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The Empirical Basis of Ethics

What kind of justification can be offered for ethical assertions? Ethical assertions attribute ethical properties—goodness and evil, justice and injustice, and so on—to actions, people, or states of affairs. Like most contemporary philosophers, I believe that any time you assert a property of some concrete object, the only way to justify such an assertion is by appeal to experience. The experience or experiences on which an assertion is grounded are what I mean by the “empirical basis” of the assertion.

“Ethics,” in a broad sense, can refer to any inquiry aimed at establishing guidelines for the conduct of life in general. But I am concerned here with just a branch of ethics so defined. It seems fair to distinguish two large divisions of ethical thought, which can be traced back to Cicero’s contrast between “utility” and “duty.” Under the former heading belong all those considerations that revolve around happiness as a human goal; under the latter, considerations related to such notions as justice, righteousness, and desert. The division corresponds approximately to Kant’s distinction between maxims of prudence and commands of morality.¹ Maxims of prudence teach us how to pursue happiness; the commands of morality teach us what we must do in order to deserve to be happy. Kant perhaps formulated the distinction most clearly, but something like it seems to pervade much of the history of ethics in the west. And the same or a similar distinction is reflected in ordinary discourse. Most people, I believe, recognize a difference between saying of something that it is “good” and saying that it is “morally good.” The adverb seems to acknowledge that there are both moral and non-moral senses of “good.” Terms like “justice” and “righteousness” seem to carry this moral inflection without need of an adverb. Accordingly, the second of these branches of ethics might be called the “distinctively moral” branch. And I can describe the ethical assertions that I wish to focus on here as “distinctively moral assertions.”

The first feature of distinctively moral assertions, then, is precisely that they are thought to be different in kind from assertions about happiness and what is productive or destructive of happiness. We might further specify: this difference in kind is such as to imply that moral assertions cannot be translated without loss into assertions about happiness, or in more technical terminology, moral assertions are not reducible to assertions about happiness. Perhaps you are familiar with G.E. Moore’s defense of the proposition that properties like goodness, in a moral sense, are “non-natural properties.” In his usage, natural properties were those which were either recognized by the natural sciences or could be completely explained in terms of properties recognized by the natural sciences.² I think that part of the distinctiveness of moral properties consists in their being non-natural in this sense. Now to say that moral properties cannot be defined with reference to happiness is not the same thing as to say that they are non-natural. But I believe that both common usage and philosophical tradition understand moral properties as radically different from the sorts of things recognized by contemporary natural science. I also believe that if you are going to construct an ethical theory which rejects non-natural properties, your best bet will be an ethics of happiness. But there’s no need to defend that claim here. We

¹ *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. James W. Ellington, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1993), 25-7 (Ak. 417-19).

² See *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), esp. p. 40. This is my formulation rather than Moore’s. His text is complex and open to interpretation. But this way of characterizing non-natural properties reflects a simplification that the term has undergone in subsequent discussion.

can merely stipulate that by “moral assertions” we shall mean assertions not reducible either to assertions about happiness or to assertions which refer exclusively to natural properties.

Another feature of distinctively moral assertions, as I understand them, is that people who assert them commonly take them to be true in a straightforward sense. In other words, they take the properties referred to by moral terminology to be objectively real properties of things. And if you persuade them that their moral assertions are false, they will understand that to mean that these properties do not in objective fact belong to the subjects they attributed them to.

In looking into the possibility of justifying ethical assertions, it is specifically moral assertions *as understood in this way* that I am interested in—moral assertions understood as irreducible to considerations of happiness, irreducible to assertions about natural properties, and attributing objective properties to things. In the terms used in the most recent discussions of this issue, I want to explore the possibilities for defending non-naturalistic ethical realism.

As you know, one of the dominant schools of philosophy during the 20th century denied that ethical statements are genuine assertions at all. Philosophers of a positivistic stripe argued that to call something ‘good,’ ‘right’, and so on was not to attribute a property to it but to express or recommend certain attitudes toward it. At times it was not clear whether they thought they were describing ordinary usage or suggesting a radical revision of it. At any rate, as a thesis about how moral language is actually used, this view seems to have fallen out of favor among most philosophers. More common today is the kind of theory defended by J.L. Mackie, which he christened an “error theory” of ethics.³ This kind of theory admits that ethical propositions are genuine assertions and must therefore be taken as intending to refer to objectively real properties. But such references fail, because there *are* no real properties of that ethical sort. This is the error to which “error theory” points, and it holds all distinctively moral propositions to be false. Hence another way of describing my project is to say that I want to explore the possibilities of defending ethical realism against the criticisms of the error theorists.

The issue can be expressed in the form of two simple questions: What empirical evidence do we have for the truth of some distinctively moral assertions? And, how good is that evidence?

Just as a point of reference I should say that the ethical propositions in which I am most interested are those which attribute dignity and worth to persons or ascribe fundamental human rights to persons. Accordingly, the empirical bases I am most concerned with are the experiences that ground our beliefs in these sorts of values. But this discussion must proceed at a somewhat more general level.

The understanding of certain assertions or properties as distinctively moral in the way I have described is founded, I believe, in a type of experience. To claim that people have experiences of this sort is not particularly controversial. The experiences are common enough. The hard question is whether we are justified in taking these experiences as trustworthy, as providing reliable evidence for what they seem to show us.

Perhaps the best way to describe this sort of experience is by contrasting it to another sort. For it seems to me that we have experiences corresponding to both sides of the grand division of ethics that I have been discussing. Sometimes these occur separately, and sometimes together. They occur together when we find ourselves experiencing the familiar conflict between what I see as my duty and what I want to do.

I want to be happy. When I see some opportunity for enjoyment, I am moved to realize that possibility. There are also occasions on which I see a situation as *calling on me* to take some

³ *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin, 1977), 35.

action. These seem very different sorts of experience. True, when I feel called on to act in a certain way, there must be something in me that is capable of feeling and responding to that call. And this tempts some observers to believe that the experiences are not importantly different, that in fact everything I do is motivated by a desire for my own satisfaction. And it is quite possible that some observers *feel* no such difference between experiences. But many of us, perhaps most of us, do feel such a difference. Enjoyment of any sort is experienced as, among other things, an affirmation of the self, and the pursuit of enjoyment is felt as self-assertion. Now when I feel it incumbent on me to do something, it feels different. The sense is not necessarily one of self-denial. That description might be appropriate when I am torn between duty and temptation. But in other cases I might be inclined to describe it as self-assertion of a different sort, or perhaps as assertion of a different aspect of the self. And even then it differs from the first sort of self-assertion in that it involves a certain kind of deference, a kind of submission to an importance which transcends me. It may be as simple as responding to someone else's need for reassurance or consolation. Or it may be as profound as an act of heroism. In any event, what motivates me in this second sort of case is a sense of the worthiness of another to be respected or cared for, independently of any benefit redounding to me, or a sense of the desirability of some state of affairs independently of any gratification it may bring me. Again, we must admit that if you are the sort of person you ought to be, there is a kind of gratification in doing what you ought to do. But we insist that it is gratification of a different sort. Surely the satisfaction of having fulfilled one's duty, of having done what was most called for by the situation, is very different from the ordinary satisfactions of fulfilled desire, whether those desires be animal satisfactions or distinctively human ambitions. To take a personal example, I sometimes fantasize about being acclaimed as a great musician—and considering my lack of talent, this requires a generous amount of imagination—but the joy I would take in such acclaim is a very different sort of thing than the satisfaction of a job well done or an obligation fulfilled, or the satisfaction of having performed “above and beyond the call of duty.” The difference is sometimes expressed by saying that the motivation toward happiness or pleasure is felt as coming from inside the person, while moral force is felt as confronting one from the outside.

If you reflect on these experiences, I think you will agree that in them, moral values are experienced as both independent of happiness and as objectively real. Here, if anywhere, we would expect to find empirical evidence for our moral assertions. But the hard question remains: Should we regard these experiences as providing us with evidence of the existence of such values? Should we ever regard such experiences as revealing to us some truth?

Many people who are skeptical about moral truths regard some non-moral propositions, particularly scientific propositions, as unobjectionable. They fault moral assertions precisely for failing to live up to the standards of scientific evidence. This is something that both old-fashioned positivists and modern error theorists tend to have in common. There are some philosophers, of course, who embrace a more global skepticism, or as they might prefer to call it, anti-realism. For present purposes, I am just going to assume that they are wrong, that our scientific beliefs and the general run of beliefs based on sense-perception stand on pretty firm foundations. A common strategy used in defending ethical beliefs is to show that they do not differ as much as they seem to from these admittedly reliable sorts of belief. This strategy seems to become more persuasive as we begin to understand that the grounds of these other sorts of belief are not as straightforward as we once thought. At this point, some brief remarks about the philosophy of knowledge are in order.

Once upon a time it was believed that a science, understood as a body of knowledge, had to be founded on either or both of (a) general principles which were necessarily true, and whose necessary truth was self-evident to reason, or (b) direct observations of individual facts, observations which, in the ideal, would be incorrigible. In either event, the idea was that science could be certain, because our routes of access to its foundations were infallible. This view of science has now been generally abandoned. Some philosophers deny that any truths are self-evidently necessary. Others continue to believe that some truths, for which the prime candidates are certain logical and mathematical propositions, are necessary and in some sense knowable a priori (independently of experience). But hardly anyone, if anyone, maintains that the domain of necessary truths can be enlarged to include other principles fundamental to our knowledge of the world. Most of us still accept some version of the Logical Positivists' principle that knowledge of the world outside our minds must be fundamentally empirical. At the same time, the second of the proposed bases of certainty has likewise fallen out of favor. The attempt to identify observations which were both incorrigible and rich enough to solidly ground what we think we know about the world—this attempt quickly foundered. The lesson most philosophers have drawn from these developments is that none of our capacities for establishing foundations for knowledge can be considered infallible. All of our “starting points” are in principle subject to revision. The method of science is at heart that which John Rawls, with reference to ethics, dubbed the method of “reflective equilibrium.”⁴ We progress by comparing our general principles with specific observations, and adjusting both our principles and our reports of our observations until the two cohere with each other. New observations and further reflection on principles can prompt us to repeat the process. On this understanding of science, a report of an observation is a description of an experience which is *provisionally* taken to be reliable. Neither the experience nor the linguistic description of it is considered a bare datum; not only do our theories depend on observation, observation conversely is theory-dependent. The content of your experience is determined in part by the expectations and beliefs you bring to it. Neither our scientific principles nor our observations are, so to speak, “pure,” each being “contaminated” to some extent by the other. What makes an observation an observation, however, is that the proposition for which it is most immediately taken to provide evidence arises directly from the experience itself, rather than being consciously inferred from it. I believe that the book is on the desk because I see that the book is on the desk, and the “because” here does not represent an inference. At the same time, we must recognize that my ability to see that the book is on the desk results from a learning process in which innate programs of cognitive development have been actuated and informed by previous experiences. We might say that to really see that the book is on the desk requires that I previously be in possession of the concepts ‘book’ and ‘desk,’ and a grasp of spatial relations. But to speak of concepts tempts one to regard the whole thing as more intellectual or more conscious than it actually is.

In philosophical usage, the term ‘intuition’ generally refers to an experience which, to the experiencer, appears to be a direct awareness of some reality or an immediate apprehension of the truth of some proposition. Intuitions, like sense-perceptions, may well be the end-product of certain processes, but we are not conscious of these processes; we are conscious only of their results. Ethical intuitions fit this description. In the past, the term was sometimes used for an allegedly direct insight into the truth of general ethical principles. Contemporary ethicists tend to restrict it to experiences of individual ethical facts, which can then, of course, be taken up into the method of reflective equilibrium and used as bases for establishing general principles.

⁴ *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 17-18, 42-45.

If we take ethical intuitions as our “observations” for the purpose of doing ethics, and we view the method of reflective equilibrium as the appropriate way to achieve progress in the science of ethics, what differences will this make in how we think of these intuitions? In particular, what difference will it make in our judgments of their reliability?

We should start by noting some peculiarities of ethical intuitions. They are in one way more complex than many others. From the content of an ethical intuition we can abstract an ethically neutral description of the act or object being judged, and thus distinguish it from the moral property attributed to it. Recognizing an act as, say, an instance of unjustified harm presupposes recognizing it as an instance of harm. In the current terminology, ethical properties “supervene” on the natural properties of things. There is disagreement about just what this relation of supervenience is, but we need not settle that issue here. In the experience of intuition, recognition of what one passes judgment on and recognition of what judgment is called for may not be readily separable. But it is clear at any rate that one can contrive an ethically neutral description of a situation, and we can then explore our ethical intuitions as responses to these hypothetical facts. Indeed, much of ethical argument and the teaching of ethics consists in presenting people with such cases and drawing out their responses. This is a reason why history and literature are so useful in such discussions. Our “experiments” in ethics are more often like thought experiments than like laboratory experiments. This feature may increase the uncertainty of our ethical intuitions. Our intuition in a hypothetical case might not coincide with the intuition we would have when confronted with an actual case fitting the same description. At the same time, however, hypothetical cases may tend to make our observations more trustworthy by insulating our intuitions from irrelevant influences like biases of attention and interest and from constraints of time and urgency which are often present in actual situations where judgment and decision are called for.

Now let us turn to some points on which ethical intuitions are similar to other intuitions or observations. First, a single experience, or a set of experiences that are generically the same, can be subject to multiple descriptions, some of them incompatible with others. We know that different witnesses to a single event may supply different and in some respects contradictory reports of what happened. Besides elements of interpretation and perspective that influence the experience itself, there is further room for interpretation when we reflect on and describe the experience. This is perhaps most clearly evident when one’s reaction to a situation is considered part of the experience to be reported. Thus, one poem may seem to us to capture the essence of an emotion, or of the mood of an action or event, much better than another. And readers may disagree about who does the better job. Here it is not a matter of discriminating simply true from simply false reports, but of distinguishing more or less accurate, more or less complete descriptions. For a simple example, consider our reaction to a minor accidental injury. When I stub my toe on a table leg, I get mad. What precisely is involved in this emotion? Am I in some sense “blaming” the table for hurting me? Blaming the gods for not preventing this accident? Why do I curse when this happens, and on what or whom am I calling down damnation? Finally, what role should my answers to these questions play when I try to describe the experience? Shall I just say, “I stubbed my toe,” and let you imagine the rest, on the assumption that you know what it’s like because it has happened to you? What about people who have trained themselves into reverse cursing? Instead of saying “God damn it” they say “God bless it.” Do they have the same experience and merely interpret it differently, or is the experience itself somehow different?

Similar ambiguities attach to ethical intuitions. Two persons may agree in morally condemning an action, but one may describe it by saying “I saw that unjustified injury was being done,” another that “I saw that the victim’s rights were being violated,” another that “The agent failed to show the respect due to rational agents,” another that “The agent was deficient in compassion.” A consequentialist may say “I saw someone committing an act which produced a net deficit of good consequences.” An emotivist may say “I witnessed an act of the sort which evokes a negative emotion in me.” We could conclude that these variations merely demonstrate that our judgments are “theory-laden.” But turn that around and you will be saying that one of the differences among ethical theories is precisely that they prefer different descriptions of what might be in some sense the same observed fact. When descriptions of an observation differ, how are we to decide which is correct? We may well find ourselves in a situation where some observers claim to see something in an experience that others do not see. Whose reports are to be believed?

Second, insofar as observations are theory-laden or dependent on expectations or prior knowledge, their accuracy and reliability tend to depend on how far the observer has mastered the theory or acquired the relevant art, or how wide and diverse a range of experiences the observer has had previously. When it comes to judging wines, or horses, or athletes—or teachers—an experienced observer is more trustworthy than a novice. Contemporary culture has an ambivalent attitude toward experts, sometimes relying on them completely and sometimes completely rejecting their authority. Expertise is so anti-democratic, so un-egalitarian. But surely we must admit that in many matters, some people are better observers than others. Why wouldn’t this be as true of ethical intuitions as of any other observations? But if it is, how do we recognize which ethical observers are the better ones?

Third, while a sufficiently wide experience by itself *can* turn a person into an expert or a connoisseur, it’s much more expedient, and you are likely to advance much further in the end, if you learn your art or science under the tutelage of others who already have the knack. One thinks of the benefits of doing rounds with an experienced doctor, or playing football under an experienced coach. And as a rule, the best tutors have had tutors of their own, who in turn had theirs, who in turn had theirs, and so on. There are *traditions* of observation and judgment which are passed on from teacher to pupil through generations. One might refer here to the claim made by some defenders of virtue ethics (but only some, for they are a motley crew) that there are truths about the virtues that are only available to people who have had the right sort of upbringing. Whatever you think of this, it does seem to be the case that accurate observation often depends on enculturation into a tradition. This raises concerns about the trustworthiness of various traditions, and consequently about the observations made within those traditions. This problem, too, is not peculiar to ethics. Your chemistry teacher leans on a tradition no less than your ethics instructor.

If our beliefs depend ultimately on observations, and no observation is pure or infallible, then the question of justification is modified. It now becomes: Which observations is it appropriate to take as provisionally reliable, and how far should we rely on them—that is, how reluctant should we be to discredit them as a result of reflection? Practically speaking, what we take for our starting points are whatever intuitions and beliefs we happen to have at a given time. We provisionally accept them as true and then go on to compare them to each other, perhaps gathering additional intuitions and beliefs in the process. This is what the method of reflective equilibrium involves. As a result of these reflections, we come to regard some of our previous intuitions or beliefs as unreliable. Even the scientifically naïve person goes through some such

process with respect to sense-perception. We have learned to recognize a number of ways in which our senses are deceiving. Most of us do not proceed from there to a global skepticism about sensation. Instead, we look for ways of guarding against deception, while regarding most observations as tolerably reliable, especially if monitored for evidence of possible deceptions. Our operating principle seems to be “Take things to be as they appear to be, unless you have good reason for suspecting otherwise.” Shouldn’t the same sort of principle govern our treatment of ethical intuitions?

I suppose an error theorist would answer: “Even if we do accept this principle, it won’t help to justify ethical assertions, because we do have good reasons for thinking our ethical intuitions unreliable. In fact, we have good reasons for supposing that they are all deceptive and that all our ethical assertions are therefore false.” What are these allegedly good reasons? I turn again to J.L. Mackie, who offers a concise summary of them.⁵

The first is the argument from relativism. As Mackie characterizes it, this argument starts from the fact that moral codes vary in important ways from culture to culture, and then claims that these variations are much more plausibly explained by the hypothesis that these codes emerge primarily from the distinctive, historically developed ways of life of a culture than by the hypothesis that they represent different cultures’ conflicting perceptions of some common and objective truths. Older versions of this argument have been thoroughly criticized and, to my mind, effectively undermined.⁶ Does Mackie’s version introduce something new? If so, it must consist in the appeal to the notion that one hypothesis offers a better explanation than the other. But the notion of a better or more plausible explanation is, in the most important cases, not one for which we can provide hard and fast criteria of application. I suspect that the apparent plausibility of many versions of the argument from relativism, including Mackie’s, depends on our accepting the same sort of assumptions that underlie the other argument against ethical realism. So I will focus my attention on that argument.

This other argument is what Mackie calls the “argument from queerness.” He divides it into two parts which are really two independent arguments; he lumps them together because both their conclusions can be described by saying that we should reject objectively real moral properties because they are very strange sorts of things. The first argument raises a metaphysical objection; it points out that moral properties are radically different from the other properties we recognize in the world. They fundamentally differ in kind both from properties we perceive via sensation and from theoretical properties which we postulate to explain sensible properties. They are *sui generis*, and that makes them at least suspect. They seem to belong in the same category as discredited phenomena like ghosts, witchcraft, telekinesis, and fortune-telling. Mackie does not explicitly affirm that only naturalistic properties *could be* real, but such an assumption seems to hover nearby.

The second argument from queerness makes an epistemological point: that the generally recognized modes of perception and reasoning, and the established methods of finding the truth, do not include any which would give us access to the sorts of properties in question. As he puts it, every moral realist must ultimately fall back on an appeal to intuition, and it is not clear what this alleged mode of knowing is or whether anything we might point to with this term can be considered a source of knowledge.

⁵ Op. cit., 36-42.

⁶ For a classic treatment, see the discussion in W.T. Stace, *The Concept of Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), as excerpted in John R. Burr and Milton Goldinger, eds., *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), and in numerous other anthologies.

Here is a problem with this argument. The methodology of both the natural and the social sciences requires that these disciplines be, to revive an older term, “value-free.” The term has passed out of use in part because critics have argued that the sciences often, or for some critics necessarily, fail to live up to that ideal. Another reason is that we came to realize that the criteria by which we judge scientific theories include scientific values such as simplicity and potential for future research, and that the criteria by which we judge scientists include “ethical” values like deference to the community of scholars, honesty in reporting one’s results, and allegiance to scientific methodology. In sum, there are values which are integral to the practice of science itself. Some critics have gone so far as to depict science as just another self-justifying and self-serving ideology. But even those who have stopped short of so radical a conclusion have sometimes lost sight of the element of truth in the claim that sciences can be value-free. Both natural and social sciences try to establish how things are, rather than how they ought to be. Or if that distinction is too strong for you, we should at least admit that they try to set ethical judgments about their subject matters to one side, and establish non-moral facts about them. Even where the object of study is the sociology or psychology of ethical values, the job of the social scientist qua scientist is not to pass moral judgment on the morality being studied, but to accurately depict what it is. The moral psychologist is looking for non-moral, “purely factual” truths about moral beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. The scientist sets aside the issue of the truth or falsity of value judgments in investigating their psychological causes and effects. A scientist who proposed to integrate properties like goodness, rightness, and justice into his or her theories other than as objects of human belief would surely be told that he or she was no longer doing science.

From the viewpoint of a believer in the objective reality of moral values, the natural or social scientist abstracts from the moral dimensions of the subject matter, and does so for perfectly good reasons. But the scientist, qua scientist, need not deny the existence of those dimensions. In the eyes of the moral skeptic, by contrast, what the scientist is setting aside is not some real aspects of the objects being studied, but fictions, illusory properties. To justify this interpretation of the process, the skeptic appeals to the fact that scientific explanations do not invoke real moral properties. In effect, the skeptic argues that because a method which precludes the recognition of moral facts yields results in which no moral facts are appealed to, we are justified in concluding that there are no moral facts. In other words, the skeptic assumes from the outset that the “value-free” approach is the only route to reality.

So my first criticism of the arguments from queerness is that they essentially beg the question. Here’s another way of putting the point. I have at least provisionally accepted the principle, “Take things as they appear to be, unless you have good reason for suspecting otherwise.” Now to have a good reason for suspicion is to have a good reason for doubting the conclusions arrived at by the “mode of appearing” under scrutiny. But the fact that some much-relied-on method of investigation which bars appeal to moral intuitions fails to establish moral facts is not in itself a reason to doubt these alleged facts. To get that conclusion we would have to add that the much-relied-on method is the only reliable method worth relying on. But if we do that, then we are presupposing that moral intuitions are unreliable.

Now here’s a reply on behalf of the error theorist: “I am not presupposing that value-free methods provide the only route to reliable conclusions. I am assuming that the methods of the sciences are reliable. And I can defend this conclusion. First, there is the predictive success of scientific theories. Since moral theories aren’t concerned with prediction, they find no footing here. Second, scientific investigation of the cognitive processes which underlie scientific

investigation, including especially the processes of observation, yields an account of these processes which explains both their successes and their failures. For example, studies of visual perception yield explanations of both trustworthy perceptions and optical illusions, and help us to discriminate between the two. We have no comparable accounts of ethical intuition. Third, the principle that we should trust the appearances except where we have reason not to is itself on much firmer ground when applied to scientific observations than when applied to ethical intuitions. When all is said and done, the fact remains that scientific theories rely heavily on sense-perceptions, and we must rely on sense-perceptions if we are to have any substantive theories at all.⁷ No parallel argument can be made for moral realism. We don't have to assume it for theoretical purposes, nor is it required for practical purposes. We can get by quite well with a naturalistic ethics consisting of maxims of prudence and dispensing with your distinctively moral notions. I conclude that we can now *presume* the reliability of scientific observations, but in the case of ethical intuitions, the burden of proof lies on the realist."

What can we say to this? First, I think we should concede the point about predictions. If ethical assertions can be used to make predictions, I assume that confirming those predictions would depend on ethical intuitions, so no relief is to be sought there. As for the second point, defenders of ethical intuition are in a much better position now than they were just a few years ago. Over the last two decades, psychologists as well as philosophers have increasingly turned their attention to moral psychology, and a great deal of research has been generated on intuition generally and moral intuition in particular.⁸ This research has included both empirical studies and efforts at conceptual clarification, and they have ranged from clinical studies of how variations in the details of a situation or in how the situation is described affect people's moral intuitions or judgments, to physiological accounts of the neural bases of moral reactions, based on brain-imaging techniques. No longer are we reduced to using the term "intuition" for we-know-not-what process of arriving at belief. There is not yet a standard, widely-accepted account of intuition. Varying definitions of the term, and other terms referring to similar if not the same processes are deployed in the literature. Many questions remain to be answered and much research to be done. But we already know more than ever before about how intuitive judgments can be biased by irrelevant factors, and about circumstances in which intuitive judgments are more apt to succeed than carefully reasoned ones. The latter was the theme of Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*,⁹ and research on so-called mental "heuristics" has contributed to both topics. Antonio Damasio's work on the role of emotion in decision-making belongs in the same category.¹⁰ We seem to be well on the way to constructing a scientific account of the processes which lead to intuitive judgments which should help us to discriminate more successfully between reliable and unreliable intuitions.

The fact remains, however, that purely psychological studies in the moral realm continue to approach this issue with a deliberately neutral attitude toward the truth of our intuitive judgments. We continue to assume that the opposite approach would introduce ideological bias into our investigations. Consequently, our psychological researches can help us monitor the

⁷ As I noted earlier, there are philosophers who embrace a more global skepticism and offer anti-realistic accounts of science, while claiming that we can still preserve our scientific theories and some notion of truth. But for purposes of this article, I am just going to proceed as if they were wrong.

⁸ For a sampling, see Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, ed., *Moral Psychology*, v. 2: *The Cognitive Science of Morality: Intuition and Diversity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

⁹ *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005).

¹⁰ *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994).

reliability of our intuitions when they lead us to conclusions about morally neutral facts, but they cannot test some of our moral intuitions by comparison with others whose reliability can be taken for granted, even provisionally. Or if they do this, then they will also thereby have provisionally granted the truth of moral realism. And then we won't be able to use the results of their researches as evidence for moral realism, or the skeptic will justifiably accuse us of begging the question. In sum, such developments have made moral intuitions much less "queer" than they formerly seemed to be, but they have not settled the issue of their reliability.

The third point I attributed to my error theorist is that the principle "Take things to be as they seem unless there is good reason to think otherwise" is well-nigh indispensable in common-sense and scientific contexts, if we are to claim objective knowledge at all. But it is far from clear that it is even a good principle to follow, much less an indispensable one, in the context of morality. The best evidence for moral realism is our moral intuitions. If we place all of those in doubt, we have nowhere else to go for evidence of their reliability. We seem to be still in the situation depicted by William Frankena in 1939: We have a disagreement between people who insist that the moral content of their intuitions represents something real, and people who claim that that content is merely a product of subjective, non-truth-producing mental processes. And the very nature of the agreement leaves us with little or no ground for resolving it by appeal to the evidence.¹¹ How then are we to resolve it?

If we should come to believe that even adequate *scientific* theories require us to postulate values of some sort, not just to be guided by certain values in the practice of science, but to assert the objective reality of certain values, and if these values at least bore some analogy to ethical values if not simply being ethical values, that would essentially eliminate the queerness of morality. From late antiquity through the Renaissance, most philosophers in the European tradition accepted an essentially Platonistic metaphysics which sanctioned just such an infusion of values into science. But there seems little prospect of reviving such an approach at present. These days, if you want people to stop taking you seriously, just tell them you're a Platonist.

Here's what I think *is* feasible. Those of us who are deeply committed to the reality of moral values can reflect on the experiences which seem to us to corroborate them, on the range and variety of these experiences, and on their mutual coherence. We can reflect as well on past efforts to articulate these intuitions and work them up into ethical theories. From all this we can attempt to extract strategies for teaching others to see what we see. In the end, however, I think the ability to believe what one intuits depends on a willingness to believe it. In other words, it depends on something like an act of faith. Even the scientist's trust in empirical evidence could be said to constitute an act of faith, although it is one we can refrain from only with difficulty, and only imperfectly. The moral act of faith requires a bit more of a "leap," but it is still considerably more modest, it seems to me, than the act of faith that undergirds a revealed religion. In a famous lecture, William James offered a defense of such acts of faith with respect to what he saw as the core of religious belief.¹² That core of belief was far short of the elaborate constructions of theology. In the final analysis it may not be much removed from what I have called distinctively moral beliefs. At any rate, I believe something like his argument applies even more straightforwardly to faith in our moral intuitions. As he looked at it, such faith

¹¹ "The Naturalistic Fallacy," originally published in *Mind* 48 and widely reprinted. One source: Steven M. Cahn and Joram G. Haber, eds., *20th Century Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 129-138.

¹² "The Will to Believe," *Essays in Pragmatism*, Albury Castell, ed. (New York: Hafner, 1948), 88-109. Originally published in *New World*, June 1896.

represents a gamble, but if you decide that the risk is worth taking, you cannot be faulted on intellectual grounds. I am inclined to draw the same conclusion about moral assertions.

This is not the result one would have hoped for. I would much have preferred to come upon an unanswerable demonstration of the reality of distinctively moral values, of the truth of some distinctively moral assertions. Nonetheless, I think that what I have said is true.

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