There is little to be learned from [those] historians of morality, especially Englishmen. They themselves are usually quite unsuspiciously under the influence of a definite morality, and act unwittingly as its armour-bearers and followers—perhaps still repeating sincerely the popular superstition of Christian Europe, that the characteristic of moral action counts in abnegation, self-denial, self-sacrifice, or in fellow-feeling and fellow-suffering. The usual error in their premisses is their insistence on a certain consensus among human beings, at least among civilized human beings, with regard to certain propositions of morality, and from hence they conclude that these propositions are absolutely binding even upon you and me or reversely, they come to the conclusion that no morality at all is binding, after the truth has dawned upon them that to different people moral valuations are necessarily different: both of which conclusions are equally childish follies. . . The worth of a precept ‘Thou shalt’ is still fundamentally different from and independent of [opinions about its origin, religious sanction, etc.] and must be distinguished from the weeds of error with which it has perhaps been overgrown: just as the worth of medicine to a sick person is altogether independent of the question whether he has a scientific opinion about medicine, or merely thinks about it as an old wife would do. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, II §345.

Thinking should not be conceived to ‘form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link’, but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected. C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, V 265.

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*Meeting of the Aristotelian Society, held at the Senior Common Room, Birkbeck College, London on Monday 19th November, 1990 at 8.15 p.m.*
In this paper, I attempt two things: to state in a way that might suit an opponent of the position just as well as a friend one particular version of moral cognitivism; then later to say how a defender of the position might respond to certain objections that have currency in present-day discussions of moral realism, moral properties and the rest. But being more concerned to arrive at a natural statement of the position than to try to complete the effort to make it prevail, I shall begin by rehearsing deliberately the semantical and metaethical considerations that have influenced the particular formulation and terminology I propose.

The general thesis of moral cognitivism, which is a speculative position about the nature of morality (not a moral theory in the sense of the word ‘moral theory’ now prevalent, not a philosophical supplement to first order moral argument), is twofold. It says first, with the error theory of J. L. Mackie, but against emotivism (or moral positivism), prescriptivism, irrealism, quasi-realism etc., that the judgments of morals are irreducibly cognitive in their aspiration. This is to say that moral judgments purport to represent moral knowledge (in the general and ordinary sense of ‘know’) and that there is no other way for them to be seen by their authors, qua moral judgments, than as aimed at truth. Secondly—in opposition to emotivism, prescriptivism, irrealism, quasi-realism etc. and in opposition to the error theory—moral cognitivism claims that the cognitive aspiration of moral judgments need not necessarily or always go unachieved. Despite all proclaimed proofs that it must go unachieved, there are significantly many moral questions where we may hope to attain truth—however many other moral questions there be where (contrary to the expectations of the moral absolutist) underdetermination will have to be expected or allowed for.

I call this position moral cognitivism rather than moral realism, and for several reasons. In ascending order of importance and complexity, let me mention four of these reasons.

First, the name ‘moral realism’ has unwanted associations with
moral absolutism, a commitment the cognitivist need not incur.

Secondly, the name ‘realism’ suggests, even if it does not entail, an unwanted comparison between the aspirations of first order morality and the aspirations of first order science.

Thirdly, in metaphysics, ‘realism’ has associations with the contrast between realism and idealism and between realism and mentalism. In philosophy of mathematics it has associations with the contrast between Platonic realism and conceptualism. Surely the label ‘realism’ consorts ill as it figures in these contrasts with the chief thing that the moral cognitivist is anxious to persuade the world of. (He is not concerned with combating either idealism or conceptualism.)

Fourthly, the choice of the word ‘realism’ has further and more recent associations. In the writings of Michael Dummett and those whom he has influenced, realism contrasts with anti-realism. In ethics the use of the label ‘anti-realism’ for what I call non-cognitivism has sometimes created the impression that the question of cognitivism in ethics can be subsumed within the class of disputes that Dummett and others would label realist/anti-realist disputes. But I would suggest that this is an unfortunate assimilation.

In metaphysics and the philosophy of language, the realism/anti-realism contrast appears under two aspects: sometimes as a contrast between competing conceptions of what the meaning of an assertion is, and sometimes as a contrast between competing conceptions of what the objective correctness or assertibility of a statement must consist in. Over a certain elementary area where confirmation of a claim is supposedly immediate or direct, the realist and anti-realist conceptions of sense coincide and their conceptions of correctness in assertion coincide. But for judgments outside this class, the realist interprets both what he calls truth and what he calls truth-conditions (which he identifies with sense) by a sort of extrapolation from the finite (‘surveyable’) to the infinite (‘unsurveyable’) case, or by analogical extension of what applies in the evidentially more straightforward case to the case where what we judge seems to transcend any possible evidence we could have for what we judge. Thus the semantic realist sees no

1 This gives the anti-realist’s, not the realist’s, version of what is at issue. It is not a version which an even-handed adjudication should simply accept just as it stands. 

Mutatis mutandis, the same applies to the three sentences that follow.
harm in thrusting the judgment out towards the reality that it purports to present. Whereas the semantic anti-realist, by contrast, displays the opposite tendency. He would rather conceive reality in a way that will pull it closer to some judgment he thinks it is in our power to judge. He seeks to replace the semantic realist’s conception of truth and truth-conditions with more constructive conceptions, conceptions conditioned by consideration of what acts we can engage in to prove or disprove a sentence. For this reason, he may well propose that, instead of speaking of the property of truth, we should speak more constructively of assertibility. That usage has served certain expository and rhetorical purposes. But, whatever we decide to call the property that is in question, the chief thing at issue in the semantical-cum-metaphysical dispute is surely the choice between competing accounts of the property that the realist calls truth.2

The conclusion I draw from this characterization of semantical realism and anti-realism is that, if I have not misdescribed that dispute, then ‘moral realism’, suggesting as it persistently will the contrast between realism and anti-realism, is now a very bad name for the position I have called moral cognitivism. There are at least two reasons for this.

The first task of a cognitivist (or of any philosopher who undertakes to oppose emotivism, prescriptivism, quasi-realism and most other 20th century views of morality) is simply to restore the cognitive aspiration of moral judgment. Evidently he could seek to do this even if he were an anti-realist in Dummett’s sense.3

The moral cognitivist’s second, more difficult task, once having restored the cognitivist’s aspiration, is to consider how to make good that aspiration. This task is complex and it involves at least two things. First, the cognitivist needs an independent, relatively uncontroversial fix on the idea of truth. So he needs, I think, to find a way to enumerate the marks of the concept true, in terms (unlike correspondence or matter of fact) that are innocent of

2 On this view of the matter, those who dispute in this connection about the validity of the law of excluded middle seek to follow out their diverging conceptions of this property by taking up diverging standpoints concerning the principles logic must adopt or refuse to adopt in order to ensure that inference preserves it. For a recent statement of a cognate point of view, see Michael Luntley, Language, Logic and Experience, Duckworth 1988.

3 If a moral cognitivist took Dummett’s position in semantics, then, if we called moral cognitivism ‘moral realism’, we should have to call this philosopher an anti-realist moral realist.
parti pris with respect to the question of the status of morality. (In my Fregean usage, $\emptyset$ is a mark of the concept $F$ if everything that is $F$ is $\emptyset$). Let that be task (2a). And then, once he has identified these marks (contrast the more controversial marks on which such things as the issue of bivalence might be claimed to depend) and once the cognitivist and anti-cognitivist are better placed to agree about what the cognitivist would have to show, the cognitivist must try to show how truth could actually be attained in moral questions. Let that be task (2b). Here again, almost everything that is at issue appears to be oblique to the dispute between realism and anti-realism. 4

IV

So much then for moral cognitivism and so much for why it seems better to call it cognitivism than call it anything else.

Even the claim that the aim or aspiration of moral discourse is truth is not trivial. But here I shall put task (1) to one side, and concentrate on the further tasks (2a) and (2b).

Under 2(a), one route along which one may hope to advance in order to give substance to the idea of truth is to ask what truth must be like if the following is to stand as a correct claim about truth and meaning: truth is a property such that to know what sentence $s$ means is to know under what conditions $s$ is true. That is an approach I have advocated elsewhere, and among the several marks of truth I claim to arrive at on that basis is this: if $s$ is true, then $s$ will under favourable circumstances command convergence in belief, and the best explanation of this convergence in belief will require the actual truth of $s$. In Needs, Values, Truth (pp. 149-51), I try to derive this claim (and certain others) from the exigencies of intersubjective interpretation. On this occasion, however, I shall try to reach the same conclusion by a more direct and informal argument, one intended to make appeal to the relations that we intuitively expect between the ideas of truth, knowledge, publicity and objective reality.

4 It is true that there would be much to say in due course about the contrast between discovery and construction in ethics; and this may seem to be cognate with what divides realism from anti-realism. But even this similarity will disappoint in the end if in ethics (as I suppose, see Needs, Values, Truth, Blackwell/Aristotelian Society 1987) 350, 343 note 24) the difference between discovery and construction needs to be brought out not at the level of reference and truth, but at the level of sense. Cf. also section XIII below.
The suggestion is this. A subject matter is objective or relates to an objective reality if and only if there are questions about it that admit of answers that are substantially true. It is sufficient for some judgment that p to be substantially true that one could come to know that p. One can come to know that p only if one can come to believe that p precisely because p. And one comes to believe that p precisely because p only if the best full explanation of one’s coming to believe that p requires the giver of the explanation to adduce in his explanation the very fact that p. What follows from this is that his explanation will conform to the following schema: for this, that and the other reason (here the explainer specifies these), there is really nothing else to think but that p; so it is a fact that p; so, given the circumstances and given the subject’s cognitive capacities and opportunities and given his access to what leaves nothing else to think but that p, no wonder he believes that p.

Let us call such an explanation of a belief a vindicatory explanation of that belief. Using the idea of a vindicatory explanation, one can then say that the chief point on which the correctness of moral cognitivism will turn is the following. Is morality the kind of subject matter in which there are beliefs that admit of vindicatory explanation? At this stage, however, a further claim suggests itself. Surely moral cognitivism can only be correct if morality affords a subject matter in which truths that impinge on me can impinge on others, and vice versa. Within this subject matter as it conceives itself, all discrepancies in belief have to be accounted for. The specious appeal of a falsehood to those not disabled from grasping the truths of this subject matter and the failure of a real truth to gain recognition among such

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5 The criteria for ‘good’ and ‘best’ are in part normative, but they are to be determined by considerations more or less independent of moral cognitivism—i.e. by considerations concerning explanation and the intellectual satisfactions that it seeks.

Of course an argument can only be the best argument if it is from true premises. If we were attempting a philosophical analysis of the concept of truth, then I expect we should be charged with circularity. But we are not. See Needs, Values, Truth, 115, 142, 334, Sameness and Substance, 2, 4, 49-55.

The requirement that one who knows that p should believe p precisely because p, represents the relatively uncontroversial constituent (necessary condition) of a neo-Peircean conception of knowledge. Cf. the sentence from Peirce’s ‘On the Fixation of Belief’ singled out for special attention at my op. cit., pp. 342 and 334.
people will stand in equal need of explanation. But then, if
cognitivism is true, morality will be a subject matter in which
there can be convergence in belief (cf. op. cit., pp. 149–50)—and
not just any old convergence, but a convergence that admits of
vindicatory explanation.\(^6\)

So it seems that a key question for moral cognitivism is this: Is
there a substantial number of moral judgments such that they
can command a measure of convergence in belief and such that
the best explanation of that convergence in belief is vindicatory?
(And not only vindicatory but irreducible. I shall recur to
irreducibility at the very end.) The cognitivist is one who
answers yes to that question.

VI

Before we proceed further, it will be helpful to illustrate by an
example what a vindicatory explanation looks like. By choosing
an example of a belief that resembles an ordinary empirical
belief in being *uncontroversially true* (though not empirical) but
resembles a moral belief in *not being empirical*, I hope to demonstrate
(*inter alia*) the complete generality of what is at issue.

My son (aged nine) believes, and all other boys and girls in his
class at school believe, that \(7 + 5 = 12\). The best explanation of
why they all believe this is not that they have learnt and taken on
trust the one truth \('7 + 5 = 12'\) but (I hope and believe this):
(i) as can be shown by use of the calculating rules (and could in
the end be rigorously demonstrated), it is a fact that \(7 + 5 = 12\).
There is nothing else to think\(^7\) but that \(7 + 5 = 12\).

\(^6\) Cf. C. S. Peirce, ‘The real then is that which, sooner or later, information and
reasoning would finally result in, and which is independent of the vagaries of me and
you. Thus the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception
essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits and capable
of a definite increase of knowledge’ (*Collected Papers* 5, 311). Note again that such claims
are not best seen as definitions or analyses (see note 5 paragraph 2), but as elucidations.
(A new lease of life for pragmaticism.)

\(^7\) Indeed in this particular case any other answer to the question what the sum of \(7 + 5\)
is would generate an actual contradiction, but this is not a universal feature of
explanations given in this mould. That there should be nothing else to think is something
we get not from necessity as such but from the argument for \(7 + 5 = 12\). That particular
argument has the special property of leaving no room even for a possible world in which
\(7 + 5 \neq 12\). But that need not be present in all conclusive arguments. Consider the
arguments (stellar parallax etc.) that leave us with no alternative but to suppose that the
earth revolves around the sun. And think here of what Peirce called ‘secondness’ and the
(ii) The best explanation of my son and his classmates' shared belief is that they are going by the calculating rule that shows there is nothing else to think but that \(7 + 5 = 12\). If there is nothing else to think, then no wonder that, if their beliefs are answerable to the calculating rules, they agree in the belief that \(7 + 5 = 12\).

VII

So much for vindicatory explanations, and so much for knowledge, truth, reality and their linkage. There are many loose ends here. But let me now draw away from considerations whose interest is purely general, and advance to moral cognitivism. It will be recalled that the moral cognitivist’s task (2b) is specific to morality. He has to make it plausible that some moral beliefs admit of vindicatory explanations. Not only must he suggest how explanations of moral beliefs can depend upon the truth of the thing believed: in the end he must also show (see §XVI) how hard it would be to upstage and supersede these explanations by others that released the explainer from the commitment to treat the thing believed as a truth—as that to which the believer is to be seen as making his recognitional-cum-cognitive response.

To face up to this task the moral cognitivist needs to take a positive view of the phenomenon of morality, and there will be advantages both of dialectic (carrying the war into the enemies’ camp) and of verisimilitude (or so I happen to think, but another moral cognitivist could take another view) if the view he can take is a Humean or subjectivist one—a view that is in one sense naturalistic, by virtue of his treating human morality as a certain sort of natural phenomenon, a phenomenon of feeling, but not naturalistic in the sense of the term ‘naturalistic’ associated with the diatribes of G. E. Moore. No analysis or reduction is offered of the content of morality. In the place of reducing moral statements to statements of any other kind, such a subjectivism will offer elucidation. In commentary upon the sense of moral language this subjectivism will involve the sense of the various moral predicates with various kinds of affect,

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8 And the reason why they go by that calculating rule? Well, no conflicting rule would give workable answers. So no wonder that, millennia after the invention of arithmetic, that is the calculating rule that is taught in school. For the thought of something comparable in ethics, see my op. cit., 157, paragraph 2.
comprising a host of pleasureable/unpleasureable sentiments of approbation/disapprobation (these sentiments standing in one-one correspondence with the diversity of thoughts that sustain them) in which we strive perpetually (albeit without quite concluding) to agree. (For a defence of this view, see op. cit. Essay III §6, Essay V with references to Hide Ishiguro, Edward Hussey, Michael Smith, John McDowell et al.) It will see these sentiments and the intersubjectively discernible features of the world with which they engage as related in this way: as the sentiments arise, these features are discerned or singled out; and as the features are discerned or singled out, the sentiments become possible.

According to this picture, we seek (if you want to put it so) to spread our minds similarly upon putatively similar objects of attention (affectively similar, that is), regulating our judgments by our would-be intersubjective standards and simultaneously adjusting our would-be intersubjective standards to the judgments that command our best collective confidence. Our sentiments will have a diversity of sources. But, according to Hume (and here other subjectivists may wish to add or subtract), many or most of those that are intersubjectively reinforced have been reinforced by a social process that ignores partial (thinker-relative) sentiments and actively reinforces sentiments that depart from our private and particular situation and appeal to the point of view that shall be common between one man and another. Although the eventual destination of the public standards that emerge from this process is quite different from that of benevolence, these standards have their origin in a diversification (and a redirection) of primitive benevolence, benevolence importing the weak but morally pure sentiment of pleasure in the happiness of others or of resentment of their misery that makes it possible for us to abandon our private and particular situation and assume a point of view that is common to us with others (cf. Inquiry IX §1). This last is the point of view we are encouraged by others to explore more and more deeply—without detriment to prudence or self-love and without, of course, losing our grasp on our own potentially conflicting interest.

Perhaps the moral sensibility so conceived has its first origin in a primitive system of responses scarcely more differentiated than
boo and hurrah—just as the language of consciousness has sometimes been supposed to have its origin in the verbalization of reactions of striving towards things (ooh) or away from them (ouch etc). We need not deny these possibilities. But in each of these cases of the valuational and the mental, what we have now seems to have transcended its simple origin countless times over. In aspiration at least, our developed response in each of these provinces sees itself as something simply and straightforwardly cognitive. The real question is not the fact of this aspiration (Mackie concedes it and I think Hume does) but whether the aspiration is achieved.9 Our moral response is a response to an intersubjectively discernible feature that engages with sentiment. It expresses the sentiment, but does so by representing an object as thus and so, as having this or that feature.

VIII

Let this be the provisional beginning of a particular positive account of morality. Let us now go back to the question of vindicative explanations. Consider for instance the judgment (just the sort of judgment that Nietzsche would have angrily predicted that one caught by eponymy, nationality and period in my Whiggish, English, after 1833 situation would select) ‘Slavery is unjust and insupportable’. What the moral cognitivist has to make plausible is this. That, by drawing upon the full riches of our intersubjectivity and our shared understanding, such a wealth of considerations can now be produced, all bearing in some way or other upon the question of slavery, that, at some point in rehearsing these considerations, it will become apparent that there is nothing else to think but that slavery is unjust and insupportable. Of course some may think something else—just as some may think 7 + 5 = 11. But this is not to say that there is anything else to think. At some point in running through these considerations, the cognitivist claims, it will appear that the price of thinking anything at variance with the insupportability of slavery is to have opted out altogether from the point of view that shall be common between one person and another. This is the point of view that conditions our

9Note that if the aspiration is achieved, it will not be quite right to say simply that the mind spreads itself on objects. We might then say (either instead or as well) that the mind lights up the features of the world that engage with its sensibilities.
understanding of ‘unjust’ or ‘insupportable’, and that lends motivating effect to our thoughts of their reference. For at some point in the adding consideration upon consideration and comparing one point of view with another, we can have enough. Just as, in making a cable from threads that are ever so slender, we can reach the point where there are enough for such a cable. The situation is not exactly like that with $7 + 5 = 12$. But it is relevantly similar—in respect of the creation of conviction. Or so the moral cognitivist says.

Let it be clear that there is a difference between there being nothing else to think and there being nothing else for us to think; and equally clear that what we are concerned with is the first of these things, not the second. The moral cognitivist will be the first to insist on this, just as he will also insist that the wealth of considerations which show how there is nothing else to think but that slavery is unjust and insupportable will need to be accompanied by an explanation of how those who once thought otherwise failed to grasp or follow through upon this, that or the other specified thing.\(^\text{10}\)

Different philosophers will give different accounts of the difference between there being nothing else to think and there being nothing else for us to think. (Semantical anti-realists can be expected to have their own special way of elucidating the distinction.) But what matters at this point is not so much the nature of this difference (a question that can remain open so far as the present formulation of cognitivism is concerned) but rather the existence of the distinction (and the fact that it is the question what to think, not the question what there is for us to think, that organizes ordinary moral inquiry).

How to create the conviction that there is nothing else—nothing else for anyone at all, anywhere, who knows what slavery is—but that slavery is unjust and insupportable? And how to

\(^\text{10}\) In general, this is not a task to be underestimated. Yet, in the particular case of slavery and the slave-trade, one can survey the arguments used on both sides in all the debates in the British Parliament that led eventually to the voting of the huge sum of twenty million pounds for total emancipation in 1833 (and provoked the final astonishment of the world, see Schopenhauer On the Basis of Morality §18), without discovering what else there was to think. What stood in the way of the acknowledgment of the insupportability of slavery was not really the existence of another sustainable position on the matter but mainly the thought that ‘Though men may be generous with their own property, they should not be so with the property of others'.
David Wiggins

make the argument stick, so that it will then reach beyond one's fellows? The two doubts appear to comprise the philosophically genuine residue of what Mackie calls the problem of relativity. This problem will occupy us for some time (§§IX–XII below). Then in the rest of the paper I shall try to round up certain other problems about cognitivism that still exercise moral philosophers. Many of these may be thought to fall under the head of what Mackie calls the queerness of value-properties.

IX

First then relativity. The term of art 'relativity' sounds so many different bells in moral philosophy that it will be well to make a brief inventory of its senses and single out the sense or senses that are most relevant here.

(i) Among the first and oldest things there are to mean by relativity, is the claim that no act or practice can be assessed as right or wrong, good or bad, etc. without the full specification of circumstances and context (and even, in some versions, the identity of agents). This position could be called contextualism and might be attributed to Aristotle. In Aristotle, it very readily consists with the idea that there is a unitary morality that can find expression in a variety of different acts in a variety of different contexts. This is an undogmatic form of objectivism. Modern versions of the position offer what is still one of the most coherent responses to the facts about ethical diversity.

(ii) At the other extreme, there is the position that maintains that 'right' or 'wrong', 'good' or 'bad' are really relational predicates requiring supplementation not by context or circumstances but by the specification of the moral system or society for which ethical predicates are indexed. Such a position makes disagreement between different moral systems strictly impossible. What seem like rival views of a given act or practice simply attribute different but (it now seems) compossible properties to that act or practice. Squeezing out all inter-systematic disagreement, as it does, this position is too silly (as it stands) to threaten anything.
(iii) Somewhat similarly, it has sometimes been maintained that the properties of truth and falsehood as predicated of moral judgments are really relative to a system of moral assessment, so that the sentence 'harming one's enemies is wrong' could be true relative to Christian morality and false relative to ordinary pre-Christian Greek morality. But this too is a quite unsuitable position from which to make the attack on cognitivism. There is nothing for the words 'relative to pre-Christian morality' to mean in the combination 'true relative to pre-Christian morality', except of course 'according to pre-Christian morality'. And then all that is being said is that according to pre-Christian morality, it is true that harming one's enemies is wrong. This relativizes nothing.

What we learn from these failures of formulation ((ii) and (iii), I mean), is to look for subtler ways in which something might be relative to an ethical system. Relativism (ii) and Relativism (iii) sought to establish difference in extension by dint of crude distortions of sense. What is really needed perhaps is to discover a relativity of sense that is already theoretically uncontroversial and then try to discover some relativity in reference or extension, if there is one, that is consequential on that relativity of sense. Versions (iv) and (v) attempt this.

(iv) Consider the sense of a value-predicate. On the subjectivist account, we grasp the sense of such a predicate by acquiring a sensibility all parties to which respond in a particular way to certain particular features in what they notice in any given act, person or situation. (Contrast this sort of relativity with the relativity or relationality mentioned in versions (i) (ii) (iii).) There are then two reasons for finding relativity at the level of the sense of value-predicates. First, on the subjectivist account, value-predicates cannot be elucidated otherwise than by reference to the responses that the properties that they introduce call for or make appropriate. But if a moral or aesthetic sensibility comprises responses keyed to associated properties, and these moral or aesthetic properties are demarcated only by reference to responses they make appropriate, then the sense of a predicate standing for a property begins by
being fixed only correlative to that response. Secondly, although the sensibility that links value property and response will be eagerly propagated by its participants and will aim for universality (will seek, not without mutual adaptation, to take over the thoughts of all it comes into contact with), it cannot be assumed that it will actually attain universality. So until such time as it attains that, it may be important in the case of any given value-predicate, taken in a certain given sense, to be prepared to make any effort that it takes to strive to enter into the sensibility that conditions that sense.

(v) Finally then, if what you attribute by a value term can depend not only on (e.g.) a reference class (good when appraised as an /) or on circumstances (see relativity (i)) but also, more fundamentally, on the nature of the sensibility that conditions the sense of the value term; and if the reference and extension of a predication involving the term depend at least in part on that sense so conditioned: then (if all this holds) there is the possibility of a fifth and quite unsurprising kind of relativism. This says (however plausibly or implausibly) that, in spite of the fact that disputants with different sensibilities can nominally or formally agree that what is at issue in some argument is (say) ‘whether one ought to acquiesce in the institution of slavery’ or ‘whether one ought to try to harm one’s enemies’—in spite, that is, of disputants seeming to mean the same by ‘one ought to’ or the words translated so—the eventual conclusion that anyone will come to will depend on what is distinctive in the substance of their understanding of the question of what one ought to do. That substance is not guaranteed to be the same by its being agreed that ‘ought’ is the best rendering of the thoughts they are thinking.

X

Relativities (iv) and (v) combine to constitute the real challenge of relativity.

I think that the cognitivist response to the challenge will best take the form of distinguishing at least three kinds of difference
of opinions that may be exemplified by the moral convictions of parties apparently, potentially or actually in dispute.

(a) (Verdict of incommensurability.) It may seem in a certain sort of given case that the disputants (who may or may not know of one another's existence and may not actually argue) are caught up in such utterly different forms of life and civilization—that their expectations and presumptions are so different—that any semblance of agreement on the sense of the question what one ought to do or what is good is only a semblance. Because the standards of correctness (etc.) implicit in their respective norms are so utterly different, the reference and the extension of the words that they use cannot be expected to be the same. The reference and extension may differ even though one cannot improve on an interpretation that interprets all the parties as claiming this or that is what they 'ought' to do. Let it be noted that this form of relativism, which may remind the reader of various claims entered by Peter Winch, does not threaten cognitivism as such. (Whatever else it may threaten.) For here at least, the difference between the disputants is too great for them even to arrive at a point where they really disagree; and the fact of their seeming to disagree cannot count against the cognitivist expectation that there will be convergence in belief among those who do understand the same thing.

(b) (Counsel of perseverance.) On the other hand, it may seem in a given case that there really is a common question that the disputants are addressing, that the disagreement between them is non-trivial, but that their initial disagreement is best explained by a difference in their starting points, a difference they could overcome. If that is how things seem, then a philosopher can begin by trying to make explicit any relativity to circumstances that may be discovered within the content of the question on which they disagree. Once that has been attempted, it may still appear that there is a disagreement of substance. But this disagreement does not imply that it is senseless to urge that the matter be deliberated further and argued à outrance. For under the present diagnosis of the situation, we may want to say that it simply does not matter that at the outset the parties' understandings are conditioned by different sensibilities. For surely they can try to overcome that by any means that may come to hand. What is more, before they
continue argument on the level of reasons, they must sometimes interrogate one another and themselves about the aetiology of their beliefs. Once they understand that better then, despite the difference in their starting points, surely one or the other or both parties can still arrive at an improved sensibility that is the proper inheritor of the sensibility they began with. If so, why can they not arrive at an improved standard of correctness? In so far as our philosophical response to disagreement is to urge perseverance with the matter in hand as a substantive moral or social question, we have still not abandoned the Aristotelian idea that (at least as regards substantial questions) a unitary morality can be found beneath the visible diversity of practices. An account of morality that begins by grounding the phenomenon in human sensibility and in the contingency of particular desires that arise from practices at particular times and places can postulate an initial relativity of morality to that sensibility, but then (in a manner in some ways anticipated by Hume himself) make room for what is central to any given morality to surmount this condition. Of course, unless a fully formed universal notion of rationality exists in advance of the attempt to surmount—unless there is a notion of practical rationality which is more than something immanent in actual norms and practices, more than Aristotelian—there is no guarantee (pace Kant) that morality can always or everywhere transcend its starting point. Equally, though, no limit needs to be set in advance. For the effect of morality’s attaining a better understanding of itself along the lines suggested by Hume is not to identify that clear limit but to make room for both possibilities, our capacity to transcend in one case and our inability to transcend in another case. (See (a) and (c).) The cognitivist need not make predictions, except to urge in general terms (and to try to show in particular cases) that, for the central core of morality, perseverance is the proper counsel.

(c) (Finding of underdetermination.) So much for cases where we may reasonably persevere. In other cases, on the other hand, even though there is the appearance of a common question,

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11 With some disagreements, it may eventually appear that the question is not so much one of morality as one of ethos, and that the disputants can be content to leave matters at that. Cf. (c) below. For the distinction of morality and ethos, see Aurel Kolnai, ‘Moral Consensus’, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1969–70.
disagreement may appear inexpugnable. Relativization to circumstances does not help. Relativization to ethos represents distortion. And there is no manifest possibility of any winning set of considerations ever being mustered. In this case, the disagreement between the two parties may be real yet represent, in a certain sense that has interested Bernard Williams, a purely notional confrontation. It may represent a choice between alternatives such that it could never be a real option for an upholder of one option to live the other. And it may seem that there is no standpoint from which this choice could ever be deliberated truly practically. If so, and if, where practical reason idles, it is pointless to look to it for a practical verdict, then—in so far as we persist in attributing to the disputants a common understanding of what is meant by the question of what one ought to do about this or that—well, indeterminacy or underdetermination is revealed in the reference and extension of certain moral words (understood in this way) or in certain combinations of them (so understood.)

XI

Is it not a refreshing thought that, in all the mutual relations of the many and various ethical systems there have been in the world, we might find not undifferentiated difference but some cases of mutual opacity and, among cases where there is not opacity but sufficient transparency, some cases where the question can be pursued and decided and other cases where one might reasonably but undogmatically doubt that? I myself think so. What is essential to cognitivism as I have described it is only that there will be a sufficiency of cases where the counsel of perseverance is the right reaction to the disagreement that is found; and that plenty of the seemingly central questions of ethics will either collect convergent answers (as all contextualists and even some relativists, such as Vico, have claimed) or will occasion the kind of disagreement for which the counsel of perseverance is the right reaction.

XII

Let us return now to where we were before moral relativism made its appearance. In §VIII, I mentioned the cognitivist’s need to find some way to show that there is nothing else to think.
Perhaps the cognitivist cannot always show this. But, as I have implied, the moral cognitivist position does not stand or fall with his doing so in every case. Against the claim that, whatever conviction may be achieved, there will always be a tenable point of view that finds something inconsistent with our own best considered finding, its main defence will have to be to attack the insidious presumption of symmetry between points of view. Unless the non-cognitivist or the error theorist can show that there is an incoherence in the very idea of enlightenment and of refinement of moral conceptions, it is simply question-begging to make this presumption.

Here, however, I can imagine the non-cognitivist disclaiming any such presumption of symmetry and pursuing another doubt about how our claim ‘there’s nothing else to think’ can get beyond ‘there’s nothing else for us to think’. The non-cognitivist may suggest that we should return to the cognitivist’s imagined attempt to show that there is nothing else to think but that slavery is unjust and insupportable, and suggest that we should ask how the cognitivist could show that just anyone who is willing to take up the point of view that shall be common between one person and another must subsume the institution of slavery under the concepts it is subsumed under in the argument for its injustice and insupportability. How to demonstrate the necessity to speak in this connection of ‘injustice’—or even of ‘slavery’?

This is a challenging line of questioning. But my answer to it is that, in order to make this into a real difficulty, the opponent of cognitivism would have himself to show the workability of the scheme of moral ideas that dispenses in the face of phenomena such as the slave trade and its historical effects with ideas like ‘justice’, ‘slavery’, ‘using human beings as means not ends’, etc. Like everyone else, he needs to have a reason for what he says here—unless he simply aspires to the condition of the philosophical sceptic (namely one whom we ignore entirely, except when moved to a scientific interest in the theoretical tenability of his position). When the opponent of cognitivism looks for those reasons, he will discover what everyone else already knows, which is that the workability of moral ideas cannot be judged idea by idea but only by comparing systems that make use of the idea with systems that dispense with it—comparisons
that are complex and difficult for the defenders of moral positions and equally difficult for critics who criticize in good faith.

XIII

For the tenability of cognitivism, then, everything seems to depend of what kind of conviction can be created in particular first order cases, or cannot be created; and once again we are led to the conclusion that a moral cognitivist has simply to work from the most convincing cases that he can find. All he can do in testing and/or commending his speculative position is to ask what the best arguments are that can be mustered in this or that specimen case. Unlike so many philosophical positions, moral cognitivism cannot even pretend that it reposes upon an a priori foundation. The thesis is grounded, if in anything, then in the peculiar nature, strength and dialectical and persuasive resources that can be mustered within the subject matter of morality itself. It is a form of speculative optimism.

There are two reasons why such an outcome may be found disappointing. First it may seem that any proper philosophical position is, if true, true a priori. But that is just a prejudice. Secondly it may be disturbing that the contingencies of human nature and human responses should suddenly appear, in the cognitivist's account, to be what determines the truth or falsity of moral claims. But that would be a misunderstanding—a mistake comparable to a confusion of Sinn and Bedeutung. What is shaped and conditioned by the contingencies of human nature and the responses in which human beings can share is the sense of moral language. These things shape the content of the moral questions that we ask. But once that content is given and the sense of some moral question is determinate, it is not human nature and responses that determine the reference or truth-value of the putative answers to it.12 You can say, if you like, that we create a form of life that invests certain features of people, acts and situations with the status of values. (Surely that is not false.) But this is not to say that values are created thereby. Rather values are discovered by those who live the form of life that is said to have been created.

12 See op. cit., 204–6, with references there to Michael Smith, L. Humberstone and M. K. Davies, 314, 343n, 346ff, 350.
Having explained what moral cognitivism amounts to, why the position is not well called realism, and what it would take to gain favour for it; and having been prompted by the argument from relativity to say that cognitivism is not the kind of view that admits of a priori proof or disproof, it remains to survey some of the more serious remaining objections to moral cognitivism. The considerations that remain may be subsumed under the general heading of what Mackie called the queerness of moral properties. Off the page and by implication, I would claim to have done almost enough already to answer that charge. Nevertheless it may be well to be more explicit.

First, vindicatory explanations of moral beliefs work (where they do work) after the same fashion as vindicatory explanations of arithmetical beliefs. Vindicatory explanations are causal explanations but the causality that they invoke is not one that holds between minds and values or between minds and integers. That would be a gross misunderstanding of what is got across by the explanatory schema exemplified by: ‘There’s nothing else to think but that 7 + 5 = 12. So no wonder they think that 7 + 5 = 12’. (Somewhere else I will try to say more about that schema.)

Secondly, values are non-natural things and that may make them seem queer. But on a careful understanding of ‘non-natural’, this only means that values do not have to pull their weight in one of the experimental sciences. That does not make them inaccessible to thought, experience or feeling. See again §V. But let me add that one need not take the view that the way in which values are accessible to thought is to be understood on the model of the way in which colours are accessible to perception. The true purpose of the analogy that has sometimes been made between colours and values was not that comparison. The purpose of the analogy was only to draw attention to an abstract point about the part played by a sensibility, which is not different from the point that was explored at the time of our formulating the fourth version of the claim that values are relative. But I note again that the fourth kind of relativity does not logically imply the fifth. And (more important), even if there is relativity of the fifth kind, a quantum of the indeterminacy of
sense and reference that it imports can be lived with. Moral cognitivism, when defended as an account of what is central to morality, will easily survive the underdetermination of some questions, provided that there are numerous others at the centre of morality that are not underdetermined.

XV

So far, recapitulation seems nearly sufficient to counter the charge of queerness. But more seriously, one must mention the objection that arises from the motivating role of thoughts of value. The objection is this. Thoughts of value or obligation not only appear to us as beliefs; they also have some sort of necessary connection with our having a reason of some sort (not necessarily a universally overriding reason) to act (or otherwise respond) accordingly. On the other hand, no mental state that is a belief and only a belief can suffice in itself to explain one’s acting or responding thus or so. So, since valuing something does suffice for having such a reason, whereas the state of having a belief does not suffice for having a reason to act or respond so, valuing something cannot simply amount to believing that it has such and such value. Or so the objector will say. The moral conviction that p cannot then be a straightforward belief that p.

In various forms, the objection has had considerable currency, as have similar arguments designed to discredit the ordinary conception of weakness of will. But we need not disturb the claim of necessary connection between our thoughts of value and our having defeasible reasons of some kind. Questions could only arise about this if a stronger principle were looked for. What we should scrutinize closely is the claim that nothing that is a belief could suffice in itself to explain someone’s acting or responding thus or so. Obviously ‘a mere belief’ need not do so. But to say that is not to say that the right sort of belief with the right sort of content cannot. Here I would refer back to our

\[13\] For what it is worth, my view of the paradoxes of \textit{akrasia} is that, even though the principles used to derive them do have conceptual backing, everything always depends on how precisely the thing that has the real conceptual backing is to be formulated. Always the principles that actually deliver the paradox either fail to be clear or fail to be exceptionless. Always philosophers who struggle to refine these principles ignore the irreducible non-intellectual components of execution and resolve in acting out the best finding of practical reason and the difficulties (the diversity of human goods etc.) of acquiring the character and virtues that furnish these powers of execution and resolve.
Humean account of the nature and genesis of convictions with the content that moral convictions have: some object of appraisal x makes appropriate such and such an approbative response. Not only does a judgment of this kind furnish the right sort of content. To grasp a thought with this content, to grasp a thought that aspires to express the point of view that shall surmount one’s private and particular situation and be common between one person and another—this surely presupposes an original participation in a general way of feeling and of being motivated that sets up the standard for such appropriateness. Or so the Humean story went. The story does not in the least exclude someone’s opting out of that participation. But where the person who has grasped the sense and point of moral language begins, according to this story, is by finding—not by merely believing—that x has this or that value or disvalue.

Is this enough? Well, given the concession about the possibility of opting out, this account of the matter falls short of demonstrating that the state of believing that x has such and such value could suffice in itself to explain someone’s acting thus or so. An after-the-fact explanation that aspired to achieve real explanatory ‘completeness’ would have, I suppose, to draw attention (even at risk of painting the lily) to certain obvious facts about the case, facts often neglected or redescribed by writers of a rationalistic persuasion, the agent’s state of character, his executive virtues, and so on.14 But before we take this admission as sustaining the objection, we must remember that exactly the same is true of an explanation of someone’s acting thus and so that depends on the fact of his valuing or his desiring something in such and such a way as so and so. At least in the case of most states of valuing, the simple fact of the agent’s doing so will never suffice by itself for the ‘complete’ explanation of his act.

Does this account and my tu quoque defence of it restore the idea that an explanation of someone’s acting thus or so necessarily depends on the explainer’s attributing to the agent

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14 Writers of the rationalistic persuasion fail to see someone’s conformity in act to his best considered finding as the hard-won achievement that it is. They fail to see it as something not to be taken for granted. See note 13 above; op. cit. 267; and (for this and other common themes) Mark Johnston, ‘Dispositional Theories of Value’, The Aristotelian Society, supp. vol. 63, 1989.
the desire to act so? No. I don’t think so. Such an explanation only depends on the idea that the motivational effectiveness of moral beliefs, like that of moral valuations, requires them to operate from the right general basis of affect (desire etc.). We do not need to reckon under this head the particular desire to do the act that we hope to explain the agent’s having done. Indeed, so far as that act is concerned, we probably hope to reserve the right to explain the desire to do that as itself consequential upon the operation in its actual context of the moral sentiments. This is the real import (I should claim) of Hume’s theory, a theory that has never deserved the hostility of moral cognitivists. The positive Humean theory of morality does not undermine moral cognitivism. Nor, incidentally, does it undermine truly moral motivation. With regard to those great issues, it is perfectly benign.

What then are moral thoughts that motivate? They are states of finding that x deserves such and such response. Or they are states of valuing x as having value v. It comes to the same thing. These states are comprised in larger motivational states. The full moral thought, if you like, is not just a belief. But it is not just a valuation either. The valuation itself can be the belief.

XVI

If there are moral properties and the cognitivist says we explore in our thoughts how they are disposed across characters, acts, outcomes and the rest, then what difference must he say these properties make to anything? If he is to bury finally the charge of their queerness, perhaps this is the question he must in the end respond to.

Moral properties do not vary independently of physical properties. But so far as the particular cognitivism I recommend is concerned, this is simply an instance of the perfectly general truth that, given a particular object x in a particular context, there will be all sorts of causal and conceptual interdependencies between a property of x in one range and x’s properties in other ranges. If that is the truth in supervenience, let us not deny it! But there is nothing the least bit special here to moral properties. And I conclude that interdependence with other properties including physical properties is not what gives value properties either the standing of respectability as really physical or the
standing of respectability as inert and harmless qua dependencies of the physical. Their respectability is better sustained in another way.

What difference do moral properties make? Perhaps the most striking among the possible differences they could make is this. Suppose that value properties continue to figure in explanations of people's actions and responses and that, despite efforts to do this, it always proves impossible to replace these explanations by other explanations that dispense with the mention of such properties. Suppose that at least some explanations that depend upon mention of value properties simply cannot be reformulated or purified of all mention of value, or that they cannot be revised in this way without loss of the understanding that these explanations create or the predictive commitments that they import. Then, if value properties turn out in this way not to be upstaged by physicalistic or scientific explanations, value properties are making a difference. They are not upstaged, because the explanations in which they figure reveal to one conscious understanding how another conscious understanding apprehended something and responded to it. This is something the theorist himself is revealed as committed to think of as real. For on the supposition being entertained, the mention of such properties in an explanation will reveal how some conscious being responded not only to the natural features of the world but to features that mind itself, as it has taken on a life of its own, has marked out there. Value properties are properties that mind critically delimits and demarcates in the world.

For such properties as these to be indispensable and irreducible—for what I have called vindication to be one indispensable element in the explanation of thinking and acting—this is surely what it is for consciousness not merely to arrive in the natural world, but for it to make itself at home there. By critically determining the presence there of valuational properties, we colonize that natural world. By treating the vindication of thought as indispensable to understanding what happens in the world of mental and non-mental beings, and by treating ideas of value as irreducible within our explanatory practice to any other ideas that pull their weight in the description of the world, we demonstrate practically the irreducibility of that consciousness.

It may seem for a moment, when we press the irreducibility
point, that consciousness itself might be an illusion. But that is absurd. (To what does the illusion appear?) Less absurdly, it may seem that a consciousness that can do what I have just said consciousness can do is an illusion. At least this is not a self-defeating claim. But what moral cognitivism says is that it is not something it is conceptually necessary for us to believe. Value properties are real, if they are, because he who would understand norms and valuations and the strivings and choices in which they issue denies or ignores values at his peril. At risk, that is, of failing to understand fully what can be fully understood.

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