

Realism

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IT IS a commonplace that we appraise each other's behaviour and attitudes from the moral point of view. We say, for example, that we did the *wrong* thing when we refused to give to famine relief this year, though perhaps we did the *right* thing when we handed in the wallet we found on the street; that we would be *better* people if we displayed a greater sensitivity to the feelings of others, though perhaps *worse* if in doing so we lost the special concern we have for our family and friends.

Most of us take appraisal of this sort pretty much for granted. To the extent that we worry about moral appraisal, we simply worry about *getting it right*. Philosophers too have been concerned to get the answers to moral questions right. However, traditionally, they have also been worried about the whole business of moral appraisal itself. Their worry can be brought out by focusing on two of the more distinctive features of moral practice: for, surprisingly, these features pull against each other, so threatening to make the very idea of a 'moral' point of view altogether incoherent.

To begin, as we have already seen, it is distinctive of moral practice that we are concerned to get the answers to moral questions *right*. But this concern presupposes that there are correct answers to moral questions to be had. It thus seems to presuppose that there exists a domain of moral facts about which we can form beliefs and about which we may be mistaken. Moreover, these moral facts have a particular character. For we seem to think that the only relevant determinant of the rightness of an act is the circumstances in which the action takes place. Agents whose circumstances are identical face the same moral choice: if they did the same then either they both acted rightly or they both acted wrongly.

Indeed, something like this view of moral practice seems to explain our preoccupation with moral argument. What seems to give moral argument its point and poignancy is the idea that, since we are all in the same boat, a careful mustering and assessment of the reasons for and against our moral opinions is the best way to discover what the moral facts really are. If the participants are open-minded and thinking correctly then, we seem to think, such an argument should result in a *convergence* in moral opinion – a convergence upon the truth. Individual reflection may serve the same purpose, but only when it simulates a real moral argument; for only then can we be certain that we are giving each side of the argument due consideration.

We may summarize this first feature of moral practice in the following terms: we seem to think moral questions have correct answers, that the correct answers

are made correct by objective moral facts, that moral facts are determined by circumstances, and that, by moralizing, we can discover what these objective moral facts determined by the circumstances are. The term 'objective' here simply signifies the possibility of a convergence in moral views of the kind just mentioned.

A second and rather different feature of moral practice concerns the practical implications of moral judgement, the way in which moral questions gain in their significance for us because of the special influence our moral opinions are supposed to have upon our actions. The idea is that when, say, we come to think that we did the wrong thing in refusing to give to famine relief, we come to think that we failed to do something for which there was a good reason. And this has motivational implications. For now imagine the situation if we refuse to give to famine relief when next the opportunity arises. Our refusal will occasion serious puzzlement, for we will have refused to do what we are known to think we have a good reason to do. Perhaps we will be able to explain ourselves. Perhaps we thought there was a better reason to do something else, or perhaps we were weak-willed. But, the point remains, an explanation of some sort will need to be forthcoming. An explanation will need to be forthcoming because, we seem to think, other things being equal, to have a moral opinion simply is to find yourself with a corresponding motivation to act.

These two distinctive features of moral practice – the *objectivity* and the *practicality* of moral judgement – are widely thought to have both metaphysical and psychological implications. However, and unfortunately, these implications are the exact opposite of each other. In order to see why this is thought to be so, we need to pause for a moment to reflect more generally on the nature of human psychology.

According to the standard picture of human psychology – a picture we owe to David Hume, the famous Scottish philosopher of the eighteenth century – there are two main kinds of psychological state. On the one hand there are beliefs, states that purport to represent the way the world is. Since our beliefs purport to represent the world, they are subject to rational criticism: specifically, they are assessable in terms of truth and falsehood according to whether or not they succeed in representing the world to be the way it really is.

On the other hand, however, there are also desires, states that represent how the world is to be. Desires are unlike beliefs in that they do not even purport to represent the way the world is. They are therefore not assessable in terms of truth and falsehood. Indeed, according to the standard picture, our desires are at bottom not subject to any sort of rational criticism at all. The fact that we have a certain desire is, with a proviso to be mentioned presently, simply a fact about ourselves to be acknowledged. It may be unfortunate that we have certain combinations of desires – perhaps our desires cannot all be satisfied together – but, *in themselves*, our desires are all on a par, rationally neutral.

This is important, for it suggests that though we may make discoveries about the world, and though these discoveries may rightly affect our beliefs, such discoveries should, again with one proviso to be mentioned presently, have no rational impact upon our desires. They may of course, have some *non-rational*

impact. Seeing a spider I may be overcome with a morbid fear and desire never to be near one. However, this is not a change in my desires mandated by reason. It is a *non-rational* change in my desires.

Now for the proviso. Suppose, contrary to the example I just gave, that I acquire the desire never to be near a spider because I come to believe, falsely, that spiders give off an unpleasant odour. Then we would certainly ordinarily say that I have an 'irrational desire'. However, the reason we would say this clearly doesn't go against the spirit of what has been said so far. For my desire never to be near a spider is *based on* a further desire and belief: my desire not to smell that unpleasant odour and my belief that that odour is given off by spiders. Since I can be rationally criticized for having the belief, as it is false, I can be rationally criticized for having the desire it helps to produce.

The proviso is thus fairly minor: desires are subject to rational criticism, but only insofar as they are based on beliefs that are subject to rational criticism. Desires that are not related in some such way to beliefs that can be rationally criticized are not subject to rational criticism at all. We will return to this point presently.

According to the standard picture, then, there are two kinds of psychological state – beliefs and desires – utterly distinct and different from each other. The standard picture of human psychology is important because it provides us with a model for understanding human action. Human action is, according to this picture, produced by a combination of the two. Crudely, our beliefs tell us how the world is, and thus how it has to be changed, so as to make it the way our desires tell us it is to be. An action is thus the product of these two forces: a desire representing the way the world is to be and a belief telling us how the world has to be changed so as to make it that way.

Let's now return to consider the two features of moral judgment we discussed earlier. Consider first the objectivity of such judgement: the idea that moral questions have correct answers, that the correct answers are made correct by objective moral facts, that moral facts are determined by circumstances, and that, by moralizing, we can discover what these objective moral facts are. The metaphysical and psychological implications of this may now be summarized as follows. Metaphysically, the implication is that, amongst the various facts there are in the world, there aren't just facts about (say) the consequences of our actions on the well-being of our families and friends, there are also distinctively *moral* facts: facts about the rightness and wrongness of our actions having these consequences. And, psychologically, the implication is thus that when we make a moral judgement we thereby express our *beliefs* about the way these moral facts are. In forming moral opinions we acquire beliefs, representations of the way the world is morally.

Given the standard picture of human psychology, there is a further psychological implication. For whether or not people who have a certain moral belief desire to act accordingly must now be seen as a further and entirely separate question. They may happen to have a corresponding desire, they may not. However, either way, they cannot be rationally criticized. Having or

failing to have a corresponding desire is simply a further fact about a person's psychology.

But now consider the second feature, the practicality of moral judgment. We saw earlier that to have a moral opinion simply *is*, contrary to what has just been said, to find ourselves with a corresponding motivation to act. If we think it right to give to famine relief then, other things being equal, we must be motivated to give to famine relief. The practicality of moral judgement thus seems to have a psychological and a metaphysical implication of its own. Psychologically, since making a moral judgement requires our having a certain desire, and no recognition of a fact about the world could rationally compel us to have one desire rather than another, our judgement must really simply *be* an expression of that desire. And this psychological implication has a metaphysical counterpart. For it seems to follow that, contrary to initial appearance, when we judge it right to give to famine relief we *are not* responding to any moral fact – the rightness of giving to famine relief. Indeed, moral facts are an idle postulate. In judging it right to give to famine relief we are really simply expressing our desire that people give to famine relief. It is as if we were yelling 'Hooray for giving to famine relief!' – no mention of a moral fact there, in fact, no factual claim at all.

We are now in a position to see why philosophers have been worried about the whole business of moral appraisal. The problem is that the *objectivity* and the *practicality* of moral judgement pull in quite opposite directions from each other. The objectivity of moral judgement suggests that there are moral facts, determined by circumstances, and that our moral judgements express our beliefs about what these facts are. This enables us to make good sense of moral argument, and the like, but it leaves it entirely mysterious how or why having a moral view is supposed to have special links with what we are motivated to do. And the practicality of moral judgement suggests just the opposite, that our moral judgements express our desires. While this enables us to make good sense of the link between having a moral view and being motivated, it leaves it entirely mysterious what a moral argument is supposed to be an argument about.

The idea of a moral judgement thus looks like it may well be incoherent, for what is required to make sense of such a judgement is a queer sort of fact about the universe: a fact whose recognition necessarily impacts upon our desires. But the standard picture tells us that there are no such facts. Nothing could be everything a moral judgement purports to be – or so it may now seem.

At long last we are in a position to see what this essay is about. For *moral realism* is simply the metaphysical (or ontological) view that there exist moral facts. The psychological counterpart to realism is called 'cognitivism', the view that moral judgements express our beliefs about what these moral facts are, and that we can come to discover what these facts are by engaging in moral argument and reflection.

Moral realism thus contrasts with two alternative metaphysical views about morality: *irrealism* (sometimes called 'anti-realism') and *moral nihilism*. According to the irrealists, there are no moral facts, but neither are moral facts required to make sense of moral practice. We can happily acknowledge that our moral

judgements simply express our desires about how people behave. This, the psychological counterpart to irrealism, is called 'non-cognitivism'. (There are different versions of irrealism: e.g. emotivism, prescriptivism, and projectivism. For a fuller discussion of these theories see Article 36, INTUITIONISM, Article 38, SUBJECTIVISM, and Article 40, UNIVERSAL PRESCRIPTIVISM.)

By contrast, according to the moral nihilists, the irrealists are right that there are no moral facts, but wrong about what is required to make sense of moral practice. The nihilist thinks that without moral facts moral practice is all a sham, much like religious practice without belief in God.

I have taken some time before introducing the ideas of moral realism, irrealism, and nihilism because, as it seems to me, each has much to be said both in its favour and against it. In what follows I will explain in more detail some of the substantive views people have taken in this whole debate. However, I want to emphasize at the outset that nearly every substantive position is fraught with difficulty and controversy. The long introduction will hopefully have given some hint of why this is so. The very idea of moral practice may well be in deep trouble, much as the moral nihilist suggests.

Remember that, according to the irrealist, when we judge it right to give to famine relief we are expressing our desire that people give to famine relief; it is as if we were yelling 'Hooray for giving to famine relief!' Irrealism is certainly an option to be considered. But it seems to me that it is ultimately an unattractive option.

To be sure, irrealists have a perfect explanation of the practicality of moral judgement. But it seems utterly implausible to suppose, as they therefore must, that moral judgements aren't truth-assessable at all. They must say this because they model a moral judgement on a yell of approval or disapproval. But when I yell 'Hooray for giving to famine relief!', though my yell may be sincere or insincere, it can hardly be true or false. My yell reveals something about myself – that I have a certain desire – not about the world.

The problem here isn't just that we *say* that moral judgements can be true or false, though we certainly do do that. The problem is rather that the whole business of moral argument and moral reflection only makes sense on the assumption that moral judgements *are* truth-assessable. When we agonize over our moral opinions, we seem to be agonizing over whether our reasons for our beliefs are good enough reasons for believing what we believe to be true. And no irrealist surrogate seems up to the task of explaining this appearance away. For example, it seems utterly hopeless to suppose that we are agonizing over whether we *really* have the desires we have. Surely *this* question isn't so hard to answer!

Indeed, in this context, it is worthwhile asking what the irrealists' view of moral argument is supposed to be. They presumably imagine that what we are trying to do, when we engage in moral argument, is to get our opponent to have the same desires as we have. But, at bottom, they must also say that we are trying to do this *not* because the opponent rationally should have these desires – remember that, subject to the proviso mentioned, desires aren't supposed to be subject to rational criticism at all – but rather just because these are the desires

we want him to have. But in that case moral argument begins to look massively self-obsessed, an imposition of *our* wants on others.

Irréalism isn't an attractive option. The irrealist's account of moral judgement as the expression of a desire simply fails to make sense of moral reflection. And the irrealist's account of moral argument makes moral persuasion look like it is itself immoral! What about the alternative, moral realism?

It might be thought that, since the moral realist admits the existence of moral facts, he has therefore no problem explaining the objectivity of moral judgement and the related phenomena of moral reflection and moral argument. It might be thought that the realist's only problem is that, if he is to eschew the existence of 'queer' moral properties whose recognition connects necessarily with the will, then he cannot explain the practicality of moral judgement. But matters are in fact much more complicated.

Certainly the moral realist needs to face up to the fact that the practicality of moral judgement is problematic, from his point of view. But his problem is more than that. His problem is that, *because* he has no explanation of the practicality of moral judgement, he has no plausible story about what *kind* of fact a moral fact is. And if he has no plausible story about the kind of fact a moral fact is, then, despite initial appearance, he has no plausible story about what moral reflection and moral argument are all about.

In order to see this, remember what we said at the outset when we first introduced the idea of the practicality of moral judgement. We said then that the practicality of moral judgement is a consequence of the fact that judgements about right and wrong are judgements about what we have reason to do and reason not to do. This is the subject matter of moral reflection and moral argument, *our reasons for action*. But the moral realist who admits an array of moral facts about which we may be motivationally neutral must reject such a conception of rightness and wrongness. After all, we could hardly remain motivationally neutral about what we think we have reason to do! The challenge such a realist faces is thus to provide us with some alternative account of what *kind* of fact a moral fact is; an alternative account of what moral reflection and moral argument are *about*.

Some moral realists do face up to this challenge. They have claimed, for example, that moral facts are facts that play a certain *explanatory role* in the social world: right acts are those that tend towards social stability, whereas wrong acts are those that tend towards social unrest. An Aristotelian version of this might be: right acts are those in accord with the 'proper function' of human beings – a quasi-biological notion – wrong acts are those that are not in accord with this proper function. Moral reflection and moral argument are thus, they suggest, arguments about which features of actions feed this tendency towards unrest and stability. Or, in the Aristotelian version, they are arguments about which acts are in accord with the proper function of humans (and thus, ultimately, about what the proper function of a human being is). The word 'tendency' is not idle here, for such realists are quick to emphasize that other factors may mitigate the tendency towards stability and unrest, or may stop humans actually having their proper function.

Let's focus for a moment on the suggestion that a moral fact can be characterized in terms of a tendency towards social stability or unrest. This suggestion cannot be dismissed out of hand, for reflection of an armchair-sociological kind does suggest that the acts we are disposed to think of as right – those that provide for a more equitable satisfaction of different people's interests, say – do tend towards social stability, and that the acts we are disposed to think of as wrong – those that provide for a less equitable satisfaction of different people's interests, say – do tend towards social unrest. It is thus best to assume that we have here two *competing* conceptions of a moral fact. Which conception seems the more plausible?

On the one hand, we have the idea of a moral fact as a fact about what we have reason to do or not to do. On the other, we have the idea of a moral fact in terms of what tends towards social stability and unrest. If the question is 'Which conception allows us to make the best sense of moral argument?' then the answer must surely be the former. For, to the extent that moral argument does focus on what tends towards social stability, it does so because social stability is deemed morally important, an outcome we have reason to produce.

Indeed, it seems to me that even this kind of moral realist's focus on *explanation* pushes us back in the direction of the idea of a moral fact as a fact about what we have reason to do. For, again, to the extent that we think of right acts as acts that tend towards social stability, we think that they have this tendency *because* they represent the reasonable thing for people to do. It is the tendency people have to do what is reasonable that is doing the explanatory work. But that, too, simply returns us to the original conception of a moral fact in terms of what we have reason to do. (We might say similar things about the idea that we can characterize a moral fact in terms of the proper function of human beings: for insofar as we understand the idea of the 'proper function' of human beings, we think that their proper function is to be reasonable and rational.)

In the end, then, we might object that this kind of moral realist fails to provide us with a real *alternative* to our original conception of a moral fact. The real question, then, is whether the moral realist is forced to reject the idea that rightness and wrongness have to do with what we have reason to do and reason not to do. In the remainder of this essay I want to explore this question.

The devil of the piece is what I have been calling the 'standard picture' of human psychology. For the standard picture gives us a model of what it is to have a reason in terms of a desire/belief pair. If the moral realist is to make headway in combining the objectivity and the practicality of moral judgement without appealing to 'queer' moral facts, he must challenge this standard picture.

The trouble is, however, that the standard picture looks substantially correct as an account of human motivation. After all, it is uncontroversial that the psychological states that motivate actions must be dispositions of some sort, dispositions to produce acts of the relevant kind. And it is also uncontroversial that actions are motivated by psychological states that have content: either they are produced by states that represent the way the world is (beliefs) or by states that represent the way the world is to be (desires), or, as the standard picture has

it, they are produced by a pairing of the two (a desire and a belief).

But now reflect for a moment. A disposition to produce acts of some relevant kind, if it has content, must have, as its content, a representation of the way the world is to be, and so it must be a desire. For how else could the psychological state in question *target* the state of affairs to be produced? (And how could it produce what is to be produced without having targeted it?) Moreover, if this state is to produce the targeted state of affairs, it must also be paired with a representation of how the world is, and so it must be paired with a belief. For only so will the relevant *change* in the world be produced so as to bring about the targeted state of affairs.

It therefore seems that the standard picture is right in insisting that desires are required in order to motivate actions. The place to challenge the standard picture, then, is not in its account of what motivates action, but rather in its tacit conflation of *reasons* with *motives*. Seeing why this is a conflation also enables us to see why we may legitimately talk about our *beliefs* about the reasons we have, and why having such beliefs makes it rational to have corresponding desires.

Imagine that you are giving the baby a bath. As you do, it begins to scream uncontrollably. Nothing you do seems to help. As you watch it scream, you are overcome with a desire to drown the baby in the bathwater. Certainly you may now be *motivated* to drown the baby. (You may even actually drown it.) But does the mere fact that you have this desire, and are thus motivated, mean that you have a *reason* to drown the baby?

One commonsensical answer is that, since the desire is not *worth* satisfying, it does not provide you with such a reason; that, in this case, you are motivated to do something you have *no* reason to do. However, the standard picture seems utterly unable to accept this answer. After all, your desire to drown the baby need be based on no false belief. As such, it is entirely beyond rational criticism – or so that standard picture tells us.

The problem, here, is that the standard picture gives no special privilege to what we would want if we were 'cool, calm and collected' (to use a flippant phrase). Yet we seem ordinarily to think that not being cool, calm and collected may lead to all sorts of irrational emotional outbursts. Having those desires that we would have if we were cool, calm and collected thus seems to be an independent rational ideal. When cool, calm and collected, you would wish for the baby not to be drowned, no matter how much it screams, and no matter how overcome you may be, in your uncool, uncalm and uncollected state, with a desire to drown it. This is why you have no reason to drown the baby.

Perhaps we have already said enough to reconcile the objectivity of moral judgement with its practicality. Judgements of right and wrong are judgements about what we have reason to do and reason not to do. But what sort of fact is a fact about what we have reason to do? The preceding discussion suggests an answer. It suggests that facts about what we have reason to do are not facts about what we *do* desire, as the standard picture would have it, but are rather facts about what we *would* desire if we were in certain idealized conditions of reflection: if, say, we were well-informed, cool, calm and collected. According to this account,

then, I have a reason to give to famine relief in my particular circumstances just in case, if I were in such idealized conditions of reflection, I would desire that, even when in my particular circumstances, I give to famine relief. And this sort of fact may certainly be the object of a belief.

Moreover, this account of what it is to have a reason makes it plain why the standard picture of human psychology is wrong to insist that beliefs and desires are altogether distinct; why, on the contrary, having certain beliefs, beliefs about what we have reason to do, does make it rational for us to have certain desires, desires to do what we believe we have reason to do.

In order to see this, suppose I believe that I would desire to give to famine relief if I were cool, calm and collected – i.e. more colloquially, I believe I have a reason to give to famine relief – but, being uncool, uncalm and uncollected, I don't desire to give to famine relief. Am I rationally criticizable for not having the desire? I surely am. After all, from my own point of view my beliefs and desires form a more coherent, and thus a rationally preferable, package if I do in fact desire to do what I believe I would desire to do if I were cool, calm and collected. This is because, since it is an independent rational ideal to have the desires I would have if I were cool, calm and collected, so, from my own point of view, if I believe that I would have a certain desire under such conditions and yet fail to have it, then my beliefs and desires fail to meet this ideal. To believe that I would desire to give to famine relief if I were cool, calm and collected, and yet to fail to desire to give to famine relief, is thus to manifest a commonly recognizable species of rational failure.

If this is right, then it follows that, contrary to the standard picture of human psychology, there is in fact no problem at all in supposing that I may have genuine *beliefs* about what I have reason to do, where having those beliefs makes it rational for me to have the corresponding *desires*. And if there is no problem at all in supposing that this may be so, then there is no problem in reconciling the practicality of moral judgement with the claim that moral judgements express our beliefs about the reasons we have.

However, this doesn't yet suffice to solve the problem facing the moral realist. For moral judgements aren't *just* judgements about the reasons we have. They are judgements about the reasons we have *where those reasons are supposed to be determined entirely by our circumstances*. As I put it earlier, people in the same circumstances face the same moral choice: if they did the same action then either they both acted rightly (they both did what they had reason to do) or they both acted wrongly (they both did what they had reason not to do). Does the account of what it is to have a reason just given entail that this is so?

Suppose our circumstances are identical, and let's ask whether it is right for each of us to give to famine relief: that is, whether we each have a reason to do so. According to the account on offer it is right that I give to famine relief just in case I have a reason to give to famine relief, and I have such a reason just in case, if I were in idealized conditions of reflection – well-informed, cool, calm and collected – I would desire to give to famine relief. And the same is true of you. If

our circumstances are the same then, supposedly, we should both have such a reason or both lack such a reason. But do we?

The question is whether, if we were well-informed, cool, calm and collected, we would tend to *converge* in the desires we have. Would we converge or would there always be the possibility of some non-rationally-explicable difference in our desires *even under such conditions*? The standard picture of human psychology now returns to centre-stage. For it tells us that there is *always* the possibility of some non-rationally-explicable difference in our desires even under such idealized conditions of reflection. This is the residue of the standard picture's conception of desire as a psychological state that is beyond rational criticism.

If this is right then the moral realist's attempt to combine the objectivity and the practicality of moral judgement must be deemed a failure. We are forced to accept that there is a *fundamental relativity* in the reasons we have. What we have reason to do is relative to what we would desire under certain idealized conditions of reflection, and this may differ from person to person. It is not wholly determined by our circumstances, as moral facts are supposed to be.

Many philosophers accept the standard picture's pronouncement on this point. But accepting there is such a fundamental relativity in our reasons seems altogether premature to me. It puts the cart before the horse. For surely moral practice is itself the forum in which we will *discover* whether there is a fundamental relativity in our reasons.

After all, in moral practice we attempt to change people's moral beliefs by engaging them in rational argument: i.e. by getting their beliefs to approximate those they would have under more idealized conditions of reflection. And sometimes we succeed. When we succeed, other things being equal, we succeed in changing their desires. But if we accept that there is a fundamental relativity in our reasons then we can say, in advance, that this procedure will never result in a massive *convergence* in moral beliefs; for we know in advance that there will never be a convergence in the desires we have under such idealized conditions of reflection. Or rather, and more accurately, if there is a fundamental relativity in our reasons then it follows that any convergence we find in our moral beliefs, and thus in our desires, must be entirely contingent. It could in no way be explained by, or suggestive of, the fact that the desires that emerge have some *privileged* rational status.

My question is: 'Why accept this?' Why not think, instead, that if such a convergence emerged in moral practice then that would itself suggest that these particular moral beliefs, and the corresponding desires, *do* enjoy a privileged rational status? After all, something like such a convergence in mathematical practice lies behind our conviction that mathematical claims enjoy a privileged rational status. So why not think that a like convergence in moral practice would show that moral judgements enjoy the same privileged rational status? At this point, the standard picture's insistence that there is a fundamental relativity in our reasons begins to sound all too much like a hollow dogma.

The kind of moral realism described here endorses a conception of moral facts that is a far cry from the picture presented at the outset: moral facts as queer facts

about the universe whose recognition necessarily impacts upon our desires. Instead, the realist has eschewed queer facts about the universe in favour of a more 'subjectivist' conception of moral facts. This emerged in the realist's analysis of what it is to have a reason. (For a fuller discussion of subjectivist theories see Article 38, SUBJECTIVISM.) The realist's point, however, is that such a conception of moral facts may make them subjective only in the innocuous sense that they are facts about what we would *want* under certain idealized conditions of reflection, where wants are, admittedly, a kind of psychological state enjoyed by subjects. But moral facts remain objective insofar as they are facts about what *we*, not just *you* or *I*, would want under such conditions. The existence of a moral fact – say, the rightness of giving to famine relief in certain circumstances – requires that, under idealized conditions of reflection, rational creatures would *converge* upon a desire to give to famine relief in such circumstances.

Of course, it must be agreed on all sides that moral argument has not yet produced the sort of convergence in our desires that would make the idea of a moral fact – a fact about the reasons we have entirely determined by our circumstances – look plausible. But neither has moral argument had much of a history in times in which we have been able to engage in free reflection unhampered by a false biology (the Aristotelian tradition) or a false belief in God (the Judeo-Christian tradition). It remains to be seen whether sustained moral argument can elicit the requisite convergence in our moral beliefs, and corresponding desires, to make the idea of a moral fact look plausible. The kind of moral realism described here holds out the hope that it will. Only time will tell.

Further reading

- Ayer, A. J.: 'Critique of ethics and theology', in his *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: 1936); (London: Gollancz, 1970).
- Harman, G.: *The Nature of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- Honderich, T., ed.: *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), especially the papers by Blackburn and Williams.
- Hume, D.: *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738); ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), especially Book II, Part III, Section III.
- Mackie, J.: *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), especially ch. 1.
- Nagel, T.: *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), especially ch. 8.
- Sayre-McCord, G., ed.: *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). This is the best book to read on the topic of moral realism, if you can only manage one, as it collects together papers by many of the leading figures: e.g. Ayer, Blackburn, Harman, Mackie, McDowell, Wiggins, Williams and others. Sayre-McCord's introduction is also well worth reading.
- Smith, M., Lewis, D. and Johnston, M.: Symposium on 'Dispositional theories of value', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume (1989).

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- Williams, B.: 'Internal and external reasons', in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- : *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), especially the first four chapters.