

A high-angle, wide-view photograph of Earth from space. The sun is positioned at the top center, creating a bright, multi-colored lens flare that radiates across the top of the frame. The Earth's horizon is a thin, glowing blue line. Below it, the atmosphere is a layer of white and light blue clouds. The landmasses are visible in shades of brown, tan, and green, with a prominent river system winding through a large, flat, arid-looking region. The overall scene is dramatic and emphasizes the vastness of the planet.

Is there a Meaning of Life?

BY JAMES W. GRAY © 2009-2010

About This Ebook

The essays found in this ebook are from my personal notes originally presented on my website at <http://ethicalrealism.wordpress.com>. Each essay is self-contained, so some ideas can become a bit repetitive. For example, I introduce the concept of “intrinsic value” multiple times.

This ebook is a rough draft and it has not been officially published. Suggestions and objections are welcome.

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Further Reading

If you are interested in the material found in this ebook, you might also be interested in the following:

- My free ebook, [Contemporary Metaethics Part 1](#)
- [Essays on Moral Realism](#) edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord
- [Meaning of Life @ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Intrinsic Value @ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Moral Realism @ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Moral Anti-Realism @ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Metaethics @ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

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Preface

Morality, Relativism, God, and Nihilism

Although most people have no idea what philosophers have to say about morality that doesn't deter them from discussing philosophical ramifications of morality. In particular many people want to argue the following:

1. Objective morality requires God.
2. Morality is relative.
3. Nothing really matters.

Most philosophers disagree with any of the above claims, but for some reason many other people seem to easily agree with them.¹ I will briefly describe how I view morality and why I personally disagree with the above claims.

How I view morality

Morality is about making good choices that promotes certain goods rather than impedes them. Most people accept that certain goods, such as human life and happiness, are the sorts of goods that should be promoted and shouldn't be impeded.

¹ Some contemporary philosophers do endorse moral relativism, but their view is still much different than the relativism endorsed by most non-philosophers. For example, a philosopher might think that we can reason about moral goals, and moral goals are maximally worthy when they are based on maximal non-moral knowledge. People who know everything about the world can certainly make the most informed moral judgments, but philosophical relativists insist that moral judgments could be different for each person.

Ethics is the philosophy of morality. It is through ethics that we can reason about morality and justify moral beliefs. For example, we can reason about which goods are worthy of morality and the best way to accomplish such goals. How to accomplish our goals can be a scientific endeavor (i.e. drinking water is necessary to healthy), but deciding which goals are worthy is more difficult.

I believe that moral beliefs, if true, refer to facts about the world. An example of a *moral fact* is that “torturing people willy nilly” is wrong because we know that pain is bad from our personal experiences of pain.

Additionally, I endorse [intrinsic values](#). What can make a goal *morally worthy* is somewhat controversial in the academic world, but I believe that morally worthy goals promote intrinsic values. I not only know that pain is bad, but I know that pain *really matters*. I shouldn't cause others pain even if it would benefit me to do so because everyone's pain has negative value.

For more information about how I view morality and intrinsic values, you might want to take a look at my ebooks, [Two New Kinds of Stoicism](#) and [Is There A Meaning of Life?](#)

Objective morality requires God.

I'm not exactly sure what most people think “objective morality” or “objective value” refers to, but the main idea that most people seem to have in mind is that we have moral rules that apply to everyone. Morality in that sense is universal.

To say that “objective morality requires God” is pretty much synonymous with saying that “universal moral rules would be meaningless unless God exists.” God is taken to be a supernatural foundation for morality. Either God is an *ideal* person that manifests

perfect virtues or God is a law maker who makes the moral laws for us to follow.

Why do I disagree that “God is necessary for morality?”

One, as far as I can tell, the fact that pain is bad has nothing to do with God's virtues or commands. If I found out that God doesn't exist, I would certainly still think that torturing people willy nilly is wrong because I would *still* accept that pain is bad.

Two, as far as I can tell, I don't know anything about morality from God's virtues. I have never seen God and I don't know anything about his virtues. It seems to me that I can't learn about morality by observing God. Even if I did observe God and somehow decided that *God has a virtue of causing pain*, I would still think that pain is bad. God's so-called nature and perfection couldn't convince me that pain isn't bad.

Three, as far as I can tell, I don't know morality through God's commandments. If God didn't command us not to cause pain, I would still think torturing people willy nilly is wrong. If God commanded me to torture people willy nilly, I would still think it would be wrong to do so.

For more information about why I don't think objective morality requires God, you might want to take a look at my ebook, [Does Morality Require God?](#)

Morality is relative.

Many people accept that God is necessary for “objective morality” but they reject that God exists. The result for some is that they think morality is *relative* or *subjective* rather than *objective*. It might be that pain is bad for me, but it's good for someone else. This tends to mean

two things: (1) We can't reason about morality because it's just a matter of taste. (2) Morality is merely indoctrinated behavior regulation.

When we say that pain is bad for me but not bad for someone else, it could merely mean that I dislike pain and someone else likes it. Reason is then irrelevant to morality. We can't say that I'm right and you're wrong because there is no objective truth to morality. There are no moral facts that we can try to learn about.

Why do I disagree that “morality is relative?”

One, we know that we can reason about morality, but relativists deny that we can reason about morality. For example, I can reason that your pain is bad for the same reason that my pain is bad.² I can also reason that to say that “my pain is bad, but no one else's pain is bad” is *absurd*.

It is not controversial that moral reasoning is possible as is illustrated by the fact that (1) we accept that moral progress is possible and (2) we accept that our moral beliefs can be false. We can have moral progress, such as outlawing slavery. We can find out that our moral beliefs are false, such as the belief that slavery should be legal when we now know that slavery should be illegal.

Two, there are non-controversial universal moral facts, but moral relativists must deny that there are such facts, such as the fact that torturing people willy nilly is wrong.

² Atheism and ignorance are not the only motivations for moral relativism. Some people also endorse relativism because they think such a position is “tolerant” and will help them get along with others. Instead of saying, “I'm right and you're wrong,” the relativist can say, “Everyone's entitled to their own opinion.” I am not impressed with this line of reasoning because it gives up too easily and decides not to argue about morality just because it can help make friends and so forth. The position is ultimately against philosophy itself because it tells us not to think too much about morality and just take things at face value.

Nothing really matters.

Many non-philosophers are content to be moral relativists, but relativism requires that we accept that *nothing really matters* (which is often called “nihilism”).³ In other words they reject intrinsic values. I think this is one of the main reasons that theists are not satisfied with relativism. If nothing really matters, then what's the point in being moral? There isn't any.

Much of the debate involving morality and God is the idea that atheists can't be moral. Certainly atheists can *act* morally just like anyone else, but theists then insist that atheists can't be moral in the sense that morality itself is *delusional* for the atheist. The atheist couldn't be *rationally* moral. Being moral would not longer be rational and could even be irrational.

I agree that it is rational to be moral because *something* really matters, but I don't think that has anything to do with God. I think pleasure is intrinsically good and pain is intrinsically bad because I have first hand experience with these things, not because of God's virtuous ideal nature or commandments. If God commanded us to hurt each other, then I would think God was wrong to do so. I would think that pleasure has intrinsic value and pain has intrinsic disvalue no matter what God is like.

Why do I disagree with the proposition that “nothing really matters?”

One, I have already briefly described why I think pleasure and pain involve intrinsic values. I don't think that pleasure is merely desired, but I think that pleasure is desired because we know it's good. I also discuss many arguments in favor of intrinsic values [here](#).

³ The view that “nothing really matters” is accepted by some contemporary philosophers, but such philosophers are not relativists as relativism is described above, and such philosophers almost unanimously believes that we can reason about morality.

Two, some of our commitments concerning morality seem to require us to accept that intrinsic values exist. Consider the following:

(1) We are committed to the fact that one should choose to *care* about people if given the choice not to care. If morality isn't objective, then we could imagine that we could find out that our feelings *delude* us into caring for people. We might be able to learn to stop having empathy for others and stop allowing our moral feelings to control us. We could then learn to live without morality. There would be nothing irrational with doing such a thing because morality would be delusional to begin with.

(2) The word "ought" itself seems to indicate that morality is objective because it indicates that one action is right or wrong no matter what I personally believe or desire. If I ought to do something, then it is good to do it. However, if morality is just a group of arbitrary rules that people tend to care about, then the word "ought" would merely indicate that some behavior follows those rules better than others. But so what? In that case I ought to help others only in the sense that I have a tendency to like people to help others. That wouldn't be any more *important* than following rules of etiquette.

Conclusion

All three of these views seem to give God's connection to morality too much credit, and many people reject objective morality almost entirely because they reject God's existence. However, that's not to say that any of this makes any sense. This isn't an issue for many contemporary philosophers at all. Almost no philosophers agree that morality requires God or that morality is relative. There are some philosophers who think that *nothing really matters* but even those philosophers will usually insist that we can reason about morality. Morality might be objective even if *nothing really matters*.

My understanding of morality involves reasoning and worthy goals, and these elements seem easy enough to understand with common sense alone. God doesn't seem to help the situation, and relativism fails to consider that we reason about morality. People who reject intrinsic values can often reason about morality, but they must reject certain uncontroversial facts concerning the nature of morality, such as morality's importance.

Can We Reason About Morality?

One common objection against just about any philosophical argument is considered by philosophers to be amateurish – *Philosophy can't give us the truth*. The implication is supposed to be, “Philosophy can't give us the truth, so we might as well give up on arguing about such things.” This is especially a popular objection to moral philosophy in general, but it is little more than a declaration of one's ignorance and distrust towards philosophy. The main problem with this argument is merely that philosophical arguments are usually not intended to actually give us *the truth once and for all*, and even natural science fails to do so. The point of philosophy tends to be to tell us *what it is most rational to believe*, or *what is probably true given our current information*.

I have already discussed knee-jerk skepticism against philosophy in my [Introduction to Philosophy](#) ebook, but it is probably worth considering objections against moral philosophy in general. The objections come in at least three major forms:

1. We can't know anything about morality.
2. We can't observe moral facts.
3. We can only know about morality through God.

I will consider each of these and give an additional argument that shows that we can reason about morality.

We can't know anything about morality.

I have briefly described that I think we can know about morality in part through our experiences. I can only know that pain is bad because I have experienced pain, and I know that torturing people willy nilly is wrong because I know that other people's pain is bad for the same reason that mine is.

I have a much more in depth argument about how we can experience objective moral values in my discussion, [An argument for Moral Realism](#), where I also consider various objections.

Many people reject philosophy and moral philosophy in general just because philosophers debate the issues for centuries and they don't seem to give us the absolute truth once and for all. There are two ways that I will respond to this issue:

One, philosophers do sometimes make a great deal of progress and lead to uncontroversial truths, but once philosophy reaches sufficient progress it usually branches off into another discipline, such as physics and psychology. Morality could one day reach that high point and become a branch of science.

Two, even uncontroversial scientific facts aren't known for certain. I think we can “know” moral facts in a similar way to how we know scientific facts. We never know moral or scientific facts with absolute certainty, but it can be pretty silly in everyday life to say we don't know that gravity exists and so on. The everyday common sense use of the word “know” only requires that the evidence is beyond a reasonable doubt. Many scientific facts are uncontroversial and we might as well say that we “know” they are true despite a lack of absolute certainty.

We can't observe moral facts.

Whether or not we need to observe moral facts in order to reason about morality is a debatable issue in moral philosophy, but I think we can observe moral facts in quite the same way we can observe psychological facts:

One, many people want to argue that we can't observe moral facts to prove that it can never become a branch of science. However, we don't

directly observe everything in science. Germs were once unobservable and scientists pretty much knew germs existed before they were observed. Electrons might never be directly observable, but we know about electrons from the effect it has on other things. Moral facts might not be directly observable either, but moral facts might be found to exist in some indirect way as well.

Two, I have already explained how we can experience objective moral values. I know that I have pain and that pain is bad because I have experienced pain. This is the same way that we observe psychological facts. We have good reason to believe that other people have psychological facts and that other people's pain is bad because other people have a similar biology to our own, and they behave in quite the same way we do. When I touch fire and feel pain, I quickly retract my hand and give a grimace. Other people have similar behavior when in similar situations indicating that they also probably feel pain for similar reasons that I do.

We can only know about morality through God.

If anything I have said about experiencing pain makes any sense, then I think it is already pretty clear that we don't need to know about morality through God. For example, we aren't necessarily born with divine knowledge that pain is bad. We can know pain is bad from actually experiencing it.

Some people also insist that we know about morality from the Bible or some mysterious sort of revelation. However, that is not how I know about morality and many people in the world know nothing about the Bible or God and still seem to know quite a bit about morality.

More evidence that we can reason about morality.

Perhaps the greatest argument in favor of the fact that we can reason about morality is the fact that many philosophers do it quite successfully. Actual moral philosophy (and in particular the progress found in moral philosophy) is a good reason to accept that we can reason about morality. There were short periods of time when philosophers weren't so sure that we could reason about moral philosophy but this didn't last long because *philosophers who were successful about reasoning about morality presented us with a pretty undeniable fact that it can be done*. John Rawls's [A Theory of Justice](#) was a powerful example of theorizing about political ethics that could be fruitful, and Peter Singer's essays of applied ethics provided us with good examples of moral reason concerning controversial moral issues.

There are many secular (non-religious) moral theories that have proven to be helpful tools to help us reason about morality and they are often applied to various situations to help us know what actions are right or wrong. I developed my own moral theory in [Two New Kinds of Stoicism](#), and I have applied ethical theories to the ethics of homosexuality in my discussion, [Is Homosexuality Immoral?](#)

Conclusion

Most objections people have against philosophy and moral reasoning is a thoughtless knee-jerk reaction, and many objections reveal how ignorant most people are of actual moral philosophy. People want to insist that we can't know anything about morality or that we can't observe moral facts despite the fact that just about everyone engages in moral reasoning and observes moral facts in everyday life. There are, however, some sophisticated arguments against morality as I understand it to exist. I discuss many of these objections in this ebook.

Even these more sophisticated objections might fall victim of overly abstract theorizing and ignoring our everyday experience of morality.

What's Next?

I want to answer the question, “Is there a meaning of life?” I take this to mean the same thing as, “Does anything really matter?” If something really matters, then it has a sort of value that philosophers call “intrinsic value.” If something has intrinsic value, then ethics seems to make sense. If pain is intrinsically bad, then causing pain is wrong (unless we have a good reason for doing so). Philosophers describe a view that intrinsic values exist as being a “moral realist” view. The view that nothing really matters is called “moral anti-realism.”

I hope to do the following:

1. Explain what it means to say that something has “intrinsic value.”
2. Describe why we want to know if anything has intrinsic value.
3. Explain how intrinsic value relates to ethics and “moral realism” in particular.
4. Describe how intrinsic values might or might not relate to our everyday moral experience.
5. Argue that it is plausible that there is at least one intrinsic value.
6. Defend intrinsic value from objections.

My arguments are based on our moral experience and I try to explain how they relate to everyday life. The discussion of the meaning of life (intrinsic value) is not new to philosophy. Professional philosophers have quite a bit to say about intrinsic value and they often have a much different understanding of the subject matter than I do.

This ebook should be a good way to introduce yourself to the moral realist philosophy debate. The first six chapters are partly designed to introduce non-philosophers to the relevant philosophical ideas.

1. Denying the Meaning of Life

Imagine that you will no longer exist within the next two seconds. If done properly, you will think about what your existence really means and appreciate the fact that you still exist. You will realize how amazing it is to be alive. Expect to no longer exist every moment and you will appreciate your life every moment. This is evidence that either our life really matters, or our life is worth living for some other reason. If we are not deluded when we imagine the value of our own existence, then we have evidence that something really does matter. However, it isn't easy to be sure.

Do you want people to stop doing horrible crimes? Do you want to live a meaningful life? Do you want to make the world a better place? If so, you need to know if "anything really matters." Philosophers have been trying to find out if "anything really matters" for thousands of years, and we have a lot we can learn from them. I am not going to currently attempt to prove that "something really matters." **Instead, I want to prove to you that the question, "Does anything really matter?" is something we should be asking ourselves, and we should want to know the best answers to the question available.**

We are sometimes tempted to believe that "nothing really matters." This temptation is perfectly reasonable. We know that tables and chairs exist, but we can't know that moral values exist in the same way. Perhaps we only think that rape and murder are wrong because those are our cultural beliefs. Some people even claim that they really believe "nothing really matters." If nothing matters, then there can't be a real "meaning of life." Life will have no real meaning.

If "something really matters," then we should accept that intrinsic values exist, which are values that are really good or bad irrespective of our beliefs. If pain is intrinsically bad, then it makes sense to give someone an aspirin when they have a headache. If pleasure is

intrinsically good, then it can make sense to eat a chocolate bar. If anything has intrinsic value, then there is a meaning of life, and our life can be truly meaningful.⁴

The vast majority of people have little interest in learning what philosophers have to say about the question, “Does anything really matter?” but what they have to say is actually quite important. I would say that everyone might even have an obligation to learn about it. It might be something that needs to be taught in high school alongside math and formal logic.

I will argue that a philosophical understanding of intrinsic values are very important for the following reasons:

1. Intrinsic values help explain why some behavior is categorized as moral and other behavior is immoral.
2. Intrinsic values might be a necessary assumption for love, grief, joy, and other emotions.
3. Philosophy clears away our doubts and motivates us to be virtuous.
4. It is reasonable to want to justify our beliefs.

I will discuss each of these propositions.

1. Intrinsic values help explain moral categories

Corporations have occasionally been involved with crimes that end up killing innocent people, such as dumping toxic waste in third world countries.⁵ When a CEO makes a decision that causes many people to die in order to raise the profits of his or her corporation, we might

4 I use the term "meaning of life" to refer to intrinsic value. That is the most significant sort of meaning possible. If anything has value, then it is either valuable for its own sake (intrinsically) or merely because someone likes it. We want things we like to have intrinsic value. We don't just want the meaning of life to be based on a matter of taste. For example, I believe that I like happiness precisely because it seems to be good for its own sake.

5 Rogers, Stephanie. “Britain Gets Caught Dumping Toxic Waste.” EarthFirst.com. 12 Jan. 2010 <<http://earthfirst.com/britain-gets-caught-dumping-toxic-waste/>>.

wonder if he or she believes that human life has real value. It is hard to believe that people could sincerely believe that human life has real value, but they would prefer for people to die than allow their company to make less profit. If we accept that intrinsic values exist, then we have a pretty good explanation for why certain actions are praiseworthy and others are blameworthy.

If something is intrinsically good, then we have a reason to promote it. If pleasure is intrinsically good, then we have a good reason to give ourselves and others pleasure. In that case a stand up comedian could be motivated to give people a good time, and it would be strange to question the comedian and say, "So what? I want the real reason to be a stand up comedian!" If intrinsic values exist, then something can be a truly worthy goal because it leads to something objectively good.

On the other hand most things are said to be "good" only because they're useful. Food is useful to stay healthy. Guns are good at helping us kill other people. And so on. "Usefulness" isn't the same thing as "intrinsic value." Useful values are often called "instrumental values." If no intrinsic values exist, then all goals are questionable. In that case no goal will be "truly worthy," and the stand up comedian probably just has a desire to give other people a good time, even though it "doesn't really matter."

Consider the following moral explanations using intrinsic values:

- If pain is intrinsically bad, then we have a reason to give a person with a headache an aspirin.
- If human life has intrinsic value, then we have reason to maintain ourselves, stay healthy, save lives, and feed starving people.
- If pleasure has intrinsic value, then we have a reason to eat chocolate, be entertainers, and write an enjoyable novel.
- If knowledge has intrinsic value, then we have a reason to want to be philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, and teachers.

To say that pain is intrinsically bad seems to imply that, "All things equal, it is wrong to cause pain." It doesn't mean that pain isn't useful. We evolved pain to help us survive. If pain is necessary for survival, then it might still be important to feel pain sometimes. In that case survival itself might have a greater significance than pain.

At this point we might wonder whether or not intrinsic values actually exist, but I just want it to be clear how intrinsic values seem to be a pretty important part of our moral experience. If we found out that we merely desire pleasure and dislike pain, then it would no longer be clear why giving someone an aspirin seems to make so much sense. I don't have to care about that person's pain in order to realize that their headache matters. It would be strange to tell me, "Don't give him an aspirin because you don't currently feel any empathy! Giving him an aspirin is irrational!"

Additionally, we think people have moral obligations. These are not merely obligations required "if you want to be moral." Instead, we seem to be forced into moral obligations whether we like it or not. This seems to imply that there are intrinsic values. It would be strange to say that it is immoral to harm others just because I have a social instinct to dislike other people's pain. If I don't want other people to feel pain, then "it would be a good idea not to hurt them," but it would not necessarily be impermissible to give them pain. If "nothing really matters," then it seems strange to say that behavior can be obligated or immoral.

It might be possible to explain why something is called "moral" or "immoral" without intrinsic values, but intrinsic values seems to do a pretty good job.

2. Intrinsic values might be a necessary assumption for some emotions

Consider how we understand the following emotions:

- If you love someone, then you think that person "really matters." It is good that the person you love exists, and it is terrible if that person dies. So, love might imply that the beloved has intrinsic value.
- If you feel grief, then you think it was terrible that the person died. It was better for them to exist. So grief might also imply that the person who died had intrinsic value.
- The joy we feel when a child is born indicates that we believe that the child is something good. It is better for the child to exist than to not exist. It would be terrible if the child dies. This might also indicate that we believe that the child has intrinsic value.
- If you crave chocolate, then you want to get pleasure. The pleasure you get is appreciated because it feels good. So, not everything is good "because it is desired." Instead, sometimes things are desired "because we think they are good." The desire for chocolate might imply that our pleasure is intrinsically good.
- If you feel bad after a friend is harmed, that implies that you think his pain matters. You know how terrible it is to feel pain and know it is the same for your friend. This might imply that pain is intrinsically bad.

Having these emotions might be an indication that the person who has them has assumptions involving intrinsic values, but it might also be possible for to find a different reason that we have these emotions. The explanation of these emotions involving intrinsic value beliefs seems like a fairly good explanation, so we have some reason to accept such a proposition.

3. Philosophy motivates us to be virtuous

Believing in intrinsic values can help motivate us to help others and become virtuous. Giving to the poor, helping alleviate people's pain, and so forth would all be justified forms of behavior. If we decide that intrinsic values don't exist, we might then decide that other people don't really matter, so we might as well decide to be self-centered.

We can decide that believing in intrinsic values makes sense without delving into philosophical literature, but we might not yet be certain that they really do exist. To have a strong and sincere belief in intrinsic values requires a strong justification. It isn't honest to say, "I know that intrinsic values exist for certain" if we don't really know much about it. We need to consider the arguments against intrinsic values before we can really know for sure whether or not intrinsic values exist. This is one reason why it's helpful to learn about what the philosophers have to say.

Additionally, having a strong belief in intrinsic values could help motivate us to behave morally, and it can help us avoid doubts. At one time I wasn't sure if intrinsic values could be justified. At that time I decided to have faith in them because I couldn't yet verbalize why they seemed so plausible. However, faith is not a sign of certainty. A person who merely has faith could be lying about their certainty, and they will have doubts. Those doubts will tempt us to act in our self-interest even when it harms others. People do it all the time. Although a deep knowledge of intrinsic values might not guarantee that everyone will become virtuous, it will at least help motivate us to nurture our social instincts and try to be less self-centered. Without intrinsic values it is much less clear why we should nurture our social instincts when it so often requires degrees of self-sacrifice.

Of course, we might worry that philosophy will convince us that intrinsic values don't exist. That finding might indeed be disheartening, and it might invalidate some of our motivation for learning about the relevant moral philosophy. However, I don't know of any philosophers that actually reject morality. That is merely what an uninformed rejection of intrinsic values leads to. Ethical philosophers agree that some actions are moral and others are immoral (and they tend to be fairly virtuous as actual human beings), even if they don't believe in intrinsic values. Our belief in morality is more certain than our belief in intrinsic values, so it is possible to believe moral behavior is justified even after rejecting the existence of intrinsic

values. How exactly this can be done is not something I fully understand.

The fact that morality is important seems to be something all philosophers agree with. So, no matter what conclusions sufficiently informed people reach about intrinsic values, they will all agree that morality is important. This might not make any sense to someone uninformed about the relevant philosophy, so uninformed people will be tempted to reject morality altogether, and an uninformed person will be much more dangerous than an informed one.

Philosophy helps us have well-reasoned justified moral beliefs, and that's very helpful in motivating moral behavior. Therefore, philosophy could greatly benefit society, and it appears quite dangerous to be ignorant of moral philosophy. Some people might have faith in morality (and intrinsic values), but that is an unreliable position.

4. It is reasonable to want to justify our beliefs

It is not reasonable to have a belief without any justification. That isn't to say that it is irrational and wrong. It's simply not a belief we have a good reason to have. If you want to have a reasonable belief concerning intrinsic values and morality, then you will need to be able to justify your belief. There is a great deal of philosophical literature written by people who devote their entire lives to these questions. We can't all do that, but the least we can do is take some time to find out more about what the experts have to say. They've spent more time learning about it than the rest of us can, and the easiest way to justify our ethical beliefs is to ride on their coat tails.

In order to be reasonable, we need to learn not only about what people who agree with us think, but also what people who disagree with us think. Justifying moral beliefs isn't about proving we are right at all costs. It's about improving our beliefs and considering all the difficulties of having them. Having a reasonable belief requires a

genuine interest in the facts and making sure our beliefs have justification.

Not only is it a good idea to learn about philosophy "if we want to have reasonable beliefs," but we have little choice in the matter. We have moral beliefs and we depend on those moral beliefs to do the right thing. We can't opt out of our moral obligations, and we have to do whatever we can to live up to our moral obligations. The best way to live up to our obligations is to understand them and justify our moral beliefs.

Conclusion

I have attempted to answer the question "Why should I want to know about intrinsic values?" Although I have explained how it could be reasonable to believe in intrinsic values, I have not answered the question, "Are there intrinsic values?" That is a very difficult question and it requires a lot of background information. I have provided an argument that intrinsic values exist in my post, *An Argument for Moral Realism*, but this one essay should not be considered a sufficient education on the question, "Does anything really matter?" If you are interested in the philosophical question, "Does anything really matter?" then you can look for arguments for and against "moral realism," which is basically the belief in intrinsic values. To be a moral anti-realist would be to deny that intrinsic values exist.

We are tempted to believe that "nothing really matters" from time to time, but the opposite belief seems reasonable. Intrinsic values can help us make sense of our moral beliefs and emotions. Additionally, the temptation to be selfish is increased with uninformed beliefs, and we seem to have an inescapable moral obligation to have reasonable beliefs concerning intrinsic values. Learning about intrinsic values helps us fight against our selfish temptations and helps assure that our beliefs concerning intrinsic values are reasonable.

2. What Does “Meaning of Life” Mean?

I am interested in understanding what it would mean to have a meaningful "purpose for life" rather than answering the question, "Why were we created?" These are related questions for some people, but I want to know if anything really matters.

I am not going to try to answer the question, "Is there a meaning of life?" in this essay. Instead, I want to clarify what the question means. What would it mean if there is a meaning of life? What would it mean if there isn't? The belief that there is a meaning of life (i.e. that something really does matter) is what philosophers call "intrinsic value." If something really matters, then it has a very important sort of value. In general, we want to increase the number of good things and decrease the number of bad things in the world.

Intrinsic values has been part of philosophical discourse for thousands of years, but it has rarely been described well, and even philosophers seem to misunderstand what "intrinsic values" are supposed to refer to. In order to describe intrinsic values, I will discuss the following:

1. What the term "intrinsic value" does and does not refer to.
2. How people misunderstand intrinsic values.

1. What the term "intrinsic value" does and does not refer to.

My definition of intrinsic values

Intrinsic values have the following three characteristics:

- If something has intrinsic value, then it is good in itself just for existing.

- If something has intrinsic value, then all things equal, it is appropriate to promote it.
- If something has intrinsic value, then it is good no matter who attains it.

Something is often said to have intrinsic value if it is "good for its own sake" or "good in itself." The idea is that some things (perhaps pleasure, happiness, and human life) are good whether or not they are useful in any sense. Intrinsic value is not merely about what we desire, and it seems to make little sense to say that certain things (such as happiness) are really valuable to me, but not for you. It would be better for everyone to be happy than not. It would be better for more people to exist than less. It is bad to lose our happiness or to lose our life.

Intrinsic value seems like a requirement for justifying morality. Killing is wrong if human life is "good in itself" just for existing. Causing pain is wrong if happiness is "good in itself" just for existing. In order to know why an action is morally justified, we want to know why our action produces good things (or doesn't produce anything bad.) All things equal, it is a good idea to promote something intrinsically good (such as happiness.) All things equal, it is good to avoid something intrinsically bad (such as suffering). If something is intrinsically good, then it is good no matter who attains it. Assuming happiness has intrinsic value, it's better for two people to be happy than one. Assuming suffering has intrinsic disvalue, it's preferable for one person to suffer than two.

If you decide to eat chocolate, then you might say that you did it to get pleasure. This makes perfect sense to most people. The chocolate might not be healthy, but it does give us something we understand to have value.

If you decide to make money, then we might want to know why. If you reply, "money is the meaning of life," then we will have a good reason to worry. Money simply isn't "good in itself." Money should be used

for something good. If money is needed to buy food, then we might still wonder if the action is justified. What's so good about food? If you reply that food is necessary to survive, then we might again ask what's so good about survival. Either survival is not really important "in itself" and we will want to know why you want to survive, or survival (human life) must be "good in itself."

There is an ancient question in philosophy, "Are things good because they are desired, or are they desirable because they are good?"⁶ Intrinsic value is an answer: Things are not merely good because they are desired. Some things are desirable because they are good. Happiness is experienced as being wonderful, and that why we desire it. We don't want to say that happiness is good just because we desire it.

We think that morality is inescapable. We can opt out of some of our obligations, but not our moral obligations. You are obligated to be a good doctor if you are a doctor, but you can decide to quit. You are obligated to refrain from killing people, and you can't opt out of that obligation. You can't say, "Well, I don't care about morality," or "I don't want to be a good person anymore." Intrinsic values can explain why morality is inescapable: There is something of real value. It would be horrible to destroy something that has real value (happiness or human life.)

We think that helping others makes sense. To help other people attain happiness or avoid pain can make perfect sense if happiness is intrinsically good, and helping others avoid pain can make sense if pain is intrinsically bad. People who are selfish and are willing to harm others to benefit themselves are criticized because they fail to realize that some things "really matter" and are good or bad no matter who attains it. To say that pain is only bad when I feel it, but it isn't bad when other people feel it seems absurd.

6 Plato. "Euthyphro." The Internet Classics Archive. 10 Jan. 2010. <<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html>>.

Some people insist that morality only requires empathy, but empathy tends to give us pain. We don't necessarily want to feel bad when other people feel bad. We might have the choice to stop having empathy by training ourselves to be "desensitized." Perhaps violence in movies can help us stop empathizing with other people. If nothing "really matters," then to insist that we improve our sense of empathy rather than neglect it seems irrational. To merely want to coerce others into being moral seems oppressive, and if nothing really matters, it could also be unjustified.

Final Ends

Aristotle introduced the idea of "final ends" or "ultimate ends."⁷ (Basically meaning "final goals" or "ultimate goals.") His point was that we psychologically accept that some goals are worth having (even if they aren't useful), but others aren't. Wanting to eat chocolate for pleasure might be worthy enough to justify eating chocolate sometimes. Wanting to avoid a headache seems to be a good reason to take an aspirin. Aristotle might have thought that final ends were intrinsic values, but they don't have to be. Instead, final ends might be strictly description of our psychology. Although final ends are things we desire for their own sake, they might not "really matter."

In other words, the human psychological understanding that something is desirable "for its own sake" is not the same thing as something being good in itself. We would continue to desire happiness just because we enjoy it, even if we found out that happiness "doesn't really matter." Intrinsic values usually seem to be final ends (things we desire for their own sake), but not all final ends are necessarily intrinsic values.

Sometimes we *illegitimately* desire something for its own sake. For example, money can be valued for its own sake, but it isn't what I would call a "final end."

⁷ Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. The Internet Classics Archive. 13 Jan 2010. <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachean.html>>.

Just like intrinsic values, final ends are not merely useful. Pain can be useful, but we still hate pain. We don't say pain is good, even though it is very helpful to us to have a capacity for pain. To say that pain is bad is to say that it is bad for its own sake. We wouldn't want to have pain "just for the heck of it."

The reason that Aristotle called final ends "final" is because he imagined that they would be the last justification you need for an action. He saw that there can be a long chain of justifications: Getting a job helps get money, getting money helps get food, getting food helps us survive. The final justification for getting a job in this example seems to be survival. Most people would agree that survival is legitimately desirable for its own sake, and it would be quite strange for someone to challenge such a justification and say, "So what? Survival is terrible!" (Survival might not be so great if we would experience too much pain, but avoiding pain seems to be a final end as well.)

Instrumental value

We often confuse intrinsic value with instrumental value or "usefulness." A machine gun might be useful for killing people, but guns do not have intrinsic value. Money might be useful for helping us survive, but money is not intrinsically valuable. Usefulness is relevant to ethics because we need to know how to achieve our goals. Even if we find out that intrinsic values exist, we still need to know how to promote them. The fact that happiness is intrinsically good is less controversial than the best way to attain happiness for oneself or others.

Although we often say worthless things are "useless," intrinsic values are useless qua intrinsic value. It isn't the usefulness of intrinsic values that make them good. They are good despite not being useful. If we found out that there is no meaning of life and nothing really matters, things could still be useful. A machine gun could be useful to kill people, for example. Although we might say that machine guns are

"good for killing people," we might still wonder if machine guns are "really good."

People often argue that pain isn't really bad considering that it is often part of our learning experiences. This means that pain can be useful, but it doesn't mean that pain isn't intrinsically bad. Many of us believe that pain is intrinsically bad precisely because there is something bad about pain despite the fact that it can be useful. It's horrible for a child to suffer greatly before dying from a disease at least partly because the pain is horrible. Torturing people is also horrible at least partly because of the pain. It would be pretty absurd to say that pain is good, even when it doesn't *lead to anything good*. Useful things can lead to something good, but they aren't really good on their own.

2. How people misunderstand intrinsic values

There are at least three ways that people have commonly misunderstood intrinsic values: One, people confuse them with usefulness. Two, people don't understand that intrinsic values can have different implications depending on the situation. Three, people don't understand that we can disagree about what has intrinsic value.

People confuse intrinsic values with usefulness

Some people argue that pain can't be bad because it does us a lot of good. Pain is part of how we learn survival skills. Touching fire teaches us that fire is dangerous. Getting cut with a knife teaches us that knives are dangerous. However, this just means that pain can be useful for attaining something good. Pain is not something worth seeking for its own sake. We don't want to experience pain unless it leads to something of significant worth. In other words, we shouldn't avoid pain all costs. Whether or not pain is an acceptable consequence of our actions depends on the situation.

Pain can be useful to attain other intrinsic values, but that doesn't prove that pain is intrinsically good. That only proves that pain might

be an acceptable cost to attain various benefits. Sometimes an action is appropriate despite the fact that pain will occur, such as when we decide to go to college (because the knowledge we hope to gain will be of greater value than the pain we will endure). Pain is part of our cost/benefit analysis and pain is considered to be a "cost" rather than a "benefit."

Intrinsic values can have different implications depending on the situation.

Some people have argued that masochists seek pain, so pain can't be intrinsically bad. This appears to be nothing more than a misunderstanding of "intrinsic value" for two reasons. One, masochists do not seek pain because they think pain is worth seeking for its own sake. They get some kind of pleasure from various painful experiences, and they decided that the pain is worth having. For example, I love it when a horror movie scares me, even though fear is not a comfortable emotion. Why? Because fear also gives us an adrenaline rush. In other words, masochism is just one more situation when pain might be acceptable. Pain isn't an acceptable cost unless it leads to something of significant value.

To seek pain in some situations (such as mutual sexual acts involving masochism) is merely evidence that seeking pain isn't always "wrong," but that is only because the cost can be worth attaining certain benefits. All things equal, it is wrong to cause pain. We can only justify causing pain when we have a good reason for doing so.

People don't understand that we can disagree about what has intrinsic value.

Someone might argue that it is possible for the masochist to seek pain for its own sake, but our psychological desires don't prove that something has intrinsic value anyway. Some people can simply be wrong. Many people love money for its own sake, but they are wrong to think money has intrinsic value.

Although I disagree that masochists really do seek pain for its own sake, it is always possible that a better example of disagreement can be found. Not everyone agrees about what has intrinsic value, such as those who believe money does.

Agreement doesn't prove that something has (or doesn't have) intrinsic value. Instead, we need to examine our actual moral experiences and decide which theory is the best explanation for them.

Conclusion

If happiness and human life really matter as we often assume, then we don't have to create our own meaning of life because the meaning of life is to promote happiness and the survival of human beings. (Of course, there might be several things that have intrinsic values that could be added to the list.) I am not saying that every waking moment must be devoted to helping others because we can only demand that each person attains a certain level of virtue. Additionally, there appears to be a huge variety of ways we need to contribute to humanity, and we are often most productive when we become specialists and do what we most enjoy. We need some people to be doctors, others to be theoretical philosophers, others to be scientists, others to be comedians, others to be farmers, and so on. You can decide how to promote intrinsic values on your own, but we are all obligated to avoid doing significant harm.

3. Mischaracterizations of Intrinsic Value

Intrinsic values state that some things are "good just for existing" and such things are good no matter who has them. Happiness seems like it has intrinsic value because it's good for anyone to be happy. I have already clarified "intrinsic value" and identified many misunderstandings people have about it in my essay, ["What Does 'Meaning of Life' Mean?"](#) Some people have some very strange ideas about how intrinsic values that should be understood, so I will now try to clarify them by discussing the following three mischaracterizations about intrinsic value:

1. Intrinsic values must be unconditional.
2. Intrinsic values require something spooky.
3. Intrinsic values require a moral sense.

I will then present an alternative view of intrinsic value that only requires an intuitive, common sense view of the world.

1. Intrinsic values must be unconditional.

Many people assume that if something has intrinsic value, then it must be totally good or totally bad. If happiness has intrinsic value, then it will always be right to do whatever is necessary to be happy. If pain is bad, then it will be wrong to do anything that causes pain. But this is false.

Why don't intrinsic values have to be unconditional? We often assess the benefits and harms of each action we can take and we want to choose the action that will produce the greatest benefit. We know that doing your homework can be painful at times, but it is still usually a good idea because of the positive consequences involved. We fear that a thief who steals from others can become happier as a consequence,

but stealing is still usually wrong because of the negative consequences involved. We know that some experiences are more pleasurable than others and are therefore preferable (all else being equal). We know that some experiences are more painful than others and we should choose the least painful experience (all else being equal).

2. Intrinsic values require something spooky.

One view of intrinsic values is that they are so strange that they couldn't be part of the natural world studied by science. Although scientists might not study intrinsic values at this time, it might be possible for ethics to become a natural science in the future. Of course, that would never happen if intrinsic values are supernatural or non-natural (other worldly). In particular, some people think that intrinsic values are somehow connected to [Plato's Forms](#) or God. I have already discussed how intrinsic values could have nothing to do with Plato's Forms or God in my essay, "[Does Morality Require God?](#)"⁸

Even if we reject the connection between intrinsic values and God (or Plato's Forms), some people will think that intrinsic values are some other strange sort of entity in the universe.

I don't really understand the idea of intrinsic value as some kind of strange entity, but Alonzo Fyfe has discussed intrinsic values in this sense when he says the following:

Now, for the sake of argument, let us assume that there is a property 'out there' that we can call 'intrinsic value'. Certain states of affairs in nature emit 'goodons' or 'badons'. Would we have evolved a faculty that would have allowed us to perceive these emissions? If so, then would it have included a component whereby we reacted appropriately to them, promoting the existence of goodon emitters and inhibiting the development of badon emitters?

⁸ Gray, James. "Does Morality Require God?" Ethical Realism. 14 Jan. 2010. <<http://ethicalrealism.wordpress.com/2009/12/21/does-morality-require-god/>>.

These questions already assume that an impossible barrier has been cleared — the question of how entities that emit ‘I-ought-to-be-preserved’ (goodon) radiation or ‘I-ought-not-to-be-preserved’ (badon) radiation can even exist. It makes the equally unlikely assumption that we have a hidden faculty of goodon detection that allows us to distinguish these states and accurately measures their level of goodon emissions. ([Desire Utilitarianism](#), ch. 12)⁹

I agree with Fife that this conception of value is probably false, but I don't know anyone who believes it. I suppose a couple "moral sense theorists" might have accepted something similar, but I couldn't find any serious philosopher who uses the words "goodon" or "badon."

What is a moral sense theory? Read on to find out.

3. Intrinsic values require a moral sense.

The closest thing to philosophers discussing a moral perception or a moral sense organ that I know of are the moral sense theorists. Moral sense is a theory that speculates about how we can know moral facts involving our "affections."¹⁰ I will argue that we can understand our moral experiences without having a moral sense of this kind.

An Alternative View of Intrinsic Value

We don't need such strange, supernatural, or non-natural elements to complicate something as simple as intrinsic values. How do we know how terrible torture is? Because we have felt pain and we know that other people's intense pain is horrible for the same reason our own is. How do we know how good happiness is? Because we have

9 Fyfe, Alonzo. "Chapter 12: Intrinsic Value" [Desire Utilitarianism](#). 14 Jan. 2010. <http://www.alonzofyfe.com/desire_utilitarianism_12.shtml>.

10 Philosophers use the term "moral sense" metaphorically. They might think that our moral beliefs are based on our intuition, instincts, or emotions rather than a sort of perception or sixth sense. The Earl of Shaftesbury is one of the founders of moral sense theory.

experienced happiness and know other people's happiness is good for the same reason our own is.

Don't we need intuition to know moral facts?

Some people argue that we can't know about intrinsic values without "intuition," which is a form of evidence we have a hard time fully explaining or justifying. (Intuition is not a supernatural ability to know about the universe.) As far as I can tell, arguments involving just about anything in philosophy requires intuition. I justify the use of intuition in moral arguments in my essay, ["Objections to Moral Realism Part 2: Intuition is Unreliable"](#).¹¹

Whether or not we can personally know anything about intrinsic value without intuition is another question because we don't necessarily know things based on arguments. Our experience of happiness might be enough evidence of intrinsic value for us to justify our belief in it during everyday life.

The way we know about moral facts seems similar to how we know about mental facts. To suggest that we couldn't know that other people have minds without a "mental sense" that could detect "thought particles" would be absurd. We know others have mental activity because they have it for the same reason we do. It's unconvincing to argue that we can't know anything about intrinsic values without a moral sense that could detect "goodon particles" for the same reason.

Don't intrinsic values require something spooky to exist?

We have minds, which are pretty "spooky" when you think about it. I don't think intrinsic values necessarily require anything more spooky than that. I agree that intrinsic values are a unique part of the world. They aren't reducible to nonmoral facts. We found out that water was "nothing but" water. In the same way it might be possible to find out that morality is "nothing but" human flourishing (or desire

¹¹ This essay was reprinted in chapter 9 of this book.

satisfaction). However, intrinsic values do require that morality *isn't* "nothing but" something else. In other words intrinsic values require that morality is "irreducible to nonmoral facts."

The reason why it's reasonable to speculate that morality is irreducible to nonmoral facts is because it's reasonable to speculate that mental activity isn't irreducible to nonmental facts. I consider the objection that moral facts are too spooky in more detail in my essay, ["Objections to Moral Realism Part 3: Argument from Queerness."](#)¹²

Conclusion

We don't know for sure whether or not intrinsic values exist, but many people are overly dismissive of intrinsic values based on their misconceptions about them. Intrinsic values don't necessarily require Plato's Forms, God, overly-spooky entities, or a moral sense. We can know about intrinsic values through various experiences that indicate to us that something is good just for existing, such as happiness.

We don't currently know everything about intrinsic values, but that does not require outrageous speculation about reality, and it isn't evidence that intrinsic values don't exist. At one time we didn't know what lightning was, but we still knew that lightning existed. Right now we don't really know what mental states are, but we know they exist. The fact that we don't know everything about intrinsic values doesn't prove that intrinsic values don't exist either.

I admit that we knew that lightning and mental states existed before we learned more about them unlike intrinsic value, but that is just because the evidence for intrinsic values is less clear. Some people deny that happiness is good for everyone equally and instead assert, "Happiness is only good when *I* experience it." In my essay, ["An Argument for Moral Realism"](#) I argue that such a selfish understanding of value is probably false.¹³

¹² See chapter 10 of this book.

¹³ This essay was reprinted in chapter 7 of this book.

4. What is Moral Realism?

Before I create an argument that moral realism is plausible, I want to take a close look at what exactly moral realism and anti-realism entail. First, I will explain what moral realism and anti-realism mean. How do we know if someone is a moral realist or not? I will then explain it would be like to adopt a moral realist or anti-realist perspective. We need to know how these perspectives relate to everyday life.

1. What is a moral realist?

A moral realist believes that there is at least one moral fact, and moral facts are not reducible to nonmoral facts. Moral statements are true or false, and at least one moral statement is true. An anti-realist merely disagrees with the moral realist in some respect. Moral realism in my view also requires us to accept intrinsic value (the view that some things really matter).

2. Moral Cognitivism

Cognitivism is the theory that something is true or false.¹⁴ Statements are supposed to be cognitive. "I am a human being" is either true or false. "Boo!" Is an emotional expression that is neither true nor false. Moral cognitivism is the hypothesis that moral judgments are true or false. "Murder is wrong" is either true or false, if moral cognitivism is true. However, noncognitivists will argue that "murder is wrong" is merely an emotional expression and means something like, "Murder, boo!"¹⁵

14 It might be impossible to know if some statements are true or false. Cognitivism doesn't require us to actually be able to find out what is true and what is false. Something could be true or false without us being able to find out.

15 There are other views of non-cognitivism, such as prescriptivism. A prescriptivist would say that "murder is wrong" means "don't murder!"

3. At least one moral statement is true.

Even if moral cognitivism is true, it might be that no moral statement is true. Then "murder is wrong" would be false, and "murder is right" would also be false. How is that possible? Because "right" and "wrong" might both be nonsense. They might both involve a false theory (perhaps Platonic forms). Let's suppose unicorns aren't real. In that case it would be true that I am not a unicorn, but false that I am a unicorn. An anti-realist could admit that "Murder is not right" is true in the same way. It is only false to say that a moral fact exists. Murder *not being right* is not necessarily a moral fact. It might just be saying that rightness is irrelevant to murder.

So, for a non-cognitivist, "right" is a word similar to "unicorn" in that it never applies to the real world, and the same would be true with "wrong." They are both like unicorns in that they never apply.

A person who denies that *at least one moral fact exists* is known as an "error theorist" or "nihilist." An error theorist can admit that we attempt to say moral facts, but they are always false because morality fails to describe the real world. Error theorists admit that most people are moral realists, but they believe that most people have made an "error" in assuming moral realism to be true.

Another concern is that no moral statement is true because we merely misunderstand moral reality. It might be that we know moral realism is true through personal experience, but language is inadequate to describe a moral fact. This is why many philosophers say that a moral statement might "approximate the truth."

One of the reasons that moral realism is appealing is because it seems obvious that we do know some moral facts. "Torturing babies is wrong" seems obvious. We certainly think we are saying something true here, and it seems like we are right to think that.

The difficulty at this point is knowing what "true" means. Aristotle thought that something is true if it matches reality, but we might also say it is true that Sherlock Holmes is a detective. In reality, Sherlock Holmes never existed. He's a fictional character. An anti-realist known as a constructivist (or relativist) might think moral statements can be true in this sense. They might be a kind of fiction that we say is true out of a communal agreement. A game, like chess, might be a better example. Only certain statements are allowed, and certain statements are true given the goals of the game. One move in chess is "right" considering that it will help you win. One action is "right" considering that it makes people happy (assuming that is a moral goal).

The main problem with constructivism is that it doesn't give morality its exalted status. Morality is about something important. It's different from etiquette. If it's just part of our tradition, then why do we think it's important? Why would we think anything is important? (I will answer these questions when discussing an anti-realist perspective in more detail.)

4. Morality is irreducible

Most philosophers describe morality as being irreducible by saying it is *sui generis*.¹⁶ Many philosophers also argue that morality is objective, and that morality does not exclusively consist in our attitudes and beliefs. We want to make it clear that morality can't be reduced to nonmoral facts. If moral facts could be reduced, then morality is "really something else," and descriptions of nonmoral facts should be enough to understand moral facts.

One reason to think morality is irreducible is because it seems to have a special kind of importance that no other area can have. Physics, chemistry, and biology don't tell us what has the most value or how we should live our lives.

¹⁶ "Sui generis" means that it's a category of its own, separate from any other.

5. Morality is objective

Although many philosophers have said that moral realists believe that morality is ontologically objective, this is false. Some philosophers believe that morality is subjective. There is ontological and epistemological objectivity. Ontology concerns reality itself, and epistemology concerns knowledge and justification.

Ontologically, something is supposed to be objective if it doesn't just exist in someone's mind, and something is subjective if it only exists in someone's mind. In this view, thoughts are ontologically subjective, but minds are ontologically objective.

Epistemologically, something is objective if it can be confirmed through an agreed upon procedure, and it is subjective if it can't be. Whether or not atoms exist is epistemologically objective. Your experience of seeing something as green is subjective unless it can be consistently verified through a procedure. If something is just a matter of taste, then it is epistemologically subjective.

It is important for both moral realists and anti-realist constructivists that morality is epistemologically objective. If we can't justify that a moral statement is true, then we are in trouble. Morality becomes meaningless at that point.

Philosophers claimed that morality must be ontologically objective because they thought there is a problem if morality is "just in your head." If it's just in your head, then it sounds delusional. However, not everyone agrees that something "just in your head" is delusional. Classical utilitarians think that pleasure and pain have intrinsic value. Pleasure and pain are "just in our head," but they don't seem delusional. It's the nature of pleasure and pain to be experienced.

There's also a question whether ontologically subjective entities, such as pleasure and pain, can't be epistemologically objective. You know

about your own experiences of pleasure and pain, but no one else can know about it. This is a general concern about psychology in general, and it is not currently endorsed by scientists. We believe we have methods to understand other people's thoughts and feelings, at least to some extent. This is partially done by theorizing that there are physical manifestations of psychological events. Pain causes certain activity in the brain, for example.

6. Morality consists in our attitudes and beliefs

The view that morality consists in our attitudes and beliefs is constructivism (also known as "relativism"). In that case morality is nothing other than our attitudes and beliefs. Saying that it is a prerequisite of moral realism to consist of something other than attitudes and beliefs is basically just saying that a moral realist is not a constructivist.

We need to know how the view of "importance" enters the picture. An experience of pain, for example, might reveal to us that pain is bad.

7. Morality is irreducible

Some moral realists argue that morality is reducible to non-moral facts. Perhaps morality is reducible to "maximizing happiness and minimizing misery." To say something is "right" might just mean that it maximizes happiness and minimizes suffering. I don't agree that this is moral realism because once we can reduce morality to non-moral facts, we can say, "We thought morality was real, but now we know we were talking about something else." Morality at that point can be dispensed with. Additionally, the reductionist will have difficulty in explaining why some things "really matter." Overall, reductionists have many of the same difficulties as constructionists, and constructionists are a kind of reductionist. They think morality is reducible to some kind of fiction or game. (Constructivists think it's reducible to our attitudes and beliefs.)

The main challenge to the idea that morality is irreducible is the fact that the scientific perspective, which is so reliable, requires use of reductionism. Although reductionism is an essential part of science, morality can join our scientific perspective without being reduced to something else. We found out water is really H₂O. We reduce everyday substances to atom configurations. But it isn't clear that everything is reducible down to infinitely small parts, and it isn't even clear that everything is reducible to physics. Chemistry might not even be reducible to physics. One reason we have chemistry is precisely because we are currently unable to reduce it to physics. Psychology might be an even better example. Understanding pain and pleasure seems like it has to involve something other than an understanding of particles.

Science has various levels of description: Physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, sociology, and so on. Some of these levels of description might be ontologically irreducible. Psychology might not be about physics. Reductionists might want to reduce morality to one of these potentially irreducible scientific levels of description. Psychology in particular is essential for an understanding of morality. However, it is also possible that morality itself is one more irreducible level of description. Morality might not be ontologically reducible to sociology or psychology. This is the kind of possibility that moral realists are interested in.

The view that morality is irreducible goes back to Plato, who introduced an entirely new reality of Forms to account for morality. This might be going too far. Most philosophers are materialists and believe there is only one reality that is causally tied to physics. The view that there is more than one substance or reality leads to a problem where some things are unable to interact with other things. (For example, the view that the mind is an immaterial soul and the body is material leads to the problem that the mind and body can't interact.)

One other reason that moral realists don't want to reduce morality to something else is because morality is important and involves values (things that are important.) It isn't easy to describe the idea of importance without reference to intrinsic value at some point, which is another moral concept.

8. Intrinsic value

Intrinsic value is the view that some things "really matter." We say some things are important, meaningful, and such things matter, and they aren't merely "useful." Intrinsic value contrasts with extrinsic (instrumental) value. We say some things are important, valuable, or good insofar as they help us accomplish a goal, but this is merely instrumental value. A certain move in chess is a "good move" insofar as we want to win the game. Intrinsic values are not good just because they help us do something, like win a game of chess. Something with intrinsic value could be said to be good "for its own sake" or "good in itself" without reference to any other goal.

Aristotle called important things "final ends." He argued that we are often justified to demand of someone, "Why did you do that?" We want them to justify why doing something is good. We might want food, but why? Because we want to stay healthy? But why stay healthy? It makes sense to wonder why staying healthy matters. Eventually we might get to something that really matters. We might want to stay healthy to avoid pain. It makes sense to want to avoid pain without referring to any other goal. We have experienced pain and it hurt. Anyone who has experienced pain knows why we don't like it. If this makes sense, then it is correct to describe pain (or avoiding pain) as a final end.

If I am right, the main problem with anti-realism is understanding intrinsic value. I will develop a possible answer to the challenge when I describe an anti-realist perspective.

5. A Moral Realist Perspective

In order to relate moral realism to everyday life, let's take a look at how a moral realist can view moral knowledge, reality, and psychology. I am not going to argue that this is the best perspective of moral realism possible. It is merely an example of a perspective.

1. Moral Knowledge

Moral epistemology is the study of moral knowledge and justification. If we are right to believe that a moral statement is true, then it should be because of the truth of the statement itself. We believe that we have bodies because we really do have bodies. We believe that $1+1=2$ because $1+1=2$ is true. So, we need a way to discover moral facts. Many moral naturalists suggested that we can discover moral facts through observation, just like everything else. (Naturalists think we can make ethics into a natural science.) Although some people have argued that moral facts can't cause anything to happen, I suggest that we can experience moral facts similar to how we can experience psychological facts.

We can't directly observe psychological facts. We know we have desires and beliefs, but how can we be sure anyone else does?¹⁷ Through a tested hypothesis. We can test psychological theories against our psychological observations. We observe that people have desires despite the fact that we can't know for sure. We can then hypothesize that various behavior or biological facts indicates psychological facts. Given desires and beliefs, we predict that people will behave in certain ways, and they won't behave in other ways. If people feel hunger, they will eat. If people get tired, they will sleep. Of course, we also have a

¹⁷ Even if someone told us how they felt, we could still wonder if they are telling us the truth. A robot could tell you it has feelings, but we will say that the computer was just programmed to say such a thing.

special access to our own psychological facts. We know when we have beliefs, desires, hunger, and so on because we experience it first hand. Psychological theories state that other people have similar psychological facts to our own.

We know about moral facts in a similar way as psychological facts. We can't directly observe moral facts, but we can test moral theories against our moral observations. We observe that someone is doing something wrong and causing harm, and we can theorize that people are doing wrong given various physical and psychological facts. (Is the person trying to harm others? If so, why?) Again, we have first hand experience with moral facts. We know when we are harmed. We know that pain is bad because of how it feels. Moral theories state that other people have similar moral experiences as our own. Intense pain is bad no matter who feels it.

It is our direct and personal experience with moral facts that contemporary moral naturalists tend to neglect. It might be that it seems too obvious to talk about or it might be philosophically risky to admit that we can have personal experiences of moral facts.

2. Moral Reality

Moral ontology is the study of moral reality. What kind of relation does morality have to reality? Once we have confirmed moral facts, we can wonder what they consist of. Moral facts tend to rely on intrinsic value, but it isn't entirely clear what metaphysical assumptions are required.¹⁸ For a moral realist, moral facts must be irreducible. If we can reduce moral facts to something else, then we can dispense with moral facts, and it won't be clear that moral facts are important. I will discuss intrinsic value, the property of irreducibility, and how moral facts are based on reality itself.

¹⁸ A metaphysical assumption is an assumption about reality. "Metaphysics" is the philosophical study of reality and asks questions, such as, "How do the mind and body interact?" and "Do we have free will?"

Intrinsic value

Once we understand that good and bad things happen to us, we can try to figure out what exactly is required for it to be good or bad. Pleasure and pain are the easiest to understand. We have various experiences that "feel good" or "feel bad." These feelings are then identified as being good or bad. This relates to Aristotle's arguments about final ends. An intrinsic value is basically a way of understanding final ends that says that we not only treat certain ends as if they are justified (and worth promoting for their own sake), but they really are justified and worth promoting for their own sake.

We often confuse intrinsic value with instrumental value. Instrumental value is just something useful. You might go to college because it will help you get a job and make money. But even the goal of making money isn't worthy of seeking for its own sake. You have to use money for something truly valuable for it to matter.

It is possible for something to be both intrinsically valuable and instrumentally valuable, but the point is that something can be merely instrumentally valuable without being intrinsically valuable. Knowledge might be both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable, but money is only instrumentally valuable.

A person who eats candy because it tastes good doesn't need another reason to eat it. We can identify that the reason the person is justified for eating candy is because it causes pleasure. Eating candy isn't usually useful for anything other than pleasure itself, but that is a good enough reason to enjoy eating it once in a while.

If anything really matters, then it has intrinsic value. We understand this as being equally important for each person. There are practical reasons to look out for our personal interests more than other people's, but intrinsic value itself determines how much something really matters. If pain matters, then it matters no matter who has it. If human life matters, then it matters no matter who has it.

Moral facts are irreducible

If moral facts are irreducible, they might still be natural facts.¹⁹ In other words, they might be compatible with a materialistic ontology. A materialist does not have to strip the world of everything except physics (atoms, quarks, and so on). Materialists merely need a view of a unified reality that is causally connected with physics. It is not clear that psychology can be reduced to physics, but minds are causally connected to physical particles and biology. It could be that minds and morality are caused by physical events, but also involve irreducible emergent properties.²⁰ (Given a living brain somehow minds start to exist, and given certain mental activity certain intrinsic values start to exist.²¹) A materialist can describe everything that exists in terms of being "physical" in the sense that everything that exists is causally connected and dependent on physics.

How are moral facts based on reality?

Some people have asked, "What makes moral facts true?" One possible answer is Platonic forms or God. However, it might be that moral facts are true based on the laws of the universe.²² Just like the laws of the universe make particles move in various ways, the laws of the universe also seem to give us minds and morality. Creatures with a certain biology get minds and morality based on causation. Once a creature can have pain that feels "bad" it seems like we have identified some kind of an intrinsic value. It could be said that pain has a property of intrinsic disvalue.

19 Papineau, David. "Naturalism" Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 17 Jan. 2010.

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/naturalism/>>.

20 O'Connor, Timothy. "Emergent Properties. 17 Jan. 2010. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/properties-emergent/>>.

21 I discuss the view that the mind is an emergent element of reality and related it to moral realism in my essay "[Searle's Philosophy of the Mind](#)."

22 I wrote more about whether or not intrinsic values require God in my essay, "[Does Morality Require God?](#)"

3. Moral Psychology

It is important as a moral realist to understand whether or not morality can make a difference. Lower animals might do something good or bad, but it's not because of their beliefs concerning morality. I will suggest that morality makes a difference if we accept something like Stoic moral psychology. We have an interest in intrinsic value. First, we have a personal interest in benefiting ourselves. Second, we have an interest in benefiting others. "Benefiting" is best understood in terms of intrinsic value. We want to benefit ourselves and others in terms of something really important, not just in some superficial way. (If intrinsic values don't exist, then benefiting people might just be a matter of taste. We could do things people like, but their likes would be based on illusions of their psychology.)

One of the most powerful motivating forces is to gain the approval of others. People too concerned with the opinion of others might be insecure with themselves, but almost everyone is concerned with it to some extent. Criticism and disgust from others can ruin our day, but the praise of others can elate us for days.

However, the approval of others can matter more when they are based on the truth, and people tend to want to display their approval of others based on the truth. If a person harms others in the sense of causing pain (something with intrinsic disvalue), that seems like the perfect reason to display our disapproval of their behavior. Such disapproval can make us feel bad not just because of our irrational social instincts, but also because of a personal realization that we did something wrong.

Stoic moral psychology basically states that our evaluative beliefs give us a motivating emotion. True ethical beliefs give us appropriate emotions, which cause appropriate action. If I touch fire, I feel pain. I believe that something bad has happened because pain has intrinsic disvalue. I then feel the need to be more cautious around fire and

know not to touch fire anymore, and I am motivated to do so. Not only that but many children who learn that fire can hurt them will then warn others not to touch it.

Our moral beliefs can cause many different emotions. If you believe someone has been wronged, it can cause anger, which can cause us to take appropriate action. If someone is being wronged, we will often be motivated to try to stop the wrongdoing from occurring.

If a person dies, it makes us sad because something with intrinsic value has been lost. If someone is born, it makes us happy because something with intrinsic value has been gained. We can love people because that they have intrinsic value. We can love and hate someone at the same time because they have intrinsic value but they also cause others harm.

Inappropriate values can give rise to inappropriate emotions and actions. If someone steals your wallet and you think of money as having intrinsic value, then you could become enraged and seek vengeance. It can be true that money is essential to promote various intrinsic values, but it isn't just the starving who tend to over-value money. It is possible that an inappropriate evaluation of money can cause the wealthy to display greed, political corruption, and the willingness to commit murder.

So, if Stoic moral psychology is correct, morality can make a difference. We have the psychology that enables our beliefs in intrinsic values to motivate and guide our behavior. Some people think that intrinsic values must somehow cause motivation on their own, but this is not necessary. All that matters is that our psychology allows us to choose to be moral.

6. A Moral Anti-Realist Perspective

There are many different [moral anti-realist](#) perspectives. On one extreme an anti-realist could just say that morality is entirely delusional. Nothing matters. Go ahead and do whatever you want. This perspective is not very satisfying and it certainly won't satisfy anyone who finds moral realism to be worthy of consideration. On the other hand an anti-realist could try to preserve our ethical beliefs, intuitions, and experiences without claiming that morality is irreducible. Morality is part of our lives, but it might be reducible to our psychology and culture. This is a kind of constructivist perspective, and it is the kind of perspective that I will present here. [Constructivists](#) believe that morality is in some sense constructed (created) by people.²³ We have moral rules because we tend to agree to them.

I will attempt to relate anti-realism to our everyday life and experiences by discussing how an anti-realist perspective will relate to moral knowledge, reality, and psychology.

1. Moral Knowledge

Constructivists believe that there are true and false moral statements, just like realists. However, moral knowledge for a constructivist is not about an independent moral reality. Moral facts somehow consist in our beliefs and behavior (or ideal beliefs and behavior). A moral fact is true because we agree it is true (or would agree it is true given absolute knowledge of nonmoral facts).

In other words, moral truth is just like truth involving fiction, games, money, tables, chairs, and cocktail parties. These things are real because we say so, and we know when a person says a true statement

²³ "Moral Constructivism" BookRags.com. 17 Jan. 2010.
<<http://www.bookrags.com/research/constructivism-moral-eoph/>>.

concerning them based on the agreed-upon meaning of the words. Sherlock Holmes is a detective based on our understanding of the fictional world he lives in. Chairs are just objects, but we have decided that some objects exist so we can sit on them alone with whatever other features chairs tend to have. Money allows you to buy stuff because we all agree that it has value. And so on.

John Searle describes facts like these as "institutional facts" and says that we have created a "social reality."²⁴ Such facts are merely true *because we say so*.

Constructivists believe that moral facts consist of institutional facts and our desires. We want to satisfy our desires and moral facts tell us how to do it. We want to avoid pain, and moral facts tell us how to avoid pain. We want to live fulfilling lives, and moral facts tell us how to do it. *The moral facts we tend to agree on require that everyone's desires are worthy of consideration*. That is why moral facts help us avoid pain for everyone equally, and help us all live satisfying lives. I am not the only person who is worthy of consideration given our ethical facts; everyone matters.

Since moral facts are based on our desires, we can *discover moral facts*, in pretty much the same way as a [moral realist](#). We experience ourselves as being benefited or harmed, and we have desires to avoid harm and attain benefits. Some objects or state of affairs are found to be worthy of attaining for their own sake. "Instrumental values" are not the most important values. However, there are no [intrinsic values](#). We have final ends, just like Aristotle thought, but final ends are merely objects or state of affairs that are worthy of desiring for their own sake. We can argue about what we *really desire*, what is truly worthy of desiring for its own sake. We can admit that we aren't completely sure what we really desire, so we can examine our experiences in order to *discover* what we really desire.

²⁴ See Searle's [The Construction of Social Reality](#) for more information.

How could something be "worthy of desiring for its own sake?" Some constructivists might consider all of our desires equally, but that position could lead us to absurd positions, such as the view that money is a final end. Final ends are merely objects or states of affairs that we desire for their own sake after sufficient deliberation, or (ideally) given that we know all non-moral facts.

Constructivists can postulate that final ends are about *what we would desire if we knew all nonmoral facts*. In other words, what we actually desire is often bad for us, or misguided. Smoking cigarettes is something that shouldn't be taken to be a worthy goal because the pleasure gained is not sufficient to justify the damage it does to us. Ideally, in order to know what is really a final end we need to be able to know all non-moral facts so that we can live maximally fulfilling lives. Being happy, or living a maximally fulfilling life might be the ultimate final end, but we don't completely know how to do that yet, so knowing all nonmoral facts can give us the ideal moral facts that we hope to discover.

2. Moral Reality

For a constructivist, moral facts are merely institutional facts that aim to satisfy our desires or final ends. Instead of intrinsic values, moral facts can refer to final ends. We can't dispute that if intrinsic values exist, then they are important. Intrinsic values are precisely the kind of property that seems to relate to true *importance*. The constructivist will have to explain how our view of importance relates to ethics.

Although constructivists believe that nothing is truly important in the sense of being an intrinsic value, they will argue that morality is important to us in the sense that we desire it and we feel that it is important. Of course, we have to wonder why ethics tends not to be egoistic. Why do we have to believe that we should help others avoid pain? Or why is it wrong to cause others pain? It makes perfect sense to develop a system to help us get the most out of life that we want, but why should we treat everyone's final ends equally? One possible

answer is that we have merely agreed to a non-egoistic ethical system within our culture. Other cultures might have a different ethical system. Another possible answer is that we instinctually care about other people (and animals), so achieving our own final ends require us to help others. (This could explain why all cultural ethical systems are non-egoistic, and people who don't care about others would fail to have reason to be moral.)

It might be that no one is completely motivated to be moral, and everyone would decide that it is worth harming others to benefit themselves. This possibility might require a contract theory similar to Hobbes's *Leviathan*. We can rationally accept that mutual respect is required to live the best lives we can, but we can't trust each other, so we need someone to watch over us and punish anyone who breaks the rules.

3. Moral Psychology

Anti-realism is compatible with Stoic moral psychology and Humean moral psychology.

Stoic Moral Psychology

Stoic moral psychology can be compatible with moral realism and anti-realism alike. What we believe about ethics can give us an emotion that motivates certain behavior. The belief that pleasure is good can lead us to eat candy or give candy to others. However, it isn't the belief in intrinsic value of things that give us our emotions. Instead, it is the belief in final ends. These evaluative beliefs could fail to motivate us to help others, but we tend to care about others. The opinion of others tends to be psychologically important to us, even if it is for irrational instinctual reasons.

Stoic Moral Psychology doesn't have to claim that only intrinsic values are motivating. Final ends could also be motivating.

Humean Psychology

[Humean psychology](#) is also compatible with anti-realism, which states that desires are motivating and beliefs aren't.²⁵ We can sometimes be motivated by a desire to do something irrational. Perhaps having a bad day could give us a desire to feel better, which could motivate us to eat. Attempting to satisfy desires without reason often leads to failure to do so, so ethics help us know how to satisfy our desires by helping us decide what is most important to us.

Certain desires are *basic*, such as the desire to avoid pain. A basic desire can also motivate us to do something instrumental to that basic desire. The desire to live can motivate us to eat food, even when we aren't hungry. The desire to avoid pain can motivate us to go to the dentist, even though the dentist might have to pull a tooth considering that even more pain could be caused by not doing so.

According to Humean psychology, final ends would be our basic desires. We might often fail to identify or fully understand the implications to our basic desires, so reason (i.e. self-reflection and ethical philosophy) can help us discover our basic desires and know how to satisfy them.

Humean psychology is often believed to be opposed to moral realism because moral realists deny that ethics is only about desires. What matters about morality is our motivation to do what's right. A Humean can explain our motivations entirely in terms of our desires, but a moral realist can't, or so it is argued. If we expect a moral belief to motivate us, then it should be a belief about how to satisfy our desires, but moral realists require us to be motivated by intrinsic values. That is impossible, so a Humean will find moral realism to be non-motivational and pointless. I will discuss this argument and others like it in more detail in Chapter 11 in this book.

²⁵ Schmitter, Amy M. "Hume on the Emotions." 17 Jan. 2010. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/emotions-17th18th/LD8Hume.html>>.

7. An Argument for Moral Realism

Moral realism is the view that some things “really matter” and have intrinsic value. I will argue that we have good reason to believe that at least one thing has intrinsic value, so we have good reason to believe moral realism is true. In particular, I will argue that we have good reason to accept that pain has intrinsic disvalue. The evidence of intrinsic value requires us to accept that anti-realists will fail to explain our moral experiences involving pain. We have more reason to accept realism than anti-realism in so far as moral realism can better account for our moral experiences involving pain.

I will argue that a moral realist can account for our moral experiences involving the badness of pain, the importance of morality, the inescapability of moral obligations, and the importance of altruism. These experiences and intuitive positions are all going to be difficult for the anti-realist to explain.

1. An Argument from Moral Experience

If we have evidence that anything in particular has intrinsic value, then we also have evidence that moral realism is true. Our experiences of pleasure and pain are probably the most powerful evidence of intrinsic value because such experiences are tied to our belief that they have intrinsic value. My argument that pain has intrinsic disvalue is basically the following:

1. We experience that pain is bad.
2. We experience that pain is important.
3. The disvalue of pain is irreducible.
4. The disvalue of pain is real.
5. If pain is bad in the sense of being important, irreducible, and real, then pain has intrinsic disvalue.
6. Therefore, pain has intrinsic disvalue.

I am not certain that the premises are true, but I currently find good reasons for accepting them. Therefore, we have reason for accepting the conclusion. The conclusion could be read saying, "We have reason to believe that pain has intrinsic disvalue." If we accept that pain has intrinsic disvalue, then we will simultaneously accept moral realism.²⁶

In order to examine the plausibility of my argument, I will examine each of the premises.

We experience that pain is bad.

We know pain is bad because of our experience of it. If someone described their pain as extremely wonderful, we would doubt they are feeling pain. Either the person is lying or doesn't know what the word "pain" means. When a child decides not to touch fire because it causes pain, we understand the justification. It would be strange to ask the child, "So what? What's wrong with pain?"

We experience that pain is important.

If pain is important in the relevant sense, then it can provide us reason to do something without merely helping us fulfill our desires. In other words, we must accept the following:

1. The badness of pain isn't just an instrumental value.
2. The badness of pain is a final end.

Pain's badness isn't an instrumental value - Pain's disvalue is not an instrumental disvalue because pain can be quite useful to us. Pain can tell us when we are unhealthy or injured. We evolved pain because it's essential to our survival. Pain's bad for a different kind of reason. Pain's disvalue is found in our negative experience, and this is why pain is a candidate for having an intrinsic disvalue.

²⁶ Intrinsic values are able to explain why there are irreducible moral facts that do not depend on our beliefs or desires.

Whenever someone claims that something has intrinsic value, we need to make sure that it's not just good because it's instrumentally valuable. If it's merely useful at bringing about something else, then it's not good in and of itself (as intrinsic values are). Pain is perhaps the perfect example of something that is useful but bad. If usefulness was the only kind of value, then pain would actually be good because it helps us in many ways.

Pain's badness isn't just our dislike of pain – We dislike pain because it feels bad.²⁷ If pain didn't feel bad, then we wouldn't have such a strong desire to avoid intense pain. Pain means "feels bad" and it is manifested in various experiences, such as touching fire. We have to know the meaning of "bad" in order to understand pain at all. We attain an understanding of "bad" just by feeling pain.

If pain was only bad because we dislike it, then we couldn't say that "pain really matters." Instead, the badness of pain would just be a matter of taste. However, we don't just say pain is bad because we dislike it. We also say pain is bad because of how it feels.

Avoiding pain is a final end – A final end is a goal people recognize as being worthy of being sought after for its own sake. Money is not a final end because it is only valuable when used to do something else. Pleasure and pain-avoidance are final ends because they are taken to be worthy of being avoided for their own sake.

We know that avoiding pain makes sense even when it doesn't lead to anything else of value, so avoiding pain is a final end.²⁸ If I want to

²⁷ We tend to desire what we believe to be valuable; we don't only desire as a matter of choice or in an arbitrary manner. Our experience that pain is bad is independent of choice. We experience pain as bad whether or not we desire to avoid it. Sometimes we have a headache and no aspirin is available. Pain can't always be avoided; sometimes we have to cope with it. It makes sense to say that pain is bad, even when it is irrelevant to our behavior. Pain is usually relevant to our behavior in the sense that we want to avoid pain, but pain is not always relevant in that way. It is quite possible to experience a headache without desiring an aspirin (or even to end the pain) because we might just accept the headache as being unavoidable or we might simply not think about it. This would be a situation when coping or ignoring the headache would be appropriate.

²⁸ From the first person perspective, we understand that pain is always bad to some extent, but avoiding pain isn't our only priority. Pleasure can be worth it, even if it leads us to pain. For example, a horror

take an aspirin, someone could ask, "Why did you do that?" I could answer, "I have a headache." This should be the end of the story. We understand that avoiding pain makes sense. It would be absurd for someone to continue to question me and say, "What difference does having a headache make? That's not a good reason to take an aspirin!"²⁹

Both realists and anti-realists can agree that pain is bad, and they can both agree that pain is a final end. Our desire to avoid pain is non-instrumental and such a desire is experienced as justified. (However, the anti-realist might argue that it is only taken to be justified because of human psychology.)

If pain is a final end, then we understand (a) that pain is important and (b) it makes sense to say that we ought to avoid pain.

Pain's disvalue is irreducible.

If the badness of pain was reducible to nonmoral properties, then we should be able to describe what "bad" means through a non-moral description. However, we currently have no way of understanding pain's badness as being something else. We can't describe pain's badness in non-moral terms. If someone needs to know what "bad" means, they need to experience something bad.

To say that some moral states are irreducible is just like saying that some mental states are irreducible. Pain itself can't be described through a non-mental description. If we told people the mental states involved with pain, they would still not know what pain is because they need to know what it feels like.

movie can cause fear, which is an uncomfortable emotion, but the fear can also give us excitement and an adrenaline rush that can be quite enjoyable. Moderate masochistic behavior is perfectly normal. Additionally, we might want to live, even if we will experience more pain than pleasure (because we might value our life more than the pain); and we might choose to go to college even though the homework can be quite painful, but college can be worth it when considering that it will lead us to a better life in the long run.

²⁹ On the intuitive level, to deny that pain has a real kind of importance is absurd. No one wants others to torture them. To think being tortured is morally irrelevant is not a position anyone could accept.

Someone could argue that "bad" means the same thing as something like "pain," and then we would find out that the badness of pain could be reduced to something else. However, pain and the badness of pain are conceptually separable. For example, I could find out that something else is bad other than pain.

They could then reply that "bad" means the same thing as a disjunction of various other bad things, such as "pain or malicious intent." But people who disagree about what constitutes what is "bad" aren't just arguing about the meaning of the word "bad." They are arguing about what has the property "bad."³⁰ Additionally, the word "bad" would no longer have any importance. If "bad" just means "pain or malicious intent," then why care about it? Why ought I refrain from causing pain or having a malicious intent?

It could be that we can find out that "bad" and "pain" are identical, but then "bad" might not be entirely reducible to "pain" (or a disjunction of bad things). We might still think that there are two legitimate descriptions at work. The "pain" description and the "bad" description. (Some people think water is H₂O through an identity relation similar to this.) This sort of irreducible identity relation require us to deny that pain is "important." (If the identity theory did require us to deny that pain is "important," then we would have a good reason to reject such an identity theory.)

I have given us a reason to think the word "bad" is irreducible, but I haven't proven it. If someone could prove that pain isn't important, and we can reduce pain to something else, then I will be proven wrong. I just don't see any reason to agree with that position at this time. I discuss the badness of pain as irreducible in more detail in my

30 R. M. Hare made it clear that we can argue about moral truth without merely arguing about what the words mean (148-149). To say "Abortion is wrong" doesn't mean "Abortion is against utilitarianism." People can argue about whether abortion is right or wrong partly by arguing about the most appropriate ethical theory. R. M. Hare introduced a story where cannibals argue with missionaries about what is right and wrong.

essays "[Objection to Moral Realism Part 1: Is/Ought Gap](#)"³¹ and "[Objections to Moral Realism Part 3: Argument from Queerness](#)."³²

The badness of pain is real.

If the badness of pain is real, then everyone's pain is bad. Pain isn't bad just for me, but not for you. It states that we don't all merely share a subjective preference in avoiding pain, but that pain's badness is something worthy of being avoided and helping others avoid it. Why does it seem reasonable to believe pain's badness to be real? There are at least four reasons. One, I experience that my pain hurts and I know that other people's pain hurts as well. Two, it's not just people's subjective preferences in question. People hate pain because of how it feels. Three, people's pain exists (and if pain exists, then the badness of the pain exists). Four, I see no reason to deny that the badness of other people's pain. I will discuss this final consideration in more detail when I discuss anti-realist objections.

We have no good reason to deny that pain is bad. We experience that pain is bad for ourselves, and other people experience that pain is bad for themselves as well. Even though pain is subjective, there is nothing delusional about our belief that pain is bad. It's not just a personal like or a dislike. We don't just agree to treat other people's pain as important as part of a social contract.

The belief that the badness of pain is real and "pain is bad no matter who experiences it" will be rejected by anti-realists. If I gave food to the hungry, it would be absurd to question why I did it. Imagine someone who disagrees with my action and says, "Other people's pain is irrelevant. You should only try to avoid pain for yourself, so feeding the hungry is stupid." This person's position is counterintuitive to the point of absurdity. We have all accepted that other people's pain matters. It makes sense to feed the hungry, it makes sense to give to charity, and it makes sense to give someone an aspirin who has a headache. We don't have to benefit from helping other people. To

31 See chapter 8 of this book.

32 See chapter 10 of this book.

deny that "pain is bad no matter who experiences it" isn't a position that many people can find acceptable. (I suppose some sociopaths might find it acceptable.)

If pain is bad, important, irreducible, and real, then pain has intrinsic disvalue.

I want to suggest this premise to be justified in virtue of the very meaning of intrinsic value. If the badness of pain is worth avoiding for its own sake, irreducible, and real; then I think we have already established that pain has intrinsic disvalue by definition. We have established moral facts that could give us what we ought to do, such as, "We ought to avoid pain." Such an ought judgment is not merely based on my personal belief or desire; it's based on the fact that pain is important no matter who experiences it.

Conclusion: Pain has intrinsic disvalue

If my premises are true, then the conclusion follows. I have given reason for accepting the premises, so we have some reason for accepting the conclusion, and the conclusion entails the truth of moral realism. I will take all of my premises to be sufficiently justified, but I will consider why someone might decide that the badness of pain "isn't real." An anti-realist could attempt to deny that "pain is bad no matter who experiences it." The strongest evidence that badness is real is the fact that denying it seems to require unjustified philosophical commitments. I will attempt to show that the alternatives are less justified in the next section.

2. Anti-Realist Objections

Anti-realists will claim that badness is not real. Five reasons to deny the reality of pain are as follows:

1. Our thoughts and feelings can't be philosophically analyzed.
2. The only bad thing about pain is that we don't like it.
3. Pain's subjective ontology causes it to be less real than required for it to have intrinsic disvalue. Pain is something like an illusion. ("Subjective ontology" merely refers to subjective reality, or subjective existence.)
4. Pain's subjective ontology causes it to be in a separate place than the rest of the universe.
5. What's good or bad is only good or bad to someone in particular.

I will consider each of these objections and explain why they are implausible. One of the best reasons to believe that pain has intrinsic value is because *rejecting that pain is bad no matter who experiences it is implausible*. My argument requires us to accept that I have mentioned all of the most plausible explanations to our moral experiences. I can't be certain that I have mentioned all of the most plausible explanations, but I will take it as the burden of proof for anti-realists to mention any that I left out.

Our thoughts and feelings can't be philosophically analyzed.

The proposition that "our thoughts and feelings can't be philosophically analyzed" is one that lacks a justification, and we should reject it considering our knowledge of observation's reliability through introspective evidence. It will be tempting for philosophers to reject my argument because I take our moral experiences seriously, but such experiences could be an unreliable source of information. People often believe that only observation can count as a reliable source of evidence. Yes, empirical knowledge is very reliable. However, that doesn't prove that no other form of justification can be possible.

We have found that empirical knowledge (observation) is one of the most reliable kinds of knowledge.³³ Gathering information through observation is the foundation of science. Some philosophers will reject

³³ Mathematics and logic are also very reliable sources of evidence, and that could also be a clear counterexample to the claim that observation is the only reliable source of evidence.

any form of justification other than observation, and they might argue that our experience that pain is bad is a subjective state that can't be analyzed. We can't know if pain is bad just by experiencing it, and we certainly have no basis to say that pain is bad no matter who experiences it.

This is a very dismissive response to all phenomenological (introspective) evidence.³⁴ If our first-person experiences don't matter, then we also have no way to know that we have observation. We know we have observation because we experience it first hand (and an introspective analysis of our experiences can give us reason to trust observation).³⁵ So, observation is not the only way to attain knowledge. We require a first person experience in order to justify that observation exists, we require a first person experience in order to justify that pain exists, and we require a first person experience in order to justify that observation and pain have certain properties. One property that pain has is that it's bad.

The only bad thing about pain is that we don't like it.

I have already discussed why I don't think pain isn't just bad because we dislike it, but there is more to be said. The statement "the only bad thing about pain is that we don't like it" lacks justification because pain feels bad, and that is a good reason to dislike it. It was bad even before we decided we don't like it (or at least it being bad is conceptually separable from disliking it). However, some people have taken our interests to be the source of all value in the sense that satisfying desires is good and unsatisfied desires are bad. However, this belief can't be satisfactorily justified. Consider these three possible reasons that personal interests could be viewed as the source of all value:

³⁴ Some philosophers consider introspection to be a form of observation.

³⁵ Observing other people observing something, or observing ourselves while observing something else in the mirror doesn't help us justify the fact that observation exists because it would require viciously circular reasoning.

1. Neglecting desires can lead to pain and satisfying desires can lead to pleasure. (However, this view of personal interest is based on the value of pleasure and pain, so it doesn't help us avoid the view that pain is bad for everyone.)
2. Personal interest is the source of all value because our desires are under our personal control. We don't have to dislike pain. (This answer is unsatisfying because it our natural reaction to pain is that it is bad. If someone was able to no longer dislike pain, then we would wonder if that person even experienced pain anymore.)
3. Personal interest is the only possible source of motivation. We can't be motivated by other people's interests. (This answer is unsatisfying because it is possible that intrinsic value exists even if we can't be motivated to promote goals with intrinsic value. It is also possible for our personal interests to coincide with goals that have intrinsic value.)

If pain is only bad because we dislike it, then pain would appear not to be bad no matter who experiences it. At least not in the sense that it really matters. Instead, avoiding pain could just be a personal preference. However, I disagree that this view of pain's badness makes sense. Its badness is actually a good reason to dislike it in the first place.

Pain isn't real because of its subjective ontology.

Some people think that physical reality (atoms and energy) is more real than mental reality. Why would someone think mental content isn't very real? Sometimes we have experiences that are "only in our head." Optical illusions are only in our mind. Hallucinations are only in our mind. Beauty might be some kind of an illusion, and the fact that we experience that *pain is bad* is also believed to be some kind of an illusion.

I am not convinced by this objection because pain isn't taken to be anything other than what it feels like. An illusion is a deceptive

experience. To see a cow in the distance, which is actually just a cardboard cutout of a cow, is an illusion when it deceives us. Pain can't be taken to be deceptive. It doesn't make us believe it is something out in the world like a cow or a rock. It's just a feeling.

Still, many people seem to think that there is something not very real about our thoughts and feelings. You see a cow, but your experience of the cow is less real than the actual cow. A materialist might be tempted to say that physical particles and energy are the most real kinds of thing, and the mind and mental experiences are not as real. However, I don't see how this view can be justified. Something is ontologically objective if it exists outside the mind (including minds), and something is ontologically subjective if it exists inside the mind. Either way, we are talking about part of reality.

Pain's subjective ontology causes it to be in a separate place than the rest of the universe.

Some people seem to enjoy a very peculiar kind of relativism where everyone lives in a separate universe.³⁶ Ontological subjectivity and objectivity seem different enough that they might indicate a severe separation of reality. Minds are each within a kind of bubble that separates mental stuff from physical reality. When you experience that pain as bad, it is really bad for you, but you are so separate from the reality other people exist in that their pain doesn't exist for you, and so their pain can't be bad for you. Such a view admits that pain really is bad and might even have intrinsic disvalue, but only within each person's perspective. Each person lives in something like a separate reality.

I do not find this objection to be plausible enough to fully discuss, but I suspect some people agree to it, and such a view might motivate a kind of anti-realism. Instead of endorsing this kind of relativism, I endorse the view that every person exists in the same reality and our thoughts and feelings are all part of the same reality. We simply are

³⁶ A relativist believes that morality is relative. What is right for one person isn't necessarily right for another.

unable to directly know each others' thoughts and feelings. Instead of having direct knowledge of other people's consciousness, we can indirectly know their thoughts and feelings through their behavior, biology, situation, and verbal reports. We know that our biology causes us pain when we touch fire, and people with similar biology will feel similar pain when they touch fire.

What's good or bad is only good or bad to someone in particular.

This position could be a problem for moral realism if good and bad were merely based on subjective desires or if we each live in a relativistic reality bubble. I have already discussed both of those possibilities. I see no other reason to find the statement "what's good or bad is only good or bad to someone in particular" to be a threat to the reality of intrinsic value. Even if good or bad things can't exist without someone in particular, that doesn't prove intrinsic values don't exist.

It could be true that specific people must be benefited or harmed in order for intrinsic value to be attained. I agree that intrinsic values don't float around in the universe. They have to be manifested appropriately. Pain doesn't exist without being experienced by someone, but it could really matter when it does exist. Other people's pain could really matter, even if I don't personally care about it.

3. Objections against Anti-Realism

An anti-realist will have some difficulty in explaining the following:

1. Why morality is important.
2. Why moral obligations are inescapable.
3. Why altruism is justified.

I can't prove that a moral anti-realist will be unable to account for these three intuitive moral beliefs, but I currently don't understand

how they could be accounted for. This is a challenge to anti-realists. Until these intuitive beliefs can be accounted for by the anti-realist, we will have additional reason to doubt anti-realism in general.

Why morality is important.

Some people argue that morality is important because it concerns our desires. This answer does explain why morality can be important to someone in particular, but there are two reasons it isn't satisfying. One, it implies ethical egoism. Breaking traditional moral rules, such as "thou shalt not kill," could be the best way to satisfy personal desires.

Two, personal desires are often unimportant. We might think someone's personal desire to count blades of grass is irrelevant to morality, unlike our desire to avoid pain.

On the other hand intrinsic values can make sense out of morality's importance. Pain really matters, so it is important to be moral (and reduce the pain in the world).

Why our moral obligations are inescapable.

I can decide to stop being a doctor in order to abandon my obligations of being a good doctor. However, we can't decide to stop being moral in order to abandon our moral obligations. The anti-realist could argue that we can't escape moral obligations because they are simply our obligations to satisfy our desires. We can't stop caring about satisfying our desires, so we can't stop caring about morality. However, this anti-realist explanation does not properly answer the question. I need to know why I should have obligations to treat other people with respect and why it's a good idea to give strangers an aspirin when it helps them get rid of a headache. As I said before, killing people could occasionally be the best way to satisfy my desires.

Again, intrinsic values can make sense out of the inescapability of our moral obligations. It is important that we don't cause people pain

because it really matters. We say that we are obligated not to cause pain because it would be horrible to cause severe harm. The more harm an action could cause, the more important it is not to do the action.

Why altruism is justified.

If pain isn't bad for everyone, then we need to know why the examples of altruism (helpfulness) are so intuitive. Why do we take other people's pain as worthy of consideration? Why do we find it so reasonable to help other people avoid pain by giving them an aspirin? Let's consider these three possibilities:

1. Instincts: We are social animals. We care for people by nature. We want people to approve of us. (However, this answer isn't entirely satisfying because we want people to approve of us based on our actual virtue and worth. It might be true that we are happy to get approval of others, but we would also prefer to be worthy of that approval.)
2. A social contract: We are rationally justified to help other people because human beings are interdependent. We require cooperation in order to live.
3. Cultural practice: We have been indoctrinated into a moral institution. Part of that institution requires us to find everyone's pain to be worthy of consideration.

These three answers are unsatisfying for at least three reasons:

1. These views imply ethical egoism.³⁷ We wouldn't be able to justify a personal interest in helping other people avoid pain unless it would benefit ourselves to do so, which is counterintuitive. Helping other people seems like a good thing that doesn't need a selfish justification.
2. These views can't account for the importance of morality itself. Without intrinsic values, we would want everyone to follow

³⁷ "Ethical egoism" is the view that we are only morally justified to promote our personal good. If ethical egoism is true, helping others is only justified if it simultaneously benefits oneself.

- moral rules except ourselves. It's within our personal interest to cheat whenever it would benefit us to do so, but we intuitively believe moral demands are always worthy of consideration.
3. Totalitarian regimes make sense if morality isn't important. We might as well all agree to a social contract that can watch us at all times and punish us whenever we break the rules of the social contract. This could help us avoid Thomas Hobbes's state of nature where life is "nasty, brutish, and short."³⁸

If morality isn't really important, then altruistic moral demands are not worthy of consideration. It might be possible to free ourselves from our instincts, social contract, and cultural practices. We sometimes have an interest of helping other people without conscious regard to ourselves, but we might be able to train ourselves to lose this interest. A wise philosopher would be able to reject morality and accept a kind of personal egoistic ethic. However, this is a highly counter-intuitive result. It would be absurd for wise philosophers to reject morality, stop caring about people, and commit crimes in order to selfishly benefit themselves. In order to accept such a counter-intuitive result, we would need a persuasive justification.

I do not deny that instincts, a social contract, or cultural practices play a role in our moral beliefs and motivations, but the role they play is limited. If our motivation in valuing other people's pain were solely from one or more of these sources, it wouldn't prove that pain doesn't have intrinsic value. It might still make sense to say that other people's pain is bad because they experience it as bad. However, if pain doesn't have intrinsic value, then these sources of motivation might be the only ways to explain why we value other people's pain.

Finally, intrinsic values can account for altruism. Everyone's pain is bad, so it's better for one person to feel pain than two. We should then do what we can to reduce the pain in the world.

³⁸ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*, Chapter XIII. Internet Archive. 18 Jan. 2010. <<http://www.archive.org/details/hobbessleviathan00hobbuoft>>.

Conclusion

We have good reason to accept that pain is intrinsically bad considering that it feels bad no matter who experiences it and the alternatives to this view do not seem plausible. Additionally, the moral realist can explain why it is intuitive to believe everyone's pain has disvalue and why we have a good reason to want to help people avoid pain. Anti-realism can explain altruistic ethics to some extent, but it's only skin deep. Anti-realists will have various ways to try to explain why people are altruistic, but altruistic action is not justified for anti-realists because they can only justify ethical egoism. Ethical egoism is counterintuitive considering that giving an aspirin to someone with a headache makes sense without any personal benefit required. I do not expect that the anti-realist will be able to justify their rejection of pain's intrinsic disvalue sufficiently, and the anti-realist will have the burden of proof considering their counterintuitive results. I have attempted to consider the best reasons to believe that pain lacks intrinsic disvalue, but those reasons lack sufficient justification.

There might be a foolproof argument that proves that pain lacks intrinsic disvalue, but I don't know of it. Most anti-realists do not provide such a proof. Instead, anti-realists argue that intrinsic value isn't needed in order to explain our moral understanding or our moral experiences. (We should reject intrinsic value because it is a queer property, and nothing queer should be accepted unless it is necessary to do so.) I have argued that the anti-realist is wrong. We do need intrinsic value in order to explain our understanding of morality and moral experiences. If we reject intrinsic value, then we have various counterintuitive conclusions:

1. We should become ethical egoists in order to know what we want out of life and to find out how to get it.
2. "Ethics" isn't important, but wise people will tend to develop their own egoistic ethic just because it is a natural behavior given our psychology. We want to satisfy our desires, and "ethics" is nothing more than an attempt to satisfy our desires.

3. We can't expect or demand that anyone take our desires into consideration. Of course, some people will try to coerce others into behaving in certain ways. (They might try to force others into treating them nicely.)
4. We should agree to live by a social contract, but we should cheat and break the rules of the contract whenever we would be benefited by doing so, and perhaps that is a good reason to want to live in a totalitarian state that can watch us all at all times to keep us in line.

8. Objections Part 1: Is/Ought Gap

Although I have already discussed several objections to moral realism, some of them are worth discussing in more detail. In particular, the is/ought gap has proven to be a source of confusion. The is/ought gap is ambiguous and there are at least two main interpretations. One is ontological and one is epistemological. In other words, one says that the is/ought gap is a description of reality and another says that it is a description of our evidence.

Here "is" refers to descriptive facts (nonmoral facts) and "ought" refers to prescriptive facts (moral facts). The idea of there being an ontological gap is that there is something different about description and prescription and one domain is not the same thing as the other (one domain is not reducible to another). The epistemological gap is that we can't know prescriptive facts from descriptive facts. Both kinds of is/ought gaps require that we accept that something is in the "is" domain or the "ought" domain. Nothing can be in both domains.

I will discuss the following:

1. David Hume's discussion of the is/ought gap
2. John Searle's discussion of the is/ought gap.
3. Lawrence Becker's discussion of the is/ought gap.
4. Intrinsic values and the is/ought gap.
5. The ontological interpretations of the is/ought gap.
6. The epistemological interpretations of the is/ought gap.
7. Two ways people have used the is/ought gap as an argument against realism.

The purpose of this discussion is to consider the arguments against moral realism. In particular, I will discuss these two objections to realism:

1. The ontological argument: Moral realism requires us to accept a new irreducible kind of property, but such a property isn't necessary. Instead of accepting irreducible moral properties, we should just admit that we are deluded about morality.
2. The epistemological argument: We can't know about moral facts through observation, but that's how we know about everything. Therefore, moral knowledge is impossible.

These arguments will be explained when I discuss the different interpretations of the ontological and epistemological is/ought gap because the arguments can be understood in various ontological and epistemological ways.

1. Hume's Discussion of the Is/Ought Gap

The is/ought gap is famously introduced by Hume, who presents us with the challenge: "How do you get an 'ought' from an 'is?'"³⁹ Hume realized that many people argued about what is the case in order to argue what ought to be the case. This kind of argument implied that we could get what ought to be the case from what is the case, but it wasn't yet clear how it could be done. Some moral realists have offered answers to this question by explaining that we can observe moral facts, but they can only do so with a moral theory. One way might be to merely attempt to explain moral observations we have in order to discover the moral theory that they imply. However, I have discussed a different answer to that question—we experience moral facts similarly to how we experience psychological facts. We can develop moral theory based on how we experience our final ends (benefits), and then by justifying the fact that other people will have similar experiences and final ends. Everyone's final ends matter, not just our own.

But Hume didn't just say that he wanted to know how to get "ought" from "is." He also discussed that prescriptive and descriptive facts seemed quite different. Hume states that sentiments are not subject to

³⁹ Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part I, Section I. 18 Jan. 2010. <http://books.google.com/books?id=5zGpC6mL-MUC&dq=hume+treatise+human+nature&as_br=1&client=firefox-a>.

truth or falsity, and morality seems to require sentiments. This implies that it is impossible to get “ought” from “is” because moral endorsements would then just be an emotional reaction. Consider these two passages:

Reason is the discovery of truth or falshood. Truth or falshood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the real relations of ideas, or to the real existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true or false, and can never be an object of our reason. Now 'tis evident our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement; being original facts and realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, and actions. 'Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounc'd either true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason. (Treatise, Part I, Section I)

[I]t is a requisite that there should be some sentiment, which it touches; some internal taste or feeling, or whatever you please to call it, which distinguishes moral good and evil, and which embraces the one and rejects the other.⁴⁰

Here it appears that Hume is saying that emotions are neither true nor false, and moral endorsements are based on emotions. Therefore, we should conclude that moral facts can't exist because morality is merely an expression of our emotions. This is the position of non-cognitivists. Hume never made it clear that he was a non-cognitivist, but his moral theory seems compatible with non-cognitivism.

40 Hume, David. Enquiry Concerning The Principles of Morals, Appendix I.V. 18. Jan. 2010. <http://books.google.com/books?id=fV0AAAAAAMAAJ&dq=Enquiry+Concerning+The+Principles+of+Morals&as_brr=1&client=firefox-a>.

I will now explain the various arguments and interpretations involving the is/ought gap.

2. Searle's Discussion of the Is/Ought Gap

John Searle decided that we can get a nonmoral "ought" from a promise. If I make a promise, then there is a sense that I should do what it takes to fulfill the promise. So, we can get "ought" from "is" because we can get a prescriptive statement (you should do x) from a descriptive fact (a promise to do x).⁴¹

This kind of "ought" is not a moral ought. There can be moral considerations that override my reason to fulfill my promise.

Although Searle does not answer Hume's challenge because Hume wants to know how to get moral "oughts," Searle still attempts to explain how we can get a kind of prescriptive fact from a descriptive one. If Searle is right, that means that prescriptive facts are not exclusively moral, and prescriptive facts might be somehow connected to descriptive facts.

3. Becker's Discussion of the Is/Ought Gap

Lawrence Becker agrees with Searle that we can get a nonmoral "ought" from "is," but he thought we could also get a "moral" ought from nonmoral "oughts" given that there are no overriding reason against doing so. If you should accomplish a goal all-things-considered, then you morally ought to accomplish the goal.⁴²

We can get a nonmoral "ought" from a goal. (If you have a goal to eat chocolate, you should buy a chocolate bar.) If you have no overriding reason not to eat it, then (all-things-considered), you morally ought to eat it.

41 Searle, John. "How to Derive 'Ought' From 'Is,'" *Philosophical Review* 73, 1964, 43-58.

42 Becker, Lawrence. *A New Stoicism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 199.

The problem with Becker's account of moral prescriptive facts is that they aren't necessarily important. If the goal is important, then the moral "ought" is important; but what's so important about eating chocolate? Eating chocolate doesn't sound important enough to be worthy of being a moral "ought."

4. Intrinsic Values and the Is/Ought Gap

Intrinsic values seem important enough to help us get a moral "ought" from "is." If intrinsic values are descriptive facts, then we can get prescriptive facts from descriptive facts. All things equal, if human life has intrinsic value, we shouldn't kill people.

Even intrinsic values can lack importance. The pleasure from eating chocolate might have a small amount of importance, but it still doesn't sound important enough to be worthy of being called moral. Perhaps we have conventionally required things to be relatively important in order for us to label it is "moral," but this is just a matter of degree. There is nothing particularly different about eating chocolate for pleasure or reading philosophy for pleasure in the sense that both actions are done out of pleasure. The only difference is the quality and/or quantity of pleasure involved.

5. Ontological Gap

The ontological gap states that "is" and "ought" are different kinds of being (existence). "Goodness" and "wrong" refer to a different kind of property than "hot" or "solid." One kind of property doesn't depend on people, but the other does. There are at least three different ways of understanding an ontological gap:

1. Moral facts are not reducible to nonmoral facts (or vice versa).
Moral facts and nonmoral facts are two different domains.
2. Moral facts are not reducible to descriptive facts (or vice versa).
Moral facts and descriptive facts are two different domains.
3. Morality is not factual at all.

I will consider each of these.

Moral facts are not reducible to nonmoral facts.

Moral realists will agree that moral facts are not reducible to nonmoral facts. That's the whole point of intrinsic value. Some things are important, but particles and energy are not constitutive of moral facts. Nothing meaningful can be found on the level of physics, so physics could be said to only entail nonmoral facts.⁴³

There is an objection against realism involving a view that moral facts aren't reducible to nonmoral facts, but this is a strange argument considering that part of my definition of realism is precisely that moral facts can't be reduced to nonmoral facts. For example, reductionists who believe that everything reduces to physics might argue that morality is delusional because it can't be reduced to physics. Everything that doesn't reduce to physics must be rejected. However, reductionism is not a persuasive reason to reject moral realism because we don't yet know how to reduce sociology, mathematics, or psychology to physics either. The fact that we can't reduce these kinds of facts is better evidence that reductionism is false than evidence that they don't really exist.

The real problem for realism is to determine if we can reduce moral facts to nonmoral facts. Such a reduction would prove that moral facts are dispensable. We could just talk about psychology, for example, instead of morality. (We would also find out that moral facts don't really matter. Importance would just be a matter of something like desires, and other people's pain would be of no rational concern to each of us.)

What about Becker? Lawrence Becker's answer to the is/ought problem seems to imply an answer to the gap between the moral and nonmoral. His answer is that we can get the moral from the nonmoral

⁴³ To say that moral facts are not reducible to nonmoral facts means that we can't get moral facts from nonmoral facts of anthropology, psychology, or physics.

because he reduces moral facts to all-things-considered judgments involving goal satisfaction. This answer appears to be a challenge to moral realism. If we can get moral judgments from nonmoral judgments, then what good are intrinsic values?

One problem with Becker's account of moral judgments lacks the importance required for moral judgments. Goals alone are not enough to give us moral judgments because they can lack importance. Although I agree that all things equal, eating chocolate might be good, it is only superficially so. Consider the following:

Becker must admit that those who want to spend hours counting blades of grass could be morally justified doing so because there are no overriding reasons not to. The fact that counting blades of grass is unimportant isn't in and of itself an overriding reason not to do it. Although most people might have overriding reasons not to spend hours counting blades of grass considering that such a goal will conflict with their other goals, it is logically, metaphysically, and physically possible that a person would have no such conflicting goals. If Becker is correct, this person morally "ought" to spend hours counting blades of grass.

What about Intrinsic values? Notice that I earlier claimed we can get "ought" from "is" using intrinsic values. It might be true that intrinsic values are descriptive facts, but they are moral facts either way. Therefore, I admit that intrinsic values do not let us get moral facts from nonmoral facts.

In conclusion, we can't get "ought" from "is" in the sense that moral and nonmoral facts are two separate domains. Arguments concerning what "is" the case that somehow give us what "ought" to be the case must have make use of a hidden premise, which would tell us how "is" is relevant to the ethical issue at hand. For example, capital punishment might be wrong if it kills innocent people given the hidden premise that people have intrinsic value. The hidden premise is itself a moral fact.

Moral facts are not reducible to descriptive facts.

Descriptive facts could include moral descriptions (e.g. torture is wrong), but that seems to miss the point. (Descriptive facts might include both moral descriptions and nonmoral descriptions.) The point seems to be that material facts and moral facts seem to be different kinds of things. (Material facts can include any fact within the materialist's metaphysics: particles, energy, minds, and anthropological facts can all exist for a materialist.) So, *descriptive facts should be taken to be facts of the material world*. Facts of the material world might include moral facts, so not all moral realists will agree that prescriptive facts aren't descriptive. (The is/ought gap could be rejected by arguing that something can be both prescriptive and descriptive—both a materialistic fact and a moral fact.) Instead, a materialist can agree that psychological and moral facts are caused by particles and energy. (We could agree to materialism as long as all material entities are causally connected.) Materialism itself doesn't require that we accept that everything is ontologically reducible to physics (particles and energy), so it is possible for a materialist to agree that an irreducible moral domain exists. I will discuss why some people agree to a materialistic is/ought gap and what it would mean to deny a materialistic is/ought gap.

If moral facts are materialistic, we can get "ought" from "is" in the sense that materialistic facts can include moral facts.⁴⁴ In that case the premise that "pain is bad" would be a materialistic fact because such an experience of pain is materialistic, and it can give us reason to avoid pain, and it gives us reason to help other people avoid pain. However, not everyone rejects the materialistic is/ought gap. Consider these alternatives to moral facts being materialistic:

⁴⁴ If moral facts are materialistic, then we can have something a lot like a science of morality. A study of the material world can give us moral facts. Theism and mysticism will be unnecessary for attaining moral truth. If I am wrong, then we might lack a reliable method to learn about moral facts.

- A dualist might argue that moral facts are part of the psychological realm, but psychological facts are quite different than materialistic facts.
- A pluralist or idealist might argue that moral facts are a different domain than the psychological realm and the materialistic realm. For example, someone could argue that moral facts are based on Platonic forms.
- Some might argue that moral facts are supernatural. For example, moral facts might depend on a supernatural deity's existence. This position is especially mysterious and requires something like divine revelation.

All three of these positions fail to fully explain why psychological facts and moral facts are causally linked to (or dependent on) the material world. The dualist, idealist, and pluralist might still have some access to moral facts through introspection, but tying moral facts to the supernatural make it very unclear how we could know moral facts. If the existence of moral facts depends on something we can't experience, and the supernatural tends to be something that people can't experience, then we can't experience moral facts.

I do not wish to argue that we have to be materialists to understand moral facts. It might be that a dualist, pluralist, or idealist can accept the existence of a materialistic world, and it is even possible for them to accept that moral facts are materialistic (or at least tied to psychological facts).

Those who believe that moral facts are materialistic are left with a question: How can we be sure that moral facts are materialistic? This is what I will discuss next.

How could a materialist reject the materialistic is/ought gap? Minds, for example, might be caused by our brain; but minds are not entirely explained and understood in terms of our brains (or in terms of particles and energy). For example, my experience of the color green doesn't seem like it's the same thing as neurons firing in my

brain. We can describe neurons firing in my brain, but new information is introduced when I describe my experience of the color green. A materialist can then say that minds are not the same thing as brains, but minds are caused by brains. A materialist would then say that minds are part of the physical world, minds are caused by brains, but mental facts are irreducible to nonmental facts. For example, John Searle argues that mental facts are emergent system features of the brain. If he is right, mental facts require irreducible emergent properties to be caused by the brain.

A materialist might then reject the is/ought gap in the sense that moral facts are also part of the material world. Although moral facts might require irreducible emergent properties, those properties are caused by particles and energy, like everything else.

It can be important for a realist to reject the materialistic is/ought gap because all the relevant facts appear to be materialistic (or psychological). Torturing others for fun involves physical actions and psychological facts, but torturing others is something we believe to be wrong based on our belief that physical and psychological facts determine moral facts. So, assuming that all relevant facts are materialistic, we must admit that we can know moral facts even if we only know materialistic facts. Moral facts are also materialistic facts.⁴⁵

On the other hand, some philosophers will also reject a materialistic is/ought gap by denying that moral facts require irreducible moral properties. We might find out that mental facts are nothing more than various configurations of particles and energy, and moral facts might be reducible in a similar way. (This would be a form of anti-realism.)

I have not argued that we know for sure that moral facts are materialistic. Instead, I simply pointed out the fact that psychology can be taken to be a materialistic fact despite the fact that we don't experience it as being part of physics. This could be seen as speculative

⁴⁵ Of course, a substance dualist might argue that psychological facts aren't materialistic, but dualism is not currently considered to be a viable option by philosophers.

—we can theorize about psychology being materialistic, but it hasn't been fully justified yet.

However, there is some independent evidence that psychology is materialistic in the sense that it is causally tied to solid objects. The mind of each creature seems to depend on the complexity and configuration of its brain; brain damage can alter someone's psychology; and our desires and beliefs can influence our body's movements.

Now we are left with the question—"Do we have evidence that moral facts are also dependent on the material world?" My answer is, "Yes." We know moral facts from a combination of psychological and biological facts. The motivations, the ability to cause pain, the ability to damage someone's biology are all essential facts to determine if an action is beneficial, harmful, justified, right, or wrong. The badness of pain influences our psychology to avoid pain and to help other people avoid pain, but pain is a psychological phenomenon.

In conclusion, just as we have evidence that psychology is dependent on the material world, we also have evidence that moral facts are dependent on the material world. In particular, our experience of moral facts influences our psychology.

The argument for a materialistic is/ought gap: Some materialists also reject moral facts on the ground that such facts imply moral realism and require emergent properties. Such materialists accept that moral facts imply irreducible emergent properties, but they reject that there could be such properties. John Mackie introduced this position and what he called the "argument from queerness."⁴⁶ The main idea is that we shouldn't accept queer entities or properties (new kinds of existence) unless we have sufficient reason to do so. He even admits that we often behave as though such irreducible moral facts exist (such as intrinsic values). Such irreducible moral facts might even be

⁴⁶ I originally wrote about Mackie's argument from queerness [here](#), and you can also find information about it on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [here](#). It was originally discussed in his book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* on page 38.

required to explain our moral experiences. However, we should reject moral facts before accepting irreducible parts of reality. We would do better to admit that our moral experiences are delusional than to admit that a new kind of entity exists.

I have already argued that anti-realists that try to make sense out of our moral experiences will fail to do so (because our moral experiences require us to accept altruistic actions as justified, but such actions are not justified for an anti-realist.) Mackie would agree with my argument, but he would reject my belief that the burden of proof is on the anti-realist. Most philosophers will accept that our moral experiences can give us evidence of moral facts. If this is right, then our moral experiences are evidence of moral realism because anti-realists will not be able to make as much sense out of our moral experiences.

However, Mackie would argue against the belief that moral experiences are evidence of realism. Moral experiences merely prove that we are delusional. In order for us to side with Mackie, we will need to accept one of the objections I mentioned in my argument for moral realism. (Such objections were meant to argue that we can't accept that "pain is bad no matter who experiences it.") In particular, these two are relevant:

1. Our thoughts and feelings can't be philosophically analyzed.
2. Pain's subjective ontology causes it to be less real than required for it to have intrinsic disvalue. Pain is something like an illusion.

I have already discussed why these are not good reasons to reject that "pain is bad for everyone," and my arguments will also be equally relevant concerning evidence that point to morality being irreducible.

I have discussed why introspective evidence can be a reliable source of knowledge (that we have observation, for example), and now I will argue that introspective evidence can be a reliable source of ontological

justification.⁴⁷ Introspective evidence is very relevant to ontological knowledge. In particular, we have reason to believe that the mind might not be reducible to the brain in the sense that our experience of green doesn't appear to be the same thing as neurons firing in a certain way. The fact that an experience of green is multiply realizable in the brain (different brain states can cause a specific experience of green) coupled with our knowledge of experiencing green gives us a strong reason to reject that certain brain states are "exactly the same thing" as our experience of green. It might make more sense to say that brain states can cause our experience of green (than t say that the experience of green is nothing other than brain states).

Given my example, we have pretty strong evidence that our introspective evidence can give us a justification for ontological beliefs. In particular, the fact that an experience of the color green is not "exactly the same thing" as a certain brain state.

If introspective evidence concerning our moral experiences can be used as evidence of moral ontological properties (just like it can give evidence concerning psychological ontological properties), then we also have reason to accept that pain is bad, and to accept that pain is bad for others; and therefore, that pain is intrinsically bad. The argument I gave for moral realism could then be considered to be based on reliable evidence.

One could object here that I haven't yet given introspective evidence that morality is irreducible. Sure, we can't understand the experience of the color green using non-psychological facts, but maybe we can understand moral facts using nomoral facts. My reply to this objection is that we can't understand the badness of pain through a nonmoral description. We can experience the badness of pain, but no amount of nonmoral facts will ever be able to fully describe the experience of the badness of pain.

⁴⁷ The fact that we can observe evidence is justified through our personal experience (introspection) rather than through observation of the outside world. If introspection is a reliable form of justification, then we might be able to use introspection to justify our moral beliefs and experiences.

At this point the anti-realist would need to give us a reason to believe that introspection involving mental ontology and moral ontology are disanalogous. They must be different in some important sense, or the reliability of psychological introspection should indicate the reliability of moral introspection. Introspection involving moral ontology could give us reason to believe that there are irreducible moral facts, just like there appear to be irreducible psychological facts.

In conclusion, we do have reason to believe our moral experiences are reliable just like our psychological experiences are reliable. We therefore have some reason to accept that moral facts are materialistic. If intrinsic values are descriptive (materialistic) facts, then we can get "ought" from "is" in the materialistic sense using intrinsic values. The fact that pain is bad is enough to give someone an aspirin, and that fact might be part of materialistic metaphysics.

Morality is not factual at all.

If morality isn't factual at all, then there can't be moral statements. No moral sentence could be true or false. "Hitler was viscous" wouldn't be true or false, and "charity is good" wouldn't be true or false. This is the commitment held by non-cognitivists (people who deny that moral sentences can be true or false). Non-cognitivists are anti-realists, so their arguments are relevant. I will treat the arguments against non-cognitivism given by other philosophers to be sufficient. In particular, non-cognitivism is against our moral experience.⁴⁸ Additionally, a non-cognitivist will have to reject that our moral experience is reliable, but I already argued above why we have some reason to believe that our moral experience (introspection) can be reliable. (If our moral experiences are reliable, then we have a good reason to accept moral realism.)

If non-cognitivists reject our moral experiences, then it isn't clear why they don't side with Mackie, who also rejects our moral experiences. I

⁴⁸ I experience myself talking about true and false moral statements, such as "Pain is bad." Non-cognitivists seem to deny that I can do this. Instead, they want to say that I am just expressing my emotions.

suppose they want to preserve more of our moral experiences than Mackie, but then they appear to want things both ways—they want to agree with Mackie that intrinsic values are queer and unjustified, but also accept that our moral experiences are worthy of consideration. Then the problem is that our moral experiences will provide us with our evidence for intrinsic values rather than non-cognitivism.

In conclusion, I reject noncognitivism and moral facts could exist. We can discuss which moral statements are true or false, even if all moral statements are false.

6. Epistemological Gap

Most philosophers seem to refer to the epistemological is/ought gap and believe that we can't *know* prescriptive facts from descriptive facts. Observation, for example, seems to give us evidence of descriptive facts rather than prescriptive facts. I will first discuss the different kinds of epistemological is/ought gaps, and then I will discuss the argument against moral observation. The argument states that *we can't know prescriptive facts because all facts are justified by observation, but we can't observe prescriptive facts.*

Just like the ontological gap, there is more than one way of interpreting the epistemological gap:

1. We can't know moral facts from nonmoral facts.
2. We can't know moral facts from materialistic facts.
3. We can't know moral facts because all facts are descriptive.

The epistemological gaps are tied to the ontological gaps, as I explain below.

We can't know moral facts from nonmoral facts.

If moral facts are not reducible to nonmoral facts, then we can't know moral facts given nonmoral facts. Although moral realists will agree

with this statement, they point out that a moral theory can be sufficient to derive moral facts from nonmoral facts. Seeing children torture a cat is enough to judge the children as doing something wrong.

Of course, the moral theory might have to be justified on moral grounds rather than nonmoral grounds. If we only know nonmoral facts, then we can never know moral facts. So, how do we ever get to know any moral facts? Because we experience them. I already explained this position in my post, [A Moral Realist Perspective](#).⁴⁹

My position is not one necessarily endorsed by all realist philosophers. Some seem to merely believe that we non-reflectively start off with moral intuitions or moral beliefs, and we are then able to observe moral facts. We could then theorize about which nonmoral facts determine moral facts based on our actual moral observations, intuitions, and assumptions.

In conclusion, we can know moral facts from nonmoral facts given bridging premises, such as "human life has intrinsic value." This premise would help us conclude that killing people is a bad idea given biological facts involving death and how essential living bodies are for our own existence.

We can't know moral facts from facts of materialism.

If moral facts are not reducible to materialistic facts, then we can't know moral facts given facts of materialism. I already mentioned how this gap can be rejected by moral realists. We have some reason to believe that moral facts are facts of materialism. Moral facts might be an irreducible sort of material fact. Once realists reject the materialist is/ought gap, they can escape the objection that *all we know are materialistic facts, so we can't know moral facts*. If I am right that moral facts are materialistic, then I am right that we can know moral facts from materialistic facts.

⁴⁹ This essay was reprinted in essay 5 of this book.

We can't know moral facts because all facts are descriptive.

One might admit that moral statements are "descriptive" in the sense that they describe part of the material world, but that is not what is meant by the assertion above. What is being asserted is the position that moral sentences are noncognitive (neither true nor false), so we can't know any nonmoral facts. This is just a trivial conclusion based on noncognitivism. Moral realists reject noncognitivism, so they don't agree to this epistemological problem.

In conclusion, we might be able to know moral facts because we reject that all facts are (by definition) descriptive. Some facts might be prescriptive. It isn't necessary at this point to admit that there are true moral facts because moral statements might all be false. Noncognitivism can be rejected, even if Mackie is right that all moral statements are false.

The argument against moral observation

Although there are different interpretations of the epistemological is/ought gap, any of them could lead to a single problem—it doesn't seem possible to know moral facts. This is the conclusion of the argument against moral observation:

The argument against moral observation is the following:

1. We can't know moral facts from observation.
2. We know everything from observation.
3. Therefore, we can't know moral facts.

This argument can be based on any of the three epistemological is/ought gap interpretations, so it is relevant no matter which interpretation of the gap we are considering.

The problem with this argument is that neither premise has been proven or sufficiently justified. The argument is mainly just a challenge to realists to explain how we can know about moral facts. I will discuss how each premise can be questioned:

Premise 1: Realists have often accepted premise 2 (that we know everything from observation), but rejected premise 1. I have already given the arguments given by [Geoffrey Sayre-McCord](#), [Nicholas L. Sturgeon](#), and [Richard N. Boyd](#), who argue that we can observe moral facts. They basically argue that observation is theory-relative, and we need a moral theory to help explain our moral observations. No observation is reducible to our actual experiences. Observations require assumptions and theory in order to make sense. I can see my hand, but that observation requires me to have assumptions about solidity, biology, and selfhood.

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord related the problem of observation to the is/ought gap.⁵⁰ He agrees that there might be an is/ought gap; but if there is, then it is no more a problem for morality than it is for psychology. Just like the is/ought gap, there appears to be something like an is/thought gap. (We might not be able to reduce psychology to non-psychological facts, or morality to nonmoral facts.) Observation by itself isn't sufficient to give us moral facts, and observation by itself isn't able to give us psychological facts. Of course, we do observe both moral and psychological facts once we realize that certain assumptions or theory is involved. Certain observed behavior and biology indicates certain psychological facts, and certain observed behavior and biology indicates certain moral facts.

Premise 2: I have already discussed the fact that premise 2 seems false, which asserts that we know everything through observation. I argued the opposite. We know about moral facts through personal experience rather than purely from observation. This is equally true

⁵⁰ Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey. "Moral Theory and Explanatory Impotence." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. XII (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 433-457. (Chapel Hill Philosophy. 18 Jan 2010. <http://philosophy.unc.edu/people/faculty/geoffrey-sayre-mccord/on-line-papers/Explanatory_Impotence.pdf/view>.)

about mental phenomena. We directly experience mental phenomena. In that case "we don't know everything from observation," so the second premise would be false. In that case we might suspect that it is true that we "don't know moral facts through observation" just like it might be true that we "don't know psychological facts through observation." Instead, we can experience psychological and moral facts, and we can know about them through introspection.

In conclusion, the argument against moral observation is unconvincing because observation is not the only way we know about the world. We also know some things through introspection. (Of course, some people might define observation in a way that includes introspection. In that case the argument is false because we can know about moral facts through personal experience.)

Conclusion

How do you get "ought" from "is?" It depends on what you mean by the is/ought gap:

- If you mean, "How do you get moral facts from nonmoral facts?" then you can't get "ought" from "is." You can only get "ought" from "is" by making use of a moral premise. Moral facts can't be known if we are only given nonmoral facts.
- If you mean, "How do you get moral facts from materialistic facts?" then you can get "oughts" simply from the fact that some materialistic facts are already moral facts. (Although a dualist might argue that moral facts are mental facts rather than material. In that case we can still know about moral facts in the same way through introspection.)
- If you mean, "How do you get moral attitudes considering they aren't factual?" then we will have to reject the assertion that moral attitudes are noncognitive.
- If you mean, "How do we know moral facts from nonmoral facts?" then we can only know moral facts through introspection or given other moral facts. "Pain is bad" will imply that we

shouldn't torture cats, and that people who are torturing cats are doing something wrong because of the cat's biology and psychology.

- If you mean, "How do you observe moral facts?" then the answer might be that we don't. Instead, we can experience moral facts through introspection.

9. Objections Part 2: Intuition is Unreliable

Many ethicists agree that moral philosophy requires the use of intuition. My argument for moral realism itself requires the use of intuition. However, philosophers will require that we justify our use of intuition. Some philosophers have argued that intuition is too mysterious or unreliable to be used for philosophy. I will present the case that intuition represents our tendency to be unable to verbalize various justifications. I will explain how our intuitions makes use of relatively reliable justifications, consider four objections against intuition, and I will attempt to explain why the objections are not convincing.

Note that I am not an expert of intuition and I have read relatively little on the subject. Still, the little that I do know can clarify some issues people tend to have concerning intuitions, and I am able to respond to superficial objections.

1. What is Intuition?

Philosophers often speak of "intuition." There is more than one meaning to the word, even in philosophy; but philosophers do not use the word "intuition" to mean "hunch," "popular opinion," or "extra sensory perception." The word "intuition" stands for our ability to understand the world in a way that is difficult for us to verbalize. When scientists, mathematicians, or ethicists talk about intuition, they are referring to their ability to grasp which statements are probably true without being able to give an account of all the reasons and justifications for their beliefs. Here are five ways we can try to understand intuition:

1. Intuition is our ability to grasp self-evident truths.
2. Intuition is an instinctual process.
3. Intuition refers to introspective evidence.
4. Intuition is based on coherence.
5. Intuition is common sense.

I will discuss each of these five sorts of intuition, and then the four objections to intuition.

Intuition is our ability to grasp self-evident truths.

A self-evident truth is something that we are justified to believe without additional justification. We can then speculate that we recognize that something is self-evident through some kind of intuition. Self-evident truths do not necessarily justify themselves, and they don't necessarily lead to certainty. They merely assure us that not every justification must be justified because some justifications are justified through self-evidence. This helps us avoid an infinite regress. If every justification required a justification, then we would worry that no justification would ever be justified, and we could never have a fully justified belief.

Beliefs we believe are "self-evident" might be misidentified as such, but some beliefs seem to be very reliable without a further need of justification. How do we know "1+1=2?" We can know it just by thinking about it. Perhaps an understanding of the statement is enough to know it's true. If so, intuition might be able to be an ability to grasp self-evident truths. On the other hand some philosophers believe that all mathematical truths are tautologies.⁵¹ Based on the definition of the numbers, we can know that the statement must be true. Denying the statement does lead to an absurdity, and that might be because denying the statement leads to a self-contradiction (the opposite of a tautology).

⁵¹ Something is a tautology if it is logically impossible for it to be false. For example, "Humans are apes or they are not apes."

A supporter of self-evidence (also known as rational intuition) will argue that no argument is necessary to know that "1+1=2" is true and the meaning of the numbers are more than just definitions. Perhaps numbers can be defined with nothing other than logic, but that might be missing a more profound meaning that numbers have.

A supporter of self-evidence might also argue that we could only endorse tautologies and reject contradictions given the fact that we have intuitions about tautologies and self-contradictions. We know through intuition that tautologies have to be true and self-contradictions have to be false.⁵² So even if mathematics can be reduced to logic (tautologies and self-contradictions), it still wouldn't necessarily prove that we should reject self-evidence. They might even be necessary in understanding logic and mathematics.

If we know "1+1=2" through self-evidence, we might also know "torturing people for fun is wrong" in the same way. Just knowing the meaning of the words might be enough to know it is true.

Is self-evidence reliable? It is possible that we are mistaken about self-evidence entirely, but we really are certain some beliefs are true just by knowing what the belief consists of. "1+1=2" is a good example. We don't need to be math majors making use of esoteric proofs to be sure that it's true. If it's not self-evidence, then we can call it something else. Either way, this kind of intuition is the most reliable sort of evidence despite the fact that no additional justification is required. We don't need to prove such beliefs are true. However, self-evidence is not infallible. If we have identified a statement as being self-evident, we should be able to defend the belief.

Intuition is an instinctual process.

We might have some beliefs because of instincts. Our unconscious instinctual beliefs tend to be reliable enough to help us attain a reproductive advantage.

⁵² A logical system could theoretically endorse contradiction by rejecting the principal of non-contradiction. We need a way of knowing why one logical system is superior to another.

The belief that "1+1=2" could be one we immediately recognize to be true through our instincts. In a similar way some or all intuitive ethical beliefs could be justified in a similar way. We might all agree that cannibalism, incest, and necrophilia are wrong because of our instincts. Such behavior does not necessarily lead to real harm, but such behavior might have had a tendency to reduce one's reproductive advantage throughout our evolutionary history. People who were repulsed by such actions might have then acquired a reproductive advantage. Some people have argued that ethics is somehow based on our instincts.⁵³

The theory that ethics is based on our instincts is not completely arbitrary because morality might have a tendency to give us a reproductive advantage. There is a kind of trial and error involved. Additionally, instincts could be a guide to ethics without indicating moral anti-realism. An realist could admit that what has intrinsic value is also something we believe has intrinsic value due to the reproductive advantage involved.

One could object that evolution could lead to delusional beliefs whenever doing so would lead to a reproductive advantage. We don't want to exclusively justify our beliefs "just because they are useful to us" because we might then live in denial and choose to be delusional. I agree with this objection. However, the belief that "1+1=2" might be instinctual without being delusional, so it is quite possible for instinctual beliefs to be a reliable source of knowledge in general.

Instincts are generally reliable or we wouldn't have them. However, they are not infallible. It is also plausible that some people have different instincts than others. (Perhaps some sociopaths lack an instinct to value other people.) Instincts can be questioned and some additional justification for instinctual beliefs should be available in order to resist our doubts.

⁵³ Stoic philosophers accepted a very similar view.

Intuition refers to introspective evidence.

Some beliefs are intuitive because they are based on our introspective evidence. We have a difficult time verbalizing and justifying introspective evidence, just like we have a hard time verbalizing and justifying our "intuitive beliefs." It could be that many of our intuitive beliefs are actually based on introspection. The belief that "pain is bad" might not simply be self-evident, but it might be immediately evident upon our experience of pain. We can then contemplate our experience of pain in order to know whether or not our belief that "pain is bad" is justified through the experience.

My argument for moral realism requires the use of introspection, and the "intuitive evidence" that I use might actually be based on nothing other than our experience of morality. Our experience of pain might justify our belief that "pain is bad" and knowledge that other people experience pain in the same way could justify our belief that "pain is bad for no matter who experiences it."

There is also an attempt to verbalize our introspection in phenomenology, and the view that intuition is based on introspection, is similar to Henri Bergson's view, who argues that we can attain knowledge through self-sympathy.⁵⁴

Some philosophers discuss "perceptual intuition," which might also be a kind of introspective intuition. We have a perceptual intuition when we see a red apple, that the apple is red. We know it immediately from the experience. In a similar way, we might immediately see that "1+1=2" is correct through our experience of seeing it, and we might know that "pain is bad" is true through our experience of pain. I technically believe something more is happening in the mathematical and pain examples than "perception," so this liberal interpretation of perceptual intuition might include any sort of personal experience that allows us to know something immediately upon seeing it, thinking it, or experiencing it in some other way.

⁵⁴ Lawlor, Leonard. "Henry Bergson." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 19 Jan 2010.
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bergson/>>.

Is introspective evidence reliable? If we have a perceptual intuition of mathematical and logical truths, then yes. Introspective evidence is also the way we know about thoughts and perception in the first place, which is very strong evidence that there are thoughts and perceptions.

Intuition is based on coherence.

Some beliefs are intuitive because they cohere with our unexamined beliefs, observations, and introspection.

Intuition based on coherence is the kind David O Brink defends in his book, Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics.⁵⁵ Scientists might have "scientific intuition" based on his or her other beliefs. Once a scientist has been sufficiently introduced to scientific facts, a kind of scientific world view might emerge that makes scientists able to predict yet-to-be-discovered scientific facts. This ability could be improved by further knowledge of scientific facts. This kind of knowledge might be what Aristotle thought of as practical wisdom. A belief could be justified through coherence without explicit verbalization. This kind of intuition might be important for theoretical physicists, such as Einstein, who could hypothesize about the nature of the universe with remarkable accuracy.

Perhaps mathematical and ethical intuition could also be justified in this way through coherence intuition. Knowing more mathematical facts can help us immediately recognize more mathematical statements to be true. We might all immediately recognize that "1+1=2" but only an expert will immediately recognize that "2938234+34234=2972468." In a similar way unconscious ethical beliefs might be improved when one acquires ethical expertise.

Coherence theorists have to be able to tell us how we should decide which belief should be rejected whenever there are two or more beliefs that contradict. One solution is that some beliefs have a greater power

⁵⁵ Also see David Brink's essay, "[How to be a Moral Realist](#)."

of coherence than others. If one belief is required to justify five of our other beliefs, it would have a greater coherence power than a belief that justifies three of our beliefs. (This is an over simplification of what we actually have to do, but it's the general idea.) If two beliefs contradict and no other beliefs are relevant, then it might be impossible to decide which belief to reject.

Consider the following beliefs:

1. We have an afterlife.
2. Our existence has intrinsic value.
3. Murder is wrong.

Of these beliefs the first seems incompatible with the other two. It makes sense to say murder is wrong if our existence has intrinsic value (and given the fact that our existence is mortal). However, we have a choice: Should we reject that we have an afterlife or should we reject that murder is wrong? It makes more sense to reject that we have an afterlife than to reject that murder is wrong because we are much more certain that murder is wrong than the immortality of the soul.⁵⁶

Is coherence intuition reliable? If scientists have a kind of scientific intuition based upon unconsciously held beliefs and coherence, then yes. It is true that coherence is not infallible and some people's coherence intuitions are different, but experts have better intuitions than non-experts. Coherence intuition is evidence that something is true, but the results of intuition shouldn't be taken to be anything close to certainty without further investigation. Further investigation could be an attempt to verbalize that which was on first examination too difficult to verbalize: We need to figure out why we find certain beliefs so intuitive, or we need to investigate whether or not our intuition is correct through observation and/or introspection.

⁵⁶ Note that these beliefs are just used for demonstration, and I have not provided a serious argument that we should reject the immortality of the soul.

Intuition is common sense.

Some beliefs are intuitive because they are based on successful unconscious assumptions. These assumptions should be defensible. We might not be able to prove common sense assumptions are true, but common sense requires that there be no overriding reason to reject them.

There are different levels of justification common sense assumptions can have. All common sense assumptions should cohere with our beliefs just as much as the alternative. (Sometimes neither a belief nor its negation will perfectly cohere with our other beliefs.) Some common sense assumptions are highly justified because the assumption is in some sense necessary. Common sense is open to the possibility that observation, self-evidence, coherence, and/or introspective evidence are all relevant when deciding whether or not a belief is "necessary."

Consider the following 3 examples of common sense intuition:

Example 1: It might be necessary to understand the world by assuming that inductive reasoning is effective. We could argue that we might not be able to prove that inductive reasoning is effective, but denying that it is leads to the absurdity that empirical knowledge becomes impossible. Gravity might stop working tomorrow, but that is very implausible. Our belief that gravity will keep on working is one of our most reliable beliefs, but the belief is only justified if inductive reasoning can be effective.

Example 2: " $1+1=2$ " might be justified by common sense because we rely on the truth of the statement for so many other things in our lives. For example, lots of mathematical truths depend on the fact that " $1+1=2$," so we need to assume its truth in order to assure that our other mathematical beliefs are justified. If " $1+1=2$ " is false, it leads to the absurdity that other mathematical statements we know are true would also have to be considered to be false.

Example 3: Ethical statements might be justified through common sense. "All things equal, causing pain is wrong" might have to be assumed to be true in order to justify several of our other ethical beliefs, such as "torturing people for fun is wrong."⁵⁷

Coherence theorists sound like they endorse what I have described as "common sense" because they agree that we need our beliefs to cohere with our observations and introspective evidence. However, there are two differences between common sense and coherence. One, common sense assumptions can be rationally permissible as long as there are no overriding reasons to reject them, but coherence generally demands that a belief be justified through evidence of some sort. Two, common sense assumptions could admit that some beliefs are self-evident, or something a lot like being self-evident. Some beliefs are very plausible whether or not we have additional justification for them in the form of coherence, introspective evidence, or observation.

One reason that coherence alone might have to take a back seat to common sense is that it might be unable to appropriately decide which of two contradictory beliefs to reject. Only one belief might need to be rejected and we should reject whatever belief is less plausible. How do we know if a belief is plausible? We can consider our observations, introspective evidence, and/or self-evidence. In particular, coherence theorists don't accept self-evidence. Consider the following three beliefs:

1. $1+1=2$
2. $2+2=3$
3. $4+4=6$

" $1+1=2$ " contradicts the other two beliefs. However, " $2+2=3$ " might cohere with " $4+4=6$." Someone who had more beliefs that cohere with " $2+2=3$ " might use coherence to reject that " $1+1=2$." Coherence in

⁵⁷ If "all things equal, causing pain is wrong" is false, then we might be lead to the absurdity that we would have to admit that other strong ethical beliefs, such as "torturing people for fun is wrong," would no longer be justified.

this situation might not be a good way to decide which belief to reject. Instead, self-evidence might be more appropriate. The belief that "1+1=2" is one we are certain is true even if we hold beliefs that contradict with it. All beliefs that contradict with such a self-evident truth should be rejected.

Is common sense intuition reliable? Some people's common sense differs from others', just like coherence intuition. In that case two different people might disagree about what is "intuitively true," and they both might be permissibly justified to have their belief. I admit that common sense does not indicate absolute reliability. However, an expert's common sense (or good sense) is relatively reliable. The results from common sense intuition are worth further investigation, just like coherence intuition. The results of common sense intuition must be defended, and some assumptions will prove to be much more reliable than others.

2. Objections to Intuition

Here are different arguments against intuition's reliability:

1. Intuition is just popular opinion.
2. Intuition is mysterious.
3. Different people have different intuitions.
4. Intuition can't be justified without vicious circularity.

Intuition is just popular opinion.

Either some people misunderstand intuition as being nothing more than "popular opinion," or we could find out that intuition really is nothing more than popular opinion. We didn't want intuition to just be popular opinion, but maybe it is anyway.

The main reply to this objection is to merely take another look at the kinds of intuition that I have already discussed: Intuition can refer to self-evidence, instincts, introspection, coherence, or common sense.

Once we talk about these forms of evidence rather than "intuition," it is pretty clear that we aren't just talking about popular opinion. Coherence might be a lot like "popular opinion" for many people, but coherence for an expert is a lot more sophisticated than the coherence for everyone else.

A philosopher might reject self-evidence entirely, but whatever is happening instead of self-evidence is a very reliable kind of evidence. Intuitions are not infallible, but the results warrant further investigation.

Intuition is mysterious.

The charge that intuition is mysterious is mainly a charge against self-evidence or innate ideas.⁵⁸ I have four replies against this objection.

First, whatever we believe to be "self-evident" tends to be very plausible.

Second, there are at least four other kinds of intuition other than self-evidence, which are not mysterious.

Third, it is true that intuitions tend to be difficult to verbalize, but this merely indicates that a kind of unconscious practical wisdom is at work. Not all justified beliefs are easy to explicitly defend to other people. That doesn't in itself prove that such beliefs are unreliable.

Fourth, intuition (even of self-evidence) is not necessarily evidence of "innate ideas," which was Descartes's explanation for some intuitive knowledge. Descartes believed that innate ideas are God-given concepts or truths, such as the concept of perfection. I agree that innate ideas might not exist. However, intuitions can be quite reliable with or without innate ideas.

⁵⁸ Innate ideas were discussed by Rene Descartes in his Meditations. They are truths we know as soon as we are born.

Different people have different intuitions.

I already admitted that different people have different intuitions. This is especially true of coherence intuition, in which experts have more reliable intuition than the rest of us. Disagreement concerning intuition can prove that intuitions are fallible, and I would admit that even the intuition of experts is fallible. However, intuition is reliable enough to be worth further investigation. When it comes to science we can test the intuitions through observation. (More specifically, using a hypothesis and experiment.) When it comes to ethics we might make use of introspective evidence and observations. For example, our experience of pain gives us important evidence that "all things equal, it is wrong to cause pain."

Richard Joyce argues that people's actual intuitions have not been sufficiently examined by scientists, and such intuitions are merely anthropological facts.⁵⁹ This might be true of instinctual intuitions, which are probably reliable to some extent, but there are kinds of intuition that are even more reliable. In particular, expert coherence intuitions are more relevant than the intuitions of other people. Why would a philosopher need to know which intuitive beliefs are most common? Intuition isn't meant to provide us with an *ad populum* argument.⁶⁰ Although knowledge of instinctual beliefs could be somewhat relevant, the coherence intuitions of experts tends to be much more relevant than the opinions of everyone else.

Intuition can't be justified without vicious circularity.

In "The Problem of Intuition" Stephen Hales argues that intuition can't be justified without the use of intuition.⁶¹ Therefore, intuition

59 Joyce, Richard. "Is either moral realism or moral anti-realism more intuitive than the other?" Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 19 Jan. 2010. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-anti-realism/moral-realism-intuitive.html>>.

60 An *ad populum* argument attempts to prove something just because most people believe it. Of course, such an argument can prove that many people believe something. However, it can't prove much of anything else.

61 Hales, Stephen. "The Problem of Intuition." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, volume 37, number 2, 2000. 135-147. (Bloomsberg University of Pennsylvania. 18 Jan. 2010.

can't be justified without vicious circularity. I believe that he means "intuition of self-evidence" by the word "intuition," so his argument appears to be saying that self-evidence can't be justified without self-evidence. I am not committed to the existence of self-evidence, but I will give three responses to his objection of circularity:

1. If we accept that there are self-evident truths, then haven't we already avoided circularity? We don't need to justify a self-evident truth because it is self-evident. They are justified just by understanding them. Hales argues that self-evidence must be axiomatic or it's entirely unjustified. Perhaps I just don't understand his argument, but I thought the whole point of self-evidence was that they are justified for free.
2. I am not convinced that we do need intuitions of self-evidence in order to justify the use of intuitions of self-evidence. There are other kinds of intuition other than the self-evident variety, and those intuitions could justify self-evidence.
3. Intuitions other than the self-evident variety can be verbalized in terms of observations, introspection, coherence, instincts, and common sense. Therefore, we might find a way to justify self-evidence in terms of these other forms of justification. For example, common sense could dictate that we could assume that intuition is a reliable form of justification as long as we can defend such an assumption. Rejecting self-evidence might lead to the absurdity of rejecting logic. If that is the case, then self-evidence is necessary for every kind of justification possible and we would have to reject the possibility of knowledge despite the fact that we know at least some of our beliefs are true.

I could be wrong about what he means by "intuition." If he literally means that every kind of intuition can't be justified without intuition, then I can still reject his argument because "intuition" can mean different things. There's nothing viciously circular about justifying one kind of evidence with another kind of evidence. For example, we might know that "murder is wrong" based on a coherence justification.

<<http://departments.bloomu.edu/philosophy/pages/content/hales/articles/intuition.html>>.)

The problem of intuition stated here appears to actually describe the huge problem of epistemology in general:

How can we know what knowledge is? Any answer to this question seems to lead to vicious circularity. (Wait. Are you sure you know that's what knowledge is?) For example, if all knowledge is empirical, then how can we justify that? Do we observe that all knowledge is based on observation? That would be circular reasoning. (Assuming observation is reliable, we can observe that it exists.) You get the idea.

There are three ways we can try to know what knowledge is:

1. Use an infinite regress. We can justify what knowledge is, and justify that justification, and justify that, and so on.
2. Use circular reasoning. We know that knowledge is X, and we know X is knowledge because it is X.
3. Use a self-evident truth.

Of these options, the third appears best given our current options, but philosophers have tried all three possibilities, which corresponds to infinitism, coherentism, and foundationalism. Hales decides that we must either be foundationalists or reject intuition (and therefore most or all of philosophy), but we should consider all three of these theories:

Infinitism: Justifications can be justified indefinitely. We will never be done justifying beliefs because every justification can also be justified.⁶² It might be permissibly rational to believe something as long as it is currently the best option available. We can start off with assumptions without justifications, and we only reject our beliefs when they are "falsified" (or at least implausible considering that there are better alternatives.) Some assumptions are necessary, but we can reject assumptions when they become unnecessary. This view of epistemology is similar to [Karl Popper](#)'s.⁶³ Some people say that this view requires an infinite regress, but that would require us to accept

⁶² This is the result I expected philosophers to accept when I first learned about philosophy, and I don't think it's entirely implausible.

that no belief is justified unless the justification is also justified. Some beliefs can be rationally held without a justification. The common sense theory of knowledge might not fully justify absolute knowledge because all justifications might rely on assumptions.

Coherentism: Beliefs are justified depending on how important they are for coherence. This view allows circularity. Some beliefs are justified by other beliefs, and our whole worldview as a whole can then be used to justify our beliefs. Coherence is circular because every belief can be considered to be a partial justification for every other belief it coheres with. We could then imagine that A justifies B, B justifies C, and C justifies A. Coherence avoids an infinite regress because only a set of coherent beliefs is necessary to have a maximally justified belief. The coherence theory of knowledge doesn't justify absolute knowledge because beliefs are not completely proven to be true.

Foundationalism: Some beliefs are self-evident. We avoid circularity because we just know that something is true without any other justification required. We also avoid the problem of requiring an infinite regress because self-evident truths stop our need to justify justifications.

Hales seems to assume that all beliefs must be justified, but we can be rational by holding some nonjustified beliefs. There is a difference between beliefs that are rationally permissible and beliefs that are justified. Beliefs are rationally permissible as long as they aren't incoherent (and as long as there aren't overriding reasons to reject them). Beliefs are justified when we have evidence that they are true (and as long as there aren't overriding reasons to reject them). Absolute knowledge might require foundationalism, but we might live our lives without absolute knowledge. Instead, we could just admit that epistemological justification is possible, some beliefs are more justified than others, and some beliefs are very accurate. (Science has proven that it can be very reliable despite the fact that it is always

63 Thornton, Stephen. "Karl Popper" Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 19 Jan. 2010.
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/popper/>>.

willing to improve.) Once absolute knowledge is rejected, coherentism and infinitism will be acceptable theories of knowledge.

Conclusion

When we give intuitive evidence, we generally show that a theory of belief is absurd based on our intuitions, or that we must agree to a theory or belief because rejecting the theory or belief would be absurd. Such absurdity is based on our unconscious understanding of various kinds of justification; such as self-evidence, instincts, introspection, coherence, and common sense.

These five sorts of intuition are not infallible, but they can indicate a very strong justification that something is true. (This seems especially true for introspective evidence and self-evidence.) Although our intuitions are difficult to verbalize, sometimes we can verbalize them in order to provide an explicit justification for our intuitive beliefs. One of the least reliable forms of justification might be common sense intuition, but even common sense assumptions are (at least) rationally permissible (unless we have an overriding justification to reject them).

The use of intuition to provide us with self-evidence might allow us to attain absolute knowledge, but philosophers don't have to accept that absolute knowledge is possible. The other forms of intuition only provide us with at least enough justification to warrant further investigation. Sometimes intuition can shift the burden of proof by providing one possibility with more evidence than the alternatives.

10. Objections Part 3: Argument From Queerness

If morality is irreducible to nonmoral facts, it might still be part of the materialist worldview like any other domain, but we would merely be unable to fully describe morality in nonmoral terms. (To say that moral facts are reducible is to say that we can find out that moral facts “are really something else.”) I have argued that morality must be irreducible, but this is a substantial metaphysical claim. Such a metaphysical claim must be especially justified due to Occam's Razor

—we must not multiply entities beyond necessity.⁶⁴ (Or, more specifically, we shouldn't multiply irreducible domains of reality beyond necessity.) I will present three objections against the claim that morality is irreducible, then I will attempt to reply to those objections in order to show them to be unconvincing. In particular I want to show that morality's irreducibility is just as justified as psychology's irreducibility, that we have reason to believe psychology is irreducible, and that we have more reason to accept that morality is irreducible than to reject it.

This discussion is divided into the following sections:

1. I will explain J. L. Mackie's argument from queerness.
2. I will review relevant arguments I have made in the past. In particular, I will touch upon my argument for moral realism and my past arguments for the claim that morality is irreducible.
3. I will relate my past arguments to the argument from queerness.
4. I will discuss the ontological objections against morality being irreducible.

⁶⁴ Baker, Alan. "Simplicity." Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 19 Jan. 2010.
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/simplicity/>>.

1. Mackie's Argument from Queerness

The main argument against the irreducibility of morality is Mackie's argument from queerness, which states that our moral experiences require us to accept substantial metaphysical claims without an appropriate justification. Therefore, we should think of our moral experiences as being delusional. Mackie's argument can be summarized as the following:

1. Moral experience requires substantial metaphysical claims.
2. Substantial metaphysical claims should be rejected unless they are appropriately justified.
3. Ethical metaphysical claims are not appropriately justified.
4. Therefore, we should reject ethical metaphysical claims.

According to the argument for queerness, Occam's razor forces us to reject moral realism, and the argument from queerness can be reformulated to apply whenever we make any unjustified substantial claim. It is more plausible that I forgot where I put my keys than the possibility that a ghost moved it; it is more plausible that a person has a hallucination than that a person sees a unicorn; and it is more plausible that I accidentally deleted a computer file than that someone broke into my house to delete it.

I agree that moral realism requires intrinsic values, and intrinsic values are part of an irreducible domain. We can't reduce intrinsic values to nonmoral facts of psychology or physics. Mackie might argue that such an "irreducible domain" is an insufficiently justified substantial metaphysical claim. However, I will defend that such a metaphysical claim is sufficiently justified.

2. Review: My Past Arguments

In [An Argument for Moral Realism](#) I argue that we experience that pain is bad, and our experiences and understanding of pain leads us to

the conclusion that it has intrinsic disvalue.⁶⁵ I then defend these premises from various objections. One objection to pain's intrinsic disvalue is that our moral experience can't be philosophically analyzed, but this objection would force us to admit that we can't philosophically assess the existence of observation. We know we observe things by directly experiencing our observations.

I defended the view that introspection can be reliable by relating it to introspection involving philosophy of mind in my essay on [The Is/Ought Gap](#).⁶⁶ In particular, my argument can be found in the following two sections:

1. How could a materialist reject the materialistic is/ought gap?
2. The argument for a materialistic is/ought gap.

It is here that I argued that introspection is a reliable source of information concerning the philosophy of mind because we have direct experience of mental phenomena. This experience provides us with some reason to believe that mental phenomena is irreducible. It is impossible to understand the experience of green through non-mental descriptive facts. This kind of irreducibility is a substantial metaphysical claim, but it is justified. Additionally, this kind of irreducibility isn't metaphysically illegitimate considering that it is compatible with materialism. Although psychology and morality may be irreducible metaphysical domains, they can still be part of the same reality as everything else.

3. The Problem: An Earlier Reply to Mackie

My defense of moral introspection implies an objection against the argument from queerness. In particular, premise 3 of the above version of the argument from queerness is implausible because *we can justify our ethical metaphysical claims*. Some metaphysical claims in ethics are justified, just like metaphysical claims in philosophy of mind are

⁶⁵ This essay was reprinted as chapter 7 of this book.

⁶⁶ This essay was reprinted as chapter 8 of this book.

justified. Although I have given us some reason to reject the argument from queerness, there is much more to be said on the subject. Many people will still be unconvinced that we have good reason to believe that ethics is an irreducible metaphysical domain. I will consider three new objections to my argument that morality is irreducible in the next section.

4. Ontological Objections to Irreducible Morality

I will consider the following three reasons to reject the belief that morality is irreducible:

First, moral metaphysics might be disanalogous to psychological metaphysics. In particular, we experience some psychological facts directly. I will argue that this objection is unconvincing because we can experience some moral facts directly.

Second, it can be debated whether or not psychology is irreducible. Some philosophers are identity theorists and believe that brain activity is identical to mental states. I will argue that this objection is unconvincing because some mental states (probably) can't be understood through a description of non-psychological facts.

Third, it isn't clear that we have more reason to accept morality's irreducibility than to reject it. In particular, we shouldn't accept substantial metaphysical claims without *substantial* evidence, and perhaps we don't have substantial evidence. I will argue that this objection is unconvincing because we can justify the fact that morality is irreducible in a very similar way to how we can justify other substantial metaphysical claims.

Is ontological moral philosophy analogous with mental philosophy?

The objection: One could argue that metaphysical claims of psychology can easily be justified through introspection because we

can examine our direct experience of psychology. For example, we know what it is like to experience the color green because we have actually done so. To experience it is to have direct access to part of reality. That part of reality is the psychological domain. We can say that the psychological domain is metaphysically irreducible in the sense that non-psychological descriptions can never fully describe our experiences of psychology. No matter how many non-psychological facts are cited, you will never know what “the experience of the color green” is. However, we do not have a direct access to the moral domain. Therefore, we can’t know that the moral domain is irreducible.

My reply: We do have direct access to some moral claims because some moral claims are part of our psychological experience. To experience pain is enough to decide that pain is bad, and we realize other people feel pain in the same way, which is enough for us to realize that it’s a good idea to give someone an aspirin when they have a headache. The “badness” of pain is part of our experience of pain.

If we have direct access to moral facts through our experiences, then there is a new concern— isn’t the moral domain reducible to the psychological domain? It is quite possible that the moral domain is part of psychology, but if it is, then it is an irreducible domain of psychology. What I claim is that moral facts are irreducible to nonmoral facts. Whether or not moral facts could be psychological facts wouldn’t be enough to prove that moral facts aren’t irreducible to nonmoral facts. Psychological facts are not by definition non-moral.

Is psychology irreducible?

Objection: I claim that we know moral facts are irreducible the same way we know psychological facts are irreducible, but some will argue that psychological facts are reducible to non-psychological facts. If our experiences can’t prove that psychology is irreducible, then they might also fail to prove that morality is irreducible. Some philosophers are identity theorists of the mind. They believe that mental states are

identical to various brain states. There can be various brain states that correspond to a single mental state. (This is to say that the mind is multiply realizable. A single mental state can exist from various brain states.)

We might find out that the mind is reducible to non-mental states just like water is reducible to H₂O. When you touch and taste water, you don't experience H₂O. When H₂O is described to you, you don't know anything about experiencing water, but that just means that our experience of water is deceptive. Perhaps our experience of pain is deceptive in the same way. Pain is really a brain state (or disjunctive chain of possible brain states), but we experience it in a strange way.

My reply: John Searle, Thomas Nagel, Saul Kripke, and Frank Jackson have done a good job at replying to this objection already.⁶⁷ They argue that our experience of the world is often illusory, but consciousness in particular is something that can't be an illusion. The actual experiences we have can't be an illusion insofar as we describe nothing more than the experience itself. Pain, for example, is just an experience. To have a hallucination of pain is the same thing as a real pain. In a similar way we can't accept that consciousness as a whole is a hallucination. If it was, who would be having it? Hallucinations require hallucinators.

At this point I would like to provide two additional arguments for the reliability of our introspective evidence: One, we know our experiences exist because we have direct access to them. Introspection is reliable when it gives us direct access. Two, the feeling (or qualia) of the experience includes real properties of something that exists, even if that something that exists is nothing other than our mental events.⁶⁸ We have direct access to the properties of our experiences. The fact that some introspective evidence is reliable for these two arguments should give us reason to consider the possibility that it might also give us reliable evidence that some psychological facts are irreducible.

67 Searle, John. The Rediscovery of the Mind. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992. 116-118

68 "Qualia" refers to the subjective experience involved with various mental events from the first person perspective.

In conclusion, we should accept that a mental state, such as “the experience of pain,” is an ontologically real state, and we can’t intuitively understand the experience of pain to “really be something else,” but some overriding reason might be presented that forces us to accept pain as being reducible. In the same way the “badness of pain” is part of our pain experience and likewise must be accepted as a real state, can only be intuitively understood as being irreducible, but an overriding reason may someday be presented to force us to reject it as being irreducible. We currently have no overriding reason to reject the irreducibility of psychology or morality, so the burden of proof has been shifted to those who believe such domains to be reducible.

Do we have sufficient reason to accept morality to be irreducible?

Objection: It could be argued that we still don’t have better reason to accept that morality is irreducible than the opposite. Although we can justify the fact that morality is irreducible, it isn’t clear if the justification is sufficient. We shouldn’t accept a claim with more metaphysical implications than necessary, and it could be objected that “it isn’t necessary to accept that morality is irreducible.” Consider the following:

1. My keys aren’t where I left them.
2. I didn’t move my keys.
3. No other human or animal moved my keys.
4. Therefore, a ghost moved my keys.

Although this argument is absurd, it can be justified to some extent. We might then wonder—is the justification that morality is irreducible insufficient similar to how this argument for a ghost is insufficient? This argument provides a justification for the belief that a ghost moved my keys. All of the premises can be justified. Our memory is a pretty reliable source of knowledge and I remember leaving my keys somewhere. I also remember not moving them, and I can have good

reason to believe that no humans or mammals were around. Perhaps I am the only person around for 10 minutes before I realize my keys aren't where I left them. The problem is that we need a stronger justification in order to accept such a claim with so many metaphysical implications. We can't accept new kinds of entities unless it is truly the most justified possibility. It is more likely that one of the premises is false than that the conclusion is true. In particular, our memory is not reliable enough to prove the existence of ghosts. Sometimes our mind plays tricks on itself and we put our keys somewhere other than where we remember putting them. Although it is also more likely that an illusionist is playing a trick on me than the possibility that ghosts exist, it is even more likely that my mind is playing a trick on itself. (Notice that we don't have to know for sure which premise is false to know that the conclusion is unacceptable.⁶⁹)

My reply: The objection is unconvincing because we have some reason to believe that the irreducibility of morality could be the best explanation of our moral experience. Consider these three arguments for substantial metaphysical claims:

Argument 1

1. We have observations.
2. Having observations are impossible without having psychological experiences.
3. Therefore, psychological experiences exist.

Argument 2

1. My experience of seeing a television is best explained by a television actually existing.
2. Therefore, it is much more plausible that a television exists than otherwise.

⁶⁹ If a valid argument has true premises, then the conclusion must be true. Therefore, we must know that premise of a valid argument could be false in order to doubt the conclusion.

Argument 3

1. We experience the notion of “bad” through moral experience.
2. It is impossible to understand the fact that something is bad given a description of nonmoral facts.
3. Therefore, moral facts are irreducible.

Argument 1 and 2 are sufficiently justified, and the reason that they are sufficiently justified is that we have no overriding reason to reject them, and they reflect the best possible explanation for a phenomena. Argument 1 is about as justified as any metaphysical argument can be because the best explanation for being able to observe things is to have psychological experiences. Argument 2 is very plausible. It might be that I am hallucinating that a television exists, but this would be very unusual. The only reason to think someone is hallucinating is when there are overriding reasons to believe their experience to be deceptive. So, the best reason to think that someone is seeing a television is because there really is a television.

Argument 3 is *sufficiently* justified for the same reason Argument 1 and 2 are justified. It is also the best explanation of our experience, and we have no overriding reason to doubt it. How do we know it is the best explanation for our experience? Because we can't intuitively accept that nonmoral facts could somehow give us moral facts. (Perhaps someday it will be proven that we can get moral facts from nonmoral facts, but we have no reason to believe it yet.)

What reasons do we have to doubt Argument 3?

1. If it is possible to understand moral facts from a description of nonmoral facts.
2. If introspective evidence is unreliable.
3. If nothing could possibly be irreducible.

Is it possible to understand moral facts from a description of nonmoral facts?

I have already given some reason to believe we can't understand moral facts from a description of nonmoral facts. In particular, it is very intuitive. We can't see how important something is just by looking at atoms flying around, just by looking at the brain, or even by looking at nonmoral psychological states.

The possibility of understanding moral facts from a description of nonmoral facts is the best strategy to prove that moral facts are reducible, but no argument of this sort has been convincing. For example, it has been proposed that "maximizing pleasure" means the same thing as "good." However, pleasure doesn't seem to be good by definition. Why? Because there is a kind of importance involved with morality. "Maximizes pleasure" doesn't impress upon us any sort of importance. It might be that maximizing pleasure is always important, but understanding the word "importance" doesn't guarantee an understanding of the word "pleasure." Additionally, there might be things that are important other than pleasure. (I already argued that pain is important.)

If "maximizing pleasure" did mean the same thing as "good," then the reason we find maximizing pleasure to be important is because we desire it. However, there is something important about pain other than just the desire to avoid it. The desire to avoid pain isn't something we can choose, and it isn't something that happens just because of our instincts. We desire to avoid pain because of how it feels.

Is introspective evidence unreliable?

I have already discussed why introspective evidence is reliable. (For example, we can sufficiently justify the fact that we have observations through our psychological experiences.)

Is it impossible for something to be irreducible?

I see no reason to accept that “nothing could possibly be irreducible.” Someone could argue that we have good reason to believe nothing could be irreducible, but I have no idea what that reason would be.

Conclusion

I have argued here and elsewhere that moral facts are irreducible, and this possibility is more plausible than its alternative. We intuitively accept that no description of nonmoral facts will be sufficient to understand a moral fact. We can justify ethical metaphysics in the same way that we can justify psychological metaphysics. Even if we aren't sure whether or not introspective evidence can sufficiently justify that moral facts are irreducible, we can be sure that introspective evidence can be reliable, and introspection is therefore worthy of consideration. Finally, there are no overriding reasons to reject that moral facts are irreducible.

11. Objections Part 4: Moral Beliefs Can't Motivate

There is evidence that moral values involve desires. When we say "human life has intrinsic value," we expect a desire to promote human life and a pro-attitude towards human life. The connection between moral beliefs and desires is not clear, and some people have argued that morality is *only* about desires. If morality is only about desires, then we should reject the existence of intrinsic values because our intrinsic value beliefs would merely state our desires. These concerns reflect Humean psychology, which states that there are beliefs and desires, and beliefs can't motivate. [Mark Platts](#), John Searle, and others have disputed Humean psychology. Although not all philosophers agree with Humean psychology, I will not question it here. Instead, I will attempt to prove that Humean psychology is compatible with moral realism.

I will explain Humean psychology, four Humean objections against moral realism, and my reply to those objections. The Humean objections to moral realism that I will discuss are the following:

1. Intrinsic values don't exist because they can't motivate.
2. Moral experience indicates that moral values are desires.
3. Even if there are intrinsic values, they still can't motivate.
4. We can't reason about moral values.

1. Humean Psychology

Humean psychology basically says that beliefs and desires are totally different kinds of things. The difference between beliefs and desires reflects Hume's gap between "ought" and "is" (prescriptive and descriptive facts). What we desire is prescriptive and what we believe is descriptive.

According to Humean psychology, all reasoning is means-ends reasoning. A belief can help you know how to best satisfy a desire. You can desire an apple, and the belief that an apple is on the table will give me a reason to pick up the apple. All reasoning will be like this. We can't reason about which desires to accept or which desires to reject. Desires aren't true or false.

Of course, we can reason about *which desires we really have*. Sometimes we are wrong about which desires we have. Some pain in the stomach might be hunger. Sometimes we might not know why our stomach hurts. We will desire to alleviate the pain in our stomach and eating food would then be the appropriate means to achieve such an end, but it might take us a moment to figure out why our stomach hurts.

I have already discussed how anti-realists are interested in final ends. For a Humean, all our desires are actually final ends. A final end is something we find to be of importance without being useful. It's valued for its own sake. Whenever we have a desire, we must desire something for its own sake. To value something for any other reason would be just to value it in order to satisfy a desire.

Our desires must be "given." We can't decide on which desires we want, which desires we should have, or commit ourselves to having a desire. This is why Hume said, "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions" (Treatise, Book II, Section III).

2. Intrinsic values don't exist because they can't motivate.

Objection: Some philosophers have argued that what some believe to be intrinsic values just reflect their desires. The argument can be summarized as the following:

1. Our moral values reflect either beliefs or desires, but not both.
2. Our moral values are motivational.
3. Desires are motivational, but beliefs aren't.
4. Therefore, moral values reflect desires.
5. If moral values reflect desires, then they aren't intrinsic values.
6. Therefore, moral values aren't intrinsic values.

To say "pain is intrinsically bad" is to say "I desire people to avoid pain," or possibly "I desire myself to avoid pain." One reason to accept this is because moral values don't appear to be beliefs. Moral beliefs would be unable to motivate us, but moral values always reflect a pro-attitude and reflect a motivation. To say that murder is wrong is to communicate a motivation to eliminate murder. To say that pain has intrinsic disvalue communicates a motivation to avoid pain (and perhaps to help others avoid pain.)

My Reply: There are at least three ways to attack this argument. We can either reject premise 1, premise 2, or premise 3:

Rejecting Premise 1

It could be false that "our moral values reflect either beliefs or desires, but not both." Why not both? I don't know how this premise can be justified. It is a metaphysical premise about the nature of beliefs, desires, and moral values. I suggest that we have to admit that it is possible for a moral value to reflect *both a belief and a desire*. It is possible to find out that something is good, even if we already desire it.

Rejecting Premise 2

It could be false that "our moral values are motivational." Correlation doesn't indicate an identity. Sure, we might (almost) always have a desire that correlates with a moral value, but that fact doesn't prove that the moral value is a desire. It is possible that moral values are not in and of themselves motivational. Instead, the fact that we are motivated to promote intrinsic values could be a contingent fact about

human beings. In other words, we usually already have a desire for our moral values to be promoted.

How can we know if all values are motivational? I propose the following ways:

1. To identify values that would not be motivational.
2. To identify situations when values don't motivate.

Identifying values that would not be motivational – Consider what it would be like to find out something has intrinsic value that we have no interest in, such as rocks. Even if we somehow found out rocks had intrinsic value, we might be unable to care. Taking care of rocks is not something that humans are willing to do. It isn't surprising that we don't talk about values that we can't find motivational because these aren't of any interest to us.

Identifying situations when values don't motivate – Consider that we probably don't always desire what we believe to be good. Even if we found out that human life has intrinsic value, we might not be motivated to help people who would die without our help. Many people claim to value human life, but they don't donate most of their money to charities. It is reasonable to admit that sometimes we don't desire what we believe to be good because we have a degree of selfishness. To be selfish doesn't prove that we actually believe that we have more value than anyone else.

Rejecting Premise 3

It could be false that "desires can motivate, but beliefs can't," but I won't discuss this possibility because it would require us to reject Humeanism entirely.⁷⁰ Premise 3 will be justified if Humean psychology is justified.

⁷⁰ I don't expect anyone to be a Humean, but this discussion requires us to assume that Humeanism is true for the sake of argument. Why? Because I want to argue that Humeanism is compatible with moral realism. I have already referred to philosophers who reject Humeanism.

3. Moral experience indicates that moral values are desires.

I have already discussed some reason to deny that we experience moral values to be desires. When we experience pain, we experience that there is something bad about it. The belief that pain is bad is not the same thing as the desire to avoid pain. *We desire to avoid pain precisely because there is something bad about it.* We can then believe that pain is bad and simultaneously desire to avoid pain. We can believe pain has intrinsic value, and simultaneously have a desire to avoid pain.

There are at least one way a Humean might try to show that moral values are desires—A Humean could point out that our desires are like our moral values. There are two experiences that seem to indicate that desires are like moral values. One, we can't have conflicting moral values. Two, we can have genuine conflicting moral obligations.

Can desires conflict with our moral values?

A Humean would point out how absurd it would be for a person to sincerely say, "All things equal, murder and torture are wrong," but to want to be murdered or to experience pain. This could reflect that moral values are desires because desires can't conflict in this way, but desires can conflict with our beliefs. We can't desire something and its opposite at the same time without an overriding reason to do so. You can't desire pleasure but desire not to have that same pleasure simultaneously. It is also important to notice that desires can conflict with our beliefs: The fact that a mountain exists has nothing to do with whether or not I want it to exist. I can believe a mountain exists, but want it not to exist.

We could restate the argument as the following:

1. Moral values are either beliefs or desires, or both.
2. You can't desire x and not- x simultaneously.
3. You can't desire x and value not- x at the same time.
4. All beliefs are compatible with all desires. (It is possible to have any belief and any desire at the same time.)
5. Not all moral values are compatible with all desires.
6. Therefore, moral values don't reflect beliefs.
7. Therefore, moral values reflect desires.

Reply

The moral experience that desires can't conflict with moral values can be explained by a moral realist in at least two ways. First, it might be possible to desire something and its negation simultaneously. I will not discuss this possibility because it would require us to reject Humean psychology entirely. Second, we can argue that premise 3 is not sufficiently justified: Perhaps you can desire *not- x* and judge that *x is good* at the same time. Intrinsic values could merely correlate with our desires as a contingent fact of human beings. What I said earlier about how "it is possible that moral values are not in and of themselves motivational" can apply here as well. Knowing that pain is bad and desiring not to have pain are two different things and it's a contingent fact that the desire to avoid pain correlates with the fact that pain is intrinsically bad. (Additionally, it is possible that some intrinsic values won't correlate with our desires.)

Can we have genuine conflicting moral obligations?

Consider that we can't reject an obligation on the grounds that it conflicts with another obligation, as argued by [Bernard Williams](#) in "Ethical Consistency."⁷¹ Conflicting obligations are those that can't both be satisfied. Perhaps you have to go to school, but you also have to go to the hospital to see an injured friend. It might be impossible to do both. No matter which obligation you satisfy, you could appropriately still feel regret, and you might feel that you have to

⁷¹ Williams, Bernard, "Ethical Consistency," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp, vol. 39, 1965. 103-124.

"make it up" to whoever you wronged by your decision (if anyone.) We can then give the following argument to reject moral realism:

1. Moral obligations reflect either beliefs or desires.
2. When we have two conflicting beliefs, we have a good reason to reject one of them.
3. When we have two conflicting moral obligations, we don't have good reason to reject one of them.⁷²
4. So, moral obligations aren't beliefs.
5. Therefore, moral obligations are desires.

Reply

This experience can be explained by a moral realist in at least four ways. One, if there is only one intrinsic value, then our obligations might never actually conflict. This is the position of classical utilitarianism, which has already been defended by some philosophers. This answer basically states that regret doesn't reflect true moral beliefs when we do the right thing, but regret could reflect true moral beliefs when we do the wrong thing. If moral obligations never conflict, then premise 3 might be false because moral obligations might be able to reflect beliefs.

Two, the realist could admit that we can have two conflicting obligations nothing-else-considered: You might decide not to go to work because you need to spend time with a suicidal friend, for example. But all-things-considered, it might be better to spend time with your suicidal friend instead of go to work. If it was possible to do both (at some point in time), then you could have had an all-things-considered obligation to do both. So, we would just find out that you broke an all-things-considered obligation after all. The two obligations didn't have to conflict by necessity. (They didn't at some earlier point in time, so a wrong decision was made at some point.)

⁷² If you desire chocolate cake and to stay thin, you can't choose to reject one of these desires. You can rationally want both despite the fact that they could be mutually exclusive.

Williams would find option two and three to be dismissive of our experiences involving the fact that regret seems to make a lot of sense when we fail to live up to an obligation. Basically these replies deny that we have two conflicting obligations, so they can't explain why regret seems appropriate.

Williams also argued that such dismissive replies neglect the fact that we should *avoid getting into situations that give us two conflicting obligations*. If we can't have conflicting obligations, then we have no reason to avoid getting into situations that require us to break an obligation. For example, we could accept the duties of a 50 hour work load when we also have obligations to a sick mother we need to spend time with.

I am unconvinced by Williams's rebuttal that we need to avoid getting into situations that could give us conflicting obligations, and this somehow provides evidence that obligations aren't based on beliefs. If all things equal, we have an obligation to avoid such situations, then the moral realist would justifiably feel regret when he or she gets into such a situation due to negligence.

Three, if there are multiple intrinsic values, then our obligations could be expected to conflict. Let's say that pleasure has intrinsic value and pain has intrinsic disvalue. In that case eating chocolate will be good insofar as it gives us pleasure and bad insofar as it can contribute to health problems (and therefore pain) later on. We might feel regret for eating chocolate, even though it was good to get the pleasure; and we might also regret not eating it, even though it could contribute to pain later on. There might be no way to determine which course of action is all-things-considered best in this situation, so it could make sense to feel regret either way. However, it might not make sense to feel regret if we found out that we really made the right choice all-things-considered.

Four, obligations might involve both beliefs and desires. our desires can lead us to regret, so intrinsic values might have nothing to do with

regret. We might be able to reject an obligation in the form of a belief, but still be unable to reject the obligation in the form of a desire. For example, we might desire to go to work *and* spend time with a depressed friend, even when these obligations conflict. We might decide we have an all-things-considered obligation to spend time with our friend, but we will still regret not going to work. In this case we might simply desire to both go to work and spend time with a friend. The desire does not necessarily match the all-things-considered value judgment. We might desire many things, even if we can't satisfy them all. We might then feel regret concerning any of the desires that don't get satisfied.

4. Even if there are intrinsic values, they can't motivate.

This objection against realism can be summarized as the following:

1. If moral values reflect beliefs, then they can't motivate us.
2. However, the whole point of moral values is to motivate us.
3. Therefore, moral values don't reflect beliefs.

Reply

I disagree that the whole point of moral values is that they motivate us. We can know that pain is bad separately from the fact that we desire to avoid it. To repeat from earlier, the reason that we tend to discuss moral values when we desire them rather than intrinsic values we don't desire is that we are simply not interested in the possible moral value of rocks and so forth. In fact, our interest in morality might be limited to the intrinsic value of things that coincides with our desires. The intrinsic disvalue of pain coincides with our desire that people avoid pain.

It is quite possible for desires to coincide with intrinsic values, and it is quite possible that we can nurture desires that coincide with intrinsic values. For example, we can choose to nurture our desire for people to

avoid pain. We might also be able to do the opposite: Neglect our desire for people to avoid pain. Nurtured desires might become stronger and better at motivating us, and desires we neglect could become weaker. Therefore, intrinsic values themselves don't need to be motivational in order to have practical implications. Perhaps we can choose to indulge and "exercise" some desires and ignore others.

Of course, we do want to admit that morality needs to be *effective* in order to be worth discussing. If we found out that moral values don't influence the world at all, then we might suspect that they don't exist. I have two responses to this problem.

One, moral beliefs don't have to motivate us in order to be effective. Instead, we might be able to decide which of several desires to act on. We can desire to do something with greater intrinsic value and to do something selfish. We might be able to then decide to do whatever has greater intrinsic value.

Two, (as I said before) we might be able to change the motivational impact our desires have on us by neglecting them or nurturing them. For example, a drug addict can rid themselves of their addiction by neglecting it. Additionally, we might be able to develop our desire for others to avoid pain by developing close relationships with others.

5. We Can't Reason About Moral Values

If moral values merely reflect our desires, then it might be true by definition that we can't reason about moral values. Some philosophers, such as [A. J. Ayer](#), have argued that moral reasoning is only means-to-ends reasoning.⁷³ What food you "should eat" depends on nonmoral facts about health. It is the nonmoral beliefs we have that matters to a moral debate. We don't argue about what has intrinsic value.

Furthermore, it could be argued that some arguments concern a discovery about "what we really desire." We can be wrong about what

⁷³ Ayer, A. J. Language, Truth and Logic.

we really desire, so people can spend time trying to separate what they value as a means and what they value as an end in itself.

Reply

There are at least two ways that a moral realist could respond to this problem. One, a moral realist can agree that we don't reason about intrinsic values. If we can know intrinsic values through intuition, for example, then we might not have to provide much argument for them. Intrinsic values might be self-evident and require no argument. So, it is quite possible for a moral realist to admit that we don't argue about intrinsic values.

Two, a moral realist can meet the challenge by showing how we do argue about intrinsic values. My [argument for moral realism](#) might be one such example because it involves the argument that pain has intrinsic disvalue. What is most important about arguments is the evidence given. Intuition might therefore even be used in arguments. "We intuitively believe that x is an intrinsic value" could be considered to be an argument.

Additionally, arguments involving intrinsic value don't necessarily require any desires. The following two arguments don't seem to reflect our desires:

Argument 1

1. Imagine a world with nothing but plants.
2. Now imagine a world with plants and woolly mammoths.
3. We intuitively believe that the world with plants and woolly mammoths is better.

This argument is not concerning means-ends reasoning, it has nothing to do with our behavior, and it might have nothing to do with our desires. Therefore, the argument probably isn't about finding what we "really desire."

Argument 2

1. We experience that pain is bad, and we desire to avoid it for that reason.
2. Therefore, pain's disvalue isn't just our desire to avoid it.
3. Therefore, pain might have an intrinsic disvalue.

This argument makes it clear that pain does not have to be based on our desires, and it is not means-ends reasoning. So, it's certainly not about finding out "what we really desire." It is reasoning based on our psychological experiences. Moreover, it doesn't necessarily require practical implications. Sometimes we can realize pain is bad without feeling a desire to avoid small amounts of pain. Sometimes we might not feel a desire to avoid pain because we might just accept that we can't get rid of it.

The fact that we can argue about intrinsic values can also be treated as an objection that we experience moral values as merely reflecting desires. Such arguments are examples of moral experience that reflects beliefs. Consider other examples of moral experience—We experience moral mistakes, moral progress, and moral evidence.

Consider each of these elements:

Moral mistakes: Some people falsely believe that pain isn't bad. This belief can be corrected once they understand that we experience that pain is bad separable from our desires. Some people falsely believe that we have no reason to accept that mammoths have intrinsic value, but the above argument gives at least a small amount of evidence that mammoths do have intrinsic value. People commonly accept moral mistakes as part of their everyday experience.

Moral progress: Once we have corrected our mistaken beliefs, we can correct them. This is moral progress. People commonly accept moral progress as part of their moral experience.

Moral evidence: Intuition is evidence of moral facts. It might not be infallible, but it is worthy of consideration. People commonly accept moral evidence as part of their everyday experience.

Conclusion

Some philosophers believe that Humean psychology and moral experience has refuted moral realism. However, Humean psychology and the moral experiences examined here in no way refute moral realism. It is quite possible to be a moral realist and accept Humean psychology.

If Humean psychology is incompatible with moral realism, then we will have to agree that "moral values are motivational." Although we might experience that moral values are motivational, that could be just because we already had the desire. Our moral values can often (or always) correlate with our desires. All the objections to moral realism above require that we accept that our moral values are motivational. If our moral values aren't motivational, then we have no reason to think that they reflect desires.

12. Objections Part 5: The Persistence of Moral Disagreement

Many people believe that morality is little more than cultural traditions. One culture can say that revenge is right and another can say it's wrong. There is no "moral fact" of the matter. This view is known as "[cultural relativism](#)" and it's a form of "[moral anti-realism](#)," which is the view that moral truth consists in our opinions rather than reality itself. One important reason to endorse cultural relativism is Mackie's [Argument from Relativity](#), and the argument based on the "Persistence of Moral Disagreement" is a variation of the Argument from Relativity. It is claimed that even ideal people would disagree about moral facts, so [moral realism](#) is false. Everyone is entitled to their own moral opinions.

I will describe (1) how I understand the Persistence of Moral Disagreement and (2) my objections to it.

The argument from Moral Disagreement that I will discuss is based on the lecture by [Stephen Stich](#), which is available on Youtube. I understand the argument as the following:

1. The existence of fundamental moral disagreement is a good reason to reject moral realism.
2. Fundamental moral disagreement exists.
3. Therefore, we have a good reason to reject moral realism.

Fundamental moral disagreement is moral disagreement that can never be solved through reason and knowledge of non-moral facts. Sometimes non-moral facts can help us solve a moral disagreement. For example, we might think that eating fatty foods is good idea until we find out that it's unhealthy. Stich wants to argue that not all moral disagreements are like that. Sometimes we really disagree about the nature of morality itself.

I will examine both of these premises.

Premise 1: Fundamental moral disagreement is a good reason to reject moral realism.

Is fundamental moral disagreement a good reason to reject moral realism? Stich quotes moral realists who admit that fundamental moral disagreement could be a problem for moral realism. If we can't find a single instance of a highly justified moral belief that we can agree on, then I agree that moral realism is probably false.

My objections

Objection 1: It might be that fundamental moral disagreement would have to be pervasive in order for it to be a problem for moral realism. Why? Because moral realism is probably false unless at least some of our moral beliefs are based on reality. If we can find some moral beliefs that are highly justified based on reality, then fundamental moral disagreement won't prove that moral realism is false. Moral realism only claims that there is at least one moral fact. If we know one moral fact, then moral realism has already been established. A single instance of fundamental moral disagreement would certainly not convince us that our highly justified moral belief is false.

Objection 2: The moral realist philosophers cited by Stich admit that *some* fundamental moral disagreement *isn't* a problem:

- Richard Boyd: “[C]areful philosophical examination will reveal... that agreement on nonmoral issues would eliminate almost all disagreement about the sorts of issues which arise in ordinary moral practice.”
- David Brink: “It is incumbent on the moral realist... To claim that *most* moral disputes are resolvable at least in principle.”

- Michael Smith: “The notion of objectivity signifies the possibility of a *convergence* in moral views.”

None of these philosophers claimed that a single instance of fundamental moral disagreement would disprove moral realism.

Objection 3 Finally, one cause of moral disagreement could be based on a disagreement concerning moral facts. If we are to reject moral realism based on fundamental moral disagreement, then we would have to believe (a) that *all* moral opinions are open to fundamental moral disagreement and (b) we have no way to adequately justify any particular moral belief. It might be possible to justify a moral fact with other moral facts, which is perfectly compatible with fundamental moral disagreement.

Stitch's argument, the Persistence of Moral Disagreement, seems to assume that non-moral facts have to be able to be used to justify moral facts. That assumption is not necessarily true. My experience of pain as “bad” seems to be based on the moral fact itself. No non-moral fact seems to account for my moral belief, but that isn't to say that my belief is unjustified. (We justify psychological beliefs in a similar way. I can't justify my belief that I have thoughts based on non-mental facts alone. My experience of my mind itself is the main reason that I believe that I have a mind.)

Premise 2: Fundamental moral disagreement exists.

Stitch uses studies of everyday people to establish that moral intuitions and everyday moral beliefs are relative to our culture. These moral intuitions and beliefs supposedly can't be accounted for by non-moral beliefs. He admits that the examples of cultural moral differences are “disputable” and moral realists tend not to be convinced by them. Let's consider some examples he gives:

1. Some cultures believe that harming animals for entertainment is morally permissible, but others don't.
2. People from "honor cultures" believe that it is permissible use violence against those who insult us, but people not from honor cultures don't believe violence is as justified in such situations.
3. People from "collectivist cultures" believe that infidelity deserves punishment but people from "individualist cultures" don't feel as strongly about it.
4. People from "collectivist cultures" believe that blaming the wrong person for a crime to prevent a riot is more justified than people from "individualist cultures."

Stitch argues that our non-moral beliefs can't explain the moral differences. I agree. For example, the cultures that believe that harming animals for entertainment is morally permissible can simultaneously agree that animals can feel pain, just like us.

Stitch argues that the moral differences seem to be based on a culture's situation. For example, people from "honor cultures" lack of police protection and they live in a situation in which their private property could easily be stolen.

My objections

Objection 1: The examples presented in no way prove that fundamental moral disagreement is possible because *fundamental* moral disagreement is agreement in ideal situations. Many people's moral beliefs are poorly formed. The fact that people can thoughtlessly accept the moral beliefs of others isn't shocking. Many people seem to form at least some moral beliefs thoughtlessly, which is not an ideal condition.

Another problem with cultural moral beliefs is our tendency to over-generalize. An honor culture might *generally* have a good reason to take insults very seriously. Perhaps insults in those cultures tend to be a real threat. People might insult others to see if they can be pushed around

and manipulated. People from these cultures could generalize (and/or impulsively expect) insults to be a threat, but such generalization will be illegitimate in certain situations, such as situations that offer adequate police protection. (Vigilantism might also be appropriate when adequate police protection is unavailable.)

Objection 2: Almost everyone agrees that moral progress is possible, but moral progress implies that we can have highly justified moral beliefs based on reality. Although some “cultures” (used to) find slavery to be acceptable, just about everyone seems to *know* that such cultures are *wrong*. Abolition of slavery and moral education against the use of slavery is moral progress and implies that we corrected a false moral belief in favor of a true moral belief.

A better argument for fundamental moral disagreement might be based on what actual philosophers believe, but there does seem to be a great deal of progress and agreement among philosophers. Although most philosophers can't agree which “moral theory” is true, they seem to make progress and reach a great deal of agreement about what is morally right given specific situations. Most philosophers now agree that slavery is wrong, capital punishment is wrong, freedom of speech is good, gender equality is good, and homosexuality should be a right.

Objection 3: Stich needs to prove that fundamental moral disagreement is pervasive, but these examples do not prove that it is. It is inevitable that we can find moral agreement within each culture and disagreement across cultures considering that (a) people in a culture live in a similar environment and (b) people in other cultures live in a different environment. It isn't surprising that not only do people disagree about what's right and wrong, but people in a certain culture have the tendency to agree.

Additionally, moral disagreement is expected because (a) we are often uncertain about what's best, (b) many of our values are immeasurable, and (c) many values seem to be incommensurable.

Uncertainty – People are almost certain that killing people willy nilly is wrong, but they aren't quite as sure about how to appropriately respond to insults. Sometimes we have to respond to insults in the appropriate way to maintain the respect of others.

Immeasurable values – We don't know how much our happiness is “worth.” For example, we have to decide if going to school is worth it. School offers many benefits, but it can also require a lot of hard work and suffering. We have no way to know for sure that it's our “best option” despite the fact that it is generally a pretty good option. We simply can't measure the values involved. How much happiness will it give us and how much suffering will we have to endure? What other options do we have and how will they measure up?

Incommensurable values – We don't have a good way to measure one sort of value with another. For example, should we shoot a suffering animal to put it out of it's misery, or is a few more minutes of life worth more than the pain it will endure? Should we legalize euthanasia because human life can be worth less than the pain that will be experienced?

When we compare cultural differences we lack the ideal conditions that would be necessary to avoid uncertainty, the immeasurability of values, and the incommensurability of values. Of course, we might wonder if immeasurability and incommensurability of values will lead to fundamental disagreement (in ideal conditions). These factors seem like a pretty good reason to think that at least some fundamental moral disagreement would be inevitable, even if moral realism is true. If human life and suffering are both worth something, we might still have no way of knowing for sure which is more important.

Conclusion

The main problem with the argument “The Persistence of Moral Disagreement” is that *some* fundamental moral disagreement is not enough to have a good reason to reject moral realism. One single

justified moral belief can be enough to establish moral realism. If we proved that one moral belief is impossible to justify, that wouldn't disprove any other moral facts that have been established.

Moreover, pervasive moral disagreement might also be compatible with a highly justified form of moral realism because the ideal conditions that are could solve "fundamental moral disagreement" only include knowledge of non-moral facts. It might be that we can highly justify moral facts though our personal experience of moral reality.

Although I disagree that cultural moral differences are evidence for *fundamental* moral disagreement, I do agree that fundamental moral disagreement is a plausible view in at least some situations. However, some fundamental disagreement would be expected, even for a moral realist.

Conclusion

I have argued that moral realism is more plausible than anti-realism based on our moral experience and the inability of anti-realism to explain why pain is bad. I did not actually prove that moral realism is more plausible than anti-realism all things considered. There might be objections I didn't think of, and there are numerous arguments for and against moral realism that must be fully analyzed.

I considered four major objections that are used to undermine moral realism, and I attempted to show that these objections are not persuasive. If all of my arguments succeed and there are no plausible objections against moral realism, then I am correct that moral realism is more plausible than anti-realism. However, I doubt this essay is the final word in the moral realist debate. Even so, I hope to have shown that a reasonable and informed person can be a moral realist. Moral realism is not absurd, and there are good reasons to agree to it. Moreover, anti-realism is not an infallible position. Our moral experiences do not seem to make sense if moral anti-realism is true. In particular, an anti-realist can't explain why unselfish moral obligations (such as "don't murder") are inescapable, or why morality itself is important.

Appendix

Although my main focus has been on whether or not there is a meaning of life at all, I think I should say something about finding the meaning of life and knowing what it consists of. Therefore, I made two chapters for the appendix. The first is an attempt to tell you *how to identify intrinsic values* and find out what really matters. The second is a discussion about what great philosophers have had to say about possible intrinsic values. Pain, pleasure, happiness, virtue, good will, human existence, and consciousness all seem like they *could* have intrinsic value. I personally am not convinced that virtue or good will actually have intrinsic value, but these goods are still extremely important in another sense.

How to Find the Meaning of Life

I have suggested that several things seem to “really matter.” If something “really matters,” such as happiness, then we can live a meaningful life when we promote it (such as by making people happy). If something “really matters” then it has “intrinsic value.” I have argued that there is at least one meaning of life (one thing that has intrinsic disvalue)—Pain. However, pain is “bad.” If pain is the only thing that matters, then nothing could make life worth living. I don't want to suggest that pain is the only thing with intrinsic value, but we need to know how to find out what has intrinsic value.

We can provide evidence that X has intrinsic value based on the following evidence:

1. We experience X as good (or bad).
2. We know X is good (or bad) for everyone.
3. X's intrinsic value explains our moral experiences.
4. Our experience of X's value can't be fully accounted for as a "final end," usefulness, and/or a pre-existing desire.

I will attempt to explain each of these elements of evidence:

1. We experience X as good (or bad).

We experience pleasure as good and pain as bad. This fact is undeniable. So far we still can't say that pleasure or pain are intrinsic values because of several reasons. For example, we might just have a personal interest to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

2. We know X is good (or bad) for everyone.

It might be a universal fact that everyone experiences pleasure as good and pain is bad, but that's not the point I want to make. (It's possible that everyone lives within the same illusion.) Something with intrinsic value really matters even if you don't personally care about it. The value is real rather than illusory. If *you* want something intrinsically valuable, that valuable thing matters, even if *I* don't care about your interests. For example, your pain matters even if I don't care about you. Intrinsic value provides us with a *reason to care* about something (or to at least nurture our caring nature.)

We can know that something is good (or bad) for everyone in at least two ways. One, through induction (generalization). We know it's bad to feel pain and we know that other people can also feel pain (and therefore experience that their pain is bad) because we observe other people's behavior and biology. Their biology and behavior is similar to our own, so we have good reason to believe that they also feel pain and experience it as bad.

Two, attempts to explain why the valued thing isn't good (or bad) for everyone are less plausible than the alternative. It seems more plausible to think that pain is bad for everyone than to think that pain is only bad when we experience it. To say, "My pain is bad, but yours isn't" might make sense given various assumptions, but I see no reason to accept those assumptions.

3. X's intrinsic value explains our moral experiences.

One reason to choose one theory over another is that the theory is the best explanation of our experiences. This is not a controversial statement when it comes to science and the importance of observation to verifying scientific hypotheses. However, it is less clear that our moral experiences are relevant because morality might be nothing more than a human invention or psychological disorder.

I agree that our moral experiences don't provide *conclusive* proof that something has intrinsic value, but they do provide *some* evidence. If there are any intrinsic values and we somehow know about them, then it is reasonable to think that we already know a little about them.⁷⁴ Intrinsic values are a hypothesis in part to explain our actual moral experiences, and intrinsic values are in part meant to help us correct our false moral beliefs (and identify deceptive moral experiences).

How can we use moral experiences to help us justify the belief in an intrinsic value? Consider the following. We know that "all things equal, it's wrong to give people pain." This is evidence that pain is intrinsically bad insofar as pain's intrinsic disvalue explains our belief that it's wrong to cause pain willy nilly. It is possible that our belief that it's wrong to cause pain willy nilly is false, but that would require us to reject just about everything we think we know about morality.

⁷⁴ There is something strange about the claim that we don't know anything about morality until philosophers come up with a theory about it. If intrinsic values exist, then it seems reasonable that many of our moral beliefs are caused by the reality of intrinsic values similar to how my experience of a table is caused (in part) by the reality of the table.

Our belief that *it's wrong to cause pain willy nilly* is just about as certain as moral beliefs get.

To repeat, the belief that *it's wrong to cause pain willy nilly* does not by itself prove that pain is intrinsically bad. There might be a better explanation for this moral judgment, but such an intuitively appropriate judgment is something we want our moral theories to be able to explain.

4. Our experience of X's value can't be fully accounted for as a “final end,” usefulness, and/or a pre-existing desire.

We often say that something is good or bad because it is useful, a psychologically satisfying goal (a final end), or desired. If something is only good for one of these reasons, then we aren't talking about intrinsic value.

Usefulness – We don't say pleasure is good because it's useful. Sometimes pain is the opposite of useful and tempts us to over-indulge in unhealthy behavior.

Final ends – Although intrinsic values tend to be goals we find to be worthy of promoting for their own sake (final ends), we don't understand pleasure to be merely satisfying in this way. Instead, we understand that pleasure is good because it feels good. A final end could be valued due to delusion, but pleasure seems to be valued for a good reason.

Desired – If something is valued merely because it is desired, then we have no reason to think it is really good. Money can be desired for its own sake, but money isn't “really good.” To desire money in this way seems delusional. However, pleasure is not valued in this way. Instead, pleasure is valued because it feels good.

Conclusion

Some people seem to think that dozens of things have intrinsic value, and this doesn't help us build a plausible view of intrinsic value. Even G.E. Moore was overly-liberal with identifying intrinsic values (and suggested that books have intrinsic value). A healthy dose of skepticism is required to try to best identify intrinsic values, and the four criteria mentioned in this essay seem to allow us to provide plausible evidence of intrinsic values. Although I argued that pain has a great deal of evidence of having intrinsic disvalue, it is possible that my evidence is insufficient. We could use the criteria here to find out that nothing has intrinsic value after all.

What is the Meaning of Life?

“The meaning of life” actually refers to various intrinsic values—various values that “really matter.” To live a meaningful life is to attain and promote intrinsic goods. I have argued that at least one intrinsic value exists, but I believe that there are more. Let's consider what philosophers believe to have intrinsic value:

1. Pain
2. Pleasure
3. Happiness
4. Virtue
5. Good will
6. Human existence
7. Consciousness

1. Pain

I have already argued that pain has intrinsic disvalue, and other philosophers agree, such as Epicurus and John Stuart Mill. Zimmerman gives evidence that even Socrates believed that pain is intrinsically bad. “At one point Socrates says that the only reason why the pleasures of food and drink and sex seem to be evil is that they result in pain and deprive us of future pleasures.”⁷⁵ If anything has intrinsic disvalue, then it is pretty undeniable that pain has it. We feel that pain is bad and we know other people feel pain in a similar way that we do.

⁷⁵ Zimmerman, Michael J. “Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Value” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 14 Jan. 2010. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-intrinsic-extrinsic/index.html>>.

“Pain” isn't just a physical feeling. It's every sort of emotional pain and suffering. Discovering someone we love died can be more painful than a great deal of physical pain.

2. Pleasure

If pain has intrinsic disvalue, then it's not a stretch of the imagination to think pleasure has intrinsic value. The same philosophers who believe that pain is intrinsically bad also believe pleasure is intrinsically good. We experience that pain is bad and pleasure is good and we know other people do as well.

“Pleasure” isn't just a physical feeling, like pleasure from eating food or having sex. It can also refer to the emotional delight and enjoyment that comes with our personal success, spending time with friends, and so on.

3. Happiness

Many philosophers equate “happiness” with “pleasure,” but there is a lot more to be said about happiness. It's much like joy and delight, but it doesn't necessarily refer only to “momentary” feeling. It seems to refer more to a consistent sort of state of mind or existence. To be happy isn't just to feel good that moment, but to constantly feel that you have a fulfilling life, even when you are currently in pain. Momentary pain is not enough to invalidate our sense of having a good life.

Happiness as I discuss it here does seem to be close enough to pleasure to also be “experienced as good,” so it is a good candidate for having intrinsic value. The opposite of happiness could be depression, which seems intrinsically bad.

4. Virtue

I'm not sure if many great philosophers thought that virtue has intrinsic value, but it is often mentioned as being of the utmost importance. The Stoics are probably the best example of a philosophical group that might think virtue has intrinsic value because they often said that "nothing is good except virtue, and nothing is bad except vice."

I am not convinced that virtue as such is an intrinsic value. I believe virtue is best defined as "being willing and able to do good." This is certainly of the utmost importance because it is so helpful to doing good things. However, it isn't clear that virtue is worth having just for its own sake.

5. Good will

Immanuel Kant defines "good will" as the kind of force that can put practical reason into action as a separate force from desire. It sounds like he believes that good will has intrinsic value, but Michael Zimmerman cautions us to be careful when interpreting Kant's understanding of value (ibid). Certainly good will could be of the utmost importance, but that might be only because it enables us to do what is right.

6. Human Existence

Although one of the most important values we have is human existence, the greatest philosophers tend not to list this as an intrinsic value. Friedrich Nietzsche and Kant both discuss the high importance of human life, but it isn't clear that they believe it to have intrinsic value.

It is difficult to justify the value of human existence apart from intuition because it isn't clear that we can experience our existence as such. We can experience *what it is like* to exist, but we can't experience *existence itself* as good.

7. Consciousness

The intrinsic value of consciousness seems like a reasonable alternative to mere "human existence." First, human existence without consciousness doesn't seem to have any value. Second, animals with consciousness also seem to have intrinsic value. Third, it seems possible to rate the quality of consciousness. A low quality of consciousness might be unintelligent and small-minded. Some fish probably would fit into having a low quality of consciousness.

A high quality of consciousness seems to be the consciousness of people, great apes, elephants, and dolphins.

John Stuart Mill said, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." He thought that this intuitive statement was evidence that "intellectual pleasure" is better than physical pleasure. However, it might actually be evidence that certain forms of consciousness are intrinsically better than others.⁷⁶

Nietzsche argued that some people are better than others in some sense other than moral virtue itself. If he is right, then it might be that people have different levels of consciousness, and Mill might be right that it is "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."

Conclusion

This essay was not intended to prove what has intrinsic value, but it does seem beneficial to consider what great philosophers have thought

⁷⁶ Mill, John Stuart. "Chapter 2: What Utilitarianism Is" Utilitarianism. 14 Jan. 2010. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11224/11224-h/11224-h.htm>>.

to have intrinsic value (or anything else they believe to be of the utmost importance). Pleasure and pain are the best candidates for intrinsic value, which might be why many people find hedonism attractive. However, hedonism might ignore and neglect other important intrinsic values.

I discuss what I personally believe has intrinsic values in my master's thesis, [Two New Stoic Ethical Theories](#) (now downloadable as a free ebook.)

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Glossary

Argument: To provide statements and evidence in an attempt to lead to the plausibility of a particular conclusion.

Argument from queerness: The argument that we shouldn't accept that something strange exists unless it is necessary to explain something else. This is used by J. L. Mackie to argue that moral facts are queer and probably don't exist.

Begging the question: An argument that uses a premise to prove a conclusion when the premise already implies that the conclusion is true. See circular reasoning.

Circular reasoning: Reasoning that requires us to assume something is true in order to provide evidence that it's true. See begging the question.

Cognitivism: If something is cognitive, then it can be true or false. Moral cognitivism states that moral judgments can be true or false.

Coherence: See consistency.

Coherentism: The view that we start with various assumptions and such assumptions are legitimate as long as they are part of a coherent world view. It is also often claimed that an assumption is justified through coherentism (a kind of coherence) if it is useful as part of an explanation. Observation itself is meaningless without assumptions, and observation appears to confirm our assumptions as long as our observations are consistent with them. For example, my assumption that a table exists can be confirmed by touching the table.

Common sense: Assumptions we hold without significant evidence, but are explanatory; and rejecting the assumption does not appear to be a rational option. For example, we accept that inductive reasoning is effective even though we can't prove it without circular reasoning. Rejecting inductive reasoning would lead to absurdity including the rejection of all natural science altogether.

Conclusion: A statement that we are expected to accept given certain plausible premises.

Contradiction: When two statements cannot both be true due to their logical form. "Socrates was a man" and "Socrates was not a man" are two statements that can't both be true because the logical form is "A" and "not-A." ("A" is any proposition.)

Constructivism: The view that something is created through agreement or a common understanding. The game "chess" is constructed. The presidency of the United States is constructed. Moral constructivism is the view that morality exists in that way. It might be that moral reality is constructed through our instinctual reactions rather than on purpose.

Consistency: To be logically consistent is to have beliefs that could all be true. To have two beliefs that are mutually exclusive (only one could be true) is to be logically inconsistent. This is the main idea of using logic when providing an argument.

Dualism: The view that there are two different kinds of stuff, usually mind and matter.

Empiricism: The philosophical belief that all knowledge is empirical (based on observation).

Empirical: Evidence based on observation.

Epistemology: The philosophical study of knowledge and justification. Empiricism is a very popular view of knowledge, and empirical evidence in general seems to be quite reliable.

Ethics: The philosophical study of morality.

Final end: Something we psychologically accept to be worthy of desire. If someone asks why you need money, you might need to explain what you will do with the money to justify the need, but “happiness” seems to be worthy of desire without an additional justification.

Foundationalism: The view that there are self-evident truths. Not every justification needs evidence. Justification comes to an end when we reach a self-evident justification. See self-evidence.

God: An eternal and unchanging being that many believe created the universe.

False: A statement that fails to be true, such as “Socrates was not a man.” See truth.

Forms: See Plato's Forms.

Hedonism: The view that pleasure and pain are the only things worthy of desire.

Idealism: The view that there is only one kind of stuff, and it's not material.

Infinitism: The view that we are never done justifying a belief. Every belief could be justified, but every justification can also be justified.

Induction: The view that the future will resemble the past in order to arrive at conclusions. To see only white swans could lead to the conclusion that all swans are white. To see that bread has always been nutritious could lead to the conclusion that similar bread will still be nutritious tomorrow.

Inductive reasoning: See induction.

Instrumental value: The usefulness of something. For example, knives have instrumental value for cutting food.

Intrinsic value: Something with value just for existing. We might say something, such as happiness, is “good for its own sake” to reflect that it good without merely being useful to help us attain some other goal. If something is intrinsically good, then it is something we should try to promote. Intrinsic goods are good no matter who attains it. For example, if human life is intrinsically good, then we should help save lives.

Introspection: An examination of our first person experiences.

Intuition: A form of justification that is difficult to fully articulate, but is understood by many people. For example, we know that “ $1+1=2$ ” even if we can't explain why. If something is counterintuitive, then we have some reason to doubt its truth.

Irreducible: Something is irreducible if it can't be fully understood in terms of something else. We can't find out “it was actually

something else.” We found out that water could be reduced to H₂O. To say that morality is irreducible is to say that it can't be fully understood to be something else in that sort of way.

Is/ought gap: The view that morality is a different domain from other parts of reality, and/or that we can't know moral facts from nonmoral facts. See irreducible.

Logic: A tool used to provide consistent arguments. The conclusion of an argument is only plausible if accepting certain premises force us to accept a conclusion, and denying the conclusion would require us to contradict ourselves.

Logical form: The logical form of an argument consists in the truth claims devoid of content. “The sky is blue or red” has the same logical form as “the act of murder is right or wrong.” In both cases we have the form, “A or B.” (“A” and “B” are statements.) The truth claim is that one thing is true and/or another thing is true.

Materialism: The view that there is only one kind of stuff, and everything is causally connected to particles and energy.

Meaning of life: What we should do with our life. If something “really matters,” then we might have reason to promote it. For example, happiness seems to really matter. If happiness is worthy of being a meaning of life, then making people happy would be a good idea.

Metaethics: Philosophical inquiry involving ethical concepts. Metaethical questions include “Is anything good?” and “What does 'good' mean?”

Metaphysics: Philosophical study of reality. Some people think that subatomic particles are the only real part of the universe, for example.

Morality: Rules and values that regulate human behavior.

Moral anti-realism: The belief that intrinsic values don't exist. A rejection of moral realism.

Moral constructivism: The view that moral truths consist in psychology, agreements, or some kind of an ideal based upon one or both of them.

Moral psychology: The philosophical study of moral reasoning and motivation.

Moral realism: The belief that intrinsic values exist. The belief that there are moral facts and justification other than social conventions or moral beliefs. A moral realist could say, "Murder is wrong because human life has intrinsic value, not merely because you believe that it's wrong."

Naturalism: There is epistemological and ontological naturalism. Epistemological naturalism is the view that that natural science provides the only source of knowledge. Ontological naturalism comes in at least two forms. The first is the view that only "natural" stuff exists. The second view that the only stuff that exists is stuff described by science.

Nihilism: See moral anti-realism.

Noncognitivism: The rejection of cognitivism. Moral noncognitivism states that moral judgments are neither true nor false. They might just be an expression of our emotions, for example.

Occam's razor: The view that we shouldn't accept an equally useful explanation if it is more complicated.

Ontology: See metaphysics. Ontology is often “descriptive” rather than an account of causes.

Paradox: When a proposition (which is true or false) has a logical form that could neither be true nor false without leading to a contradiction. Consider the following sentence: “This sentence is false.” If it's false, then it's true. If it's true, then it's false.

Phenomenology: Philosophical study of our mental activity and first person experiences.

Philosophy: “Love of wisdom.” The quest to find truth and improve ourselves.

Plato's Forms: The view that there is a non-natural, eternal, unchanging part of reality. Plato viewed this part of reality as consisting of “ideals.” We could find out the ideal right, ideal justice, ideal good, and so on. These ideals are the part of reality we refer to when we make moral assertions.

Platonism: See Plato's Forms.

Plausible: A statement is plausible if it is probably true given the current evidence.

Premise: A statement used in an argument with other premises in order to give reason to accept a conclusion.

Proposition: A truth claim. The statement “Socrates is a man and he is mortal” contains two propositions. (1) he is a man and (2) he is mortal.

Qualia: The subjective experience of mental events from the first person perspective. The taste of chocolate, feel of pain, the appearance of green, and so on.

Reductionism: The view that something can be reduced. Some philosophers think that particles and energy (the reality described by physics) is the only real part of the universe and everything else is actually “nothing but” physical reality. Moral reductionists think that moral reality is actually “nothing but” nonmoral facts of some other sort.

Relativism: The belief that moral statements are true because we agree on their truth (or merely believe it is true on our own). Rape and murder would be considered wrong if a society agrees that it is wrong (or if a person believes it is wrong).

Self-contradiction: A statement is a self-contradiction when it can't be true because of the logical form. For example, “Socrates is a man and he is not a man.” This statement can't be true because it is impossible to be something and not something. It has the logical form, “A and not-A.” “A” is any proposition.

Self-evidence: A form of justification based on our immediate intuition that something is true. Mathematical beliefs, such as “ $1+1=2$ ” is a common example. Such a justification does not have to justify itself, and it doesn't necessarily provide certainty. The main point is merely that if something is self-evident, then justification has come to an end.

Skepticism: Often a term of disbelief, but it can also describe an attitude that includes a healthy level of doubt.

Sound: An argument is sound if it is valid and the premises are true.

Spooky: Something is spooky if it is mysterious, supernatural, or other-worldly. We have a view of the world full of atoms and energy, and anything that isn't explained by physical science is going to be regarded with a skeptical attitude by philosophers.

Sui generis: A separate category that is different from all other categories.

Tautology: A statement with a logical form that guarantees that it is true. The statement "Socrates was a man or he wasn't" is true no matter what because it has the logical form "A or not-A." ("A" is any proposition.)

True: According to Aristotle, a statement is true if it corresponds with reality. For example, "Socrates was a man" is true. However, there can be other uses of the word true, such as, "The pawn can move two spaces forward when it is first moved in a game of Chess." Many such "truths" are based on agreements.

Usefulness: The importance of something for attaining a goal. See instrumental value.

Valid: An argument is valid when it has a logical form that assures us that true premises guarantee the truth of the conclusion. It is impossible for a valid argument to have true premises and a false conclusion.