

IN DEFENSE OF ETHICS

by

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ABSTRACT

Many writers on ethics have presented arguments which are supposed to show that moral absolutism is an unacceptable doctrine. However, very few of these writers have tried to give a clear formulation of the doctrine that they have attempted to refute. Furthermore, those who have tried to say explicitly what moral absolutism is have not succeeded in formulating an adequate definition. The problem of providing a satisfactory characterization of moral absolutism is the primary focus of the first of this dissertation's two parts. In Part One, I point out the shortcomings of several formulations of absolutism and then try to provide a new definition that avoids these inadequacies. In Part Two, I turn my attention to a variety of considerations which have prompted people to reject moral absolutism. I argue that none of these considerations constitutes a compelling reason for anyone to abandon absolutism in ethics.

PART ONE (Chapters 1 - 3)

At the beginning of Part One, I set out simple adequacy conditions that must be satisfied by any acceptable definition of moral absolutism. I insist that an adequate definition must identify absolutism with a doctrine that is incompatible with the theories of philosophers who are standardly characterized as moral nihilists or moral relativists. I also require that an adequate definition identify absolutism with a position that is consistent with the views of philosophers who are standardly said to subscribe to absolutist moral theories. After stating the adequacy conditions that must be met by any acceptable definition of absolutism, I proceed to show that these conditions *aren't* satisfied by any of the definitions of absolutism that appear in recent philosophical literature. In particular, I argue that moral absolutism cannot be equated with any of the following five propositions. (The names that appear after each proposition identify philosophers who have equated it with absolutism.)

- A. For some ethical sentence s, what a speaker says by asserting s does not depend either on who he is or on where or when he asserts s. (Jonathan Harrison)

- B. There is always one, and only one, correct moral appraisal of a given issue. (Richard Brandt)
- C. There are no conflicting ethical opinions that are equally valid. (Richard Brandt)
- D. There is a single moral standard which is equally applicable to all people at all times. (Fred Feldman, Philippa Foot, David Lyons, Walter Stace)
- E. All agents have categorical moral reasons. (J.L. Mackie)

After explaining why none of these propositions is a satisfactory formulation of moral absolutism, I offer a new definition, defend its adequacy, and explain its implications.

PART TWO (Chapters 4 - 7)

In Chapters 4 and 5, I examine several arguments which purport to show either (a) that there are no moral facts or (b) that we have no justification for believing that such facts exist. The first of these conclusions implies that moral absolutism is false ; the second implies that, even if absolutism is true, we aren't justified in believing it. I contend, however, that the arguments which philosophers have presented in order to establish these conclusions are based on questionable ontological and epistemological assumptions.

In Chapter 6, I analyze and evaluate Gilbert Harman's objections to moral absolutism. Harman presents data about the linguistic impropriety of certain ethical assertions and argues that we can account for these data only if we adopt a relativistic theory of morality. I respond to Harman by pointing out that he has underestimated the explanatory resources that are available to moral absolutists. I then go on to show that if an absolutist makes use of these resources, he has no difficulty explaining Harman's data.

In the concluding chapter of the dissertation, I discuss the proposition that moral absolutism cannot be reconciled with the ubiquity of apparently irresolvable moral disagreements. I propose various explanations of this phenomenon and argue that none of these explanations suggests that there is any need whatever to abandon moral absolutism.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	6
1. The Subject and Structure of This Dissertation	6
2. Some Remarks on Sentence Schemas	10
2.1. Well-formedness	13
2.2. A definition of truth for schemas	22
2.3. Truth-ascriptions	25
2.4. Schemas and quantifiers	26
1. Defining Moral Absolutism	31
1.1. Some Standards of Evaluation	31
1.1.1. Moral nihilism	32
1.1.2. Three examples of moral relativism	34
1.2. Harrison's Definition of Absolutism	39
1.2.1. The case in favor of Harrison's definition	41
1.2.2. The inadequacy of Harrison's definition	43
1.3. Brandt's Definitions of Absolutism	45
1.3.1. Brandt's first definition	45
1.3.2. Brandt's second definition	51
2. Absolutism and Universal Moral Standards	61
2.1. Feldman's Characterization of Moral Absolutism	63
2.1.1. An interpretation of MA_5	63
2.1.2. Why MA_6 is not a satisfactory statement of moral absolutism	67
2.2. Alternatives to MA_6	75
2.2.1. The failure of MA_7 as an interpretation of MA_5	76
2.2.2. The failure of MA_6 as an interpretation of MA_5	80
2.2.3. MA_9 : a new interpretation of MA_5	82
2.2.4. When is a true S_1 -completion of F_1 <i>non-trivially</i> true ?	85
2.3. The Inadequacy of MA_9 as a Statement of Moral Absolutism	89
2.3.1. An outline of Ross's Theory	90
2.3.2. Ross's lack of commitment to MA_9	93
2.3.3. Ross's commitment to the denial of MA_9	94
3. Moral Absolutism and Categorical Imperatives	101
3.1. The Inadequacy of MA_{10} as a Statement of Moral Absolutism	104
3.2. A New Definition of Absolutism	111
3.3. When Is a Reason a Moral Reason ?	119
3.3.1. Nagel's conception of reasons	120
3.3.2. Agent-neutral reasons and agent-relative reasons	123
3.3.3. Lack of significance and lack of sense	136
3.3.4. Deep worries about Nagel's general theory of reasons	137

4. Moral Skepticism	147
4.1. Mackie's Argument from Relativity	147
4.2. Two Skeptical Arguments Based on Foundationalism	154
4.2.1. The reductionist argument	157
4.2.2. The explanatory posit argument	162
5. Harman's Skeptical Argument	167
5.1. The Basic Argument	167
5.2. Statements about Grammaticality : Explanatory Utility	171
5.3. Statements about Grammaticality : Irreducibility	173
5.4. Why Harman's Skeptical Argument is Unsound	182
6. Harman's Argument for Moral Relativism	185
6.1. Harman's Basic Arguments	186
6.2. Lyons' Attempt to Explain Harman's Data	193
6.3. The Flaws in Harman's Argument Against Absolutism	198
6.4. Objections to Harman's Explanation	204
7. Roots of Nihilism, Skepticism and Relativism	209
7.1. Introduction	209
7.2. Non-Epistemic Influences on the Resolvability of Moral Disagreements	210
7.2.1. Self-esteem and moral convictions	210
7.2.2. Moral beliefs as unwanted constraints on action	216
7.3. Moral versus Physical Constraints	219
7.4. Further Remarks on Irresolvability	223
7.4.1. A hypothetical moral disagreement	223
7.4.2. The road to relativism and nihilism	224
7.4.3. Overlooked arguments	227
7.4.4. The appeal to intuitions in moral enquiry	230
7.4.5. The need for argumentative proficiency	234
7.4.6. The practical costs of trying to convince one's opponents	236
7.4.7. Genuine irresolvability	236

INTRODUCTION

1. The Subject and Structure of This Dissertation

Many writers on ethics have presented arguments which are supposed to show that moral absolutism is an unacceptable doctrine. However, very few of these writers have tried to give a clear formulation of the doctrine that they have claimed to refute. Furthermore, those who have tried to say explicitly what moral absolutism is have not succeeded in formulating adequate definitions. The problem of providing a satisfactory characterization of moral absolutism is the primary focus of the first of this dissertation's two parts. In Part One, I point out the shortcomings of several formulations of absolutism and then try to provide a new definition that avoids these inadequacies. In Part Two, I turn my attention to a variety of considerations which have prompted people to reject moral absolutism. I argue that none of these considerations constitutes a compelling reason for anyone to abandon absolutism in ethics.

PART ONE (Chapters 1 - 3)

At the beginning of chapter 1, I set out some basic standards for evaluating the adequacy of proposed definitions of absolutism. Briefly stated, I suggest that satisfactory definition should identify moral absolutism with a statement that is incompatible both with moral nihilism and with ethical theories that are standardly regarded as versions of moral relativism. I also propose that an adequate definition should equate absolutism with a statement that does not conflict with the views of philosophers who subscribe to moral theories that are normally regarded as versions of absolutism. In the remainder of the first chapter, I apply my adequacy standards to characterizations of moral absolutism proposed by Jonathan Harrison and Richard Brandt.

I look first at Harrison's contention that absolutism is identical to the statement that, for some ethical sentence s, what a speaker says by asserting s does not depend either on who he is or on where or when he asserts s. I argue that Harrison's proposal is incorrect because it identifies absolutism with a statement that is entirely compatible with both moral nihilism and moral subjectivism. After demonstrating the shortcomings of Harrison's position, I turn my attention to two definitions of moral absolutism that have been advanced by Richard Brandt. One of these defines absolutism as the view that, for any issue i, there is exactly one correct moral appraisal of i. The other definition identifies absolutism with the statement that there are no equally valid, conflicting ethical opinions. I contend that each of Brandt's definitions is unsatisfactory. The first initially fails because it can reasonably be accepted by moral relativists who individuate issues in non-standard ways. It fails a second time because, after it is revised to avoid the individuation problem, it contradicts the views of certain philosophers whose absolutist credentials are unimpeachable. Brandt's second characterization of absolutism

is unacceptable because it rests upon an incoherent conception of the conditions under which ethical opinions conflict.

In Chapter 2, I explore the suggestion that a moral absolutist is someone who is committed to the proposition that there is one, and only one, correct standard of morality. This suggestion has recently been endorsed in the writings of David Lyons, Philippa Foot, and Fred Feldman. However, it is far from clear what people really mean when they say that there is exactly one correct standard of morality. Thus, I consider several interpretations of this claim. I argue that one of these interpretations is decidedly superior to the others, but then go on to show that this interpretation rules out the identification of moral absolutism with the doctrine that there is one, and only one, correct standard of morality. In particular, I demonstrate that, under the preferred interpretation, this doctrine is incompatible with the non-naturalistic forms of absolutism espoused by H.A. Prichard and W.D. Ross.

I begin Chapter 3 by discussing a definition of moral absolutism that appears in J.L. Mackie's book, *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*. According to Mackie, absolutism is the doctrine that all agents have categorical moral reasons. I contend that this definition is unacceptable because it identifies absolutism with a doctrine that is entirely consistent with certain versions of moral relativism. Nevertheless, I argue that it is at least a necessary condition for the truth of absolutism that all agents have categorical moral reasons. Moreover, I incorporate this condition into a new definition of moral absolutism and try to show that my new definition does not contain the inadequacies that I discovered in other characterizations of absolutism. Finally, in the last section of Chapter 3, I investigate the problem of conceptually distinguishing moral reasons from reasons of other kinds. One promising suggestion is that the difference between moral and non-moral

reasons is captured by Thomas Nagel's distinction between agent-neutral reasons and agent-relative reasons. I consider this suggestion in some detail but argue that it is ultimately unacceptable. Furthermore, I show that Nagel's distinction is predicated on a general theory of reasons that is critically flawed.

PART TWO (Chapters 4 - 7)

In Chapter 4, I begin my examination of the considerations that prompt people to reject moral absolutism. I look first at an argument that Mackie has advanced in order to establish that there are never any facts of the matter in ethics. Roughly speaking, Mackie contends that there are no moral facts because, no matter what moral issue we choose, it is possible for two people to disagree over that issue and for there to be no evidence that is capable of persuading either party to revise his opinion. In response to this argument, I point out that Mackie's hypothetical moral disagreements only pose a problem for ethics if the parties to those disputes are reasonable. I then go on to examine two versions of foundationalism which seem to support the proposition that, even when two individuals are perfectly reasonable, they may be party to a moral disagreement that would go unresolved even if they had access to all of the "relevant" factual data. I suggest that neither of these foundationalist theories provides a compelling argument in favor of moral skepticism because each contains statements that are either false or highly questionable.

In chapter 5, I examine a new skeptical argument, one that is not based on a foundationalist epistemology. This new argument contends that, unless propositions are either themselves useful in explaining how we acquire our beliefs or reducible to propositions that have this property, we have no justification for believing them. I attempt to show that this premise is unacceptable because it precludes justified belief in contexts where there is no doubt that our beliefs are justified.

In Chapter 6, I analyze and evaluate Gilbert Harman's objections to moral absolutism. Harman presents data about the linguistic impropriety of certain ethical assertions and argues that we can account for these data only if we adopt a relativistic theory of morality. I examine David Lyons' attempts to account for Harman's data within an absolutist moral framework and conclude that Lyons fails to explain what he sets out to account for. I then go on to show, however, that there is a perfectly plausible explanation of Harman's data that is consistent with moral absolutism. Furthermore, I point out that Harman's own relativistic explanation is unacceptable. Thus, absolutism comes out looking significantly more plausible than relativism.

The concluding chapter of this dissertation examines a variety of factors which give rise to unresolved moral disputes. I show, however, that most of these factors do not indicate that the issues under dispute cannot be resolved through further argument. I also indicate that the existence of disputes that are absolutely irresolvable need not pose serious problems for absolutism.

2. Some Remarks on Sentence Schemas

Before going on to confront the substantive metaethical issues that I am primarily concerned with in the seven chapters that I have just described, I would like to explain the notation that I will be using in my discussions of those issues. In many respects, this notation is similar to the schematic language which moral philosophers often employ when they want to state metaethical generalizations. We find a typical example of this language in the following passage from Harman's book, *The Nature of Morality*.

. . . to say that P ought to do D is not necessarily to say that P's doing D is absolutely required. It would be better, if that is what is meant, to say that P has to do D or that it would be wrong of P not to do D. We can assume that P ought to do D

without assuming that he absolutely must do D or even that it would be wrong of him not to do D. To say that P ought to do D, on the other hand, is stronger than to say simply that it would be good of P if he were to do D.¹

Let us call the schema that I have just quoted "S.1". It is reasonable to suppose that when Harman asserts S.1, he is saying something like this : any grammatical sentence that can be formed from S.1 by replacing "P" and "D" with English word-strings is true. Thus, we may assume that when Harman asserts S.1, he implies that (1) is true :

- (1) To say that David Rockefeller ought to do his own laundry is stronger than to say simply that it would be good of David Rockefeller if he were to do his own laundry.

Moreover, it seems clear that when Harman asserts S.1, he also intends to be making a claim which is sufficiently general to imply that the following sentence is true :

- (2) To say that Phyllis Schlafly ought to be home in time to prepare dinner for her husband is stronger than to say simply that it would be good of Phyllis Schlafly if she were to be home in time to prepare dinner for her husband.

But (2), unlike (1), cannot be formed by substituting English expressions for the occurrences of "P" and "D" in the following part of S.1 :

- (S.2) To say that P ought to do D is stronger than to say simply that it would be good of P if he were to do D.

In short, (2) is not an instance of S.2. This being the case, it is a complete

¹Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, pp. 116 - 117

mystery how the truth of (2) could follow from what Harman is saying when he asserts S.1. Thus, in asserting S.1, Harman seems to be stating a proposition which is less general than the one that he wants to be stating.

I believe that if Harman were to make use of a schema that is similar to, though distinct from, S.1, he could capture the generalization that he intends to be stating when he asserts S.1. In particular, I think that Harman could say what he wants to say by claiming that the following schema is true :

(S.3) To say that N_1 ought to VP_1 is not necessarily to say that N_1 's VP_1 -ing is absolutely required. It would be better, if that is what is meant, to say that N_1 has to VP_1 or that it would be wrong of N_1 not to VP_1 . We can assume that N_1 ought to VP_1 without assuming that N_1 absolutely must VP_1 or even that it would be wrong of N_1 not to VP_1 . To say that N_1 ought to VP_1 , on the other hand, is stronger than to say simply that it would be good of N_1 if N_1 were to VP_1 .

Here we have a typical example of the schematic language that I shall be employing throughout the chapters that follow. However, it may not be obvious to the reader just what is implied by the claim that S.3 is a true schema. I shall therefore try to make clear what such a claim really amounts to.

Put succinctly,

(3) A schema \underline{s} is true if, and only if, for any sentence (or series of sentences) \underline{a} that is a well-formed completion simpliciter of \underline{s} , \underline{a} is true in all relevant contexts of utterance.

But what is it for a sentence \underline{a} to be a *well-formed completion simpliciter* of a schema \underline{s} ? And, supposing that \underline{a} is a well-formed completion simpliciter

of \underline{s} , which are the contexts in which \underline{a} must be true if \underline{s} is to be true? It is plain that we must know the answers to these questions in order to understand (3).

2.1. Well-formedness

In schema S.3, we find numerous occurrences of the expressions " \mathbf{N}_1 " and " \mathbf{VP}_1 ". These expressions are *schematic terms*. Two other such terms that we shall encounter are " \mathbf{S}_1 " and " \mathbf{Pred}_1 ". In order to form a completion of a schema \underline{s} , we must substitute word-string occurrences for some or all of the schematic term occurrences in \underline{s} . When we *correctly* substitute word-string occurrences for all occurrences of a schematic term \underline{t} in a schema \underline{s} , we form a word-string \underline{a} which is a *completion of \underline{s} with respect to \underline{t}* . And, if \underline{t} is the only schematic term in \underline{s} , then \underline{a} is a *completion simpliciter of \underline{s}* . On the other hand, if there are schematic terms in \underline{s} other than \underline{t} , \underline{a} is only a *partial completion of \underline{s}* .

Whether it is or isn't legitimate to substitute occurrences of a word-string \underline{a} for occurrences of a schematic term \underline{t} depends on what \underline{t} 's *schematic stem* is. Every schematic term consists of two elements: a schematic stem and a numeric subscript. The schematic stems of " \mathbf{N}_1 ", " \mathbf{VP}_1 ", " \mathbf{S}_1 ", and " \mathbf{Pred}_1 " are " \mathbf{N} ", " \mathbf{VP} ", " \mathbf{S} ", and " \mathbf{Pred} " respectively. Whenever two schematic terms \underline{t}_1 and \underline{t}_2 have the same stem, the set of word-string occurrences that can be legitimately substituted for occurrences of \underline{t}_1 will be identical to the set of word-string occurrences that can be legitimately substituted for occurrences of \underline{t}_2 . However, this will not be the case where \underline{t}_1 and \underline{t}_2 have different stems. The following principle stipulates what kinds of word-string occurrences it is legitimate to substitute for occurrences of schematic terms whose stems are " \mathbf{N} ", " \mathbf{VP} ", " \mathbf{S} ", or " \mathbf{Pred} ".

- (P) For any schematic term \underline{t} and any word-string \underline{a} ,
- (a) if the schematic stem of \underline{t} is "N", then occurrences of \underline{a} can be legitimately substituted for occurrences of \underline{t} if, and only if, \underline{a} is either a person's name or a pronoun ;
 - (b) if the schematic stem of \underline{t} is "VP", then occurrences of \underline{a} can be legitimately substituted for occurrences of \underline{t} if, and only if, \underline{a} is a verb phrase ;
 - (c) if the schematic stem of \underline{t} is "S", then occurrences of \underline{a} can be legitimately substituted for occurrences of \underline{t} if, and only if, \underline{a} is either a sentence or a sentence schema ; and
 - (d) if the schematic stem of \underline{t} is "Pred", then occurrences of \underline{a} can be legitimately substituted for occurrences of \underline{t} if, and only if, \underline{a} is a predicate.

Given this specification of when occurrences of a word-string \underline{a} can be legitimately substituted for occurrences of a schematic term \underline{t} , it is clear that it is not legitimate to substitute an occurrence of "to make compromises with Democrats" for the occurrence of " N_2 " in

(4) Although N_1 doesn't like N_2 , N_1 can't VP_1 .

Since the expression, "to make compromises with Democrats", is neither a person's name nor a pronoun, (4.1) is not a well-formed partial completion of (4) :

(4.1) Although N_1 doesn't like to make compromises with Democrats, N_1 can't VP_1 .

Similarly, (4.2) is not a well-formed completion simpliciter of (4) :

- (4.2) Although Reagan doesn't like to make compromises with Democrats, he can't ignore O'Neill's power in Congress.

On the other hand, (4.3) *is* a well-formed partial completion of (4), and (4.4) *is* a well-formed completion simpliciter of (4) :

- (4.3) Although N_1 doesn't like O'Neill, N_1 can't VP₁ .
- (4.4) Although Reagan doesn't like O'Neill, he can't ignore O'Neill's power in Congress.

Consider now the following schema :

- (5) N_5 is identical to N_5 .

While (5.1) is a well-formed completion simpliciter of (5), (5.2) is not :

- (5.1) Kripke is identical to himself.
- (5.2) Kripke is identical to Quine.

Rather than being a well-formed completion simpliciter of (5), (5.2) is a well-formed completion simpliciter of (6) :

- (6) N_5 is identical to N_6 .

The fact that (5.2) is a well-formed completion simpliciter of (6) but not of (5) indicates that a string \underline{a} may fail to qualify as a well-formed completion of a schema \underline{s} even though we can transform \underline{s} into \underline{a} simply by making legitimate substitutions for schematic term occurrences in \underline{s} . The same fact also indicates that, in spite of the obvious similarity between (5) and (6), there is an important difference between these schemas.

In order to understand precisely why (5.2) is a well-formed completion

simpliciter of (6) but not of (5), we must first understand a particular relation that holds between the occurrences of "Kripke" and "himself" in (5.1) but does not hold between the occurrences of "Kripke" and "Quine" in (5.2). This relation has some connection to *coreference*, but it is not the same as coreference.

The relation that I have in mind is particularly prominent in the following sentence :

- (7) Hellman loved Hammett is spite of the fact that he was often disappointed in himself.

Under the most natural reading of (7), the reflexive pronoun "himself" refers to the referent of "he", and "he" refers to the referent of "Hammett". We thus have a chain of reference that runs from "Hammett" through "he" to "himself". As linguists would say, "himself" is an anaphor whose antecedent is "he"; and "he" is an anaphor whose antecedent is "Hammett". Or, to put the matter in slightly different terms, the occurrences of "Hammett", "he", and "himself" in (7) are links in an *antecedent-anaphor chain*. In general, we can think of antecedent-anaphor chains as ordered n-tuples. In all such n-tuples, each member subsequent to the first is an anaphor whose antecedent is the preceding member. Thus, if we use the expressions "HAMMETT⁽⁷⁾", "HE⁽⁷⁾", and "HIMSELF⁽⁷⁾" to stand for the occurrences in sentence (4) of "Hammett", "he", and "himself", respectively, we can say that $\langle \text{HAMMETT}^{(7)}, \text{HE}^{(7)}, \text{HIMSELF}^{(7)} \rangle$ is

an antecedent-anaphor chain.² Similarly, $\langle \text{HAMMETT}^{(7)}, \text{HE}^{(7)} \rangle$ and $\langle \text{HE}^{(7)}, \text{HIMSELF}^{(7)} \rangle$ are antecedent-anaphor chains.

So far as our purposes are concerned, $\langle \text{HAMMETT}^{(7)}, \text{HE}^{(7)}, \text{HIMSELF}^{(7)} \rangle$ and $\langle \text{HAMMETT}^{(7)}, \text{HE}^{(7)} \rangle$ differ in an important way from $\langle \text{HE}^{(7)}, \text{HIMSELF}^{(7)} \rangle$. Whereas the first element in the latter chain is an anaphor, the first element in each of the former chains is not. Let us call an antecedent-anaphor chain *maximal* just in case its first element isn't an anaphor. Thus, $\langle \text{HAMMETT}^{(7)}, \text{HE}^{(7)}, \text{HIMSELF}^{(7)} \rangle$ is the maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with $\text{HIMSELF}^{(7)}$; and $\langle \text{HAMMETT}^{(7)}, \text{HE}^{(7)} \rangle$ is the maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with $\text{HE}^{(7)}$.

It should be noted that some maximal antecedent-anaphor chains have only one member. Indeed, if a string occurrence \underline{a} has no antecedent, $\langle \underline{a} \rangle$ is the maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with \underline{a} . This being the case, $\langle \text{HAMMETT}^{(7)} \rangle$ is the maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with $\text{HAMMETT}^{(7)}$.

Now that we are armed with the notion of a maximal antecedent-anaphor chain, we can say very explicitly when a word-string \underline{a} is a well-formed completion of a schema \underline{s} with respect to schematic terms $\underline{t}_1 - \underline{t}_n$ in \underline{s} . Putting the matter as generally as possible,

(Df.₁) For any schema \underline{s} , any word-string \underline{a} , and any schematic terms $\underline{t}_1 - \underline{t}_n$ that occur in \underline{s} , \underline{a} is a well-formed

²In a number of cases where I talk about specific string occurrences, I adopt the following notational convention:

For any numerals i and j and any expression \underline{e} , if $\langle (i) \rangle$ designates a sentence or sentence schema, then $\langle E^{(i)} \rangle$ abbreviates 'the sole occurrence of \underline{e} in (i) '; and $\langle E^{j, (i)} \rangle$ abbreviates 'the j th occurrence of \underline{e} in (i) '.

completion of \underline{s} with respect to $\underline{t}_1 - \underline{t}_n$ if, and only if, for any schematic term occurrences $\underline{o}_1 - \underline{o}_m$ in \underline{s} such that \underline{o}_1 is an occurrence of a term in $\{\underline{t}_1 - \underline{t}_n\}$, \underline{o}_2 is an occurrence of a term in $\{\underline{t}_1 - \underline{t}_n\}$, . . . , and \underline{o}_m is an occurrence of a term in $\{\underline{t}_1 - \underline{t}_n\}$, there are \underline{m} string occurrences $\underline{x}_1 - \underline{x}_m$ such that

- (a) \underline{a} is the result of replacing \underline{o}_1 with \underline{x}_1 , \underline{o}_2 with \underline{x}_2 , . . . , and \underline{o}_m with \underline{x}_m ;
- (b) there is a word-string $\underline{\beta}$ and a schematic term \underline{t} such that \underline{x}_1 is an occurrence of $\underline{\beta}$, \underline{o}_1 is an occurrence of \underline{t} , and occurrences of $\underline{\beta}$ can be legitimately substituted for occurrences of \underline{t} ; there is a word-string $\underline{\beta}$ and a schematic term \underline{t} such that \underline{x}_2 is an occurrence of $\underline{\beta}$, \underline{o}_2 is an occurrence of \underline{t} , and occurrences of $\underline{\beta}$ can be legitimately substituted for occurrences of \underline{t} ; . . . ; and there is a word-string $\underline{\beta}$ and a schematic term \underline{t} such that \underline{x}_m is an occurrence of $\underline{\beta}$, \underline{o}_m is an occurrence of \underline{t} , and occurrences of $\underline{\beta}$ can be legitimately substituted for occurrences of \underline{t} ; and
- (c) for any O_1 and O_2 in $\{\underline{o}_1 - \underline{o}_m\}$ and any X_1 and X_2 in $\{\underline{x}_1 - \underline{x}_m\}$, if O_1 and O_2 are occurrences of the same schematic term and, in forming \underline{a} from \underline{s} , we replace O_1 with X_1 and O_2 with X_2 , then either
 - (i) X_1 and X_2 are occurrences of the same non-anaphor, or
 - (ii) for some word-string $\underline{\beta}$, there are occurrences X_3 and X_4 of $\underline{\beta}$ in \underline{a} such that X_3 is the first member of the maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with X_1 , and X_4 is the first member of the maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with X_2 .

At the beginning of my discussion of well-formedness, I provided a rough statement of the conditions under which a completion of a schema counted as a completion simpliciter of that schema.³ However, now that we have a precise definition of what it is for a string \underline{a} to be a well-formed completion of a schema \underline{s} with respect to schematic terms $\underline{t}_1 - \underline{t}_n$, it seems appropriate to state an equally precise definition of what it is for a string \underline{a} to be a well-formed completion simpliciter of a schema \underline{s} :

(Df₂) For any schema \underline{s} and any word-string \underline{a} , \underline{a} is a well-formed completion simpliciter of \underline{s} if, and only if, for any schematic terms $\underline{t}_1 - \underline{t}_n$ that occur in \underline{s} , \underline{a} is a well-formed completion of \underline{s} with respect to $\underline{t}_1 - \underline{t}_n$.

Given Df₁ and Df₂, it is not difficult to see why (5.1) is a well-formed completion simpliciter of schema (5) while (5.2) is not:

(5) \mathbf{N}_5 is identical to \mathbf{N}_5 .

(5.1) Kripke is identical to himself.

(5.2) Kripke is identical to Quine.

It is a consequence of Df₁ that (5.1) is a well-formed completion of (5) with respect to " \mathbf{N}_5 " just in case

- (i) occurrences of "Kripke" and "himself" can be legitimately substituted for occurrences of " \mathbf{N}_5 ", and either
- (ii) KRIPKE^(5.1) and HIMSELF^(5.1) are occurrences of the same non-anaphor, or
- (iii) for some word-string $\underline{\beta}$, there are occurrences X_3 and X_4 of $\underline{\beta}$ in (5.1) such that X_3 is the first member of the

³Vide p. 13 *supra*.

maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with $KRIPKE^{(5.1)}$ and X_4 is the first member of the maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with $HIMSELF^{(5.1)}$.

Now then, since "Kripke" is the name of a person and "himself" is a pronoun, it follows from principle (P) that condition (i) is true. Thus, (5.1) will qualify as a well-formed completion of (5) with respect to " N_5 " if either (ii) or (iii) is true. (ii), of course, is plainly *not* true. (Since $KRIPKE^{(5.1)}$ and $HIMSELF^{(5.1)}$ are not occurrences of the same string, it follows that they are not occurrences of *the same* non-anaphor. Furthermore, $HIMSELF^{(5.1)}$ happens to be an occurrence of an anaphor.) Nevertheless, (iii) *is* true. For in (5.1) there are occurrences X_3 and X_4 of "Kripke" such that X_3 is the first member of the maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with $KRIPKE^{(5.1)}$ and X_4 is the first member of the maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with $HIMSELF^{(5.1)}$. In particular, $KRIPKE^{(5.1)}$ is the first member of the antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with $KRIPKE^{(5.1)}$; and $KRIPKE^{(5.1)}$ is also the first member of the antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with $HIMSELF^{(5.1)}$. We thus see that (5.1) is a well-formed completion of (5) with respect to " N_5 ". Moreover, since " N_5 " is the only schematic term that occurs in (5), it follows from Df_2 that (5.1) is a well-formed completion simpliciter of (5) if it is a well-formed completion of (5) with respect to " N_5 ". Hence, (5.1) *is* a well-formed completion simpliciter of (5).

Let us now look at (5.2) :

(5.2) Kripke is identical to Quine.

Given Df_1 and Df_2 , (5.2) is a well-formed completion simpliciter of (5) only if at least one of the following statements is true :

- (iv) KRIPKE^(5.2) and QUINE^(5.2) are occurrences of the same non-anaphor.
- (v) for some word-string β , there are occurrences X_3 and X_4 of β in (5.1) such that X_3 is the first member of the maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with KRIPKE^(5.2) and X_4 is the first member of the maximal antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with QUINE^(5.2).

Now then, the first of these two statements clearly *isn't* true ; although KRIPKE^(5.2) and QUINE^(5.2) are both occurrences of non-anaphors, they are obviously occurrences of *different* non-anaphors. Furthermore, because they are occurrences of different non-anaphors, (v) also isn't true. It follows from (v) that the first member of the antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with KRIPKE^(5.2) is an occurrence of the same non-anaphor as the first member of the antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with QUINE^(5.2). However, KRIPKE^(5.2) is the first member of the antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with KRIPKE^(5.2), and QUINE^(5.2) is the first member of the antecedent-anaphor chain that ends with QUINE^(5.2). Since neither (iv) nor (v) is true, (5.2) does not qualify as a well-formed completion simpliciter of schema (5).

Of course, the features of (5.2) which prevent it from qualifying as a well-formed completion simpliciter of (5) do not prevent it from qualifying as a well-formed completion simpliciter of (6) :

- (6) N_5 is identical to N_6 .

Because " N_5 " and " N_6 " are not the same schematic term, we construct a well-formed completion simpliciter of (6) whenever we replace the occurrences of

"N₅" and "N₆" in (6) with occurrences of people's names.⁴

2.2. A definition of truth for schemas

As I mentioned at the outset of my remarks about schemas, in order to understand what it means to say that a given schema is true, one must know the answers to the following questions :

- (a) What is it for a sentence α to be a well-formed completion simpliciter of a schema \underline{s} ?
- (b) Given that a particular sentence α is a well-formed completion simpliciter of a schema \underline{s} , which are the contexts of utterance in which α must be true if \underline{s} is to be true ?

Now that I have set out definitions 1 and 2 and discussed some of their implications, the answer to (a) should be reasonably clear. However, at this point the answer to (b) is still something of a mystery.

We can get to the heart of this mystery by looking at schema (8) :

- (8) Either N₁ will VP₁ or N₁ won't VP₁ .

I would like (8) to turn out to be a true schema. But if it were necessary for (8)'s truth that every completion of (8) be true in all contexts of utterance, (8)

⁴We also construct a well-formed completion simpliciter of (6) whenever we both (a) replace the occurrence of "N₅" in (6) with an occurrence \underline{o} of a person's name and (b) replace the occurrence of "N₆" in (6) with a reflexive pronoun occurrence whose antecedent is \underline{o} . Consequently, (5.1) counts as a well-formed completion simpliciter of both (5) and (6). In general, the set of well-formed completions simpliciter of (5) is a proper subset of the set of well-formed completions simpliciter of (6).

would not be a true schema.⁵ To see why this is so, consider the following completion of (8) :

(8.1) Either Kissinger will consult with the present king of France or he won't consult with the present king of France.

If I were to assert (8.1), I would either be implying or presupposing that there is a present king of France. And, since there is no present king of France, I would either be implying or presupposing a false statement by asserting (8.1). But if one would either be implying or presupposing a false statement by asserting a particular sentence a, one would not be making a true claim by asserting a. And, if one would not be making a true claim by asserting a, then there is at least one context of utterance in which a isn't true. Thus, there is at least one context of utterance in which (8.1) isn't true.

Since I want (8) to turn out to be true even though (8.1) is a completion of (8) which is not true in all contexts, I cannot say that a schema s is true if, and only if, every completion of s is true in all contexts. However, what I *can* say is this :

(Df₃) For any schema s, s is true if, and only if, for any context of utterance c and any sentence (or series of sentences) a, if a is a well-formed completion simpliciter of s, then a is true in c if for any denoting phrase β, every occurrence of β in a has a referent in c.

Given Df₃, the truth of (8) is not undermined by the fact that there are contexts in which (8.1) isn't true. For, in every context c where (8.1) isn't true,

⁵In this sentence, I am using the word "completion" as an abbreviation for the expression "well-formed completion simpliciter". For the sake of convenience and brevity, I will often adopt this usage when I am talking about schemas.

there are denoting phrase occurrences in (8.1)--viz. THE PRESENT KING OF FRANCE^{1, (8.1)} and THE PRESENT KING OF FRANCE^{2, (8.1)}--which don't have referents in \underline{c} .

While Df_3 allows (8) to be true, it guarantees that

(6) N_5 is identical 'o N_6

is not true. Although there are contexts in which some completions of schema (6) are true, there are also contexts in which many completions of that schema are *not* true. In particular, there are contexts in which

(5.2) Kripke is identical to Quine

isn't true. And, since KRIPKE^(5.2) and QUINE^(5.2) have referents in many of the contexts in which (5.2) isn't true, it follows from Df_3 that (6) isn't a true schema.

On the other hand,

(5) N_5 is identical to N_5

is true. As I have noted, any completion of (5) is also a completion of (6). But in every completion \underline{a} of (6) that is a completion of (5), the string occurrence in \underline{a} that corresponds to the occurrence of " N_6 " in (6) is a member of an antecedent-anaphor chain whose first member is the string occurrence in \underline{a} that corresponds to the occurrence of " N_5 " in (6). This being the case, for any completion \underline{a} of (5) and any context \underline{c} , if all of the denoting phrase occurrences in \underline{a} have referents in \underline{c} , the string occurrence in \underline{a} that corresponds to the occurrence of " N_6 " in (6) has the same referent in \underline{c} as the string occurrence in \underline{a} that corresponds to the occurrence of " N_5 " in (6). But

it is clear that for any completion \underline{a} of (5) and any context \underline{c} , if the string occurrence in \underline{a} that corresponds to the occurrence of " N_6 " in (6) has the same referent in \underline{c} as the string occurrence in \underline{a} that corresponds to the occurrence of " N_5 " in (6), then \underline{a} is true in \underline{c} . So, for any completion \underline{a} of (5) and any context \underline{c} , \underline{a} is true in \underline{c} if all denoting phrase occurrences in \underline{a} have referents in \underline{c} . But Df_3 implies that a schema \underline{s} is true if for any completion \underline{a} of \underline{s} , \underline{a} is true in every context where all of the denoting phrase occurrences in \underline{a} have referents. It therefore follows from Df_3 that (5) is true.

2.3. Truth-ascriptions

On the assumption that the implications of Df_3 are now reasonably clear, I would like to point out that we can ascribe truth to schemas in either of two ways. These two ways are illustrated in (9) and (10) :

(9) The following schema is true :

(S.4) Whenever an individual says that N_1 ought morally not to have VP_1 -ed, he implies that it would have been morally permissible for N_1 not to have VP_1 -ed.⁶

(10) If Chomsky says that Nixon ought morally not to have ordered the bombing of Cambodia, he implies that it would have been morally permissible for Nixon not to have done so. More generally, whenever an individual says that N_1 ought morally not to have VP_1 -ed, he implies that it would have been morally permissible for N_1 not to have VP_1 -ed.

If someone utters (10), he appears to *assert* schema S.4 instead of making a

⁶It will be noted that the morpheme "ed" is suffixed to the occurrences of " VP_1 " in S.4. In general, whenever a morpheme is suffixed to an occurrence \underline{o} of a schematic term whose stem is "VP", that morpheme becomes the suffix of the first verb in any verb phrase occurrence that we substitute for \underline{o} .

claim *about* S.4. However, I shall assume that when someone "asserts" a schema, he is merely employing a convenient way of talking to say that the schema is true. Indeed, if this is *not* what he is saying, I don't see how we can make any sense of his "assertion". Thus, so far as I am concerned, when someone "asserts" S.4, he says precisely the same thing that he says when he asserts (9).

2.4. Schemas and quantifiers

The reader may recall that I opened my discussion of schemas by pointing out that philosophers often employ them in the statement of generalizations. And, given my account of what it is for a schema to be true, it should be evident that if someone were to say that

(5) N_5 is identical to N_5

is true, he would be stating a generalization which is basically equivalent to the one that he would state by asserting (11) :

(11) For any person x , x is identical to x .

This fact may lead one to ask the following question : Why bother using schemas at all ? Why not simply use the language of quantification theory to state the generalizations that need to be stated ?

I think that I can best respond to this challenge by directing the reader's attention to (12) and (13) :

(12) The following schema is true :

(S.5) If we know that N_1 has committed an utterly heinous crime by VP_1 -ing, it is inappropriate to say only that N_1 ought morally not to have VP_1 -ed.

- (13) For any person \underline{x} and any act-type \underline{a} , if we know that \underline{x} has committed an utterly heinous crime by doing \underline{a} , it is inappropriate to say only that \underline{x} ought morally not to have done \underline{a} .

It might be supposed that, for all intents and purposes, (12) and (13) are equivalent. But in point of fact, (13) does not even make sense. In (13), certain variables that occur within referentially opaque contexts are bound by quantifiers that stand outside those contexts. Quine, however, has convincingly argued that such quantification into opaque contexts is incoherent.⁷ It is true that (13) can be revised in such a way that its bound variable are shifted outside of opaque "know that" and "say that" contexts ; but many logical complications arise when we do this.⁸ We avoid all these problems if we simply use (12) in place of (13). For in (12), there is no quantification into opaque contexts.

Moreover, there are problems with (13) that have nothing to do with referential opacity. In order to understand (13), one must have some understanding of *act-types*. Now, to the extent that I understand these entities, I am inclined to think that each of the following phrases designates an act-type :

- (a) eating pork
- (b) blowing out birthday candles

⁷W.V.O. Quine, "Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes", in *Reference and Modality*, Leonard Linsky, ed., pp. 101 - 104 ; Quine, "Reference and Modality", also in *Reference and Modality*, pp. 22 - 26.

⁸Quine, "Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes", pp. 104 - 106 ; David Kaplan, "Quantifying In", in *Reference and Modality*, pp. 117 - 128.

- (c) walking down Fifth Avenue without any clothes on
- (d) drowning a female baby
- (e) ordering the crucifixion of captured enemy soldiers

But if (a) - (c) designate act-types, we end up with some very strange results when we instantiate (13). (14), for example, is a typical instance of (13) :

- (14) If we know that Vlad has committed an utterly heinous crime by doing ordering the crucifixion of captured enemy soldiers, it is inappropriate to say only that Vlad ought morally not to have done ordering the crucifixion of captured enemy soldiers.

However, here we don't even have a grammatical sentence. As far as ordinary English goes, the string "doing ordering the crucifixion of captured enemy soldiers" is pure gibberish. Of course, we might decide to treat this string merely as a term of art and interpret it to mean the same as the standard phrase "ordering the crucifixion of captured enemy soldiers". Similarly, we could interpret "done ordering the crucifixion of captured enemy soldiers" to mean the same as "ordered the crucifixion of captured soldiers". Once we have thus interpreted the problematic strings in (14), we have no difficulty understanding that "sentence". But what are we to do with other instances of (13) ? It is obvious that these "sentences" will also contain strings that make no sense in ordinary English. The most convenient way to solve the general problem that this raises is to appeal to *schemas*. We can say, for example, that any string of the form "doing VP₁-ing" should be interpreted as meaning the same as the corresponding instance of "VP₁-ing". However, if we are going to employ schemas in order to make sense of the "sentences" implied by (13), why not avoid (13) altogether and simply use (12) in its place ? If we do so, we won't have to worry about assigning interpretations to instances of (13) ; for such "sentences" are not well-formed completions of S.5.

To sum matters up, there are often more problems involved in the use of quantifiers than is initially apparent. Since we can sidestep some of these difficulties by employing schematic terms instead of quantified variables, a case can be made for stating certain kinds of generalizations schematically, rather than quantificationally.

Although there is a great deal more to be said about the use of schemas, I think that it would be best at this point to table further discussion of these matters and proceed to moral substantive problems.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

DEFINING MORAL ABSOLUTISM

In this chapter and in the two which immediately follow it, I analyze and evaluate various attempts to define moral absolutism. My purpose in doing this is to clear away certain misconceptions about a doctrine that has frequently been attacked by philosophers and non-philosophers alike.

1.1. Some Standards of Evaluation

In evaluating proposed definitions of absolutism, I shall employ three basic criteria of adequacy. These criteria can be summed up as follows :

A satisfactory definition of moral absolutism should identify that doctrine with some statement S such that

- (i) S does *not* conflict with the theories of philosophers who are standardly categorized as moral absolutists;
- (ii) S *does* conflict with all theories that are standardly thought to be opposed to moral absolutism; and
- (iii) S is sufficiently clear to enable us to determine whether it satisfies conditions (i) and (ii).

The class of philosophers who subscribe to moral theories that are standardly called "absolutist" includes Plato, Kant, Sidgwick, Moore, and Ross. Thus,

given condition (i), I shall reject any definition of absolutism which identifies that doctrine with a statement that is incompatible with the basic tenets of Kant's moral philosophy.

Whereas Kant's ethical theory is a paradigm of moral absolutism, the views of other philosophers are clearly opposed to absolutism in ethics. For example, Ayer's emotivism and Hare's prescriptivism must be regarded as expressions of decidedly anti-absolutist sentiments. So, on the basis of the second adequacy condition that I have imposed on definitions of absolutism, I shall deem unsatisfactory any such definition which characterizes a doctrine that Hare could reasonably accept without abandoning his brand of prescriptivism.

1.1.1. Moral nihilism

Although Ayer and Hare are both opponents of moral absolutism, they differ from each other in the following respect : whereas Ayer has maintained that logical concepts cannot properly be applied to ethical statements, Hare has proposed that genuine logical relations obtain among these statements.⁹ Thus, Hare holds that one ethical statement may logically imply a second and logically contradict a third.

Where statements of a certain kind cannot enter into any logical relations, there is no substantial sense in which they can be called either "correct" or "incorrect". Ayer, then, is committed to the view that ethical statements are neither correct nor incorrect. This view might be called "radical moral

⁹ Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, pp. 107 - 108. See also Ayer, "On the Analysis of Moral Judgements", in *Philosophical Papers*, pp. 231 - 249. Hare's basic views on the logic of moral statements are set out in *The Language of Morals*, pp. 17 - 55.

nihilism". Proponents of a somewhat milder variety of nihilism merely maintain that no *positive* moral appraisals are correct. When I speak here of "positive" moral appraisals, what I have in mind are statements of the following sort :

- (a) Capital punishment is morally wrong.
- (b) Franklin Roosevelt ought morally not to have ordered the mass internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.
- (c) It is sometimes morally permissible for a woman to get an abortion during the second trimester of her pregnancy.

The negations of (a) - (c) do not count as positive moral appraisals. Roughly speaking, to say that no positive moral appraisals are correct is to say that nothing is morally right, morally wrong, or morally obligatory. This view, which I shall call "simple moral nihilism", is endorsed by Mackie in *Ethics : inventing right and wrong*.¹⁰

If someone is a moral absolutist, he is undoubtedly opposed to both radical and simple moral nihilism. Thus, it is clear that Plato, Kant, Sidgwick, Moore, and Ross all believe that there are correct positive moral appraisals. Yet one needn't embrace absolutism in order to oppose nihilism. There is a third course : moral relativism. A moral relativist is opposed to both moral nihilism and moral absolutism. I consider Hare to be a moral relativist.

¹⁰J.L. Mackie, *Ethics : inventing right and wrong*, pp. 15 - 49.

1.1.2. Three examples of moral relativism

Although I shall make occasional references to Hare's theory in the course of evaluating proposed definitions of moral absolutism, I shall refer much more frequently to a brand of relativism which is sometimes called "moral subjectivism". This relativistic thesis implies that ethical statements are propositions about people's feelings. Explicitly formulated, moral subjectivism is the doctrine that

(MS) Sentence schemas (f₁) - (f₃) are true :

- (f₁) If N₂ said that it would be morally right for N₁ to VP₁, what N₂ would be saying is that the thought of N₁'s VP₁-ing arouses a feeling of approval in N₂.
- (f₂) If N₂ said that it would be morally wrong for N₁ to VP₁, what N₂ would be saying is that the thought of N₁'s VP₁-ing arouses a feeling of disapproval in N₂.
- (f₃) If N₂ said that N₁ ought morally to VP₁, what N₂ would be saying is that the thought of N₁'s not VP₁-ing arouses a feeling of disapproval in N₂.

According to G.E. Moore, if MS is true, some actions are both morally right and morally wrong.¹¹ It is not difficult to see why Moore draws this conclusion. Consider, for example, the following completions of (f₂) and (f₃) :

- (s₂) If Meyer Kahane said that it would be morally right for Israel to annex the West Bank, what Kahane would be saying is that the thought of Israel's annexing the West Bank arouses a feeling of approval in him.

¹¹G.E. Moore, *Ethics*, p. 39.

- (s₃) If Vanessa Redgrave said that it would be morally wrong for Israel to annex the West Bank, what Redgrave would be saying is that the thought of Israel's annexing the West Bank arouses a feeling of disapproval in her.

To reach Moore's conclusion, one simply has to reason as follows :

1. Assume that MS is true.
2. If MS is true, then both s₂ and s₃ are true.
3. Given the convictions of Kahane and Redgrave, it is evident that the thought of Israel's annexing the West Bank arouses a feeling of approval in the former and a feeling of disapproval in the latter.
4. So, it is both the case that
 - (a) Kahane would be saying something true if he said that it would be morally right for Israel to annex the West Bank, and
 - (b) Redgrave would be saying something true if she said that it would be morally wrong for Israel to annex the West Bank. (from 1 - 3)
5. Consequently, it would be both right and wrong for Israel to annex the West Bank. (from 4)
6. Therefore, if MS is true, it would be both right and wrong for Israel to annex the West Bank.

Notice, however, that the inference from (4) to (5) is invalid. For, if we are assuming that MS is true, what we are saying when we claim that it would be both right and wrong for Israel to annex the West Bank is that the thought of Israel's doing this arouses both a feeling of approval and a feeling of disapproval in us. But it is clear that this does not follow from (4). Given MS and (4), we may infer something about the feelings of Kahane and

Redgrave ; but we are not entitled to infer anything about our own feelings. Thus, Moore is mistaken when he says that if MS is true, some actions will be both right and wrong. What we *may* conclude is that if MS is true, each of two people may be stating a correct claim even though one is calling an action morally right while the other is calling the very same action morally wrong.

Another relativistic theory that I will make use of in evaluating proposed characterizations of moral absolutism is *Cultural Relativism*. Roughly speaking, the cultural relativist maintains that when a person makes moral judgments, he is stating claims about his society's norms. Explicitly, cultural relativism is the doctrine that

(CR) Sentence schemas (f₄) - (f₆) are true :

- (f₄) If N₂ said that it would be morally right for N₁ to VP₁ , what N₂ would be saying is that N₁ would not violate the norms of N₂'s society by VP₁-ing .
- (f₅) If N₂ said that it would be morally wrong for N₁ to VP₁ , what N₂ would be saying is that N₁ would violate the norms of N₂'s society by VP₁-ing .
- (f₆) If N₂ said that N₁ ought morally to VP₁ , what N₂ would be saying is that N₁ would violate the norms of N₂'s society by not VP₁-ing .

Given that some actions which would violate the norms of one society would not violate the norms of other societies, if two people come from different societies, each may be stating a correct claim even though one is calling an action morally right while the other is calling the very same action

morally wrong. Here we see a definite similarity between CR and MS. However, there are forms of moral relativism which are such that if N_2 says that it would be morally right of N_1 to VP_1 while N_3 says that it would be morally wrong of N_1 to VP_1 , then either N_2 is mistaken or N_3 is mistaken. One such relativistic theory has recently been advanced by Gilbert Harman.¹² Harman's relativism (HR) may be interpreted as the conjunction of the following three statements :

I. Sentence schemas (f₇) - (f₉) are true :

(f₇) If N_2 says that it would be morally right of N_1 to VP_1 , then, in saying this, N_2 is

(a) presupposing that the moral conventions that N_1 intends to adhere to are the same as those that N_2 intends to adhere to, and

(b) stating that, given the moral conventions that N_1 intends to adhere to, it would be reasonable for N_1 to VP_1 .

(f₈) If N_2 says that it would be morally wrong of N_1 to VP_1 , then, in saying this, N_2 is

(a) presupposing that the moral conventions that N_1 intends to adhere to are the same as those that N_2 intends to adhere to, and

(b) stating that, given the moral conventions that N_1 intends to adhere to, it would be *unreasonable* for N_1 to VP_1 .

¹²Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended", *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 84 (1975), pp. 3 - 22 ; Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, pp. 103 - 124.

(f₉) If N₂ says that N₁ ought morally to VP₁, then, in saying this, N₂ is

(a) presupposing that the moral conventions that N₁ intends to adhere to are the same as those that N₂ intends to adhere to, and

(b) stating that, given the moral conventions that N₁ intends to adhere to, it would be *unreasonable* for N₁ *not* to VP₁.

II. The following sentence schema is true :

(f₁₀) If N₁ would VP₂ by VP₁-ing, the fact that N₁ would VP₂ by VP₁-ing is a moral reason for N₁ (not) to VP₁ if, and only if, by VP₂-ing, N₁ would promote N₁'s (non)compliance with some moral convention that N₁ intends to adhere to.

III. Not everyone intends to adhere to the same moral conventions.

One salient feature of HR is that it makes a moral judgment into a claim about the intentions of the agent who is being evaluated. Another important characteristic of Harman's theory is its implication that moral judgments involve presupposition failures when the evaluator and the agent being evaluated do not accept the same moral conventions. Thus, on Harman's view, it is inappropriate for A to make a moral judgment about B if B has no intention of adhering to the conventions that A intends to abide by.

Having now described (a) the standards that I will use in evaluating definitions of moral absolutism and (b) some of the theories that I will appeal to in applying those standards, I turn my attention to the characterizations of absolutism that have been advanced by Jonathan Harrison and Richard Brandt.

1.2. Harrison's Definition of Absolutism

According to Harrison, moral absolutism is identical with the statement that

(MA₁) Some ethical sentence s is such that, for any individual i, if i were to assert s, what i would thereby be saying would not depend on any of the following :

- (a) who i is,
- (b) where i's assertion of s takes place,
- (c) when i's assertion of s takes place.¹³

Thus, Harrison conceives of moral absolutism as a linguistic thesis--a thesis about the grammar of sentences that can be used to make ethical claims. Given what he has proposed, if absolutism were true, there would be at least one ethical sentence that differs from the following sentence in three important respects :

- (1) Right now this place gives me the creeps.

If I assert (1) in some place p at a time t, the proposition that I then state says something about my reaction to p at t. However, if Jonathan Harrison were to assert (1) in p at t, the proposition that he would thereby state would say nothing whatever about *my* reaction to p at t. Thus the proposition that I state when I assert (1) at a particular place and time is distinct from the proposition that Harrison would assert were he to utter (1) at the very same place and time. We therefore see that the identity of a speaker partially

¹³Harrison, "Ethical Objectivism", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 3, pp. 71 - 75.

determines what he says when he asserts sentence (1). In addition, the time at which an individual asserts (1) plays a crucial role in determining what he says by asserting that sentence. If I assert (1) at 1 pm in a place p , the proposition that I then state says something about my reaction to p at one o'clock in the afternoon. However, if I assert (1) in the very same place at 1 *am*, the proposition that I thereby state says something about my reaction to p at one o'clock in the morning, but *nothing at all* about my reaction to p at one o'clock in the *afternoon*. Finally, whenever someone asserts sentence (1), what he says by asserting that sentence will be affected by where he is when he asserts it. If at a given time t I assert (1) in the city morgue, I clearly state a different proposition from the one I would state were I to assert that sentence at t in the middle of a subtropical rain forest.

To sum matters up, if we want to know what proposition has been stated by a given assertion of (1), we have to determine the values of three contextual variables :

- (a) *speaker*
- (b) *place*
- (c) *time*

On the other hand, in order to discover what a person says when he asserts the following sentence,

- (2) I like kiwi fruit,

it is only necessary to pay attention to variables (a) and (c)—*speaker* and *time*. And, if we want to know what proposition someone states in asserting (3),

- (3) Dodos are extinct,

the only contextual variable that need concern us is *time*. Finally, we can ignore *time*, as well as *speaker* and *place*, in determining what an individual says when he asserts (4) :

(4) All wombats are marsupials.

In short, (4) is a sentence \underline{s} such that

(5) For any individual i , if i were to assert \underline{s} , what i would thereby be saying would not depend on any of the following :

(a) who i is,

(b) where i 's assertion of \underline{s} takes place,

(c) when i 's assertion of \underline{s} takes place.

(5), of course, is the very condition that must be satisfied by some ethical sentence if MA_1 is to be true.

1.2.1. The case in favor of Harrison's definition

If we examine the theory that I have called "moral subjectivism", we can easily see what might have led Harrison to equate moral absolutism with MA_1 . According to subjectivism, each of the following sentence schemas is true :

(f₁) If N_2 said that it would be morally right for N_1 to VP_1 , what N_2 would be saying is that the thought of N_1 's VP_1 -ing arouses a feeling of approval in N_2 .

(f₂) If N_2 said that it would be morally wrong for N_1 to VP_1 , what N_2 would be saying is that the thought of N_1 's VP_1 -ing arouses a feeling of disapproval in N_2 .

(f₃) If N_2 said that N_1 ought morally to VP_1 , what N_2 would be saying is that the thought of N_1 's not VP_1 -ing arouses a feeling of disapproval in N_2 .

Now, if (f_1) - (f_3) are all true, it is clear that each of the following three statements is also true :

(6) Whenever a speaker asserts a completion of

(f_{11}) It would be morally right for N_1 to VP_1 ,

what he says is identical to what he would say by asserting the corresponding completion of

(f_{12}) The thought of N_1 's VP_1 -ing arouses a feeling of approval in me.

(7) Whenever a speaker asserts a completion of

(f_{13}) It would be morally wrong for N_1 to VP_1 ,

what he says is identical to what he would say by asserting the corresponding completion of

(f_{14}) The thought of N_1 's VP_1 -ing arouses a feeling of disapproval in me.

(8) Whenever a speaker asserts a completion of

(f_{15}) N_1 ought morally to VP_1 ,

what he says is identical to what he would say by asserting the corresponding completion of

(f_{16}) The thought of N_1 's not VP_1 -ing arouses a feeling of approval in me.

A brief glance at (f_{12}) , (f_{14}) , and (f_{16}) reveals that each of these sentence schemas contains an occurrence of the first-person pronoun "me". This being the case, "me" will occur in all completions of (f_{12}) , (f_{14}) , and (f_{16}) . Furthermore, when a sentence \underline{s} contains a first-person pronoun, no two individuals will state the very same proposition by asserting \underline{s} . Therefore, what a person says in asserting a completion of (f_{12}) , (f_{14}) , or (f_{16}) will

depend on who he is--in particular, it will depend on the fact that he is the one who is doing the asserting. From this it follows that if a sentence is a completion of either (f_{12}) , (f_{14}) , or (f_{16}) , it fails to satisfy condition (5). And, if no completion of (f_{12}) , (f_{14}) , or (f_{16}) satisfies (5), then, on the assumption that (6) - (8) are true, (5) also won't be satisfied by any sentence which is a completion of either (f_{11}) , (f_{13}) , or (f_{15}) . Moreover, since completions of these schemas seem to be typical of ethical sentences in general, one might infer that if no completions of any of these schemas satisfy (5), then no ethical sentences satisfy (5). And, if no ethical sentences satisfy (5), MA_1 is false. We thus reach the conclusion that MA_1 is false if moral subjectivism is true. This result tends to confirm the plausibility of identifying moral absolutism with MA_1 because this identification explains the validity of our basic intuition that subjectivism is incompatible with absolutism.

1.2.2. The inadequacy of Harrison's definition

Nevertheless, we must ultimately reject Harrison's suggestion that moral absolutism is identical with MA_1 . One reason why we ought to discard Harrison's proposal is that it identifies moral absolutism with a statement that might well be embraced even by a moral subjectivist. Thus, consider the following completions of schemas (f_{13}) and (f_{14}) :

- (9) It would be morally wrong for Reagan to order the CIA to assassinate Arafat.
- (10) The thought of Reagan's ordering the CIA to assassinate Arafat arouses a feeling of disapproval in me.

(9) is clearly an ethical sentence. And, on the assumption that moral subjectivism is true, what a person would say by asserting (9) is the same thing that he would say by asserting (10). This being the case, it would be

perfectly reasonable for a moral subjectivist to maintain that (10) is no less an ethical sentence than (9). But now consider the following sentence :

(11) At 1 pm Eastern Standard Time on October 2, 1983, the thought of Reagan's ordering the CIA to assassinate Arafat arouses a feeling of disapproval in Jonathan Pressler.

What a person says in asserting (11) does not depend either on who he is, or on where or when he asserts it. (11), then, is a sentence which satisfies condition (5). Consequently, if (11) were an ethical sentence, MA_1 would be true. Of course, most people would not have the slightest inclination to call (11) an ethical sentence. But most people are not moral subjectivists. For an advocate of moral subjectivism, the idea that (11) is an ethical sentence may not seem at all implausible. We have already seen that if someone is a moral subjectivist, it is reasonable for him to regard (10) as an ethical sentence. Furthermore, insofar as it is reasonable for a subjectivist to view (10) in this way, it is reasonable for him to take the position that people state *ethical propositions* whenever they assert (10). Let us suppose, then, that an advocate of moral subjectivism adopts this latter position. Such a subjectivist would maintain that I would be stating an ethical proposition if I asserted (10) at 1 pm EST on October 2, 1983. But many philosophers would claim that *that* proposition is identical to the one that I would state if I asserted sentence (11).¹⁴ So, if our subjectivist follows these philosophers, he will reach the conclusion that I would state an ethical proposition by asserting (11). Given

¹⁴See R. Cartwright, "Propositions", in *Analytical Philosophy*, pp. 81 - 103. E.J. Lemmon expresses a similar position in "Sentences, Statements, and Propositions", reprinted in *Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, J. Rosenberg & C. Travis, eds., pp. 233 - 249. (Lemmon's terminology differs somewhat from mine. He uses the term "statement" to describe the sorts of things that I call *propositions*. When he talks of "propositions", what he has in mind are *sentence meanings*.)

this conclusion, it seems entirely appropriate to call (11) an ethical sentence. And, since MA_1 is true if (11) is an ethical sentence, it makes perfect sense for an advocate of moral subjectivism to embrace MA_1 . But if a subjectivist is free to embrace MA_1 , Harrison is clearly mistaken when he claims that moral absolutism is identical with MA_1 .

Although the foregoing argument is sufficient to show that Harrison's definition of absolutism is unacceptable, there is another reason for rejecting this definition. As I noted in section (1.1.1), absolutism implies that moral nihilism is false. Yet MA_1 is perfectly compatible with the proposition that there are no correct, positive moral appraisals. In short, MA_1 is entirely consistent with *simple moral nihilism*. What this indicates is that moral absolutism cannot be construed merely as a claim about the grammar of the sentences that are used to assert ethical statements. Thus, Harrison's mistake is a double one : he has presented us with an unacceptable grammatical thesis, and, in addition, he has failed to recognize that absolutism transcends any proposal about the grammar of ethical sentences.

1.3. Brandt's Definitions of Absolutism

1.3.1. Brandt's first definition

An alternative to Harrison's characterization of absolutism can be found in an article by Richard Brandt entitled, "Ethical Relativism". According to Brandt, a metaethical *relativist* is one who *rejects* the thesis that "there is always one [and only one] correct moral appraisal of a given issue."¹⁵ This suggests that we might characterize a moral *absolutist* as one who *accepts* this thesis.

¹⁵Brandt, "Ethical Relativism", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 3, pp. 75 - 78.

In other words, moral absolutism is to be identified with the following statement:

(MA₂) There is always one, and only one, correct moral appraisal of a given issue.

The first thing to notice about MA₂ is that it appeals to the notion of an *issue*. But just what is an *issue*? On a fairly straightforward interpretation, each of the following is an issue:

- (i) whether or not it was right for Harry Truman to have authorized the use of atomic weapons against Japanese cities;
- (ii) whether or not Heisenberg deserved blame for having worked for the Nazis;
- (iii) whether or not Goldbach's conjecture is true.

But, of course, it doesn't make much sense to talk of a *moral* appraisal in the case of (iii). So I expect that this issue is not in the extension of the term "issue" as this expression is used in MA₂. One might say that it is only *ethical issues* that moral absolutism is concerned with.

But even if we restrict ourselves to ethical issue, the identification of moral absolutism with MA₂ is problematic. We can see where the problem lies by turning once again to moral subjectivism. From this theory's point of view, there is no such thing as *the* issue of whether or not it was right for Truman to have authorized the use of atomic weapons against Japanese cities. According to the subjectivist, if one person asserts sentence (12) while another asserts sentence (13), they are *not* taking opposing stands on the same issue :

- (12) It was morally right for Truman to have authorized the use of atomic weapons against Japanese cities.
- (13) It was not morally right for Truman to have authorized the use of atomic weapons against Japanese cities.

From the perspective of subjectivism, if Dick asserts (12), he is taking a stand on the issue of whether he has a feeling of approval when he thinks about Truman's having authorized the use of atomic weapons against Japanese cities. On the other hand, if Jane asserts (13), she is taking a stand on a completely different issue : the issue of whether a feeling of approval arises in *her* when *she* thinks about Truman's having authorized the use of atomic weapons against Japanese cities. Thus, where a moral absolutist would say that different people have expressed conflicting opinions about a single ethical issue (viz. the issue of whether it was morally right for Truman to have authorized the use of atomic weapons against Japanese cities), a moral subjectivist would say that different people have expressed perfectly compatible opinions about entirely separate ethical issues. And, with respect to each of these ethical issues, the subjectivist might well maintain that there is exactly one correct appraisal. Thus, an advocate of moral subjectivism is free to embrace MA₂. This fact is sufficient to show that moral absolutism should not be identified with MA₂.

One way of escaping from the problem that I have just raised is to modify MA₂ so that it reads as follows :

- (MA₃) There is always one, and only one, correct moral appraisal of a given *action* or *state of affairs*.

If N₂ said that it would be morally right for N₁ to VP₁ and N₃ said that it would be morally wrong for N₁ to VP₁ , both N₂ and N₃ would be stating

70

moral appraisals of the same action or state of affairs (viz. N_1 's VP_1 -ing). Moreover, given moral subjectivism, if the thought of N_1 's VP_1 -ing arouses both a feeling of approval in N_2 and a feeling of *disapproval* in N_3 , then (a) N_2 would state a correct moral appraisal of N_1 's VP_1 -ing if N_2 said that it would be morally right for N_1 to VP_1 , and (b) N_3 would also state a correct moral appraisal of N_1 's VP_1 -ing if N_3 said that it would be morally wrong for N_1 to VP_1 . Thus, so long as some sentence of the following form is true,

- (14) The thought of N_1 's VP_1 -ing arouses both a feeling of approval in N_2 and a feeling of disapproval in N_3 ,

there will be an action or state of affairs that has more than one correct moral appraisal. But there undoubtedly are many true completions of (14). Hence, if moral subjectivism were true, MA_3 would be false.

This conclusion provides some degree of support for the identification of moral absolutism with MA_3 . In the end, however, such an identification is untenable. We cannot equate absolutism with MA_3 because MA_3 can be shown to contradict the views of a great many moral philosophers who are standardly categorized as absolutists. In particular, MA_3 is incompatible with Kant's moral theory.

Kant held that some actions are both morally right and lacking in moral worth.¹⁶ And it is surely the case that to claim that an action is right and to claim that it lacks moral worth is to make two quite distinct *moral* appraisals

¹⁶Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, pp. 61 - 74. A detailed analysis of Kant's views on the relation between duty and moral worth can be found in Onora Nell's *Acting On Principle*, pp. 94 - 124. See also Barbara Herman, "On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty", *The Philosophical Review*, July 1981, pp. 359 - 382.

of a single action. Thus Kant was committed to a view that there is sometimes more than one correct moral appraisal of a given action. In fact it is obvious that Kant thought that there is more than one correct moral appraisal of *any* action. For he believed that every action could be evaluated along two ethical dimensions: deontic status and moral worth. Every action either has or lacks moral worth, and every action falls into at least one of the following four deontic categories: (a) morally permissible, (b) morally impermissible, (c) morally obligatory, (d) morally nonobligatory. Moreover, even if we look just at deontic status, it is clear that there can be more than one correct moral appraisal of a given action. For if an act is morally impermissible, it is also morally nonobligatory. Conversely, if an act is morally obligatory, it is also morally permissible.

Given that Kant's views straightforwardly contradict the statement that

(MA₃) There is always one, and only one, correct moral appraisal of a given action or state of affairs,

we must either reject the identification of moral absolutism with MA₃ or say that Kant is not really a moral absolutist after all. Of these two alternatives, the former is clearly preferable.

In point of fact, an individual needn't give up a commitment to moral absolutism even if he thinks that there are *infinitely* many correct moral appraisals of any given action. Furthermore, a very strong argument can be put forward in support of the claim that there *are* infinitely many correct moral appraisals for each and every action that we care to give a name to. To begin with, after only brief reflection it becomes clear that there are infinitely many moral appraisals of any given action. In addition to judgments about rightness and moral worth, there are judgments about the infringement

of people's rights. A judgment of this latter sort is stated by the following sentence:

- (15) The assassination of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth infringed Lincoln's right against Booth that Booth not kill him.

Now (15) is an instance of

- (16) The assassination of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth infringed N_1 's moral right against N_2 that S_1 .

And there are an infinite number of non-equivalent completions of (16). (This is a consequence of the fact that there are infinitely many non-equivalent sentences that can be substituted for S_1 .) Moreover, insofar as each of these completions says that Lincoln's assassination was an infringement of a right, each completion states a moral appraisal of the assassination. Thus there are infinitely many moral appraisals of this action. In addition, if we assume that for every completion \underline{s} of (16), either \underline{s} is true or the corresponding completion of

- (17) The assassination of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth did *not* infringe N_1 's moral right against N_2 that S_1 .

is true, we reach the conclusion that there are infinitely many *true* (i.e. *correct*) moral appraisals of Lincoln's assassination. For just as there are an infinite number of non-equivalent completions of (16), there are an infinite number of non-equivalent completions of (17). And just as each completion of (16) states a moral appraisal of the assassination, each completion of (17) also states a moral appraisal of that action.

Quite generally, for any fixed expression X that designates an action, there are infinitely many non-equivalent completions of both

(18) 'X infringed N_1 's moral right against N_2 that S_1 .'

and

(19) 'X did not infringe N_1 's moral right against N_2 that S_1 .'

Each of these completions states a moral appraisal of the action designated by X. Hence, there are infinitely many moral appraisals of any action we can name. Furthermore, if it is the case that for any completion \underline{s} of (18), either \underline{s} is true or the corresponding completion of (19) is true, there are also infinitely many *correct* moral appraisals of any action we can name.

1.3.2. Brandt's second definition

In *Ethical Theory*, Brandt offers a definition of moral absolutism that is somewhat different from the one that we have just been examining. What he specifically proposes is that moral absolutism is identical with the following claim:

(MA₄) There are no conflicting ethical opinions that are equally valid.¹⁷

Unfortunately, this characterization of absolutism appears to fall victim to a rather obvious objection. For it seems that even advocates of relativistic theories could accept MA₄. In particular, it appears that a proponent of moral subjectivism is actually *committed* to the truth of MA₄. As I pointed out in (1.2.1), if subjectivism is true, then (6) and (7) will be true :

(6) Whenever a speaker asserts a completion of

¹⁷Richard Brandt, *Ethical Theory*, p. 272.

(f₁₁) It would be morally right for N₁ to VP₁ ,

what he says is identical to what he would say by asserting

(f₁₂) The thought of N₁'s VP₁-ing arouses a feeling of approval in me.

(7) Whenever a speaker asserts a completion of

(f₁₃) It would be morally wrong for N₁ to VP₁ ,

what he says is identical to what he would say by asserting

(f₁₄) The thought of N₁'s VP₁-ing arouses a feeling of disapproval in me.

Let us suppose that an individual A states his ethical opinion about something by asserting a sentence \underline{s}_{11} of form (f₁₁). Let us also suppose that B states his ethical opinion about the same thing by asserting the corresponding sentence \underline{s}_{13} of form (f₁₃). Given moral subjectivism, what A says in asserting \underline{s}_{11} is that a certain thought arouses a feeling of approval in him. On the other hand, what B says in asserting \underline{s}_{13} is that the same thought arouses a feeling of *dis*approval in him (i.e. in B). But if this is what A and B are saying, they are not making contradictory claims; each is merely saying something about himself. Moreover, if they are not making contradictory claims, then the opinions that they are stating are not in conflict. Surely, though, if there are any conflicting ethical opinions at all, the opinion that A states in asserting \underline{s}_{11} conflicts with the opinion that B states in asserting \underline{s}_{13} . Hence, if moral subjectivism is correct, there are no conflicting ethical opinions. However, if ethical opinions never conflict, it follows that there are no conflicting ethical opinions that are equally valid. Thus, if moral subjectivism is correct, MA₄ is true.

33

The preceding argument seems to show that moral absolutism cannot be identified with MA₄. According to the argument, moral subjectivism and MA₄ are perfectly compatible; indeed, the argument maintains that the former is true only if the latter is. However, since subjectivism is a brand of moral relativism, it must be *incompatible* with MA₄ if absolutism and MA₄ are one and the same.

If Brandt were confronted with the reasoning that I have just set out, he would no doubt claim that it relies on quite a different conception of conflicting opinion than the one he had in mind when he proposed MA₄ as a statement of moral absolutism. Thus, he would say, moral subjectivism turns out to be genuinely incompatible with MA₄ when we adopt an interpretation of MA₄ based on his conception of what it is for people's ethical opinions to conflict.

In order to evaluate the adequacy of this reply, we must examine Brandt's views on conflicting ethical opinion. These views are set out in the following passage from *Ethical Theory*.

[S]uppose Mr. A makes an ethical statement, and Mr. B makes a different ethical statement. How shall we tell whether the two statements "conflict"? A sufficient condition of conflict is this: that both statements are about the *same subject* . . ., and the one applies to this subject an ethical predicate P, and the other applies to it the same ethical predicate prefaced by the English "not" or something that means or entails the same. For instance, one may say "is morally right" and the other may say "is not morally right" of the very same subject. But now, when do two ethical statements have the *same subject*? . . . [S]uppose Mr. A, a resident of the South Pacific, says it is right to bury one's father alive on his sixtieth birthday, irrespective of his state of health; and suppose I say this is not right. Are we talking about the same thing? Not necessarily. . . . Perhaps he is assuming that the body one will have in the next world will be exactly like the

kind one has just before departing this life (and hence, may think it advisable to depart before feebleness sets in); whereas I may think one has no further existence at all after one's earthly demise. . . . In this situation, it is only confusing to say that our ethical opinions "conflict." Let us say that two people are *talking about the same subject* only in the following situation. Let us suppose A and B make conflicting ethical predications about something or some kind of thing, ostensibly the same for both. But suppose further there is some property P that A more or less consciously believes this thing or kind of thing has, whereas B does *not* believe this. Further, let us suppose that if A *ceased* to believe this, he would cease to have the same ethical opinion about it but agree with B; and let us suppose that if B *began* to believe this (other things being equal), he would change his ethical opinion and agree with A. In this case, let us say that A and B are *not* appraising the same subject. But if there is no more-or-less conscious belief having the status described, then we shall say that they *are* talking about the same subject, and that their ethical opinions are conflicting.¹⁸

I believe that there are several very serious problems with the proposal that Brandt makes in the preceding passage. Indeed, these problems seem to me to be so profound that I can only conclude that Brandt has altogether failed to present a coherent account of conflicting ethical opinion. First of all, Brandt refers to various properties of *statements* and *speech acts* in order to explain what it is for *opinions* to conflict. Yet he never clearly specifies how statements, speech acts, and opinions relate to one another. Furthermore, he seems to slip back and forth between these notions without any awareness that he is doing so. Thus, when setting out a sufficient condition of conflict between ethical statements, he speaks of these statements "applying predicates" to things. But surely it is *people* who apply predicates to things. The application of a predicate to something is a speech act; and statements do not perform speech acts. Further confusions can be found in Brandt's

¹⁸*ibid.*, pp. 273 - 274.

description of the conditions under which two people talk about the same subject. There he seems to suggest (a) that two people talk about the same thing only when they apply conflicting ethical predicates to it, and (b) that an individual is always stating some opinion that he holds when he applies a predicate to something. However, there obviously are many cases in which two people talk about the same thing without applying any conflicting ethical predicates to it. They may talk about the same thing by applying compatible non-ethical predicates to it. Likewise, they may talk about the same thing when they merely discuss the question of whether a particular predicate applies to it. As for the relation between stating an opinion and applying a predicate to something, people very often apply predicates to things even when they do not think that the predicates are true of those things. In such cases their assertions simply don't correspond to their opinions.

Yet another ground for complaint is Brandt's failure to explicitly formulate any condition whose satisfaction is both necessary and sufficient for the presence of conflict between ethical *opinions*. What he does provide is a statement of a condition that is alleged to be *sufficient* for the existence of conflict between two ethical *statements*:

. . . both statements are about the *same subject* . . . , and the one applies to this subject an ethical predicate P, and the other applies to it the same ethical predicate prefaced by the English "not" or something that means or entails the same.¹⁹

Yet, Brandt never explains why this is merely a sufficient condition for conflict between ethical statements. Nor does he tell us how conflict between ethical statements relates to conflict between ethical opinions. Perhaps he

¹⁹/dem.

thinks two ethical opinions are in conflict when one can be expressed by an ethical statement that conflicts with some ethical statement that can be used to express the other. But can any pair of conflicting ethical opinions be expressed by a pair of ethical statements that satisfies the sufficient condition for conflict that Brandt has proposed? No answer to this question can be gleaned from Brandt's discussion.

The foregoing criticisms do not show that Brandt's conception of conflict between ethical opinions is inherently misguided. Brandt might be able to meet my objections by paying closer attention to the ways in which statements, speech acts, and opinions relate to one another. But even if Brandt could do this, he would not have succeeded in giving us a coherent formulation of the conditions under which ethical opinions conflict. In addition to the shortcomings I have mentioned thusfar, two further problems can be found in Brandt's discussion of conflicting ethical opinion. These problems undermine his account of the circumstances in which two individuals are appraising the same subject.

According to Brandt, when an individual A and an individual B make conflicting ethical predications about something that is ostensibly the same for both, they are making an appraisal about the same subject just in case there is no property P such that

- (i) A believes that the thing in question has P,
- (ii) B does not believe that it has P,
- (iii) if A ceased to believe that it had P, he would cease to have the same ethical opinion about it but would instead agree with B, and
- (iv) if B began to believe that it had P, he would change his

ethical opinion and agree with A.²⁰

In this explanation of the circumstances under which A and B appraise the same subject, it is clearly assumed that we already know what it is for A and B to make ethical predications about something that is "ostensibly the same for both". Indeed, unless we have this knowledge, the explanation cannot succeed. However, it is difficult to see how we could have the requisite knowledge without *already* understanding what it is for A and B to make appraisals about the same subject. When an individual says that A and B have made ethical predications about something that is ostensibly the same for both, he seems just to be saying this:

A has made an ethical appraisal about something, B has made an ethical appraisal about something, and it appears that, in making these appraisals, A and B were appraising the very same subject.

Thus, in order to know what it is for A and B to make ethical appraisals about something that is ostensibly the same for both, we have to know what it is for A and B to appear to be making appraisals about the same subject. But we obviously can't know what it is for people to *appear* to be making appraisals about the same subject unless we already understand what it is for them *actually* to be doing this. So, it would seem that we cannot know what it is for A and B to make ethical predications about something that is ostensibly the same for both without having an antecedent understanding of what it is for them to appraise the same subject. And, since Brandt's explanation of the circumstances under which two people appraise the same subject presupposes that we know what it is for those people to make ethical predications about something that is ostensibly the same for both, it also

²⁰*Idem.*

presupposes an understanding of the very thing that it is supposed to be explaining. Such an "explanation" is no explanation at all.

In order to set the stage for my final objection to Brandt's account of conflicting ethical opinion, let me repeat what he has to say about the conditions under which two people appraise the same subject. According to Brandt, when an individual A and an individual B make conflicting predications about something that is ostensibly the same for both, they are appraising the same subject if, and only if, there is no property P such that

- (i) A believes that the thing in question has P,
- (ii) B does not believe that it has P,
- (iii) if A ceased to believe that it had P, he would cease to have the same ethical opinion about it, but would instead agree with B, and
- (iv) if B began to believe that it had P, he would change his ethical opinion and agree with A.

Now then, Brandt puts forward this description of the circumstances under which A and B appraise the same subject in order to clarify what it is for an ethical opinion of A to be in conflict with an ethical opinion of B. Thus Brandt's purpose in setting out the conditions under which A and B appraise the same subject will be undermined if, in his formulation of these conditions, he has appealed to a notion that is no less in need of explanation than the notion of conflict between people's ethical opinions. However, a brief look at conditions (iii) and (iv) confirms the fact that Brandt has indeed appealed to just the sort of notion that he is not free to use. In these conditions, he talks about *agreement* between the ethical opinions of A and B. And, if the notion of *conflict* between people's ethical opinions requires explanation, so also does the notion of *agreement* between their ethical opinions. Conflict and

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agreement are two sides of the same coin. Thus, if (as Brandt assumes) we must know what it is for A and B to appraise the same subject in order to know what it is for them to have conflicting ethical opinions, we must also know this in order to know what it is for there to be agreement between the ethical opinions of A and B. But in that case, talk about agreement between the ethical opinions of A and B has no place in an account of what it is for A and B to appraise the same subject. Since Brandt employs such talk when describing the circumstances under which they appraise the same subject, his description is fatally flawed.

To sum matters up, I have been arguing that Brandt's account of conflicting ethical opinion is plagued by at least three major problems. First, Brandt mixes up talk about opinions, statements, and speech acts to such an extent that it is not really clear what conditions he is proposing for the existence of conflict between people's ethical *opinions*. Second, we can understand Brandt's explanation of what it is for two people to appraise the same subject only if we already know what it is for those people to make ethical appraisals about something that is "ostensibly the same for both." However, this knowledge itself presupposes an understanding of the conditions under which two people appraise the same subject. Thus, Brandt is giving us an explanation that can succeed only if we already understand the very thing that it purports to be explaining. Third, and last, Brandt makes an illegitimate appeal to the notion of agreement between people's ethical opinions in order to tell us what it is for people's ethical opinions to conflict. Since agreement and conflict are simply two sides of the same coin, it won't do to appeal to the former in an explanation of the latter. When taken together, the foregoing criticisms constitute an overwhelming case against the coherence of Brandt's account of conflicting ethical opinion. However, if Brandt does not have a coherent account of this notion, then it is not at all clear what he is proposing when he identifies moral absolutism with MA₄ :

(MA₄) There are no conflicting ethical opinions that are equally valid.

Moreover, as I showed at the beginning of this section, on one perfectly natural interpretation of what it is for opinions to conflict, an advocate of moral subjectivism could very happily accept MA₄. Yet an advocate of subjectivism is anything but a moral absolutist. Consequently, unless we can come up with an acceptable alternative to this interpretation of conflicting opinion, there is no reason to think that there is any reading under which MA₄ is a statement of moral absolutism.

CHAPTER 2

ABSOLUTISM AND UNIVERSAL MORAL STANDARDS

In *The Concept of Morals*, Walter Stace characterized the ethical relativist as one who "denies that there is a single moral standard which is equally applicable to all men at all times. . . ." ²¹ This conception of ethical relativism can also be found in the recent work of Philippa Foot and David Lyons. ²² If, as these philosophers claim, a moral *relativist* is one who *denies* the existence of any universally applicable standard of morality, a moral *absolutist* should be one who *affirms* the existence of such a standard. Thus, let us consider the following proposal: moral absolutism is identical with the claim that

(MA₅) There is a single moral standard which is equally applicable to all men at all times.

This characterization of absolutism is only as clear as MA₅ itself. And, unfortunately, MA₅ is both ambiguous and vague. So far as ambiguity goes, it is possible to read MA₅ in either of the following two ways :

²¹Walter Terence Stace, *The Concept of Morals*, excerpt reprinted in Paul Taylor, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 52-66

²²Philippa Foot, "Moral Relativism", in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, Michael Krausz and Jack W. Meiland, eds., pp. 152-166. David Lyons, "Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence", also in *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, pp. 209 - 228.

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- (a) There is one, and only one, (correct) moral standard, and that standard applies to everyone.
 - (b) There is one, and only one, (correct) moral standard that applies to everyone.

Furthermore, the expression "applies to everyone" is ambiguous. It can mean either

- (c) determines the correctness of everyone's moral judgments,

or

- (d) determines the moral status of everyone's behavior.

And even if we could decide which of these readings were appropriate, we would be left with the very vague term, "moral standard". Someone might claim that each of the Ten Commandments is a moral standard. But another might say that the conjunction of the Ten Commandments is a single moral standard. Thus, if one thinks that the Ten Commandments specify the totality of all moral obligation, one might say either that there are exactly ten correct moral standards or that there is exactly one correct moral standard (which has ten component propositions).

Despite the obvious ambiguity and vagueness of MA_5 , philosophers who are inclined to equate that statement with moral absolutism almost never bother to explain how they want MA_5 to be interpreted. Indeed, so far as I know, Fred Feldman is the only philosopher who has assigned an explicit interpretation to MA_5 .²³ In the following section, I introduce Feldman's interpretation and argue that, if MA_5 is read in the way he suggests, it cannot

²³Fred Feldman, *Introductory Ethics*, pp. 160 - 173.

plausibly be identified with moral absolutism. In section (2.2), I indicate how Feldman's interpretation might be modified to yield a new reading of MA_5 . Furthermore, I show that this new reading avoids some of the more obvious shortcomings of the interpretation provided by Feldman. However, in the final section of this chapter, I argue that my new interpretation of MA_5 can avoid an unacceptable degree of vagueness only by coming into conflict with the views of certain philosophers who are standardly acknowledged to be proponents of moral absolutism.

2.1. Feldman's Characterization of Moral Absolutism

2.1.1. An interpretation of MA_5

Fred Feldman's interpretation of MA_5 may be viewed as a statement about sentence schema F_1 :

(F_1) For any agent a and any time t , it is the case at t that a ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, S_1 .

In particular, we can paraphrase Feldman's interpretation of MA_5 as follows :

(MA_6) Some sentence schema that is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " is both eternal and non-trivially true.²⁴

If MA_6 is a satisfactory interpretation of MA_5 and moral absolutism is identical with MA_5 , we may also identify absolutism with MA_6 . In fact, this is precisely what Feldman proposes.²⁵

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁵ *idem.*

In order to determine the implications of Feldman's proposal, we must have some conception of

- (i) what it is for a sentence schema to be *eternal*,

and

- (ii) what it is for a sentence schema to be *non-trivially true*.

So far as (i) is concerned, let us in general take a sentence schema \underline{s} to be *eternal* just in case some completion of \underline{s} states the same proposition in all contexts of utterance. We may thus say that some completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " is an eternal sentence schema if, and only if, there is a sentence \underline{a} and a sentence schema \underline{s} such that \underline{s} is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ", \underline{a} is a completion simpliciter of \underline{s} , and \underline{a} states the same proposition in all contexts of utterance. So, if a given completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " is eternal, that partial completion of F_1 will have an important property in common with

- (1) If NP_1 is an even number, NP_1 is divisible by 2 without remainder.²⁶

that it does not share with

- (2) Until recently, I never liked N_1 's paintings.

²⁶When one completes a schema that contains occurrences of " NP_1 ", one replaces each occurrence of " NP_1 " with a noun phrase. Any noun phrase can be substituted for any occurrence of " NP_1 ". Thus the possible substituents for an occurrence of " NP_1 " comprise a broader class than the class consisting of the possible substituents for " N_1 ". The latter class is a proper subclass of the former.

Whenever we complete (1) by replacing both occurrences of "NP₁" with the same numeral, we form a sentence which states the same proposition in all contexts. However, no matter what expression we substitute for the occurrence of "N₁" in (2), the sentence that we form states different propositions in different contexts. This is due to the indexicality of the temporal adverb "recently" and the first-person pronoun "I".

On the assumption that moral absolutism is identical with MA₆, an absolutist is committed not only to the view that some S₁-completion of F₁ is eternal, but also to the view that some eternal S₁-completion of F₁ is *non-trivially true*.²⁷ We will return later to issues involving eternity; but for the moment let us focus our attention on the question of what it is for an S₁-completion of F₁ to be non-trivially true. Almost everyone would be willing to admit that the following sentence schema is true.

- (3) For any agent a and any time t, it is the case at t that a ought morally to VP₁ if, and only if, it is the case at t that a ought morally to VP₁.

Moreover, (3) is obviously a completion of F₁ with respect to "S₁". (We form (3) by replacing the occurrence of "S₁" in F₁ with an occurrence of "it is the case at t that a ought morally to VP₁".) Consequently, almost everyone would be willing to say that there is at least one S₁-completion of F₁ that is true.

But Feldman claims that (3) is only trivially true.²⁸ And this claim seems to be right. Thus, if moral absolutism is identical with MA₆ and (3) is the

²⁷I will often use the phrase, "S₁-completion of F₁", as an abbreviation for 'completion of F₁ with respect to "S₁".

²⁸*idem*.

only completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " that is true, moral absolutism is false. More generally, even if there turn out to be *many* true S_1 -completions of F_1 and, in addition, each of those S_1 -completions is eternal, if all such partial completions of F_1 are only trivially true, then absolutism will be false if it is identical with MA_6 .

As it turns out, however, we can quite easily show that

- (4) If there are any completions of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " that are both true and eternal, some of these S_1 -completions of F_1 are non-trivially true.

Furthermore, the following statement is a logical consequence of (4) and the fact that MA_6 is true just in case some true, eternal S_1 -completions of F_1 are non-trivially true :

- (5) If there are any completions of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " that are both true and eternal, then moral absolutism is true if it is identical with MA_6 .

I shall shortly set out a proof of (5). But before doing so, I want to explain why this proof is significant. Contrary to what one might think, its significance does not lie in the fact that its conclusion is important. By itself, the truth of (5) does not really have much importance. What is significant for our purposes is the reason *why* (5) is true. More explicitly, the particular proof of (5) that I will present is significant because it obviously *fails* to resolve *any* of the issues that separate moral absolutists from their opponents. The fact that it obviously fails to do this undermines the view that moral absolutism is identical with MA_6 .

2.1.2. Why MA_6 is not a satisfactory statement of moral absolutism

The identification of absolutism with MA_6 implies that, if one could show that some S_1 -completions of F_1 are both true and eternal, all that one would have to do in order to establish the truth of absolutism would be to demonstrate that some of those true, eternal S_1 -completions are non-trivially true. What is evident from my proof of (5) is that, if one could show that some S_1 -completions of F_1 are true and eternal, one could also show that some of those true, eternal S_1 -completions are non-trivially true *without* thereby establishing the truth of moral absolutism. Consequently, it is a mistake to take absolutism to be identical with MA_6 .

To put the matter another way, my proof of (5) shows that, in identifying moral absolutism with MA_6 , Feldman makes the same sort of mistake that a philosopher of religion would make if he identified theism with the claim that

- (6) There is a very powerful being who didn't prevent Secretariat from winning the Triple Crown.

According to this proposal about theism, if one could show that there is a very powerful being, all that one would have to do in order to prove the truth of theism would be to demonstrate that some such being didn't prevent Secretariat from winning the Triple Crown. But it is ludicrous to think that there are any circumstances in which every demonstration of this sort would be sufficient to establish the truth of theism.

Having now explained why my proof of (5) undermines the identification of moral absolutism with MA_6 , I shall present this proof without further delay. The argument begins with the observation that the following argument-form is valid :

(A)

- i. $(\underline{a}) (\underline{t}) (p \leftrightarrow q)$
- ii. r
- iii. $(\underline{a}) (\underline{t}) (p \leftrightarrow (r \ \& \ q))$

(Here "r" stands for any closed sentence or sentence schema; "p" and "q" stand for any sentences or sentence schemas which, if open, contain only "t" as an unbound variable.) For our purposes it will be important to bear in mind three facts about arguments of form (A). First, given that (A) is valid, any argument of that form will have a true conclusion if its premises are true. Second, if, in addition to having true premises, an argument of form (A) has a second premise that is non-trivially true, the conclusion of that argument will likewise be non-trivially true. Third, and last, if both the first and second premises of an argument of form (A) are eternal sentences or sentence schemas, the conclusion of that argument will also be eternal.

Now then, one can readily see that the following sequence of sentences and sentence schemas is an argument of form (A):

(B)

- (3) For any agent a and any time t, it is the case at t that a ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at t that a ought morally to VP_1 .
- ii. Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus.
- iii. For any agent a and any time t, it is the case at t that a ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus and it is the case that at t that a ought morally to VP_1 .

And, besides being an argument of form (A), (B) has a second premise which is both eternal and non-trivially true. It therefore follows from what

has been said about arguments of form (A) that if (3) is true and eternal, (B.iii) will be eternal and non-trivially true. Furthermore, (B.iii) is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ". (We form (B.iii) by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with the clause, "Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus and it is the case at t that a ought morally to VP_1 .") Consequently, if (3) is true and eternal, there is an eternal, non-trivially true S_1 -completion of F_1 . But (3) is itself an S_1 -completion of F_1 ; and surely (3) is true and eternal if any S_1 -completion of F_1 is true and eternal. We may therefore conclude that

- (4) If there are any completions of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " that are both true and eternal, some of these S_1 -completions of F_1 are non-trivially true.

From (4) it is only a short step to (5) :

- (5) If there are any completions of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " that are both true and eternal, then moral absolutism is true if it is identical with MA_6 .

As I pointed out above, (5) is a consequence of (4) and the fact that MA_6 is true just in case some true, eternal S_1 -completions of F_1 are non-trivially true.

This, then, is my proof of (5). And, to reiterate what I said just a few pages ago, the proof clearly does not resolve any issue that could possibly divide moral absolutists from their opponents. Anyone who denies absolutism is making an important claim about the nature of morality. But I have established the truth of (5) by appealing to facts that have no more to do with the nature of morality than Secretariat's Triple Crown victory has to do with the truth of theism. It is absurd to suppose that someone who doubts or denies the truth of theism might become convinced of its truth simply by being shown that if a very powerful being exists, that being didn't prevent

Secretariat from winning the Triple Crown. And it is likewise ridiculous to suggest that someone who either doubts or denies the truth of moral absolutism might become convinced that this doctrine is true just by being shown that

- (7) If (3) is both true and eternal, one can formulate an eternal, non-trivially true S_1 -completion of F_1 by conjoining

(B.ii) Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus

with the right-hand side of the biconditional in (3).

However, if moral absolutism and MA_6 were one and the same, this suggestion wouldn't be ridiculous at all. On the view that absolutism is identical with MA_6 , it is not sufficient for the truth of absolutism that some S_1 -completion of F_1 (such as (3)) be both true and eternal. In addition, some true, eternal S_1 -completion of F_1 must be *non-trivially* true. Hence, on the assumption that absolutism is identical with MA_6 , it makes perfect sense for an individual to doubt or deny absolutism if he believes (3) to be true and eternal but doubts or denies that there is an eternal, non-trivially true S_1 -completion of F_1 . And, since such an individual, believing (3) to be true and eternal, doubts or denies absolutism *only* because he doubts or denies that there is an eternal, *non-trivially* true S_1 -completion of F_1 , we would expect him to admit that absolutism is true once he is shown that (7) is true. Consequently, if moral absolutism and MA_6 were one and the same, it would make perfect sense to suggest that someone might become convinced of absolutism's truth simply by being shown that (7) is true. Yet we know that this suggestion is utterly absurd. Therefore, we must reject Feldman's proposal that moral absolutism is identical with the statement that

(MA_6) Some sentence schema that is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " is both eternal and non-trivially true.

On the other hand, it might be possible to make only minor changes in MA_6 which transform that statement into a proposition that can be identified with moral absolutism without falling prey to the objections that have just been made to the identification of absolutism with MA_6 . I am sure that Feldman would want to pursue this possibility. Indeed it is not difficult to imagine what sorts of changes he might want to make in MA_6 .

In order to explain and to concisely state the revised version of MA_6 that I think Feldman would want to identify with moral absolutism, it is necessary to pick out and give a name to a certain relation which holds between sentence schemas such as

(B.iii) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus and it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1

and

(3) For any any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 .

(B.iii) is what I shall call a *superfluous augmentation* of (3). In general,

Df₁: For any sentence schemas \underline{s}_1 and \underline{s}_2 , if \underline{s}_1 has the form

(A.i) $(\underline{a}) (\underline{t}) (p \leftrightarrow q)$,

then \underline{s}_2 is a *superfluous augmentation* of \underline{s}_1 if, and only if, \underline{s}_2 is not logically equivalent to \underline{s}_1 , and \underline{s}_2 is either formed by or logically equivalent to a sentence schema that is formed by conjoining a true sentence or sentence schema with the right-hand side of the biconditional in \underline{s}_1 .

The name "superfluous augmentation" is intended to reflect two facts about any sentence schema \underline{s}_2 which is a superfluous augmentation of a sentence schema \underline{s}_1 of the form

(A.i) (\underline{a}) (\underline{t}) ($p \leftrightarrow q$)

First, if \underline{s}_2 is a superfluous augmentation of \underline{s}_1 , it is an *augmentation* of \underline{s}_1 in the following sense: \underline{s}_1 implies that if we instantiate " \underline{a} " and " \underline{t} " in any completion of \underline{s}_1 , the truth of the right-hand side of the resulting biconditional is sufficient for the truth of the left-hand side; but \underline{s}_2 implies that some *further* substantial claim must be true if the left-hand side is to be true. To take an example, consider the following sentence schemas:

(8) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} would produce more utility by VP_1 -ing than by doing anything that would be incompatible with VP_1 -ing

(9) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, Hesperus is identical with Phosphorus and it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} would produce more utility by VP_1 -ing than by doing anything that would be incompatible with VP_1 -ing.

(9) is obviously a superfluous augmentation of (8). Now it follows from (8) that

(10) It is the case at present that Pavarotti ought morally to become a vegetarian if, and only if, it is the case at present that Pavarotti would produce more utility by becoming a vegetarian than he would by doing anything that would be incompatible with becoming a vegetarian.

And (10) implies that the truth of its own right-hand side is sufficient for the truth of its left-hand side. Consequently, (8) implies that the truth of

- (11) It is the case at present that Pavarotti would produce more utility by becoming a vegetarian than he would be doing anything that would be incompatible with becoming a vegetarian

is sufficient for the truth of

- (12) It is the case at present that Pavarotti ought morally to become a vegetarian

But (9) implies that something *further* must be true if (12) is to be true. According to (9), (12) is true only if (11) is true *and, in addition,*

- (B.ii) Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus.

In this example, then, (and in infinitely many others) (8) implies that the truth of a statement Q is sufficient for the truth of a statement P; and (9) *augments* this sufficiency condition by requiring not only that Q be true, but also that (B.ii) be true. It is for this reason that I call (9) an augmentation of (8).

Having now mentioned one of the two facts that the term "superfluous augmentation" is intended to reflect, let me turn briefly to the second fact. According to Df₁, if a sentence schema \underline{s} has the form (A.i), we can construct a superfluous augmentation of \underline{s} by conjoining a true sentence or sentence schema with the right-hand side of the biconditional in \underline{s} . But whenever we augment \underline{s} in this way, we always form a sentence schema that has the very same truth-value as \underline{s} itself. So, if \underline{s} is false, we never correct its deficiencies by conjoining a true sentence or sentence schema with the right-hand side of the biconditional in \underline{s} . And, conversely, if \underline{s} is true, such an augmentation of \underline{s} never introduces any deficiencies. My use of the adjective "superfluous" to refer to the result of such an augmentation of \underline{s} is intended to reflect the fact that we never correct or create any deficiencies by augmenting \underline{s} in this way.

By appealing to the notion of superfluous augmentation, we can generalize upon the specific problem that led to the rejection of MA_6 as a characterization of moral absolutism. That problem arose because the following fact is relevant to the truth of MA_6 even though it has no bearing at all on the truth of moral absolutism:

- (7) If (3) is both true and eternal, one can formulate an eternal, non-trivially true S_1 -completion of F_1 by conjoining

(B.ii) Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus

with the right-hand side of the biconditional in (3).

(For the reader's convenience, I now restate F_1 , MA_6 , and (3).)

- (F_1) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, S_1 .

- (MA_6) Some sentence schema that is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " is both eternal and non-trivially true.

- (3) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 .

One can readily see that the reason why (7) has no bearing on the truth or falsity of moral absolutism is that, by conjoining (B.ii) to the right-hand side of the biconditional in (3), we are merely forming an S_1 -completion of F_1 which is a superfluous augmentation of another S_1 -completion of F_1 . Generally speaking, it is irrelevant to the truth of absolutism that

- (13) For any sentence schema \underline{s} , if \underline{s} is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " and \underline{s} is both eternal and true, some superfluous augmentation of \underline{s} is an eternal, non-trivially true completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ".

Because (13) has absolutely no bearing on the truth or falsity of moral absolutism, the truth of (13) could not possibly settle any issue that might divide moral absolutists from their opponents. However, if moral absolutism were identical with MA_6 , the truth of (13) *would* settle such an issue. For if absolutism and MA_6 were identical, one could not show absolutism to be true merely by showing that there are true, eternal S_1 -completions of F_1 . Even if one established that there are such S_1 -completions, the truth or falsity of absolutism would hinge on the further issue of whether or not any of these S_1 -completions are *non-trivially* true. So, if moral absolutism were identical with MA_6 , this issue would be one that might very well divide absolutists from their opponents. But it is an issue that is definitively settled by the truth of (13): if it has been shown that some completions of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " are both eternal and true, it follows from (13) that there are eternal, non-trivially true completions of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ". Consequently, moral absolutism cannot be identified with MA_6 .

Stated in the most general terms, MA_6 cannot be regarded as an adequate statement of moral absolutism because, although (13)'s truth is relevant to the truth of MA_6 , it has no bearing whatever on the truth of absolutism.

2.2. Alternatives to MA_6

This general objection to the identification of moral absolutism with MA_6 could be side-stepped simply by deleting one word in MA_6 : "non-trivially". What remains after this excision is

(MA_7) Some sentence schema that is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " is both eternal and true.

Unlike MA_6 , MA_7 does not claim that there are any non-trivially true instances of F_1 . This being the case, whereas (13)'s truth has some bearing

on the truth of MA_6 , it is not relevant to the truth of MA_7 . Thus, our reason for rejecting the identification of moral absolutism with MA_6 does not undermine the view that absolutism is identical with MA_7 . Nevertheless, I do not think that Feldman would be very anxious to replace MA_6 with MA_7 .

2.2.1. The failure of MA_7 as an interpretation of MA_5

It will be recalled that Feldman takes the following claim to be a somewhat vague, though basically sound, characterization of moral absolutism.

(MA_5) There is a single moral standard which is equally applicable to all men at all times.

When he sets out MA_6 , he sees himself as only providing an interpretation of MA_5 , not as presenting an entirely new characterization of absolutism. Indeed, because he thinks that MA_5 does capture the essence of moral absolutism, it is reasonable to suppose that he would reject any view which identifies absolutism with a statement that cannot be considered a satisfactory interpretation of MA_5 . But the position that moral absolutism is identical with MA_7 is a view which identifies absolutism with just such a statement.

To see why this is so, let us first look at another statement that might be put forward as an interpretation of MA_5 :

(MA_8) Some sentence schema that is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " is a formulation of the single standard for determining which completions (simpliciter) of

F_2 It is the case at t that a ought morally to VP_1 .

are true.²⁹

(Once again, F_1 runs as follows :

(F_1) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, S_1 .)

Unless MA_8 is itself a reasonable interpretation of MA_5 , it is difficult to see how *any* satisfactory interpretation of MA_5 could begin with the following phrase :

Some sentence that is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 "

Indeed, it would seem that a statement which does begin in this way could only be considered a satisfactory interpretation of MA_5 in virtue of being a satisfactory interpretation of MA_8 . So, if MA_7 were a satisfactory interpretation of MA_5 , it first would have to be a satisfactory interpretation of MA_8 .

But MA_7 will be an adequate interpretation of MA_8 only if the following condition is satisfied:

(14) Under some conception of what it is for an S_1 -completion of F_1 to state the single standard for determining which completions of F_2 are true, being an S_1 -completion of F_1 that is both eternal and true is the same as being an S_1 -completion of F_1 that states the single standard for determining which completions of F_2 are true.

Furthermore, because F_1 has the form,

²⁹If a string \underline{a} contains free occurrences of the variables " \underline{a} " and " \underline{t} ", one completes \underline{a} by (i) replacing the free occurrences of " \underline{a} " in \underline{a} with occurrences of an expression that designates an agent, (ii) replacing the free occurrences of " \underline{t} " in \underline{a} with occurrences of an expression that designates a time, and (iii) making an appropriate substitution for each schematic term occurrence in \underline{a} .

(A.i) $(\underline{a}) (\underline{t}) (p \leftrightarrow q)$,

if (14) is satisfied, it should quite generally be the case that,

(15) For any name N of a schema of form (A.i) and any name L of the left-hand side of the biconditional named by N, the following is true :

'Under some conception of what it is for an S_1 -completion of N to state the single standard for determining which completions of L are true, being an S_1 -completion of N that is both eternal and true is the same as being an S_1 -completion of N that states the single standard for determining which completions of L are true.'

However, it is not difficult to construct counter-examples to (15). The following is a schema of form (A.i) :

(16) For any atom \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} is a plutonium ion if, and only if, S_1 .

And,

(17) It is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} is a plutonium ion.

is the left-hand side of the biconditional in (16). But the following claim will be false under any conception of what it is for an S_1 -completion of (16) to state the single standard for determining which completions of (17) are true :

(18) Being an S_1 -completion of (16) that is both eternal and true is the same as being an S_1 -completion of (16) that states the single standard for determining which S_1 -completions of (17) are true.

To verify that (18) is false under any conception of what it is for an S_1 -completion of (16) to state the single standard for determining which completions of (17) are true, we need only satisfy ourselves that some S_1 -completion of (16) is both eternal and true even though it can in no sense be said to state a *standard* for determining which completions of (17) are true. But surely the following is just such an S_1 -completion of (16) :

(19) For any atom a and any time t , it is the case at t that a is a plutonium ion if, and only if, it is the case at t that a is a plutonium ion.

(19) states the very same proposition in all contexts of utterance, and that proposition is a simple tautology. However, simple tautologies never constitute *standards* for determining the truth of anything.

Because (18) is false under any conception of what it is for an S_1 -completion of (16) to state the single standard for determining which completions of (17) are true, (15) is also false. Furthermore, since (14) is true only if (15) is and MA_7 is a satisfactory interpretation of MA_8 only if (14) is true, the fact that (15) is false means that MA_7 is *not* a satisfactory interpretation of MA_8 . But it has already been pointed out that MA_7 does not qualify as an acceptable interpretation of MA_5 unless it is a satisfactory interpretation of MA_8 . Hence, MA_7 does not constitute an acceptable interpretation of MA_5 . We thus see that the position that moral absolutism is identical with MA_7 is a view which identifies absolutism with a statement that cannot be considered acceptable as an interpretation of MA_5 . It is therefore reasonable to assume that Feldman would reject the claim that MA_7 is a correct characterization of moral absolutism.

2.2.2. The failure of MA_6 as an interpretation of MA_5

Interestingly enough, an argument which parallels the one that I have just presented shows that MA_6 fares no better than MA_7 as an interpretation of MA_5 . Just as (19) is both eternal and true even though it fails to state a standard for determining which sentences of form (17) are true, the following superfluous augmentation of (19) is eternal and *non-trivially* true even though it also fails to state such a standard :

- (20) For any atom a and any time t , it is the case at t that a is a plutonium ion if, and only if, Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus and it is the case at t that a is a plutonium ion.

Because (20) is eternal and non-trivially true even though it does not state a standard for determining which completions of (17) are true, being an eternal, non-trivially true S_1 -completion of (20) is not the same as being an S_1 -completion of (20) that states the single standard for determining which completions of (17) are true. And if these two properties are not the same, then the property of being an eternal, non-trivially true S_1 -completion of F_1 is also not identical with the property of being an S_1 -completion of F_1 that states the single standard for determining which completions of F_2 are true. But these latter properties would have to be identical if MA_6 were to be a satisfactory interpretation of MA_5 . Consequently, and contrary to what Feldman thinks, in identifying moral absolutism with MA_6 , one equates absolutism with a statement that cannot be considered acceptable as an interpretation of MA_5 .

What is particularly noteworthy about MA_6 's failure to constitute a satisfactory interpretation of MA_5 is that this failure can be linked to the same general fact that motivated my earlier objection to MA_6 as a

characterization of moral absolutism : whenever a sentence or sentence-schema \underline{s} is both eternal and true, if \underline{s} has the form,

(A.i) $(\underline{a}) (\underline{t}) (p \leftrightarrow q)$,

we can construct a superfluous augmentation of \underline{s} that is eternal and *non-trivially* true simply by conjoining *any* eternal, non-trivially true sentence with the right-hand side of the biconditional in \underline{s} . Given this fact, even where \underline{s} does not state any sort of standard, so long as it is both an eternal and a true instance of (A.i), we can transform it into an instance of (A.i) that is eternal and non-trivially true just by conjoining an eternal, non-trivially true sentence with the right-hand side of the biconditional in \underline{s} . However, if \underline{s} does not state any sort of standard to begin with, such a transformation will not in general produce a standard-stating instance of (A.i). Thus, the fact that some sentence or sentence-schema \underline{s} is an eternal, non-trivially true instance of (A.i) does not guarantee that \underline{s} states a standard of any sort. This being the case, since any S_1 -completion of

(F₁) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, S_1 .

is an instance of (A.i), it is utterly implausible that

(21) being an eternal, non-trivially true S_1 -completion of F_1

is the same as

(22) being an S_1 -completion of F_1 that states the single standard for determining which completions of

(F₂) It is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1

are true.

But if (21) is not identical with (22), MA_6 (the claim that some S_1 -completion of F_1 is eternal and non-trivially true) does not qualify as a reasonable interpretation of MA_5 (the claim that there is a single, universally applicable moral standard).

2.2.3. MA_9 : a new interpretation of MA_5

Although there are eternal, non-trivially true instances of (A.i) that do not state standards of any sort, it might be proposed that all such sentences or sentence-schemas are merely superfluous augmentations of eternal *trivially* true instances of (A.i). This suggestion is certainly compatible with the fact that (20) does not state any sort of standard, even though it is an eternal, non-trivially true sentence of form (A.i). For (20) is a superfluous augmentation of (19) ; and (19) is an eternal, trivially true instance of (A.i). Furthermore, if it is indeed the case that eternal, non-trivially true instances of (A.i) fail to state standards only when they are superfluous augmentations of eternal, trivially true instances of (A.i), then no objection analogous to the one that I raised against the use of MA_6 as an interpretation of MA_5 would apply to the use of the following statement as an interpretation of MA_5 :

(MA_9) Some sentence schema that is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " is eternal and non-trivially true, but is not a superfluous augmentation of any true completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " .

I argued that MA_6 is not acceptable as an interpretation of MA_5 because

(21) being an eternal, non-trivially true S_1 -completion of F_1

is not identical with

(22) being an S_1 -completion of F_1 that states the single standard for determining which completions of

(F₂) It is the case at t that a ought morally to
VP₁

are true.

And I claimed that (22) is distinct from (21) because

(a) these two properties are the same only if it is quite generally true that instances (A.i) state standards of some sort if they are eternal and non-trivially true,

and

(b) it is not in general the case that instances (A.i) state standards if they are eternal and non-trivially true.

If we were to argue in a parallel fashion against the adequacy of MA₉ as an interpretation of MA₅, we would say that MA₉ does not qualify as a satisfactory interpretation of MA₅ unless

(23) being an eternal, non-trivially true S₁-completion of F₁ that is not a superfluous augmentation of any true instance of
F₁

is the same as

(22) being an S₁-completion of F₁ that states the single standard for determining which completions of

(F₂) It is the case at t that a ought morally to
VP₁

are true.

We would then claim that

- (a) (23) and (22) are identical only if every eternal, non-trivially true instance \underline{s} of (A.i) states some sort of standard if \underline{s} is not a superfluous augmentation of any true instance of (A.i);

and

- (b) some eternal, non-trivially true instances of (A.i) fail to state a standard of any sort even though they are not superfluous augmentations of any true instances of (A.i).

However, (b) clearly contradicts the proposal that an eternal, non-trivially true instance \underline{s} of (A.i) fails to state any sort of standard only if \underline{s} is a superfluous augmentation of eternal, trivially true instances of (A.i). So, if this proposal is correct, we cannot show that MA_9 is unsatisfactory as an interpretation of MA_5 by means of an argument which parallels my objection to the use of MA_6 as an interpretation of MA_5 .

In addition to the fact that MA_9 has more promise than MA_6 as an interpretation of MA_5 , MA_9 is immune to the original criticism that I voiced against the use of MA_6 as a characterization of moral absolutism. As I earlier argued, absolutism cannot properly be identified with MA_6 because the following fact is relevant to the issue of whether or not MA_6 is true even though it has no bearing whatever on any issue that divides moral absolutists from their opponents :

- (13) For any sentence schema \underline{s} , if \underline{s} is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " and \underline{s} is both eternal and true, some superfluous augmentation of \underline{s} is an eternal, non-trivially true completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ".

But MA_9 is like moral absolutism in that (13) has no more bearing on the truth or falsity of MA_9 than it has on the truth or falsity of absolutism. Although

(13) guarantees that there is an eternal, non-trivially true S_1 -completion of F_1 if any completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " is both eternal and true, it neither tends to confirm nor to disconfirm the claim that, if there are eternal, non-trivially true S_1 -completions of F_1 , some of those S_1 -completions will not be superfluous augmentations of any true completions of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ". And, since (13) must tend to confirm or disconfirm this claim if it is to be relevant to the truth or falsity of MA_9 , (13) is *not* relevant to the truth or falsity of MA_9 .

2.2.4. When is a true S_1 -completion of F_1 non-trivially true ?

In spite of the fact that MA_9 escapes some of the problems that plague MA_6 as a characterization of moral absolutism, the real import of MA_9 is somewhat obscure. If MA_9 is true, then, for some sentence schema \underline{s} , \underline{s} is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ", and

- (a) \underline{s} is eternal,
- (b) \underline{s} is true, and
- (c) \underline{s} is not a superfluous augmentation of any true completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ".

However, the discovery that (a), (b), and (c) are satisfied by some S_1 -completion of F_1 is, by itself, not sufficient to establish the truth of MA_9 . For it may be that only *trivially* true S_1 -completions of F_1 satisfy (a) - (c); and MA_9 is true only if (a) - (c) are satisfied by an S_1 -completion of F_1 that is *non-trivially* true. But, supposing that we have some S_1 -completion of F_1 that satisfies (a) - (c), how do we tell whether the S_1 -completion is non-trivially, as opposed to trivially, true? The answer to this question is by no means obvious. And, until we can come up with some reasonably clear answer, the proposal that moral absolutism is identical with MA_9 still leaves us somewhat in the dark as to just what moral absolutism is supposed to be

A claim that Feldman makes when he introduces MA_6 as a statement of moral absolutism suggests a possible solution to the problem I have just raised. According to Feldman,

- (24) For any sentence schema \underline{s} , if \underline{s} is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " and \underline{s} is true, then \underline{s} is non-trivially true if, and only if, \underline{s} can be formed by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that *does not contain any moral expressions*.

As it stands, this proposal is very questionable. Nevertheless, a relatively minor revision will correct its most obvious shortcoming. To see what this shortcoming is, let us assume that (24) is true. Given this assumption, we could never form a non-trivially true S_1 -completion of F_1 by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with any clause containing the words, "ought morally". For "ought morally" is certainly a moral expression. Thus, if (24) is true, the following completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " is either trivially true or not true at all :

- (B.iii) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus and it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 :

However, I have already shown that if (B.iii) is true, it is non-trivially so (in virtue of the fact that "Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus" is non-trivially true).³⁰ Therefore, if (24) is true, (B.iii) is not true. Yet (B.iii) is surely true if there are any moral truths at all. Consequently, if (24) is true, there are no moral truths. This means that it is untenable to accept (24) and also to believe in the existence of moral truths. But, in advance of being presented

³⁰*Vide* pp. 67 - 69 *supra*.

with any compelling argument against the existence of moral truths, it is much more reasonable to believe that there are such truths than to accept (24). Hence, (24) is a highly suspect proposition.

Although (24) is clearly in conflict with the claim that there are moral truths, there is no apparent conflict between this claim and the following revision of (24) :

- (25) For any sentence schema \underline{s} , if \underline{s} is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " and \underline{s} is true but is not a superfluous augmentation of any true instance of F_1 , then \underline{s} is non-trivially true if, and only if, \underline{s} can be formed by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that does not contain any moral expressions.

It is perfectly consistent with (25) that (B.iii) is a non-trivially true S_1 -completion of F_1 . Even though (B.iii) cannot be formed by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that does not contain any moral expressions, if (B.iii) is a non-trivially true S_1 -completion of F_1 , it is also a superfluous augmentation of a true S_1 -completion of F_1 (viz. (3)). And, unlike (24), (25) has nothing to say about any sentence-schema that is a superfluous augmentation of a true S_1 -completion of F_1 . Therefore, the plausibility of (25) is not undermined by any argument that parallels the reasoning I just presented to illustrate the questionable nature of (24).

On the assumption that (25) is true, the import of MA_9 becomes reasonably clear. Given (25), MA_9 will be true if, and only if,

- (26) there is a sentence schema \underline{s} such that \underline{s} is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ", and
- (a) \underline{s} is eternal,

- (b) \underline{s} is true,
- (c) \underline{s} is not a superfluous augmentation of any true completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ", and
- (d) \underline{s} can be formed by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that does not contain any moral expressions.

Thus, if we suppose that the following statement of act utilitarianism is both eternal and true, MA_g will also be true:

- (8) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} would produce more utility by VP_1 -ing than by doing anything that would be incompatible with VP_1 -ing.

If (8) is eternal and true, then (8) obviously satisfies conditions (a) and (b). Furthermore, it is plain both that (8) is not a superfluous augmentation of any true S_1 -completion of F_1 and that (8) can be formed by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that does not contain any moral expressions (there is no moral expression in "it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} would produce more utility by VP_1 -ing than by doing anything that would be incompatible with VP_1 -ing"). Thus (8) also satisfies conditions (c) and (d).

On the other hand, even if each of the following two S_1 -completions of F_1 is both eternal and true, the fact that they are eternal and true does not guarantee the truth of MA_g :

- (3) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 .
- (27) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a}

ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at t that it is morally impermissible for a not to VP_1 .

Like (8), (3) and (27) are not superfluous augmentations of any true completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ". However, when we form (3), we replace the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that contains the expression, "ought morally"; and, when we form (27), we replace the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that contains the expression, "morally impermissible". But "ought morally" and "morally impermissible" are obviously moral expressions. So, even if (3) and (27) are each eternal and true, neither can be formed by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that does not contain any moral expressions. Thus, they each fail to satisfy a condition whose satisfaction is necessary for the truth of MA_g .

2.3. The Inadequacy of MA_g as a Statement of Moral Absolutism

Although (25) clarifies the import of MA_g , it also undermines the identification of moral absolutism with MA_g . For several philosophers who are standardly taken to be proponents of moral absolutism are committed to the denial of (26). And, as I have already pointed out, (26) and MA_g are equivalent if (25) is true. So, on the assumption that (25) is true, if moral absolutism were identical with MA_g , several philosophers who are standardly labelled moral absolutists would turn out to be committed to the denial of absolutism. This constitutes a strong case for either rejecting (25) or abandoning the identification of absolutism with MA_g . But if we reject (25) in order to save the view that MA_g is identical with moral absolutism, we are left with only an obscure characterization of absolutism.

W.D. Ross is one of the most prominent philosophers who is committed to the denial of (26) even though he is almost universally considered to be an

advocate of moral absolutism. In the discussion that follows I shall give a brief sketch of Ross's moral theory and then explain why this theory fails to commit Ross to the truth of (26). I shall then go on to argue that Ross is not merely not committed to the truth of (26), he is actually opposed to its truth.

2.3.1. An outline of Ross's Theory

In *The Right and The Good*, Ross proposes that what an agent ought morally to do is a function of the relative stringency of his *prima facie* moral duties.³¹ Roughly speaking, to say that an agent has a *prima facie* moral duty to VP₁ is to say that there is some moral consideration which favors his VP₁-ing. And Ross thinks that a given fact constitutes a moral consideration in favor of an agent's VP₁-ing if that fact implies that the agent would do one of the following things by VP₁-ing :

- (a) fulfill one of his explicit or implicit promises;
- (b) repay a past kindness that someone has shown him;
- (c) make up for a past wrong that he has done;
- (d) help to bring about a more just distribution of pleasure and pain;
- (e) improve his own character;
- (f) improve someone else's character or further someone else's interests;
- (g) avoid injuring someone else's interests.

Thus, let us take it to be a fact that Dr. Smith has promised her husband that she will pick up a roll of stamps from the post office on her way home from

³¹W.D. Ross, *The Right and The Good*, pp. 19 - 20 and p. 41.

work. Since this fact implies that Smith would fulfill one of her promises by picking up a roll of stamps on her way home, it constitutes a moral consideration in favor of her picking up a roll of stamps on her way home. And because there is a moral consideration in favor of her doing this, she has a *prima facie* moral duty to do it.

But even though Dr. Smith has a *prima facie* moral duty to buy a roll of stamps on her way home, it does not follow that she ought morally to do this. For it may be that she has another *prima facie* moral duty that conflicts with and is more stringent than her *prima facie* moral duty to buy the stamps. Imagine, for example, that one of Smith's patients needs an emergency operation, that Smith is the only available doctor who has mastered all of the surgical techniques that the operation requires, and, finally, that she will not have an opportunity to get to the post office before it closes if she operates on her patient. In this situation there clearly are moral considerations in favor of her performing the operation. Hence, she has a *prima facie* moral duty to do this. Furthermore, since she will be unable to get to the post office before it closes if she operates on her patient, her *prima facie* duty to perform the operation conflicts with her *prima facie* duty to pick up a roll of stamps on her way home. But it also seems clear that the former *prima facie* duty is more important, more stringent, than the latter *prima facie* duty. And Ross believes that it is never the case that an agent ought morally to do the less stringent of two conflicting moral duties. Thus, in the situation now under consideration, it is not the case that Smith ought morally to buy stamps at the post office on her way home.

Generally speaking, Ross may be characterized as someone who maintains that

(R) The following sentence-schema is true:

- (28) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} 's *prima facie* moral duty to VP_1 is more stringent than any of \underline{a} 's *prima facie* moral duties that conflict with \underline{a} 's *prima facie* moral duty to VP_1 .³²

Given (R), Dr. Smith ought morally to operate on her patient just in case her *prima facie* duty to do this is more stringent than any of her *prima facie* duties that are in conflict with it. We have already seen that Smith has at least one *prima facie* duty (viz. her *prima facie* duty to buy a roll of postage stamps) that *is* in conflict with her *prima facie* duty to operate. But Smith's *prima facie* duty to buy stamps is *less* stringent than her *prima facie* duty to operate. So, if all of her other *prima facie* duties that conflict with her *prima facie* duty to operate are likewise less stringent than this duty, Smith ought morally to operate on her patient.

Having now looked at some basic elements of Ross's ethical theory, let us see why this theory does not seem to commit Ross to the view that

- (26) there is a sentence schema \underline{s} such that \underline{s} is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ", and

- (a) \underline{s} is eternal,
- (b) \underline{s} is true,
- (c) \underline{s} is not a superfluous augmentation of any true completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ", and

³²An agent's *prima facie* moral duty to VP_1 conflicts with his *prima facie* moral duty to VP_2 if, and only if, he could not carry out his *prima facie* moral duty to VP_1 without thereby preventing himself from carrying out his *prima facie* moral duty to VP_2 .

- (d) \underline{s} can be formed by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that does not contain any moral expressions.

2.3.2. Ross's lack of commitment to MA_9

It is not difficult to see that Ross *is* committed to the view that some completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " satisfies at least conditions (b) and (c). For he believes that (28) is true, and it is evident that (28) is an S_1 -completion of F_1 that is *not* a superfluous augmentation of any true S_1 -completion of F_1 . Furthermore, since Ross quite clearly uses the terms "ought morally", "*prima facie* moral duty", and "more stringent than" as if context plays no role in determining the properties or relations that they represent, it is reasonable to claim that he is committed to the view that (28) is an instance of F_1 that satisfies (a) as well as (b) and (c). This claim is reasonable simply because it is difficult to see how (28) could fail to be eternal unless one or more of these terms stands for a different property or relation in some contexts than it stands for in others.

But what of condition (d)? Well, given that

- (i) (28) is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ", and
- (ii) Ross is committed to the view that (28) satisfies (a) - (c),

if we could show that (28) satisfies (d), we could conclude that Ross is committed to the view that some completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " satisfies (a) - (c) *and* (d). However, there is no hope of showing that (28) satisfies (d). In fact, it is plain that (d) is *not* satisfied by (28). If it were, (28) could be formed by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that does not contain any moral expressions. But the clause in (28) that corresponds to the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 contains three occurrences of the

term "*prima facie* moral duty". And this term is undoubtedly a moral expression.

In virtue of the fact that (28) fails to satisfy (d), Ross's commitment to the view that (28) satisfies (a) - (c) does not indicate any commitment on his part to the position that some completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " satisfies (a) - (c) and (d). And, if no commitment to the latter position is indicated by Ross's commitment to the former view, I can think of no reason whatever for maintaining that Ross is committed to the truth of (26). However, I have already noted that (26) is equivalent to MA_9 if the following statement is true :

- (25) For any sentence schema \underline{s} , if \underline{s} is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " and \underline{s} is true but is not a superfluous augmentation of any true instance of F_1 , then \underline{s} is non-trivially true if, and only if, \underline{s} can be formed by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that does not contain any moral expressions.

So, if (25) is true, Ross's lack of commitment to the truth of (26) implies a similar lack of commitment to the truth of MA_9 .

2.3.3. Ross's commitment to the denial of MA_9

It might be claimed, of course, that I have given only an incomplete description of Ross's theory, and that a more complete account of his position would show that he is really committed to the truth of (26). But I can see no reason for thinking that a further investigation of Ross's theory will reveal any such commitment. On the contrary, when we delve more deeply into the theory, we unearth statements which suggest that Ross is actually committed to the view that (26) is *false*. For example, Ross maintains that there is no perfectly general and exceptionless criterion for determining whether or not a

given *prima facie* moral duty is more stringent than the *prima facie* moral duties that conflict with it.³³ But such a criterion *would* exist if

(29) For some sentence schema \underline{s} such that \underline{s} is a completion with respect to " S_1 " of

(F_3) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} 's *prima facie* moral duty to VP_1 is more stringent than any of \underline{a} 's *prima facie* moral duties that conflict with \underline{a} 's *prima facie* moral duty to VP_1 , if, and only if, S_1 ,

(a) \underline{s} is true,

(b) \underline{s} is not a superfluous augmentation of any true completion of F_3 with respect to " S_1 ", and

(c) \underline{s} can be formed by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_3 with a clause that does not contain any moral expressions.

So, Ross is committed to the view that (29) is false. Furthermore, we have already seen that Ross believes that

(R) The following sentence-schema is true:

(28) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} 's *prima facie* moral duty to VP_1 is more stringent than any of \underline{a} 's *prima facie* moral duties that conflict with \underline{a} 's *prima facie* moral duty to VP_1 .

And it is a consequence of (R) that

³³*ibid.*, p. 41

(30) if (26) is true, then (29) is true.

Ross is therefore committed to (30). But from (30) and the statement that (29) is false, it follows that (26) is also false. Hence, given that Ross is committed both to (30) and to the claim that (29) is false, he is committed to the further claim that (26) is false.

To sum up where matters stand at this point, Ross is not merely someone who has no commitment to the truth of (26), he is committed to the denial of this statement. The fact that he is not committed to (26) shows that, if (25) is true, he is also not committed to the claim that

(MA_g) Some sentence schema that is a completion of F₁ with respect to "S₁" is eternal and non-trivially true, but is not a superfluous augmentation of any true completion of F₁ with respect to "S₁".

But if MA_g is identical with moral absolutism, we would expect Ross to be committed to the truth of MA_g. For, as was earlier remarked, Ross regards himself as, and is standardly acknowledged to be, a proponent of moral absolutism. We thus reach the conclusion that, if (25) is true and MA_g is identical with moral absolutism, a philosopher who is generally thought of as a moral absolutist really has no commitment at all to the truth of absolutism. Worse still, because Ross is actually committed to the denial of (26), he turns out to be *opposed* to absolutism if (25) is true and moral absolutism is identical with MA_g. Yet, to say the very least, it is extremely difficult to believe that someone who regards himself as, and is standardly acknowledged to be, a proponent of absolutism is really opposed to that doctrine. We must therefore conclude either that (25) is false or that moral absolutism cannot be identified with MA_g.

37

If we reject the identification of moral absolutism with MA_9 , we also call into question the view that absolutism is identical with MA_5 :

(MA_5) There is a single standard of morality that is equally applicable to all men at all times.

For, at the moment, MA_9 is the best interpretation of MA_5 that we have. If anyone still wants to identify moral absolutism with MA_5 , he must show either that

(i) it is a mistake to categorize Ross as a proponent of moral absolutism,

or that

(ii) although Ross cannot accept MA_9 , he is committed to the truth of some other interpretation of MA_5 .

However, I do not see any real prospect for making a convincing case in favor of either (i) or (ii).

The alternative to rejecting the identification of moral absolutism with MA_9 is to deny

(25) For any sentence schema \underline{s} , if \underline{s} is a completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " and \underline{s} is true but is not a superfluous augmentation of any true instance of F_1 , then \underline{s} is non-trivially true if, and only if, \underline{s} can be formed by replacing the occurrence of " S_1 " in F_1 with a clause that does not contain any moral expressions.

(25), of course, was originally introduced to clarify MA_9 . Where a sentence-schema \underline{s} is a true completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 " but is not a superfluous augmentation of any completion of F_1 with respect to " S_1 ", (25)

tells us how to determine whether \underline{s} is trivially or non-trivially true. But if we reject (25), we seem to be left with no reliable procedure for making this determination. And, if we identify moral absolutism with MA_g yet don't have a reliable way of distinguishing trivial from non-trivial truth, the line between absolutism and alternative views becomes rather difficult to discern.

It might be said that we can always rely on our intuitions when it comes to making distinctions between trivially and non-trivially true S_1 -completions of F_1 . But our intuitions are clear only within a limited domain of cases. They do indeed tell us that, if either of the following S_1 -completions of F_1 is true, it is only trivially true :

- (3) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 .
- (27) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at \underline{t} that it is morally impermissible for \underline{a} not to VP_1 .

But what of (28) ?

- (28) For any agent \underline{a} and any time \underline{t} , it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, it is the case at \underline{t} that \underline{a} 's *prima facie* moral duty to VP_1 is more stringent than any of \underline{a} 's *prima facie* duties that conflict with \underline{a} 's *prima facie* moral duty to VP_1 .

I have no definite intuition about this sentence-schema: it is just not clear to me whether, if (28) is true, its truth is trivial or non-trivial.

If our intuitions are all that we have to rely on in distinguishing the trivially true from the non-trivially true and they fail us when we consider (28), then we simply can't tell whether Ross's theory is or isn't compatible with

MA₉. Furthermore, if MA₉ is identical with moral absolutism and the compatibility of Ross's theory with MA₉ is questionable, this theory's compatibility with absolutism is likewise uncertain. However, if it is really uncertain whether the theory can be reconciled with moral absolutism, it is difficult to understand the fact that

- (i) Ross is usually categorized as a proponent of absolutism, and
- (ii) no one (to my knowledge, at least) has ever suggested that there is a real question as to whether he should be so categorized.

Moreover, Ross is by no means an exceptional case. Many philosophers with apparently unimpeachable absolutist credentials have subscribed to theories that are at best questionably compatible with MA₉. Though I have appealed only to Ross's views in formulating my objections to the identification of moral absolutism with MA₉, I could just as well have appealed to any form of moral intuitionism. Thus, I would maintain that Moore's moral philosophy can't be reconciled with MA₉ when we interpret the notion of trivial truth in accordance with (25). And if we simply rely on our intuitions in distinguishing the trivially true from the non-trivially true, it will be unclear whether Moore's theory is compatible with MA₉.

Insofar as there are real questions about the possibility of reconciling MA₉ with numerous moral theories that are standardly thought to belong to the absolutist tradition, we should be highly suspicious of the suggestion that absolutism and MA₉ are one and the same doctrine. Furthermore, this suspicion should extend to the identification of moral absolutism with MA₅. For at present, MA₉ is the best interpretation that we have of MA₅. And though we could go on to formulate new interpretations, I think that our

energies would be best spent by turning our attention to an entirely different approach to the characterization of moral absolutism.

CHAPTER 3

MORAL ABSOLUTISM AND CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVES

In his recent book, *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*, J. L. Mackie identifies moral absolutism with the doctrine that

(MA₁₀) All agents have categorical moral reasons.³⁴

Insofar as Mackie equates absolutism with MA₁₀, he conceives of absolutism as a thesis about the *source* of people's moral reasons. Loosely speaking, when an agent has a reason for doing something, his reason is *categorical* just in case it is not founded on his present desires. Stated in a more precise fashion,

(Df₁) If the fact that N₁ would VP₂ by VP₁-ing is a reason for N₁ (not) to VP₁, then that fact is a *categorical* reason for N₁ (not) to VP₁ if, and only if, its being a reason for N₁ (not) to VP₁ is not contingent upon N₁'s already having a desire, intention, or plan whose fulfillment would be promoted by N₁'s (not) VP₂-ing.³⁵

Kant's name immediately comes to mind when one thinks about categorical reasons. When Kant discusses the motive of duty, he gives several

³⁴J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*, pp. 27-29.

³⁵*ibid.*, p. 29.

illustrations of reasons that he takes to be categorical.³⁶ He suggests, for example, that if a person would help to relieve the distress of others by donating money to a particular cause, the fact that he would help to relieve their distress by making such a donation is a reason for him to do so. Moreover, it is a reason for him to do so even if he has no philanthropic inclinations and no self-interested desires whose satisfaction would be promoted by his helping to relieve the distress of others.

The facts that Kant cites as categorical reasons are facts that seem intuitively to be moral reasons as well. However, Mackie points out that a reason could be categorical without being moral.³⁷ Suppose, for instance, that it will be in Zelda's interest in a year's time to know how to program computers. It might be maintained that the *mere* fact that it will then be in her interest to know how to do this gives her a reason to do things that will lead to her having this knowledge a year from now. On this view Zelda has a reason to, say, enroll in a programming course next semester whether or not she presently has any desire, intention, or plan whose fulfillment would be promoted by her taking such a course. Thus, according to the view under consideration, the fact that Zelda has a reason to enroll in a programming course is not contingent on her wanting her future interests to be furthered or on her wanting to be able to program computers. In short, if Zelda has a reason to enroll in a course that will teach her programming skills merely in virtue of the fact that it will be in her interest to have those skills, she has a *categorical* reason to enroll in such a course. *However*, insofar as her reason

³⁶Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, pp. 65 - 67.

³⁷Mackie, *op. cit.*, p. 28. See also Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, pp. 33 - 46 ; Philippa Foot, "Reasons for Action and Desires", in *Virtues and Vices*, pp. 148 - 156.

for enrolling in the class is *just* that, by taking it, she can acquire the programming ability that it will be in her interest to have, her reason for enrolling is *not* a moral one.

We can see this by noting that, were Zelda motivated to take the course simply because she realizes that doing this will enable her to acquire certain skills that it will be in her interest to have, we would not say that her taking the course was an action that had moral worth. We would only say that, in taking the class for this reason, she was being *prudent*. Thus, the fact that Zelda's taking the course will help her to acquire an ability that, in a year's time, it will be in her interest to have is a prudential, not a moral, reason. And it seems perfectly compatible with the existence of categorical reasons that all such reasons be prudential rather than moral. Therefore, the existence of *moral* categorical reasons does not appear to follow from the existence of categorical reasons.

If this is indeed the case, the following question arises: what differentiates *moral* categorical reasons from categorical reasons that are *not moral*? Or, to put the matter more generally, what is it to be a moral, as opposed to a non-moral reason?

I consider this question in the final section of the present chapter. In that section, I evaluate the suggestion that the distinction between moral and non-moral reasons is captured by the distinction that Thomas Nagel has drawn between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons.³⁸ I argue that the moral/non-moral distinction is not identical with the agent-neutral/agent-relative

³⁸Thomas. Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, pp. 79 - 98 ; Nagel, "The Objectivity of Ethics" (an unpublished paper presented at Tufts University in 1980).

distinction. Indeed, I contend that the latter distinction is not even coherent. Furthermore, I try to show that there are serious flaws in the general theory of reasons within which Nagel has tried to define the agent-neutral/agent-relative dichotomy.

At any rate, it seems to me that we can evaluate the adequacy of Mackie's characterization of moral absolutism even if we lack a precise account of the difference between moral and non-moral reasons. In the next section of this chapter, I try to show that Mackie makes a mistake when he identifies moral absolutism with the proposition that

(MA₁₀) All agents have categorical moral reasons.

In particular, I argue that MA₁₀ is entirely consistent with a theory that is unquestionably relativistic. Although I reject MA₁₀ as a statement of moral absolutism, I formulate a new definition of absolutism (in section (3.2)) which implies that there are categorical moral reasons. I then proceed to show that this definition identifies absolutism with a statement that is genuinely incompatible with moral nihilism and with each of the relativistic theories that I have considered. And, since it gives every appearance of being compatible with the views of moral philosophers who are standardly categorized as absolutists, I suggest that we adopt it as a statement of moral absolutism.

3.1. The Inadequacy of MA₁₀ as a Statement of Moral Absolutism

Although I think it is reasonable to maintain that moral absolutism would be false if there were no categorical moral reasons, I don't believe that anyone commits himself to the truth of moral absolutism simply by accepting MA₁₀. Hence, I don't think that moral absolutism is identical to MA₁₀. One reason why I don't believe that the mere acceptance of MA₁₀ commits one to

the truth of absolutism is that I don't see any incompatibility between MA₁₀ the doctrine that I have called "cultural relativism"---"CR", for short. According to CR, the following sentence schema is true :

- (f₆) If N₂ says that N₁ ought morally to VP₁, what N₂ is saying is that N₁ would violate the norms of N₂'s society by not VP₁-ing.

It is clear that moral absolutism would be false if CR were correct. Thus, if I am right in saying that CR and MA₁₀ are perfectly compatible with each other, it won't do to identify absolutism with MA₁₀.

Let me now try to explain why I take CR and MA₁₀ to be compatible propositions. In recent years, many philosophers have proposed that "ought"-statements are analyzable into statements about reasons. According to this view, when N₁ says that N₂ ought morally to VP₁, N₁ implies that N₂ has a moral reason to VP₁. So far as I can tell, there is no conflict whatever between CR and this conception of "ought"-statements. Of course, since CR maintains that moral "ought"-statements are statements about social norms, an advocate of CR who accepts the view that these "ought"-statements can be analyzed into statements about moral reasons will no doubt want to reduce statements about these reasons to statements about social norms. And it is reasonable to suggest that any proponent of CR who advocates such a reduction would look favorably upon some principle very similar to CR₁ :

- (CR₁) Whenever a speaker asserts a completion of sentence schema (s₁), the proposition that he states is the same as the one he would state by asserting the corresponding completion of sentence schema (s₂) :

- (s₁) The fact that N₁ would VP₂ by VP₁-ing is a moral reason for N₁ not to VP₁.

- (s₂) Given that N₁ would VP₂ by VP₁-ing, N₁ would be promoting N₁'s compliance with some of my society's norms by not VP₁-ing.

It will be noted that the first of the following two sentences is a completion of (s₁), while the second is the corresponding completion of (s₂):

- (1) The fact that Muammar al-Qaddafi would kill innocent people by detonating an atomic bomb in Times Square is a moral reason for him not to do this.
- (2) Given that Muammar al-Qaddafi would kill innocent people by detonating an atomic bomb in Times Square, he would be promoting his compliance with some of my society's norms by not doing this.

Therefore, it is a consequence of CR₁ that the proposition I would state by asserting (1) is the same as the proposition I would state by asserting (2). Furthermore, I take it to be necessary that I would state a true proposition by asserting (2) just in case I would be stating true propositions by asserting sentences (3) and (4):

- (3) Muammar al-Qaddafi would kill innocent people by detonating an atomic bomb in Times Square.
- (4) Muammar al-Qaddafi would promote his compliance with some of my society's norms by not killing innocent people.

Thus, if we assume CR₁ to be correct, I would be stating a true proposition by asserting (1) if, and only if, I would be stating true propositions by asserting (3) and (4). But it seems quite clear that I *would* be stating true propositions if I asserted this pair of sentences. (After all, it would be well nigh impossible for anyone to set off an atomic bomb in the middle of Manhattan without killing innocent people. And, given that certain norms of

my society prohibit the killing of innocent people, Qaddafi would obviously be promoting his compliance with some of my society's norms (by *not* killing innocent people.) This being the case, if CR_1 were correct, I would be stating a true proposition by asserting sentence (1).

Indeed, not only would I be stating a true proposition by asserting (1), the truth of the proposition that I would state by asserting that sentence is not contingent upon the truth of the following statement :

- (5) Muammar al-Qaddafi has some desire, intention, or plan whose fulfillment would be promoted by his not killing innocent people.

On the assumption that CR_1 is correct, the truth of the proposition that I would state by asserting (1) is guaranteed by the truth of the propositions that I would be stating by asserting sentences (3) and (4). Consequently, if CR_1 were correct, the truth of the proposition that I would state by asserting (1) is contingent upon the truth of (5) only if the truth of the propositions I would state by asserting (3) and (4) depends on the truth of (5). But it is quite plain that I would state true propositions by asserting (3) and (4) regardless of whether Muammar al-Qaddafi has any desire, intention, or plan whose fulfillment would be furthered by his not killing innocent people. Even if we were to discover that he has no such desire, intention, or plan, the fact would remain that Qaddafi couldn't fail to kill innocent people by detonating an atomic bomb in Times Square. Similarly, no matter what Qaddafi's desires, intentions, and plans happen to be, he would promote his compliance with at least some of my society's norms by not killing innocent people. Thus, it is not merely the case that I would state true propositions by asserting sentences (3) and (4) ; the truth of the propositions that I would state by asserting those sentences does not depend on the truth of (5). From this we may conclude that if CR_1 were correct,

- (6) I would state a true proposition by asserting sentence (1), and the truth of the proposition that I would state by asserting that sentence is not contingent upon (5)'s being true.

Now then, to say that the truth of a proposition isn't contingent upon (5)'s being true is just to say that its truth isn't contingent upon Muammar al-Qaddafi's having some desire, intention, or plan whose fulfillment would be promoted by his not killing innocent people. Thus, on the assumption that CR_1 is correct,

- (7) I would state a true proposition by asserting sentence (1) and the truth of the proposition that I would state by asserting that sentence is not contingent upon Qaddafi's having some desire, intention, or plan whose fulfillment would be promoted by his not killing innocent people.

Furthermore, by asserting (1) I would be stating the following proposition : the fact that Qaddafi would kill innocent people by detonating an atomic bomb in Times Square is a moral reason for him not to do this. So, given that (7) would be true if CR_1 were correct, if CR_1 were correct, I would make a true statement by asserting (8) :

- (8) The fact that Qaddafi would kill innocent people by detonating an atomic bomb in Times Square is a moral reason for him not to do this, and its being a moral reason for him not to do this is not contingent upon Qaddafi's having some desire, intention, or plan whose fulfillment would be promoted by his not killing innocent people.

Of course, nothing is a *moral reason* unless it's a *reason*. Consequently, I would make a true statement by asserting (8) only if I would make such a statement by asserting (9) :

- (9) The fact that Qaddafi would kill innocent people by detonating an atomic bomb in Times Square is a reason for him not to do this, and its being a reason for him not to do this is not contingent upon Qaddafi's having some desire, intention, or plan whose fulfillment would be promoted by his not killing innocent people.

Since

- (a) I would make a true statement by asserting (8) only if I would make such a statement by asserting (9)

and

- (b) I would make a true statement by asserting (8) if CR_1 were true,

it follows that I would make a true statement by asserting (9) if CR_1 were true.

From here it is only a short step to the result that if CR_1 were true, Qaddafi would have at least one categorical moral reason. As I noted at the start of this chapter, Df_1 is a true sentence schema :

- (Df_1) If the fact that N_1 would VP_2 by VP_1 -ing is a reason for N_1 (not) to VP_1 , then that fact is a *categorical* reason for N_1 (not) to VP_1 if, and only if, its being a reason for N_1 (not) to VP_1 is not contingent upon N_1 's already having a desire, intention, or plan whose fulfillment would be promoted by N_1 's (not) VP_2 -ing.

Because Df_1 is true, I would state a true proposition by asserting the following completion of Df_1 :

- (10) If the fact that Qaddafi would kill innocent people by

detonating an atomic bomb in Times Square is a reason for him not to do this, then that fact is a categorical reason for Qaddafi not to detonate an atomic bomb in Times Square if, and only if, its being a reason for him not to do this is not contingent upon his having a desire, intention, or plan whose fulfillment would be promoted by his not killing innocent people.

Given that I would state a true proposition by asserting (10), it follows that I would state a true proposition by asserting (11) if I would state true propositions by asserting (8) and (9) :

- (11) The fact that Qaddafi would kill innocent people by detonating an atomic bomb in Times Square is a categorical moral reason for him not to do this.

Moreover, we have already established that I would state true propositions by asserting (8) and (9) if CR_1 were true. So, on the assumption that CR_1 is true, I would state a true proposition by asserting (11). But if I would state a true proposition by asserting (11), it is clear that I would be making a true statement if I said that Qaddafi has a categorical reason not to detonate an atomic bomb in Times Square. Thus, on the assumption that CR_1 is true, Qaddafi has at least one categorical moral reason.

The argument that has brought us to this conclusion about Muammar al-Qaddafi can easily be modified to yield a parallel conclusion about William F. Buckley. If we replace the occurrences in the preceding argument of "Muammar al-" and "Qaddafi" with occurrences of "William F." and "Buckley", respectively, we formulate an argument for the following statement :

On the assumption that CR_1 is true, Buckley has at least one categorical moral reason.

Our new argument about Buckley is just as sound as the original one about Qaddafi. Moreover, once we see how to transform the original argument into a parallel one about Buckley, we can easily go on to transform the original into a parallel argument about about any agent whatever. Each of these derived arguments will be as sound as the one about Qaddafi. This being the case, we may assert the following conclusion : on the assumption that CR_1 is true, all agents have categorical moral reasons. In other words, on the assumption that CR_1 is true, MA_{10} is true. However, I have already pointed out that CR_1 is entirely compatible with cultural relativism (CR). Thus, there is no conflict between MA_{10} and a doctrine that is unquestionably incompatible with moral absolutism. This suffices to show that moral absolutism cannot be identified with MA_{10} .

3.2. A New Definition of Absolutism

Although it won't do to identify moral absolutism with MA_{10} , I believe that a strong case can be made for identifying this doctrine with a statement that implies the existence of categorical moral reasons. In particular, I think that it is reasonable to identify moral absolutism with the following statement :

(MA₁₁)MORAL ABSOLUTISM

I. Sentence schema (F-1) is true :

(F-1) If N₂ were to say that N₁ ought morally to VP₁, the propositions that N₂ would be stating and presupposing are identical to the propositions that N₃ would be stating and presupposing if N₃ were to say that N₁ ought morally to VP₁ ;

II. Sentence schema (F-2) is true :

(F-2) If N₂ were to say that N₁ ought morally to VP₁, what N₂ would be saying would be correct only if N₁ had a categorical moral reason to VP₁ ; and

III. Some completions of sentence schema (F-3) are true :

(F-3) If N₂ were to say that N₁ ought morally to VP₁, what N₂ would be saying would be correct.

It is not difficult to show that MA₁₁ is incompatible with moral subjectivism (MS), cultural relativism (CR), and Harman's relativism (HR). Indeed, all of these theories conflict with clause (I) in MA₁₁. Consider MS, for example. It follows from this doctrine that sentence schema (f₃) is true :

(f₃) If N₂ said that N₁ ought morally to VP₁, what N₂ would be saying is that the thought of N₁'s not VP₁-ing arouses a feeling of disapproval in N₂ .

Now, if (f₃) is true, then each of the following completions of that schema is also true :

- (12) If Ayatollah Khomeini said that Jane Fonda ought morally to wear a chador when she appears in public, what Khomeini would be saying is that the thought of Fonda's not wearing a chador when she appears in public arouses a feeling of disapproval in him.
- (13) If Tom Hayden said that Jane Fonda ought morally to wear a chador when she appears in public, what Hayden would be saying is that the thought of Fonda's not wearing a chador when she appears in public arouses a feeling of disapproval in him.

Given that (12) and (13) are both true if MS is true, it follows that the following completion of (F-1) is false if MS is true :

- (14) If Khomeini were to say that Fonda ought morally to wear a chador when she appears in public, the propositions that Khomeini would be stating and presupposing are identical to the propositions that Hayden would be stating and presupposing if he were to say that Fonda ought morally to wear a chador when she appears in public.

Briefly put, (14) will be false if MS is true because, if that doctrine is true,

- (a) Khomeini would be stating a proposition about himself, but wouldn't be stating one about Hayden, if he said that Fonda ought morally to wear a chador in public ; and
- (b) Hayden would be stating a proposition about himself, but wouldn't be stating one about Khomeini, if he said that Fonda ought morally to wear a chador in public .

Although (14) will be false if MS is true, (14) will be *true* if MA_{11} is true ; for (14) is a completion of (F-1), and, given MA_{11} , (F-1) is a true sentence schema. We thus reach the conclusion that moral subjectivism conflicts with MA_{11} .

Furthermore, it is clear that arguments which are almost identical to the one that has just led us to this conclusion will establish that both cultural relativism and Harman's relativism are incompatible with MA_{11} . Stated in the most general way, the reason why MS, CR, and HR all conflict with MA_{11} is that

- (i) each of these three theories implies that people are either stating or presupposing propositions about themselves whenever they say that N_1 ought morally to VP_1 , and
- (ii) under none of the three theories is it the case that when two people say that N_1 ought morally to VP_1 , each is stating or presupposing about the other what he is stating or presupposing about himself.

Thus, if HR were true and both N_2 and N_3 said that N_1 ought morally to VP_1 , N_2 would be presupposing that N_1 accepts the same conventions that N_2 accepts, and N_3 would be presupposing that N_1 accepts the same conventions that N_3 accepts. However, neither N_2 nor N_3 would be presupposing what the other presupposes.

Let us now turn our attention to clause (II) of MA_{11} :

II. Sentence schema (F-2) is true :

(F-2) If N_2 were to say that N_1 ought morally to VP_1 , what N_2 would be saying would be correct only if N_1 had a categorical moral reason to VP_1 ..

We have just seen that HR is incompatible with clause (I) of MA_{11} . But HR *also* conflicts with clause (II). Harman maintains that all of an individual's moral reasons stem from his intentions. In particular, the intentions that generate an individual's moral reasons are intentions to adhere to moral

conventions. Thus, according to Harman, N_1 has a moral reason to VP_1 if, and only if, by VP_1 -ing, N_1 would promote N_1 's compliance with some convention that he intends to adhere to. But if moral reasons are hooked up with intentions in this way, it is evident that they aren't categorical. Harman, then, is committed to the proposition that there are *no* categorical moral reasons. Nevertheless, he does think that people often would be saying something correct if they asserted that a particular agent ought morally to act in a certain way. This being the case, Harman is committed to the proposition that sentence schema (F-2) is *not* true. In short, his views about the nature of moral reasons commit him to the denial of clause (II) in MA_{11} .

As Harman himself has noted, the brand of moral relativism that he advocates is closely related to Hare's prescriptivism.³⁹ Like Harman, Hare maintains that an individual's moral reasons have their source in the ethical principles that he intends to abide by. Thus, Hare would say that if an individual i sincerely intends to live his life in accordance with general principles that never require any person to come to the aid of another, i has no moral reason to help others when they are in need.⁴⁰ Insofar as Hare regards moral reasons as stemming from intentions, he too will be committed to the denial of clause (II) in MA_{11} .

It will be noted that although Harman's relativistic theory conflicts with both clause (I) and clause (II) of MA_{11} , we can easily modify his brand of relativism to make it compatible with (I), but still in conflict with (II). As it stands, HR claims (in part) that the following sentence schema is true :

³⁹Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended", *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 84 (1975), p. 10.

⁴⁰Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, chp. 6, esp. pp. 104 - 105.

(f₉) If N₂ says that N₁ ought morally to VP₁, then, in saying this, N₂ is

- (a) presupposing that the moral conventions that N₁ intends to adhere to are the same as those that N₂ intends to adhere to, and
- (b) stating that, given the moral conventions that N₁ intends to adhere to, it would be *unreasonable* for N₁ *not* to VP₁.

Clearly, it is the presence of (a) in (f₉) that brings HR into conflict with clause (I) of MA_{1,1}. So, if we delete (a) in (f₉) (and, for the sake of parity, from (f₇) and (f₈) as well)⁴¹, we get a theory that is compatible with (I). However, this revision does not involve any modification of HR's position on the source of moral reasons. Therefore, if we remove (a) from (f₇) - (f₉) but make no further changes in HR, we formulate a doctrine (call it "HR*") that is incompatible with (II). This incompatibility with (II) is quite important. For (i) it is intuitively clear that HR* is a relativistic theory, and (ii) HR* is just as compatible with clause (III) of MA_{1,1} as it is with clause (I). Thus, there is at least one form of moral relativism that conflicts with MA_{1,1} only because it is incompatible with (II). From this it follows that the mere conjunction of (I) and (III) does not constitute an adequate formulation of moral absolutism.

Now that we have seen the importance of the role that (II) plays in MA_{1,1}, it is time to turn our attention to (III):

⁴¹(f₇) is the part of HR that is concerned with what a person is saying when he claims that it would be morally right of N₁ to VP₁. (f₈) is the part of HR that is concerned with what a person is saying when he claims that it would be morally wrong of N₁ to VP₁. If one wants to maintain that no presupposition about shared conventions is implicit in saying that N₁ ought morally to VP₁, one presumably will also want to maintain that no such presupposition is implicit either in saying that it would be morally right of N₁ to VP₁ or in saying that it would be morally wrong of N₁ to VP₁.

III. Some completions of sentence schema (F-3) are true :

(F-3) If N_2 were to say that N_1 ought morally to VP_1 , what N_2 would be saying would be correct.

The presence of this statement in MA_{11} is merely intended to ensure that MA_{11} is incompatible with moral nihilism. Since it follows from (III) that some positive moral appraisals are correct, both radical and simple moral nihilism are ruled out. And, as the latter version of nihilism is plainly consistent with clauses (I) and (II), it is obvious that we must not identify moral absolutism with the mere conjunction of (I) and (II).

Given that MA_{11} is genuinely incompatible both with moral nihilism and with each of the various forms of moral relativism that I have mentioned in this dissertation, it seems to me that a reasonably strong case has been made for identifying moral absolutism with MA_{11} . Of course, I have not shown that MA_{11} is compatible with the views of philosophers such as Plato, Kant, Sidgwick, Moore, Prichard, and Ross. But I don't see any obvious reason why any of these moral theorists would object to the three propositions in MA_{11} . Indeed, I am tempted to say that their writings indicate that they tacitly accepted these propositions. Be that as it may, the burden of proof seems clearly to lie with those who would object to the identification of absolutism with MA_{11} .

Before we move on to other matters, it will be useful to employ the clauses in MA_{11} in making some general comments on moral facts. Let us begin by giving a definite interpretation to the following sentence schema :

(17) There's an absolute fact of the matter as to whether N_1 ought morally to VP_1 .

In particular, let us say that

(Df₂) There's an absolute fact of the matter as to whether N_1 ought morally to VP_1 if, and only if, (a) clauses (I) and (II) of $MA_{1,1}$ are true, and (b) one, and only one, of the following is correct :

- (a) N_1 ought morally to VP_1 .
- (b) It is not the case that N_1 ought morally to VP_1 .

Armed with this definition, we can make some clear substantive claims about ethics. First, since we have already seen that the conjunction of (I) and (II) will not be true if any of the following relativistic doctrines are true,

moral subjectivism

cultural relativism

Harman's relativism

Hare's prescriptivism,

it follows that if any of these forms of relativism are true, no completion of (17) will be true. Or, putting the matter loosely, if any version of moral relativism is true, there is never any absolute fact of the matter in ethics. Of course, if there's never any *absolute* fact of the matter in ethics, two possibilities remain : either there are no moral facts at all, or there are such facts, but all of them are *relative*. The first possibility is just a characterization of moral nihilism which is ambiguous between radical and simple nihilism. The second alternative will be realized if either (I) or (II) is false but some completions of (F-3) are true :

(F-3) If N_2 were to say that N_1 ought morally to VP_1 , what N_2 would be saying would be correct.

Whether one is a relativist or an absolutist, one may hold either that there is *always* a moral fact of the matter or that there is *sometimes* a moral fact of the matter. It is important to bear in mind that an absolutist need not be committed to the former view. Thus, a proponent of absolutism can admit that in many, perhaps even in most, cases, there is no fact of the matter. Thus, when someone trots out Sartre's tired example about the young Frenchman who has to choose between supporting his mother and taking up arms against the Germans,⁴² we should realize that this case is quite irrelevant to the truth or falsity of absolutism. The absolutist can agree with Sartre that there is no principle that is capable of deciding the issue. Indeed, intuitionists such as Prichard and Ross would be happy to go along with Sartre on this point. However, to say that there are some instances in which morality is indeterminate is quite different from saying that there are never any facts of the matter about moral issues.

3.3. When Is a Reason a Moral Reason ?

In MA₁₁, I have used the expression "moral reason" without attempting to explain what distinguishes moral reasons from non-moral ones. At one time, I thought that Nagel had provided precisely the explanation that I wanted. In his book, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Nagel defined a purely formal distinction between *objective* reasons and *subjective* reasons.⁴³ More recently, he has called objective reasons "agent-neutral" reasons and subjective reasons "agent-relative" reasons.⁴⁴ Although Nagel never explicitly says that his distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons is the same as the

⁴²Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, pp. 24 - 26.

⁴³Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, pp. 79 - 98.

⁴⁴Nagel, "The Objectivity of Ethics", pp. 7 - 9.

distinction between moral and non-moral reasons, the examples that he uses to illustrate the former distinction strongly suggest something very much like identity. Moreover, if there is no very close connection between the two distinctions, then one can only wonder what prompted Nagel to bother with the agent-neutral/agent-relative dichotomy. I am now convinced that there really is no connection whatever between Nagel's distinction and the difference between moral and non-moral reasons. However, I think that it is interesting to see how a distinction which at first seemed to yield insight ended up yielding nothing at all.

3.3.1. Nagel's conception of reasons

In order to fully understand Nagel's interpretation of the basic distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, it is necessary to have some acquaintance with the central thesis of Nagel's general theory of reasons. This thesis may be formulated as follows:

(P₁) Where p is a proposition and a is a sentence that states p, a states a reason when it states p if, and only if, p is true and there is a sentence β such that

(a) β states p,

(b) the subject of β refers to a possible event,
and

(c) a true sentence is formed when we substitute the predicate of β for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in

(F) Everyone has reason to promote any event that Pred₁.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, pp. 47 - 56.

The basic import of P_1 is most easily grasped by looking at a few examples of its application. To begin, let us suppose that General Pinochet, head of Chile's military government, is attending a reception at an embassy in Santiago when the embassy is attacked by guerillas who oppose his regime. The guerillas subdue the forces guarding the embassy and capture everyone at the reception. They then present Pinochet with a list of prisoners in Chilean jails and demand that he secure the release of all prisoners on the list. If Pinochet fails to do this, the guerillas will execute him and all their other captives. On the other hand, if he does what the guerillas demand, they will release him and the others captured at the embassy.

Given the situation just described, the following sentence surely seems to state a reason for Pinochet to secure the release of the prisoners on the list presented to him by his captors:

- (18) General Pinochet's securing the release of the prisoners on the guerillas' list would prolong his life.

And it might be argued that our intuition that this sentence states a reason is supported by P_1 , Nagel's general thesis concerning the conditions under which sentences state reasons. For (18) clearly states a proposition (let us call it " π_{18} ") which is true in the scenario I set out in the preceding paragraph. Furthermore, one might well hold that there is a sentence $\underline{\beta}$ such that

- (a) $\underline{\beta}$ states π_{18} .
- (b) the subject of $\underline{\beta}$ refers to a possible event, and
- (c) a true sentence is formed when we substitute the predicate of $\underline{\beta}$ for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in
 - (F) Everyone has reason to promote any event that Pred₁.

For, in the first place, (18) itself states π_{18} . Secondly, (18)'s subject ("General Pinochet's securing the release of the prisoners on the guerillas' list") clearly refers to a possible event. Thirdly, on the face of it, the following sentence is quite plausible.

(19) Everyone has reason to promote any event that would prolong his life.⁴⁶

And (19) results from substituting (18)'s predicate for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in

(F) Everyone has reason to promote any event that Pred₁.

So, according to Nagel's account of when a sentence states a reason, (18) appears to be a reason-stating sentence in the hypothetical situation where Pinochet is being held captive by guerillas who will kill him and all others who attended the embassy reception, unless he secures the release of the prisoners on the list presented to him by his captors.

Moreover, it might be maintained that, in the same situation, Nagel's theory of reasons supports the claim that the following sentence also states a reason:

⁴⁶One can, of course, have a reason to do something and still have an equally strong, or even a stronger, reason not to do it. This being the case, it does not follow from the fact that someone has a reason to do what will prolong his life that he does not have a good reason not to do what will prolong his life. Thus, even if everyone has a reason to promote events that will prolong his life, it may be perfectly rational for some persons to knowingly refrain from doing what is necessary to prolong their own lives.

For a brief discussion of the question of whether everyone really does have reason to promote events that will prolong his life, see section (3.1.4).

- (20) General Pinochet's securing the release of the prisoners on the guerillas' list would prolong someone's life.

For if we suppose that the hypothetical circumstances I have described actually obtain, then π_{20} , the proposition stated by (20), is true. In addition, since the subject of (18) refers to a possible event, and (18)'s subject is identical to the subject of (20), (20)'s subject must also refer to a possible event. Finally, it may seem to some that a true sentence is formed by using (20)'s predicate to complete

- (F) Everyone has reason to promote any event that Pred_1 .

In other words, some may hold that everyone has reason to promote any event that would prolong someone's life. And if this contention is correct, then, according to P_1 , (20) states a reason in the hypothetical situation where Pinochet and others have been captured by a group of guerillas who will execute them just in case Pinochet fails to secure the release of all the prisoners on the list the guerillas presented to him.

3.3.2. Agent-neutral reasons and agent-relative reasons

Having now set out some examples that illustrate the application of P_1 and, in so doing, elucidate this basic thesis of Nagel's theory of reasons, I turn to that part of his theory which deals with the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons.⁴⁷ The essentials of Nagel's proposal regarding this distinction are summarized by the following three principles:

- (P_2) A reason is agent-relative, if, and only if, it is stated by a sentence

⁴⁷I return to P_1 in section (3.1.4). There I argue that P_1 is radically mistaken.

- (a) whose subject refers to a possible event,
and
- (b) whose predicate contains a *free agent-variable*.

(P₃) A reason is agent-neutral if, and only if, it is stated by a sentence

- (a) whose subject refers to a possible event,
and
- (b) whose predicate does not contain a *free agent-variable*.

(P₄) A reason is agent-neutral if, and only if, it is not agent-relative.⁴⁸

Clearly the critical concept used in P₂ and P₃ is that of a *free agent-variable*. To illustrate the difference between sentences whose predicates contain free agent-variables and sentences whose predicates do not contain such variables, Nagel asks us to imagine that "G. E. Moore finds himself in the path of an oncoming truck, and concludes that he has reason to remove himself If he is asked *what* reason he has to get out of the way, he may say (among other things) . . ." that

(21) the act will prolong G. E. Moore's life;

or that

(22) the act will prolong his life;

or that

⁴⁸*ibid.*, p. 90-94.

(23) the act will prolong someone's life.⁴⁹

Nagel asserts that the predicate of (22) contains a free agent-variable, while the predicates of (21) and (23) do not. He explains that (22)'s predicate contains a free agent-variable because, when this predicate is substituted for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in

(F) Everyone has reason to promote any event that Pred₁,

the result,

(24) Everyone has reason to promote any event that will prolong his life,

is a sentence in which a term in (22)'s predicate (namely "his") functions as a variable that is bound by "everyone," a term that is not contained in the predicate of (22).⁵⁰ It is easily seen, however, that when the occurrence of Pred₁ in F is replaced by the predicate of (21), the resulting sentence,

(25) Everyone has reason to promote any event that will prolong G.E. Moore's life,

is not one in which a term in (21)'s predicate is bound by the quantifier "everyone". Similarly, in

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

⁵⁰ Insofar as the quantifier "everyone" implicitly ranges over agents, if it binds some term in a given predicate, that predicate is said to contain an *agent-variable*. Thus, since the pronoun "his" in (22)'s predicate is bound by "everyone" when that predicate replaces the occurrence of Pred₁ in F, "his" is an agent-variable in the predicate of (22). Furthermore, as the expression in (24) that binds "his" is not itself contained in (22)'s predicate, "his" is said to be *free* in that predicate. Hence, in "will prolong his life," the predicate of (22), "his" is a free agent-variable.

- (26) Everyone has reason to promote any event that will prolong someone's life,

"everyone" binds no term in "will prolong someone's life" (i.e., in the predicate of (23)). Therefore the predicates of (21) and (23) do not contain free agent-variables.⁵¹

On the basis of this explanation of why the predicate of (22) contains a free agent-variable while the predicates of (21) and (23) do not, it appears that the basic distinction between predicates that do and predicates that do not contain free agent-variables is captured by the following general principle:

- (P₅) In any sentence \underline{a} , the predicate G of \underline{a} contains a free agent-variable if, and only if, when G is substituted for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in schema F, an expression in G, is bound by the quantifier "everyone."

However, comments that Nagel makes after his initial discussion of free agent-variables suggest that P₅ is not quite accurate. He says that, in addition to using sentences (21) - (23) to respond to a request for Moore's reason for removing himself from the path of the oncoming truck, one might use the following sentence:

- (27) The act is one which will prolong the life of its agent.

And, according to Nagel, whether or not (27)'s predicate contains a free agent-variable depends on how one reads the sentence.⁵² If it is taken to say what (22) says about Moore's getting out of the truck's way, its predicate contains a

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 92.

free agent-variable. Under this interpretation, says Nagel, (27) states a agent-relative reason. However, he goes on to say, there is a second reading of (27) which is such that, if (27) states a reason under this reading, the reason it states is agent-neutral. And, when (27) is given this reading, its predicate does *not* contain a free agent-variable.

Since Nagel's notion of a free agent-variable is such that a sentence's predicate may contain this type of variable under one reading of the sentence though not under another, P_5 is not a satisfactory statement of the conditions in which predicates contain free agent-variables. The problem is that P_5 does not take different interpretations of sentences into account. Given this principle there is no question of (27)'s having one reading under which its predicate contains a free agent-variable and another reading under which its predicate fails to contain such a variable. According to P_5 , (27)'s predicate simply doesn't contain a free agent-variable. For when we use the predicate of (27) to replace the occurrence of Pred_1 in F , we derive

- (28) Everyone has reason to promote any event that is one which will prolong the life of its agent.

And it is clear that in this sentence the quantifier "everyone" binds no term in (27)'s predicate -- i.e., in "is one which will prolong the life of its agent."

The following principle seems as plausible a candidate as any to overcome the shortcomings of P_5 .

- (P_6) For any sentence \underline{a} and any proposition \underline{p} stated by \underline{a} , the predicate of \underline{a} contains a free agent-variable when \underline{a} is interpreted as stating \underline{p} if, and only if, there is a sentence \underline{b} such that

- (a) \underline{b} states \underline{p} , and

- (b) when the predicate of β is substituted for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in schema F, an expression in that predicate is bound by the quantifier "everyone."

Given P_6 , the predicate of sentence (27), will, as Nagel claims, contain a free agent-variable when it is interpreted to say what (22) says about Moore's removing himself from the path of the truck that is heading towards him. For when (27) is interpreted in this way, the proposition it states is identical with the proposition stated by (22). And, as we have already seen, if the predicate of (22) is used to complete schema F, the pronoun "his" in that predicate is bound by the quantifier "everyone."

Moreover, it might be claimed that, when (27) is given the second interpretation mentioned by Nagel, the proposition it then states is not stated by any sentence whose predicate will contain a term bound by "everyone" when that predicate is substituted for the occurrence of Pred₁ in F. If this claim is correct, then, consonant with what Nagel claims, there will be an interpretation of (27) under which its predicate does not contain a free agent-variable.

Nevertheless, P_6 is unacceptable. The problem arises from Nagel's suggestion that there are readings of

(29) The act will help his family

under which its predicate fails to contain a free agent-variable as well as readings under which its predicate contains such a variable.⁵³ To see why this is problematic, let us consider some arbitrary interpretation i of (29) under

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 93.

which (29)'s predicate does *not* contain a free agent-variable. The proposition (I'll call it π_{29}) that (29) states under \underline{j} is clearly one that is stated by a sentence $\underline{\beta}$ which is such that, when the predicate of $\underline{\beta}$ is substituted for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in schema F, an expression in that predicate is bound by the quantifier "everyone." For (29) itself states π_{29} ; and when its predicate is substituted for the the occurrence of "Pred₁" in F, the term "his" in (29)'s predicate is bound by "everyone". This being the case, it follows straightforwardly from P₆ that (29)'s predicate contains a free agent-variable when (29) states π_{29} . And, since (29) states π_{29} under \underline{j} , the predicate of (29) contains a free agent-variable under \underline{j} . But this result contradicts our initial assumption that (29) does not contain such a variable under \underline{j} .

The preceding argument demonstrates that P₆ is incompatible with Nagel's claims about the occurrence of free agent-variables in predicates. However, it may be that, in trying to find a principle compatible with all that Nagel says about free agent-variables, we are engaged in a Quixotic quest. In fact, I suspect that this is the case. For there is a basic confusion in Nagel's discussion of the conditions under which predicates contain free agent-variables. When he attempts to distinguish a reading under which a sentence's predicate doesn't contain a free agent-variable from a reading under which that sentence's predicate does contain such a variable, he does so by referring to the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons. But this is putting the cart before the horse. For Nagel is supposed to be defining the agent-neutral/agent-relative distinction in terms of the distinction between predicates that don't contain free agent-variables and predicates that do. It is, among other things, the circularity in Nagel's attempt to set out the conditions under which predicates contain free agent-variables which suggests that there simply is no clear way to state these conditions.

Though there seems to be no way to make sense of *everything* that Nagel says about free agent-variables, his discussion of sentences (21) - (23) is quite coherent. Moreover, P_5 is a straightforward generalization of his reasons for claiming that the predicate of (22) contains a free agent-variable, while the predicates of (21) and (23) do not. Thus we will perhaps be most charitable to Nagel if we take P_5 to state his basic position on the difference between predicates that contain free agent-variables and predicates that fail to contain such variables. So let us ignore everything in Nagel that is incompatible with P_5 and assume that this principle provides an adequate account of the conditions under which predicates contain free agent-variables.

Now that we have a reasonably clear picture of what Nagel has in mind when he talks about agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, let us consider how the distinction between these two types of reasons is related to the distinction between moral and non-moral reasons. One possibility is that the agent-neutral/agent-relative distinction is identical to the moral/non-moral distinction. If this were so, we would have a positive account of what it is for a reason to be moral. In short, we could say that a reason is moral just in case it can be stated by a sentence with (a) a subject that refers to a possible event and (b) a predicate that doesn't contain a free agent-variable. However, in the discussion that follows I will argue that the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons is not the same as the distinction between moral and non-moral reasons. Moreover, if my arguments are sound, they will not merely establish that the distinctions in question are not identical. They will show that, to the extent that we can make sense of Nagel's distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, we can conceive both of agent-neutral reasons that are non-moral and of moral reasons that are agent-relative.

Though I do not believe that the distinction between moral and non-moral reasons is identical to the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, our intuitions about *some* cases tend to confirm this identification. For example, in normal circumstances we would intuitively say that Smith's reason for giving blood is non-moral if he is motivated to give by his recognition of the fact that he will impress his girlfriend by doing so. Thus our intuitions support the claim that

(30) Smith's giving blood will impress his girlfriend

states a non-moral reason.

The same conclusion about (30) can be derived from the conjunction of

(a) principles $P_2 - P_5$

and

(b) the thesis that the agent-neutral/agent-relative distinction is identical to the moral/non-moral distinction.

(From this point on, I will refer to this identity thesis as the "Identity Hypothesis". I will refer to $P_2 - P_5$ as "Nagel's principles".) According to P_2 , (30) states an agent-relative reason if its subject refers to a possible event and its predicate contains a free agent-variable. Well, the subject of (30) *does* refer to a possible event (namely, Smith's giving blood); and the predicate of (30) *does* contain a free agent-variable. This latter fact is a straightforward consequence of P_5 :

(P_5) In any sentence \underline{a} , the predicate G of \underline{a} contains a free agent-variable if, and only if, when G is substituted for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in schema F, an expression in G is bound by the quantifier "everyone."

For when we substitute (30)'s predicate for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in schema F, the pronoun in that predicate is bound by "everyone." We see, then, that whether we rely on our intuitions or on the conjunction of the Identity Hypothesis with Nagel's principles, we arrive at the same result : (30) states a non-moral reason.

Further cases that support Nagel's position are easily found. For instance, we would naturally say that Smith is motivated by a moral reason if he gives blood simply because he sees that doing so will help to save someone's life. So by appealing to our intuition we arrive at the conclusion that

(31) Smith's giving blood will help to save someone's life

states a moral reason.

This conclusion also follows from the conjunction of the Identity Hypothesis with Nagel's principles. If we substitute the predicate of (31) for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in

(F) Everyone has reason to promote any event that Pred₁,

we derive

(32) Everyone has reason to promote any event that will help to save someone's life.

And in (32) the quantifier "everyone" binds no term in "will help to save someone's life" -- the predicate of (31). So, according to P₅, (31)'s predicate contains a free agent-variable. Furthermore, its subject refers to a possible event: the same event designated by the subject of (30). Therefore, assuming that (31) states a reason, it follows from P₃ that it states an agent-neutral

one. and, since the Identity Hypothesis implies that any agent-neutral reason is a moral reason, we may conclude that (31) states a moral reason.

In spite of the confirmation that the Identity Hypothesis receives from the cases I have just discussed, disconfirming considerations can also be mustered. Imagine that Sarah has given Abe \$100 and that Abe has promised her that he will pay the money back. Imagine also that Abe has no particular desire to pay her back, that he has little or nothing to gain by doing so, and that his failure to do so will not cause him to suffer any significant adverse consequences. (We might suppose that Abe has already left town and gone to some distant space outpost where his failure to pay Sarah back will have no noticeable effect on his life.) So at best any self-interested reason that Abe has to pay Sarah \$100 is extremely weak. Nevertheless, any moral absolutist worth his salt would surely say that the following sentence states an important reason for Abe to send \$100 to Sarah:

- (33) Abe's sending Sarah \$100 would fulfill his promise to pay back the money she gave him.

Now then, since there is no compelling non-moral reason for Abe to send Sarah \$100, if (33) states an important reason for him to do this, it must state a moral reason. However, it follows from the conjunction of the Identity Hypothesis with Nagel's principles that (33) does not state such a reason. When we substitute the predicate of (33) for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in F, we get

- (34) Everyone has reason to promote any event that would fulfill his promise to pay her (Sarah) back the money she gave him.

And in this sentence "everyone" binds two expressions (i.e., "his" and "him")

in (33)'s predicate. Thus, by appealing to P_5 , we discover that the predicate of (33) contains a free agent-variable. Moreover, (33)'s subject refers to a possible event -- namely, Abe's sending \$100 to Sarah. So, assuming that (33) states an important reason for Abe to send Sarah money, it follows from P_2 that that reason is agent-relative. But it is a consequence of the Identity Hypothesis that agent-relative reasons are not moral reasons. Hence, this hypothesis generates the mistaken conclusion that (33) states a strong non-moral reason for Abe to send Sarah \$100.

The case just discussed is by no means the only one that poses a problem for the Identity Hypothesis. A consideration of the following sentence brings further difficulties to light.

(35) Reagan's publicly advocating passage of an anti-abortion amendment will favorably impress Jerry Falwell.

It is easy to conceive of a scenario in which (35) states a non-moral reason for Reagan to advocate passage of an anti-abortion amendment. Suppose, for example, that Reagan enjoys the power he wields as President and is set on getting re-elected. Suppose also that his chances for re-election will be enhanced significantly if he continues to have the support of Jerry Falwell and his so-called "Moral Majority". In these circumstances it is clearly in Reagan's *own* interest to do things that will please Falwell. Moreover, there is no doubt that Falwell will be favorably impressed if Reagan openly supports an anti-abortion amendment; for the institution of such an amendment is an important goal of the Moral Majority. So, the fact that Reagan's publicly advocating passage of an anti-abortion amendment will favorably impress Jerry Falwell is an obviously self-interested reason for Reagan to do this. And, insofar as it is a self-interested reason, it is a non-moral one.

Though (35) clearly states a non-moral reason in the situation I have described, the conjunction of the Identity Hypothesis with Nagel's principles implies that (35) does not state such a reason. When (35)'s predicate is substituted for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in schema F, we get

(36) Everyone has reason to promote any event that will favorably impress Jerry Falwell.

But in (36) the quantifier "everyone" obviously fails to bind any expression in "will favorably impress Jerry Falwell", the predicate of (35). Thus P₅ tells us that (35)'s predicate does not contain a free agent-variable. Furthermore, the subject of (35) refers to a possible event -- namely, Reagan's publicly advocating adoption of an anti-abortion amendment. It therefore follows from P₃ that any reason stated by (35) is agent-neutral. And this fact, together with P₄, implies that no reason stated by (35) is agent-relative. However, if no reason stated by (35) is agent-neutral, the Identity Hypothesis tells us that (35) only states moral reasons-- a result that directly contradicts what was established in the preceding paragraph.

Given the case of Abe and Sarah and the case of Reagan and the anti-abortion amendment, it seems clear that we cannot accept the conjunction of

(a) Nagel's principles (i.e., P₂ - P₅)

and

(b) the Identity Hypothesis (i.e., the view that the agent-neutral/agent-relative distinction is the same as the moral/non-moral distinction).

However, we can't reject P₂ - P₅ in order to save the Identity Hypothesis. For P₂ - P₅ tell us what the agent-neutral/agent relative distinction is. If we give

up $P_2 - P_5$, the Identity Hypothesis becomes a meaningless shell. Thus, we have no choice but to jettison the proposal that the agent-neutral/agent-relative distinction is identical to the moral/non-moral distinction.

3.3.3. Lack of significance and lack of sense

Of course, as I noted at the outset of this discussion, Nagel never explicitly formulates the Identity Hypothesis. And, in the face of the objections that I have raised against that Hypothesis, Nagel might simply reply that the agent-neutral/agent-relative distinction was never really supposed to capture the moral/non-moral distinction. However, not only does the former distinction not capture the latter, it seems to provide no insight at all into the latter. This being the case, it is legitimate to ask whether the agent-neutral/agent-relative distinction has any significance at all.

But a lack of significance is not the only problem that confronts the agent-neutral/agent-relative dichotomy. A consideration of the following two sentences reveals that even the coherence of this distinction is highly dubious :

- (37) Susan's studying conscientiously will enable her to pass the exam.
- (38) Her studying conscientiously will enable Susan to pass the exam.

We can easily describe situations in which each of these sentences states a reason for Susan to study conscientiously. Moreover, (37) and (38) can clearly state the very same reason.

Yet, according to principles $P_2 - P_5$, (37) and (38) *never* state the same reason. From P_5 it follows that (37)'s predicate contains a free agent-variable,

while the predicate of (38) does not. However, this result, together with $P_2 - P_4$ implies that, if (37) and (38) state the same reason, that reason can be both agent-neutral and not agent-neutral. Thus, we cannot accept $P_2 - P_5$ and also admit that (37) and (38) state the same reason.

The fact that principles $P_2 - P_5$ require us to deny that (37) and (38) state the same reason seems to me to be ample proof that some of these principles are unacceptable. I suspect, moreover, that each and every one of them is false.

3.3.4. Deep worries about Nagel's general theory of reasons

As we have already seen, it is very easy to conceive of circumstances in which the following sentence states a reason for Reagan to publicly advocate passage of an anti-abortion amendment :

(35) Reagan's publicly advocating passage of an anti-abortion amendment will favorably impress Jerry Falwell.

However, the fact that (35) states such a reason in the circumstances outlined on page 134 seems to raise insuperable problems for P_1 , a principle that purports to set out certain conditions that must be met by *any* sentence that states a reason.

(P_1) Where p is a proposition and a is a sentence that states p , a states a reason when it states p if, and only if, p is true and there is a sentence β such that

(a) β states p ,

(b) the subject of β refers to a possible event,
and

(c) a true sentence is formed when we

substitute the predicate of $\underline{\beta}$ for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in

- (F) Everyone has reason to promote any event that Pred₁ .

If we suppose that the facts about Ronald Reagan and Jerry Falwell are as I described them above, there clearly is a proposition (let's call it " π_{35} ") such that, in stating that proposition, (35) states a reason for Reagan to openly support an anti-abortion amendment. So, according to P₁ there is a sentence $\underline{\beta}$ such that

- (i) $\underline{\beta}$ states π_{35} .
- (ii) the subject of $\underline{\beta}$ refers to a possible event, and
- (iii) a true sentence is formed when we substitute the predicate of $\underline{\beta}$ for the occurrence of "Pred₁" in schema F.

Now (35) itself satisfies conditions (i) and (ii). However, when we replace the occurrence of Pred₁ in schema F with (35)'s predicate, we get

- (36) Everyone has reason to promote any event that will favorably impress Jerry Falwell.

And (36) is surely false. If we posit that *everyone* has reason to promote such events, then even an opponent of Reagan's re-election who believes that abortion should remain legal has reason to promote Reagan's publicly advocating adoption of an anti-abortion amendment. But this is absurd! Why should a person opposed to Reagan and to restrictive abortion laws have any reason whatever for promoting Reagan's open advocacy of an anti-abortion amendment?

Since (36) is false, (35) does not satisfy condition (iii). Still, as (35) states

a reason in stating π_{35} , it follows from P_1 that *some* sentence satisfies conditions (i) - (iii). But what sentence could this be? None, so far as I can tell. If the result of replacing the occurrence of Pred_1 in F with (35)'s predicate isn't true, neither is the result of replacing that occurrence of Pred_1 with the predicate of any other sentence that meets conditions (i) and (ii).

Thus our intuitions conflict once again with Nagel's proposals. It is intuitively clear that, in the situation I have described, (35) states a reason for Reagan to publicly support an anti-abortion amendment. However, it follows from one of Nagel's basic principles that (35) does not state such a reason.

Surprisingly, the shortcomings of P_1 can be seen even in the examples that Nagel uses to illustrate his theory of reasons. In the case of Moore and the oncoming truck, Nagel suggested that the following sentence states a reason for Moore to remove himself from the truck's path:

(23) The act will prolong someone's life.

So, assuming that Nagel's suggestion is correct, some proposition (I'll call it " π_{23} ") is such that, in stating it, (23) states a reason. And, given that (23) states a reason when it asserts π_{23} , it follows from P_1 that π_{23} is stated by a sentence \underline{g} which is such that a true sentence is formed by substituting the predicate of \underline{g} for the occurrence of Pred_1 in F. Now one might think that (23) itself is such that, when its predicate is substituted for the occurrence of Pred_1 in F, the resulting sentence is true. Indeed, at first blush

(26) Everyone has reason to promote any event that will
prolong someone's life.

seems plausible enough. However, a closer examination reveals that the statement asserted by (26) is highly suspect.

Suppose, for instance, that Fred has terminal cancer and is in constant, severe pain. He sees no value in going on, for he recognizes that continued life only means ever-increasing pain and the rapid deterioration of his mental and physical faculties. Accordingly he decides to kill himself. At the first opportunity he takes an overdose of morphine.

In the circumstances just described, it may well be that, even if we can prolong Fred's life by pumping out his stomach, we have *no* reason to do this. It is not that the reasons for letting him die outweigh the reasons for prolonging his life. There simply is no reason to prolong Fred's life.

If this is correct, then (26) is false. And if (26) is false, we do not get a true sentence when we replace the occurrence of Pred_1 in F with the predicate of (23). But what other sentence that states π_{23} has a predicate which, when used to complete F , gives us a true sentence? Clearly none. Thus, on the basis of P_1 we must conclude that (23) does not state a reason for Moore to remove himself from the path of the truck that threatens his life. This conclusion cannot be a welcome one for Nagel.

Furthermore, an argument essentially the same as the one I have just presented suggests that Nagel's advocacy of P_1 commits him to the view that

(22) The act will prolong his life

also fails to state a reason for Moore to get out of the way of the oncoming truck. This result is most unfortunate. For, in the scenario described by Nagel, (22) most certainly does state such a reason.

The foregoing discussion exposes a fatal flaw in P_1 . This principle is committed to the claim that an event's being ϕ constitutes a reason for a particular agent to promote it only if, for any agent A and any event E , E 's

being ϕ constitutes a reason for A to promote E. But this claim is false. The fact that Reagan's publicly advocating passage of an anti-abortion amendment will impress Jerry Falwell may indeed be a reason for Reagan to openly push for the adoption of such an amendment. The same fact, however, is hardly a reason for a "pro-choice" liberal to promote Reagan's supporting passage of a Constitutional amendment prohibiting abortions. Similarly, it may be a reason for Moore to remove himself from the path of a certain truck that his doing so will prolong his life; but Moore's having this reason for getting out of the truck's way does not imply that every agent has reason to promote any event that will prolong his own life. A cancer victim like Fred may have no reason at all for promoting events that will prolong his life.

Whether or not an event E's being ϕ is a reason for an agent A to promote E often depends on further facts — facts about A, about E, and about the world in general. In our discussion of Reagan and the anti-abortion amendment it has been stipulated that Jerry Falwell's support will help to get Reagan re-elected. It is in virtue of this fact and Reagan's desire to serve another term that sentence (35) states a reason for him to push for the adoption of an amendment prohibiting abortion. If Reagan were to become disgusted with politics and want only to retire to his ranch as soon as possible, it might be quite irrelevant to him whether his actions impress Jerry Falwell. Furthermore, if Reagan did want to be re-elected, but Falwell's assistance were a definite political liability, the fact that Reagan's open support of an anti-abortion amendment would impress Falwell favorably might also fail to be a reason for Reagan to advocate passage of such an amendment. In fact, it could be a compelling reason for Reagan to *refrain*

from lending his voice to the anti-abortion chorus.⁵⁴ The points I am making here bring to mind some of Judith Thomson's remarks in "Reasons and Reasoning."⁵⁵ Speaking about what I shall later refer to as "epistemic reasons", Thomson notes that certain moral philosophers have appeared to claim that

Reasons are implicitly general -- what is a reason for thinking one person acted wrongly must equally be reason for thinking any other person acted wrongly.⁵⁶

Yet, as Thomson points out, this claim is just not true.

⁵⁴The fact that an event's being ϕ can be a reason for someone *not* to promote it is problematic for Nagel. Consider the following sentence:

(39) Pressler's telephone's ringing at 3:00 a.m. tomorrow would prevent him from getting the sleep he desperately needs.

(39) is a true sentence that clearly states a reason for me *not* to promote my telephone's ringing at the ungodly hour of 3:00 a.m. Since it states a reason, anyone who ascribes to P_1 is, for all intents and purposes, committed to the truth of the sentence that is formed by replacing the occurrence of Pred_1 in F with (39)'s predicate. Thus an advocate of P_1 is committed to the truth of

(40) Everyone has reason to promote any event that would prevent him from getting the sleep he needs.

But (40) is manifestly false. And insofar as P_1 requires that (40) be true if (39) states a reason, P_1 is itself false.

⁵⁵Judith Jarvis Thomson, "Reasons and Reasoning", in *Philosophy in America*, Max Black, ed., pp. 282-303.

⁵⁶*ibid.*, p. 291.

For example, things being as they now are, the fact that a quite specific child, Jonathan, now looks uncomfortable is a reason for thinking he has just done something wrong; but this would not be quite generally a reason for thinking this of anyone, or even a reason for thinking this of Jonathan at any time whatever.⁵⁷

In short, whether or not a thing's being ϕ is a reason for believing it to be ψ often depends on a number of facts about the thing in question. At a certain point in his life Jonathan may tend to exhibit a very special type of behavior when he has just done something wrong. But others may not behave in a similar way after they have done the very same sorts of things that Jonathan has done. Moreover, at a later point in his own life, Jonathan's behavior patterns might change. The conduct he had previously displayed after doing things he shouldn't have done may then appear only when he is introduced to strangers. After such a change has taken place, behavior that had formerly been a reason for thinking that Jonathan had done something wrong no longer would be. Instead it would be a reason for thinking that he was being introduced to a stranger.

The position that Thomson is criticizing in the case of reasons for believing is precisely parallel to the view that Nagel adopts with respect to reasons for acting. Thomson has shown that a certain thing's being ϕ may, in a given situation, be a reason for believing it to also be ψ , even though it is not the case that for any x whatever, x 's being ϕ is always a reason for believing that it is also ψ . Likewise, in the realm of reasons for acting I have shown that a particular event's being ϕ may, in a given situation, be a reason for a specific agent to promote it, even though it is not the case that for any event E and agent A , E 's being ϕ is always a reason for A to promote E .

⁵⁷ *Idem.*

By now it should be quite evident that the theory of reasons that Nagel presents in *The Possibility of Altruism* is seriously flawed. Our discussion of Nagel's theory was motivated by our search for a clear characterization of the distinction between moral and non-moral reasons. At first it looked as if Nagel's distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons might help us to understand the difference between moral and non-moral reasons. However, we discovered that Nagel's distinction is anything but a model of clarity. The notion of a *free agent-variable* plays a crucial role in his account of the difference between agent-neutral reasons and agent-relative reasons. But Nagel doesn't seem to have a very clear conception of what it is for the predicate of a sentence to contain or fail to contain a free agent-variable. Moreover, when we ourselves tried to capture as much in Nagel's conception as *is* clear, the principle we formulated (i.e., P_5) was found to provide an unacceptable standard for distinguishing moral from non-moral reasons. Some sentences that stated obviously non-moral reasons had predicates which did not contain free agent-variables. Conversely, moral reasons were stated by sentences whose predicates contained free agent-variables. Thus it was concluded that Nagel does not show us what the basic difference is between moral and non-moral reasons. Furthermore, some of our counterexamples to the Identity Hypothesis (viz. the hypothesis that the agent-neutral/agent-relative distinction is the same as the moral/non-moral distinction) also proved to be counterexamples to principle P_1 . The basic import of P_1 is that reasons for acting must be general. Thus the fact that P_1 is false means that, like reasons for believing, reasons for acting need not be general.

Having now argued that we cannot learn anything from Nagel about the distinction between moral and non-moral reasons, I would like very much to be able to offer a satisfactory characterization of that distinction. However, I am not able to do so. Thus for the time being I can only suggest that we

consult our moral intuitions and the best available moral theories when we want to know whether a given fact is a moral reason for us to do something.

PART TWO

CHAPTER 4

MORAL SKEPTICISM

4.1. Mackie's Argument from Relativity

Assuming that the definition of moral absolutism that I presented in the previous chapter is satisfactory, we are now in a position to examine and evaluate a variety of philosophical arguments whose conclusions imply that absolutism is either false or unjustified. The first class of arguments that we shall look at are those which purport to show either that there are no moral facts or that we have no justification for believing that there are. J.L. Mackie's "argument from relativity" is one line of reasoning that falls into this class. It is set out in the following passage from *Ethics : inventing right and wrong* :

. . . radical differences between first order moral judgements make it difficult to treat those judgements as apprehensions of objective truths. But it is not the mere occurrence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of values. Disagreement on questions in history or biology or cosmology does not show that there are no objective issues in these fields for investigators to disagree about. But such scientific disagreement results from speculative inferences or explanatory hypotheses based on inadequate evidence, and it is hardly plausible to interpret moral disagreement in the same way. Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people's adherence to and participation in different ways of life. The causal connection seems to be mainly that way round: it is that people approve of monogamy because they participate in a monogamous way of life rather than that they participate in a

monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy.⁵⁸

In this passage Mackie seems to be advancing an argument that runs as follows :

1. Unless every disagreement over a given issue arises because the parties to it infer conflicting opinions about the issue from explanatory hypotheses that have been adopted on the basis of inconclusive evidence, there is no fact of the matter on that issue.
2. With respect to any moral issue there are disagreements which do not arise because the parties hold different explanatory hypotheses based on inadequate evidence (because some disagreements on every issue arise because the parties were raised in different environments with different practices).
3. Hence, there is no fact of the matter on any moral issue (i.e. there are no moral facts).

As soon as he presents this argument, Mackie goes on to consider a possible objection that might be advanced by someone who disagrees with the argument's nihilistic conclusion :

. . . the items for which objective validity is in the first place to be claimed are not specific moral rules or codes but very general basic principles which are recognized at least implicitly to some extent in all society. . . . It is easy to show that such general principles, married with differing concrete circumstances, different existing social patterns or different preferences, will beget different specific moral rules. . . .⁵⁹

⁵⁸J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: inventing right and wrong.*, p. 36

⁵⁹*Ibid.* p. 37.

Mackie agrees that his argument from relativity *would* be adequately answered if all moral disagreement could be accounted for in a manner that is compatible with the view that all society accepts the same basic moral principles. Such an account would claim that all moral disagreements are merely differences of opinion over derivative ethical principles and over the application of ethical principles to particular circumstances. It would maintain that these differences of opinion either arise from differing factual beliefs or from the mistaken application of derivative moral rules to circumstances in which the factual presuppositions for their application are not met.

But why exactly is it that the argument from relativity would be undermined if such an account of ethical disagreement were correct? It must be because this sort of an account of moral conflict provides grounds for rejecting premise (2) of that argument: if there is universal agreement at the level of basic moral principles and conflict arises only over how to apply these principles, then moral disagreement will result from the adoption of different explanatory hypotheses or speculative inferences based on inconclusive evidence. For example, suppose that the basic principle accepted by everyone were some version of act utilitarianism. There would then be disagreement over moral issues only insofar as there were disagreement over such things as

- (a) what effects would be produced by particular actions, and
- (b) which actions are in fact available to agents.

But disagreement over these questions would be a matter of different speculations made on the basis of inconclusive evidence.

Nevertheless, Mackie ultimately rejects the view that all people accept the same basic moral principles and are willing to submit all ethical questions to the arbitration of those principles. As he says,

. . . in ordinary moral thought . . . much is concerned . . . with what Hare calls "ideals" or, less kindly, "fanaticism". That is, people judge that some things are good or right, and others are bad or wrong, not because--or at any rate not only because--they exemplify some general principle for which widespread implicit acceptance could be claimed, but because something about those things arouses certain responses immediately in them, though they would arouse radically and irresolvably different responses in others.⁶⁰

The idea here is that a person can be so thoroughly committed to a particular moral position that no argument based on the incompatibility of that position with a set of supposedly basic moral principles will cause him to revise his commitment. Or, two people can be so intransigently committed to opposing ethical views about a given action that no amount of argument will convince either party to revise his convictions about the action.

The claim that certain kinds of moral dispute are irresolvable will be familiar to anyone who has read the ethical writings of Ayer, Stevenson, and Hare. Just how much mileage can be gotten out of this claim, however, depends on what it really is for two individuals to have an irresolvable disagreement over a particular issue. Some comments about irresolvability are thus in order.

First of all, when people call a given dispute irresolvable, what they often mean is that, for one reason or another, the parties to it continue to disagree, even though each has brought forward all of the considerations that he can at the time conceive to be relevant to changing his opponent's mind. But this is not to say that if one of the disputants thinks about the matter a while longer, he will be unable to think of new considerations which will change his

⁶⁰*ibid.* pp. 37 - 38.

opponent's mind. It is a mistake to think that because no one can (for the moment, or even for years or centuries) come up with a compelling consideration against a certain view, there is no such consideration to be found. We too quickly think that if we can't come up with something, there is nothing to come up with.⁶¹

A second and more important point is that a disagreement may be said to be irresolvable in either of two senses. First, we may call a dispute D irresolvable because there is no argument A which is such that D would cease to exist if the parties to D considered A. But in this sense, the existence of an irresolvable dispute about some issue needn't have any serious bearing on whether, for that issue, there is an objective fact of the matter. Where people have important interests at stake, they can hold to their views with remarkable tenacity. If a disagreement arises over an issue that involves critical concerns of one or both of the parties, no citation of considerations may bring about a resolution. And important concerns can certainly be connected with disputes about issues where we have no doubt that there is a fact of the matter. Lists that enumerate well-known disputes of this sort are not difficult to construct. In "The Objectivity of Ethics", Nagel notes that disagreements over heliocentrism, evolution, the innocence of Captain Dreyfus, and the genetic contribution to racial differences in I.Q. are among those where resolution has been effectively precluded by people's divergent interests.⁶²

⁶¹In Chapter 7, I elaborate on this point and on those that are mentioned in the following paragraph.

⁶²Nagel, "The Objectivity of Ethics", p. 21. See Philip Kitcher, *Abusing Science*, for a thorough (and thoroughly engaging) analysis of the contorted arguments that creationists employ in order to justify their adherence of Biblical accounts of the origin of species.

A second thing that someone might have in mind when he says that a dispute is irresolvable is that there simply is no argument in favor of one of the opposing views whose conclusion must be accepted by any reasonable person who considers that argument. I expect that this is what Mackie has in mind when he cites the irresolvability of ethical disputes to support the view that there are no moral facts. However, if one is to appeal to such irresolvability in arguing against the existence of moral facts, one must ultimately base one's claims on some well-defined conception of what it is to be a reasonable person. In short, it is not enough merely to say (as Mackie does) that rational argumentation in ethics reaches a dead end when the ideals cherished by some conflict with those that are highly valued by others. The fact that something is highly valued doesn't mean that it is highly valuable. Thus, some ideals may simply be more reasonable than others.

Kant certainly would have subscribed to this proposition. For Kant, the proper ideal of practical reason is defined by the Categorical Imperative. This Imperative specifies certain tests for evaluating maxims--the practical principles that people act on whenever they behave in a purposeful manner. In the recent literature on Kantian ethics, these tests have been collectively referred to as the "CI-procedure".⁶³ Roughly, if a maxim fails any of the tests in the CI-procedure, then any action based on that maxim is morally wrong. If, on the other hand, the maxim passes the tests specified by the Categorical Imperative, any action based on that maxim is morally permissible. Thus, Kant believes that if it is shown that the maxim of a given action fails a test in the CI-procedure, any reasonable investigator would conclude that the action is morally wrong. An individual who admits that the action's maxim fails one of

⁶³See Barbara Herman, *Morality as Rationality*, chps. 4 - 6 ; Onora Nell, *Acting On Principle*, chp. 5 ; John Rawls, "Remarks on Kant's Ethics", pp. 1-6 - 1-10.

these tests is simply being unreasonable if he refuses to admit that the action is wrong because he adheres to some ideal that conflicts with the Categorical Imperative.

I suspect that Mackie would respond to Kant's proposal by saying that the Categorical Imperative is simply one moral ideal among many. In short, Mackie would say that Kant cannot justify the privileged status that he accords to the CI-procedure. And, in order to support his position, Mackie might turn to some version of *foundationalism*. Broadly construed, foundationalism is the view that a belief is justified only if either it is self-justifying or it ultimately derives warrant only from self-justifying beliefs. Modifying slightly a definition of self-justification suggested by James Cornman,⁶⁴ we may say that

(Df₁) A belief *b* is self-justifying = Df. *b* is justified and it is not the case that *b* would be justified only if it were justified by some relationship that it has to other beliefs.

On the basis of a foundationalist theory, Mackie might argue that no rationally compelling case can be made in favor of any substantive ethical statement because (a) substantive moral beliefs aren't themselves self-justifying and (b) such beliefs can't be confirmed through any relation that they bear to beliefs that are self-justifying.

⁶⁴James Cornman, "Foundational versus Nonfoundational Theories of Justification," in Pappas and Swain, *Essays on Knowledge and Justification*.

4.2. Two Skeptical Arguments Based on Foundationalism

In the remainder of this chapter I will examine two versions of foundationalism which seem to lend support to Mackie's moral skepticism. Each of these versions maintains that all self-justifying beliefs are either

- (a) beliefs whose objects are propositions which merely give phenomenal descriptions of immediate sense experience, or
- (b) beliefs whose objects are simple analytic propositions.

However, the two theories part company over the issue of how self-justifying beliefs relate to other justified beliefs. According to one of them, the object of every justified belief that is not self-justifying is reducible to statements which can be inferred by deduction or simple enumerative induction from statements that are objects of self-justifying beliefs. I will refer to this theory as "the reductionist view". The reductionist view was strongly advocated by classical logical positivists such as Schlick, Carnap, and Ayer. For example, in *Language, Truth and Logic* and *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* Ayer subscribed to a position which he later summarized as follows :

Experimental reasoning can carry us forward on a given level ; on the basis of certain sense-experiences it allows us to predict the occurrence of other sense experiences. . . . What it does not permit us is to jump from one level to another ; to pass from premises concerning the contents of our sense-experiences to conclusions about physical objects . . . [unless these conclusions are analyzable into statements which only mention the contents of actual or possible sense-experiences].⁶⁵

Furthermore, given that Ayer was convinced that certain beliefs about physical

⁶⁵A.J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, pp. 76 - 78.

objects and the theoretical entities of science are justified, he considered the analysis of statements about such objects and entities into propositions which are solely about sense experience to be one of the essential enterprises of epistemology. For Ayer, an accurate analytic reduction was necessary for any precise statement of the evidential relations between self-justifying beliefs and non-self-justifying beliefs. In fact, he was committed to the very strong claim that if there is no way to analyze talk about physical objects and theoretical entities into purely phenomenal talk about sense experience, ordinary observation reports and scientific theories are devoid of cognitive meaning.

An alternative to the reductionist view is a position that I will call "the explanatory posit view". According to this position, we can be justified in believing a proposition that is not an object of a self-justifying belief if, by supposing that proposition to be true, we can best explain the truth of certain self-justifying beliefs. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell implicitly subscribed to the explanatory posit view. Russell claimed that we are justified in believing many propositions which imply the existence of other persons, everyday physical objects, and invisible theoretical entities because the supposition that these propositions are true helps us to best explain the truth of self-justifying beliefs about our immediate sense experience.⁶⁶

It is not very difficult to see why advocates of the reductionist and explanatory posit views have often also been proponents of moral skepticism. To begin with, it is obvious that when we say of a person that he ought to act in a certain way or that it would be morally wrong for him to act in some other way, we are not directly making phenomenal judgments about the contents of our immediate sense experience. Thus, given either of the

⁶⁶Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, pp. 21 - 24.

foundationalist positions that I have described, if any ethical convictions are to be justified, they must either be non-self-justifying beliefs or beliefs whose objects are simple analytic statements. Let us explore the suggestion that some ethical statements are analytic.

Among the propositions of morality, quite a number might be supposed to be analytic. Consider, for example, (1) - (3):

- (1) If it would be morally wrong for an individual not to keep the last promise that he made, then he ought morally to keep that promise.
- (2) If it would be morally permissible for an individual to have an abortion, then it wouldn't be morally wrong for her to have an abortion.
- (3) If an individual ought morally not to torture sentient beings, then it would be morally permissible for him not to do so.

These seem as good candidates for analyticity as any statements. Notice, however, that they are all universally quantified conditionals whose antecedents and consequents are moral statements. From statements of this sort we cannot justifiably infer any substantive moral conclusions unless we already have some justified substantive moral beliefs. Thus, for example, from (1) we could justifiably conclude that Robert Vesco ought to keep the last promise that he made only if we were already justified in believing that it would be morally wrong for Vesco not to keep that promise. But it has not yet been shown how we could be justified in believing that it would be morally wrong for a particular individual not to keep the last promise that he made. In general, since we can't directly infer substantive moral judgments from moral statements that can plausibly be regarded as analytic, anyone who advocates either the reductionist position or the explanatory posit view must

maintain that if any substantive ethical opinion is justified, it ultimately derives its warrant from its relation to beliefs whose objects are purely phenomenal propositions (i.e. propositions which merely give phenomenal descriptions of immediate sense experience).

4.2.1. The reductionist argument

However, if one subscribes to the reductionist position, one might want to argue that our substantive moral convictions really aren't justified because they don't bear the proper relation to purely phenomenal beliefs. Just such an argument can be found in *Language, Truth and Logic*. There Ayer argues that none of our substantive moral beliefs are justified because the objects of those beliefs can't be inferred by deduction or simple enumerative induction from statements which are objects of purely phenomenal beliefs.⁶⁷ One can make such inferences only if the objects of substantive moral beliefs are analytically reducible to propositions which only give phenomenal descriptions of actual or possible sense experience. But Ayer maintains that no such reduction is possible.⁶⁸ To support this contention, he tries to show that none of the following three proposals are acceptable :

- (a) To call an action right is to say that it is generally approved of.
- (b) To call an action right is to say that one approves of it oneself.
- (c) To call an action right is to say that it would produce as great a net balance of pleasure over pain as any alternative action.

⁶⁷ Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, pp. 102 - 113.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 104 - 106.

With respect to the first of these proposals, Ayer reasons as follows : if (a) were true, then anyone who asserted that some actions which are generally approved of are not right would be contradicting himself. But a person who makes such an assertion does not contradict himself. Hence, (a) is false.⁶⁹ By similar reasoning, Ayer convinces himself that (b) and (c) are no better off than (a).⁷⁰

(a) - (c) may be regarded as loosely formulated analyses of a particular class of substantive moral statements. Now, none of these suggested analyses proposes a reduction of any moral statement to a proposition that is transparently nothing more than a phenomenal description of actual or possible sense experience. However, Ayer clearly believed that whenever an individual A says of an action X either that (i) X is generally approved of, or that (ii) he approves of X, or that (iii) X would produce as great a net balance of pleasure over pain as any alternative action, A is stating a proposition that can be analytically reduced to a purely phenomenal description of actual or possible sense experience. Thus Ayer thought that if either (a), (b), or (c) were true, a crucial prerequisite for justified substantive moral belief would be met. On the other hand, he also thought that any proposed analysis of moral statements into purely phenomenal propositions about sense experience would be vulnerable to an argument similar to the one that he employed against (a). Consequently, Ayer maintained that we are not justified in believing any

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 104.

⁷⁰ It is obvious that Ayer's arguments borrow much from G.E. Moore's criticisms of naturalism. (See *Principia Ethica*, pp. 5 - 21 ; see also *Ethics*, p. 46.) However, unlike Ayer, Moore did not use the unanalyzability of ethical concepts as a stepping stone to moral skepticism and nihilism. No doubt this was due to the fact that Moore rejected the radical empiricism embraced by Ayer and other logical positivists.

substantive moral statements. Even more strongly, the verificationist criterion of meaningfulness that Ayer subscribed to led him to conclude that moral statements are utterly devoid of cognitive meaning.⁷¹

It is clear that it is not reasonable to subscribe to moral absolutism if Ayer has given us a sound argument for the claim that there are no justified substantive moral beliefs. For if no one is justified in believing any substantive moral statement, no one will be justified in holding that people sometimes make correct statements when they assert sentences of the following form :

N_1 ought morally to VP_1 .

And, if we aren't justified in holding that correct statements are sometimes made by asserting such sentences, we also aren't justified in believing that

III. Some completions of sentence schema (F-3) are true :

(F-3) If N_2 were to say that N_1 ought morally to VP_1 , what N_2 would be saying would be correct.

But (III) is one of the conjuncts of MA_{11} , the proposition that I have identified with moral absolutism. Thus, assuming that this identification is appropriate, no one will be justified in embracing moral absolutism if Ayer has convincingly shown that there are no justified substantive moral beliefs.

However, Ayer's argument is far from convincing. In the first place, one might claim that Ayer begs the question when he tries to establish that the following proposition is false :

⁷¹Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, pp. 106 - 107.

(a) To call an action right is to say that it is generally approved of.⁷²

According to Ayer, (a) is false because

(4) No one would be contradicting himself if he said that some generally approved-of actions aren't right.

But (4) won't seem evident to anyone who subscribes to (a) ; and it doesn't seem that there is any argument in favor of (4) that would be found compelling by a supporter of (a). Thus, when Ayer appeals to (4) in order to refute (a), he is offering an argument that couldn't possibly sway anyone who accepts (a). Indeed, Ayer's "refutation" of (a) seems to amount to little more than the mere assertion that (a) is false. If this isn't begging the question, what is ?⁷³

But question-begging is really the least of Ayer's problems. It is now almost universally acknowledged that there are fatal flaws in the reductionist position that provides the basic premises in his argument for moral skepticism.⁷⁴ For example, no one seriously doubts that we are all justified in believing many statements about everyday physical objects ; but it is quite impossible to analytically reduce such statements to propositions which give purely phenomenal descriptions of actual and possible sense experience. Harman describes the basic problem very nicely in the following passage :

⁷²I thank Judith DeCew for bringing this objection to my attention.

⁷³Similar question-begging charges have been levelled against Moore's famous Open Question Argument. See W.K. Frankena, "The Naturalistic Fallacy", in *Theories of Ethics*, Philippa Foot, ed., pp. 50 - 63.

⁷⁴See, for example, R.M. Chisholm, "The Problem of Empiricism", *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XLV, no.19 (September, 1948), pp. 512 - 517 ; Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 126-127 ; Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief*, pp. 116-118.

. . . according to phenomenalism, statements about objects in the external world can be translated without loss of meaning into statements about the possibility of one's own experience. . . . Now, it was always embarrassing to . . . phenomenalism that no one was ever able to give a single example of such a translation. Lately it has become clear that the required sort of translation is impossible. . . .

[T]o say that there is a typewriter on your desk is not to say, among other things, that under certain *purely experiential* conditions it would look to you as if there were a typewriter on your desk. For these conditions must include such things as that your eyes are open, that nothing opaque intervenes between you and the typewriter, that you have not just taken a hallucinogenic drug, and so on. A statement of relevant conditions must speak not only of possible experience but also of things in the external world. There is no way to translate simple statements about objects in the external world, without loss of meaning, into statements that are solely about possible experience.⁷⁵

To sum matters up, if the reductionist position were true, we would only be justified in believing propositions which imply the existence of physical objects if such propositions could be analytically reduced to statements which make purely phenomenal claims about possible sense experience. However, there is no doubt that we *are* justified in believing certain propositions which imply the existence of physical objects ; and there is likewise no doubt that these propositions *can't* be analyzed into purely phenomenal statements about possible sense experience. Consequently, the reductionist position is false. And, given that it is false, even if Ayer could show that substantive moral statements can't be analytically reduced to propositions that are solely about possible sense experience, this irreducibility would not establish that no substantial moral beliefs are justified.

⁷⁵Gilbert Harman, *Thought*, pp. 10 - 12.

However, we can't lay moral skepticism to rest simply by defeating arguments for that doctrine which are based on the reductionist position. As I have already indicated, an argument for moral skepticism seems to flow very naturally from the explanatory posit view. According to this view, we are justified in believing a substantive moral proposition P only if the supposition that P is true helps to explain the truth of certain purely phenomenal statements. But it is arguable that moral hypotheses don't really help us to account for the truth of any such statements.

4.2.2. The explanatory posit argument

The most plausible way for substantive moral hypotheses to play a role in explaining the truth of phenomenal statements is by helping to explain human behavior. An advocate of the explanatory posit view will surely want to say that suppositions about human behavior help us to account for the truth of certain phenomenal statements. So, if moral hypotheses enter into explanations of human behavior, they will also, in a derivative way, play a role in explaining the truth of phenomenal statements.

Now then, there is no doubt that we often do appeal to moral hypotheses in explanations of people's behavior. A person who broods and merely picks at his food may explain his behavior by saying that he did something wrong and is depressed by his moral failing. Similarly, someone who writes a letter to the president of Argentina imploring him to put an end to the use of torture in Argentinian prisons may explain his action by asserting that the torture of human beings is always wrong and that, in writing his letter, he is trying to bring about a morally better world.

Despite the fact that moral hypotheses *are* used in explanations of people's actions, the moral skeptic will claim that their use plays no *essential*

role in the explanations. Insofar as such hypotheses enter into an explanation of some piece of behavior, the skeptic will say, their only value lies in the fact that they indicate certain *beliefs* which help to motivate the behavior. Thus the individual who cites the wrongness of torture in his account of why he has written a certain letter to Argentina's president is, in stating this alleged fact, merely indicating that one of the things which motivated him to write the letter was his *belief* that torture is wrong. Had he left out his reference to the moral status of torture and merely cited his belief that torture is wrong, his explanation would not have been any less complete. The moral hypothesis is thus quite superfluous to explaining why the letter was written.

The defender of justified moral belief might respond to the skeptic's position in the following way:

You claim that moral hypotheses contribute to an explanation of an individual's behavior only by suggesting beliefs which help to motivate that behavior. But why don't you say the same thing of many non-moral suppositions? Jones may explain to us that he is planing the bottom edge of a certain door because the door has been scraping against the floor. If we here apply the reasoning you used in the case of the letter writer, the supposition that the door has been scraping the floor should be regarded as having explanatory value only insofar as it indicates that Jones *believed* the door to have been scraping the floor. But it is clear that the claim about the door can do more than merely *suggest* that Jones had a certain belief. It can help to *explain* why he had the belief. And, similarly, moral hypotheses can help to explain people's moral beliefs.

To the position just described, the moral skeptic has a ready reply. He can justifiably complain that the defender of ethics has *merely stated* that moral hypotheses have genuine explanatory utility: no example of how these hypotheses enter into explanations of moral beliefs has been provided. On the other hand, the skeptic will say, it is not difficult to indicate, at least roughly, how statements which describe physical events (e.g. the scraping of a door on a floor, the breaking of a thumb in an Argentinian jail) help to explain why people have some of the beliefs they have. Thus in the case of Jones we may say that the door's scraping against the floor scratches the floor's surface; light reflected from the moving door and the damaged floor, together with sound waves produced by the scraping, then strike Jones' sensory receptors causing a particular pattern of neurological activity; this activity leads in turn to the formation of a belief that the door has scraped against the floor.

The moral skeptic may then go on to say that, not only has the defender of ethics not shown how moral hypotheses help to explain why people have the moral beliefs that they have, but he (i.e. the skeptic) can provide a perfectly good framework for the explanation of moral beliefs in which ethical claims play no useful role. A reasonably plausible account of the acquisition of moral beliefs might run as follows:

The existence of social cooperation depends on the existence of a set of behavioral conventions which are by and large accepted by the cooperating individuals. Through the process of socialization, those who grow up in a given society acquire knowledge of the principles that characterize its conventions together with dispositions to approve of actions that accord with these principles and disapprove of behavior that fails to accord

with them. Furthermore, insofar as an individual's acceptance of conventional principles leads him to disapprove of doing certain things that he would do if he gave in to his strongest desires or followed the course dictated by prudence, he comes to feel that something outside of himself demands that he not act in certain ways. But when he looks around for something that makes these demands on him, he sees nothing but the actions that he disapproves of. He thus concludes that it is the actions themselves which make demands on him. They possess, as it were, the property of "not-to-be-doneness." And he comes to regard his disapproval of an action as a sign that it is not to be done--or, in other words, that it is morally wrong. Similar considerations account for the individual's coming to believe that other actions are morally right, good, obligatory, etc.

The basic message of a story like the one just recited is that moral beliefs initially arise from a mistaken objectification of certain experiences that people have as a result of acquiring a set of dispositions through socialization. It is thus sociological and psychological, rather than ethical, hypotheses that account for people's moral beliefs.

One way to attack the skeptical argument that I have just been describing is to question the validity of its foundationalist underpinnings. Ultimately, the argument is grounded in the claim that all justified substantial beliefs are either (a) self-justifying phenomenal beliefs or (b) beliefs whose truth would help to explain the truth of self-justifying phenomenal beliefs. However, Richard Rorty and Michael Williams have argued that this is not a satisfactory

picture of justification.⁷⁶ Indeed, they have argued that many of our beliefs are justified even though *none* of our beliefs are self-justifying. If Rorty and Williams are right, one obviously can't show that we have no justified substantive moral beliefs by showing that moral hypotheses don't help to explain the truth of self-justifying phenomenal beliefs. Thus it might be claimed that there are no sound arguments for moral skepticism based on the explanatory posit view because that view is an unacceptable theory of justification.

While it seems to me that Rorty and Williams have presented some interesting objections to foundationalism, I do not think an opponent of moral skepticism can simply cite their arguments and then confidently assert that there is no reason to doubt the existence of justified moral beliefs. Such confidence would only be appropriate if foundationalism were the sole source of moral skepticism. But it is not. In fact, one can reject all foundationalist theories of justification and still present an argument for moral skepticism which is quite similar to the one that was based on the explanatory posit view. In essence, this is what Gilbert Harman does in *The Nature of Morality*. Let us now turn our attention to Harman's argument.

⁷⁶Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, chps. III, IV, and VI. Williams, *op. cit.*, chps. 2 and 5.

CHAPTER 5

HARMAN'S SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

5.1. The Basic Argument

Harman opens his discussion of moral skepticism by presenting two examples which are intended to illustrate an important *prima facie* difference between scientific beliefs and moral convictions. In the first of these examples he asks us to imagine a physicist who observes a vapor trail while looking through the window of a cloud chamber. Upon seeing the vapor trail, this physicist immediately thinks, "There goes a proton". Harman suggests that if we try to explain why this belief comes into the physicist's mind, we will naturally propose that it has something to do with the fact that he has internalized a particular physical theory. According to this theory, perhaps, vapor trails signify the presence of protons. Had the physicist internalized some other theory, the presence of the vapor trail might have prompted him to think, "There goes an electron," or even, "There goes an arrow from the bow of Artemis."

To propose that an individual accepts a certain theory is to put forward a hypothesis about his psychological make-up or "set". Thus, in explaining why our physicist comes to believe that a proton has just passed through the cloud chamber, we will employ hypotheses that purport to describe particular aspects of his psychological set. However, hypotheses other than those about the scientist's psychology will enter into our explanation. In particular, we will

surely want to say something about the presence of the vapor trail in the cloud chamber. For, evidently, it is not a mere coincidence that the physicist comes to believe that a proton has just passed through the chamber when he observes the vapor trail. Furthermore, once statements about the presence of the vapor trail enter into our explanation of the physicist's belief, hypotheses that help to explain why the trail is in the cloud chamber also become part of an extended explanation of this belief. So, if the hypothesis that a proton has passed through the chamber helps to account for the vapor trail, this hypothesis will also help to explain why the scientist comes to think that a proton has just passed by. And, indeed, current physical theory tells us that vapor trails in cloud chambers *are* produced by the passage of protons.

In the example that has just been described, our scientist comes to believe a certain physical statement and the very same statement plays a role in explaining why the scientist acquires that belief. Harman contrasts this case with the case of someone who comes to have a particular moral conviction.⁷⁷ He invites us to imagine an individual who sees a group of children pour gasoline over a cat and set the animal ablaze. Upon viewing this scene, the observer immediately thinks, "Those children just did something that was morally reprehensible."

Let us call the observer in this hypothetical scenario "Arthur". If we try to explain why Arthur comes to think that the children have just done something morally reprehensible, we will naturally refer to the fact that the children poured gasoline over the cat and put a match to the animal. After all, it was seeing them do this that prompted Arthur to make a moral appraisal of what they did. Furthermore, our explanation will contain certain statements

⁷⁷*ibid.*, pp. 7 - 9.

about Arthur's psychological set. We might propose, for example, that he has internalized certain more or less well articulated moral principles which he unconsciously refers to when he sees what the children are doing to the cat. A more extensive account of the matter might explain that the moral principles that Arthur unconsciously employs in arriving at his moral assessment were internalized through a process of socialization.

What is noteworthy about the sort of explanation that has just been sketched is that it does not propose that the children did anything that really was morally reprehensible. As Harman points out, this suggests an important difference between ethical convictions and scientific beliefs.⁷⁸ In explaining the physicist's belief that a proton has just passed through the cloud chamber, we hypothesize that a proton *has* passed through the chamber. This fact accounts for the vapor trail that the physicist observes. On the other hand, the hypothesis that it was morally reprehensible for the children to set fire to the cat does not seem to have any place in an explanation of why Arthur came to think that it was morally reprehensible. Indeed, no moral hypothesis seems to be helpful in explaining Arthur's belief.

But what if the children perversely set fire to the cat just because it was morally wrong to do such a thing? If that was why they put a match to the poor animal, then perhaps a moral hypothesis *does* play a useful role in explaining Arthur's conviction that the children did something reprehensible. One might propose that, prior to what the children did, it was the case that it would be morally wrong for them to set the cat on fire. The children perceived this and just happened to be in the mood to do something morally wrong. So, they torched the cat. Arthur saw them do this and unconsciously

⁷⁸ *idem.*

submitted a description of what he saw to his internalized morality. Since under that description the children's act violated the rules of this morality, he judged that the children had done something morally reprehensible.

Harman considers an account of the sort that I have just outlined, but concludes that the moral hypothesis that it contains doesn't really have any explanatory value :

What explains the children's act is not clearly the actual wrongness of the act but, rather, their belief that the act is wrong. The actual rightness or wrongness of their act seems to have nothing to do with why they do it.⁷⁹

Moreover, Harman thinks that, just as the hypothesis that the children's act really was morally reprehensible seems to contribute nothing to our explanation of why someone came to believe that the act was morally reprehensible, *no* moral hypothesis seems really to help us account for anyone's beliefs about anything. From this and the apparent irreducibility of moral hypotheses to statements that really do help us to explain people's beliefs, he concludes that we appear to have no reason to think that there are any moral facts at all -- that is, no reason to think that any moral statements are correct.

If we call a proposition P "belief-explanatory" just in case the supposition that P is true helps to explain why someone comes to have certain of his beliefs, we can give the following summary of Harman's skeptical argument :

- (A)
- 1. Unless some proposition P of kind K is either (a) belief-explanatory or (b) reducible to a belief-

⁷⁹*ibid.*, p. 9.

explanatory proposition, we are not justified in thinking that any proposition of kind K states a fact (i.e. is correct).

2. No moral proposition is either belief-explanatory or reducible to a belief-explanatory proposition.
3. Therefore, we are not justified in thinking that any moral proposition states a fact (i.e. is correct).

5.2. Statements about Grammaticality : Explanatory Utility

At this point it is worth noting that moral statements are not the only ones that seem to play no useful role in the explanation of why people think what they think. In particular, so far as explanatory utility is concerned, statements about the grammaticality or ungrammaticality of certain strings of words appear to be on all fours with moral statements. This similarity is best displayed by means of an example which parallels the case that Harman uses to illustrate why moral statements seem not really to make any contribution to the explanation of people's beliefs. Thus, let us suppose that we hear someone utter the following string of English words:

- (1) What bill did you appreciate the fact that Reagan signed?

And let us imagine that, upon hearing this utterance, we think, "That's ungrammatical." Will an explanation of why we think this involve any use of the claim that (1) is really ungrammatical? In other words, will the hypothesis that (1) is ungrammatical help us to explain why we think that it is ungrammatical? No more or less, I think, than an appeal to the moral reprehensibility of the children's setting the cat on fire helped us to explain why that act was immediately judged to be morally reprehensible by the person who observed it. In accounting for our grammaticality judgment we will obviously appeal to our psychological set. It seems plausible to say that

we believe (1) to be ungrammatical because (i) we have internalized certain rules of grammar which we unconsciously appeal to when we process language and (ii) (1) does not accord with those rules. Here the role played by internalized grammatical rules is precisely parallel to the role played by internalized ethical principles in explanations of our intuitive moral observations.

Of course, even if (1) does accord with our internalized rules of grammar, we still might never come to make an intuitive judgment about its grammaticality. The fact that we *do* make such a judgment is obviously a result of someone's having uttered that string and our having heard him do so. Thus by stating that someone has uttered (1) we help to explain why we come to think that (1) is ungrammatical.

In the explanation that I have been describing, the hypothesis that (1) really is ungrammatical does not appear at all. However, one might propose that it would make an appearance if we extended the explanation with an account of why (1) was uttered. Now, in some such extensions it is clear that the ungrammaticality of (1) would play no role whatever. For example, if a performance error were involved in the production of (1), we would not say that it was uttered *because* it was ungrammatical. Rather, we would say that it was produced in spite of the fact that it does not accord with the speaker's internalized grammar. But perhaps the utterance of (1) that we hear is not the result of any performance error. Perhaps this utterance is produced by a linguistics professor who wants to give an example of a particular type of ungrammatical string (namely, one that violates John Robert Ross's Complex Noun Phrase Constraint). In this situation, it might be said, the speaker utters (1) *because* it is ungrammatical. However, to explain the professor's utterance in this way is exactly analogous to explaining why the children set the cat on

fire by appealing to the moral reprehensibility of that act (and the fact that the children simply wanted to do something that was morally reprehensible). Thus, if Harman is correct in suggesting that the children's act is really just explained by their *belief* that it would be wrong to set the cat on fire and *not* by the actual wrongness of that act, we should likewise say that the professor's utterance is explained by his belief that (1) is ungrammatical and not by the actual ungrammaticality of (1).

The foregoing considerations suggest that whenever we judge a string of words to be ungrammatical, we can fully explain the judgment without claiming that the string in question really is ungrammatical. But if this is so, then it is difficult to see why any of our beliefs are explained by statements about the grammaticality of particular strings of words.

5.3. Statements about Grammaticality : Irreducibility

Furthermore, it can be argued that grammaticality claims are not reducible to belief-explanatory propositions. One such argument runs as follows:

(B)

1. A proposition P is reducible to a proposition Q only if there is no metaphysically possible circumstance in which P and Q differ in truth-value.
2. For any proposition P that makes a grammaticality claim and any belief-explanatory proposition Q, there is a metaphysically possible circumstance in which P and Q differ in truth-value.
3. Therefore, no proposition that makes a grammaticality claim can be reduced to a belief-explanatory proposition.

On the assumption that the "metaphysical" conception of reducibility that is formulated in (B)'s first premise is plausible, the issue of whether

propositions which make grammaticality claims can be reduced to propositions that are belief-explanatory turns on the truth-value of (B.2). And, in order to defend (B.2) (thereby opposing the reduction of grammaticality statements to propositions that are belief-explanatory) one might advance the following argument :

(C)

1. If (B.2) isn't true, then there is a sentence \underline{a} such that
 - (a) \underline{a} is a completion of (F) :
 - (F) For any word-string \underline{s} and any language L, \underline{s} is grammatical in L if, and only if, S_1 ;
 - (b) \underline{a} is a necessary truth ; and
 - (c) we state a belief-explanatory proposition when we assert the right-hand side of some instance of \underline{a} .
2. For any sentence \underline{a} , if \underline{a} is a completion of (F) and we state a belief-explanatory proposition when we assert the right-hand side of some instance of \underline{a} , \underline{a} is riot a necessary truth.
3. Hence, (B.2) is true.

The first premise of this argument seems to me to be quite reasonable. And, though the second premise makes quite a strong claim, the claim that it makes is a difficult one to refute. We can see why this is so by examining sentences (2) and (3) :

- (2) For any word-string \underline{s} and any language L, \underline{s} is grammatical in L if, and only if, \underline{s} normally doesn't sound odd to native speakers of L.
- (3) For any word-string \underline{s} and any language L, \underline{s} is grammatical

in L if, and only if, s is assigned a structural description by the system of grammatical rules that has been internalized by all native speakers of L.

(2) and (3) are completions of (F) that have a fair amount of initial plausibility. Moreover, we state belief-explanatory propositions by asserting the right-hand sides of certain instances of (2) and (3). This being the case, if the initial plausibility of either (2) or (3) turned out to be a genuine sign of that sentence's necessary truth, the second premise of (C) would be false. And, if that premise were false, we would be left without any justification for (B.2), a crucial statement in my argument against the reducibility of grammaticality claims to propositions that are belief-explanatory. Indeed, if the second premise in (C) were false, it is clear that (B.2) would also be false.

Happily (for me, at any rate), (2) and (3) can be shown *not* to be necessary truths. Hence, two potential counterexamples to the second premise in (C) fall by the wayside. Furthermore, by eliminating these potential counterexamples, I believe that we place the burden of proof on those who think that (C)'s second premise is false. For if this premise were false, there would have to be some sentence a such that

- (a) a is a completion of (F),
- (b) a is a necessary truth, and
- (c) we state a belief-explanatory proposition by asserting the right-hand side of some instance of a.

But of all sentences that satisfy (a) and (c), none appears more likely to satisfy (b) than (2) or (3). So, by showing that (2) and (3) are not necessary truths, we provide substantial confirmation for the second premise in argument (C). Indeed, we are justified in believing this premise until someone proves

that there is a sentence satisfying (a) and (c) which does not fall prey to the sorts of considerations which undermine the necessity of (2) and (3). And, until someone proves this, *no one* is justified in holding that (C)'s second premise is false.

Before I go on to show that (2) and (3) are not necessary truths, I would like to pause for a moment to explain why (2) and (3) satisfy condition (c)--i.e. why we state belief-explanatory propositions when we assert the right-hand sides of certain instances of (2) and (3). It seems appropriate to take the time to explain this because, if (2) and (3) didn't satisfy (c), that fact alone would be sufficient to falsify the claim that one of these sentences is a genuine counterexample to the second premise of argument (C).

In order to verify that (2) and (3) really do satisfy condition (c), let us consider the following sentence :

(4) The house needs scraped and painted.

To me, (4) sounds rather odd. However, my friend Loretta believes that (4) isn't the least bit odd-sounding. Why does she believe this ? Well, the most obvious explanation is that (i) she is aware of the way (4) sounds to her, and

(ii) (4) doesn't sound odd to her.⁸⁰ If a somewhat more substantial explanation is desired, we can go on to point out that (iii) Loretta is a native speaker of "Pittsburghese" and (iv) (4) normally doesn't sound odd to native speakers of Pittsburghese. Furthermore, we might propose that (4) normally doesn't sound odd to native speakers of Pittsburghese because (4) is assigned a structural description by the system of grammatical rules that has been internalized by all native speakers of Pittsburghese.

In this extended explanation of why Loretta believes that (4) is not an odd-sounding string, there is both a proposition that we would state if we asserted sentence (5) and a proposition that we would state if we asserted sentence (6) :

(5) (4) normally doesn't sound odd to native speakers of Pittsburghese.

(6) (4) is assigned a structural description by the system of grammatical rules that has been internalized by all native speakers of Pittsburghese.

⁸⁰The reader may feel that this explanation utterly trivial, almost not any explanation at all. However, it is worth bearing in mind that many of our other explanations are no less trivial. Thus to explain why someone *believes* that he's not in pain, we might just point out that he *isn't* in pain.

So far as I can tell, statements about whether or nor a person is in pain play a role in explanation that is analogous to the role played by statements about whether or not a particular string sounds odd to someone. If the role of the one is trivial, then so is the role of the other. And if someone thinks that statements of neither kind really have any utility when it comes to explaining beliefs, he should maintain either that they can be reduced to propositions that are genuinely useful in explaining beliefs or that Harman is mistaken when he says that a claim is justified only if it either helps to explain why people think what they think or is reducible to statements which play a useful role in such explanations. For it is obviously absurd to claim that we are never justified in thinking that certain strings of words sound odd to us or in thinking that we are sometimes not in pain.

Thus, the propositions that we state by asserting these sentences are belief-explanatory. Moreover, (5) is the right-hand side of an instance of (2), and (6) is the right-hand side of an instance of (3). Consequently, (2) and (3) both satisfy condition (c) :

- (c) we state a belief-explanatory proposition by asserting the right-hand side of some completion of a.

Given this conclusion (and the fact that (2) and (3) are obviously completions of schema (F)), we can confidently assert that if either (2) or (3) were a necessary truth, it would constitute a counterexample to the second premise of argument (C). However, I have already noted that (2) and (3) are *not* necessary truths. While (2) may *seem* to be a fairly plausible generalization, it is a good deal less than necessarily true. In fact, (2) isn't even actually true. As numerous generative linguists have noted, there are many grammatical English sentences that sound odd to native speakers of English. Consider, for example, the following string of English words :

- (7) The man who the boy who the students recognized pointed out is a friend of mine.

Here we have a string that is unquestionably odd-sounding. However, Noam Chomsky has convincingly argued that (7) is a grammatical sentence of English that only sounds odd to us because of certain very general constraints on human memory.⁸¹ In (8) we have another case of a grammatical but odd-sounding English sentence :

- (8) The horse raced past the barn fell.

⁸¹Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, pp. 10-15.

In general, speakers of English are unable to coherently parse this string until they are presented with a structurally similar sentence that can be used as a sort of parsing template. For example, (8) does not seem nearly so strange if we think of it as synonymous with

(9) the horse that was raced past the barn fell

and as analogous to

(10) The man arrested for the crime committed suicide.

The fact that (8) is structurally similar to such grammatical sentences as (9) and (10) and that we can eventually learn how to interpret (8) suggests that the string is really grammatical and that its initial strangeness results from some standard, though overridable, routine in our parsing procedure. Indeed, this is just what linguists propose. When we try to process (8), our standard parsing heuristics lead us to interpret

(11) the horse raced past the barn

as an active sentence. But so long as we give this interpretation to the occurrence of (11) in (8), the grammatical rules of our language cannot assign a coherent structure to (8). As Lyn Frazier puts it, our ordinary parsing heuristics "lead us down the garden path".⁸² Only when we override these standard rules and interpret the occurrence of (11) in (8) as a noun phrase are we able to assign (8) a coherent structural description.

The examples that I have just discussed show very clearly that both of the following sentences are false :

⁸²Lyn Frazier, *On Comprehending Sentences : Syntactic Parsing Strategies*.

- (12) (7) is grammatical in English if, and only if, (7) normally doesn't sound odd to native speakers of English.
- (13) (8) is grammatical in English if, and only if, (8) normally doesn't sound odd to native speakers of English.

But (12) and (13) are instances of (2) :

- (2) For any word-string \underline{s} and any language L, \underline{s} is grammatical in L if, and only if, \underline{s} normally doesn't sound odd to native speakers of L.

It therefore follows that (2) is false. And, since it is false, it plainly is *not* a necessary truth. Consequently, (2) is not a genuine counterexample to the second premise of argument (C).

While (2) is unquestionably falsified by the data I have cited, none of that data disconfirms the claim that the following sentence is a necessary truth :

- (3) For any word-string \underline{s} and any language L, \underline{s} is grammatical in L if, and only if, \underline{s} is assigned a structural description by the system of grammatical rules that has been internalized by all native speakers of L.

Nevertheless, we *can* establish that (3) is not a necessary truth. To do so, we need only describe a metaphysically possible circumstance in which (3) is false. Thus, let us imagine a situation in which strings of a particular kind K are regularly produced and understood by most speakers of a language L (including the socially privileged speakers of L). Imagine further, though, that the native speakers of L who come from a certain geographic region R do not standardly produce strings of kind K, can only hazard a guess as to their meaning, and uniformly consider them to be awkward-sounding. These facts about speakers of L might be best explained by hypothesizing that the

grammatical rules internalized by most L-speakers assign a structural description to strings of kind K, whereas the rules internalized by L-speakers who come from region R do not assign a structural description to strings of that kind. But in that case K-strings are *not* assigned a structural description by *the* system of grammatical rules that has been internalized by *all* native speakers of L; for there simply is no system of rules (let alone a unique one) that every speaker of L has internalized. On the other hand, since most speakers of L (and, in particular, the ones who are socially privileged) have internalized a grammar that assigns a structural description to K-strings, it seems eminently plausible to call such strings grammatical sentences of L. We thus have a situation in which certain grammatical sentences of a language are not assigned a structural description by any system of rules that is internalized by all speakers of that language. And since this situation does not appear to be plagued by any sort of incoherence, we may conclude that (3) is not a necessary truth.

Although this conclusion is sufficient to show that (3) is not a genuine counterexample to the second premise of argument (C), I think that we can easily argue that (3) is false. A natural language such as English comprises many dialects and millions of idiolects. But for any two idiolects \underline{x} and \underline{y} , the system of grammatical rules which generates structural descriptions for all and only those sentences that are well-formed in \underline{x} is distinct from the system of grammatical rules which generates structural descriptions for all and only those sentences that are well-formed in \underline{y} . This being the case, there won't be any single system of grammatical rules which has been internalized by all native speakers of English. But it follows from (3) that there aren't any grammatical English sentences unless *all* native speakers of English have internalized the very same system of grammatical rules. Therefore, if (3) were true, there wouldn't be any grammatical English sentences. Yet we all know full well that (14) is grammatical in English :

(14) Aardvarks like to eat ants and termites.

Consequently, (3) is false.

5.4. Why Harman's Skeptical Argument is Unsound

Though the connection may not be readily apparent, all of the arguments I have been presenting about sentences (2) and (3) are related to Harman's argument in support of moral skepticism. According to this argument, we aren't justified in believing that there are any moral facts because moral propositions are neither belief-explanatory nor reducible to propositions that are belief-explanatory. In section (7.2), I pointed out that statements about grammaticality don't appear to be any more belief-explanatory than moral propositions. Thus if we simply apply Harman's skeptical reasoning about ethics to the domain of grammar, we reach the conclusion that we aren't justified in believing that there are any grammatical facts unless we can reduce statements about grammaticality to propositions that are clearly belief-explanatory. But the reasoning that I set out in section (7.3) strongly suggests that such a reduction is not possible. Roughly speaking, the argument against reducibility runs as follows :

(D)

1. Statements about grammaticality can be reduced to belief-explanatory propositions only if there is a sentence \underline{a} such that

(a) \underline{a} is a completion of

(F) For any word-string \underline{s} and any language L , \underline{s} is grammatical in L if, and only if, S_1 ;

(b) \underline{a} is a necessary truth ; and

- (c) we state a belief-explanatory proposition when we assert the right-hand side of some instance of a.
2. For any sentence a, if a is a completion of (F) and we state a belief-explanatory proposition when we assert the right-hand side of some instance of a, a is not a necessary truth.
 3. Therefore, statements about grammaticality cannot be reduced to belief-explanatory propositions.

As we saw, the second premise in this argument (which is identical to the second premise in argument (C)) can be confirmed by showing that sentences (2) and (3) are not necessary truths. Moreover, the fact that we could actually establish that (2) and (3) are *false* suggests that statements about grammaticality couldn't be reduced to belief-explanatory propositions even if we replaced clause (b) in (D.1) with

(b.1) a is true.

If we cannot reduce statements about grammaticality to belief-explanatory propositions, then the reasoning that Harman employed in arguing for moral skepticism would lead us to the conclusion that we have no justification for believing that there are any grammatical facts. But we clearly *are* justified in believing that there are grammatical facts. To be so justified it is sufficient that we be warranted in believing that certain strings are grammatical sentences of English. Thus, given that we are entirely warranted in thinking that (14) is a grammatical sentence of English, we are perfectly justified in believing that there are grammatical facts.

Because we are justified in believing that there are grammatical facts, one or the other of two things must be the case. Either there is an as yet

undiscovered way to reduce statements about grammaticality to belief-explanatory propositions (and the mere existence of this method of reduction justifies us in believing that there are grammatical facts). Or, contrary to what Harman suggests, we can be justified in believing that there are facts of a given kind K, in spite of the fact that propositions of kind K are neither belief-explanatory nor reducible to propositions that are belief-explanatory.

Of these two alternatives, the latter is clearly preferable. For it is virtually impossible to see how the existence of an undiscovered method of reduction could justify us in believing anything. But once we reach the conclusion that we can be justified in believing that there are facts of a given kind even though no propositions of that kind are either belief-explanatory or reducible to propositions that are belief-explanatory, we must also conclude that Harman's skeptical argument is unsound.

CHAPTER 6

HARMAN'S ARGUMENT FOR MORAL RELATIVISM

Although Harman himself ultimately rejects moral skepticism, his grounds for doing so are rather different from those that I advanced in the preceding chapter.⁸³ Moreover, whereas I have decidedly absolutist leanings, Harman has embraced a version of moral relativism. In this chapter, I consider an argument that he has presented in support of relativism. Briefly stated, Harman maintains that his relativistic theory of morality helps us to explain certain facts about the use of ethical sentences that cannot be adequately accounted for by moral absolutists. In the following section of this chapter, I review a few salient features of Harman's relativism and state the particular facts that Harman wants to explain. I then present both his relativistic explanation of these facts and his reasons for claiming that moral absolutists cannot provide a satisfactory account of them. In section (6.2), I evaluate David Lyons' attempt to provide an acceptable absolutist explanation of Harman's facts. Although I argue that all of Lyons' explanations are unsatisfactory, I do not conclude that Harman is right in contending that his data can't be reconciled with moral absolutism. Instead I show (in section (6.3)) that Harman himself has presented, and unjustifiably rejected, a perfectly good absolutist explanation of his data. In the last section, I identify several flaws in Harman's relativistic explanation and suggest that it is this account, not the absolutist one, which should be rejected.

⁸³Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, pp. 131 - 132.

6.1. Harman's Basic Arguments

As I noted in Chapter 1, Harman's version of moral relativism may be interpreted as the conjunction of statements (I) - (III) :

I. Sentence schemas (f₇) - (f₉) are true :

(f₇) If N₂ says that it would be morally right of N₁ to VP₁, then, in saying this, N₂ is

(a) presupposing that the moral conventions that N₁ intends to adhere to are the same as those that N₂ intends to adhere to, and

(b) stating that, given the moral conventions that N₁ intends to adhere to, it would be reasonable for N₁ to VP₁.

(f₈) If N₂ says that it would be morally wrong of N₁ to VP₁, then, in saying this, N₂ is

(a) presupposing that the moral conventions that N₁ intends to adhere to are the same as those that N₂ intends to adhere to, and

(b) stating that, given the moral conventions that N₁ intends to adhere to, it would be *unreasonable* for N₁ to VP₁.

(f₉) If N₂ says that N₁ ought morally to VP₁, then, in saying this, N₂ is

(a) presupposing that the moral conventions that N₁ intends to adhere to are the same as those that N₂ intends to adhere to, and

(b) stating that, given the moral

conventions that N_1 intends to adhere to, it would be *unreasonable* for N_1 *not* to VP_1 .

II. The following sentence schema is true :

(f₁₀) If N_1 would VP_2 by VP_1 -ing, the fact that N_1 would VP_2 by VP_1 -ing is a moral reason for N_1 (not) to VP_1 if, and only if, by VP_2 -ing, N_1 would promote N_1 's (non)compliance with some moral convention that N_1 intends to adhere to.

III. Not everyone intends to adhere to the same moral conventions.

Given this theory, if I were to say that

(1) Jones ought morally to get someone to feed her cat while she is out of town,

I would presuppose (i) and state (ii) :

(i) The moral conventions that Jones intends to adhere to are the same as those that I intend to adhere to .

(ii) Given the moral conventions that Jones intends to adhere to, it would be unreasonable for him not to get someone to feed her cat while she is away.

Since not everyone intends to adhere to the same conventions, it is possible that what I presuppose when I assert (1) is false. If it is, and I know that it is, it would be a misuse of language for me to assert (1).

The specific argument that Harman advances against moral absolutism is based on the fact that if any of us were to assert either of the following statements, our assertion would sound odd, somehow "too weak":

- (2) Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.
- (3) It was morally wrong of Hitler to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.⁸⁴

According to Harman, if we were to assert either (2) or (3), we would be implying

. . . that Hitler had a reason (every reason in the world) not to do what he did. But what is horrible about someone who did what he did is that he could not have had such a reason. If he was willing to exterminate a whole people, there was no reason for him not to do so: that is just what is so terrible about him. That is why it sounds too weak to say that it was wrong of him to do what he did. It suggests that he had a reason not to act as he did and we feel that any man who could have done what Hitler did must be the sort of man who would not have had a reason not to do it.

. . . Hitler is outside our morality. . . . [Were we to assert (2) or (3), we] would imply that he was someone who acknowledged the moral standards we use to judge him. To say, "It was wrong of Hitler" or "Hitler ought morally not to have done it" would imply that Hitler accepted the relevant moral conventions. But his actions show that he does not accept those conventions. He is therefore beyond the pale and an enemy of humanity.⁸⁵

What makes [an assertion of (2) or (3)] odd, "too weak," is . . . that [Hitler] seems beyond the pale -- in other words beyond the motivational reach of the relevant moral considerations.⁸⁶

It is not easy to discern the precise structure of the argument that Harman

⁸⁴Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," p. 7 ; *The Nature of Morality*, p. 107.

⁸⁵Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, pp. 108 - 109.

⁸⁶Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," p. 8.

is stating in the foregoing passages. As best I can determine, his reasoning runs roughly as follows:

1. We know that Hitler ordered the extermination of the Jews.
2. Moreover, we recognize that anyone who was capable of doing that would not have had any moral reason not to do it.
3. But anyone who intended to adhere to the moral conventions that we intend to adhere to *would* have had a moral reason not to order the extermination of the Jews.
4. Furthermore, if we were to say either that Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews or that it was morally wrong of him to have done this, we would presuppose that he intended to adhere to the moral conventions that we intend to adhere to.
5. The following sentence schema is true :

If we know that N_1 VP_1 -ed and we recognize that anyone who was capable of VP_1 -ing could not have had any moral reason not to VP_1 , it would sound "too weak" to us to say either that N_1 ought morally not to have VP_1 -ed or that it was morally wrong of N_1 to have VP_1 -ed if

- (i) anyone who intended to adhere to the moral conventions that we intend to adhere to would have had a moral reason not to VP_1 , and
- (ii) we would presuppose that N_1 intended to adhere to the moral conventions that we intend to adhere to if we were to say either that N_1 ought morally not to have VP_1 -ed or that it was morally wrong of N_1 to have VP_1 -ed.

6. Therefore, it would sound "too weak" to us to say either that

(2) Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews,

or that

(3) It was morally wrong of Hitler to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.

As Harman recognizes, the foregoing explanation is not one that a moral absolutist could happily embrace. Insofar as the explanation assumes that all of an individual's moral reasons stem from the particular conventions that he intends to adhere to, it conflicts with absolutism's commitment to the existence of categorical moral reasons. Thus, if absolutism is correct, there must be some alternative account of why it would sound odd to assert either (2) or (3). What Harman seems to want to argue is that absolutism is incompatible with any satisfactory account of why such remarks would sound odd. However, he does not provide us with a proof that this is so. Instead, he argues against the adequacy of a particular explanation that doesn't violate the tenets of moral absolutism. Of course, one need not put much of a dent in a theory T by demonstrating the inadequacy of a particular explanation that is compatible with T. After all, even if the explanation in question is not an adequate account of the phenomenon that it purports to explain, there may well be alternative accounts of that phenomenon that are both reasonable and compatible with T. Thus, if an inadequacy in the particular explanation that Harman examines is to cast serious doubt on the acceptability of moral absolutism, there must be good reason to think that if the explanation in question is deficient, there is no satisfactory alternative that respects the tenets of absolutism. Harman apparently believes that there *is* good reason to think this because

- (a) his own explanation of why it would sound odd to assert (2) or (3) is incompatible with absolutism, and
- (b) the alternative explanation that he criticizes is the most plausible absolutist account⁸⁷ of the phenomenon that he has been able to construct.

Given this brief description of Harman's case against moral absolutism, it is evident that any of the following three strategies might be adopted by a defender of absolutism:

- (i) Criticize Harman's own relativistic explanation of why it would sound odd to assert (2) or (3).
- (ii) Argue that Harman has not presented sound objections to the absolutist explanation that he considers.
- (iii) Present an account of why it would sound odd to assert (2) or (3) that is compatible with moral absolutism but immune from the criticisms that Harman has advanced against the absolutist explanation that he considers.

David Lyons adopts the last of these strategies in "Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence". But, as I shall shortly argue, Lyons fails to provide us with a fully satisfactory account of why it would sound odd to say either that Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews, or that it was morally wrong of him to have ordered their extermination.

I myself will not pursue strategy (iii) at all. Instead I will follow courses (i) and (ii). However, before I begin my defense of moral absolutism, I must

⁸⁷In the present context, the term "absolutist account" should be treated as an abbreviation for "account that is compatible with moral absolutism." Thus, by calling an account "absolutist," I don't mean to imply that it is incompatible with moral relativism.

finish presenting Harman's indictment. Thus far I have only said that Harman considers, and ultimately rejects, a particular absolutist account of why it would sound odd to assert (2) or (3); I have not yet indicated what that account is or why Harman finds it inadequate.

The account that Harman deems unsatisfactory is one that appeals to the magnitude of Hitler's moral transgression in order to explain the oddness in assertions of (2) or (3). According to this account,

. . . it is the enormity of Hitler's crime against humanity that makes such remarks seem too weak. . . . To say simply that it was wrong of him to have ordered the extermination of the Jews suggests that it was *only* wrong -- that it is wrong only in the way in which murder is wrong. And, given what Hitler did, that is as if one were to say that it was *naughty* of Hitler to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.⁸⁸

Harman rejects this explanation because he believes that, even where someone has committed a crime as enormous as Hitler's it may not sound odd to say that it was morally wrong of the individual to have done what he did. As Harman points out, Stalin was a mass murderer who ordered the purges of the nineteen thirties knowing that millions would be killed. However, Harman suggests that we might think of Stalin as someone who was really only trying to do the right thing. In short, we might suppose that Stalin himself hated the prospect of killing so many people, but believed that Lenin's revolution would collapse unless its enemies were purged from Russian society. Harman goes on to say that if we thought of Stalin in this way but still disapproved of his policies, it would be perfectly natural for us to make either of the following claims:

⁸⁸Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, p. 107.

- (4) Stalin ought morally not to have ordered the purges.
- (5) It was morally wrong of Stalin to have ordered the purges.⁸⁹

According to Harman, remarks like these wouldn't sound odd to us even if we fully realized the enormity of the crime that Stalin committed when he ordered the purges. Thus, Harman concludes, it is not the enormity of an individual's crime that determines whether it will sound odd to say that he ought morally not to have committed that crime. In short, if it were the enormity of Hitler's crime that makes it odd to say that he ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews, we would also expect it to be odd to say that Stalin ought morally not to have ordered the purges. For just as Hitler's "final solution" was responsible for millions of deaths, so were Stalin's purges. However, since it need *not* be odd to say that Stalin ought morally not have ordered the purges, the enormity of Hitler's crime does not explain why it would sound odd to say that he ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.

6.2. Lyons' Attempt to Explain Harman's Data

Although David Lyons has denied that Harman has made a convincing case against moral absolutism, he has not (to my knowledge) denied the cogency of Harman's contention that the magnitude of Hitler's crime is not responsible for the fact that it would sound odd to say either that

- (2) Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews,

or that

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 107 - 108.

- (3) It was morally wrong of Hitler to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.

Instead of arguing that the oddness of such remarks really can be explained by citing the enormity of Hitler's crime, Lyons suggests that an absolutist can account for the relevant data in other ways. In particular, Lyons claims that

. . . the data assumed by Harman [can] . . . be accounted for . . . by refer[ring] to our substantive convictions about the pointlessness of advising a person when we cannot influence him and, more generally, the unfairness of judging a person . . . by standards other than his own⁹⁰

However, the factors that Lyons cites cannot explain all of Harman's data. Most notably, they can't explain why it would sound odd to assert (2) or (3). Consider the matter of pointless advice. I agree with Lyons that it would be odd for us to try to influence someone by means that are certain not to produce the effect that we desire. To take a case in point, we all know that Hitler believed the Jews to be a blight upon the human race. He thought that they were inherently corrupt and that they therefore had to be exterminated in order to protect the well-being of society. In light of the fact that Hitler had such beliefs, it is clear that one could not have dissuaded him from implementing his "final solution" by telling him that it would be morally wrong of him to pursue such a monstrous policy. To have thus attempted to influence Hitler would have been pointless. And, given the obvious pointlessness of trying to influence him in this way, it would have been odd for anyone to have chosen such an approach. In general, where it is certain that an agent wouldn't be moved by a particular appeal to morality, it would

⁹⁰Lyons, "Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence," pp. 223 - 224.

be odd to make that appeal in order to influence him. This explains why it would have been odd for someone to have tried to get Hitler not to order the extermination of the Jews by telling him that it would be morally wrong to issue such an order.

However, since we all know that Hitler has been dead for over 35 years, it is plain that we wouldn't be trying to influence his decision if we said either that

- (2) Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews,

or that

- (3) It was morally wrong of Hitler to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.

But if we wouldn't even be *trying* to influence Hitler by saying these things, then in saying them, we clearly wouldn't be making a *pointless* attempt to influence him. Consequently, the oddness of asserting (2) or (3) can't be due to the fact that such assertions would constitute pointless attempts to influence Hitler. Would they then be pointless attempts to influence someone other than Hitler? I see no reason to think so. After all, it is perfectly normal to make moral claims without intending to influence anyone. Furthermore, even if we did intend to influence someone's decision by asserting (2) or (3), there is no particular reason to suppose that this attempt would be pointless. Whether it would be pointless depends both on the people we would be trying to influence and on the effect we would be trying to produce in those people. Since we don't know either of these variables, there is no justification for the claim that we would be engaged in pointless advice-giving if we asserted (2) or (3).

A further point should also be mentioned. Harman does not merely say that it would be odd for us to assert (2) or (3); he says that such assertions would sound "too weak." This is a particular sort of oddness, one that is quite distinct from the oddness that attaches to pointless assertions. Thus, even if we would be engaged in a pointless attempt to influence someone's decisions if we asserted (2) or (3), this pointlessness would not account for the fact that our assertions would sound "too weak."

To sum matters up, an appeal to "the pointlessness of advising a person when we cannot influence him" does not explain why it would sound odd, somehow "too weak," to say either that

- (2) Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews,

or that

- (3) It was morally wrong of Hitler to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.

For, in the first place, we might make either of these remarks without trying to influence anyone. Secondly, even if we did try to influence someone by asserting (2) or (3), there is no a priori basis for assuming that our attempt would be pointless. Finally, even if our assertion of (2) or (3) would constitute a pointless attempt to influence someone's decisions, that pointlessness wouldn't explain why our assertion would sound "too weak."

Of course, Lyons hasn't claimed that all of Harman's data are to be accounted for by appealing to the notion of pointlessness. He has indicated that some of the data should be explained by referring to "the unfairness of judging a person by standards other than his own." Thus, let us consider the

proposal that it would sound odd for us to assert (2) or (3) because these assertions would be based on standards that Hitler didn't subscribe to.

If this proposal were correct, one would expect any moral appraisal of Hitler to sound odd if it is based on standards that Hitler didn't accept. But this simply isn't the case. Even Harman admits that there is no oddness in saying that Hitler was an evil man, a moral monster.⁹¹ Yet, in making such a claim about Hitler, we are obviously judging him by standards that he didn't subscribe to.

In short, we are judging Hitler by standards other than his own whether we claim that he was evil or that it was morally wrong of him to have ordered the extermination of the Jews. Thus, if the latter claim sounds odd because it is based on standards that Hitler didn't subscribe to, the former claim should also sound odd. Since it doesn't, the oddness of the latter claim does not derive from the fact that it is based on standards that Hitler didn't accept.

It is worth mentioning one further consideration that defeats any attempt to explain Harman's data by referring to the unfairness of judging someone by standards other than his own. If it were *unfair* to judge someone by standards that he doesn't subscribe to, one would expect that it would sound *too strong* for us to say either that

- (2) Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews,

or that

- (3) It was morally wrong of Hitler to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.

⁹¹Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," p. 7 ; *The Nature of Morality*, p. 109.

For we would be judging Hitler by standards other than his own if we made either of these claims. However, it wouldn't sound at all too strong for us to assert (2) or (3). As Harman tells us, these assertions would sound *too weak*. Thus, far from explaining Harman's data, any unfairness in our assertions of (2) or (3) would suggest that these data are false.

If the arguments that I have been presenting are sound they show that Lyons has failed to provide a satisfactory account of why it would sound odd for us to assert (2) or (3). The oddness of such assertions cannot be explained by appealing to the pointlessness of trying to influence someone by means that are certain not to produce the desired effect. Nor can their oddness be accounted for by any appeal to the unfairness of judging an agent by standards other than his own. Consequently, even if such appeals are open to the moral absolutist, their availability doesn't show that absolutism is compatible with a satisfactory explanation of the data that Harman cites in his argument for moral relativism.

6.3. The Flaws in Harman's Argument Against Absolutism

Nevertheless, I am confident that Harman's data pose no real problems for those with absolutist sympathies. To the extent that these data are valid, I see no reason to think that they favor relativism over absolutism. Harman, of course, thinks otherwise. He has argued that relativism provides a better explanation of the data than absolutism. However, his argument is far from compelling. In the first place, he does not present a convincing case against the only absolutist explanation that he considers. Furthermore, his own relativistic explanation is highly dubious.

Harman has told us that a moral absolutist might appeal to the enormity of Hitler's crime against the Jews in order to explain why it would sound odd for us to say either that

- (2) Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews,

or that

- (3) It was morally wrong of Hitler to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.

On this view such remarks would sound odd because the utter heinousness of what Hitler did calls for even stronger condemnations. To only assert (2) or (3) would be to indulge in a strange sort of understatement. It would be rather like calling someone imprudent after one learns that she drinks and smokes heavily in spite of being a diabetic who has had a recent brush with cancer.

But Harman ultimately rejects this account of why it would sound odd for us to assert (2) or (3). According to Harman, if the magnitude of Hitler's crime is what makes it odd to say that it was wrong of him to have ordered the extermination of the Jews, then it should always sound odd to say that it was wrong of so-and-so to have done such-and-such when we know that so-and-so committed an enormous crime by doing such-and-such. However, Harman claims, this is *not* the case. To support this claim, he points to the fact that it could be perfectly natural for someone who is fully aware that millions were murdered in Stalin's purges to assert either of the following statements:

- (4) Stalin ought morally not to have ordered the purges.

- (5) It was morally wrong of Stalin to have ordered the purges.

Harman says that these statements wouldn't sound odd if they came from the mouth of someone who disapproved of what Stalin did, but believed that

Stalin himself dreaded the prospect of the purges and only ordered them to avoid what he thought were even greater evils. Thus, Harman concludes, since it needn't sound odd to assert (4) or (5) even when one recognizes the enormous loss of life that Stalin caused, the enormity of Hitler's crime against the Jews is not responsible for the fact that it would sound odd for us to assert (2) or (3).

While there may appear to be some merit in what Harman is saying, I believe that this merit is *merely* apparent. As I shall now try to show, his argument relies on an overly narrow interpretation of what determines a crime's magnitude. Once one recognizes just how narrow this interpretation is, the deficiencies in Harman's argument are readily apparent.

Harman correctly points out that Stalin committed an enormous crime when he instituted the purges of the 1930's. However, Harman treats this crime as if its enormity were purely a function of the number of people who were liquidated in the purges.⁹² This is extremely misleading. If one views Stalin merely as someone who was responsible for a vast amount of killing, one overlooks many of the factors that made his crime so terrible. Indeed, if Stalin had only been guilty of killing millions, his crime wouldn't have compared to the crime that Hitler committed when he ordered the extermination of the Jews. Hitler did much more than preside over the killing of six million individuals; he terrorized his victims, humiliated them, and robbed them of their self-respect; he tortured them, starved them, and herded them about like animals. And though Hitler may have thought that his treatment of the Jews was fully justified, no even vaguely plausible case can be made in favor of the atrocities that he orchestrated. If one overlooks

⁹²Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, pp. 107 - 108.

many of these atrocities or fails to appreciate their utter lack of justification, one simply doesn't recognize the full enormity of Hitler's crime against the Jews. Similarly, if the crime that Stalin committed when he initiated the purges is truly comparable to the crime that Hitler committed when he ordered the extermination of the Jews, one doesn't appreciate just how awful Stalin's crime was unless one recognizes both that he employed methods no less horrible than Hitler's and that no serious moral argument can be offered in support of his policies. But it is quite possible not to recognize these things even when one is aware that Stalin was responsible for the liquidation of millions of people who were (often unjustly) judged to be enemies of the revolution.

Now then, Harman has tried to demonstrate that our recognition of the enormity of Hitler's crime is not what makes it odd for us to assert the following statements:

- (2) Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.
- (3) It was morally wrong of Hitler to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.

Harman's argument is based on the contention that, even if we realized the enormous number of people who were killed in Stalin's purges, it might be perfectly natural for us to say either that

- (4) Stalin ought morally not to have ordered the purges,

or that

- (5) It was morally wrong of Stalin to have ordered the purges.

But it should be clear from my remarks in the preceding paragraph that even if Harman's contention is correct, it can't support the conclusion that he has inferred from it. What Harman needs to show is that even though Stalin committed a crime that is comparable in enormity to Hitler's crime against the Jews, we could be fully aware of the enormity of what Stalin did and still assert (4) or (5) without any oddness. However, I have already pointed out that if Stalin's crime was as awful (or nearly as awful) as Hitler's, a person wouldn't appreciate its full magnitude if he were only aware that Stalin was responsible for the killing of an enormous number of people. Someone who only knew this might be able to assert (4) or (5) without any oddness. But this hardly shows that there are circumstances in which it would sound perfectly natural for someone to assert (4) or (5) when he knows the true magnitude of Stalin's crime.

Indeed, if Stalin's crime actually rivalled Hitler's in enormity, I doubt that there are any circumstances of this sort. Once we have recognized that Stalin's purges were as inhumane and unjustified as Hitler's final solution, an assertion of (4) or (5) sounds no less odd than an assertion of (2) or (3). To merely say that Stalin ought morally not to have done what he did is to understate the matter in the extreme. Furthermore, I don't believe that the oddness of this remark is noticeably diminished if we think of Stalin as someone who dreaded the prospect of the purges and only instituted them because he was convinced that the revolution would collapse unless its enemies were eradicated. After all, we're talking about a man whose policies were genocidal, a man who sanctioned the use of monstrous methods to stamp out the expression of every idea that he deemed unacceptable. Does it really matter that Stalin may have thought that he was only trying to do the right thing? I can imagine that Torquemada was only trying to do the right thing when he had people tortured and burned at the stake in order to root out

and destroy heresy in 15th century Spain. I can even imagine that he genuinely regretted having to use these methods in the pursuit of his goal. But even when I imagine these things, I still find it odd to say only that Torquemada ought morally not to have had people put on the rack and burned alive. To say this is to make a statement that fails to reflect the full extent of Torquemada's wrongdoing.

In general, if we know that N_1 has committed an utterly heinous crime by VP_1 -ing, it is inappropriate to say only that N_1 ought morally not to have VP_1 -ed. Furthermore, the inappropriateness of such a remark is not mitigated by the belief that N_1 was just trying to do what he thought was right when he VP_1 -ed. Of course, even if N_1 has committed a thoroughly atrocious crime by VP_1 -ing, we might not realize the full extent of the injury he has caused. Alternatively, we might think that there were strong (though ultimately inadequate) moral reasons for N_1 to have VP_1 -ed. In either of these circumstances it is possible that we wouldn't find it odd to say that N_1 ought morally not to have VP_1 -ed. But in such circumstances we don't really appreciate the full magnitude of the crime that N_1 committed when he VP_1 -ed.

When someone has violated the requirements of morality, the magnitude of his crime is a function both of the injury he has brought about and of the moral considerations that favor what he has done. As I have indicated, however, Harman completely ignores the latter factor when he discusses the crimes of Hitler and Stalin. Furthermore, when he talks about injury, the only thing he mentions is that Hitler and Stalin were both responsible for killing millions of people. Thus, Harman incorrectly treats the magnitude of what these men did as if it depended solely on the number of people that they killed. What I have tried to show is that an important part of Harman's argument against moral absolutism is invalidated by his overly narrow view of

what determines the enormity of the crimes committed by Hitler and Stalin. In short, Harman hasn't demonstrated any deficiency in the proposal that the enormity of Hitler's crime is responsible for the fact that it would sound odd for us to make either of the following claims:

- (2) Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.
- (3) It was morally wrong of Hitler to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.

And, since this proposal is perfectly consistent with moral absolutism, Harman hasn't given us any reason to doubt that absolutists can adequately explain why it would sound odd for us to assert (2) or (3).

6.4. Objections to Harman's Explanation

On the other hand, there are good reasons for rejecting the relativistic explanation that Harman has proposed. As I suggested in section (6.1), Harman's account can be thought of as a six-step argument that runs as follows:

1. We know that Hitler ordered the extermination of the Jews.
2. Moreover, we recognize that anyone who was capable of doing that would not have had any moral reason not to do it.
3. But anyone who intended to adhere to the moral conventions that we intend to adhere to *would* have had a moral reason not to order the extermination of the Jews.
4. Furthermore, if we were to say either that Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews or that it was morally wrong of him to have done this, we would presuppose that he intended to adhere to the moral conventions that we intend to adhere to.

5. The following sentence schema is true :

If we know that N_1 VP_1 -ed and we recognize that anyone who was capable of VP_1 -ing could not have had any moral reason not to VP_1 , it would sound "too weak" to us to say either that N_1 ought morally not to have VP_1 -ed or that it was morally wrong of N_1 to have VP_1 -ed if

- (i) anyone who intended to adhere to the moral conventions that we intend to adhere to would have had a moral reason not to VP_1 , and
- (ii) we would presuppose that N_1 intended to adhere to the moral conventions that we intend to adhere to if we were to say either that N_1 ought morally not to have VP_1 -ed or that it was morally wrong of N_1 to have VP_1 -ed.

6. Therefore, it would sound "too weak" to us to say either that

- (2) Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews,

or that

- (3) It was morally wrong of Hitler to have ordered the extermination of the Jews.

One problem with this explanation is that it implies that we would be making a false presupposition if we were to assert either (2) or (3). From steps 1 and 2 in the explanation, it follows that Hitler had no moral reason not to order the extermination of the Jews. Furthermore, step 3 claims that anyone who accepted the same moral conventions that we accept would have had a moral reason not to order the extermination of the Jews. Thus, it is a consequence

of steps 1 - 3 that Hitler didn't accept the same moral conventions that we accept. According to step 4, though, we would presuppose that Hitler *did* accept the same moral conventions that we accept if we were to assert either (2) or (3). It therefore follows from Harman's explanation that we would be presupposing something false if we asserted either of those sentences.

However, I don't see any reason for thinking that we would make a false presupposition if we said either that Hitler ought morally not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews or that it was morally wrong of Hitler to have done this. In fact, these statements seem to me to be perfectly true. They resemble the claim that we would make by asserting (6):

(6) Hitler wasn't as good a person as Gandhi.

Given that Hitler was an inhumane monster while Gandhi was almost a saint, this claim is a gross understatement of the Fuhrer's moral deficiencies; it sounds too weak in the same way that an assertion of (2) or (3) sounds too weak. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Hitler *wasn't* as good a person as Gandhi.

Since (2) and (3) seem so similar to (6), there is a strong *prima facie* case against Harman's account of why it would sound odd for us to assert either of the former sentences. Unlike this account, the absolutist explanation that I defended in section (6.3) does not imply that we would be saying something false if we asserted (2) or (3). Thus, other things being equal, the absolutist explanation is preferable to the account that Harman favors. Of course, Harman does not think that other things are equal. But we have seen that his argument against the absolutist account is unsound; that is, he fails to show that there are any real deficiencies in the view that our recognition of the enormity of Hitler's crime is what makes it sound odd for us to assert (2) and

(3). Hence, until Harman comes up with better arguments than he has so far offered, there is good reason to regard the view that he rejects as superior to the relativistic explanation that he advocates.

An even more serious problem with Harman's explanation is that it contains a claim which is patently false. According to the second step of this explanation, we recognize that

- (7) Anyone who was capable of ordering the extermination of the Jews could not have had any moral reason not to order their extermination.

But I, for one, most certainly *don't* recognize this. In fact, I think that Hitler himself had every moral reason in the world not to order the extermination of the Jews. And I take it that most people with absolutist sympathies would agree with me.⁹³ Thus, step 2 in Harman's explanation is false.

Since Harman clearly doesn't want an explanation that rests on a false premise, he must either revise or reject his account of why we think that assertions of (2) and (3) sound too weak. However, the prospects of his coming up with a plausible revision don't look very promising. The best that he could do would be to restrict his explanation to an account of why assertions of (2) and (3) sound too weak to those who believe (7). But those who believe (7) constitute only a subset of the people who think that assertions of (2) and (3) sound too weak. So, even if Harman were to revise his explanation, he would still need an account of why assertions of (2) and (3) sound too weak to some people who *don't* believe (7). It seems to me that

⁹³Most, but presumably not all. For National Socialism and moral absolutism are entirely compatible. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Hitler was a moral absolutist.

Harman could best fill this gap by suggesting that when people who don't believe (7) find that assertions of (2) and (3) sound too weak, their reaction stems from their recognition of the enormity of Hitler's crime. However, if Harman were to make this suggestion, he would be putting forward an explanation that he had previously declared unacceptable. Thus, he would have to admit that his objections hadn't been well-founded. More importantly, the explanation he would be proposing would be one that seems just as applicable to people who believe (7) as it does to those who don't. Thus, Harman's relativistic explanation would become entirely superfluous.

All of the foregoing arguments suggest that it is relativism, rather than absolutism, which is riddled with problems.

CHAPTER 7

ROOTS OF NIHILISM, SKEPTICISM AND RELATIVISM

7.1. Introduction

Although there are not many philosophers who would deny the truth of the following statement, many would disagree as to why it is true:

- (I) There are numerous cases in which an ethical dispute between two individuals reaches a point where each party thinks that his opponent has failed to provide a compelling argument, yet neither party can think of any further arguments in support of his position that are more compelling than the ones he has already given.

Let us call any dispute "*apparently irresolvable*" if each participant finds his opponents' arguments unconvincing and no participant can think of any new considerations in favor of his position that are more compelling than those that he has already cited. It seems to me that a major source of moral nihilism, moral skepticism, and moral relativism is the conviction that we can only account for the truth of (I)--i.e. the existence of numerous apparently irresolvable ethical disputes--by adopting a position which implies that we have no knowledge of any absolute moral truths. For example, one explanation of why each of the parties to an apparently irresolvable ethical dispute is unable to come up with any argument that his opponent finds compelling is that there simply are no compelling reasons for his opponent to change his mind. And one might go on to suggest that these reasons are non-

existent because the disputants adhere to different basic moral ideals. This, of course, is the position that Mackie advocated in the "argument from relativity" that we examined in the first section of Chapter 4. It is also a view which has been embraced by Hare and Harman.⁹⁴

In the present chapter I shall point out a number of factors which give rise to the phenomenon of apparently irresolvable ethical disagreement. It seems to me that these factors are quite sufficient to account for the existence of this phenomenon. But I shall argue that none of them gives us any reason to doubt that we have knowledge of absolute moral truths. Furthermore, I shall indicate that, although the factors which make it difficult for us to resolve ethical disputes have an especially powerful influence on the way people respond to arguments that challenge their moral opinions, the same or very similar factors also affect the way they react to arguments that challenge their non-moral opinions.

7.2. Non-Epistemic Influences on the Resolvability of Moral Disagreements

7.2.1. Self-esteem and moral convictions

A fundamental reason why ethical disputes are often very difficult to resolve is that people standardly attach a great deal of importance to moral judgments which either are directly about them or reflect on them indirectly. Generally speaking, people feel that if they ought morally to act in a certain way, they have an overriding reason to act in that way. And, in perceiving that they have such a reason to do something, they feel a motivational "tug" in the direction of doing it. Furthermore, if they do not do what they believe

⁹⁴Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, chps. 6,8 & 9 ; Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, pp. 103 - 112.

they ought morally to do, they usually feel *shame* when they reflect on their failure to abide by the imperatives of morality. To experience shame is to experience a diminution in one's own estimation of oneself: it is to suffer a loss of self-esteem. The extent to which an individual's sense of his own worth is diminished when he admits that he is guilty of moral wrongdoing is a function of several factors. Among the most important of these are his perception of the seriousness of the wrongdoing and the degree to which he believes himself responsible for what he has done. Thus, other things being equal, we would expect a person's estimation of his own worth to be less adversely affected by his belief that he wrongfully neglected to do his fair share of last week's house chores than by his belief that he wrongly beat his wife. Likewise, we would expect an individual's self-esteem to suffer less in the first of the following two cases than in the second:

- (a) he believes that he has done something that he ought morally not to have done, but thinks that, when he did it, he had no good reason to think that he was doing anything wrong;
- (b) he believes that he has done something that he ought morally not to have done, and also thinks that, when he did it, he had good reason to think that he was doing something wrong.

The fact that we usually feel shame and a loss of self-esteem when we believe that we are violating the demands of morality provides us with a strong motive to refuse to admit that we are violating these demands. And, since our estimation of our own worth will suffer most if we believe ourselves to be guilty of a serious moral lapse, our motive for refusing to admit that we are doing anything wrong becomes all the more intense as the seriousness of the charge against us increases. An individual's tendency to deny moral wrongdoing and to search for excuses is most pronounced when

the charge against him is most grave. Thus a pilot who has laid waste to an inhabited village by dropping napalm cannisters and anti-personnel bombs has done something which is so obviously horrible that he *must* believe his actions to be morally justified. It would be psychologically devastating for him to admit that there is no moral justification for the destruction and agony he has caused.

One reason, then, why many moral disputes appear to be irresolvable is that their resolution is threatening to the self-esteem of one or more of the disputants. If an individual's estimation of his own worth would diminish were he to admit that certain of his moral beliefs are wrong, he has a strong motive to reject as unsound any argument which purports to show that these beliefs are mistaken.

In one sense, the fact that an individual's self-esteem would be shaken if he came to doubt or disbelieve a certain proposition P is a reason, indeed a very good one, for him to continue to believe P and to deny the soundness of arguments which purport to establish that P is false. However, there is also a sense in which this fact provides the individual in question with no reason at all either for maintaining his belief in the truth of P or for rejecting arguments that purport to show that P is false. The difference between these two senses is nicely illustrated by the plight of Winston Smith in George Orwell's novel, *1984*. It is clear to all readers of *1984* that Smith has solid evidence that the government of his country, Oceania, systematically feeds its citizens false information. Thus, Oceania's government claims that the nation has always been allied with Eurasia in a war against Eastasia. But Smith distinctly recalls that, only a few hours ago, the government asserted that Oceania had always been at war with Eurasia and allied with Eastasia. The government also claims that Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford betrayed important military

secrets to the Eurasian General Staff at a meeting in Siberia on Midsummer Day, 1963. But Smith has seen a clipping from an old newspaper which reports that, on the date in question, the three men attended a Party function in New York. Given this and other evidence, Smith is justified in concluding that his government systematically distorts the truth.

However, from a purely self-interested perspective, Smith has overwhelming reason to believe that the government always reports the facts accurately. For if he believes this, he will be permitted to lead the normal life of an ordinary citizen. To be sure, the citizen of Oceania leads a far from wonderful life. Nevertheless, if Smith harbors any doubts about the government's veracity, he will certainly be discovered by the Thoughtpolice. Then he will be brutally tortured until his personality and will are destroyed. And this fact is a powerful reason for him to believe in his government's veracity—in spite of his having more than adequate evidence that Oceania's government distorts the truth.

What is to be noticed about Smith's situation is *not* that he has a *self-interested* reason to believe something and a *non-self-interested* reason to disbelieve it. Rather, the important point is that Smith's reasons for believing that Oceania's government is not truthful either entail or are evidence that the government is not veracious. However, his reason for holding that the government always reports the truth neither entails nor constitutes evidence that the government is veracious.

Where R is a reason for a to believe P, and R either entails or is evidence for P, let us say that R is an *epistemic* reason for a to believe P. Winston Smith, then, has certain epistemic reasons for thinking that his government reports the facts inaccurately. But insofar as his only reason to believe that Oceania's government does not lie to its citizens is the fact that his failure to

adopt this belief will lead to his being brutally tortured, Smith merely has a *non-epistemic* reason to believe in the veracity of the government.

Now then, insofar as the prospect of suffering a loss of self-esteem gives an individual a reason both for believing a certain moral proposition P and for refusing to accept the soundness of arguments which purport to show that P is false, the reason in question is non-epistemic. And, although the distinction that I have drawn between epistemic and non-epistemic reasons does not seem to preclude the possibility that one and the same reason might be both non-epistemic and epistemic, in most cases, the fact that an individual a would avoid a loss of self-esteem by believing P and by rejecting arguments which purport to show that P is false is *only* a non-epistemic reason for a to do these things. For, generally speaking, the fact that a would protect his sense of his own worth by doing these things neither entails nor is evidence for either the truth of P or the unsoundness of arguments in favor of P's denial. Thus, though a member of the secret police who tortures prisoners of conscience may preserve his self-respect by believing that his actions are morally justified, the fact that he can protect his self-esteem by maintaining this belief neither entails nor is evidence for the claim that his actions really are morally justified. Insofar as his continued belief in the permissibility of torturing prisoners of conscience is motivated by a desire to preserve his sense of his own worth, what motivates him to believe as he does has no bearing on the truth or falsity of that belief.

Of course, it is not only in the realm of morality that protection of self-esteem plays a role in determining the beliefs that people have and the arguments that they find unacceptable. The value of a scientist's research is undermined by the discovery that his findings are based on mistaken theoretical claims. And it is almost inevitable that his perception of the worth

of his life will be tied to his perception of the value of his research. Thus, one way for a scientist to preserve his self-respect is to reject arguments which purport to show that his theoretical assumptions are erroneous. Although his criticisms of these arguments may be valid, the fact that his self-esteem would be damaged if he accepted the arguments is obviously *not* an epistemic reason for refusing to accept them. To the extent that a scientist adheres to a theoretical claim merely because giving it up would lower his estimation of his own worth, he is no different from the man who protects his self-respect by continuing to believe that he is morally justified in torturing people simply because they have "subversive" political views.

Where a disagreement fails to get resolved because the position adopted by at least one of the disputants is motivated more by non-epistemic than by epistemic considerations, the persistence of the disagreement in no way suggests that the disputed issue is one about which there is no absolute fact of the matter. We have grounds for doubting that there is an absolute fact of the matter with respect to a particular issue only when we have evidence which suggests that epistemic considerations do not decisively favor one side of the issue over the other. This being the case, to the extent that considerations of self-esteem are responsible for the persistence of a moral disagreement, the fact that the dispute goes unresolved fails to give us any reason to doubt that there is an absolute fact of the matter about the disputed issue. Furthermore, insofar as the difficulty of resolving ethical disputes can be traced to the tenacity with which people resist challenges to their sense of their own worth, it does no harm to admit that ethical disputes are often more difficult to resolve than factual disagreements. All that such an admission indicates is that, generally speaking, the belief that one is guilty of moral wrongdoing poses a greater threat to one's self-respect than the belief that one has made a factual error.

7.2.2. Moral beliefs as unwanted constraints on action

The loss of self-respect that people often experience when they accept moral propositions that reflect unfavorably on their actions or intentions is only one non-epistemic motive for refusing to accept such propositions. A further non-epistemic reason for not admitting that a certain moral proposition is true is that this admission may place one in the position of feeling constrained to abandon a plan or course of action that one has an interest in following. In general, people's moral beliefs function as constraints on their behavior. When an agent \underline{a} believes that it would be morally wrong for him to VP_1 , this belief is an obstacle to \underline{a} 's VP_1 -ing. The obstacle that the belief constitutes may of course be overcome by other motivations; but insofar as it is something which itself has a motivational influence that must be overridden if \underline{a} is to VP_1 , it is a constraint against \underline{a} 's VP_1 -ing.

Now then, to the extent that an agent \underline{a} has an interest in VP_1 -ing, he also has an interest in not having beliefs that would get in the way of his VP_1 -ing. Hence, where \underline{a} has an interest in VP_1 -ing, he has an interest in not believing the proposition that it would be morally wrong for him to VP_1 . But this proposition is in no way disconfirmed by the fact that \underline{a} has such an interest in not believing it. Thus, imagine that a former CIA agent named Wilson can make phenomenal profits by selling sophisticated small arms to a country which exports terrorism. If Wilson believed that it would be morally wrong for him to provide weapons to that country, this belief would get in the way of his doing something that he has a clear interest in doing. So, Wilson has an interest in not believing that it would be morally wrong for him to sell arms to the country in question. But the fact that he has such an interest clearly has no bearing on the question of whether it would or wouldn't be morally wrong for him to sell weapons to that country. For, regardless of

what the correct answer to this question is, Wilson's interest in selling weapons to the country in question will give him an interest in not believing that it would be morally wrong for him to do so. Consequently, if someone argues against the moral permissibility of Wilson's prospective arms sale and Wilson is motivated to reject this argument by his interest in not placing obstacles in the way of the sale, his rejection of the argument will not raise any questions about its soundness.

In general, whenever an individual a has an interest in VP_1 -ing and a's believing a certain moral proposition P would be an obstacle to his VP_1 -ing, the fact that this belief would be such an obstacle is a non-epistemic reason for a not to believe P . But the same fact is not an epistemic reason for a not to believe P if a's believing P would be an obstacle to his VP_1 -ing regardless of whether P is true or false. Hence, where a's belief in P would be an obstacle to his VP_1 -ing independently of P 's truth-value and a is motivated to doubt or disbelieve P by his interest in not having this belief get in the way of his VP_1 -ing, his failure to accept P does not suggest that he has any compelling epistemic reason to doubt or deny that proposition. Similarly, where b believes that P is true but cannot convince a to accept P , the fact that a does not find b's arguments persuasive will not suggest that b has failed to present a with compelling epistemic reasons to believe P if

- (i) a has an interest in VP_1 -ing,
- (ii) a's belief in P would be an obstacle to his VP_1 -ing regardless of P 's truth-value, and
- (iii) a rejects b's arguments in order to avoid this obstacle.

In these circumstances there is an apparently irresolvable moral disagreement between a and b, but the apparent irresolvability doesn't indicate that the

opinions of both a and b are equally justified by epistemic considerations. This being the case, there is no basis for claiming that the disputed issue is one about which there is no absolute fact of the matter.

I have now set out two (non-competing) explanations of why many ethical disagreements go unsettled. First, I have noted that the resolution of these disagreements is hampered by the fact that a person's self-esteem is usually tied to his image of himself as someone who acts in accordance with the demands of morality. Insofar as an individual's sense of his own worth will be shaken if he accepts moral propositions which state or seem to him to imply that he is guilty of moral wrongdoing, he will tend to resist arguments that purport to establish the truth of those propositions. Second, I have pointed out that the resolution of ethical disagreements is hindered by the fact that their resolution would often require one of the disputants to believe a moral proposition whose belief is a constraint against his doing things that he has an interest in doing. Since he has an interest in not being subject to such a constraint, he will tend to object to arguments advanced by his opponents.

What is significant about these explanations of why ethical disagreements often go unresolved is that they do not provide any support to the view that the apparent irresolvability of the disagreements stems from inherent limits to the epistemic reasons that can be advanced in favor of moral claims. There may be decisive epistemic reasons for an individual to believe that it would be morally wrong for him to VP_1 even though he is motivated to avoid this belief either by a concern for his self-esteem or by a desire to avoid unwanted obstacles to his VP_1 -ing. In general, to the extent that an individual is motivated to accept or reject a proposition by either a concern for his self-respect or a desire to avoid an unwanted psychological obstacle to the pursuit of some attractive course of action, he is motivated by purely non-epistemic factors.

Lest my argument be misunderstood, I should point out that I have *not* been claiming that every unsettled ethical dispute would be resolved were it not for the fact that one or more of the disputants is prejudiced by either a concern for his self-esteem or a desire to avoid moral beliefs that would obstruct his plans. All that I have wanted to indicate is that

- (i) these purely non-epistemic motives contribute significantly to the persistence of many ethical disagreements, and
- (ii) so far as these motives are responsible for the persistence of an ethical dispute, its apparent unresolvability provides no evidence that epistemic considerations fail to come down decisively on one side of the issue under dispute.

7.3. Moral versus Physical Constraints

Throughout the preceding section I have stressed that an individual's moral beliefs can constrain his actions and affect his self-esteem. I also noted that the truth or falsity of a moral belief is quite irrelevant to its effect on a person's self-respect and its function as an obstacle to action. For example, whether or not homosexual relations are morally wrong, a person who firmly believes that they are will suffer a loss of self-esteem if he has sexual intercourse with a member of his own sex. Similarly, his belief that homosexual relations are morally wrong will be an obstacle to his having them whether or not they really are morally wrong.

What I want to focus attention on now is the fact that the truth of a given moral proposition does not affect anyone unless someone believes that proposition. If we believe that it would be morally wrong for us to VP_1 , that belief will normally constitute a constraint against our VP_1 -ing. And, if others believe that we ought not to VP_1 , this belief may motivate them to prevent us from VP_1 -ing. But if neither we nor anyone else took any

cognizance of morality, no one would be constrained to act in accordance with morality's demands—that is, nothing would prevent us from violating moral imperatives or even impose a penalty on us for violating them. Thus, even if it were morally wrong for us to have sexual relations with members of our own sex, the moral impermissibility of such relations would not adversely affect anyone's self-esteem and would not place obstacles in the way of anyone's actions, if no one believed that these relations were morally impermissible.

Whereas an action's moral impermissibility would not impinge on anyone's life if no one believed it to be impermissible, many facts about the physical world seem to influence our lives independently of our beliefs about those facts. If a man who fancies himself a patriot wants to shoot someone who has made an obscene gesture at the American flag, he won't come any closer to his goal by refusing to accept the fact that he is pulling the trigger of an unloaded gun. Likewise, if a mountain climber has failed to hammer his petons in securely, his belief that they are firmly in place will not delay his downward plunge when he slips off the icy ledge on which he has been precariously balanced.

Insofar as an individual has any plans at all, certain facts about the physical world will impinge on his life. And these facts do not cease to have an effect if the individual simply refuses to admit that they exist. As Richard Rorty has noted, physical reality "shoves us around" whether we like it or not.⁹⁵ We cannot avoid entering into causal relationships with objects in our physical environment. And these relationships are at least partly responsible for the things that happen to us. However, there doesn't seem to be any

⁹⁵Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 375.

causal connection between the things that happen to us and the moral status of our actions. Even if we look at the unhappy fates that certain individuals have suffered after acting in ways that are standardly held to be wrong, it doesn't seem that the actual wrongness of their acts is responsible for their unfortunate circumstances. For example, if Smith loses both his job and his friends after it becomes public knowledge that he physically abuses his wife, his fall from grace seems to stem from people's moral *beliefs* about him, not from the *actual* moral status of his actions.

Rorty suggests that most people's doubts about the reality of the moral domain stem from the fact that the moral status of our actions never *causes* anything.⁹⁶ However, I don't think that this suggestion is wholly accurate. It is true that if ethical statements did occur in causal explanations, the objective reality of moral facts would not be seriously questioned. Yet there are facts of other kinds whose reality is not usually questioned even though statements of those facts do not play a role in causal explanations. Thus, suppose that I have an impacted wisdom tooth which is giving me a lot of pain. If the pain will become chronic and only grow more intense if the tooth is not removed, there is obviously a reason for me to get it pulled. Nevertheless, no statement of the following sort will appear in any causal explanations :

- (1) The fact that my wisdom tooth will continue to give me pain if it isn't removed is a reason for me to get it pulled.

If I go ahead and get the tooth pulled, we might give causal explanations of my action which include certain propositions describing my pain and my beliefs. But no proposition which says that such-and-such was a reason for me to get the tooth extracted will appear in these explanations.

⁹⁶ *idem.*

In general, reason-ascribing statements (i.e. statements which describe things as reasons for people either to act in certain ways or to have certain beliefs) will not play a role in causal explanations. These explanations may contain statements about many things that we would normally call reasons ; but the statements themselves will not refer to them *as* reasons.

Since reason-ascribing statements never enter into causal explanations, we would expect general skepticism about the truth of such statements to be just as widespread as moral skepticism if people's doubts about the moral realm primarily stemmed from the fact that ethical propositions don't play a role in causal explanations. However, there is no widespread skepticism about the truth of reason-ascribing statements. Indeed, I don't think that it would be very easy to find anyone who maintains either that no reason-ascribing statements are true or that we have no justification for believing that any such statements are true. What we *can* find are people who are skeptical about a particular class of reason-ascribing statements : the class of statements which claim that certain facts constitute categorical *moral* reasons for us to act or not act in certain ways. I expect that some of this skepticism stems from the widely-held belief that a person can't really have a reason to do something unless he would promote the satisfaction of one of his own desires by doing it. Those who hold this belief will not see how it is possible for there to be any categorical moral reasons. However, I don't find it in any way self-evident that a person's reasons must flow from his own desires. Nor am I acquainted with any compelling argument in support of this view. Thus, until such an argument is forthcoming, the moral absolutist need not worry that he is committed to a doctrine which violates some iron law about the source of reasons.

7.4. Further Remarks on Irresolvability

In the first section of this chapter, I tried to show how the resolution of moral disagreements is impeded by the influence of certain non-epistemic motivations. At this point I would like to propose several further factors that are responsible for the persistence of these disagreements. Once again, my basic goal is to demonstrate that the prevalence of apparently irresolvable ethical disputes is entirely compatible with the truth of moral absolutism.

7.4.1. A hypothetical moral disagreement

In a typical moral dispute between two individuals, neither of the disputants will advance a very sophisticated argument in support of his position. Imagine, for example, that Doe and Roe have a moral disagreement about government safety regulations for automobiles. Doe thinks the federal government ought to require that every new car be equipped with an airbag--a balloon-like device that is installed underneath the dashboard and is designed to inflate automatically during accidents, thereby preventing the car's occupants from being thrown into the windshield. Roe, on the other hand, believes that it would be morally wrong for the government to require airbags in all new cars. If Roe were to ask Doe to explain why the government should require the installation of airbags in new cars, Doe might simply say that the requirement would save thousands of lives each year and would prevent an even greater number of serious, non-fatal injuries. And, upon hearing this answer, Roe might point out that while the airbags would probably save lives and prevent injuries, a law requiring all new cars to be equipped with airbags would interfere with people's freedom to choose how safe they want to be. At this point, the argument between Doe and Roe is likely to deteriorate very quickly. Doe will probably admit that a law requiring airbags would restrict freedom of choice. However, he will say that, in his opinion, the number of

lives that such a law would save outweighs the loss of freedom that it would entail. In response to this claim, Roe will probably say that Doe is underestimating the value of freedom. Once Doe and Roe have expressed their views on the relative values of freedom and safety, they are likely not to be able to think of very much more to say. Consequently, their disagreement will go unresolved.

7.4.2. The road to relativism and nihilism

Now then, since neither party to the dispute has been able to come up with an argument that either justifies his position or undermines his opponent's claim, each may come to the conclusion that there is no rational way to settle their disagreement. If Doe and Roe adopt this view of the matter, they may be attracted to some brand of emotivism. For example, they may decide that

- (a) different people have different moralities,
- (b) moralities are systems of dispositions for having pro and con attitudes, and
- (c) there is no objectively neutral standpoint from which to evaluate the relative merits of different moralities.

Given this basic framework, it won't be difficult for Doe and Roe to explain why reason is incapable of resolving their dispute. In brief, they have a disagreement in attitude that arises from differences between their respective moralities. Since there is no neutral perspective from which objective comparisons between moralities can be made, it is impossible for either of the disputants to demonstrate that his opponent's attitude is mistaken.

Instead of turning to emotivism to explain the irresolvability of their disagreement, Doe and Roe might take a somewhat more moderate course.

They might decide that the reason why neither of them can establish the superiority of his position is that there is no absolute fact of the matter about whether the government ought or ought not to require that all new cars be equipped with airbags. By concluding that there isn't any absolute fact of the matter, Doe and Roe do not commit themselves to the rejection of moral absolutism. As I have already pointed out, moral absolutism is perfectly consistent with the existence of a certain amount of indeterminacy in ethics.

However, if Doe and Roe feel compelled to conclude that there is no absolute fact of the matter about the moral status of the government's requiring airbags in all new cars, they are bound to find themselves saying "No fact of the matter" in many other contexts. Indeed, we can expect each of them to discover that in most cases where he has a moral disagreement with someone over an important question, the dispute will go unresolved. In these disputes, each party will present a consideration or two in favor of his position; but neither party will be able to say very much about why the considerations he has advanced have more weight than those that have been advanced by his opponent. The parties will then be tempted to account for their failure to come up with compelling arguments by suggesting that there are no compelling arguments to be found. And from here it is a short step to the belief that there is no absolute fact of the matter about the issue they are discussing.

When people find themselves saying, "No fact of the matter," on almost every occasion where a serious moral disagreement arises, it is very easy for them to become convinced that absolute moral facts are a fiction. Once someone reaches this conclusion, he can say either that there are no moral facts at all or that the only moral facts are relative ones. In short, he can opt for either nihilism or relativism.

Because people are so often unable to conceive of anything beyond the most elementary moves in moral argumentation, it is not surprising that they come to think that there are no moves beyond the elementary ones. They might not think this way if there were a recognized group of moral experts who received special training, employed rigorous methods of enquiry, and produced original results whose accuracy could be tested by reliable procedures. However, there is no such group of experts. Consequently, most people's inability even to imagine how to go about constructing a compelling moral argument tends to convince them that it is impossible to construct such arguments. This tendency is enhanced by people's need to believe that their actions conform to the demands of morality. Insofar as people have this need, they are likely to find a certain amount of comfort in the idea that reason cannot make any contribution to the resolution of an ethical disagreement when there are significant moral considerations on each side of the disputed issue. For if reason is impotent in situations where people have to weigh the relative importance of competing moral considerations, each person can be confident that there are few resources available to those who might want to argue that his actions are morally wrong. In section (8.2) I discussed the fact that a person's need to believe that his actions are morally acceptable might lead him to reject rationally compelling arguments that undermine the moral legitimacy of his behavior. But it is also important to realize that this need is one factor which motivates people to deny that there are any rationally compelling arguments about the relative stringency of competing moral considerations. This denial is a prerequisite to acceptance of the reassuring and often expressed view that, so long as an individual has thought seriously and carefully about a difficult moral decision, his choice is morally acceptable if he thinks that it is.

7.4.3. Overlooked arguments

Although most people are unable to produce anything more than the most rudimentary arguments in favor of their moral opinions, this inability is not difficult to reconcile with the view that those opinions often can be backed up with very complex arguments. Indeed, the fact that people usually fail to provide substantial arguments in support of their moral judgments is less often due to a shortage of such arguments than to people's lack of imagination and their lack of practice in defending their opinions. Consider, for example, our hypothetical dispute between Doe and Roe over the mandatory installation of airbags in automobiles. The only thing that Doe was able to say in favor of a law requiring airbags in new cars was that the law would save thousands of lives and prevent an even greater number of serious injuries. However, this is far from the only argument that can be advanced in favor of the law. Had Doe been somewhat more imaginative, he might have said something like this :

Almost anyone would be acting irrationally if he knew how effective airbags are in reducing serious injury, but nevertheless purchased a car that wasn't equipped with one of those devices. Given (a) the irrationality of making such a purchase, (b) the real risk of serious injury that a person incurs by riding in cars not equipped with airbags, and (c) the fact that a large percentage of the population will buy cars that don't contain airbags if they have the option of doing so, the usual presumption in favor of giving people the freedom to make their own decisions is overridden in this case. In general, the value of letting people make their own choices diminishes when the likelihood of an irrational choice is high and irrationality poses a serious threat to the chooser's happiness.

Once a presumption in favor of allowing free choice in a given context has been overridden, it is replaced by the presumption that choice in that context ought to be constrained. This new presumption can itself be overridden by certain considerations. For example, if the social and monetary costs of effective constraint are bound to be high, it may be best not to prevent people from making their own decisions. But the costs imposed by a law requiring that all new cars be equipped with airbags would not be exorbitant. Quite the contrary. The expense of enforcing such a law and the inevitable increase in automobile prices that would follow its implementation would be more than offset by the benefits that would derive from the decreased number of serious injuries and fatalities. In the first place, by preventing many deaths and grave injuries, a law requiring airbags in all new cars would tend to lower insurance rates. This decrease in rates might even be sufficient in itself to compensate people for the increased cost of new cars. Secondly, when a person is killed or injured, those who love and depend on him suffer emotional trauma and, not infrequently, economic loss. So, by bringing about a significant decrease in the number of fatalities and injuries caused by car accidents, an airbag law would protect many people's emotional and economic well-being. Thirdly, because such a law would prevent millions of serious injuries, it would allow society to reallocate resources that must now be used to treat accident victims.

These last three points suggest another way to argue for a law requiring the installation of airbags in new cars. When important social resources are being used to repair damages or injuries that

could be eliminated by preventing people from pursuing a certain course of action and these lost resources are greater than those that are saved or generated by allowing people to pursue the course in question, the government ought to prevent people from pursuing that course unless the imposition of this constraint on a person would seriously interfere either with his freedom to formulate his own plan of life or with his success in carrying out that plan. Now, there is no question that important social resources are being used to treat and care for victims of automobile accidents. It is likewise clear that much of this drain on society's resources would be stopped if the government prevented people from buying new cars that are not equipped with airbags. Furthermore, by preventing people from doing this, the government wouldn't be eliminating a practice that saves or generates resources which come close to matching those needed to pay for the treatment of injuries that would not occur if airbags were installed in all new cars. Lastly, if the government did not allow a person to purchase a new car unless it was equipped with an airbag, it would not be imposing a significant constraint either on his freedom to devise his own life plan or on his successful pursuit of that plan. Therefore, the government ought to require that an airbag be installed in every new car.

So far as my purposes are concerned, it is not important whether either of the foregoing arguments constitutes an entirely satisfactory defense of the position that the government ought to require the installation of airbags in all new cars. What *is* important is that each of the two arguments that I have outlined goes well beyond Doe's simple assertion that many lives would be saved if there were a law requiring that all new cars be equipped with airbags.

Thus, both arguments include numerous premises about the benefits and costs of such a law. In addition, the first contains a premise about the rationality of purchasing automobiles that aren't equipped with airbags. All of these statements are non-moral, and the truth of some of them is certainly open to question. This provides an opportunity for counterargument from those who oppose mandatory installation of airbags in new cars. And, once these counterarguments are set out, they will themselves be open to attack from proponents of mandatory airbag installation. If each side in the disagreement were to continue to match the other side's arguments with new ones of its own, this process of claim and counter-claim would eventually lead back to a complicated tangle of problems involving economic theory and the theory of rational choice. Indeed, it may well be that certain of the non-moral questions that bear directly on the dispute between Doe and Roe cannot be definitively answered until fairly deep theoretical issues are settled. This suggests that the resolution of moral disagreements is often blocked by the fact that resolution would require agreement on complex non-moral questions. To the extent that this is so, it is just not plausible to claim that moral disputes go unresolved because the disputants reach a point where there is no longer any possibility of further argument. What *is* plausible is that the disputes go unresolved because the arguments that would be needed to settle them are highly complicated and theoretical.

7.4.4. The appeal to intuitions in moral enquiry

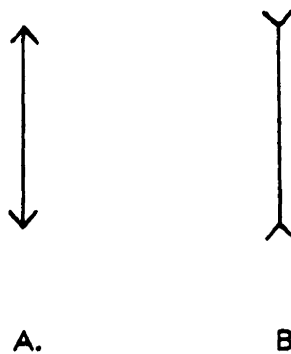
But let us suppose that opponents of airbag legislation don't dispute any of the non-moral statements that appear in the two arguments that I constructed on behalf of those who support this legislation. Does this supposition imply that there no longer remains any rational way to resolve the ethical disagreement between Doe and Roe? Not at all. Each of the two

arguments contains moral as well as non-moral premises. For example, in the first it is claimed that the strength of the moral presumption in favor of allowing people to make their own decisions varies inversely with increases in (a) the likelihood that they will choose irrationally and (b) the probability that irrationality will lead to consequences that would be severely detrimental to their well-being. In the second argument there is a premise that sets out certain conditions under which the waste of social resources gives rise to a moral requirement on government to restrict people's options. Both of these proposals have implications that extend well beyond the immediate focus of the dispute between Doe and Roe. This being the case, Doe might defend the statements by appealing to Roe's moral intuitions about cases that have no direct connection with automobile safety. He might try to show that the truth of these intuitions can best be accounted for by supposing that the two statements are true. Roe, on the other hand, might try to explain the truth of his intuitions in a way that doesn't lend support to these statements. Furthermore, he might attempt to turn the tables on his opponent and show that Doe's own moral intuitions can't be reconciled with the principles that are needed to justify a law requiring the installation of airbags in new cars.

As the preceding remarks suggest, appeals to people's moral intuitions play a crucial role in ethical enquiry. However, it is also implicit in these remarks that conflicts of intuition don't cut off the possibility of further argument. Indeed, they usually *call for* further argument. Intuitions are far from infallible. If some of our intuitions conflict with the intuitions of someone else, we can often present good reasons for doubting the correctness of his intuitions by making direct and indirect appeals to a third set of intuitions. *Direct* appeals to such a set are common in analogical arguments. Thus if I have a moral intuition about a particular situation that conflicts with someone else's intuition about the same situation, I can call his intuition into

question if (a) its truth cannot be reconciled with the truth of certain ethical intuitions about analogous cases and (b) there are good grounds for trusting the latter intuitions. I might also undermine the credibility of my opponent's intuition by showing that it is incompatible with some well-confirmed moral principle. In doing so I would be making an *indirect* appeal to a set S of ethical intuitions if the credibility of the principle stems either from its role in explaining the truth of the intuitions in S or from its relation to other principles that help to account for the truth of the members of S.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that there is nothing suspect in the idea that the credibility of a moral intuition can often be undermined by showing that it does not cohere well with other moral intuitions. It is entirely legitimate to use some moral intuitions to criticize others. After all, a moral intuition is simply a moral belief that arises spontaneously, rather than through any conscious inference or calculation. And it is a common practice in every domain of human enquiry to undermine the credibility of certain spontaneous beliefs by demonstrating their lack of coherence with other such beliefs. To mention a fairly trivial case, some people who look at figures A and B in the following diagram will immediately judge that the vertical line in A is shorter than the vertical line in B.



Individuals who have this intuition about the relative lengths of A and B can come to see that they are mistaken by measuring the two verticals with a ruler. When they hold a ruler up against the vertical in A, they will spontaneously judge it to be one inch in length. Likewise, when they measure the vertical in B, they will immediately judge it to be one inch long. Since these "ruler assisted" judgments conflict with the initial intuition that the vertical in A is shorter than the one in B, some belief has to be jettisoned. In this case the most reasonable course is to give up the initial intuition.

Once it is recognized that we can test the validity of a moral intuition by making direct and indirect appeals to other moral intuitions, it is not difficult to see that this testing process may involve extremely complex reasoning. Thus, every time that a moral principle is cited either to justify or to undermine a given intuition, the principle itself can be tested through appeals to ethical intuitions. As I indicated in the last paragraph, to the extent that a principle P helps to explain the truth of some subset of our moral intuitions, there is a *prima facie* case in favor of P. On the other hand, if we have intuitions that seem to be incompatible with P, there is a *prima facie* case against that principle. The strength of these competing cases will depend on a variety of factors. Among the most important of these are

- (a) the range and credibility of the intuitions whose truth we seem to be able to explain by appealing to P,
- (b) the range and credibility of the intuitions with which P is supposed to be incompatible,
- (c) P's "fit" with other well-confirmed principles,
- (d) the plausibility of the non-moral statements that must be conjoined with P in order to give it explanatory force,
- (e) the plausibility of the non-moral statements that are

appealed to in trying to demonstrate that P is incompatible with certain of our moral intuitions.

In making determinations about (a) - (e), there is room for any number of arguments. For example, one might attempt to undermine the credibility of the intuitions that are supposed to support P by showing that they are based on mistaken non-moral beliefs. Alternatively, one could try to cast doubt upon the intuitions that are supposed to be incompatible with P by showing that they stem from people's internalization of certain highly questionable moral principles. The questionable nature of these principles might be brought out in various ways. Thus, someone could argue that it would be necessary to make several *ad hoc* assumptions in order to reconcile the principles with certain data provided by our moral intuitions. Another strategy would be to try to show that even the most promising arguments in support of the principles contain highly questionable premises. These questionable premises may be either moral or non-moral statements.

7.4.5. The need for argumentative proficiency

The foregoing remarks suggest that people are usually mistaken when they think that they are involved in a dispute where all possibility of further rational debate has been exhausted. There are almost always additional arguments to examine when the parties to a disagreement decide that they have irreconcilably different intuitions about the relative weights of competing moral considerations. Once we see that these arguments exist, the attraction of moral skepticism and moral relativism begins to wane. The skeptic and the relativist would have us believe that the very nature of morality precludes the resolution of many ethical disputes: the disputes go unresolved because there are no absolute moral facts. However, if we realize that people rarely exploit more than a small fraction of the moral arguments that they might use

to defend their own opinions and undermine the views of their opponents, we can see that there is no need to appeal either to the non-existence of moral facts or to their inherent relativity in order to account for the prevalence of apparently irresolvable moral disagreements. Thus, one reason why there is such an abundance of these disagreements is that most people aren't very good at constructing moral arguments. Our hypothetical dispute between Doe and Roe typifies the lack of sophistication and imagination that most people exhibit when they are called upon to defend their ethical opinions. If the population in general were more proficient at constructing and evaluating moral arguments, and this improvement in proficiency were accompanied by a heightened concern for the truth, there would certainly be a significant reduction in the number of apparently irresolvable ethical disagreements. These disagreements would not be eliminated, of course. But those that would remain would not pose a serious threat to moral absolutism. Many of the remaining disagreements would persist because their resolution would require the resolution of highly technical and theoretical issues. These issues might go unsettled for a long time. However, it is hardly surprising that this should be so. As problems become more technical, fewer people can be found who have the knowledge, the skill, and the perseverance that are necessary to solve them. Moreover, as questions become increasingly theoretical, it becomes increasingly difficult to settle them by employing standard decision procedures. None of this poses a particular problem for ethics. After all, there are many disputes in physics that persist for decades or even centuries because they involve issues which are either technically complex or theoretically controversial. The existence of such disputes does not constitute a good reason to doubt or deny that there are any physical facts. Nor does it suggest that there is never any absolute fact of the matter when there is a disagreement about an object's physical properties. Likewise, then, the

persistence of ethical disputes that involve difficult technical and theoretical questions does not justify the adoption of either moral skepticism or moral relativism.

7.4.6. The practical costs of trying to convince one's opponents

Progress in moral theory and the discovery of new evidence may bring about the resolution of many long-standing ethical disputes. However, there is no doubt that indefinitely many ethical issues will never get settled. Some of these issues will go unresolved simply because people perceive that very little would be gained and much might be lost by taking the trouble to try to resolve them. If N_1 is about to VP_1 and I think that it would be morally wrong for him to do this, I might try to persuade him not to VP_1 by attempting to convince him that he would be violating the demands of morality by VP_1 -ing. However, if N_1 has already VP_1 -ed, it is too late for me to get him not to do so by arguing that he did something morally wrong by VP_1 -ing. Furthermore, it is not unlikely that I would only succeed in annoying or hurting N_1 if I tried to convince him that it was morally wrong for him to have VP_1 -ed. If I have affection for N_1 , I won't want to hurt him; and if I think that my arguments are likely to annoy him, I will probably want to avoid the unpleasantness of his reaction. Moreover, I will have an additional interest in not irritating N_1 if I suspect that the irritation will turn into a lasting resentment that will color all of N_1 's future dealings with me.

7.4.7. Genuine irresolvability

Although many ethical disagreements go unresolved either because the personal costs of trying to resolve them are high or because the likely benefits of resolution are low, the persistence of other ethical disagreements can be traced back to underlying non-moral issues that cannot be settled

because it is impossible to obtain the evidence that is needed to resolve them. If a moral disagreement falls into this latter category, neither side in the dispute will be able to present a case that would have to be accepted by any reasonable individual who understands it. But this doesn't mean that one side won't be correct and the other incorrect. There is often an absolute fact of the matter about a particular issue even when there is no way to show what the fact of the matter is. Thus, suppose that my wife and I have different recollections about what we had for dinner last Monday. I think that we ate bluefish, but my wife's memory informs her that we dined on mackerel, not bluefish. Now, neither my wife nor I keep a diary. So we can't consult a written record to resolve our disagreement. Furthermore, we won't find any telltale scraps by digging through our garbage; for better or worse, the sanitation department has taken away all remains of the relevant meal. Finally, since we didn't have dinner guests last Monday, my wife and I can't appeal to anyone else's memory to settle our dispute. In short, the evidence that we would need to determine who is right is non-existent. Nevertheless, this much is perfectly clear: one and only one of the following statements is correct:

- (a) My wife and I had bluefish for dinner last Monday.
- (b) It is not the case that my wife and I had bluefish for dinner last Monday.

The impossibility of obtaining sufficient evidence to resolve a moral dispute is most common where counterfactual questions are involved. Thus, imagine that Aaron and Zelda have an ethical disagreement over their government's adoption of a certain policy P. Aaron thinks that it was wrong for the government to adopt P while Zelda believes that the government was morally justified in doing this. As Aaron and Zelda debate the matter, it

becomes clear that their moral dispute is based on a difference of opinion over what would have happened if the government hadn't adopted P. However, neither party has managed to present a compelling case against his opponent's position. One explanation of why this is so is that each person can reasonably maintain his opinion in the face of the most cogent counter-evidence that it is possible for anyone to obtain. In other words, the totality of possible evidence underdetermines the answers to the counterfactual questions which underlie the ethical disagreement between Aaron and Zelda. This does not mean that there are no correct or incorrect answers to these counterfactual questions. It may well be that Zelda is right while Aaron is wrong. If this is indeed the case and, in addition, Aaron and Zelda have correctly identified the connection between the counterfactual issues that divide them and the moral status of the government's adoption of policy P, then Zelda will be right when she says that the government was morally justified in adopting P and Aaron will be mistaken when he denies this. Of course, there won't be any way to show that Zelda's position is better than Aaron's; but the fact will remain that she is right and he is wrong. Thus, there will be an absolute moral fact of the matter even though there can never be enough evidence to determine what the fact of the matter is.

In the two preceding paragraphs I have stressed that a dispute may be impossible to resolve even though one side in the dispute is correct and the other side incorrect. In other words, there can be an absolute fact of the matter about a given issue even when there is no way even in principle to resolve a disagreement over what the fact of the matter is. Nevertheless, I am perfectly willing to admit that there may be, indeed that there probably are, moral issues about which there are no absolute facts of the matter. By making this admission, I am not committing myself to the denial of absolutism in ethics. Moral absolutism could be true even if there turn out to

be infinitely many moral issues about which there are no absolute facts of the matter. All that is required for the truth of moral absolutism is that there be *some* absolute facts of the matter in ethics.

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