The idea of moral objectivity seems to me best construed as follows: it is possible to find out about some moral sentences that they are true. Under that construal, the idea is an epistemological thesis. It has further consequences, however: accepting it constrains what can count as an acceptable metaphysics of morality and as a plausible account of the nature of moral discourse.

I take moral scepticism to be the negation of the idea of moral objectivity. The moral sceptic says it is not possible to find out about any moral sentences that they are true. In Chapters 6 and 7 of Harman's and my book, I discussed arguments for moral scepticism.

Chapter 6 is primarily concerned with an epistemological argument for moral scepticism. Suppose we accept (i) the truth of a sentence S is evidence for a sentence T just in case the truth of T would explain the truth of S. (Thus the truth of "It seems to me now that I am sitting in front of a fire" is evidence for "I am sitting in front of a fire" since its actually being the case that I am sitting in front of a fire would explain its seeming to me that I am.) Suppose we also accept (ii) there is no moral sentence whose truth would explain the truth of any factual sentence. It follows that there is no factual sentence whose truth is evidence for any moral sentence. Suppose we also accept (iii) we can only find out that some moral sentence M is true by finding out that some factual sentence is true, whose truth is evidence for M. It follows that we cannot find out about any moral sentence that it is true.

Some people have argued that this argument fails because (ii) is false. I surveyed, and rejected, their arguments. I will not summarize my grounds for doing so here: two of the critics argue against me on this point, and I will return to it in my Reply to Critics.

I said that the argument fails because (i) is false. The truth of

(1) Alfred is gorging on hamburgers

is evidence for

(2) Alfred will soon feel ill, despite the fact that the truth of (2) would not explain the truth of (1). Rather, the truth of (1) is evidence for (2) because the truth of (1) would explain the truth of (2).

The explanation in that example is causal, but there are non-causal explanations too. The fact that a painting has such and such features explains its being an impressionist painting, though not causally, of course. Similarly for other style properties such as being a Federal or Victorian style house. Similarly for such properties as being a religion and being a legal system. Here too, what does the explaining may constitute evidence for the hypothesis whose truth would be explained by it.

So, similarly, I should think for moral sentences. What is my evidence for “Alice acted justly in giving Bert a banana”? Perhaps it is the nonmoral fact that she had promised to do so, and keeping her promise was costly to her, and she could have got away without doing so. That nonmoral fact is evidence for the moral sentence, not because the truth of the moral sentence would explain the nonmoral fact, but rather because the nonmoral fact would explain the truth of the moral sentence—ceteris paribus, the nonmoral fact is what (non-causally) makes the moral sentence true.

Chapter 7 discusses a metaphysical argument for moral scepticism, namely that whose first step takes us to the preliminary conclusion that there are no moral beliefs. (Its second step is: if there are no moral beliefs, then there are no moral truths. And its final step is: if there are no moral truths, then there is no such thing as finding out about any moral sentence that it is true.) Why take the first step? The argument is Hume’s. Suppose we agree that no belief is such that the person who has it is, by virtue merely of having it, favorably or unfavorably disposed toward something. Suppose we also agree that people who are in the state we call “having a moral belief” are, by virtue merely of being in the state, favorably or unfavorably disposed toward something. It follows that people who are in the state we call “having a moral belief” are not having a moral belief. Indeed, there is no such thing. What, then, is the state that we call “having a moral belief”? To be in that state is merely to have an attitude, favorable or unfavorable, toward something.

I called the people who hold these views, and others that follow from them, Letter-Emotivists. And I drew attention to an argument—due to Geach—which seems to me a conclusive refutation of Letter-Emotivism. Geach said that the following would not be a valid argument if Letter-Emotivism were true:

If we ought not kill people, then we ought not pay others to kill people.
We ought not kill people.
Therefore, we ought not pay others to kill people.

But (Geach said) the argument is valid. So Letter-Emotivism is not true.

The people I called Spirit-Emotivists agree. They say: of course there are moral beliefs, and some are true and some are false. On their view, we should say that having a moral belief is also having an attitude, favorable or unfavorable. According to this view, there is such a thing as moral truth, and there is therefore nothing in this view that stands in the way of the possibility of finding out about a moral sentence that it is true. We could therefore bypass it.

I thought it worth a closer look, however, since it is popular nowadays. So Chapter 7 brought out further difficulties for the idea that having a moral belief is having an attitude, and for the idea that moral beliefs have “motivating force”—I took it to be worth stress that those two ideas are not the same.

In Chapter 8, I suggested that opposition to moral objectivity issues from the idea that all of morality is a function of goodness and badness and the comparative betterness. It is a deeply seductive idea. How could it be all right to do a thing if the world would be worse if you did it than if you did not?

On the other hand, goodness, badness, and betterness are metaphysically, and therefore epistemologically, mysterious. On one view, for a state of affairs to be good is for it to, as it were, call on us to promote its obtaining. What a queer property!—and how on earth could we be supposed to find out that anything possesses it?

What is needed, I suggested, is that we give up the idea that there is such a property as goodness. I suggested that we should suppose that all goodness is goodness in a way: thus, for example, being good for use in doing such and such, being good at doing so and so, being good to look at or listen to, being good for a carpet, a tree, a person, and so on. There is nothing metaphysically or epistemologically mysterious about these properties.

The ways of being morally good—being just, kind, generous, and so on—are also ways of being good, and moral requirement, I suggested, is fixed by their contraries. That is, what we are required to do is to avoid moral badness: we are required to avoid being unjust, cruel, mean, and so on.

But I will not summarize here any of the details in Chapter 8, partly because the critics participating in this Symposium do not comment on it, and partly because some of it has since come to seem to me to need revision. (A revised version of the main ideas in Chapter 8 may be found in my “The Right and the Good,” Journal of Philosophy, June 1997.)

Chapter 10 contains my criticism of Harman’s Chapters 1 through 5. I will not summarize it, however, since Harman and I have thought it best to restrict ourselves here to replies to the critics participating in this Symposium.