

The Moral Universe

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Introduction

We are impressed by the thought that there is an unseen order to the universe, moral in character. Its arc needn't inevitably "bend towards justice," somehow guaranteeing rewards for the virtuous and comeuppance for the vicious. Nor is this order irresistible; many have ignored or repudiated its direction. Yet the moral order compels us in its own way, not by forcing compliance, but by supplying us with sound reasons to do as it says. Each of us—whether Hobbesian foole, Nietzschean doubter, or willing participant in the kingdom of ends—is its subject.

This book endeavors to make good on this picture of morality by developing a version of nonnaturalist moral realism according to which morality is not only objectively authoritative, but essentially so. To this end, we assemble a set of theses about the nature and character of moral objectivity, reasons, requirements, values, fittingness relations, and more. We use the terms 'develop' and 'assemble' advisedly. Our aim here is not to defend nonnaturalist realism by rebutting objections. Nor is it simply to present an extended argument for the position. Rather, the goal is to construct a multifaceted theory of the metaphysical and normative dimensions of morality. (We dedicate a separate book, *Grasping Morality*, to discussing other dimensions.¹)

Our project has four distinguishing features. The first concerns our methodology, which steers our theorizing at every turn. The method we employ instructs theorists to raise questions, carefully attend to certain pretheoretical claims (data) bearing on those questions, and then construct a theory that adequately handles that data—all the while defending, explaining, and integrating the claims enlisted in that enterprise. Second, our theory centers on a formulation of realism that underlines the view's animating idea, namely, that morality is objectively authoritative. Eschewing construals of realism set to the lowest common denominator, we affirm a richer, undiluted characterization designed to fully secure this idea. Third, we fashion our theory within a post-modal metaphysical framework, emphasizing the theoretical importance of the notions of ground and essence. The latter notion in particular acts as a thread that binds together a variety of elements of our approach, including our formulation of nonnaturalism, as well as our treatments of morality's objectivity and normative authority. Fourth, our theory commits itself to the integrity of moral philosophy insofar as it unites central metaethical theses with substantive moral claims. The latter include moral platitudes, such as those prohibiting wanton torture of innocents; hypological claims regarding praiseworthiness and blameworthiness; and deontic moral principles regarding the conditions under which actions are right or wrong.

¹ BCS (forthcoming).

These four features comprise the heart of our approach to metaethical inquiry. The purpose of this introduction is to say more about them, highlighting the contributions that each makes to our project.

Feature 1: Methodology

We anticipate that our discussion will feel familiar in some respects but not in others. Unsurprisingly, we focus on central questions in metaethics: Are there moral facts? In what sense are they objective? How are they related to the facts unearthed by the natural sciences? What is their source? Do they supply powerful reasons for acting? What will probably seem less familiar is the way we go about addressing these questions. We say relatively little about rival metaethical views, we don't organize our discussion around responses to prominent objections to nonnaturalist moral realism, and we draw no conclusions about which metaethical view is best. This isn't because we deem such labor futile. Rather, the explanation is given by our conception of theory construction.

We regard theory construction, evaluation, and comparison as distinct activities that make different demands of those who engage in them. Constructing a philosophical theory is not a matter of countering possible objections or advancing criticisms against the competition. It is instead a matter of formulating one's position with an eye to the data; identifying the theoretical burdens it faces, as determined first and foremost by its success or failure at accommodating and explaining those data; and endeavoring to discharge those burdens to the best of one's ability. In our estimation, there is a natural order of operations to theorizing. Productively engaging in intertheoretical comparison with rival views is best accomplished only after one has done the constructive work just described. The rationale for this is simple. That work enables one to put forth for consideration the strongest version of one's theory. Its claims and commitments—and the reasons for making them—are now in the open, there for other theorists to assess in fruitful ways.

Despite the diversity of metaethical theories and the creativity with which they've been developed, questions about their methodological underpinnings loom. It would be an exaggeration to say that work in metaethics has altogether failed to disclose its methodological commitments. Yet it can be extremely challenging to identify them and discern how they shape the views they inform. This would not be especially significant if such commitments had little effect on the construction of metaethical theories or if there were de facto agreement concerning these commitments. But that's not the situation at all. In fact, we suspect that what largely explains why rival metaethical theories answer the central questions of metaethics so differently is that they draw on fundamentally different methodological ideas.

When embarking on the project of writing this book, we recognized these

challenges. But we did not see a method that provided what we were looking for: a highly comprehensive set of guidelines for the construction, evaluation, and comparison of metaethical theories that yields understanding of the issues in question. Over a period of years, we devised one; we call it the ‘Tri-Level Method.’ The full results of this effort are published in our small book *Philosophical Methodology: From Data to Theory*.² We outline the method’s constituent criteria in Chapter One of the present book. These criteria call for accommodation and explanation of relevant data, and substantiation (i.e., defense and explanation) and integration of any claims invoked during that venture. More than anything, it is our dedication to satisfying these criteria that gives our discussion its distinctive flavor.

While we anticipated that implementing the Tri-Level Method would color our own theorizing, we didn’t quite foresee the ripples it would send throughout our project. Hewing to its strictures forced us to rethink a good deal of what we’d taken for granted about how to develop a metaethical view. Above all it altered our perception of the place of arguments and objections in philosophical inquiry. Philosophers are accustomed to honoring the dialectic, situating the considerations they advance in an unfolding debate with other views. Though important, arguments and objections are not ends in themselves, but are instead means to a very different goal: crafting a theory that facilitates understanding of its subject matter. And that in turn requires sensitivity to the data that delineate the subject matter of one’s inquiry. The Tri-Level Method is designed with this in mind. It frees one to construct a view without having to constantly compare it to rivals, thereby enabling the theorist to focus on the task of assembling a position sensitive to the full range of data.

Feature 2: Realism without Qualification

Those familiar with metaethical discussion know that moral realism is not typically formulated with this task in mind. Many aspire to list a minimal set of commitments that could function as common ground among all those who identify as realists. But this is not obviously the right approach. In general, citing the bare minimum required to qualify as belonging to a kind does not by itself guarantee an adequate construal of that kind. Indeed, when we looked to paradigm realist positions developed by figures ranging from Plato to Clarke, to Price, and pondered what the aims of a realist theory should be, we found ourselves pulled in just the opposite direction. Three things account for this.

First, while there are considerable differences among the paradigms, they shared the conviction that morality is objectively authoritative—roughly, there is a

² BCS (2022). Its fourth chapter includes a critical survey of several prominent alternative philosophical methods—focused on analysis, argument, reflective equilibrium, and cost-benefit assessment—that have informed classical and contemporary metaethical debate. We discuss a fifth, conservative method in BCS (2023, §5).

moral reality not of our own creation, comprised of standards that merit our allegiance. Capturing this conviction, we'll argue, calls for a robust set of theses regarding the compass, source, content, and strength of moral considerations. Second, when it comes to the paradigms, their allegiance to realism tended to be motivated by an interest in respecting central features of morality, such as the independence of moral demands from a given agent's wishes or fancies. In this way, the paradigms evidenced commitment to the important idea that a realist view should comprise a series of claims that are highly sensitive to a wide range of metaethical data. Third, at their very best, the paradigms showed concern to go beyond this idea, by recognizing the value of substantive explanations of morality's metaphysical and normative dimensions. Here, perhaps, the model is Kant. While arguably not a realist, he fashioned explanations to illuminate many of the phenomena that realists care about, and so functioned in our thinking as a helpful reminder of the explanatory ambitions appropriate to metaethical theorizing.

The version of realism that we articulate in Part One (Chapter Two) secures the view's animating idea while positioning us to accommodate a number of metaethical data. It also sets our agenda for the rest of the book: accommodate the remaining data, supplement realism with additional theses that explain the data, and substantiate and integrate any claims made in that process. Fulfilling these goals yields a set of *basic* realist theses a good deal richer than that nowadays cited as definitive of realism. We fuse those theses with auxiliary claims designed to reap explanatory benefits not normally associated with realist positions, especially nonnaturalist ones. This highlights a respect in which our project is closer to Kant's than to most contemporary realist programs, which set their explanatory sights much lower.

The concern to account for both the data and our own theoretical claims leaves footprints on our discussion. For one thing, it encourages us to craft explanations not only of an array of moral truisms—an effort familiar enough from much moral philosophy—but also of the fundamental moral truths and facts themselves. For another, it undergirds our effort to substantiate a powerful version of moral rationalism, which tells us that moral requirements and prohibitions ground strong reasons to act as morality dictates, while also laying the foundation for our defense of the thesis of nonnaturalism. In fact, we'll contend that theoretically satisfying treatments of the claims embedded in our version of realism all but guarantee the truth of that thesis.

Feature 3: Post-Modal Metaphysics

While the Tri-Level Method includes a set of directives for the construction of philosophical theories, it says nothing about which materials theorists should use

when assembling their views. Instead, it grants theorists the liberty to employ whatever claims and commitments are needed to do the requisite theoretical work, provided that they can be substantiated and integrated. When constructing our theory, we found ourselves drawing upon the resources of post-modal metaphysics, especially the notions of grounding and essence.

As we understand it, grounding is a matter of metaphysical explanation, and the essence of something is simply what it is to be that thing—what it is at its core. While both notions seemed to us poised to contribute to metaethical theorizing, we came to view the notion of essence as particularly helpful when characterizing nonnaturalism. There are important differences between self-described nonnaturalist views. But they all share the core idea that morality is autonomous. For various reasons, this idea seemed to us to be nicely captured by the thesis that normativity figures ineliminably in the *essences* of at least some moral properties. This formulation highlights nonnaturalism’s metaphysical character, without implying that the view is borne of the conviction that it should figure in the explanation of why morality is objective, or why moral features are motivating, or why we should live in certain ways. Rather, we submit, the impetus for embracing nonnaturalism stems from its attunement to a metaethical datum regarding the centrality of normative force to morality.

The notion of essence also proved helpful at several junctures in Part Two, which is devoted to our treatment of the metaphysical dimensions of morality. It falls on realists to defend and explain their contention that morality is real—there are moral truths and facts, which are objective. When considering the former existence claim, we found a foothold in the idea that the moral status of certain act-types is not an accidental feature of them, but is part and parcel of *what they are*. And so we arrived at the thesis that a range of substantive moral truths and facts are essential ones, and moreover that they satisfy plausible conceptions of conceptual truth and real definition. As for the claim of morality’s objectivity, reflecting on the prospect of a tight connection between essence and grounding inspired us to build an argument for this claim based on observations about how facts regarding moral essences could ground other moral facts. We contend that these post-modal metaphysical tools also support a fresh perspective on thorny questions about supervenience and the non-normative grounds of fundamental moral reality.

We put these same tools to work when treating morality’s normative authority, the focal point of Part Three. Such authority implies the existence of moral reasons that are both categorical and excellent. We conceived an explanation of why moral reasons have these features, one that appeals to the notions of befitting and unbefitting action. These notions position us to formulate a deontic moral principle—what we call the ‘Principle of Befittingness’—whose explanatory credentials license a multilayered argument on its behalf. But we wondered: what

explains *it*? This inquiry led to a series of unanticipated innovations in our position. Not only did it generate an essence explanation of the Principle of Befittingness; it also sowed the seeds of a new argument for nonnaturalism, the culmination of Part Four, according to which this thesis emerges organically from the realist view developed to that point.

We were of course pleased to hit on a set of claims that (in our estimation) manage to accommodate and explain all the core metaphysical and normative data, are amenable to defense and explanation, and integrate well with one another and our best picture of the world. The emerging view is a version of “metaphysical” or “heavyweight” nonnaturalist realism. It has seemed to us that the kinds of theoretical achievements we’ve just listed aren’t available to views that abjure the post-modal resources of grounding and essence. These include theories billed as “non-metaphysical,” “lightweight,” “quietist,” or “relaxed” versions of realism. These types of views are plausibly interpreted as denying the possibility of certain sorts of metaphysical explanations, such as those that would illuminate fundamental moral principles, connect moral reality to non-moral reality, or identify why there are moral features of certain kinds. We ourselves find such positions unsatisfying, and are inclined to embrace the following diagnosis of their inadequacy: they fail to satisfy the Tri-Level Method’s criteria. However, the central problem can be stated without reference to our preferred method: any view that rejects metaphysical explanations of the sorts we’ve listed is fated to leave something crucial unexplained. Let us add that any theory that shuns the notion of essence is hardly better off, since it undercuts the possibility of illuminating what it is to be the very things that the view itself countenances. Insofar as all of the foregoing approaches resist taking the post-modal turn, they’re ill-suited to deliver the understanding of morality to which sound metaethical theorizing aspires.

Feature 4: The Integrity of Moral Philosophy

Moral philosophy today proceeds by division of labor. It is relatively rare to read work in contemporary metaethics that directly addresses questions in normative ethics. Conversely, it is fairly uncommon to find contributions to contemporary normative ethics that wrestle with overtly metaethical issues. But it was not always so. A backward glance at the writing of figures such as Plato, Price, Reid, Kant, Mill, and Sidgwick reveals that they observed no such distinctions. They took up whatever questions in moral philosophy seemed pressing, fluidly crossing what today have become rather fixed territorial boundaries.

Our intention isn’t to wax nostalgic: the complexity and difficulty of contemporary moral philosophy often justifies dividing the theoretical labor. Its genuine advantages notwithstanding, such division can sometimes be

counterproductive. In metaethics, it can make challenging questions yet more challenging, by obscuring from view the integrity of moral philosophy: the subject matters of different fields within moral philosophy are often sufficiently intertwined that satisfactorily addressing central questions of one field requires engaging with those of others. We ourselves gained newfound appreciation for this point when reflecting on realism's animating idea that morality is objectively authoritative.

When it comes to moral objectivity, we found our thinking shaped by the conviction that morality isn't a domain in which anything goes. This led us to develop the idea that there are necessary moral truisms, or 'fixed points.' Far from being neutral about what morality is like, fixed points incorporate substantive normative claims about what is right and wrong, virtuous and vicious, good and bad, and the like. Agents are morally prohibited from harming others simply because of their physical appearance—that's a fixed point. So too is the requirement to protect one's children from lethal danger. There are many others.

As for moral authority, our approach in Part Three draws on two ideas that fall outside the ambit of metaethics as it's traditionally understood. The first is that there is an intimate connection between the strength of moral reasons and hypological notions, such as blameworthiness and admirability. The second is that agents can treat what has substantial morally relevant worth (such as an agent's well-being) in ways that are befitting or, alternatively, unbefitting. This idea plays a highly significant role in our thinking. It helps to explain the strength of moral reasons and correlative requirements and prohibitions in a manner that speaks to one of philosophy's enduring questions: "Why be moral?" It also provides a way to unify claims regarding four distinct normative categories—deontic, favoring, fitting, and evaluative—by appeal to the Principle of Befittingness. If our overall approach is on target, a satisfactory treatment of realism's animating idea involves deploying claims at home in normative ethics and axiology.

Just above, we adverted to stalwarts of the nonnaturalist tradition, noting that they thought of the fabric of moral philosophy as tightly interwoven. While we didn't set out to model our view on theirs, the theory we construct bears more than a passing resemblance to the positions several of them advanced. Like the early nonnaturalists, we embrace the thought that there are contentful, necessary moral truths and facts. We share the belief that entities such as actions, moral properties, and moral concepts have normative essences. Like these figures, we also affirm a version of moral rationalism. And together with intuitionists such as Price, Clarke, and Broad, we assign a central place to the normative category of fittingness in our thinking about moral requirements and reasons. A marked difference between their views and ours, however, is that we articulate theses involving the notions of essence and fittingness that explain the moral fixed points and the existence of strong reasons to act. In this way, we go beyond the early nonnaturalists, albeit by developing their

very own commitments in ways we imagine they would've found congenial.

Addendum: How to Read this Book

This book has four Parts. The first, *Foundations*, lays out the Tri-Level Method, and our characterizations of moral realism and nonnaturalism. The second, *Metaphysics*, investigates the metaphysics of morality, contending that moral reality is objective. The third Part, *Normativity*, explores the force of moral considerations, developing a view according to which there are strong moral reasons. Finally, the fourth Part, *Essence*, builds to a sustained defense of nonnaturalism, by extending and deepening the treatment of the objective authority of morality offered in the previous two Parts.

We recognize that readers will have varying degrees of interest in different portions of this book. That said, it is a highly integrated work—there are lots of connections across chapters, and each Part is enmeshed with the others. For readers who might nevertheless be inclined to move selectively through the book, dipping in and out as their interests dictate, we urge them to read Chapters One and Two before doing so. They delineate the philosophical methodology implemented throughout the book, as well as the central elements and burdens of the version of realism that we seek to vindicate.

One of the Tri-Level Method's signal features is that it encourages philosophers engaged in theory construction to keep their eyes on the prize: the assembly of a theory that provides understanding of the target domain. Doing so has led us to furnish novel characterizations of notions that will be familiar to many metaethicists. Our definitions of various ideas and theses—realism, nonnaturalism, normativity, natural property, conceptual truth, moral reason, categoricity, and so on—represent a fresh take on these central elements of metaethical discourse. This proves important when it comes time to track our arguments and explanations, which often employ our distinctive construals.

Another result of the Tri-Level Method's emphasis on understanding is that the method downplays efforts to criticize competing views, as such efforts do not by themselves facilitate that goal. It also cautions theorists against delving into neighboring topics that are best saved for another day. Accordingly, we've accentuated the positive in this book's chapters, rarely pausing to launch criticisms of rival views. And we've resisted the urge to chase down every interesting issue that pops up. Still, the Tri-Level Method acknowledges that these pursuits can sometimes augment understanding. So we've devoted several appendices to replying to (and very occasionally leveling) objections. Other appendices offer opportunities to pursue important questions raised by our claims and commitments, or chart the conceptual or taxonomic territory we've been covering in a given chapter. Our hope is that the appendices will address some of the questions that readers may have that we don't

take up in the chapters themselves.

Our discussion is complex; it not only covers considerable territory, but also draws upon and develops work in a variety of philosophical subfields. Accordingly, we've taken a few measures to help crystallize the book's main lines of thought. The first is to include a synopsis of each Part prior to its first chapter. The second is to compose an *Envoi* that offers a bird's eye view of our project, emphasizing the understanding of morality that our theory provides. The third is to draft a Compendium that maps connections among all of the main claims that we advance in the course of our efforts to follow the Tri-Level Method's instructions. While the latter two brief entries appear just after the last of the book's chapters, they may be consulted at any point.

Part One

Foundations

Metaethical debate often takes a familiar shape. Its contours include laying out a menu of metaethical views, detailing what's to be said for or against them, and advocating for a particular theory as the one to beat. While we believe that elements of this approach deserve a place in metaethical inquiry, we also recognize the limitations of this way of proceeding. It rarely keys into the ideas that animate particular metaethical positions, the extent to which canonical formulations of these positions express these ideas, and the full range of tasks that a theory must fulfill in order to assume its most powerful form. Since issues such as these play a central role in the project of theory construction, our discussion in Part One revolves around them.

We begin by asking what a metaethical theory must accomplish in order to realize the epistemic goals of inquiry. Chapter One answers by presenting a methodology for theorizing that we dub the 'Tri-Level Method.' Any metaethical theory that satisfies the Tri-Level Method's criteria is, we contend, thereby poised to deliver understanding of the nature and status of morality. Chapter Two puts this methodology into action. It offers a formulation of moral realism geared toward satisfying the Tri-Level Method's criteria while capturing the view's animating idea that morality is *objectively authoritative*. If what we say is correct, the Tri-Level Method helps to pinpoint moral realism's theoretical strengths, while also revealing what further work it needs to do to make sense of morality.

Realism can take multiple forms. Chapter Three introduces a version that endorses nonnaturalism, whose animating idea is that moral reality has its own distinctive character, being *autonomous* vis-à-vis stretches of the natural world. As we formulate it, nonnaturalism is the thesis that normativity figures ineliminably in the essence of moral reality. This thesis can be paired with the distinct claim that normativity also figures ineliminably in the essence of non-moral reality—a view we call 'Enchantment.' The Tri-Level Method positions us to spotlight the explanatory potential of nonnaturalism and the metaethical significance of Enchantment.

As we emphasize, our project in this book is to construct a metaethical theory that furthers understanding of the nature and status of morality. Given different aims, it might make sense to pay only glancing attention to questions about methodology or how best to formulate realism and nonnaturalism—metametaethical questions, if you will. The work of theory construction, however, requires that we give careful attention to these issues. Doing so helps to lay the groundwork for the rest of the book, in which we seek to systematically develop a version of nonnaturalist realism via a thorough application of the Tri-Level Method.