I. Introduction

Moral realism is the view that (i) moral judgments are beliefs that are meant to describe the way things really are; (ii) some of these beliefs are true, and (iii) moral judgments are made true in some way other than by virtue of the attitudes taken towards their content by any actual or idealized human agent. If torturing a child is wrong, it is not because of anyone’s disapproval of such an action. It is not because the action falls afoul of standards that I endorse, or rules that any society accepts. Even the disapproval of an ideal observer – say, someone who knows all nonmoral facts, and is fully rational – is not what makes an action wrong. For moral realists, the ultimate standard(s) of morality are as much a part of reality as the ultimate laws of logic, or the basic principles of physics. Perhaps God (if there is a God) made them up, but human beings certainly didn’t. We humans have created for ourselves a number of different sets of conventional moral standards, but these are never the final word in the moral arena. The flaws and attractions of any conventional morality are rightly measured against those of a moral system that human beings did not create.

II. Ethics as Philosophy

Ethics is a branch of philosophy. Few would dispute that. Yet this fact has significant, wide-ranging implications, many of which have gone little noticed in debates about the status of ethical judgments. My central claim is that there are very close parallels between ethical investigation and that pursued in philosophy quite generally. These parallels provide excellent reason for rejecting some of the perennial criticisms that moral realism has faced.

I locate the central claim within a central argument. Here it is:

1. Ethics is a species of inquiry; philosophy is its genus.
2. A species inherits the essential traits of its genus.
3. One essential trait of philosophy is the realistic status of its truths.
4. Therefore moral realism is true.

Both premise (1) and (2) strike me as extremely plausible – so plausible, in fact, that I will proceed here by assuming, rather than arguing for, their truth. If one is willing to make these concessions, then all the attention must focus on premise (3).

To see ethics as philosophy is to appreciate a certain kind and degree of methodological similarity. Philosophy is not primarily an empirical discipline, but
an *a priori* one. Its truths are ordinarily discoverable, when they are, not exclusively by appeal to what our senses can tell us. We don’t bump into such things as universals, free will, or modalities; we can’t see them, or hear or touch them. We may have reason to deny the existence of such things, but not because we aren’t sure what they taste like. Dismissing such things from our ontology, or ratifying their inclusion in it, is something that no scientist is able to do. Such things are dealt with in an *a priori* way.

Substantiating the claim that fundamental philosophical truths are *a priori* is work for a chapter unto itself (at the least). This isn’t that chapter. Yet this claim about philosophy, while contentious, isn’t on the face of it that implausible. Of course there are those who deny the very possibility or existence of *a priori* knowledge. But for all others, basic philosophical principles should be quite attractive candidates. Philosophy must run a close second to mathematics as an exemplar of an *a priori* discipline (if indeed there are any such exemplars). Part of this is explicable by reference to the metaphysically or conceptually necessary status of the principles that are the object of philosophical investigation. And part of this is explicable by reflection on cases. Consider for a moment Leibniz’s law of the indiscernibility of identicals, or the modal principle that anything that is necessary is possibly necessary. These certainly don’t seem to be inductive generalizations, or conclusions of inferences to the best explanation. The role of sensory evidence in establishing such claims is peripheral, at best. I might be mistaken about this, and nothing to come will absolutely protect against this possibility. But the view that makes the justification of such principles a matter of empirical confirmation is (much) more contentious than the one I am prepared to rely on.

As ethics is a branch of philosophy, we have excellent reason to think that fundamental ethical principles share the same status as fundamental philosophical principles. When we want to know whether something is right or wrong, admirable or vicious, we will certainly want to know what’s going on in the world. The evidence of our senses may tell us that happiness has been maximized, or that the words of a promise have been uttered, but that’s only the beginning, not the end, of our ethical investigations. When trying to verify the basic standards that govern the application of moral predicates, we will only secondarily (if at all) advert to what the physicists and botanists and hydrologists say. The conditions under which actions are right, and motives and characters good, aren’t confirmed by the folks with lab coats. They are confirmed, if at all, by those who think philosophically. And much of that thinking, especially when focused on non-derivative, core principles, is undertaken without clear reliance on what we can see, or hear, or touch.

Since doing ethics is doing a kind of philosophy, we shouldn’t be surprised at the similarities just mentioned. In what follows, I will rely on the parallels between the species (ethics) and its genus (philosophy) in a way that aids moral realists in answering three of the most pressing objections against their views.

The first objection says that the intractability of ethical disagreement sustains an antirealist diagnosis of ethical thought and talk. The second criticism claims that this disagreement in any event undermines any justified belief we may have for our moral views, provided that they are meant to tell us about how the world really is. The third asserts that the causal inefficacy of moral facts provides excellent reason to deny their existence. These aren’t the only criticisms that moral realists have faced,1 but they are among the most important. I think that they can be met. That is work enough for a day, if it can be accomplished.

III. Moral Disagreement as a Metaphysical Objection

If there is an objective truth about what is morally right and wrong, why is there so much disagreement about such matters? Many believe that objective truths of any kind must be such as to garner consensus about them, at least among people who are well situated to appreciate such things. But it doesn’t take an expert to realize that such consensus is extremely elusive in ethics. So persistent moral disagreement presents us with a choice. Perhaps there are no moral facts at all. Or there are, but ones that are not objective. Either way, the moral realist loses.

There are really two ways to run this skeptical argument, though they usually remain entangled in the literature. One is as an argument that seeks to best explain the scope of actual ethical disagreement we see in our world. The second is as an *a priori* argument that has us anticipating persistent disagreement even among hypothetical, idealized moral deliberators. In both cases, the presence of intractable disagreement is said to
be sufficient to draw an antirealist conclusion: there are no real, objective moral standards that could serve as guideposts to our moral investigations. In ethics, we make it all up.

The first version of the argument, as an inference to the best explanation, is inconclusive at best. Certainly there is intractable moral disagreement – plenty of it. But just as surely, such disagreement might be well explained as a product of insufficient nonmoral information, or adequate information insufficiently “processed.” Such processing failures cover a wide range of cases, from errors of instrumental reasoning, to a failure of nerve, sympathy, empathy, or imagination. One explanation (not the only one) of these errors is that there’s typically much more personally at stake in ethical matters than in scientific ones, and these stakes tend to introduce biasing factors that skew correct perception. It may be that for any given real-world ethical disagreement, we could cite at least one of these failings as an explanation for its continued existence.

I think that one’s expectations of (lack of) consensus is largely an expression of one’s antecedent metaethical commitments, rather than anything that could serve as an independent argument in this context. Imagine away all of the failings mentioned in the previous paragraph: will there or won’t there be any disagreement left to threaten moral realism? I’m not sure. If not, then the realist can rest easy. But suppose disagreement persists, even in the imagined situation in which we rid our agents of the flaws that impede correct moral reasoning. Even here, however, realists can sustain their view with a minimum of damage. They will have to say that impeccable reasoning may nevertheless fail to land on the truth. There can be a gap between epistemic accessibility and truth. If we are to posit an absence of consensus even among perfected inquirers, then the idealized picture of moral inquirers will fail to guard against their fallibility.

At this point we can introduce the ethics-philosophy parallel and use it to defend moral realism from the argument from disagreement. The breadth and depth of philosophical disagreement is just as great as that found within ethics (perhaps greater). There’s still no consensus on whether we have free will, on the analysis of knowledge, or on the relation of the mental and the physical. Nor is there broad agreement about which methods are best suited to confirm the right answers for us.

If the intractability of disagreement in an area is best explained by antirealist assumptions about its status, then we must be global philosophical antirealists. The judgments we render, and the arguments we offer on their behalf, must all be seen either as incapable of truth, as expressions of conative commitments only, or as claims whose truth is contingent on personal or interpersonal endorsement. But that’s not a very plausible take on the status of our philosophical views. There is a truth – a real, objective truth – about whether the mental is identical to the physical, or about whether certain kinds of freedom are compatible with determinism. Once we are sure of our terms and concepts, the judgments that affirm or deny the existence of such things are literally either true or false, in as robust a sense as we can imagine. We don’t have the final say about the truth of such judgments, and the content of these judgments is indeed something other than whatever practical commitments contingently accompany them.

I invite you to reflect on the status of the philosophical judgments you hold most dear, and have worked most carefully to defend. Do you imagine that your views, and their supporting arguments, are either untrue, or possessed of only the sort of minimal truth that is attainable by having been sincerely endorsed from within a parochial perspective? No matter how skeptical you might be about some alleged philosophical entities (universals, free will, or moral facts), you presumably take your confident opinions about such matters as having registered a real truth, one that is dependent neither of your attitudes towards it, nor of the language you have used to comprehend it. That truth, you believe, is independent of the circle you inhabit, the agreements you’ve entered, the conventions you are part of, and the era in which you find yourself.

And yet one’s philosophical views are bound to be as controversial as one’s ethical views. Disagreements in core (and peripheral) philosophical areas are apparently intractable. Empirical evidence hasn’t yet been able to solve any major philosophical problem, and any prediction that it someday might is as likely to divide philosophers as any other philosophical question. If intractable disagreement about verdicts and methods is enough to warrant an antirealist diagnosis of an area, then the whole of philosophy must be demoted. That simply is implausible: there really is (or isn’t) such a thing as an omnipotent God, numbers without spatio-temporal location, actions that are both free and determined, etc. My say-so doesn’t make it so. Neither does anyone else’s.
The philosophical stance that denies the existence of objective moral properties is itself the subject of intractable disagreement. If such disagreement is sufficient to undermine the realistic status of the controversial judgments, then the views of the moral antirealist cannot be objectively correct. They are either untrue, or are true reports of the attitudes they themselves take toward moral realism, or are noncognitive expressive that reflect their own practical commitments. If they are any of those things, then they cannot rationally command the allegiance of their detractors. Moral realists needn’t be making any error when rejecting such views.

The alternative is to see our beliefs about such matters as aspiring to, and possibly succeeding in, representing a philosophical reality not of our own making. This reality is constituted by a set of claims whose truth is independent of our endorsement of their content. And this despite the presence of intractable philosophical disagreement.

Of course, one might say that were we free of the shortcomings that beset all of us actual inquirers, we would converge on a set of philosophical claims about free will, the mind, the existence of God, etc. The disputes that seem to us so intractable would vanish with more information, more efficient and comprehensive application of that information, etc. That may be so. But then we have every reason to render the same verdict in the ethical case. Since ethics is a branch of philosophy, it would be very surprising to come to any other conclusion.

IV. Moral Disagreement as an Epistemic Defender

For any nontrivial moral view one holds, there are bound to be others who disagree with it. This very fact is probably not enough to undermine any epistemic justification one may have for the belief. One might, after all, be unaware of the disagreement, and this ignorance might be non-culpable. Yet what of the ordinary situation, where we realize that our own moral views fail to command universal allegiance? Suppose not only that you know of such disagreement, but that you also rightly believe that your opponents, reasoning correctly from their own incompatible but justified beliefs, will never come over to your side. What does that do to the status of your own belief?

As I see it, such awareness does not, by itself, constitute a defeater of one’s views. It does not entail that one ought to suspend judgment about what one believes. For one may well think – and this is the usual case – that one has justifying reasons that the other is failing to appreciate. That she is reasoning impeccably from her own starting points does not mean that her beliefs must be true, since her starting points may be way off-base. And, as you will see things, they almost certainly are.

Surely it is possible that any defense you offer of your contested views will invoke other beliefs that are as controversial as the ones you are intending to support. In fact, this happens all the time in moral discussions. Perhaps, for many such cases, there is nothing one can do but beg the question. And question-begging arguments never confer justification.

There are two things to say here. First, one’s belief might continue to be justified, even if defending it to others has one begging questions. A belief’s justification is distinct from an agent’s ability to justify it to others. So long as the belief was initially justified, it is possible that its justification survives, despite an agent’s inability to advance considerations that an audience finds compelling. (Someone rightly convinced that tomatoes are fruits might be justified in her belief, even if she’s unable to bring others around to the idea.) Second, there is excellent reason to believe that the presence of another’s incompatible, justified belief doesn’t always undermine justification; indeed, there might even be a case for thinking that question-begging arguments can supply positive justification for one’s contested beliefs.

We can see this with the help of series of examples. Suppose that you are engaged in conversation with a principled fanatic. He thinks that the fundamental ethical imperative is to gain power over others; everything else is subsidiary to this primary goal. Any argument you offer for beneficence is bound to be treated as the product of an effective brainwashing. Nothing you can say will convince him. Moreover, suppose that he’s not contradicting himself, and isn’t making any false empirical claims to support his ultimate principle. In the context of your conversation, you are bound to beg the question.

But you might be justified in your beliefs anyway. For the presence of an intelligent, consistent and indefatigable opponent does not necessarily undermine a belief that one is otherwise justified in holding. This is a general point. It holds for one’s ethical views, but also for perceptual, memorial, and philosophical ones, as well.
To simplify, consider a case in which one’s perceptual beliefs later form the basis of a memorial belief. I saw and remember talking to my hated nemesis Smith the moment before he made that fatal misstep that no one else witnessed. I try to convince others of what I have seen, and am met with disbelief. They know of our rivalry, and they think I killed him. (Suppose I’ve done just that in other, similar cases.) That others have excellent reason to doubt my word is compatible with my original belief, and its memorial descendant, both being highly justified. In this case, not only do the incompatible, well-justified beliefs of others fail to undermine my justification, but my own question-begging attitudes (e.g., regarding my own innocence in this case) do appear to be enough to constitute positive justification for the beliefs I hold.

We can broaden the picture in an obvious way. Informed, rational and attentive skeptics, possessed of internally consistent and coherent attitudes, might remain unconvinced by any of our empirical claims. According to this version of the argument from disagreement, that resistance defeats any justification we might have for our empirical beliefs. Though we can’t absolutely discount that possibility, the conclusion is so drastic as to call into question the soundness of the argument that generated it. If we assume, as everyone reading this chapter will, that we do have some positively justified empirical beliefs, then, so far as I can tell, it follows that question-begging grounds can confer positive justification. For anything one might cite as evidence on behalf of one’s empirical beliefs will surely be regarded as question-begging by the skeptic.

A similar story can be told regarding all of our philosophical beliefs. The most brilliant philosophers, rational, open-minded, and well-informed, have failed to agree among themselves on just about every key philosophical issue. If pervasive and intractable disagreement signaled an absence of justification, this would mean that none of those philosophers (much less the rest of us) would be at all justified in holding the philosophical views that they (we) do. But this seems false; it’s certainly belied by anyone who sincerely undertakes to argue philosophically. One who has developed a theoretically sophisticated take on some philosophical issue, coming to grips with deep criticisms and developing novel and integrated positive proposals, is surely justified to some extent in thinking her views correct. Of course such a person will see that some others will fail to be convinced— even some others who are as smart, ingenious and imaginative as she is. She will recognize her fallibility and appreciate a salient feature of philosophical history— namely, the failure of greater minds to attract even near-unanimity on most of the major points that they had advanced. Still, awareness of this history, and the skepticism of some of her contemporaries, is not enough to force her to suspend judgment on the views that she has so skillfully defended.

I see no reason to register a different verdict for ethics. Deep disagreement there, as elsewhere, should give one pause. It can sap one’s confidence, and if it does, then that (but not the disagreement per se) may be sufficient to undercut one’s justification. But this is no different from the general case. Provided that one brings to a dispute a moral belief that is justified, then exposure to conflicting belief needn’t defeat one’s justification, even if one is unable to convince an intelligent other of the error of his ways.

The present argument against the epistemic justification of moral belief relies on the following principle (or something very like it):

(E) If (i) S believes that p, and R believes that not-p, and (ii) S and R know of this disagreement, and (iii) S and R have formed their beliefs in rational and informed ways, then S is not justified in a belief that p, and R is not justified in a belief that not-p.

(E) may be true. But no one could be justified in believing it. (E) itself is the subject of intractable disagreement— there are informed and rational people who endorse it, and equally qualified people who reject it. By its own lights, then, we must suspend judgment about (E). Having done that, however, we are no longer epistemically forbidden from positively embracing a contested belief, even if our opponents are as smart we as are.

We can reveal another kind of skeptical self-defeat if we renew our emphasis on establishing a parity between ethical investigation and philosophical investigations generally. A familiar skeptical line is that there isn’t, really, any adequate evidence that can be called upon to support our ethical opinions. Unlike empirical investigations, we haven’t anything tangible that can, at the end of the day, finally settle a disputed moral question. All the sensory evidence at our disposal will underdetermine an ethical verdict. And what’s left? Only our emotional responses and our moral
convictions, both of which are traceable to accidents of birth and upbringing. Their genesis marks them as unreliable indicators of any truth there might be. But there’s nothing else to rely on in ethics. And, therefore, our moral views lack justification, one and all.

The problem with such an argument should by now be apparent. There is a striking equivalence between the nature and source of our evidence in philosophy, and in ethics. We have no choice but to rely on our intuitions and considered judgments in both. What tells us, for example, that many proposed analyses of knowledge are no good is not some empirical finding that scientists have unearthed. It is instead our conceptual intuitions about counter-examples. If we want to know whether determinism is compatible with free will, we will consult arguments that invariably appeal to our intuitive responses to hypothetical cases. If such convictions and responses have no evidential credibility, then we should have to regard all philosophical beliefs as unjustified. Perhaps they are. But then those of the moral antirealist are similarly undone.

V. The Causal Inefficacy of Moral Facts

Gilbert Harman (see his reading earlier in this part) has famously charged that moral facts are causally inert, and are, therefore, best construed antirealistically. If I am right, his basic line of attack is misdirected.

Harman doesn’t put things in quite this way, but I think his position, and that of many who take his lead, can be accurately captured in the following argument:

1. If something exists, and its existence is best construed realistically, then it must possess independent causal powers.
2. Moral facts possess no independent causal powers.
3. Therefore, either moral facts don’t exist, or their existence isn’t best construed realistically.

Harman himself believes in moral facts, though he regards them as artifacts of social agreements. He is an ethical relativist, not a moral realist.

Since the argument is valid, any realist must choose either or both of the premises to come in for criticism. I opt for (1), because I suspect that (2) is true. A fact has independent causal powers only if its causal powers obtain regardless of the causal powers of any other facts it depends upon or is realized by. I’m not confident that moral facts possess such powers.

I won’t try to vindicate my lack of confidence here. If it is misplaced, then so much the better for moral realism. Moral facts would possess independent causal power, and thereby pass the most stringent test for ontological inclusion. But let’s instead imagine that my suspicion is correct, and that we are thus placed in what many have considered a worst-case scenario: trying to defend the existence of moral facts, realistically construed, while acknowledging that they are fundamentally different in kind from those whose existence is ratified by the natural sciences. If I am right, then such things as a benefactor’s generosity, a regime’s injustice, a friend’s thoughtfulness, are causes (if they are) only by virtue of inheriting the causal powers of the facts that realize them at a time. Any causal power they have is exhausted by that of the subvening facts that fix a situation’s moral status. Nothing follows from this admission unless we are also prepared to insist on a causal test of ontological credibility, of the sort espoused in Harman’s first premise.

Such a test is powerfully motivated, but is ultimately resistible. This test is an application of Occam’s razor, and is responsible for our having pared down our ontology in many sensible ways. We’re quite finished with explanations that invoke Osiris or golems or centaurs, and Occam’s razor is responsible for that. All that these entities were once invoked to explain can be more parsimoniously explained by relying on facts or properties whose existence is vindicated through scientific confirmation. And such confirmation makes essential reference to a putative entity’s causal powers.

So out with the trolls, the ancient pantheon, and the vampires. That’s not so bad, is it? Such things aren’t required to explain the goings-on in our world. But then, by my admission, neither are moral facts. So, by parity of reasoning, either we keep moral facts, but at the expense of a bloated ontology that implausibly lets these minor supernatural agents sneak back in, or we abolish the lot of them. Why should morality get special treatment here, when, as we all agree, the causal test has done its good work in so many other areas? Very conveniently for me, I don’t have the time in this context to provide the full answer to this question.² But in lieu of that long story, let me offer a brief reply, and then a longer one that invokes the ethics–philosophy parallel that I have already relied on.

The brief reply: application of the causal test has highly counter-intuitive implications. This is so on two
assumptions: first, that only physical facts and properties possess independent causal powers, and second, that at least most of the properties of the special sciences are not identical to, but only supervenient upon, those of physics. From these assumptions, allied with the causal test, it follows that nothing exists but (roughly) atoms and the void. There certainly won’t be any such things as atmospheres, rock strata, newts, and dandelions, if we grant that such things are not identical to anything referred to in a physics journal. It seems to me that such things do exist, but are composed of, and not identical to, particular physical facts and properties. Thus the causal test eliminates too much from our ontology.

Suppose that doesn’t faze you – you can live with such a parsimonious ontology, or you don’t endorse one of the two assumptions that got us there. Still, we can invoke the ethics–philosophy parallel in the service of a further argument that should worry proponents of the causal test. By way of introduction, we can note that moral facts are a species of normative fact. Normative facts are those that tell us what we ought to do; they rely on norms, or standards, for conduct within a given realm. Normative facts cause nothing of their own accord.

We can be helped to see this by comparing ethics, not to philosophy as a whole, but to one of its close philosophical cousins. In my opinion, moral facts are sui generis, but they are most similar to another kind of normative fact – epistemic facts. Epistemic facts concern what we ought to believe, provided that our beliefs are aimed at the truth. Once one understands the concept of logical validity, then if confronted with a modus ponens argument, one ought to believe that it is logically valid. This is a true epistemic principle.

It’s also the case that you oughtn’t believe things that you have no evidence for, and much evidence against. What does this epistemic truth cause? Nothing. Nor are particular, concrete epistemic duties – duties had by agents at a time – at all independently causally efficacious. Epistemic facts have as their primary function the specification of standards that should or must be met. Unlike scientific principles and facts, such normative standards may be perfectly correct even if they are honored only in the breach. The epistemic requirement that we proportion our beliefs to the evidence can be true even in a world populated wholly by spell-casters and astrologers. The normative facts that specify the conditions under which we ought to believe the truth, or behave morally, lack the ability to explain the workings of the natural order. Our epistemic and moral duties cannot explain why apples fall from trees, why smallpox takes its victims, why leopards have their spots. But they may exist for all that.

Nor is this failure something specific to the moral or epistemological realms. Consider prudential or instrumental duties – those that require us to enhance self-interest or efficiently satisfy our desires. Such normative demands do not explain what goes on in the world. Alternatively, if they are thought, for instance, to be powerful enough to explain why agents act as they do, then surely moral and epistemic requirements are capable of doing so as well. I see no basis for distinguishing the causal powers of any of these normative types from one another.

I don’t mean to suggest for a moment that the causal test is useless. Rather, I think we should recognize its limits. The causal test fails as a general ontological test: it doesn’t work when applied to the normative realm.

Scientific principles are vindicated, when they are, because they are able to do two closely related things: cite the causes of past events, and accurately predict the nature and occurrence of future events. Their claim to be genuinely explanatory depends almost entirely on their ability to discharge these two tasks.

But moral rules are not like that. Moral principles aren’t viewed in the first instance as hypotheses that predict the actions of agents, but rather as requirements that everyone knows will encounter predictive failures. True, moral principles will reliably predict the doings of good and bad agents. But that presupposes the reality of moral goodness and badness, and there’s no reason to make such a concession at this stage, especially given the seriousness of antirealist charges, and the aim (given a naturalistic vantage point) of beginning from a neutral perspective and relying on the causal test as a way to determine the nature of reality. Yes, we can enshrine moral predicates within true counterfactuals, even (in some cases) counterfactuals of greater generality than those describable at the physical level. But that is no proof of moral realism, as we can do the same for the predicates of etiquette and the civil law, which obviously cannot be construed realistically. Moral principles and facts aren’t meant to explain behavior, or anticipate our actions, but rather to prescribe how we ought to behave, or evaluate states or events. They don’t cite the causes of outcomes, but rather indicate what sort of conduct would merit approval, or justify our gratitude, or legitimate some result. Science can’t tell us such things.
If I am right, then an allegiance to the causal test entirely eliminates the normative realm. But this is highly implausible. There are reasons to believe things, reasons to satisfy one’s desires, reasons to look out for oneself. There are also moral duties to aid others and refrain from harming them, even if doing so isn’t going to improve one’s lot in life. The standards that supply such reasons are not capable of causing anything. Nor, it seems, are the reasons or obligations themselves. (Again, if they are, all the better for moral realists.) If there is any such thing as a genuine reason, the test must fail. Alternatively, if the test is retained, then such reasons must be capable of passing it. And then the causal argument against moral facts evaporates.

Maybe we can have our cake and eat it, too? Why not retain the causal test, allow that normative facts exist, but view them, as Harman does moral facts, as by-products of human choice and election? The causal test is a realist’s test. Failure to pass it doesn’t mean that a putative fact doesn’t exist. It just means that the fact cannot be construed realistically. Normative facts may be like this. If so, we could retain the test, and also retain a global normative antirealism. Perfectly in keeping with the physicalist leanings of so many of our contemporaries.

The animating spirit behind the causal test is the ontological principle that the real is limited to what is scientifically confirmable, and the epistemic principle that we have good reason to believe in something only if it impinges on our experience, or is required in the best explanation of that which does. The causal test obviously supports, and derives support from, both the ontological and the epistemic principle. Yet both principles are dubious. The case for the causal test is considerably diminished once we see why.

The epistemic principle is problematic because it invokes an entity—a good reason—whose existence is not itself scientifically confirmable. It’s like saying that God sustains a universe that contains no supernatural beings. There’s a kind of internal incoherence here: the claim discounts the existence of the kind of thing that is presupposed by the claim itself.

Further, a belief’s being justified is not the sort of thing that we can empirically detect. Nor, seemingly, is reference to its epistemic status required to explain anything that we have ever observed. But then, by the epistemic principle under scrutiny, we have no good reason to think that there is any such thing as the property of being epistemically justified. But if there is no such property, then the principle that implies such a thing cannot itself be justified. And so we can be rid of it.

Here’s another way to get to the same result. We needn’t make essential reference to this epistemically principle to explain why we see or hear or feel the things we do. Nor, so far as I can see, is any epistemic principle required in the best account of why various observable events have occurred in the world. So if the principle is true, then we lack a good reason for thinking it so. This principle, like normative standards quite generally, seeks to regulate and appraise conduct, rather than to describe its causal antecedents or powers. If that’s sufficient to render it unreal, or sufficient to remove any justification we might have for believing it, then it can’t rightly be used to constrain our epistemic findings or practices.

And the ontological view? The relevant ontological principle tells us that the only existential truths there are (i.e., truths about what exists) are those that are scientifically confirmed. This is certainly false if we are concerned with science as it stands, as some such truths have yet to be discovered. Yet the view is no more plausible if we are envisioning the edicts of a perfected natural science.

Here’s why. Consider this existential claim:

\[ (O) \text{ There are no existential truths other than those ratified by perfected natural sciences.} \]

Either (O) is true or false. If false, let’s drop it: our ontology wouldn’t then be entirely fixed by the natural sciences. But if it’s true, then it must be false: it’s self-referentially incoherent. For (O) cannot itself be scientifically confirmed. If it were true, it would be an instance of a non-scientifically confirmable existential truth. Thus either way we go, (O) must be false.

(O) is a thesis from metaphysics, not physics. Philosophers, not natural scientists, are the ones who will end up pronouncing on its merits. This is another application of the general idea that there are specifically philosophical truths that escape the ambit of scientific confirmation. There might be abstract entities, or such a thing as conceptual necessity, justified belief, or goodness. Bring your beakers, your electron microscopes, your calculators and calipers—you’ll never find them. You can’t abolish such things just because they lack independent causal power, and so escape empirical detection. After all, the principle calling for such abolition isn’t itself scientifically confirmable.
In the end, the absence of independent causal power is not a good reason to deny the existence of moral facts, realistically construed. Of course, nothing I’ve said in this section supplies any argument for thinking that there are such things. I doubt that causal considerations could do that. But undermining their role in antirealist arguments can go some way towards removing a familiar barrier to justified belief in the sort of moral realism that I find appealing.

VI. Conclusion

Once we attend to the fact that ethics is a branch of philosophy, the plausibility of moral realism is greatly enhanced. Basic, fundamental philosophical principles are realistic in nature. And central ethical principles are philosophical ones. This combination of claims gives us an excellent reason to suppose that fundamental ethical truths are best construed realistically.

This seems to me to be a very powerful argument that can aid the moral realist in replying to a number of perennial criticisms. One such criticism—namely, that persistent, intractable moral disagreement is best explained as antirealists would do—can be met once we avail ourselves of the ethics–philosophy parallel. Moral disagreement shares all structural features with philosophical disagreement generally, and yet a global philosophical antirealism is very implausible. Moral disagreement also fails to provide a strong epistemic defeater for one’s own already-justified moral beliefs. Controversial philosophical beliefs might be justifiedly held; things are no different in the specifically moral domain. And the causal inefficacy of moral facts can be admitted without threatening moral realism, since the causal test is too restrictive a standard for ontological credibility. Alternatively, if (contrary to my suspicions) moral facts do manage to pass that test, then retaining the test will entitle moral facts to admission into our ontology.

Once we attend to the fact that ethics is a branch of philosophy, a defense of moral realism becomes a bit easier than it otherwise might be. That’s not to say that the project is easy, and there are other criticisms of realism that I have not been able to discuss here. Still, reliance on the ethics–philosophy parallel enables us to plausibly respond to some of the critical obstacles to the development of a plausible moral realism. We can hardly hope to vindicate a complex metaethical theory in one fell swoop. We can, if the preceding arguments are any good, manage to show that some of the sources of its unpopularity have been overrated. I hope to have done that here.

Notes

1. Perhaps the most important additional objection—one leveled by Hume and Mackie in their readings in this part—is that if moral realism is true, then moral duties must supply all people with an excellent reason to do as they command. But moral duties cannot do this. Therefore, either there are no moral duties (Mackie), or those moral duties that do exist are best construed antirealistically (Hume). I try to answer this objection, by trying to show that moral duties do entail excellent reasons for action, in my article on moral rationalism in Part III.


3. Beware: arguments for rejecting either assumption may well allow moral facts to pass the causal test.

4. So in this respect I think that Harman was wrong to concede to his opponents the existence of moral facts. The proper starting point for an antirealist is one in which we suspend judgment on the existence of such facts, and demand of the realist some positive arguments for believing in them. Harman instead was willing to grant the existence of moral facts, but claimed that even so they possessed no independent causal powers, and so could not be construed realistically.