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19

Bare Bones Moral Realism and the Objections from Relativism

MARK BALAGUER

Abstract

This chapter does two things. First, it defends moral realism against three objections from relativism (due to Mackie, Horgan, and Timmons). The defense is based on the idea that there are certain relativistic, non-factual strands within moral realism and, hence, that realism is compatible with some versions of relativism. Second, the chapter articulates the exact thesis that moral realism depends upon. This is important for three reasons. (1) It enables us to articulate the most non-committal (and, hence, the most plausible) version of realism; this view is dubbed *bare bones moral realism*. (2) Since the thesis that realism depends on is a straightforward (and fairly plausible) empirical hypothesis about the ordinary meanings of moral terms, we get the surprising result that moral realism doesn't require the truth of any controversial metaphysical claims about the nature of the world. (3) By revealing how weak moral realism can be, this chapter shows that realism is more plausible than one might have thought.

Introduction

Moral realism can be defined (somewhat roughly) as the view that there are (objective) moral facts; e.g., realists maintain that some actions are wrong. (Two points: first, some people might define realism in a way that allows for subjectivist versions of realism, e.g., versions that hold that there are moral facts but that these facts are at least partially about our moral preferences. But according to the lingo I'll be using, views like this don't count as genuine versions of realism. Second, I'll be assuming here that realists also endorse the existence of moral *properties*; more specifically, I'll assume a general sort of property realism, so that if, say, an object is round, then it has the property of roundness, and if an action is wrong, then it has the property of wrongness, and so on. But moral realists aren't really committed to this; they could endorse property anti-realism if they wanted to.)

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Moral relativism is a bit harder to define because the term is used in several different ways; one (somewhat rough) way to define it is as the thesis that the truth-values of moral claims are always relative to particular groups of people. But however relativism is defined, it is generally thought that realism and relativism are competitors. Indeed, three of the most important arguments against realism (one due to Mackie and two due to Horgan and Timmons) can be thought of as arguments from relativism.

In this chapter, I will do two things. First, I will explain how realists can respond to these three objections from relativism. In all three cases, I will respond in a similar and, I think, somewhat novel way, namely, by embracing the idea that there are certain relativistic (and non-factual) strands within moral realism, thus undermining the idea that realism is incompatible with all versions of relativism. Second, having blocked these objections, I will turn to the question of whether there are any positive arguments for realism. I will not try to provide such an argument here; instead, I will articulate the exact thesis that realists need to justify in order to argue for their view. This will be important for three reasons. First, in locating the exact thesis that realism depends on, I will also have located the most non-committal version of realism; I will call this view *bare bones moral realism*; and it should be noted that because this view is the most non-committal version of realism, it follows that it's also the most plausible. Second, as we will see, the thesis that realism depends on is a straightforward (and fairly plausible) empirical hypothesis about the ordinary meanings of moral terms like "wrong"; thus, we are going to get the surprising result that moral realism does not require the truth of any controversial metaphysical claims about the nature of the world. And finally, by showing how little moral realists need to say – or how weak their view can be – I will have shown that realism is more plausible than one might have thought.

1. Three Objections From Relativism

1.1 *The (first) Horgan–Timmons objection from intercultural relativism*

The (first and most widely discussed) Horgan–Timmons objection – see their (1991), as well as a series of other essays – was originally raised against certain kinds of *moral naturalism*, the view that (a) moral realism is true, i.e., there are moral facts, and (b) these facts are naturalistic. (What claim (b) amounts to differs significantly from theorist to theorist, but for our purposes here, this won't matter.) More specifically, the original version of the Horgan–Timmons argument probably worked best against versions of naturalism that take moral terms like "wrongness" to be rigidly designating natural kind terms, like "water." Moreover, it is widely believed (see, e.g., Shafer-Landau 2003: 68; Cuneo 2007: 90) that the Horgan–Timmons argument applies only to naturalistic views, perhaps only certain kinds of naturalism. But I will show in this section that the Horgan–Timmons argument has a much wider application. Indeed, I will argue that it can be raised with equal force against *all* reasonable versions of realism, whether they're naturalistic or not. This includes all the mainstream versions of realism in the literature (e.g., the views of Moore 1903; Brink 1984; 1989; 2001; Sturgeon 1985; Railton 1986; Boyd 1988; Smith 1994; Sayre-McCord 1997; Jackson

1998; Scanlon 1998; Copp 2000; Shafer-Landau 2003; Huemer 2005; Cuneo 2007). More specifically, I'm going to formulate a version of the (first) Horgan–Timmons objection that can be raised against any version of realism that involves a commitment to a certain very weak (and trivially true) supervenience thesis. The thesis in question is the following:

(1) If there are any moral facts and properties, then they supervene on physical and mental facts and properties.

This is obvious. It would be bizarre and wrongheaded (indeed, it would reveal a lack of understanding of what moral terms like "wrong" *mean*) to claim that two actions (and their environments, including their consequences, motivations, and so on) are physically and mentally identical but that one of them is right and the other is wrong. Or to put the point differently, if two actions (and their environments) are physically and mentally identical, then any property that one of them has and the other doesn't have couldn't possibly be the property of wrongness – i.e., it couldn't be the property that we express with the term "wrong."

It's very easy to proceed from thesis (1) to the following more widely discussed supervenience thesis:

(2) If there are any moral facts and properties, then they supervene (at least in the actual world) on physical, or natural, facts and properties.

In particular, all we have to add to (1) in order to get (2) is the following plausible hypothesis:

(3) There are no ghosts, and so some kind of mind-brain materialism is true, and so (in the actual world) mental facts and properties supervene on physical facts and properties.

In this chapter, I take thesis (3) as a working assumption and am therefore assuming that moral realists are committed not just to (1), but to (2) as well. It's important to remember, however, that (1) is really all that's needed here – i.e., it's all realists need to endorse in order to open themselves up to Horgan–Timmons-style objections. And as far as I know, no philosopher of note has ever endorsed a version of realism that wasn't committed to (1). And for good reason, because, as we've seen, (1) is obviously true.

The (first) Horgan–Timmons objection is best thought of not as a single, general argument that can be used to refute all versions of realism simultaneously, but rather as a *recipe* for constructing specific arguments against specific versions of realism. To appreciate this, note first that we can define infinitely many different versions of realism that give different answers to the question of *which* natural properties are sufficient for which moral properties (and, remember, we're assuming here that realists are committed to moral-natural supervenience and, hence, to the idea that natural properties are sufficient for moral properties). So, for instance, some versions of realism entail that the property *being an abortion* is a sufficient condition for moral wrongness, whereas others do not. The main idea behind the Horgan–Timmons argument, as I'm reconstructing

it here, is that moral realism isn't true because no specific version of it is true. The argument for this consists in the construction of a recipe R that works as follows: given any specific version V of realism, i.e., any version that takes a stand on which natural properties are sufficient for which moral properties, R tells us how to construct a Horgan–Timmons-style objection to V. To see how this works, let P be some specific natural property, and let *not-P-MR* be a specific version of realism that entails that P is *not* a sufficient condition for wrongness – i.e., not a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of our term "wrong." Then we can mount a Horgan–Timmons-style objection to not-P-MR by constructing a thought experiment in which the following three conditions hold:

(A) There is a group of Twin Earthlings (call them *P-twins*) who use "wrong" in a property-ascribing, moral-realist way – just as we do, according to not-P-MR.
(B) The naturalistic property P is a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of the twin term "wrong," i.e., it's sufficient for the property picked out by twin "wrong." (Note, however, that our twins might not *know*, or even believe, that P is sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong"; this might not be obvious to them at all.)
(C) There is an action A that has P but doesn't have any property that, according to not-P-MR, is a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of our term "wrong."

Given this, the Horgan–Timmons-style objection to not-P-MR is based on the following two claims:

(i) Not-P-MR entails that we cannot have genuine, non-semantically-based disputes with our P-twins over the truth-value of the sentence "A is wrong." In other words, it entails that if we got into an argument with our P-twins over this question, we would be talking past each other; the dispute would be merely verbal – or factually empty, or based in semantic differences, or something along these lines – because we would be using "wrong" differently. In particular, our twins would be using it to pick out a property for which P is a sufficient condition, and we would be using it to pick out a different property, one for which P is *not* sufficient.
(ii) We have an intuition that we *can* have genuine disputes with our P-twins over the truth-value of the sentence "A is wrong."

So the idea here is that we can refute moral realism by appealing not to a single intuition, but to a series of different intuitions of the following form:

(Genuine-Disputes) We can have genuine, non-semantically-based disputes with our P-twins over the truth-value of the sentence "A is wrong."

where "P" and "A" are variables. Given a specific natural property P and a specific version of realism that entails that P is not a sufficient condition for wrongness, we define an appropriate set of Twin Earthlings, who satisfy conditions (A) and (B) above,

and we define an action A that satisfies condition (C). This will generate a specific sentence of the form (Genuine-Disputes) that, according to Horgan and Timmons, will seem intuitively correct to us; and this in turn will give us an argument against the given version of realism, because that view will entail that the given instance of (Genuine-Disputes) is false.

The conclusion, then, is that moral realism isn't true because we can construct arguments like this against every specific version of realism – i.e., every version that takes a stand on which natural properties are sufficient for which moral properties. (This formulation of the Horgan–Timmons argument differs somewhat from the original formulation given by Horgan and Timmons, but I think they would approve of it.)

Most of the realists who have responded to this objection (e.g., Sayre-McCord 1997; Copp 2000; Brink 2001) have pursued the hostile-to-relativism strategy of attacking claim (i). In contrast, I will pursue the relativism-friendly strategy of defanging (ii). (Merli (2002) has pursued this strategy as well, but in a rather different way.)

I want to begin here by looking at a specific instance of P to see if what's said in the Horgan–Timmons argument is correct. If P is the property *being an abortion*, then the relevant versions of moral realism – the ones we're supposed to be able to refute with a Horgan–Timmons argument – are those that entail that being an abortion is *not* sufficient for wrongness. Let's call views of this kind *pro-choice versions of realism*. Given this, the relevant twins are the following:

> *Pro-life twins*: These creatures use "wrong" in a property-ascribing, moral-realist way, and in particular, the naturalistic property *being an abortion* is a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of their term "wrong." (Let me make two points here. First, these twins might not *know* that being an abortion is sufficient for the correct applicability of their term "wrong"; they might argue the point just like we do. Second, we should not think of these twins as being molecule-for-molecule copies of us; rather, we should think of them as being as similar as possible to the way we would be if pro-choice moral realism were true of our moral discourse; but, since abortion is a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of their term "wrong," they presumably can't be identical to what we would be like in that scenario. (I am assuming here that even if "wrongness" is a rigidly designating natural kind term for us and our twins, if it denotes different properties in English and Twinese, this is because of differences in our heads and not because of differences in our environments. So this is different from Putnam's H_2O/XYZ scenario. The reason I make this assumption is that in connection with "wrongness," it's plausible to suppose that both properties – i.e., $\text{wrongness}_{\text{English}}$ and $\text{wrongness}_{\text{Twinese}}$ – are present in both environments. Thus, if the two words denote different properties, it must be because of differences in the heads of the two groups of speakers.))

According to the Horgan–Timmons argument, we're supposed to have an intuition to the effect that the following claim is true:

> (Genuine-Disputes-With-Pro-Life-Twins) We can have genuine, non-semantically-based disputes with our pro-life twins over the truth-value of the sentence "Abortion is wrong."

If we do have an intuition that this claim is true, then Horgan and Timmons can claim that this refutes pro-choice versions of moral realism. But I want to argue that even if people do have this intuition – and it's not clear that they do – most of us have good reason to reject it, and those of us who can accept it can't use it in the way Horgan and Timmons want to use it.

Let me start out by admitting that there are some related sentences here – sentences that are similar in certain ways to (Genuine-Disputes-With-Pro-Life-Twins) – that seem intuitive, or that feel right. For instance, one sentence that seems prima facie plausible is the following:

> (Genuine-Disputes-With-Underdescribed-Twins) If we encountered a group of people who used moral terms in ways that seemed similar to the ways in which we use those terms, and if these people said that abortion was wrong (or not wrong), then we could have genuine, non-semantically-based disputes with them over the truth-value of the sentence "Abortion is wrong."

Again, this *feels* right to me. But I would argue that we ought not to trust this feeling in the way that we trust ordinary intuitions. By an "ordinary intuition," I mean an intuition (or a knee-jerk belief) about a sentence of the following form:

> (OI) Our term "t" applies (or doesn't apply) in scenario S.

Intuitions about sentences of this form should be taken very seriously, because the application conditions of our terms are largely determined by our usage and intentions, and our intuitions are presumably generated by our intentions, or our understandings of our terms, or some such thing. I am not suggesting that intuitions of this sort are infallible, but I think it's a good methodological principle to treat them as usually trustworthy and reliable. In short, they are data points that we can use to confirm and falsify conceptual analyses. But our knee-jerk feeling that (Genuine-Disputes-With-Underdescribed-Twins) is true isn't an intuition of this sort at all. It seems to me to be borne of a sort of "default setting" to the effect that we can argue with other people about moral issues. But if we don't have any detailed information about what our underdescribed twins mean by their moral terms, then we don't really know if we can have genuine, non-semantically-based moral disputes with them. So in any given case, (Genuine-Disputes-With-Underdescribed-Twins) could quite easily turn out false. Intuitions of the form (OI) can turn out false only if we're somehow confused about how to use our own terms. But (Genuine-Disputes-With-Underdescribed-Twins) could turn out false for an entirely different reason – because we're not clued into how our twins use *their* moral terms (and how this differs from our own usage). But we don't have any business having intuitions about the meanings of twin moral terms. And because of this, we shouldn't trust any intuition or knee-jerk feeling we have about (Genuine-Disputes-With-Underdescribed-Twins).

Another sentence that seems intuitively right is the following:

> (Genuine-OUGHT-Disputes-With-Pro-Life-Twins) We can have genuine disputes with our pro-life twins about whether abortion *ought to* be a sufficient condition for

the correct applicability of "wrong" (where "ought" is presumably to be read here in a non-moral way).

But this sentence is perfectly consistent with moral realism. One might try to argue that realism entails that arguing about what the application conditions of "wrong" ought to be would be silly – comparable to arguing about whether "water" ought to refer to H_2O or XYZ. But this is just false – realism doesn't entail that it would be silly to argue points like this. If we understood what "wrong" meant in Twinese, we might try to convince our twins that the property they picked out with "wrong" was arbitrary in certain ways, or less natural or coherent than the property we pick out with "wrong," or some such thing. And, of course, they might try to convince us of a similar point. And given how much we care about moral questions, we would not treat this as silly at all. We might decide that we would be better off if we altered our moral practices, i.e., if we started using our moral terms slightly differently, so that they expressed slightly different concepts, concepts that were less arbitrary, or more natural or coherent, or some such thing. So, again, it may be that (Genuine-OUGHT-Disputes-With-Pro-Life-Twins) is intuitively right, but Horgan and Timmons can't use this intuition in their argument, because it's perfectly consistent with realism.

The sentence that Horgan and Timmons need to claim is intuitive is (Genuine-Disputes-With-Pro-Life-Twins). But (a) I simply doubt that people really have this intuition – personally, it doesn't strike me as intuitive at all – and, more importantly, (b) even if people do have this intuition, in the present context, it doesn't matter, because most of us (including non-cognitivists like Horgan and Timmons) have good reason to *reject* it, i.e., to claim that we *can't* have genuine disputes with our pro-life twins over the truth-value of "Abortion is wrong." The only people who can embrace (Genuine-Disputes-With-Pro-Life-Twins) are pro-life realists; for they're the only people who can claim that our term "wrong" and the twin term "wrong" are roughly equivalent in semantic value. The rest of us have to reject (Genuine-Disputes-With-Pro-Life-Twins). This is true even if we endorse an anti-realist, non-cognitivist view of moral discourse. Even if you think we can always argue with *each other* over moral questions – because our moral evaluations are really just expressions of our moral preferences, or some such thing – you still shouldn't claim that we can have genuine disputes with our pro-life twins over the truth-value of "Abortion is wrong," because we know by assumption that the twin term "wrong" does apply to abortions. Given this, it seems to me that (a) most of us have good reason to reject (Genuine-Disputes-With-Pro-Life-Twins); and (b) if people really do have an intuition that this sentence is true, then we ought to interpret this as an intuition that we use "wrong" in something like the way that our pro-life twins use it and, hence, that pro-life realism is true. Obviously, this isn't the result that Horgan and Timmons want.

Before moving on, it's worth noting how odd the reasoning in the Horgan–Timmons argument would seem if it were employed in other settings. To appreciate this, let *compatibilistic free-will realism* be the view that the term "free will" denotes some compatibilistic kind of free will. Now suppose that we encountered some twins who used "free will" to denote libertarian free will. Some people might have an intuition that we could have genuine disputes with these twins about whether the term "free will" can be correctly applied to deterministic creatures. If the reasoning in the Horgan–Timmons

argument were correct, this intuition would suggest that compatibilistic free-will realism is false. But this just doesn't seem right. We can't argue against compatibilism in this way, and, it seems to me, we can't argue against moral realism in this way either.

1.2 *The second Horgan–Timmons objection from intercultural relativism*

The second Horgan–Timmons argument (see their 1996: 15–17) starts out just like the first – by claiming that moral realism entails that certain kinds of disputes between us and certain kinds of Twin Earthlings would be non-genuine, semantically based disputes. To bring this argument out, let's assume that (a) there's a naturalistic property N that's a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of our term "wrong"; and (b) N is not a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of twin "wrong" (though we can assume that our twins use "wrong" in a property-ascribing, moral-realist way and that, in other cases, there is significant overlap between the application conditions of our "wrong" and their "wrong"); and (c) there is an action D that has N but doesn't have any property that's a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of twin "wrong." Moral realism seems to entail that we cannot have genuine, non-semantically-based disputes with these twins (call them N-twins) over the truth-value of "D is wrong."

So far, this argument is just like the first Horgan–Timmons argument. But now, instead of claiming that we have an intuition that we *can* have genuine disputes with our N-twins over the truth-value of "D is wrong," the second Horgan–Timmons objection continues differently. One might put the argument like this:

> Moral realism is not supposed to lead to the result that disputes like the one between us and our N-twins are non-genuine, both-parties-are-right disputes. This, after all, is what relativistic views say: relative to our moral practices and our usage of "wrong," the sentence "D is wrong" is true; but relative to twin moral practices and their usage of "wrong," the sentence "D is wrong" is false. But this isn't what realism is supposed to say. It's supposed to deliver the result that there are objective moral facts that settle disputes like this. Thus, there is an internal tension in moral realism, as it's standardly understood. It tells us (in its pre-theoretic advertising, so to speak) that there are objective facts that settle moral disputes like the one between us and our N-twins; but then it entails (behind our backs, so to speak) that disputes like this are non-genuine, semantically based disputes.

Once again, I want to begin my response with the relativism-friendly admission that moral realism does indeed entail that the dispute between us and our N-twins is a non-genuine, both-parties-are-right dispute. But I want to argue that this is not a problem because, contrary to what's suggested above, realism isn't "supposed to" deliver the result that disputes like this are genuine, non-semantically-based disputes. If this means that moral realism counts as a version of moral relativism (in at least some senses of the term), then so be it – that's not a problem either. In short, I want to suggest that

(a) the way that realism is relativistic here – i.e., the fact that it entails that certain kinds of disputes (e.g., the dispute between us and our N-twins) are

non-genuine disputes in which both parties are right, given what they mean by their terms – is not antithetical to the spirit of realism; and

(b) realism is not relativistic in any other ways that are unacceptable, i.e., that are inconsistent with the "spirit" of realism, or what realism is "supposed to" say.

In connection with (a), I simply want to point out that while the dispute between us and our N-twins is a non-genuine, both-parties-are-right dispute, there are still objective moral facts here that *make it the case* that both parties are right. Notice, first, that in this scenario, it is an objective fact that action D is *wrong*. For (i) we use "wrong" in this scenario to pick out a property for which the naturalistic property N is a sufficient condition, and (ii) D actually has that property. So it's wrong. Really and objectively. Moreover, it's also an objective fact that D isn't $\text{wrong}_{\text{N-Twinese}}$. For our N-twins use "wrong" to pick out a certain property, and D doesn't have that property – really and objectively. So when we say that this is a "both-parties-are-right dispute," that doesn't undermine realism, because both parties are *really and objectively* right – i.e., right in a way that fits perfectly with realism. (Note, too, that the same thing can happen in connection with all of our predicates. There could be a tribe of Twin Earthlings who used "game" (or "mountain" or "electron" or whatever) with slightly different application conditions, but this doesn't undermine realism about any of these domains.)

So, again, if we use "relativism" to denote views that entail that certain kinds of intercultural disputes are non-genuine disputes – i.e., semantically based disputes in which both cultures are correct, given what they mean by their terms – then moral realism is indeed relativistic. But so is any sensible version of realism about anything.

Now, of course, one might define other kinds of relativism that are inconsistent with the spirit of realism, or what realism is supposed to entail. But, as far as I can see, moral realism doesn't lead to any of these other kinds of relativism. For instance, one might define relativism as the view that even given what our moral claims mean, their truth-values are still relative to specific groups of people because these claims contain hidden indexical elements that refer to things having to do with the particular circumstances of the given speakers – e.g., the aims or moral practices of their cultures. But moral realism, as I'm understanding it here, is not relativistic in this sense, and the Horgan–Timmons argument doesn't suggest that it is.

Moreover, realism isn't relativistic in the sense of entailing that *all* intercultural moral disputes are non-genuine. On the contrary, it entails this *only* in cases where the two cultures actually use the relevant terms with different application conditions (and where the differences in application conditions actually lead to different results). Realism also allows for moral disputes in which the two parties (whether they're entire cultures or individual persons) are using their terms in essentially equivalent ways and in which one party is right and the other is simply mistaken about what the moral facts are.

1.3 *The Mackian objection from intracultural relativism*

The final relativism-based objection to moral realism can be put like this (see, e.g., Mackie, 1977):

> Moral realism couldn't be true because it's inconsistent with the fact that within our culture, there are deep and pervasive disagreements about morality. If realism were true, there would be more agreement about moral questions because there would be objective facts out there that settle these questions.

I don't want to say too much in response to this objection because it's been widely discussed by others (see, e.g., Brink 1989; Moody-Adams 1997; Shafer-Landau 2003; Huemer 2005) and most of the points I would make have already been made. For instance, I would argue that (a) contrary to what's commonly supposed, there is far more moral agreement in our culture than disagreement (indeed, it seems to me that we disagree in our moral evaluations of only a very small set of action types, e.g., abortion, the death penalty, and so on). And (b) moral realism is obviously consistent with the existence of deep and pervasive moral disagreements because it's consistent with it being very difficult in certain situations to figure out what the moral facts *are*. Suppose, for instance, that actions of type T have the naturalistic, non-moral property P and that P is a sufficient condition for wrongness. Then type-T actions are wrong. But this might be difficult to see, for it might be non-obvious that type-T actions have P, or that P is sufficient for wrongness, or both.

But there's one response to Mackie's argument that I want to emphasize: moral realism is perfectly consistent with the idea that many of the moral disagreements in our culture are factually empty in the sense that there aren't any facts out there that settle these disputes. There are multiple ways that factual emptiness can arise within an overall realist framework. One way is via semantic imprecision. For instance, the predicate "mountain" doesn't have precisely defined application conditions, and because of this it's plausible to suppose that there could be an object (say, a foothill) about which there was no fact of the matter whether it was a mountain. But, of course, this doesn't undermine realism about mountains; e.g., it doesn't undermine the claim that Mount Everest is a mountain. Likewise, if the application conditions of "wrong" aren't perfectly precise, then there may be some actions such that there's no fact of the matter whether they're wrong. And for all we know, it could be that some of the moral disputes in our culture involve imprecision and indeterminacy of this kind. For instance, it could be that the dispute over abortion is of this kind, so that there's no fact of the matter whether abortion is wrong. But, again, this doesn't undermine moral realism, and it doesn't undermine the claim that actions of various other kinds (e.g., killing babies just for money) are really and objectively wrong.

A second way that factual emptiness can arise within an overall realist framework is through semantic differences between speakers. In other words, there can be cases in which two parties seem to be making conflicting claims but really aren't because they're using their words with different meanings. We saw above (section 1.2) that moral realism is consistent with the existence of intercultural moral disputes of this kind. But it's also consistent with the existence of such disputes within our own culture. For it could be that within our culture there are multiple moral subgroups in which words like "wrong" are used somewhat differently. For instance, it's plausible to suppose that there are certain kinds of theists and atheists who use their moral terms with at least slightly different meanings and application conditions. And it may be that certain

moral disputes – think, for instance, of the dispute about whether homosexuality is wrong – are based in linguistic differences along these lines.

So the point here is that realists can admit that it may be that the best explanation of the existence of certain moral disputes involves the claim that those disputes are factually empty. For, again, there is no inconsistency in claiming that (a) there are moral facts and (b) some moral disputes are factually empty.

2. Bare Bones Moral Realism

In this section, I will do four related things. First, I will formulate a novel version of moral realism. More specifically, I'm going to articulate a view that, I'll argue, is the weakest (i.e., the most non-committal) version of moral realism. I will do this by formulating a thesis – which I'll call EH – and arguing that moral realism is true if and only if EH is true. It's important to note that the novelty of this version of realism consists not in what it says, but, rather, in what it *doesn't* say; for the only controversial claim that it commits to is EH, and if I'm right, then all tenable versions of realism are committed to EH. (It's possible to articulate non-EH versions of realism, but I will argue that such views are untenable because they're inconsistent with the specific kind of moral-natural supervenience thesis that realists are committed to.) I will call the view that commits to EH and essentially nothing else – or nothing else that, in the present context, is controversial – *bare bones moral realism*; and I will use "EH-realism" to denote realist views that involve EH, regardless of whether they involve other theses as well.

Second, I will argue for the controversial conclusion that the question of whether moral realism is true reduces to a question of empirical semantics. This will follow from the fact that (a) moral realism is true if and only if EH is true, and (b) EH is a simple hypothesis of empirical semantics. Thus, if I'm right, it will follow that moral realism needn't involve any controversial metaphysical claims. The only controversial claim that realists need to endorse is a semantic one – namely, EH.

Third, my arguments will entail that bare bones realism is the most plausible version of moral realism there is. This will follow from the fact that (a) it's the most non-committal version of EH-realism, and (b) non-EH versions of realism are untenable.

Fourth, my arguments will suggest that moral realism is more plausible than one might have thought. This will follow from the fact that EH is, I think, reasonably plausible. This won't constitute a positive argument for realism because I won't be arguing that EH is true, and, as I'll make clear, EH is controversial – i.e., lots of people would reject it. But by showing that realism reduces to an empirical semantic hypothesis that's at least reasonably plausible (and that it needn't involve any controversial metaphysical claims), I think I will have shown that it's more plausible than many people have supposed.

In section 2.1, I will formulate EH and say a bit about what it involves. Then in sections 2.2 and 2.3, I will argue that moral realism is true if and only if EH is true.

2.1 EH

Since the thesis that realists are committed to is a semantic thesis, we can divide it into sub-theses about particular moral terms, like "good," "wrong," "right," and so on.

Of course, it's possible that some of these sub-theses are true and others are false, but I won't worry about this here. I will concentrate on the case of "wrong" and assume that other moral terms can be treated in roughly similar ways. That said, the thesis that realists are committed to, at least in connection with "wrong," is as follows:

> *Empirical Hypothesis (EH)*: We use "wrong" as a property-ascribing term, and it is built into our usage and intentions concerning this word – i.e., it follows from the way we use and understand the term "wrong" – that certain kinds of actions or behaviors are sufficient conditions for the correct applicability of the term; e.g., one such action type might be *killing an infant just for money*, and another might be *stealing from poor people for the sole purpose of upgrading from an iPod to an iPod touch*. Put differently, the claim here is that it's built into our usage and intentions that certain natural properties – e.g., *being a killing of an infant just for money* – are sufficient conditions for the correct applicability of "wrong."

It might seem that realists are committed to more than just EH. It might seem that they're committed not just to the claim that *we use* "wrong" in a property-ascribing way, but also to the claim that "wrong" *is* a property-ascribing term. More specifically, it might seem that realists are committed to the following:

> *Semantic Hypothesis (SH)*: The word "wrong" is a property-ascribing term, and certain kinds of actions or behaviors are sufficient conditions for the correct applicability of this term – i.e., for the presence of wrongness. For instance, *killing infants just for money* might be one such sufficient condition, and another might be *stealing from poor people for the sole purpose of upgrading from an iPod to an iPod touch*. Put differently, the claim here is that certain natural properties – e.g., *being a killing of an infant just for money* – are sufficient conditions for the correct applicability of "wrong," or for the presence of wrongness.

Moral realists *are* committed to SH; but they're also committed to EH, and, in fact, EH is prior to SH; i.e., if SH is true, it's *because* EH is true. Indeed, I will argue below that SH is true if and only if EH is true. (Three points. First, the argument for this claim is a bit scattered. In section 2.3, I give a direct argument for the first direction of the biconditional – i.e., for the thesis that if SH is true then EH is also true. The second direction (i.e., "if EH then SH") follows trivially from an argument given in section 2.2 for something I call premise (2); but I won't pause there to point this out. Second, in arguing that SH iff EH, I will not be assuming that the application conditions of "wrong" are completely determined by folk usage and intentions; I will argue that even if these application conditions aren't completely determined by folk usage and intentions, we still get the result that SH is true iff EH is true. Third, in saying that realists are committed to EH and SH, I'm assuming a general sort of property realism; in particular, I'm assuming that if an object is round then it has the property of roundness, and if an action is wrong then it has the property of wrongness, and so on; this assumption isn't needed – we could reformulate EH and SH so they didn't involve any reference to properties – but I won't bother with this here.)

In the remainder of this subsection, I want to say a bit to clarify what EH says. The first point I want to make is that EH doesn't tell us *which* behavior types are sufficient for wrongness. Of course, it's easy to think of behaviors one might list here; for instance, aside from baby killing and stealing from the poor, one might list behaviors having to do with selling children into slavery. But EH itself doesn't take a stand on any particular behavior types; the claim is simply that it's built into our usage and intentions concerning "wrong" that certain kinds of actions or behaviors – or certain natural properties – are sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong."

Second, I want to clarify what I mean by the phrase "built into our usage and intentions." In particular, I want to draw a distinction between the following two claims:

(i) It's built into our usage and intentions that the natural property P is a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of "wrong."
(ii) We believe that P is sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong."

These two claims are importantly different. It could be built into our usage and intentions that P is a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of "wrong" even if none of us has ever noticed this. And, likewise, even if some or all of us think that P is sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong," it might not be. So, again, (i) is different from (ii); (i) is actually closer to

(iii) The naturalistic property P *is* a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of "wrong."

But (i) isn't identical to (iii). The reason is that it may be that the application conditions of our predicates aren't completely determined by our usage and intentions (it may be that they're determined partially by our usage and intentions and partially by other things, e.g., things having to do with coherence, non-arbitrariness, "carving nature at the joints," and so on). Given this, we can say that (i) tells us something about what the application conditions of "wrong" would be if our usage and intentions were the only relevant factors in determining what these application conditions are. Moreover, it's important to note that what's built into our usage and intentions is not something that we're necessarily aware of – it's something for semantic theorists to discover.

The third point I want to make here is that EH is not a metaphysical claim about the nature of the world. It is, rather, a hypothesis of empirical semantics. More specifically, it's a claim about how we use a certain word with certain kinds of application conditions. But there is no claim in EH to the effect that these application conditions are ever satisfied, and so, by itself, EH does not involve any metaphysical claims.

Now, this doesn't mean that *bare bones realism* doesn't involve any metaphysical claims. In fact it does. But it doesn't involve any *controversial* metaphysical claims. The only controversial claim that bare bones realists are committed to is EH, which, again, is not a metaphysical claim; and the only metaphysical claims they're committed to are trivial, or uncontroversial. Let me bring this point out by comparing bare bones realism to a certain kind of realism about games. I am a realist about games – that is, I think there actually exist some games – because (a) I think we use the word "game" to pick out certain kinds of events (e.g., chess events), and (b) I think there are some events of

these kinds. Bare bones moral realists endorse a parallel view of wrong actions. They think that (a) we use "wrong" to pick out certain kinds of actions (e.g., actions having to do with stealing from the poor), and (b) there are some actions of some of these kinds. So there *is* a metaphysical thesis here – namely, (b) – but it's not controversial. Everyone knows there are some actions of some of the kinds that bare bones realists have in mind (e.g., many killings and robberies are of these kinds). The only controversial question is whether an action's being of one of these kinds is sufficient for its being wrong; e.g., it's controversial whether the natural property *being a killing of an infant just for money* is sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong." Thus, what's controversial here is the semantic thesis contained in (a) – or, more precisely, EH. (I suppose one might object here that claim (b) is controversial because it involves the assumption that there really exist such things as actions. But (i) the debate about the existence of actions doesn't really have much to do with the debate in metaethics, and it seems reasonable to take realism about actions to be a background assumption of the latter debate; and (ii) it seems to me that moral realists aren't really committed to the existence of actions in any deep way and that we could reformulate EH-realism so that it didn't involve any ontological commitment to actions, although I won't bother with this here.)

Another way to put the point here is as follows: if moral anti-realists (e.g., non-cognitivists and error theorists) accepted the EH-realist's semantic thesis about what's required for the correct applicability of "wrong" – that is, if they accepted EH – then they would also endorse the EH-realist's metaphysical claim that there are some wrong actions; that is, they would abandon their anti-realism. Thus, the really important, bottom-level disagreement that anti-realists have with bare bones realists is the semantic disagreement over the truth of EH. (Of course, anti-realists might have other disagreements with non-bare-bones EH-realists, i.e., EH-realists who endorse additional controversial theses, on top of EH; but this doesn't matter here.)

This brings me to the fourth point I want to make about EH – namely, that moral anti-realists would indeed reject it. This point is pretty obvious in connection with non-cognitivists because they don't think "wrong" is a genuinely property-ascribing term. Now, some non-cognitivists might want to give EH a deflationary reading and accept it; for instance, one might claim that (a) we use "wrong" *syntactically* as a property-ascribing term, and (b) baby killing is a sufficient condition for the applicability of "x is wrong," where this is supposed to be read non-cognitively, e.g., expressivistically. But I'm assuming here that EH is to be given a non-deflationary reading – i.e., that it's to be read as saying that (a) we use "wrong" as a *genuinely* property-ascribing term, or a *semantically* property-ascribing term, and (b) it's built into our usage and intentions that certain natural properties (e.g., *being a killing of an infant just for money*) are sufficient conditions for the presence of the relevant moral property, i.e., the property expressed by "wrong." And, of course, on this reading of EH, non-cognitivists would reject it.

EH would also be rejected by certain kinds of relativists, subjectivists, and contextualists. I've got in mind here people who claim that (a) "wrong" is a property-ascribing term but (b) the application conditions of this term involve things having to do with our moral standards, or our preferences, or aims, or some such thing. (As I pointed out at the start of the chapter, people like this might count as realists on some terminological conventions, but they're not realists in the sense I have in mind, because they're

not sufficiently objectivist.) In any event, such people would reject EH because they would deny that natural properties like *being a baby killing just for money* are sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong" (although they *can* say that, relative to our moral standards, or our aims, such properties are sufficient for this).

Finally, error theorists like Mackie (1977) and Joyce (2001) would also reject the EH-realist claim that natural properties like *being a baby killing just for money* are sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong." It's worth considering how one might motivate a view of this kind, for doing this will bring out some important features of EH-realism. One way to motivate error theory would be to argue for the following three claims:

> *Wrongness-entails-oughts*: Wrongness claims of the form "Aing is wrong" entail moral ought claims of the form "People (morally) ought not to A."
>
> *Oughts-entail-reasons*: Moral ought claims of the form "People (morally) ought not to A" entail reasons claims of the form "We all have a reason not to A."
>
> *Reasons-aren't-like-that*: The sorts of naturalistic facts that, according to EH, are sufficient for the truth of wrongness claims (i.e., claims of the form "Action A is wrong") are *not* sufficient for the truth of reasons claims of the form "S has a reason to perform (or not perform) action A." For instance, according to EH-realism, if action A is a killing of an infant just for money, then the naturalistic facts that make it the case that A is a killing of an infant just for money are already sufficient for the truth of "A is wrong." But regardless of whether these naturalistic facts are sufficient for the truth of wrongness claims of this sort, they are *not* sufficient for the truth of reasons claims like "We all have a reason not to A." Something more is needed for the truth of sentences like this. (What exactly is needed depends on the theory of reasons that we endorse – i.e., on what sorts of things we take reasons to be.)

These three claims are jointly inconsistent with EH, so if they're all true then EH is false. It is important to note, however, that EH-realists don't have to straightforwardly reject any of these claims. If they want, they can endorse all three and then say that (a) "reason" is ambiguous, and (b) the second and third theses are not true in the same sense of "reason" – i.e., we only get the result that they're both true if we interpret "reason" differently in the two different cases.

It's also important to note that error theorists who endorse the above three claims can still say that there's *something* right about EH because they can say that (a) there's a *facet* of our usage and intentions that suggests that natural properties like *being a baby killing just for money* are sufficient for wrongness; but (b) there are other facets of our usage and intentions that suggest that wrongness claims entail reasons claims and that natural properties of the above kind are not sufficient for the truth of reasons claims; and (c) the best overall semantic theory has it that the considerations in (b) trump those in (a), so that, in the end, EH is false. What error theorists *cannot* say is that the best overall semantic theory entails that natural properties of the above kind are sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong." In general, error theorists think that much more than this is needed for the correct applicability of "wrong." Indeed, they think that what's needed is so substantive that it's never present.

Two more points about this. First, EH-realists can agree with the error theorist's metaphysical claim here. That is, they can grant that if error theorists were right about what's needed for the correct applicability of "wrong," then that term would never be correctly applicable. What EH-realist's must reject is the error theorist's semantic claim about what's needed for the correct applicability of "wrong." Second, while EH-realists *can* endorse the error theorist's metaphysical thesis, they don't *have* to. If they want, they can add to EH – i.e., they can go beyond bare bones realism – and endorse the metaphysically controversial claim that the world is set up so that whenever an action has a natural property that's sufficient for wrongness, it's also the case that we all have a reason not to perform actions of the given kind, where the reason in question is a metaphysically distinct object whose existence is in some important sense metaphysically independent of the relevant naturalistic facts that are sufficient for wrongness. But EH-realists cannot endorse the further *semantic* claim that the real existence of metaphysically independent reasons of this kind is required for the correct applicability of "wrong." They can't say this because it's inconsistent with EH.

This brings me to the fifth point I want to make: If moral realists do claim that the real existence of metaphysically independent reasons of the above kind is required for the correct applicability of "wrong," then they have to reject EH. Now, it might seem that the possibility of a view like this being true undermines my claim that moral realism is true iff EH is true. But I will argue in section 2.3 that views like this – and, more generally, that *all* non-EH versions of realism – are untenable because they're inconsistent with the kind of moral-natural supervenience thesis that realists are committed to.

The sixth point I want to make about EH is that it's consistent with both naturalism and non-naturalism and with both reductionism and non-reductionism. So, for instance, there is no claim here to the effect that moral terms like "wrong" can be defined in non-moral naturalistic terms, and there's no claim to the effect that they can't. Now, having said this, I want to emphasize that (i) EH is perfectly consistent with an overall naturalistic view, and (ii) it's inconsistent with certain kinds of nonnaturalism (though I should add here that in section 2.3 we'll find that any version of non-naturalistic realism that's inconsistent with EH is untenable). But there are many ways of defining "non-naturalism," and on some of these definitions, the view is consistent with EH. So if they wanted to, EH-realists could endorse certain kinds of non-naturalism, though, of course, they don't have to.

Finally, just as EH-realists needn't commit to any controversial metaphysical claims, so too, they needn't commit to any controversial epistemological claims. For if they want to, they can claim that ordinary people are capable of moral knowledge because (a) they've learned (via ordinary linguistic/semantic learning) that the word "wrong" is used in English to pick out certain kinds of actions (just as they've learned that "game" is used to pick out certain kinds of events, and "mountain" is used to pick out certain kinds of objects, and so on); and (b) they have the ability to recognize actions of the relevant kinds when they encounter them (just as they have the ability to recognize game-type events and mountain-type objects). Thus, moral realists can claim that knowledge that killing babies just for money is wrong is no harder to come by, and no more mysterious, than knowledge that chess is a game. And if you see some hoodlums burning a cat, then knowledge that their action is wrong is no harder to come by,

and no more mysterious, than knowledge that two particular people (who you see playing chess) are playing a game. (It might not be obvious *how* we acquire knowledge of the application conditions of predicates like "game" and "mountain" and "chair," but it seems obvious that we do, and if EH-realists of the present kind are right, then this is no more mysterious in connection with "wrong" than it is with non-moral predicates like "game.")

2.2 *From EH to moral realism*

I now want to argue that moral realism is true iff EH is true. I'll argue for one direction of the biconditional (viz., "if EH then moral realism") in the present section, and I'll argue for the other direction ("if moral realism then EH") in section 2.3. I argue for the first direction by assuming EH and arguing that moral realism follows. The argument goes like this:

(1) *Hypothetical Assumption*: EH is true; i.e., it's built into our usage and intentions concerning the word "wrong" that it is a property-ascribing term and that certain sorts of behaviors – e.g., killing babies just for money – are sufficient conditions for the correct applicability of this term.
(2) If it's built into our usage and intentions that "wrong" is a property-ascribing term and that certain sorts of behaviors (e.g., killing babies just for money) are sufficient conditions for the correct applicability of the term, then "wrong" *is* a property-ascribing term and at least some of the behavior types in question (e.g., killing babies just for money) *are* sufficient conditions for the correct applicability of "wrong" – and, hence, for the presence of wrongness. Therefore, by *modus ponens*,
(3) "Wrong" is a property-ascribing term and at least some of the behavior types alluded to in premise (1) – e.g., killing babies just for money – are sufficient conditions for wrongness. But
(4) Some actions in the history of the world have involved behaviors of some of the kinds alluded to in (3). Therefore, from (3) and (4), we get
(5) Some actions in the history of the world have been wrong. Therefore,
(6) Moral realism is true.

As far as I can see, there are only two responses that one might reasonably make to this argument. First, one might object that the allegedly realistic view that EH leads to here is too relativistic to count as a genuine version of realism, because it entails that the application conditions of "wrong" are largely determined by *us* – in particular, by our usage and intentions. But I already argued in section 1.2 that views like this do provide us with a genuinely realistic view of morality, and what I said there is applicable here. Nonetheless, I'd like to say one thing about this particular version of the worry: the fact that EH-realism entails that the application conditions of "wrong" are largely determined by our usage and intentions does not suggest that that view is not a genuinely realistic view, because it's true of *all* our predicates that their application conditions are largely determined by our usage and intentions, including predicates about which we're straightforward realists, e.g., "electron," "mountain," "game," and so on.

The second worry one might have about the above argument is that one might doubt premise (2). I will respond to this worry by simply giving an argument for (2). My argument is based on the fact that (2) follows trivially from the following two (true) claims:

(2a) If it's built into our usage and intentions that "wrong" is a property-ascribing term, then "wrong" *is* a property-ascribing term. (This isn't to say that "wrong" actually succeeds in picking out a property; it's just to say that it belongs in a certain semantic category, i.e., that it plays a certain role in our language. But note that the arguments of this paper suggest that if EH is true, and if we assume a general sort of realism about properties, then "wrong" does succeed in picking out a property.)
(2b) If "wrong" is a property-ascribing term, and if it's built into our usage and intentions that certain sorts of behaviors (e.g., killing babies just for money) are sufficient conditions for the correct applicability of the term, then at least some of these behavior types (e.g., killing babies just for money) *are* sufficient conditions for the correct applicability of "wrong" – and, hence, for the presence of wrongness.

In order to see why these two claims are true, we need to think about what determines the meanings (or more precisely, the application conditions) of our predicates. One view we might adopt here is the following:

> *The folk-usage-and-intentions theory of meaning determination*: The meanings (and in particular, the application conditions) of our predicates are completely determined by folk usage and intentions.

If this view is right, then (2a) and (2b) are obviously true – the point doesn't even require argument in this case. But I want to argue that even if the folk-usage-and-intentions theory is false, (2a) and (2b) are still true. To appreciate this, notice first that even if folk usage and intentions don't *completely* determine meaning and application conditions, they are still large determining factors. It is simply incoherent to maintain that meaning and application conditions are unrelated to folk usage and intentions. Imagine someone saying the following:

> *Crazy Claim A*: I know we use the word "bachelor" to pick out the property of being an unmarried male, but we are simply mistaken about this; in fact, "bachelor" really picks out the property of being a bowling ball.

This is clearly madness. "Bachelor" is, after all, *our* word. It means – at least *roughly* – what we use it to mean. Now, we might reasonably deny that its meaning is completely determined by our usage and intentions, because we might in the end adopt a view like this:

> *The hybrid view of meaning determination*: In trying to figure out the meanings and application conditions of our predicates, we need to *start* with folk usage and

intentions. But there can be problems with folk usage, and so it may be that, in some cases, we need to "clean up" folk usage. For instance, there may be inconsistencies built into the usage and intentions associated with some predicate P, and so meaning theorists (or conceptual analysts) might have to eliminate these inconsistencies by figuring out the best overall way to adjust the application conditions that are determined by folk usage and intentions. Or it may be that if we deviated somewhat from the application conditions that are determined by folk usage and intentions, we would arrive at application conditions that "carved nature at the joints," and so it may be best to maintain that in order to arrive at the real meanings and application conditions of our predicates, we need to take considerations like this into account.

It may be that some view like this is right, but again, I don't see how we could drive any more of a wedge between the application conditions of our predicates and what's determined by folk usage and intentions. But now notice that (2a) and (2b) don't require anything close to a complete connection between the folk usage and intentions associated with "wrong" on the one hand and its application conditions on the other. Indeed, all that's required for the truth of (2a) and (2b) is a fairly loose connection between meaning and usage. All (2a) requires is that "wrong" is the same general kind of word that we take it to be in our usage and intentions: if we use it as a property-ascribing word, then that's what it is. It's hard to see how we could deny this. Imagine someone saying the following:

Crazy Claim B: I know we use "wrong" as a property-ascribing term, but we are simply mistaken about this; in fact, it's really a different kind of word.

It seems to me that this is every bit as crazy as Crazy Claim A. Since "wrong" is *our* word, it is simply incoherent to drive this big a wedge between the way we use "wrong" and its "real meaning." (It wouldn't be crazy to claim that we use "wrong," syntactically, as a property-ascribing term but that we do not use it as a genuinely property-ascribing term. But this isn't relevant to (2a). What I'm saying is crazy – and what we'd have to say if we denied (2a), as I'm understanding that thesis – is that (i) the best overall account of our usage and intentions has it that we use "wrong" as a genuinely property-ascribing term, but (ii) despite this, "wrong" really *isn't* a genuinely property-ascribing term.)

Similar remarks apply to (2b). Assuming that "wrong" is a property-ascribing term, it can't be that it's application conditions are completely unrelated to the application conditions that are determined by our usage and intentions. In particular, no matter how much meaning theorists (or conceptual analysts) need to "clean up" the application conditions of "wrong," it is wildly implausible to suppose that there's any cleaning up to do in connection with things like baby killing just for money. In short, if it's built into our usage and intentions that baby killing just for money is a sufficient condition for the correct applicability of "wrong," then it *is*. And that's all (2b) says.

Thus, it seems to me that (2a) and (2b) are true no matter what – even if the folk theory of meaning determination is false. And since (2) follows from (2a) and (2b), it is true as well.

Before going on, I want to respond to a pair of worries: "Could the style of reasoning employed in this section be used to argue for realism about (a) witches or (b) deliciousness?" No; for the witch-analogue-of-EH and the deliciousness-analogue-of-EH are both pretty clearly false. We don't use "witch" to pick out obviously present naturalistic objects; rather, we use it in such a way that if it picks out anything, it's supernatural objects of a certain kind – and, of course, there just aren't any objects of this kind. And as for "delicious," I would argue that we simply don't use this word in a genuinely property-ascribing, EH-style, objective-realist way (though I won't try to say how we do use it, i.e., whether we use it in a non-cognitivist way, or a subjectivist way, or what).

2.3 *From moral realism to EH*

I now want to argue that if moral realism is true, then EH is true. I begin by giving a quick argument for the claim that EH follows from

SH: The word "wrong" is a property-ascribing term, and certain kinds of actions (or certain natural properties, e.g., *being a baby killing just for money*) are sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong," or the presence of wrongness.

If this is true then EH seems to follow. For in the first place, if "wrong" is a property-ascribing term, this must be because we use it that way (for as we saw above, it would be incoherent to maintain that we use "wrong" as a certain kind of word but that it's really a different kind of word). And similarly, if certain natural properties are sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong," it must be that we use the word in some such way. The sufficient conditions couldn't come from nowhere; they must come (at least partially) from our usage and intentions. Now, again, this isn't to say that our usage and intentions completely determine the application conditions of "wrong." But there has to be some connection here, and indeed, the connection has to be at least somewhat close. In short, it couldn't be that (a) according to our usage and intentions, no action type is sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong," but (b) we are simply mistaken about this and, in fact, certain kinds of actions *are* sufficient for this. Thus, it seems that if SH is true then EH is true as well.

Given this, I now want to argue that if moral realism is true, then EH and SH are also true. I want to do this by admitting that there are versions of realism that reject EH and SH and then arguing that all such views are untenable because they're inconsistent with the specific sort of moral-natural (or moral-mental/physical) supervenience thesis that realists are committed to. Consider, for instance, the following view:

Semantically thick moral realism: EH and SH are false; it is not the case that natural properties like *being a baby killing just for money* are sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong"; in order for an action to be wrong, it also needs to be the case that we all have a *reason* not to perform actions of the given kind. Indeed, it turns out (because of considerations about the sorts of things reasons *are*) that what's needed here is the real existence of a *metaphysically independent* reason – i.e., a reason whose existence is metaphysically independent of the sorts of naturalistic facts that EH-realists think are sufficient for wrongness. This is a substantive additional

requirement for the correct applicability of "wrong," and so, again, EH and SH are false. Nonetheless, moral realism is true because, in point of actual fact, the world is set up so that whenever there's an instance of a natural property like *being a baby killing just for money*, there also really exists a (metaphysically independent) reason for all of us not to perform actions of the given kind. So whenever an action has some such natural property, it will be wrong. But, again, this isn't all there is to the *meaning* of "wrong," or to its application conditions; as far as its application conditions go, there are always two different requirements, one having to do with the presence of a certain kind of action, e.g., a baby killing just for money, and the other having to do with the real existence of a (metaphysically independent) reason not to perform actions of the given kind.

I want to argue that this view is untenable because it's inconsistent with the kind of supervenience thesis that moral realists are committed to. (Note, however, that I will not be arguing against the *metaphysical* thesis that whenever there's an instance of a natural property like *being a baby killing just for money*, there also really exists a (metaphysically independent) reason for all of us not to perform actions of the given kind. I will argue only against the *semantic* thesis that the existence of such reasons is required for the correct applicability of "wrong." For it's only this semantic thesis that's inconsistent with EH. As far as the metaphysical thesis goes, EH-realists can remain neutral.)

The first point I want to make here is a familiar one: the supervenience thesis that moral realists are committed to is much stronger than the supervenience thesis that mind-brain materialists are committed to. The latter thesis doesn't seem to be a conceptual truth. Even if the mind supervenes on the brain, it's plausible to suppose that it doesn't do so in all conceptually possible worlds, i.e., that there are conceptually possible worlds that are physically identical to our world but mentally distinct because they contain ghosts, or immaterial souls. But things are different in the moral case. The idea that there could be two actions that are physically and mentally identical (including their motivations, consequences, and so on) but morally distinct – e.g., one of them being wrong and the other not being wrong – is *conceptually* confused. In short, if you think this is possible, then you don't understand what "wrong" means. But this is just what moral realists of the above kind (i.e., semantically thick moral realists) are committed to. Given what they say about the application conditions of "wrong," they have to allow that it's at least conceptually possible for someone to kill a baby just for money (with selfish motives, horrible consequences, and so on) without it being wrong; for they have to allow that it's conceptually possible that the relevant sorts of metaphysically independent reasons don't really exist. For example, if the relevant reasons are supposed to be propositions, then they have to say it's at least conceptually possible that there are no such things as propositions. Now, they might say that it's metaphysically impossible for an action to fail to be wrong for this reason, but they can't say it's *conceptually* impossible because their view entails that it's not. But the problem is that the supervenience thesis that realists are committed to entails that it *is* conceptually impossible. If some action A (say a baby killing) is wrong, then it's conceptually impossible to change the situation so that (i) all the relevant naturalistic facts about A (including mental facts about things like motives) remain the same, but (ii) A is no longer

wrong. In particular, it's conceptually impossible for A to fail to be wrong because the relevant sorts of metaphysically independent reasons don't really exist.

Put differently, the point is this: If moral realism is true, and if the supervenience thesis that realists are committed to is indeed a conceptual truth, then the question of whether a given action is wrong can't depend on esoteric questions about the real existence of metaphysically independent reasons of the above kind, i.e., reasons whose existence is independent of the kinds of facts that, according to both EH and the supervenience thesis, are sufficient conditions for wrongness.

This argument seems to rule out all versions of realism that are inconsistent with EH. If the supervenience thesis that realists are committed to is a conceptual truth, then realists have to endorse EH; they have to say that the kinds of actions (or natural properties) that EH-realists think are sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong" in fact *are* sufficient for the correct applicability of "wrong." If they say that something else is needed here, they will run afoul of the supervenience thesis, and so they have to say that *nothing* else is needed. (One might respond here by trying to drive a wedge between (a) the supervenience bases of the wrongness of certain kinds of actions and (b) the EH-realist's sufficient conditions for the wrongness of those actions. In order to do this, one would need to find some naturalistic facts or properties that were built into (a) but not (b). But how could this be done? If there were good reasons for thinking that certain natural properties were both parts of the relevant supervenience bases and actually present in the relevant cases of wrong action – and our interlocutor would need both of these results in order to have a tenable version of realism – then EH-realists could simply build these natural properties into their sufficient conditions.)

I haven't argued in this chapter that moral realism is true. But I have argued that realism follows from EH, and this, I think, is an important result. It doesn't establish realism, but it does make the view seem more plausible than it might otherwise have seemed.

Note

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