

ESSAYS IN  
QUASI-REALISM

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comes out oddly. Necessitation gives us the alternative posed in the first part of this essay, that there is some ground  $G^*$  such that, necessarily, if anything is  $G^*$ , it is  $F$ . It may be, as I hint in the essay, that this is a better notion to work with, and if so my problem disappears. But something in the texture of ethics is left out. For it is not evidently 'constitutive of competence' to recognize any instance of the conditional 'if anything is  $G^*$ , it is  $F$ ' as necessary. It is not even clear that the competent must recognize that *there are* instances of such necessities. Yet supervenience (like universalizability) latched onto something quite obvious about ethics. This obvious thing seemed better captured by weak supervenience than by necessitation.

What this leaves us, however, is a rival explanation to mine. The analytic claim can be put weakly: it is entirely intraworld, as in ( $S_2$ ) (p. 137), and this befits a condition on competent moralizing—which, after all, concerns what is true in this world rather than what might be true in exotic possible worlds. But then the proposition that there are no mixed worlds need not be analytic: it is no doubt true, and is recognized as true by the most capable people, such as philosophers. But the question of why philosophers think it true is answered another way: it is because we philosophers believe that there are instances of the necessitation, and that is where the authority behind the ban lies. Because if there cannot be things that are  $G^*$  and not  $F$ , then there cannot be worlds in which some  $G^*$  things are and others are not  $F$ .

If that is right, my original puzzle gets a solution without invoking any projective theory. But the explanatory demand must turn to the necessities, and the realist must say why, for her, they do not amount to danglers best accepted in a spirit of natural piety. I know why I accept them, if I can find my ethical imagination simply baffled at trying to contemplate how not to approve or disapprove of things with particular natural properties. But the realist still seems left drawing a blank cheque on the synthetic *a priori*, which strikes me as worse, especially when, far from having examples of these necessities, we are so hard pressed to find examples where the unmodal conditionals are even true.

## 8

# Errors and the Phenomenology of Value

Oh Is there not one maiden breast  
That does not feel the moral beauty  
Of making worldly interest  
Subordinate to sense of duty?

W. S. Gilbert

*The Pirates of Penzance*

### I

John Mackie described himself as a moral sceptic, and he described his theory of ethics as an error theory. The ordinary user of moral language wants to claim something that, according to Mackie, cannot be claimed without error: he wants to claim 'something that involves a call for action or for the refraining from action, and one that is absolute, not contingent upon any desire or preference or policy or choice, his own or anyone else's' (p. 33).<sup>1</sup> Again, someone in moral perplexity may want to know whether a course of action is wrong 'in itself' (p. 34), and 'something like this is the everyday objectivist concept', which is erroneous. For, according to Mackie, ordinary judgements and perplexities include an assumption that there are objective values, in a sense in which he denies that there are. This assumption is ingrained enough to count as part of the meaning of ordinary moral terms, but it is false.

Mackie did not draw quite the consequences one might have expected from this position. If a vocabulary embodies an error, then it would be better if it were replaced by one that avoids the error. Slightly more accurately, if a vocabulary embodies an error *in some use*, it would be better if either it, or a replacement vocabulary, were used differently. We could better describe this by saying that our old, infected moral concepts or ways of thought should be replaced by ones that serve our legitimate needs but avoid the mistake. Yet Mackie does not say what such a way of thought would look like, and how it would differ in order to show its innocence of the old error. On the contrary, in the second part of the book he is quite happy to go on to express a large number of straightforward moral views about the good life, about whether it is

1. Unless otherwise stated, page references are to *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).

permissible to commit suicide or abortion, and so on. All these are expressed in the old, supposedly infected, vocabulary. Mackie does, of course, notice the problem. He explicitly asks (p. 49) whether his error theory rules out all first-order ethics, and when he returns to the question (p. 105) there is a real threat that ideally there would be no such activity as first-order moralizing. The threat is averted, supposedly, only by introducing the general Humean theme about the social function of morality: 'Morality is not to be discovered but to be made: we have to decide what moral views to adopt, what moral stands to take' (p. 106). Yet from the standpoint of an error theory, it is quite extraordinary that we should have to do any such thing. Why should we have to choose to fall into error? Surely it would be better if we avoided *moral* (erroneous) views altogether and contented ourselves with some lesser, purged commitments that can be held without making metaphysical mistakes. Let us call these 'shmoral' views, and a vocabulary that expresses them a 'shmoral vocabulary.' Then the puzzle is why, in the light of the error theory, Mackie did not at least indicate how a shmoral vocabulary would look, and why he did not himself go on only to shmoralize, not to moralize. And in my view this is enough of a puzzle to cast doubt back on to the original diagnosis of error. In other words, it would obviously have been a silly thing to do, to try to substitute some allegedly hygienic set of concepts for moral ones; but that in itself suggests that no error can be incorporated in mere use of those concepts.

In reply to this it may be said that appearances notwithstanding, Mackie did actually go on only to shmoralize. He rids himself of the error but uses the Humean reconstruction of practical needs and practical reasoning to advocate various shmoral views. These are only accidentally expressed in a vocabulary that looks like that of ordinary moralists: the identical shape of the words does not signify identical concepts, although there is sufficient overlap in function between moralizing and shmoralizing to justify retention of the same words. This is certainly possible. But it leaves an acute problem of identifying just where shmoralizing differs from moralizing: what shows us whether Mackie is moralizing or shmoralizing? Does it determine the issue that he will say things like 'there is no objective prescriptivity built into the fabric of the world'? Troubles multiply. First, it is clear that not all moralists will deny this (many moralists will not even understand it). Second, it seems gratuitous to infer that there are two different activities from the fact that there are two or more different theories about the nature of the activity. It would be much more natural to say that Hume and Mackie moralize, just as ordinary people do, but with a developed and different theory about what it is that they are doing. The error theory then shrinks to the claim that most ordinary moralists have a bad theory, or at least no very good theory, about what it is to moralize, and in particular that they falsely imagine a kind of objectivity for values, obligations, and so on. This may be true, but it does not follow that the error infects the practice of moralizing, nor the concepts used in ways defined by that practice.

Here, however, a fairly blanket holism can be introduced to rescue Mackie, or at least to urge that it is profitless to oppose him. Our theories infect our meanings; so a different theory about the nature of the activity of

moralizing will yield a different meaning for the terms with which we do it; hence Mackie is right that the ordinary meanings do embody error. It becomes profitless to split things in two, so that on the one hand there is the error-free practice, and on the other hand a multiplicity of possibly erroneous theories about its nature. Indeed, the split appeals no more than the despised analytic-synthetic distinction, and if the opponents of an error theory need that, they will gain few supporters.

It is important, and not just to this philosophical issue, to see that this defence fails. To answer it, distinguish between the activity or practice of moralizing and the 'full meaning' of moral terms, where this is determined as the holist wishes, by both the practice and whatever theory the subjects hold about the nature of their practice. Then the holist may have the thesis about 'full meaning', with the consequence that Hume and Mackie may give a different full meaning to their terms, simply through having a different theory of their point and purpose. But it will not follow that their practice will differ from that of other people. Hence, it will not follow that other people's practice embodies error. For it is in principle possible that we should observe the practice of some subjects as closely as we wish, and know as much as there is to know about their ways of thinking, commending, approving, deliberating, worrying, and so on, yet be unable to tell from all that which theory they hold. The practice could be clipped on to either metaphysic. The holist will have it that this alters meanings throughout. But we can give him that, yet still maintain that no difference is discernible in the practice, and therefore that no error is embodied in the practice of those who hold the wrong theory. To use a close analogy, there are different theories about the nature of arithmetical concepts. Hence a holist may claim that a subject will give a different total meaning to numerals depending on which theory he accepts, and this difference will apply just as much when the subject is counting as when he is doing metamathematics. All that may be true, yet it would not follow that any practice of counting embodies error. That would be so only if one could tell just by observing it which of the competing metamathematical theories the subject accepts. In the arithmetical case this would not be true. Similarly, I maintain, in the moral case one ought not to be able to tell from the way in which someone conducts the activity of moralizing whether he has committed the 'objectivist' mistake or not; hence any such mistake is better thought of as accidental to the practice.

Obviously there is an answer to this. It is that the objectivist error does so permeate the practice that you can tell, from the way people moralize, that they are in its grip. It is as if a strict finitist theory of, say, arithmetic led someone to deny that you could count certain sets that others can happily enumerate. But which features of the practice show this? They are to be features that lie beyond the scope of what I have called 'quasi-realism': the enterprise of showing how much of the apparently 'realist' appearance of ordinary moral thought is explicable and justifiable on an anti-realist picture.<sup>2</sup>

2. 'Rule Following and Moral Realism', in *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, ed. S. Holtzman and S. Leich (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), and chapter 6 of *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

According to me, quasi-realism is almost entirely successful, and I do not think John Mackie provided reasons for thinking otherwise. In other words, proper shmoralizing is proper moralizing.

## II

So far, I have tried to show that there is something fishy about holding an error theory yet continuing to moralize, and I have argued that the 'holistic' or Quinean defence of such a position would fail. The argument can now move in different directions. Let us call the Humean picture of the nature of morality, and of the metaphysics of the issue, projectivism. On this view we have sentiments and other reactions caused by natural features of things, and we 'gild or stain' the world by describing it as if it contained features answering to these sentiments, in the way that the niceness of an ice cream answers to the pleasure it gives us. Then we could say that Mackie is right about the metaphysical issue, and ought to have been more thoroughgoing in replacing moral terms and concepts by different ones—in other words, that the projectivist in ethics should conduct his practical reasoning in a different way: his shmoralizing would not be moralizing. Let us call this a revisionist projectivism. By contrast, there is the quasi-realist identification of shmoralizing with moralizing. In effect, the skirmishes in part I of this essay urge that quasi-realism be taken seriously, because even projectivists are going to find themselves indulging in a practice that is apparently identical with moralizing. Of course, in opposition to each of these views, there is the realist charge that projectivism is false in any case; finally there is the 'quietist' view, urged by Professor Hare, for instance, that no real issue can be built around the objectivity or otherwise of moral values.

If we are to say that the practices characteristic of moralizing are or are not available to a projectivist, we should be careful to identify the practices at issue. Elsewhere I try to show how the realist-seeming grammar of moral discourse can be explained on that metaphysic.<sup>3</sup> This involves, for instance, addressing the Geach-Frege problem of accounting for the unasserted occurrence of sentences using moral terms, explaining the propositional form that we give to moral utterances, explaining why we may legitimately worry whether one of our moral views is correct and hence explaining the role of a concept of truth in ethics, and so on. If this work is successful, there is no way of arguing that the grammar of moral discourse either refutes projectivism or forces it to take a revisionist course. This means, of course, that Mackie cannot properly use these aspects of our practice in support of the error theory. And sometimes he does just this. For instance, he cites Russell's feeling that on a particular moral issue (opposition to the introduction of bull-fighting into England) one does not just express a desire that the thing should not happen, but one does so while feeling that one's desires on such a matter

3. See also essay 10.

are right.<sup>4</sup> Mackie thinks that this is a claim to objectivity, and as such erroneous. The quasi-realist will see it instead as a proper, necessary expression of an attitude toward our own attitudes. It is not something that should be wrenched out of our moral psychology; it is something we need to cultivate to the right degree and in the right places to avoid the (moral) defect of indifference to things that merit passion. This actually illustrates a central quasi-realist tactic: what seems like a thought that embodies a particular second-order metaphysic of morals is seen instead as a kind of thought that expresses a first-order attitude or need. Perhaps the nicest example comes from counterfactuals that seem to assert an anti-projectivist mind-independence of moral facts: 'even if we had approved of it or enjoyed it or desired to do it, bear-baiting would still have been wrong' can sound like a second-order realist commitment directly in opposition to projectivism. But in fact, on the construal of indirect contexts that I offer, it comes out as a perfectly sensible first-order commitment to the effect that it is not our enjoyments or approvals to which you should look in discovering whether bear-baiting is wrong (it is at least mainly the effect on the bear).

For the rest of this essay I shall suppose that this aspect of quasi-realism is successful. So projectivism can accommodate the propositional grammar of ethics; it need not seek to revise that. On the contrary, properly protected by quasi-realism, projectivism supports and indeed explains this much of our ordinary moral thought. But in my experience this explanation is apt to leave a residual unease. People feel uncomfortable with the idea that this is the true explanation of our propensity to find and to respect values, obligations, duties, and rights. This unease is perhaps rather like that of nineteenth-century thinkers who found it so difficult to do ethics without God. It is located in a tension between the subjective source that projectivism gives to morality and the objective 'feel' that a properly working morality has. It is this objective feel or phenomenology that people find threatened by projectivism, and they may go on to fear the threat as one that strikes at the core of morality. We may scoff at those who thought that if God is dead, everything is permitted. But it is harder to really shake off the feeling that if duties, rights, and so forth come down to that—to the projectivist earth—then they do not have quite the power or force, the title to respect, that we were brought up to believe.

It is, I think, particularly the side of morality associated with obligation that is felt to be subject to this threat. Obligation needs to be 'peremptory and absolute', as George Eliot famously said; it often needs to be perceived as something sufficiently external to us to act as a constraint or bound on our other sentiments and desires. The chains and shackles of obligation must come from outside us. Can anything both be felt to have this power, and yet be explained as a projection of our own sentiments? The charge will be that projectivism falsifies this aspect of morality; projectivism will be unable to endorse this kind of perception of obligation, but must explain it away as a phenomenological distortion. This perception will be seen as the result of an

4. P. 34.

to give us a good idea of what it is like

error, and realist opponents of projectivism will join with revisionists to urge that it marks a point at which quasi-realism fails.<sup>5</sup> The realists will trust the phenomenology, and the revisionists will regret it. We can notice in this connection that when Mackie identifies the error of ordinary thought, he often points to the 'intrinsic' or 'absolute' to-be-done-ness that certain actions are felt to possess.<sup>6</sup> It is not just the 'intrinsic' value of happiness or pleasure, because it is less surprising that these values should receive a projective explanation. It is as if the objectivist's error is to think of certain things as obligatory in a way that has nothing to do with us, and about which we can do nothing: a way that could in principle stand opposed to the whole world of human desire and need.

Now, admittedly, it might seem from this that the error is to adopt a deontological rather than a teleological first-order morality. But surely this is wrong, for Mackie did not want the error to be purely one of adopting a defective or nonconsequentialist first-order morality. Doing that may be a natural consequence of a metaphysical mistake, but it is not in itself an 'error' intrinsic to the very nature of morality. I think instead that Mackie chose the word, and chose to concentrate upon, *obligation* because of the absolute and external 'feel' that he wanted to indicate, and that he felt was not explicable or defensible on a projective metaphysic. And if he were right, then by threatening this part of the feeling of obligation, projectivism would indeed threaten one of the most important and characteristic parts of morality. But is there any reason to believe that he is right?

The issue will look rather different, depending on whether the difficulty is supposed to concern the explanation of moral psychology, or its justification. Consider a very pure case of someone in the grip of a duty. Mabel and Fred want to marry each other. The opportunity is there, the desires are aflame, the consequences are predictably acceptable or even desirable. There is only one thought to oppose it: they have a duty to do otherwise, so it would be wrong. And this feeling that it would be wrong can wrestle with and sometimes even overcome all the rest. Isn't this mysterious? Called conscience, it used to be mysterious enough to suggest an internal voice of God standing outside the natural world of sentiments and desires. On the present line of thought, it is mysterious enough to suggest perception of an external or objective moral fact, also standing outside the natural world of sentiments and desires. Unfortunately, neither of these explanations is more than a gesture. It is trivial to point out the gaps they leave. But there is a better explanation: Fred has been brought up in a certain way, and a consequence of his upbringing is that he looks on certain courses of action with horror. He will keep his self-respect, be able to live with himself, only if he conducts his life in a particular way, and this prompts a range of feeling that is sufficiently strong to oppose immediate desire and that gains expression when he describes the conduct as 'wrong.' Whether it was a good thing that Fred was brought up like

5. See for instance the first paragraph of John McDowell's 'Values and Secondary Qualities', in *Morality and Objectivity*, ed. T. Honderich (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

6. *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) pp. 104, 115 ff.

that is a matter of judgement, but it can hardly be doubted that it is a good thing that people should sometimes feel like that, for otherwise they are more likely to do the most awful things. It is of course a brute fact about human beings that our sources of self-respect are malleable in this way, but that is a matter of common observation. Equally, it is a matter of common observation that there are cultural ways of reinforcing such feelings in elements of the population that may be in particular need of them: traditionally soldiers and girls get strong injections of honour and duty.

At the level of explanation, then, it is hard to see why there is any problem for the projectivist. Indeed, it is hard to see how there could be. For many of the ingredients of his account will be needed by any other account. For instance, his observations on the plasticity of our sensibilities, and on the various devices that lead people to respect different sets of obligations and to value different aspects of things, will simply be copied by a realist, who will need to say that our perceptions of moral facts are similarly trained and adapted. As usual, however, the extra ingredients the realist adds (the values or obligations which, in addition to normal features of things, are cognized and the respect we then feel for these cognized qualities) are pulling no explanatory weight: they just sit on top of the story that tells how our sentiments relate to natural features of things. If Fred poses a problem, then, it cannot be one of the explanation of moral psychology but must be one of justification.

If Fred is rational, can his virtue survive his own awareness of its origin and nature? If Mabel throws into her wooing a whole projective plus quasi-realist explanation of what Fred is doing when he maintains that it's wrong, and if Fred is rational, will this not destroy his resolve? Shouldn't he think something like this: that although he has been brought up to use moral categories and to think that there are moral obligations and so forth, there are none really—they are a fiction, or a useful, regulative myth: hence, forget them? Once again we are reminded of those thinkers who felt that if there were no God or no afterlife, then it would be rational to ignore the claims of morality whenever self-interest suggested it. Their anxiety was grounded on a mistake about rationality, for the altruistic or principled man is no more nor less rational than the self-interested—he is just different in ways that affect his happiness and the happiness of communities composed of people like him. Rationality in itself does not force one sensibility or another on us just because we have some belief about the origin of that sensibility. This is obvious if we take a parallel: Mabel may be tempted to laugh at Fred's moustache; Fred may seek to dissuade her by telling a projectivist story about the judgement that something is funny, but there is no reason for him to succeed. Finding things very funny is perfectly compatible with believing that it is a tendency to laugh which we project on the world when we do so. It is not uniquely rational to try to smother our sense of humour because of this belief about its nature. So Mabel is not irrational if she accepts Fred's theory of laughter and continues to laugh at his moustache, and by analogy he may be perfectly rational to accept the projectivist account of morality, and to maintain his resolve just as forcefully as before.

EXPLAN.  
ok!  
!!!  
realist.  
advoc.  
moral  
values!

I say that he may be rational to do this. But it is possible that he is not, for an explanation of the origin of a sentiment can diminish its force. For example, psychologists sometimes connect humour with sublimated or concealed aggression. Believing this explanation, and being ashamed of aggressive instincts, it would be rational for me to find fewer and fewer things funny. The explanation *coupled with* other values undermines the sentiment. Similarly, a morality might contain values whose effect, coupled with a projective explanation, is to diminish a subject's respect for some obligations. For example, a child may be brought up to believe that things really matter only in so far as God cares about them; learning not to think of conscience as the voice of God would couple with this attitude to diminish the force with which the child feels obligations. Or someone might suppose that only commitments that describe the constitution of the real world have any importance and that all others are better ignored: a projective explanation of morality may then diminish the attention that person is prepared to pay to it.<sup>7</sup> This latter attitude is actually quite common. For example, when people feel uncomfortable about trying to impose a morality on other people, what troubles them is the idea that moral commitments lack real, objective truth values certified by an independent reality. The hope of rehabilitating morality by making it an object of perception or reason, and thereby giving it a better claim on our attention, bears witness to the same idea. In each case, however, it is not the explanation of the practice *per se* that has the sceptical consequence, it is the effect of the explanation on sensibilities that have been brought up to respect only particular kinds of thing. So when people fear that projectivism carries with it a loss of status to morality, their fear ought to be groundless, and will appear only if a defective sensibility leads them to respect the wrong things.

So far I have considered this problem only as it affects obligations. But similar remarks can be apposite in connection with values. It is not initially so surprising that we can go on valuing the good things of life while knowing that the valuing is an expression of our own subjective sentiments. This need be no more odd than that we should go on finding things funny, or painful, or worthwhile, or beautiful, although God is dead, or although we accept subjective responses as the source of these reactions. However, David Wiggins has found a problem even here for the position that he called *noncognitivism*, which shares with projectivism the Humean theme that 'ends are supplied by feeling or will, which are not conceived either as percipient or as determinants in any interesting way of perception'.<sup>8</sup> The core of the charge is, I think, that projectivism cannot coexist with the way in which we perceive values as residing in things outside ourselves. It is not entirely clear, because Wiggins associates with projectivism the repugnant (first-order) doctrine that the only things that possess any intrinsic value are human states of consciousness. But a projectivist's sensibility need not, and in my view should not, take this shape. He can admire features of things regardless of their effects on us: his first-

7. Mackie mentions this kind of psychology on p. 24.

8. 'Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life', British Academy Lecture (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

order morality need be anthropocentric no more than it need be egocentric. Remember here that a projectivist who avails himself of quasi-realism can assert those tantalizing expressions of apparent mind-independence: it is not my sentiments that make bear-baiting wrong; it is not because we disapprove of it that mindless violence is abominable; it is preferable that the world should be a beautiful place even after all consciousness of it ceases. The explanation of what we are doing when we say such things in no way impugns our right to hold them, nor the passion with which we should do so. But if we dissociate ourselves from this target, then at this point Wiggins seems to threaten projectivism no more than the attack deflected in the last paragraph. It might be that there are people who cannot 'put up with' the idea that values have a subjective source; who cannot put up with the idea that the meaning of their life and their activities is ultimately something they confer, and that even critical reflection on how best to confer them—conducts itself in the light of other sentiments that must be taken simply as given. But this will be because such people have a defect elsewhere in their sensibilities—one that has taught them that things do not matter unless they matter to God, or throughout infinity, or to a world conceived apart from any particular set of concerns or desires, or whatever. One should not adjust one's metaphysics to pander to such defects.

There is still that nagging feeling that on this metaphysic 'there are no obligations, and so on, really' (otherwise, why call the position anti-realist?). But urging this as a problem confuses two different contexts in which such a remark might occur. Protected by quasi-realism, my projectivist says the things that sound so realist to begin with—that there are real obligations and values, and that many of them are independent of us, for example. It is not the position that he says these for public consumption but denies them in his heart, so to speak. He affirms all that could ever properly be meant by saying that there are real obligations.<sup>9</sup> When the context of discussion is that of first-order commitment, he is as solid as the most virtuous moralist. It is just that the explanation of why there are obligations and the rest is not quite that of untutored common sense. It deserves to be called anti-realist because it avoids the view that when we moralize we respond to, and describe, an independent aspect of reality. Again, mathematics provides a useful model for understanding this. There are anti-realist views of what we are doing when we practise arithmetic. But they need not and should not lead to anyone wondering whether  $7 + 5$  is 'really' 12, for that would be an expression of first-order doubt that would not be a consequence of the second-order theory. Arithmeti-

9. Compare Evans on the unintelligibility of one way of thinking of colours as real ('Things Without the Mind', in *Philosophical Subjects*, ed. Z. van Straaten [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980]). I want to maintain that any genuinely anti-projective attempt to think of obligations or values as 'real' either is similarly unintelligible or marks a mistake about explanation. This is why I would deny that there is an aspect of moral phenomenology that gives morality an objective appearance that quasi-realism must regard as illusory (as McDowell claims in note 4 to 'Values and Secondary Qualities'). For there is nothing in the appearances of morality to force us to make the mistake about explanation. Obligations and so forth appear in exactly the way I would predict.

cal practice would remain as solid and certain as could be, but explained without reference to an independent mathematical reality.

### III

Thus far I have been using quasi-realism to protect the appearance of morality: to urge that there is no error in our ordinary ways of thought and our ordinary commitments and passions. This enterprise will interest a projectivist most, because it defends him against the most forceful attack he faces, which is that he cannot accommodate the rich phenomena of the moral life. But realist opponents of projectivism need to notice quasi-realism as well, since otherwise they do not know how to launch an attack on projectivism. They would not have correctly located its strengths or weaknesses. Nevertheless, they could concede that its defence is successful on these fronts, yet still maintain their hostility. They can urge that the metaphor of projection fails, or is better replaced by a comparison between our knowledge of ethics and our knowledge of other things, such as mathematics or colours. It is this latter comparison that I now wish to explore. It is not, in my view, right to suppose that there is immediately an issue between two rival theories of morality. This is partly because some of the writers I shall mention, who might seem to be offering a perceptual account of morality, are at least half-inclined to deny that they wish to offer a theory at all, although that does leave the status of some of their remarks regrettably unclear. At any rate, as I see it there are in the beginning two invitations, but they are not so much rivals as complementary to each other. The one is to explore the idea of a projection upon the world of a sentiment that we feel; the other is to explore the idea of a perception of a real property, but one that is intimately related to our own sensibilities. These mark different directions of exploration, and it should not be obvious at first sight which will prove the more profitable. I believe that at the end the first provides illumination where the second runs into obstacles, disanalogies, and an ultimate inability to say anything. I also believe that the first can explain and soothe away the fears that lead people to the second—the fear I addressed in part II, for example, that without obligations of a reality to which a person cannot aspire, everything is permitted. I shall try to make good these claims by presenting the 'perceptual' direction in the light of the writings of David Wiggins, Thomas Nagel, and John McDowell, and more recently Hilary Putnam,<sup>10</sup> but as I mentioned, I am conscious that it is not easy to extract one theory, or just one theory, from those writings. However, at least they suggest a direction of thought, and it is this direction which I want to block.

The opposition understands that projectivism is an explanatory theory that maintains that moral values are projections of sentiment because we have a

10. Wiggins, op. cit.; T. Nagel, 'Subjective and Objective', in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); J. McDowell, 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?' (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume*, 1978); H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

better explanation of moral practices if we see ourselves as responsive only to a value-free world. But according to the opposition, a number of considerations make this an insufficient basis for projectivism. Disquiet can perhaps be focused under three headings.

(1) Consider secondary properties. Colours (etc.) are real properties of objects, and this is true even if the best causal explanation of how we detect them proceeds by mentioning primary properties. Colours really exist, although the reality that contains them is not independent of the fact that there also exist human modes of perception.

(2) The thesis just put forward will appear surprising only because (i) of a prejudice that only primary properties, or the properties of some 'ultimate' scientific theory of things, are real, or (ii) we forget the truth that the world cannot be 'prised away from' our manner of conceiving it, nor from our interests and concerns when we do so. Since neither of these motives is legitimate, there is no obstacle to (1), and to using the parallel with colours to allow a reality to values and so forth.

(3) It is true that a training of a particular kind is needed to enable people properly to perceive values and so forth, but this is harmless: people need training to detect, for example, features of tunes or shades.

I do not suppose that each of the writers I have mentioned would assent to each of these. For example, although the work of Nagel is prominent in opening up the idea of a reality that is yet subject-dependent, his own work on moral motivation is much more concerned with rationality than with any analogy to the perception of secondary qualities. And Wiggins thinks that the question of the truth of moral commitments looks very different if we consider values and if we consider obligations. But I shall put questions of attribution to one side, simply taking these three themes to form the core of a perceptual model of moralizing that at least appears to be a rival to projectivism. Is it a rival, and if it is, then how are we to tell which is better?

Wiggins writes that he has 'long marvelled' at the fact that philosophers have dwelt frequently upon the difference between 'good' and 'red' or 'yellow'. I do not think he should have, unless indeed it is marvellous that philosophers should emphasize things that are banal and basic. At any rate, it is very easy to rattle off significant differences between secondary properties and those involved in value and obligation. Here are half a dozen.

(a) Moral properties supervene upon others in a way quite different from any in which secondary properties do. It is a scientific fact that secondary properties supervene upon primary properties. It may even be a metaphysical fact, at least inasmuch as it would offend deep metaphysical commitments to imagine secondary properties changing while primary properties do not. But it is not a criterion of incompetence in the ascription of secondary properties to fail to realize that they must supervene upon others. On the other hand, that moral properties supervene upon natural ones is not a scientific fact, and it is a criterion of incompetence in moralizing to fail to realize that they must do so.<sup>11</sup>

11. See also essays 6 and 7.

(b) The receptive mechanisms whereby we are acquainted with secondary properties are well-known objects of scientific study. For example, the kinds of damage to the retina or the ear or the taste buds that result in defective perception of secondary qualities can be studied. These studies are not at all similar to studies of defects of character that lead to moral blindness: these latter studies have no receptive or causal mechanisms as their topic. This is just as well, for we need to put things in a particular moral light after we are told about their *other* properties; we do not *also* have to wheel a particular sensory mechanism up against them. Connected with this, and with (a), is the thought that if our secondary-property-detecting mechanisms fail, we might expect to know that immediately: it presents itself as a loss of immediately felt phenomenal quality, just as it does when light fails or we stick cotton wool in our ears. There is no such loss when we become, say, corrupt. We cannot become corrupt overnight, and usually we cannot tell when we have done so. Indeed, it would be a hallmark of many kinds of moral blindness that this is so. The really coarse man thinks that he is perfectly in order, but that other people are too fastidious (recognizing that you have become really coarse is in this way self-refuting: the realization itself shows some residual delicacy).

(c) It is not altogether simple to characterize the 'mind-dependence' of secondary qualities. But it is plausible to say that these are relative to our perceptions of them in this way: if we were to change so that everything in the world that had appeared blue came to appear red to us, this is what it would be for the world to cease to contain blue things, and come to contain only red things. The analogy with moral qualities fails dramatically: if everyone comes to think of it as permissible to maltreat animals, this does nothing at all to make it permissible: it just means that everybody has deteriorated.<sup>12</sup>

(d) The way in which moral practices vary with the forms of life of a society is not at all similar to the way, if any, in which perceptions of secondary qualities can vary with those forms of life. Roughly, we expect such perceptions to vary in acuity depending on whether the property perceived is important to a culture. But once a predicate is located as expressing such a property, there is no prospect of finding that it has a radically different extension, whereas many things are evaluated quite differently in different groups or at different times. Similarly, apart from rare borderline cases, there is nothing in secondary quality ascription parallel to the 'essentially contested' character of many moral verdicts.

(e) It is up to a subject whether he cares about any particular secondary property in any way. If morality consisted in the perception of qualities, there would be a theoretical space for a culture that perceived the properties perfectly, but paid no attention to them. But however it is precisely fixed, the practical nature of morality is clearly intrinsic to it, and there is not this theoretical space.

(f) Evaluative predicates are typically attributive: a thing may be good *qua*

12. I stressed this in 'Rule Following and Moral Realism' in *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, ed. S. Holtzman and S. Leich (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981). McGinn concentrates upon the point in *The Subjective View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 150.

action of a commander-in-chief, but bad *qua* action of a father, just as a man may be a good burglar but a bad batsman. Secondary properties just sit there: a red tomato is a red fruit and a red object just bought at the grocer's. (Wiggins notices this asymmetry after the passage quoted.)

Of course, the extent to which these constitute disanalogies can be debated. But perhaps by way of illustrating their strength in the moral case, we can notice that sometimes they will not present such a clear picture. For example, it is very doubtful whether they apply with equal force to the perception of physical *beauty*. For at least (a), (c), (e), and (f) can be queried in this case. And this in turn connects with the sense we can have that sometimes the beauty of a thing must be perceived and cannot be told. Whereas when it cannot be told how good something was, this is always because some *other* fact about it resists communication—how happy we were, or how brave we needed to be. So, unlike John Mackie, I incline to find the projective nature of morality much better motivated than the projective theory applied to aesthetic evaluation. But applied to ethics, the cumulative effect of this considerations seems to me to be great enough that expecting a theory of moralizing to look very much like a theory of secondary quality perception appears a severe error of philosophical taste. Nevertheless, we cannot depend entirely upon this cumulative effect. For it will be retorted that mention of secondary qualities just provided an illustration of a combination, a shape of theory, that can also apply to ethics, however different the subject matter is in other respects. This is the combination or shape of theory illustrated by (1), (2), and (3). So the disqualification of secondary properties wins one battle, but it does not by itself win the war against a 'perceptual' direction.

I will now try to show that once they are properly distanced from other perceptual analogues, (1), (2) and (3) provide no theory of ethics at all, let alone one capable of standing up against projectivism. The first thing to realize is that there is nothing to prevent a projectivist from speaking of the perception of moral properties, of the world containing obligations, and so on. We speak of the perception of every single category of thing and fact that we ever communicate. We speak of perception of numerical truths, truths about the future, truths about the past, possibilities, other minds, theoretical entities of all kinds. We speak of perception whenever we think of ourselves as properly indicating the truth: in other words, whenever we feel able to say that 'if it hadn't been the case that *p*, I would not be committed to *p*'. But this is not the end of epistemology, but its beginning, for the theorist's job is to reflect upon our right to hold such conditionals. Merely reporting that we hold them is not doing this. Now, in the ethical case, the projectivist, protected again by quasi-realism, has a story to tell about this: he can explain why people who are satisfied that their moral sensibilities are functioning well express themselves in this way. But genuine cases of perception standardly demand stories with different ingredients. 'If it hadn't been the case that the shape was square, I would not have believed that it was' can be said because we are causally affected by shapes and can use those effects to deliver verdicts on them. 'If it hadn't been red, I would not have believed that it was' can be

said because I know enough of my normality in relation to other people to know that only when a thing disposes most people, in good light conditions, to say that it is red, do I say that it is red. And of course I can be wrong about that on an occasion of bad light or bad brain state or whatever.

The important point is that speaking of moral perception by itself provides no theory whatsoever of such conditionals. It provides only a misleading sense of security that somewhere there is such a theory. The theory is not causal, as in the case of shape, nor can it be a matter of conformity with a community, for that just misplaces moral reality, which is not created by community consensus, as (c) reminds us. So what is it? It just doesn't exist. But this means that the invitation to explore the perceptual direction has simply petered out. It is as if someone thought that they could seriously provide a theory of mathematical truth that based itself on the idea that we perceive that  $7 + 5 = 12$ , and then simply turned its back on the disanalogies between such knowledge and ordinary sense perception. It is obvious that until the question of the status of these conditionals, and our right to believe them, is prosecuted nothing has been said, or at any rate nothing that cannot be tacked on to the end of any genuinely successful account of arithmetic. Similarly with ethics.

The nub of the matter, then, is that the projectivist provides an explanation making moralizing an intelligible human activity with its own explanation and its own propriety, and the opposition provides none, but gestures at an evidently lame analogy. John McDowell has countered both by claiming that the explanatory pretensions of projectivism are 'spurious', and by mounting an opposition case for being able to do something better.<sup>13</sup> I take this last claim first. In effect it uses the 'interest-relative' nature of explanation to cite contexts in which proper explanations of various verdicts can be given by citing supposedly projected states of affairs. 'Why did I find that frightening/funny/appalling?' It can satisfy the interest behind such questions to answer 'Because it merited fright/mirth/horror'. 'Why do we find human happiness good?' 'Because it is good'. Citing the supposedly projected state of affairs here plays a part in an explanation, and one that in certain contexts can meet the need behind the question.

This is true, but by itself it is quite inert. Compare: 'why do we say that the cube root of 1728 is 12?' 'Because it is 12'. At least if the motive behind the question is fear that this is an anomalous, surprising thing for us to say, then the answer can allay it: we are, as it were, only running true to form in such a verdict. We are not in the grip of strange or local arithmetical error. This provides an explanation relative to an interest in whether the thing that we say shows us making a mistake: the reply says that it does not. Similarly in the first cases: a suspicion that there is something odd about, say, finding the dark frightening can be allayed by saying that it is what you would expect, that darkness merits fear. But of course allowing all this goes no way to disallowing another, wider, explanatory interest that these answers quite fail to engage.

13. McDowell, 'Values and Secondary Qualities,' p. 118ff.

This questioner may be asking why we find something frightening because he finds any such reaction puzzling: why do human beings ever feel fear, or get as far as supposing that anything merits fear? No doubt there is an answer to hand: one which talks of the behavioural consequences of the emotion, and their evolutionary advantages to creatures that have it. In a similar vein we try to place the activity of moralizing, or the reaction of finding things funny, or the practice of arithmetic. In particular we try to fit our commitments in these areas into a metaphysical understanding of the kinds of fact the world contains: a metaphysical view that can be properly hostile to an unanalysed and *sui generis* area of moral or humorous or mathematical facts. And relative to this interest, answers that merely cite the truth of various such verdicts are quite beside the point. This, again, is because there is no theory connecting these truths to devices whereby we know about them—in other words, no way of protecting our right to the conditionals I identified.

Could it be held that this explanatory interest is somehow unjustified: that explanations of a certain type cannot be had, or that the desire for them is the desire for an illusory, 'external' viewpoint outside of all human standpoints and perspectives? This is the justification for not having or wanting to have an explanatory theory along my lines at all. There are two reasons to resist this 'quietist' idea (again, I hesitate to attribute it directly, because the opponents to projectivism that I have mentioned tend to ride both the perceptual, explanatory line and the suggestion that we need no line at all, in uncomfortable tandem). The first reason for rejecting it is that we know that it is a common human option to moralize about more or fewer things in greater or lesser strengths. The scope of morality can wax and wane, and this makes it urgent to find an explanation of the practice that goes some way to defining its proper scope. Secondly, there can never be an *a priori* right to claim that our activity in making judgements *X* permits of no explanation (except the gesture that says that we perceive *X*-type states of affairs). You just have to try the various explanations out. And of course it is particularly perverse to say that any explanatory attempt in a direction must fail when many appear to have succeeded well. (I myself think that there is precious little surprising left about morality: its metatheory seems to me pretty well exhaustively understood. The difficulty is enabling people to appreciate it.) Could it be said that although these wider explanatory interests are legitimate, they mark a boundary between the philosopher and the natural scientist? The evolutionary explanation of the emotion of fear is not only empirical, but marks a recognizable divide between any enterprise of understanding fear as we all feel it and know it and understanding it discursively, in terms of its origins or function. Can the philosopher rest with the phenomenology, and dismiss the rest as sociology, psychology, or someone else's science? The trouble then is that the philosopher gets to say nothing: Hobbes and Hume and Mackie become classified as natural scientists, and the only philosophical activity left is playing variations on the theme of everything being what it is and not another thing. The philosophical spade becomes by definition the one that is turned on the first shove.

the end  
of  
metaphysics  
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## IV

There is one final question I would like to raise, but not to settle. So far I have discussed the metaphysics as if it were exclusively a second-order issue, with no necessary consequences for first-order moral theory. But we saw in part II that when Mackie characterizes the mistake that according to my kind of projectivism need not be made, he finds it natural to describe it by using a deontological moral vocabulary. And it is, I think, not a mistake to expect that a projective theory will consort with consequentialist first-order views. Since those views are generally downgraded today, it will be important to get that connection a little bit further into focus, lest projectivism be damned by association.

It should be said at the outset that there is no essential connection between projectivism and a consequentialist view in ethics. It could be that all human beings found it natural to feel certain sentiments, which gain expression as approval, when faced with some features of action, although those features have no consequences that explain the approval. This would be parallel to the way in which certain gestures or timings of actions are hugely funny, although for no apparent reason. If we had this kind of propensity, it would not alter the metaphysics—it would not in itself make a realistic theory easier to define properly, or more likely to be true. But we would say that those features are good (or right, or whatever) and perhaps we would be unable to envisage admirable moralities that did not do so: we would have a deontological ethics. As a metaphysical view, projectivism explains what we are doing when we moralize. It does not follow that it can explain, or be asked to explain, all the features of the particular way we moralize. First-order quirks would be as mysterious to a Humean as they are to anyone else. Nevertheless, it is natural to associate projectivism with consequentialist moralities, in the following way. A projectivist is unlikely to take the moral sentiments as simply given. He will fill out the story by attempting an explanation of the practice of moralizing. This turns to its function, and particularly to its social function. In Mackie's terms, morality is an invention that is successful because it enables things to go well among people with a natural inheritance of needs and desires that they must together fulfil. Moral thought becomes a practice with a purpose. Saying this goes beyond the metaphysical view, as I have tried to explain, but it is a natural addendum to it. And if it is right, there must be at least a limit to the extent to which moral thought can oppose consequentialist, teleological reasoning. It will be unclear how wholeheartedly a moralist who understands this second-order theory can endorse deontological views that stand in the way of all human purpose or fulfilment. Perhaps this is part of the trouble with Fred and Mabel. Perhaps Fred has a psychology that motivates him one way, when his and Mabel's happiness would be found another way. So should he not regard this as an encumbrance: isn't he the victim of an upbringing, and should he not see his particular psychology as a defect, whether or not he can effectively work to change it?

This is another version of the problem of part II, except that this time it is the peculiarly deontological cast of mind that is threatened. But Fred need not regard himself as a victim, so long as he can endorse the general policy of producing human beings whose motivational states are like his. What we then have is a 'motive consequentialism'—a grown-up brother of rule-utilitarianism.<sup>14</sup> The motivations people obey are good in proportion as the consequences of people being like that (and knowing that other people are like that) are good.<sup>15</sup> Actions are then judged either in the light of the motivations that prompted them, or in the different dimension of their actual effects in the world, depending on the purposes for which we are judging them. But the position does not collapse into ordinary act-consequentialism, because for well-known reasons one would expect a society of people motivated solely by consequentialist considerations to do pretty poorly. Nor need any such position share the other prominent feature of utilitarianism that causes dislike: the idea that all values are ultimately commensurable. The features of human life that we value, and that would be drawn into any remotely plausible sketch of human flourishing, very probably represent a bundle of ultimately incommensurable goods, among which there is no systematic way of making choices. In any case, there is ample room for a projectivist to respect the reasons that make this seem plausible. His explanatory project can start from the heterogeneity of ways in which life can flourish or fail. On the whole, then, I regard the alliance with consequentialism as a strength; to put it another way, it is an alliance with only the best features of that direction in ethical thought. Of course, there may be features of some people's moralities that even this diluted motive-consequentialism cannot well explain, and these it will regret. But I hope I have said enough to show that none of them could possibly count as integral to moral thought itself.

14. And, fairly clearly, the one that Hume endorsed. Talking of motives is better than talking of rules (rule-utilitarianism can be charged with 'rule worship' when it tries to give the verdict to a rule rather than to utility in a hard case. But what charge is there of motive worship?), and as explained in the text, consequentialism is not subject to at least some of the main objections to utilitarianism.

15. Rule-utilitarianism is falsely supposed to collapse into act-utilitarianism partly through neglecting this qualification (e.g., B. Williams, *Utilitarianism For and Against* [(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 118 ff]). I am contesting what Williams calls the 'act-adequacy premise'. The consequences of a rule being embedded in a society go well beyond the consequences of definite commissions or omissions for which the rule is responsible. There is also the consequence of mutual knowledge that the rule is likely to order action. To illustrate the effect of this, consider a rule that promises made to dead people should be respected. The main part of the good such a rule does lies not in any surplus utility of acts performed in accordance with it, but in the dignity with which one can approach old age or death in a society where it is known that people have such respect. This value resides not in acts, but in states of mind for which respect for the rule is responsible.

15. There is a subtle discussion of this relationship in A. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), esp. chapter 17.