate is the reality of distinctively moral facts. Indeed, one might naively expect a frank discussion of questions of the form: Are there moral properties (such as rightness and wrongness), and if so are they actually instantiated? Are there moral facts, and if so what are their nature? But the standard formulation of these issues makes essential reference to linguistic intermediaries. The standard discussion of moral realism does not directly speak of moral facts; rather, it is framed in terms of moral sentences and whether they are used to express propositions that represent putative moral facts. Similarly, the existence and instantiation of moral properties are not directly discussed, but there is an extensive discussion of the proper use of moral predicates—whether or not they are normally used to denote moral properties and, if they are, whether they are true of anything in the actual world. It is at least unobvious how a discussion of moral discourse would bear on the metaphysics of morals. After all, the metaphysical commitments of a person as embodied in his use of language is one thing and reality is quite another. The extent to which the debate about moral realism is framed in terms of moral discourse suggests that, despite initial appearances, the debate is not primarily about the metaphysics of morals. Rather, moral realism is an epistemological posture or stance that is articulated, in part, in terms of the commitments embodied in our use of moral language. Specifically, according to a moral realist, he is justified in believing the propositions expressed by at least some of the moral sentences that he in fact accepts. So understood, the varieties of moral irrealism are special forms of moral skepticism. Or so I will argue.

The realist's epistemic stance is easy to characterize at least to a first approximation. In general, a realist about some topic regards thought and talk of the putative subject matter as representing a genuine domain of fact. To be a moral realist, then, is to understand moral thought and talk as representing a genuine

domain of moral fact. But what exactly does this mean? One way to articulate the commitments of moral realism is to canvass the potential alternatives to it. This strategy is available because each of the alternatives to moral realism denies some necessary condition for being a moral realist. A complete taxonomy of the alternatives to moral realism will specify conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for being a moral realist. Thus, it is important to recognize all the potential forms of opposition if only to clarify the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a moral realist. As it stands, mainstream metaethics recognizes two varieties of moral irrealism: nonfactualism and the error theory. The nonfactualist and the error theorist each deny some necessary condition for being a moral realist. I will argue, however, that a further condition must be fulfilled in order for moral realism to be sustained. Moral fictionalism is the denial of precisely this condition.

To clarify the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a moral realist, I will begin by reviewing the recognized alternatives to moral realism.

The nonfactualist denies that moral sentences purport to represent moral reality, to say how things stand with the moral facts. Given our assumption that moral vocabulary consists solely in a class of predicates, we can usefully understand the moral nonfactualist as claiming that the content of a moral predicate does not consist in denoting a moral property:

> *The Nonrepresentation Thesis*
> The content of a moral predicate F does not consist in F denoting a moral property.

Sometimes the nonfactualist thesis is glossed by the slogan that moral sentences are incapable of truth or falsity. This slogan is potentially misleading—after all, even Ayer (1946) did not claim that moral utterances were utterly devoid of 'factual content.' Given the present framework, the slogan can be unpacked as

follows. According to the nonrepresentation thesis, moral predicates do not denote moral properties. It is plausible to assume that the content of a complex expression is determined by the content of its constituent expressions—that some version of compositionality is true. The nonrepresentation thesis in conjunction with compositionality implies that the content of a moral sentence does not consist in its expressing a moral proposition (a proposition that attributes moral properties to things). And if no moral proposition is expressed, nothing, or at least nothing moral, is being put forward as true in uttering a moral sentence. Insofar as moral sentences are true or false, their truth-value does not depend on the instantiation of any moral property, for none are denoted. As such, moral sentences do not represent moral facts, facts about the existence and distribution of moral properties.

It is worth pointing out some consequences of the nonrepresentation thesis. The nonrepresentation thesis in conjunction with compositionality implies that the content of a moral sentence does not consist in its expressing a moral proposition. However, if belief is a relation between a believer and a proposition, the acceptance of a moral sentence cannot be belief in the moral proposition expressed, for it expresses none. Specifically, the nonfactualist is committed to the following:

> *The Noncognitive Thesis*
> In accepting a moral sentence S, competent speakers who understand S do not believe a moral proposition expressed by S.

Thus, according to emotivists, the acceptance of a moral sentence is not belief in a moral proposition expressed, for it expresses none but the adoption of the relevant emotional attitude. Similarly, according to prescriptivists, the acceptance of a moral sentence is not belief in a moral proposition expressed, for it expresses none but the intention to conform to the relevant prescription.

Just as the nonrepresentation thesis in conjunction with certain plausible assumptions implies that the acceptance of a moral sentence cannot be belief in a moral proposition expressed, it implies as well that the utterance of the moral sentence cannot be the assertion of a moral proposition expressed. Specifically, the nonrepresentation thesis in conjunction with compositionality implies that the content of a moral sentence does not consist in its expressing a moral proposition. However, if assertion is a relation between a speaker and a proposition, the utterance of a moral sentence cannot be the assertion of a moral proposition expressed, for it expresses none. Specifically, the nonfactualist is committed to the following:

> *The Nonassertion Thesis*
> In uttering a moral sentence S, competent speakers who understand S do not assert a moral proposition expressed by S.

Though advanced mainly in moral philosophy, nonfactualist theses have been advanced elsewhere as well. In the philosophy of mathematics, for example, there is a traditional interpretation of Wittgenstein where the formulas of pure arithmetic do not express mathematical propositions (propositions that represent the existence, properties, and relations of mathematical objects) but rather are prescriptions for the use of number words in counting (see e.g. Gasking, 1964). Thus, in uttering the sentence '$2 + 2 = 4$,' competent speakers are merely prescribing a meta-linguistic norm:

> If two disjoint groups are counted such that '2' applies to each, then if one counts them together one should apply '4' to them.

Just as the moral nonfactualist denies that moral sentences express moral propositions, and hence represent putative moral

facts, so the mathematical nonfactualist denies that mathematical sentences express mathematical propositions, and hence represent putative mathematical facts.

Notice that the mathematical nonfactualist, unlike the moral nonfactualist, is concerned less with mathematical predicates than with mathematical singular terms and quantifiers. The mathematical nonfactualist denies that competent speakers' use of mathematical language carries with it a commitment to the existence of mathematical objects, whereas the moral nonfactualist denies that competent speakers' use of moral language carries with it a commitment to the existence of moral properties. A fully general characterization of nonfactualism, then, one appropriate to the moral and mathematical cases, will have to abstract from the moral nonfactualist's specific semantic claims about predicates. The general idea in each of these cases is that the target sentences are not understood as expressing propositions that represent the putative subject matter. So, just as moral sentences are not understood as expressing distinctively moral propositions, mathematical sentences are not understood as expressing distinctively mathematical propositions. With this in mind, we can characterize nonfactualism, more generally, as the following claim:

> *Nonfactualism*
> The sentences in the target class do not express propositions that represent the putative subject matter.

As nonfactualism is an alternative to moral realism, the moral realist is committed to precisely what the nonfactualist denies: that moral sentences express moral propositions, and hence are representations of putative moral facts.

According to moral realism, however, it is not enough that the central commitments of morality be propositional and hence aspire to moral truth: they must also be true, or at least not wildly mistaken. Moral realism is thus opposed to the conviction

that morality involves some fundamental mistake, some false presupposition about the contents of the world. John Mackie's (1977) error theory exemplifies this alternative to realism. Against the nonfactualist, Mackie contends that moral sentences express moral propositions, and hence are genuine representations of putative moral facts. Nevertheless, he believes that the facts they purport to represent are 'queer,' or would be if there were any, and best are not believed in. Mackie thinks that moral sentences purport to represent facts that are at once objective and essentially connected to the will—in the sense that forming a moral belief provides an individual with a motivation to act as a matter of necessity. But how could this be? If the moral order is objective, then it is independent of us. But if moral facts are independent of us, how could there be a necessary connection between what is right and what we ought to do? Our ordinary moral commitments involve a tension if not an outright contradiction—they seem to place inconsistent demands on what moral reality would have to be like in order for our moral beliefs to be true. Thus, Mackie believes that morality rests on a mistake, and that our moral acceptance and utterance involves us in widespread and systematic error.

The error theorist, like the moral realist, maintains that moral sentences express moral propositions. Moreover, the error theorist, like the moral realist, maintains that the acceptance of a moral sentence (in moral practice as it actually stands) involves belief in the moral proposition expressed. The error theorist, however, differs from the moral realist in further maintaining that we are in error in believing the moral propositions expressed by the moral sentences that we in fact accept, and hence we should not believe them. According to Mackie, moral properties are uninstantiated, and hence moral propositions are systematically false. But it is partly constitutive of belief that we should believe only true propositions. Insofar as the acceptance of a moral sentence involves belief in the moral proposition

expressed, we should not accept the moral sentences that we in fact accept.

Notice that the error theorist claims that moral propositions are systematically false. He does not (or, at least, should not) claim that all moral propositions are false. Consider the proposition that lying is not right. According to the error theorist, the property of rightness is uninstantiated. So lying does not instantiate the property of rightness. So the proposition that lying is not right is true. So even the error theorist must admit that there are true moral propositions. Perhaps the error theorist should be understood as claiming that all *positive attributions* of moral properties are false. Unfortunately, there is no principled way of telling which predications are positive attributions. Consider the following:

X is mortal.
X is immortal.
X is not mortal.
X is not immortal.

Which of these predications are positive attributions and which are negative? There is no saying, and this undermines the thought that the error theory should be formulated in terms of the falsity of positive attributions of moral properties. To accommodate this complexity, I have characterized the error theorist's distinctive commitment as the systematic falsity of moral propositions. 'Systematic' is, admittedly, something of a weasel word in this context, but the obvious intent of the characterization should be clear.

Again, this species of irrealism is not peculiar to moral philosophy. There is an analogous position in the philosophy of mathematics. Field (1980, 1989) denies that there are any abstract objects—objects that do not participate in the causally integrated system of spatiotemporal events. However, Field believes that our mathematical theories express propositions that would

commit one, if believed, to the existence of abstract objects—specifically, numbers, functions, and the like. Thus, according to Field, mathematical sentences express propositions that are systematically false. Not only is the error-theoretic alternative to realism not peculiar to moral philosophy, neither is it a peculiarly philosophical position. A more familiar form of error theory is atheism: the belief that the mistaken supposition that God exists discredits both theological discourse and the religious practice in which it is embedded.

The error theorist claims that moral propositions are systematically false and hence that we should not believe them. One might object that it is one thing to ascribe systematic error to the pattern of acceptance involved in actual moral practice and quite another to claim that we should not accept the moral claims that we in fact accept. After all, these claims are conceptually distinct. Moral acceptance might be moral belief, and such beliefs might be systematically false, but it might not follow that we should abandon those beliefs or suspend judgment concerning them. It is just barely conceivable that it is rationally permissible to continue to believe once we accept that error. Perhaps it is psychologically impossible for us to abandon our moral beliefs even in full recognition of the error they embody. Perhaps one can be an error theorist in the seminar room, but moral belief soon asserts itself when in the company of one's fellows—it might then be rationally permissible to continue to believe. Or perhaps the best thing to do is remain silent and try to forget, thereby ensuring that everyone continues to believe because of the disastrous social dislocation that would otherwise ensue. Just because moral belief involves some fundamental error, it might not follow that we ought to abandon moral belief once we accept that error: it might be rationally permissible to believe on the grounds of psychological impossibility, or on pragmatic grounds, or on some other grounds. But if that is the case, then it is not, after all, constitutive of belief, even in part, that we should

believe only true propositions, and hence it is a mistake to say that the error theorist is committed to claiming that we should not believe moral propositions, because of their systematic falsity.

One could grant, if one were so inclined, that continuing to believe might be rationally permissible despite recognizing the error involved, but this is perfectly consistent with the view that belief is essentially truth-normed—that it is partly constitutive of belief that one should believe only true propositions. There are two ways in which this norm might be understood. It might be understood as a standard of criticism in terms of which beliefs are evaluated, or it might be understood as a guide to belief-fixation. As a standard of criticism, the norm is used to evaluate a belief. As a guide to belief-fixation, it determines whether it is rationally permissible for a person to adopt that belief. These two notions are closely related and can often coincide. An epistemic norm can at once be a standard of criticism and a guide to belief-fixation. Indeed, the way in which a belief may be positively evaluated might be grounds for adopting that belief. But the examples of the previous paragraph reveal that these notions can come apart. The claim that belief is essentially truth-normed should be understood as a claim about a standard of criticism partly constitutive of belief: it is part of the nature of belief that it is a state that can be positively evaluated as true or negatively evaluated as false. After all, there is something manifestly wrong with a false belief. But it doesn't follow from this that it is rationally permissible to believe only true propositions. The epistemic value of truth might be outweighed in a given circumstance by some nonepistemic value. In a context where serious social dislocation would ensue if the falsity of a moral doctrine were widely appreciated, the positive value of true belief might be an insufficient reason not to undergo an amnesia-inducing course of treatment. The objection to the norm of truth mistakes a standard of criticism essential to belief for a guide to belief fixation. If moral propositions are systematically

false, one should not believe them according to a standard of evaluation partly constitutive of belief—whether or not one should believe them by some other standard relevant to guiding belief in the given circumstance.

The objection we have been considering began by distinguishing the claim that a range of beliefs are error-laden from the claim that one should abandon the beliefs recognized as error-laden. Given that an attribution of error does not entail that one should abandon the relevant belief, the objection continued, the error theory should be formulated in terms of the former and not the latter notion. Indeed, this argument, whatever its merits, is an argument for a standard formulation of the error theory. The error theory is standardly formulated in explicitly semantic terms:

> *Error Theory (Standard Formulation)*
> The sentences in the target class express propositions that represent the putative subject matter but are systematically false.

Given the standard formulation, not only must a realist regard the target sentences as expressing propositions that represent the intended subject matter, but he must also regard the propositions expressed by the accepted sentences as largely true (or at least not wildly mistaken).

However, there is independent reason to believe that the standard formulation is too narrow. Consider, for example, an agnostic about the existence of God. Such a person is, of course, no theological realist. He does not accept the central claims of theology. Indeed, he suspends judgment concerning them. However, it is also clear that the agnostic is not a theological nonfactualist—he believes that theological sentences express propositions that posit the existence of a deity. Indeed, agnosticism is a coherent epistemic stance only if a nonfactualist semantics is unavailable for theological discourse. The agnostic

maintains that theological propositions are true only if God exists, but that the available evidence justifies neither the belief in God nor the denial that God exists. However, if theological sentences do not express propositions that represent a distinctively theological subject matter, then there is nothing for the agnostic to suspend judgment about, and hence no obstacle to his acceptance of them. Notice that both Mackie and the theological agnostic decline to believe the propositions expressed by the sentences that most competent speakers accept. It is their declining to believe propositions expressed by accepted sentences that is common to Mackie-style error theorists and agnostics. The error for Mackie is believing a false proposition, whereas the error for the agnostic is believing an unjustified proposition. If we are to make room for agnosticism in our taxonomy, then we should generalize the standard formulation of the error theory as follows:

> *Error Theory (Revised Formulation)*
> Competent speakers should not believe propositions expressed by the target sentences that they accept either because they are false or because they are unjustified.

As the error theory is an alternative to moral realism, the moral realist is committed to precisely what the error theorist denies: at least some of the central moral sentences that we accept express (at least approximately) true propositions that we are justified in believing.

On the standard conception of these issues, the conceptual terrain can be exhaustively represented as in Figure 1.

The Inadequacy of the Standard Conception

Unfortunately, the standard conception is inadequate or, at the very least, incomplete. It is a necessary condition for being a

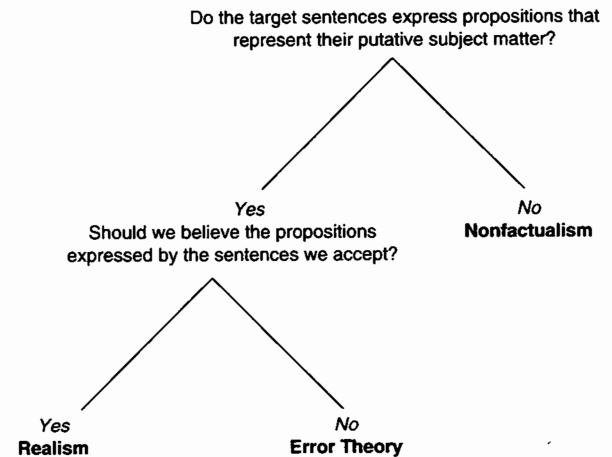

Figure 1

moral realist that the acceptance of a moral sentence is belief in the moral proposition expressed. We have seen that, given the assumption that belief is a relation to a proposition, the moral nonfactualist's commitment to the nonrepresentation thesis precludes him from construing acceptance as belief in a moral proposition expressed. However, while nonfactualism implies this denial, the converse implications fail.[9] Specifically, it is possible that moral sentences express moral propositions, and that the acceptance of a moral sentence is some attitude other than belief in the moral proposition expressed.[10] To be a realist, then, not only must the target sentences express propositions that represent the intended subject matter, not only must they express true propositions that we are justified in accepting, but our acceptance of them must be belief about how things stand in the relevant domain.

While it is indeed a necessary condition on sentences purporting to represent the world that they express propositions and, hence, be truth-evaluable, it is not sufficient. It is not enough that the target sentences express propositions that represent the putative subject matter. Competent speakers who understand

them must also put forward the target sentences as true—their utterance must normally assert the proposition expressed and their acceptance must be belief in that proposition. Contrast genuine assertions with the *faux* assertions of fictional discourse. In *Moby Dick* Melville writes:

> It is not probable that this monomania in him took its instant rise at the precise time of his bodily dismemberment. Then, in darting at the monster, knife in hand, he had but given loose to a sudden, passionate, corporeal animosity; and when he received the stroke that tore him, he probably felt the agonizing bodily laceration, but nothing more. Yet, when by this collision forced to turn towards home, and for long months of days and weeks, Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock, rounding in mid winter that dreary, howling Patagonian Cape; then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing made him mad. (Melville, 1998: 165)

The passage describes the onslaught of Ahab's madness in the aftermath of his initial encounter with the White Whale. Whatever point there was to writing this, Melville is certainly not reporting the truth of some historical episode. The represented events have not transpired—a fact that is at least tacitly understood by both Melville and his reader. Melville literally asserts nothing about Ahab's madness, and the witting participants in the fiction literally believe nothing about Ahab. In a fictional context, the utterance or inscription of a sentence is not the assertion of the proposition expressed, and the acceptance of a sentence is not belief in the proposition expressed. Realism is thus opposed to fictionalism. "Fictionalism is roughly the view that the target sentences, though they may express propositions that represent the putative subject matter, are, in fact, only representations that are somehow good or interesting or useful independently of their truth-value."

In the philosophy of science, van Fraassen's (1980) constructive empiricism exemplifies this alternative to realism. Constructive empiricism is usefully contrasted with operationalism. According to operationalism, the theoretical sentences of science do not express propositions that represent the unobservable structure of nature, but only the observable states of measuring devices. Thus, according to the operationalist, the meaning of the theoretical sentence 'There is a proton in the cloud chamber' does not involve reference to an unobservable entity, a proton; rather, it represents only that there is a vapor trail visible in the cloud chamber.

The constructive empiricist and the scientific realist are united in their opposition to operationalism—they each maintain that theoretical sentences express propositions that represent unobservable structures. However, the constructive empiricist maintains against the realist that the truth-value of a theory is irrelevant to its acceptability from the standpoint of science. The aim of science, according to constructive empiricism, is not truth but empirical adequacy—the representation of observable regularities. Scientific theories may posit the existence of unobservable entities, but an acceptable scientific theory may misrepresent unobservable matters of fact, so long as it is a reliable guide to observable phenomena. Thus, the constructive empiricist maintains that, even though the operationalist provides the wrong account of the meaning of theoretical sentences, he is nevertheless right in denying that the acceptance of a theoretical sentence involves belief in a theoretical proposition expressed.

According to constructive empiricism, then, the acceptance of a scientific theory is not belief in the theoretical proposition expressed. The constructive empiricist believes only that theory has a certain property, empirical adequacy. However, theory acceptance involves more than just the belief in its empirical adequacy. Acceptance has, as well, a significant practical component. Specifically, in accepting a scientific theory, the constructive empiricist intends to deploy that theory in the conduct of science, i.e. in experimental design, technological applications, the framing of explanations, and so on. Thus, according to constructive empiricism:

> In accepting a theory T, competent speakers who understand T do not believe the theoretical proposition expressed. In accepting T, competent speakers believe only that the theory is empirically adequate and they intend to deploy that theory in the conduct of science.

Moreover, the epistemic policy of the constructive empiricist is reflected in his linguistic behavior. In seeming to assert a theory, the constructive empiricist merely asserts that it is empirically adequate and conveys his intention to deploy that theory in the conduct of science. In seeming to assert a theory that he declines to believe, the constructive empiricist is not being insincere. He is neither joking, nor lying, nor being sarcastic. This suggests that, in uttering a theory, he is not asserting the theoretical proposition expressed but is performing some distinct linguistic action.

To see this, consider the following. When a competent speaker utters a sentence, he normally asserts the proposition expressed. Moreover, in asserting a proposition, a competent speaker normally conveys to his audience that he believes the asserted proposition. If, however, it is evident, in the given circumstances, that the speaker does not in fact believe the proposition that he asserts, then he is susceptible to the charge of insincerity. Moreover, Searle (1969) has plausibly claimed that speech acts can be individuated by the attitude normally conveyed by their sincere performance. If Searle is right about the individuation of speech acts, then we can reason as follows. If an utterance is an assertion, then its sincere performance normally conveys belief in the proposition expressed. The sincere utterances of the constructive empiricist do not normally convey belief in the theoretical proposition expressed. Thus, the sincere utterances of the constructive empiricist must perform some linguistic action distinct from the assertion of the theoretical proposition expressed. Rosen (1990, 1992, 1993, 1994) has usefully described such linguistic actions as 'quasi-assertions.'

The theoretical utterances of the constructive empiricist are quasi-assertions, since they are not the assertion of the theoretical propositions expressed by the uttered sentences. There are two ways in which quasi-assertions can fail to be an assertion of the proposition expressed. Consider the following utterances:

> Edgar likes the music of Ornette Coleman.
>
> Does Edgar like the music of Ornette Coleman?

These utterances are distinct linguistic actions in the sense that they are distinct illocutionary acts. Whereas the former is an assertion, the latter is a question. Now consider the following utterances:

> Edgar likes the music of Ornette Coleman.
>
> Edgar dislikes the music of Wynton Marsalis.

These utterances are distinct linguistic actions, not in the sense that they are distinct illocutionary acts. Each is an assertion. Rather, these utterances are distinct linguistic actions in the sense that they assert distinct propositions. Whereas the former asserts the proposition that Edgar likes the music of Ornette Coleman, the latter asserts that Edgar dislikes the music of Wynton Marsalis. The quasi-assertoric utterances of the constructive empiricist can be distinct from the assertion of the theoretical propositions expressed, in two corresponding ways. A quasi-assertion might not be the assertion of a theoretical proposition either in the sense that it is an illocutionary act distinct from assertion; or in the sense that it is the assertion of some non-theoretical proposition. For present purposes, describing an utterance as a quasi-assertion is just the denial that it is the assertion of a proposition that represents the putative subject matter. Quasi-assertoric utterances might or might not be illocutionary acts distinct from assertion.

However quasi-assertion is to be understood, the epistemic policy endorsed by the constructive empiricist stands to sincere quasi-assertion as belief stands to sincere assertion. On the one hand, in sincerely asserting a theoretical sentence, the realist asserts the theoretical proposition expressed and so conveys his belief in that proposition; on the other hand, in sincerely quasi-asserting a theoretical sentence, the constructive empiricist merely asserts that it is empirically adequate and conveys his intention to deploy that theory in the conduct of science. In general, the fictionalist maintains that the sentences in the target class express propositions that represent the putative subject matter; but he maintains, as well, that their acceptance is not belief, and that their utterance is not assertion:

> *Fictionalism*
> The sentences in the target class express propositions that represent the putative subject matter. However, in accepting a sentence S in the target class, competent speakers who understand S do not believe the proposition expressed. Furthermore, in uttering S, competent speakers who understand S do not assert the proposition expressed; rather, they are performing the distinct linguistic action of quasi-assertion. Whereas sincere assertion normally conveys belief in the proposition expressed, sincere quasi-assertion does not.

Consideration of fictionalism clarifies the commitments of realism. Not only must the target sentences express propositions that represent the putative subject matter, not only must we be justified in accepting at least most of the target sentences that we in fact accept, but our acceptance of them must be belief in the propositions that they express. The conceptual terrain can be more accurately represented as in Figure 2.

Thus, three separable commitments are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for being a moral realist:

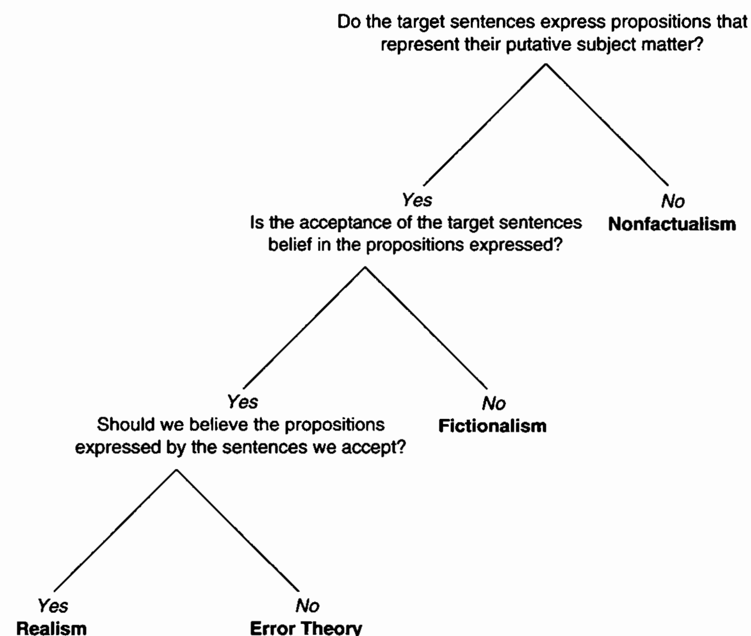

Figure 2

1. Moral sentences express moral propositions (propositions that attribute moral properties to things).
2. The acceptance of moral sentences is a belief in the moral propositions expressed.
3. Competent speakers are justified in accepting at least most of the moral sentences that they in fact accept.

One might object to the present taxonomy on the grounds that it leaves out one traditionally recognized form of moral irrealism. Many regard moral relativism, even a cognitivist moral relativism, as a form of irrealism. If moral relativism is a form of moral irrealism, then our taxonomy is incomplete and potentially misconceived. Correctly assessing this objection turns on locating the source of the intuition that moral relativism is a form of irrealism. According to the present framework, moral

relativism is, instead, a form of moral realism coupled with a substantive claim about the nature of moral facts: There are moral facts—they are just relational. Compare the following. There are facts about motion—they are just relational facts. An object is in motion only relative to a spatiotemporal framework, and, the moral relativist maintains that an action is wrong only relative to a moral framework. The sense that moral relativism is not a form of moral realism is due to a substantive disagreement about the nature of moral facts. While moral realists agree about the existence of moral facts, they nevertheless disagree about their nature. Thus, moral realists have maintained that moral facts are facts about God's commands, human welfare, nonnatural states of affairs, and so on. The conviction that moral relativism is a form of moral irrealism is due entirely to a substantive disagreement about the nature of moral facts. According to the moral absolutist, moral facts, if there are any, are not relational the way the moral relativist claims them to be. According to moral absolutism, the most that could be claimed on behalf of moral relativism is that it correctly describes the facts actually tracked by our moral beliefs. From the absolutist perspective, if moral beliefs track only relational facts, then moral beliefs are systematically false. However, this is an error theory and is accommodated as such in the present framework.

Noncognitivism without Nonfactualism

Fictionalism is a kind of irrealism distinct from nonfactualism. Yet both the nonfactualist and the fictionalist accept the noncognitive thesis—the claim that the acceptance of a moral sentence consists wholly in attitudes other than belief in a moral proposition.

Consider the dilemma we faced at the end of the last chapter. We were impressed with the arguments for noncognitivism but were also impressed with the theoretical difficulties facing an

expressivist nonfactualism. We appeared to be in the uncomfortable position of choosing between a plausible semantics wedded to an implausible cognitivism and an implausible semantics wedded to a plausible noncognitivism. The apparent dilemma, however, is merely apparent—for a noncognitivist fictionalism eschews the semantics reckoned to be implausible. Fictionalism is noncognitivism without nonfactualism. Indeed, what distinguishes nonfactualism and fictionalism, on the one hand, from the error theory and realism, on the other, is precisely the cognitive status of acceptance. Whereas the nonfactualist and the fictionalist deny that acceptance is belief in a moral proposition, the error theorist and the realist maintain that it is (though they differ about whether such belief is justified). To designate nonfactualism as noncognitivism is to elide the difference between nonfactualism and fictionalism. Moreover, it is to presuppose illicitly that the nonrepresentational function of moral acceptance requires a nonrepresentational content for the accepted moral sentence.

The way out of our dilemma was anticipated by Alasdair MacIntyre:

> Clearly... when one utters a moral judgment, such as 'This is right' or 'This is good', it does not mean the same as 'I approve of this; do so as well' or 'Hurrah for this!' or any of the other attempts at equivalence suggested by the emotive theorists; but even if the meaning of such sentences were quite other than emotive theorists supposed, it might be plausibly claimed, if the evidence was adequate, that in using such sentences to *say* whatever they mean, the agent was in fact *doing* nothing other than expressing his feelings or attitudes and attempting to influence the feelings and attitudes of others. (MacIntyre, 1981: 13–14)

MacIntyre observes that, even if emotivism provided the wrong account of the content of moral sentences, emotivism might still provide the right account of their use. Moral discourse may be fully representational—moral sentences may express