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What Is Metaethics?

1.1 Starting thoughts

There are plenty of things that happen in this world that people think are morally right and morally wrong, morally good and morally bad. As you sit, now, reading this book, we can imagine that somewhere in the world someone is sharing their sweets with someone else. Similarly, some adult is binding some child's feet in very tight and uncomfortable ways, causing the child (muted) distress. Someone else is putting their elderly parent into a care home so they can go and live in a different country. Someone else is dumping chemicals poisonous to humans into the sea. Someone else has taken the day off work to go to read at their child's school. Someone else is testing drugs on various animals in a laboratory to make sure they are safe for humans to use. Someone else is helping to decide whether a country should invade a neighbouring state. And so on.

We often pass moral judgement on these and many other sorts of activity and action. We may do so when chatting in a pub or bar, when reading a news story, or when watching the television. And, when we pass such judgement, our minds might wander in various ways to think about the things we are judging and what our judgements amount to. For example, we might become very interested in the issue of research on animals and think hard about whether this is justified. Similarly, we may ask whether a war can ever be just and, if so, what conditions have to be fulfilled for it to be morally permissible. These and many other questions are of

great practical concern and have a quite specific point. They are good examples of questions asked in *applied ethics*.

As we think through such issues, our minds might wander and we might ask questions of a more general and abstract nature. For example, perhaps we note that many actions are morally wrong and we want to work out what it is about these actions that makes them so. Perhaps, we may think, there is something that all of the wrong actions have in common – some aspect or feature of them that unites them and justifies our classifying each and every one of them as morally wrong. Perhaps we think there is something about the effects and consequences of the actions that makes them wrong, and from that we choose to focus on specific types of effect. Perhaps, alternatively, we ignore the consequences entirely and think about the various action types there are. From that, we might devise a set of ideas to show why it is that *these* sorts of action – stealing, lying, killing – are wrong, whilst *those other* types of action – sharing, caring, aiding – are morally right. Alternative to all of this, we might wonder why we should be so fixated on deciding what should be done rather than working out what sort of moral person we should be in general. These and other questions in the neighbourhood are the lifeblood of *normative ethics*.

(I have done something already that a few writers may think controversial: I have separated normative ethics from applied ethics. There is clearly some link between the two, for some writers might try to defend the wrongness of war, say, from within a certain normative perspective such as consequentialism. I use this division only for convenience's sake here; I am not wedded to it. Indeed, I am about to introduce a third main area of ethical enquiry. Although I am more wedded to its distinction from the other two, I am not going to discuss how distinct it is in this book.)

This book is not concerned with either applied or normative ethics. Instead, our focus will be on a different set of questions and ideas, questions and ideas that constitute *metaethics*. Imagine that two people – Duncan and Helen – are discussing something they have heard about, such as a country's policy to limit severely the numbers of children any family can have. Let us also imagine that whilst both acknowledge that there are good reasons to

favour this policy – worries about overpopulation and environmental sustainability being obvious ones – both think that it is, in the end, morally wrong. Duncan and Helen both agree that families should have some freedom from the state to decide how many children they can have, at least within reason. However, then their discussion takes an interesting turn, revealing some disagreement. Duncan thinks that this sort of policy is always wrong, no matter what the country and governmental structure. He might be prepared to relent on his view if the environmental situation got a lot worse. But, as things stand on that score, he thinks that any government that had this view would be wrong. Crucially, he thinks it would be wrong no matter what the government and, indeed, their citizens decided.

Helen takes a different view. She reiterates that *she* thinks the policy is wrong. But, she also worries that it is odd to claim that this policy is wrong no matter what the people in a different government have decided. Her focus is on the thought that whilst she and Duncan might find this policy wrong, their judging in this way might be caused by various local factors, such as how they have been raised, and the values and ideas currently found acceptable in their society. Whilst they might privilege the moral importance of the freedom of the family and individuals, for example, other people in different locales may prefer to privilege the strength of the state and the moral importance of the country-wide communal unit, for instance. In short, Helen might say that whilst she thinks the policy is wrong, she acknowledges that some other people might think the policy is right. And – here is the disagreement with Duncan – she thinks that neither of these views about the policy has authority beyond the country or the tribe or the group. What people in this other country think is morally right is fine and ‘right-for-them’, she thinks, and her judgement that the policy is wrong has no universal authority: she and Duncan cannot justifiably criticize the view that the policy is right, only note that they do not agree with it.

Duncan, meanwhile, seems to think that there is such a thing as universal authority. (For argument’s sake, let us extrapolate from this example to all moral debates and questions.) As far as Duncan is concerned, there are, as we might colloquially put it,

correct and incorrect answers full stop. Just because you, or your group, or your country think that something is right or kind or cruel or just, this does not make it so. And for Duncan, it appears, that applies even when you are deciding what you should do in your own country. There is something beyond people's judgements that makes it the case that their judgements are correct or incorrect, true or false, and these classifications apply no matter what people themselves think of their views and their society.

The debate between Helen and Duncan sets us to thinking about metaethical issues: we are thinking not about first-order ethical issue, but are instead thinking about the status and nature of our moral actions and moral judgements. Helen and Duncan's debate is often the sort of everyday discussion that people who are new to formal metaethical study reflect on as being the experience that connects them with the academic debates. Throughout this book there are going to be many ideas and positions introduced that complicate how I characterize Helen and Duncan's debate and which take us beyond it. Nevertheless, it is a good starting point.

Let us put a couple of labels on Duncan and Helen's thoughts. Helen we can call a *moral relativist*. She thinks that the authority of moral judgments is a local affair. There is nothing beyond what we think that can give authority to our judgements, nothing beyond them that makes them 'really true' rather than just 'true-for-them' or 'acceptable-for-them'. A little while later we will think harder about moral relativism, particularly what we mean by 'we' and 'our'. But this will do for now.

Duncan is clearly a sort of *anti-relativist*, for he denies Helen's claim. He may acknowledge, as a matter of fact, *that* people make different moral judgements. But, he thinks that there is such a thing as some universal authority: we *can* talk in terms of some standard that makes some judgements true and some false no matter what people in fact think. Now, often people call Duncan's position a type of *moral realism*. They might reason thus: 'Duncan thinks there a moral judgement is correct or incorrect "globally", as it were, that there is universal authority to moral judgement, and a very natural way of explaining this is that Duncan thinks there is some moral reality independent of human judging that people are

trying to represent with our judgements.’ This is an understandable thing to say I think, but there are a few ideas to pick out from this train of thought. (Independence? Reality? Truth?) As we will see, I don’t think it too controversial to think of Duncan’s stance as *involving a type of realism*. However, it may be too extreme for us to say that ‘realism’ should be used *exclusively* for those positions that state that there is some moral fact and truth of the matter for every moral debate and where such truth exists independently of what any and every human believes.

Indeed, in setting up the debate I focussed on truth and falsity, and standards of correctness and incorrectness: Helen is concerned with judgements being (at most) ‘true-for-us’ and ‘true-for-them’, whilst the sort of realism Duncan espouses exemplifies the idea that the truth and falsity of moral judgements is independent of what anyone thinks. However, whilst undoubtedly useful to understand the debate in these terms, some – but by no means all – writers understand our contrast differently. Instead of focussing on truth and falsity, one could focus on resolutely metaphysical or ontological questions and focus on the thing to which judgements should conform in order to be true. So, for example, one could say that for Duncan there is a moral reality to which judgements should correspond if they are to be true, and this correspondence and the reality are things that are independent of any human being and their thoughts. When it comes to relativism, things are trickier. For we might say that there is *something* that makes judgements true, but given that we are dealing with ‘true-for us’ and ‘false-for-us’ then it seems odd to say that there is some reality. Still, writers sometimes talk of relativists thinking that there are moral properties, even if that may jar a little because, intuitively, we might think that only realists believe in moral properties.

I will sort out some of this later on in this chapter as well as return to these ideas throughout the book. Three things are clear. First, what matters in metaethics is not so much the labels and jargon that are used. What matters in metaethics is asking in a deep way what ideas the words are being used to stand for. Talk of ‘moral properties’ when it comes to relativism may jar, but it might be where we are led if we follow through on some

ideas. Secondly, there is a possible debate to be had about how best to construe metaethics and its questions: as metaphysical enquiries, as enquiries focussed on language and on the truth and falsity of judgements, or as enquiries focussed on something else (something from epistemology or from philosophy of mind). In this book I do not discuss this metaphilosophical issue. All types of question will be discussed, although the metaphysical will be more obvious than the others. That said, no decent metaethicist can focus just on one, I think. We need to be alive to the interplay between, say, metaphysics and concerns about language.

Lastly, the debate between Duncan and Helen gives us an inkling of the terrain of metaethics, but there is a lot more to uncover. It's time we thought about the whole area.

1.2 The main questions and some standard positions

As just mentioned, I run many of the thoughts in this section in terms of metaphysics, although our use of language will make an appearance at the end. I often talk in terms of moral 'properties' that are part of moral 'reality'. We could use alternative terms such as 'features', 'aspects', or 'facts'. I stick with 'properties' for the most part. Similarly, right now I use 'moral', although I use 'ethical' also across this book, and I treat these two terms as synonyms.

With those notes in place, I can state what, to my mind, is the chief initial question of metaethics: Do moral properties exist? Those that answer in the affirmative are *moral realists* and those that answer negatively are *moral anti-realists*. These two labels cover many different positions and, indeed, there are some anti-realists who try to make room for moral properties understood in particular sorts of ways. That seems plain strange: moral anti-realists who believe in a (sort of) moral reality! We'll come to that move in Chapter 5. For now, I'll keep things simple and say that moral realists believe in a moral reality and moral properties whilst anti-realists do not. After all, this question is the chief *initial* question: it gets us thinking and from this interesting ideas develop.

(a) *Moral realism*: So, do such properties exist? In order to answer this question, we need to understand what sort of thing we are after and, hence, we need to consider a second question: What is a moral property? This second question can be understood in a variety of ways and will have a variety of aspects to it that are important in metaethics. For a start, we might be talking about values or evaluative properties, such as kindness, badness, and so on. Or, we might be talking about reasons, demands and prescriptions, such as a demand for you to help an old lady with heavy shopping bags, or a reason to give to charity. It has to be said that often in current metaethics, whilst recognizing that evaluative properties and reasons are different, many writers do not focus too much on this difference when considering the issue of realism. It is taken for granted that if you are a realist of any sort, then you will be a realist about both evaluative properties and reasons. However, we can note that there is an interesting debate to be had here about whether the one type of thing is more conceptually basic (or more metaphysically basic, or more epistemically basic) than the other, or whether neither is. I leave this debate aside in this book.

With that said, there is still something else important to reflect on when thinking about the nature of moral properties, something that *does* occupy a lot of metaethicists' time. We need to think hard about the relationship – the three-way relationship – between the moral properties that seemingly exist, the nonmoral, natural world in which we live, and the humans for whom things have value and to whom reasons are said to apply. Think about it like this. A stabbing has a number of aspects to it. It might happen on a certain day. A blade of a certain length might be used. The metal might enter someone's body at a certain speed. And so on. We also normally want to say of many stabbings that they are morally bad and wrong, and some of them are further thought to be cruel and wicked. Now, whilst we are normally confident that the nonmoral properties exist – after all, we can see and measure the length of the blade – we might be less confident that any supposed moral properties exist. After all, we cannot touch them or smell them. We might not even literally see the property of badness, for what we might literally see is a blade going into someone's stomach, and we categorize that as morally bad.

This prompts us to think more grandly about the subject. In our current age modern science is taken by many to be the prime standard, if not the *only* standard, of what exists and what we can discover. Whilst science can make sense of the solidity of a blade and the speed of a hand, it does not really deal with demands to act and things such as kindness. Biologists might talk of a plant ‘demanding’ certain nutrients to grow, but that is just loose, metaphorical talk. When it comes to metaethics, on the other hand, philosophers are trying to talk and think non-metaphorically. How does the moral perspective that we have of the world fit with how science explains and characterizes it?

There are a number of answers. First, some realists embrace **moral naturalism**. Moral naturalists say that moral properties exist. To show this, they are (typically) content to say that the moral claims we make about the world are true or false, and that there is something about the world, a moral property or properties, that makes them so. The key move, according to naturalists, is to realize that moral properties are in fact best understood as being natural, nonmoral properties. We then get a variety of moral naturalisms. Some naturalists say that moral properties can be reduced to various sorts of natural properties. Wrongness may turn out to be some complex organization of brain states, such as various sorts of pain, which we can isolate and use to produce moral-to-natural ‘maps’: ‘if some action is *this* natural sort of way then we know it will be *this* moral way’. Other naturalists are non-reductionists, but still maintain that moral properties are natural properties. We will sort out this difference concerning reduction later in the book. For now, it is important to realize that naturalists are *not* saying that moral properties exist and that they have their own unique nature, but are in some way *connected with* some other properties. This implies that there are two sorts of properties in the end, with moral properties being very different from natural ones. As the label implies, naturalists do not think that. We will develop naturalism and lay out its varieties in Chapter 3.

Some people wish to be moral realists but do not like naturalism. They embrace **moral nonnaturalism** instead. For them moral properties of whatever sort are metaphysically and conceptually *sui generis*, at least with respect to the natural world. (‘*Sui generis*’

is Latin for ‘of its own kind’.) We cannot identify moral properties with other sorts of properties, such as natural properties. This position has some appeal if one does not wish to be a naturalist and one wishes to support realism. But, why would one want to be a realist in the first place, and what is so bad about naturalism? And, if one does adopt nonnaturalism, how does one conceive of the relationship between the nonmoral world and the moral properties that are said to inhabit it? I explore and answer these questions in Chapters 3 and 6.

Recall that I said there was a three-way relationship to be explored. So far we have thought about the relationship between the moral stuff that seemingly exists and the nonmoral world. Another issue that occupies realists and others is the relationship between the moral stuff that seemingly exists and human judges. In particular, realists might ask, and be forced to answer, why it is that certain moral properties come to exist and what role human judges have in their existence. We might think that moral properties, whatever they are, come into existence, stay in existence, and have the character they have independently of anything to do with human thoughts, feelings, commitments and the like. (Recall the use of ‘independent’ in my initial characterization of Duncan in the previous section.) Or, we might say that things have the moral properties they have partly or wholly because of how humans judge things to be. This last idea might seem a little odd, particularly with the insertion of ‘wholly’. For it seems that we are assuming that human judgements concerning the moral nature of an action can create the property of goodness, say, that the action has. We are not picking out things that *already* exist, but are imposing views onto a (nonmoral) world. That might be a defensible position, but why call this a version of realism? Indeed, if we are saying that human judges help to create these moral properties, and if we assume some differences between humans, are we in danger of returning ourselves to something like Helen’s relativism: these moral properties ‘exist-for-us’ but they may not exist for people with different responses.

This is a good worry to raise. But as we will see, this sort of position – or something more sophisticated – is quite popular in metaethics. The alternative realist position, that properties are not *at*

all dependent on how humans judge and feel, is clearly deserving of the label ‘realism’. (I characterized Duncan’s view in this way.) It faces other problems though. Many commentators find it rather extreme and implausible. We will discuss this issue further, again primarily in Chapters 2 and 4. What I emphasize now is that we have two issues on the table: the relationship between the moral and the nonmoral, and what we can for now think of as the amount of ‘creative input’ that humans have with regards to the existence and character of supposed moral properties. There are important links between these two issues, but it is also vital to keep them apart, as I occasionally show in the rest of this book.

(b) *Moral anti-realism*: Let us move away from moral realism and think about its opposite. Many writers find it implausible to say that moral properties exist. Moral anti-realism comes in a number of forms. In this book I consider two main types: error theory and noncognitivism.

In order to introduce them let us consider some more labels. Realists often embrace two further ideas: cognitivism and descriptivism. **Cognitivists** claim that moral judgements or beliefs are (wholly or primarily) representing states: there is some moral stuff and our judgements are attempts to represent it correctly. If they do that, they are true, and if they fail they are false. (There is a theory of truth – the correspondence theory – smuggled in here. Whether it is essential to cognitivism is moot, I think, but we’ll let that point pass.) The focus here is, strictly, on how best to interpret the moral mental state. To ‘cognize’ something is to have a belief about something, and if one is correct (and other things hold), then one can be in a state of knowing something. This is to define cognitivism primarily in terms of a type of mental state that is reflected in, or expressed by, one’s moral judgement. However, sometimes writers use ‘cognitivism’ to indicate something about everyday moral language and truth only, not about any mental state. If we do distinguish between mental states and language – as some other writers do – then we need another term. **Descriptivists** claim that moral language’s (whole or prime) function is to describe stuff in the world. And, from this, descriptivists will typically say that judgements can be true or false, that is they are ‘truth-apt’. Here are some examples that indicate both

cognitivism and descriptivism. Just as we might believe that the stabbing happened on a Tuesday and has the property of being swift, so we believe it is wrong. This belief is reflected in the language typically used. Just as we say, ‘Today is Tuesday’ and ‘The blade is sharp’, so we say, ‘The stabbing is wrong’.

The realist-cognitivist-descriptivist triumvirate is a neat package. People who sign up to all three parts can tell a nice story. They believe in moral reality. They believe that everyday moral judgements are attempts to represent that reality correctly. We have mental states that are attempts to cognize the world and give us knowledge, and our moral language reflects that in the way in which it tries to describe the world. Despite the neatness of this position it can be attacked. Not only can the whole part be attacked, but some theorists pick and choose which parts to accept and which to attack. So, now for those anti-realist positions.

Moral error theorists are, typically, cognitivists and descriptivists. They believe, along with moral realists, that everyday moral judgements are representations of something, and typically that ‘something’ is assumed to be moral reality of some sort. But, error theorists deny moral realism. They think that people are profoundly mistaken in their beliefs and judgements. There are no moral properties or moral reality, and hence everyday ethical thought and language has, at its core, a great, fatal falsehood. Well, that is what some error theorists say. It is open to an error theorist to pick on any claim or claims they think are rotten, not just a claim about the existence of moral properties. There will be more on this in Chapter 4.

Moral error theory is much like atheism, at least as normally understood and when directed at traditional Christianity. Traditional Christianity has, at its core, a belief in a miracle-performing, creating, omniscient, omnipotent, personal God. Atheists argue that there is no such being and so the whole of traditional Christian thought and language built around it is erroneous. Such sincere thought and language should go the way of sincere belief in witches and literal magic.

Notice that although metaphysical issues are still in the air, we have shifted to focus on what people believe and say morally. Many moral anti-realist positions think hard about everyday

moral language and thought and use this as a way to reflect on the metaphysical assumptions and arguments we might make. This is very clearly the case with our next position.

Error theorists are quite negative about everyday moral thought and language, yet some other anti-realists are more positive. *Noncognitivists* (typically) agree with error theorists that there are no moral properties, but wish to vindicate our everyday activity. They do so by reflecting on what moral judgements are.

Moral realists and error theorists are both cognitivists and descriptivists, remember? But, there are different sorts of mental states and many ways in which language can function. For example, imagine that instead of being stabbed – that example is getting gruesome – Bob presents Jenny with a bowl of strawberries. ‘Mmmmm!’, says Jenny, licking her lips. Well, ‘Mmmmm!’ does not describe anything. A good test to see if an English utterance is attempting to describe anything is to see if it can replace *p* in the following sentence and if the resulting sentence still make grammatical sense: ‘It is true [or false] that *p*.’ We can readily see that ‘It is true that “Mmmmm!”’ doesn’t make sense at all, at least in standard English. When Jenny says ‘Mmmmm!’ she is expressing her liking of strawberries. (We assume she is being sincere and really does like the strawberries; she isn’t acting, for example.) Similarly, ‘yawns’ normally expresses boredom rather than describe that one is bored. The sentence ‘Oh, I’m bored!’ typically does the job of reporting you are bored. Likewise, we can presume that Jenny’s mental state, as she licks her lips, will not be a belief that she likes strawberries. Rather she will be in a state of desiring the strawberries or she may be anticipating eating them.

Well, that is a fair presumption. But, note now that our language and our mental lives are complex. Imagine that when Bob walks in Jenny exclaims, ‘I love strawberries!’. Strictly speaking this is a description or a report, a report by Jenny of her love of strawberries, and if we wished we could find out whether Jenny’s claim was true. This utterance has descriptive ‘surface grammar’, as it is sometimes put. However, we know from experience that when people say this sort of thing in this sort of circumstance they are not reporting, or not *just* reporting, their love of strawberries. They are also expressing their desire to have some.

Similarly, 'Oh, I'm bored!' can be used quite naturally to express boredom. Perhaps, then, this is how moral language works and how moral mental states should be construed. Whilst a lot of moral language has the surface grammatical form of being descriptive, on reflection we might conclude that it is doing a different job. Its 'depth grammar' is to express our desires and attitudes towards things, or (a possibility we have not yet considered), perhaps it is a way to issue prescriptions, commands and orders. So, when I say 'That institution is just' perhaps what I am really doing is saying something such as 'Hooray for that institution!', or perhaps I am ordering you to respect and protect it.

So, noncognitivists wish to show that moral language and thought can and does do more than just describe some supposed moral reality. Indeed, noncognitivists think that description is not its main function. And, so, although they typically do not believe in moral properties of the sort that error theorists also attack, noncognitivists are not committed to taking a negative stance towards everyday moral thought and language. In Chapter 5 we will think more about noncognitivism, the reasons for adopting it, and two problems it faces. We can also note, lastly, one more thing. Although it is traditional to think of noncognitivist theories as being anti-realist, it is open to noncognitivists to adopt the language of 'properties' and 'reality' in the hope that they can further vindicate everyday moral thought. Perhaps the best conception of a moral property is not along traditional realist lines, but is instead something that can be built upon the insight that moral language can be perfectly in order and do useful work, and yet not be primarily in the business of straightforwardly describing anything.

So, as the reader may have seen with that last thought, the terrain is already getting messy. This section is supposed to be introductory, but already *a lot* has happened. We have started with metaphysics and moved onto language (and mental states). We have thought about the places of moral properties in a natural world, and also canvassed a different but seemingly related distinction between the moral properties that may exist and human judgement about the world. We have had positions that seem to be anti-realist, but which can make room for moral properties

of a sort, and positions labelled realist that seem to make a lot of room for humans' views of the world, helping to create the moral properties that seem to exist. And, we haven't even begun to think about epistemological questions, such as 'How do we know that moral properties exist?'

The main conclusion to draw from this is not just that metaethics can seem messy, but that it often is. We will have to stay alert.

Right now I turn to another set of questions that occupies a lot of metaethicists' time, and has really interesting connections to the ideas just canvassed.

1.3 Moral psychology

We have already encountered the idea of moral mental states. I used the word 'belief' a fair bit. In everyday language people might reserve the idea of a belief for those commitments and ideas that are very important. We might speak of a politician's belief in justice or liberty, for example. But in metaethics, as in other areas of philosophy, 'belief' is used in a more wide-ranging and mundane manner. 'Belief' is a catch-all term for any sort of mental state that aims to represent the world correctly. So, one can have a belief that a table is brown or that today is Tuesday, as well as having a belief that liberty is a good thing. And, of course, such beliefs can be correct or incorrect. Perhaps today is Thursday, not Tuesday.

So, a big question in metaethics – one that has direct bearing on issues about moral language – concerns whether the mental states that typically accompany ethical utterances should be construed as being beliefs, as aiming to represent the world. When I say that the giving of some strawberries was kind, is it correct to construe my state of mind as being one that is attempting to represent the world in a certain way? My judgement that ten strawberries were shared seems to be a report of what has happened. Is the judgement that the action was kind the same?

Many people think that is the best way to construe matters. After all, if you think that moral stuff really is there, and if you are

optimistic about us and our faculties, then you will think that the mental states people have are in the business of representing that stuff. However, as we have seen, we might construe things differently. No matter what the grammatical form of the utterance, perhaps moral mental states are best construed as wants, or commands or – a word we will use a lot – desires. Again, ‘desire’ is liberally used in metaethics as a catch-all term for any sort of mental state that is a want, an urge, a commitment, a plan, an intention, or a yearning. (We will not focus on these other things too much, but a lot of what can be said for desires goes for them also.) Desires are assumed to be non-representing states. Think about what happens when Jenny licks her lips and says, ‘Mmmmmm!’ as Bob enters with the strawberries. There are reasons to think that moral judgements are accompanied by or express desires. Desires are all about preferences and likings. Furthermore, they seem to express or embody how we are motivated to act. (More on that in a moment.) Preferences, likings, and inclinations all seem to be an important if not an essential part of our ethical lives. When we are stating that some action is generous, say, it seems that we are not merely reporting, in a cold and detached way, what it is. We are expressing our liking of the strawberries as well.

So, there is a battle to be had: What sort of mental states are moral judgements? Further to that question, more interesting questions lie ahead. Why think that these two states – beliefs and desires – are the only options? Many modern writers seem to suggest, if only by implication, that these are our only options. However, not only might there be many different sorts of mental states out there (and that the sly ‘this is only a catch-all’ move disguises and misleads far too much), it could be that the mental state that typically accompanies moral judgements is both a representing state and – at the same time – a state of being motivated. Perhaps there are some states that combine the two aspects and we can have the best of both worlds.

There is another prominent debate surrounding moral psychology, linked to the previous point. What is the link between making a moral judgement and being motivated to act appropriately on that judgement? Imagine I make a moral judgement, of whatever kind, no matter how plausible, and no matter whether it is true

or false. Often there is some motivation, of some strength, on my part to act appropriately in accordance with the judgement. So, if I think that giving to charity is kind, I will feel some motivation to give. (And if I think that stabbing this person would be wicked, I will feel some motivation to refrain from doing so.) The motivation we feel may even be our strongest desire, and thus we act accordingly. Some people think it is a necessary part of making a moral judgement that motivation of some strength be present. Some other people disagree. It is clear that sometimes motivation is present, but it is not always, and when it is not that does not mean we should regard the moral judgment as bogus and a case of merely parroting words. There are things to say in favour of both sides. We will see that this debate is intimately connected with the previous one concerning beliefs and desires, and we will also see how these two debates about moral psychology are bound up in the earlier metaphysical debates. I discuss issues of motivation throughout the book, and bring them to sharp focus in Chapter 7.

1.4 Moral relativism again

There is no chapter devoted to moral relativism in this book. But this position pervades much of what we will consider and it is a crucial part of the background against which modern metaethical discussion takes place. Some professional philosophers may explicitly snub relativism, and introduce the relativist into their discussions as a sinister bogeyman, designed to scare innocent young philosophers and trouble their dreams. Other philosophers seem to accept that there are relativistic versions of many metaethical positions. And, outside of academia, we may find people who are resolutely against relativism, as Duncan is, as well as others who have an attitude just like Helen's across many issues.

To explain why relativism is crucial and why we might have these different reactions, let us return to Helen. I introduced the terminology of 'true-for-us' and 'false-for-us'. This is very important. It seems natural to say that relativists believe that there is no moral truth when it comes to moral judgements and that absolutely anything goes when it comes to morality. But, there are many varieties

of relativism beyond this. Think about the name: *relativism*. The idea is that a moral judgement is seen as being decent, correct, acceptable, kosher or, indeed, true, *relative to* a certain standard/idea or something. As part of this, the standard is assumed to be something that is local and, typically, this local thing is essentially something to do with human judges. When it comes to Helen in the debate above, it seems that the standard is her country or social group. The key relativistic thought is that the something that acts as a standard will be different for different people, and that all such standards are equally authoritative, authoritative to a certain local set of judgements. In contrast to all of this, Duncan also has a standard for moral judgements. But for him this seems to be a sort of moral reality that is conceived to be independent of humans and, thus, this reality has universal authority.

We may get different sorts of relativism depending on the standard. Helen could choose her social group as the standard. But, we might ask, how homogenous is her group? What *is* the social group? If people within her social group disagree about something, for example some governmental policy, then it is doubtful that her group can then act as *a* standard, for there is no such thing. Helen and people within her group may have the same *general* values and ideals in common, but then such a standard may not give us enough detail when it comes to a particular case. For example, perhaps people in Helen's group favour both family freedoms *and* environmental protection. Some cases, such as the one we considered, will expose a tension between these two general stances.

The obvious way out of this difficulty is to narrow what counts as the standard. One of the most narrow standards for a judgement to conform to is 'what the particular judge [e.g. Helen] believes'. And, more narrowly than that, relativists might add that the standard that matters is a particular person at a certain age of maturity, on a certain day. This will give a *very* extreme sort of relativism: what is morally right or wrong depends on what *you* believe (at a certain time). This seems like a very implausible account of morality. At the very least, we will want to account for people being wrong about moral matters, and this seems difficult if not impossible to do within this position. This is probably the reason why some people are averse to relativism *per se*, since they

have this extreme version in mind. These people may continue to be averse to relativism as we turn our back on such narrowness and widen out so that the standard (again) becomes one's social group and tribe. After all, there are plenty of examples of whole societies going wrong. But, even if this less narrow position is still worrying, it may be harder to shake off.

It is particularly hard to shake off because, as we have seen, there are a number of positions that, whilst wishing to avoid the extreme sort of relativism just encountered, base the correctness and incorrectness of moral judgement on human judgement, sentiment and reasoning ability. I do not wish to get into the details of these positions now; we will do so in Chapter 6. However, three quick points will suffice here. First, often the standard used in such positions is human beings and their responses and reasoning abilities generally rather than some particular social group. Second, whilst accepting that their position has some limited relativism, such theorists will use the label 'relativism' only for the more extreme views just introduced. Because their position seeks to encompass humans generally, they will prefer to emphasize the general nature of their account and how wide the authority of the standard is. Such theorists also work, quite consciously and sincerely, with notions of moral truth and moral property. As part of this, and third, they will say that it is enough to tie the authority of the moral standard to human beings. There is no sense in trying to justify all of our moral judgements such that they have authority over Martians as well, for example.

I started by presenting a big clash between Duncan and Helen. This clash remains, as I show in Chapter 2. But, there are many types of relativism. My contrast between the social group and one person is blunt, but I hope it gives a flavour of what one could say. Indeed, it seems that the varieties of relativism come in a sliding scale, from the less extreme to the more extreme versions.

As I have said, there is no distinct chapter on relativism. Yet the position, and the desire to avoid extreme versions of it, will be something we return to every so often. Seeing how some people try to reconcile a desire to avoid extreme relativism with an attempt to make humans' judgements central to the story of how moral value gets into the world will be interesting.