

Internal Accommodation in Moral Irrealism

by

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B.A. Hons., York University, 2011

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Philosophy

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University of Victoria

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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**Supervisor**

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## Abstract

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### ABSTRACT

In metaethics, moral irrealists argue that moral facts are neither ontologically real nor mind-independent. In moral semantics, irrealists who are descriptivist error theorists argue that typical moral claims attempt to report descriptive moral facts but that such facts do not exist, so typical moral claims are descriptively false or erroneous. Moral irrealists who are non-descriptivists, such as Mark Timmons, argue for a different function of moral claims. Timmons argues that moral claims attempt to guide action. He further maintains that moral claims can be true or false, but not according to a descriptivist function (he affirms cognitivism but denies descriptivism). I lay out Timmons' semantics and grapple with a number of objections to his view. I conclude that Timmons ought to discard his contextual truth-apt semantics and his non-descriptivism; instead he should defend the prescriptive, or evaluative, function of moral claims within an overarching descriptivist error theory.

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## Glossary

**Moral Realism:** the metaethical thesis that there exist ontologically real and mind-independent moral facts or properties. Moral irrealists, also known as anti-realists, deny this thesis in a number of ways.

**Moral Naturalism:** the moral realist thesis that moral facts or properties are, or supervene on, natural properties. Supervenience is relational, but can be worked out in a number of ways, for instance if moral properties supervene on natural properties then the relationship can be one of identity, constitution, or emergence. Moral non-naturalists deny that moral facts are natural facts of any sort, or else they claim that moral facts are over-and-above any natural properties with which they may be related.

**Descriptivism:** the metaethical semantic thesis that moral claims attempt to describe or report objectively descriptive moral facts. Non-descriptivism denies this thesis.

**Descriptivist Error Theory:** the metaethical semantic thesis that typical, descriptive, moral claims are erroneous or false. Moral irrealists/anti-realists who accept that the semantics of moral claims are descriptivist are forced to advocate some version of error theory, since irrealists deny that descriptive moral facts exist or can be accurately reported; thus, moral claims which attempt to report such facts are descriptively false or erroneous claims.

\*Moral realists and irrealists who accept a descriptivist moral semantics will accept the additional semantic thesis of cognitivism and maintain that moral claims have propositional truth-values. The acceptance of descriptivism entails the acceptance of cognitivism, but not vice-versa.

**Cognitivism:** the metaethical semantic thesis that moral claims are truth-apt propositions. In moral semantics, cognitivists interpret sentences or claims such as “*x* is wrong” as propositions about the truth of some substantive moral content. According to cognitivists, claims such as “*x* is wrong” can either be true or false. Non-cognitivists deny that moral claims are meant as propositions about the truth or falsity of some metaphysical or physical fact. Non-cognitivists instead argue that moral claims are typically meant to emote, prescribe, or express a different kind of meaning.

**Internal Accommodation:** a project that metaethicists undertake in order to address and explain the commonplace features of moral phenomenology, moral semantics, and moral practice. I will often talk about *positively* accommodating perceptive features of morality, in contrast to explaining them away.

**External Accommodation:** a project that metaethicists engage in to try to square their metaethical theories with accepted knowledge and standards in other areas of relevant inquiry. For example, one may wish to make one’s view compatible with leading theories in the various sciences, and with theories that one accepts in the philosophy of language and philosophy of mind.

## **Chapter One**

### **Moral Realism and the Move to Irrealism**

In this thesis, I will be arguing on behalf of descriptivist error theory, within the background of reviewing the semantics of a recent moral irrealist view advocated by the contemporary philosopher Mark Timmons. My aim is to explicate Timmons' position and to defend a variety of its features, such as its emphasis on the action-guiding component of moral discourse; the claim that engaged moral deliberation is undertaken within a subjective moral outlook or moral perspective; and the importance of context. However, I disagree with Timmons' attempt to make his view compatible with widespread moral intuitions and moral assumptions; I argue that he cannot vindicate these features within a moral irrealist/anti-realist position. The thesis of moral irrealism denies the existence of ontologically real, objective moral facts or properties. In order to positively accommodate the "deeply-embedded assumptions" that Timmons believes most ordinary persons (i.e. non-philosophers) have, Timmons tries to argue that many moral claims can be true.

Traditionally, irrealists either claim that all moral claims are erroneous/false (since irrealism holds that there are no extant or knowable objective moral truths), or else they argue that moral claims are not erroneous since moral claims have a different purpose or meaning; i.e. moral claims are not intended to report descriptive, objective moral facts. Irrealists in this second group are known as non-cognitivists: they argue that moral claims are not propositionally truth-apt in the way that moral realists believe they are.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are a variety of non-cognitivist views: such as emotivism, according to which moral claims express emotions e.g. "lying is wrong" = "boo! yuck! lying" (A.J. Ayer 1952); prescriptivism, according to which moral claims are prescriptions rather than assertions e.g. "lying is wrong" = "do not lie" (Carnap 1937; Hare 1952); and expressivism (Blackburn 1984) including norm-expressivism (Gibbard 1990), according to which moral claims express the

Breaking from tradition, Timmons presents an innovative moral semantics according to which persons can make true moral claims (he endorses cognitivism), but the truth of which is not based on a descriptive function. In other words, Timmons differentiates descriptivism, the thesis that the function of moral claims is to report or describe moral facts, from cognitivism, the thesis that moral claims are propositionally truth-apt, in order to argue for an innovative moral semantics that endorses cognitivist truth-aptness with a non-descriptivist function. By doing so, Timmons tries to have his cake and eat it too; he knows that most persons will positively report the existence of moral truth, he wants to accommodate this feature (among others), and so he attempts to preserve the truth-aptness of moral claims. But as an irrealist the only way he can defend the truth of moral claims, rather than arguing that all moral claims are descriptively false, is by rejecting that the point and purpose of moral discourse is descriptivist.

I disagree with Timmons and I endorse a nuanced version of descriptivist error theory. Like moral realists, and irrealists who are also descriptivist error theorists, I see major problems with the denial of a descriptivist grammar for moral claims. There are serious semantic issues with rejecting a descriptivist surface grammar for moral claims. These semantic issues are covered in chapter four.

I conclude that Timmons ought to abandon his innovative attempt to defend a contextual semantics according to which moral claims can be non-descriptively truth-apt. Instead, I argue that he is better off with a descriptivist moral semantic and an error theorist semantic position. Even though a major problem with descriptivist error theory is that it seems very counter-intuitive to maintain that all moral claims are descriptively false or erroneous, I attempt to

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attitudes or values of the utterer e.g. “I think that lying is wrong” = “I disapprove of lying” or “I accept norms according to which liars should feel guilty and others should feel angry at liars”.

alleviate this concern in chapter five while pointing out that the counter-intuitiveness does not weigh heavily upon the philosophical merits of error theory or moral irrealism. I thereby undermine the idea that a strong irrealist position will be compatible with widespread (realist) intuitions.

In the first chapter, I give a brief overview of what moral realism is, including moral naturalist and moral non-naturalist brands of realism. I indicate what typically motivates persons to reject realism and accept moral irrealism. In the second chapter, I explicate the recent moral irrealist view propounded by Mark Timmons in his book *Morality Without Foundations: A Defense of Ethical Contextualism*. In the third chapter, I engage in substantive analysis and evaluation of Timmons' view; there I defend Timmons' view against a number of substantive disagreements, and I proceed to isolate semantic weaknesses and speculations in his theory in order to dispute and rectify them in chapters four and five. This thesis may be seen in part as a critical review of Timmons' book, and in part as a series of arguments for various philosophical positions. The focus of the thesis is on Timmons' attempt to accommodate typical features of moral phenomenology and moral discourse within a moral irrealist position; I will be drawing attention to how Timmons tries to vindicate the cognitivist (propositionally truth-apt) usage of moral claims while he argues that some moral claims can be non-descriptively true.

### **Section I: Understanding Moral Realism**

There is a wide array of existing metaethical theories, and though we can attempt to neatly fit the many different doctrines into two categories – realism and irrealism – there are often significant differences between one realist doctrine and another. The division, then, between moral realism and moral irrealism indicates a crucial difference in the way moral truths

are conceived (as we shall see), but these differences do not necessarily need to translate into different moral codes. So, both the realist and the irrealist can be for or against euthanasia; abortion; aboriginal land rights; or any other moral or practical issue. The disagreement is a metaethical one: having to do with the way we fundamentally conceive of the *nature* of morals themselves – whether they are in the world, in our thoughts, in society, or altogether nonexistent. Still, not all moral realists share the same metaethical conception; and all irrealists do not agree with one another either, so I will draw attention to important differences within moral realism and within moral irrealism. In this section, I begin with a look at moral realism and some of the variations that have been offered.

Almost all *moral realist* views share at least one feature: they outline moral facts as being situated in or being justified by “mind-independent”; “non-mental”; or “external” facts (Boyd, 307; Brink, 111; Fitzpatrick, 747; Railton, 165). A common way to put this is to say that moral facts or properties are “real”: they really exist; and that they are also “mind-independent”, thus the truth or falsity of moral claims is independent of human opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. Semantically, a moral claim (such as “harming innocent persons *is wrong*”) can be true or false according to whether or not the moral claim accurately reports an objective moral fact (this is called *descriptivism*<sup>2</sup>). Further, to distinguish moral realism from descriptivist error theory, some such moral claims *are* actually true (which presupposes both the ontological thesis that moral facts really exist, and the epistemic thesis that moral knowledge is possible). This characterization is fairly broad, but to keep it simple yet remain fair in acknowledging that realist

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<sup>2</sup> In some metaethical writing, “descriptivism” and “cognitivism” are viewed as being synonymous and thus used interchangeably. Timmons claims that descriptivism and cognitivism are slightly different. Timmons explains that his own view is non-descriptivist, since he argues that moral claims are not purposed to report objective facts, but at the same time he says that it can be called cognitivist because he allows for genuine truth-apt moral belief (Timmons, 19, footnote 15). He further references Hare (1985), who apparently also pushed to keep the notions of descriptivism and cognitivism distinct. I respect this distinction.

views can be notably different, I adopt a broad conception of moral realism when defining it. So, to reiterate, moral realism is a doctrine about the nature of morals which holds that (a) morals are more than just beliefs: they have an existence or justification that is mind-independent, (b) claims about morals can be true or false in correspondence to the accuracy (correctness or incorrectness) with which a moral claim reports objective moral truth, and (c) some moral claims are in fact true.

As a denial of the thesis of realism, the position of moral irrealism, or moral anti-realism, is often portrayed as representing a rejection of at least one key attribute of real morals described above. For example, an irrealist may claim that we are epistemically barred from apprehending real moral truth; deny that moral facts are ontologically mind-independent, or at all extant; and/or reject that the alleged purpose of moral claims is to report objective moral truths (which usually results in denying true mind-independent morals as well, since external moral facts do not need to exist in order to, for instance, express one's personal "moral" attitude). According to irrealists, beliefs about morals cannot be objectively justified. But as a clarification, I should point out that this does not mean that the irrealist rejects all moral ideals and must live without principles; rather, it means that the irrealist cannot establish any moral principles as being *objectively* correct or *objectively* better than others. An irrealist can still feel negatively about genocide, take measures to prevent it, and may even be able to claim that such things are "wrong" – where by "wrong" the irrealist might mean it in some non-moral, non-objective, or non-ontological-truth-seeking sense (more on this later).

Among irrealists, it is common to argue either that (a) morals do not exist, so terms like "good" and "right", when understood in a moral sense are ontologically/empirically vacuous (this can be called ontological moral nihilism); or (b) moral truths are defined by social

agreement or personal beliefs (this can be called subjectivism or relativism). Like irrealist moral subjectivists, realists can also claim that the existence of moral goodness may require the existence of human beings or other beings that can think about or experience 'goodness'. However, for realists, the truth of a moral belief is fixed outside of the human mind – thus the broad characterization of moral realism still applies: morals are not true or false according to human beliefs alone; there exist real properties in the world that affix moral truth.

Given realists' reliance on the ontological existence of some sorts of properties or facts that are intimately related with moral truth, theories of moral realism are often separated into two camps. These camps are indicative of two distinct categories for objective reference; they are moral naturalism and moral non-naturalism.

As an ontological thesis, philosophical naturalism is a view about the nature of what exists, a thesis claiming that everything is part of the natural, physical world that is the subject matter of science (Timmons, 12). David Brink explains that natural properties are those which can be predicated and picked out through the natural and social sciences, broadly understood (Brink, 161). Naturalism in ethics hinges on the claim that moral facts are part of this scientific natural world, and that, ideally, science can broach the subject matter of morality and contribute to our general knowledge of such things. Conversely, moral non-naturalism is the view that moral facts are not natural facts of this sort.

To illustrate the difference more clearly, let us take the case of kicking a sleeping homeless person for fun. A moral naturalist, if he or she believes that kicking people for fun is wrong, would be committed to claiming that there is something in the natural facts comprising the act of kicking a person for fun which makes the act wrong. For instance, it may be the painful psychological state of the victim and the apathetic psychological state of the kicker which makes

the act wrong; it may be the social or biological consequence of being unduly kicked which makes the act wrong; or it may be the conjunction of the physical particles involved in the act which gives rise to the act's wrongness. Most ethical naturalist theories are considerably complicated and involve a cluster of such properties. For instance, the wrongness may be contingent on the agent's psychological state, the victim's psychological state, the nature of the action involved, *and* the physical or social consequences of the action. In more technical terms, moral naturalism is the thesis that moral facts *supervene* upon natural facts or properties. Two of the most popular ethical naturalist characterizations of moral facts tie them to human "needs" and "objective interests" (Boyd 1988 and Railton 1986, respectively).

In contrast, a moral non-naturalist will say that the act of kicking a sleeping homeless person for fun is wrong because of a non-natural fact. For instance: there is an *a priori* moral truth that prohibits it (Moore 1903; Shafer-Landau 2003); there is a Platonic form according to which the act is wrong; perhaps God, understood as a deity above the natural world, decreed that it is wrong; or there is a supernatural *je ne c'est quoi* which makes the act of kicking people for fun simply and straightforwardly wrong.

Due to constraints of space, I will not delve into the intricate and interesting details of varying naturalist views and varying non-naturalist views. There are a plethora of theories which fall into each camp, but I will not endeavour to explicate moral realism any further. The aim of my thesis is to establish the conceptual strength and coherence of moral irrealism and to argue for a descriptivist moral semantics as part of a providing a sound explanation for the typical moral features of moral phenomenology and moral discourse. Thus my treatment of moral realism, both of a naturalistic and non-naturalistic variety, has and will be very brief.

## Section II: The Move to Irrealism/Anti-Realism

If one has the realist belief that there exist real moral features or properties in the world, one would presumably also adopt a realist conception of moral semantics, where (i) moral claims such as “x is wrong” would have a truth value; and (ii) if true, this truth is of a descriptive and objective kind: the claim would accurately describe some moral feature of the world that is not determined by humans’ (or other moral creatures’) opinions and beliefs. In response, the typical irrealist position involves a rejection of one or more crucial aspects of realism. According to irrealists who are descriptivists and advocate an error theory, moral claims attempt to report objective moral facts (the irrealist agrees with the realist that ) but such facts are non-knowable or altogether non-existent (non-existence being the more popular version). According to other irrealists, morals do not reside in an objective/mind-independent realm – for example, morals may be contingent on social norms or intersubjective agreement. A final, rather popular, option for moral irrealists is non-descriptivism: to argue that moral claims are not true or false based on a descriptive function. By descriptive, it is meant that a moral claim is true if it shares or affirms the content of an objective moral truth/fact, but many irrealists such as A.J. Ayer, Simon Blackburn, and Mark Timmons have argued that moral claims do not seek to report objective moral facts and as a result are not true or false according to how well they capture external facts.

In denying moral truth, irrealists who are error theorists will maintain that moral claims are all descriptively and objectively false, while other moral irrealists will argue that moral claims are neither true nor false in the realist’s sense – since the concept of truth understood objectively *does not apply* to moral claims. Either way, we can see a familiar pattern among almost all moral irrealist accounts: that is, dissatisfaction with the notion of objectivity at play in

realist theories. But why the dissatisfaction with moral objectivity? The short answer is that most moral irrealists regard the postulation of mind-independent moral facts as considerably mysterious, and certainly out of the ordinary. They ask questions such as: what exactly is the nature of objective moral facts; how can there be mind-independent moral facts that are prescriptively binding, which dictate what is appropriate or inappropriate for humans to think and do; and how do objective moral facts fit into our best sciences?

In what Timmons refers to as the “external accommodation” project, which involves reconciling our metaethical views with our best known philosophical and scientific theories, he points out that moral realists have difficulty making their theories compatible with our leading ontological and scientific worldviews. The realists who typically do the best job at externally accommodating their metaethics are naturalists, and also tend to be motivational/judgement externalists. Realists who are judgement externalists do not maintain that realist moral truths are inherently motivating, or have a “built-in-pursuedness” as the error theorist J.L. Mackie (1977) claimed and criticized. Among naturalists, Peter Railton is a famous proponent of judgement externalism (e.g. Railton 1986); and David Brink defends moral naturalism with what he calls a *weak* judgement internalism – where the inherent motivation of moral judgements is defeasible (Brink 1989). Both of these shifts, to naturally-grounded moral facts and to an externalism of motivation, work to strip away the traditional notion of moral objectivity so that it becomes less ontologically extravagant.

The move to moral irrealism is also significantly motivated by dissatisfaction with the ontological mysteriousness and elusiveness of many traditional realist views, as I mentioned earlier. But contemporary irrealists further reject realist moral naturalism, for a variety of reasons. One argument is that the naturalist cannot move to judgement externalism without

forsaking the conventional internalist way that most persons regard moral judgements. And if the naturalist is going to be forced to admit something as counter-intuitive as externalism, then the naturalist might as well go all the way to moral irrealism. Another argument against naturalism targets the moral semantics of some proposed versions of moral naturalism; Timmons believes that there are serious worries about the “causal regulation” semantics of naturalists like Richard Boyd, and he uses a ‘moral twin earth’ scenario to draw this point out.<sup>3</sup>

Briefly explained, the moral twin earth argument, if successful, creates doubt that moral terms and moral facts are intimately related with a natural property or cluster thereof. Timmons asks the reader to imagine that facts which humans deem as moral facts are regulated by certain natural properties on earth (the semantic thesis of moral naturalism), and that on a different world – a “twin earth” – moral facts are causally regulated by different natural properties than they are here on our earth, all else being equal. He claims that we would still want to describe twin earthlings in moral terms, even though on twin earth there are different natural properties connected with moral ‘goodness’. If (a) in all cases of moral goodness on earth, property N must be present, (b) property N doesn’t exist on twin earth, and yet (c) we still feel that we are correctly ascribing moral qualities or moral properties to creatures and events on twin earth, this would go to show that we are more inclined to regard moral facts, and correct moral ascriptions, as being independent of any natural properties at all, and so the semantic thesis of Boyd’s moral naturalism is dubitable to say the least.

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<sup>3</sup> See Timmons (1999), *Morality without Foundations*, p.59-70; Horgan and Timmons (1991), “New Wave Moral Realism Meets Moral Twin Earth”; and Horgan and Timmons (1992), “Troubles for New Wave Moral Semantics: The Open Question Argument Revived”. For a response by David Brink (where he proposes a semantics more resilient to twin earth worries), see Brink (2001), “Realism, Naturalism, and Moral Semantics”.

There are further arguments to be made against moral naturalism on the grounds that even its most ontologically plausible versions posit more than what is warranted. Some irrealists, such as Timmons and I, believe that the applicability of normative claims, including moral claims, is ultimately judged from a subjective basis – that there is no moral standard other than the moral standards that persons adopt. As a result, the only truly satisfactory account of moral objectivity is going to be no account whatsoever: in other words, to abandon objective moral truth altogether rather than trying to make it more ontologically plausible by shifting to motivational externalism or moral naturalism.

Since the irrealist does not posit any ontologically real moral properties, the task of external accommodation is not really an issue. If it were the case that objective moral properties or facts were already accepted into our leading scientific views, then the irrealist would arguably have the need to debunk this integration in order to achieve external accommodation. However, it is currently moral naturalists who are tasked with externally accommodating their metaethical theories, as they have not yet generated widespread scientific consensus. Once and if their theories become scientifically accepted, then moral irrealism will become a much more difficult position to defend. But as of right now, external accommodation is a relatively easy task for moral irrealists. The greatest task for moral irrealists is the project of what Timmons calls “internal accommodation”.

In the next chapter, I explicate the intricate details of a fairly recent moral irrealist view that has been offered by Mark Timmons in his book *Morality without Foundations*. I focus my exegesis on his view’s ability to successfully accommodate or explain the commonly-upheld features and character of moral judgement, moral discourse, and moral practice; what he calls “the internal accommodation project”. In chapter three, following my exegesis of his view, I

tackle some objections and worries that other metaethicists have raised. I rebut various facets of the objections, but also indicate some persisting worries that I see with some of Timmons' claims. I point out how the empirical and semantic weaknesses of Timmons' view can be rectified in order to construct a stronger irrealist position. Much of this final task is continued in the latter chapters, where I offer a substantially different way of accommodating, or making sense of, typical features of moral discourse: by adopting a descriptivist error theory.

## Chapter Two **Timmons' *Ethical Contextualism***

### **Section I: The Dual Accommodation Project**

Before forming and advocating his moral irrealist view, Timmons explains what he believes a plausible metaethical view should achieve. He outlines the following two tasks: (a) the metaethical view should make sense of deeply embedded assumptions about morality and moral discourse; and (b) it should be compatible with plausible views from other relevant areas of inquiry (Timmons, 11). In more straightforward terms, a strong metaethical theory, according to Timmons, should be able to comport with or otherwise explain why ordinary persons conceptualize and speak about morals in the way that they do, and it should also be in accord with other philosophical and scientific theories that one accepts, such as naturalism. Timmons refers to the first task as the internal accommodation project, and to the second task as the external accommodation project. Earlier I discussed the prospects for success in externally accommodating realist and irrealist theories. Let me briefly explain what the typical prospects are for realist and irrealist views to positively satisfy the project of internal accommodation.

When faced with the task of internal accommodation – of comporting with or explaining deeply embedded, “commonsense”, moral presumptions – Timmons points out that irrealists tend to have a much harder time than realists (Timmons, 158). For realists, internal accommodation is not as daunting because ordinary persons seem to have objective pretensions: they use moral terms in truth-functional ways; they tend to believe that moral claims, such as “slavery is wrong”, are true; and they uphold these claims as true regardless of opinion.

Traditional irrealists deny moral objectivity, as well as the possibility of affirmative moral truth. With a few exceptions, it was mostly in the 1930's and later that very many irrealists

began to frame moral sentences independently of descriptive moral facts; often through the adoption of a non-cognitivist, and thus non-descriptivist, moral semantics. Before that, irrealists seldom tried to make their metaethical views comport with the kinds of deeply embedded assumptions that most persons had about positive moral truth and moral phenomenology. Instead, traditional irrealists accepted the implications of their theories as counter-intuitive, and claimed either that (a) persons are in error (*error theory*) because they are trying to report non-existent or non-knowable moral facts; or (b) moral facts are human constructions, wholly constituted by intersubjective agreement or accepted social policy (*subjectivism*). Later on a third option became more popular: (c) moral statements are not meant to report external moral facts (*non-descriptivism*) and are not propositionally truth-apt (*non-cognitivism*). There are other avenues for irrealism, but currently (a), (b), and (c) are the most common irrealist positions (Sayre-McCord 1986, 3; Timmons, 72).

In accordance with the third option above, Timmons argues that the point and purpose of moral claims is not to report or describe, but primarily for guiding or regulating actions; so he adopts a non-descriptivist position. But quite controversially, Timmons wants to preserve the truth-aptness of moral discourse (he wants to support cognitivism), and by doing so seeks to make his theory comport with deeply embedded assumptions rather than explaining them away. Needless to say, he has a rather ambitious project of internal accommodation, and much of my exegesis of his view will be aimed at seeing whether or not he can succeed in this regard.

## **Section II: The Nature of Moral Discourse**

Timmons claims that the primary and most important role of prototypical moral discourse is to prescribe and guide actions, rather than attempt to report facts about the world (Timmons, 6;

72; 144). He adopts this from R.M. Hare, who emphasized that the primary task of moral discourse is prescriptive, i.e. command-giving or action-guiding, and thus that moral terms are *evaluative* rather than descriptive (Hare 1952). Without keeping in mind that the point and purpose of moral discourse is to guide action, and not to describe facts, one may confuse the implications of Timmons' claims about metaethics and moral semantics; namely, his controversial argument that ordinary moral claims are truth-apt. Since many moral realists see the purpose of moral claims as attempting to report objective facts, one can easily be perplexed by how Timmons can maintain that there is no objectivity to morals (thus, no truth to moral claims which attempt to report objective facts that do not exist) while at the same claiming that people are not in error when they regard some moral claims as being genuinely true. So, to reiterate, the point and purpose of moral discourse, for Timmons, is *not* to report facts, thus the truth or falsity of moral claims does not rely on the existence of objective moral facts or properties. What, then, is the truth or falsity of moral claims grounded in? This is a very difficult question to answer directly, and I will return to it. First, we must know more about the conceptual framework that Timmons sets up.

Timmons points out that many ordinary persons make moral claims in a *categorical* fashion (143). This means that ordinary persons tend to adopt and assert their moral beliefs in a non-relativized way, i.e. they tend to stand their ground and argue on behalf of a moral position even when others do not share their moral beliefs: "*x is wrong, regardless of what others think.*" According to Timmons, persons make moral claims in a categorical fashion because the categorical style of assertion is most successful at guiding behaviour; he explains:

“Failure to express one’s views categorically over and against competing views of others manifests a kind of timidity that tends not to contribute to the fruitful pursuit

of mutual rational agreement on matters of deep importance, and also tends not to advance the fundamental point and purpose of moral discourse as a social practice: namely, guiding behaviour so that humans might coordinate their efforts toward survival and well-being.” (Timmons, 173)

Thus, typically when persons claim that something is wrong, the alleged moral wrongness is not qualified; and it may even take the form of a claim about wrongness *simpliciter*. This may make it seem as though it were a reference to some fact based on an ideology of objective moral rightness/wrongness. While many moral irrealists, namely descriptivist error theorists such as J.L. Mackie and Richard Joyce, claim that this usage of moral terms is erroneous because it is unreflective of the fact that there are no objective moral truth-values that humans can accurately report, Timmons claims that there is no error. This requires a distinction between what is objectively or scientifically true (i.e. that there are no real moral facts or properties in the world), and what is regarded as true or false based on norms and subjective perception. Here, Timmons introduces the concept of a *moral outlook*: a perspective lens each person uniquely adopts in order to analyze and understand the world, in a moral sense.

Originating from within one’s subjective moral outlook, one typically forms a moral belief about something, but then one is often inclined to externalize that belief in order to present it as a moral truth. The curious origin of the practice aside, it is because such categorical claims are made from *within* one’s moral outlook which makes it the case that those claims are invulnerable to Mackie-style claims of error. If a person were able to detach oneself from all moral outlooks, and make a purely objective, scientific claim about e.g. the objective wrongness of torture, then indeed they *would* be in error since no such objective wrongness exists (thus, Timmons’ view is still irrealist at the core). However, there is no view from nowhere according

to Timmons (170); no sure way to remain permanently detached from one's moral outlook, thus moral claims made by persons in an engaged context are not erroneous in a metaethical way.

I think it is implicit here that the greater majority of persons are not metaethicists nor attempt to make moral claims about specific matters while referencing the sorts of realist views that some philosophers advocate. Those philosophers who *do* explicitly purport to report objective moral facts in an objective way (outside of a moral outlook) are in error. In other words, realist metaethicists are wrong. But insofar as ordinary persons are not metaethicists and do not make any reference to the metaethical theories of e.g. Boyd, Brink, Railton, Shafer-Landau, etc., they are exempt. Furthermore, it is not warranted to attribute a robust metaethical doctrine to undergird any moral claim as simple and unqualified as: "abortion is wrong." At least that is what Timmons claims (Timmons, 174-175), citing Graham and Horgan 1994.

Graham and Horgan argue that the moral claims of ordinary individuals should not be interpreted as bearing any metaphysical commitments. They claim that the default metaethical interpretation of prototypical moral claims ought to be an *austere* interpretation, rather than an *opulent* one. An austere interpretation does not load the moral claims of individuals with any postulated metaphysical commitments, e.g. as being backed by Plato's Forms, a divine moral order, or natural-objective moral facts. So, if I were to make a claim such as "genocide is wrong" it would be extraneous to postulate a metaphysical basis upon which the truth of that wrongness is grounded. Simply saying "genocide is wrong" does not warrant any presumption that what I really meant was "there is an objective truth of the matter, in accordance with the divine moral order [or any other realist metaethical basis], that genocide is wrong". Such an interpretation of a moral claim would be a particularly *opulent*, i.e. metaphysically loaded, interpretation. Instead, Graham and Horgan argue that the default interpretation ought to be an austere one, which views

simple moral claims of the sort “*x* is wrong” as not being implicitly reinforced by *any* metaphysical backing. However, I believe that it is unclear whether we can confidently establish that either an *austere* or an *opulent* interpretation is or ought to be the default; it is an open debate. Setting aside the problem of taking austerity for granted until chapter three, let us continue with a closer look at moral outlooks and moral truth.

### **Section III: Inside and Outside of Moral Outlooks**

To develop the notion of a moral outlook, Timmons attributes five complementary elements to a well-functioning moral outlook<sup>4</sup>; paraphrased, they are:

- (1) A developed sensitivity to various (morally deemed) features of one’s environment.
- (2) Emotional responsiveness: such as having feelings of guilt, anger, or other emotion in response to certain events.
- (3) Acquaintance with paradigmatic cases of moral and immoral actions, persons, etc.
- (4) Applying familiar moral generalizations, i.e. putting moral matters into familiar thoughts and personalizing moral content.
- (5) Use of basic moral reasoning patterns, such as applying ‘the Golden Rule’.

In regard to points 1 and 2, one must be able to react and pick up on specific things in the environment in order to distinguish what may be of moral significance. Having focussed attention on certain key features, such as reflection on one’s reaction of anger towards thugs beating on a helpless old woman, one then compares that case with other learned and internalized

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<sup>4</sup> See Timmons, 139.

moral/immoral cases, in order to decide whether what one is witnessing is morally wrong. Being acquainted with paradigmatic cases (point 3) may be of help here, but not a necessity. Still, if for instance one is familiar with Robin Hood and admires the character then it becomes easier to draw a distinction between righteous rebels and evil terrorists. Furthermore, in connection with point 4, thinking in terms such as “freedom fighter” versus “terrorist” also helps one to frame the issues in a way that is more clearly black or white; moral or immoral. Lastly, applying moral principles which one agrees with, such as considerations of the Golden Rule (“do onto others as you would have them do onto you”); of the wrongness of using people as means; of weighing utility; etc., is a seemingly more reasoned way to come to a moral conclusion rather than relying solely on gut reaction or intuition (though these usually all work in conjunction).

Whatever the deliberative and emotional process behind a particular moral belief, being able to cite *why* one believes what they believe is crucial to interpersonal moral discourse or deliberation. It should go without saying that having reasons for one’s moral beliefs is typically important in order to feel confident about those beliefs. It is often those reasons or considerations which incline us to see something as morally ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and the same reasons can be provided in order to attempt to similarly convince others.<sup>5</sup> Thus, though a moral outlook is in a sense subjective and relative to the person whose outlook is in question, most persons are ready to provide widely accepted reasons, or justifications, for their moral claims. As I said, it is the practice of giving reasons and of criticizing one’s upheld reasons that makes an interesting moral dialectic possible between two individuals with different (by definition) moral outlooks.

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<sup>5</sup> It can be, and is, denied that all moral claims that people feel strongly about are supported by rational reasons, as sociologists attempt to illustrate with the case of moral dumbfounding – see Haidt, Bjorklund, and Murphy (2000), “Moral dumbfounding: When intuition finds no reason”. However, when a moral dialectic is not comprised of only a continual exchange of “that’s wrong!” and “no, it’s not wrong!” reasons are typically cited for one’s claims.

However, should one's dialectical opponent not be willing to accept the reasons that one provides by way of explanation, one does not tend to simply concede the argument to one's opponent or attempt to resolve the dispute by alluding to relativism. As Timmons points out, this is due to the fact that from within one's moral outlook, one tends to uphold and assert their moral beliefs in a *categorical* manner. I think that this tendency exists in many persons because persons regard their moral beliefs seriously (they are particularly attached to their moral beliefs), and they desire for others to agree with or tolerate those beliefs. The desire to be liked and to be agreed with has strong evolutionary roots and is likely hardwired in most, if not all, persons. Furthermore, as I was discussing earlier in the chapter, agreement and *evaluative* moral prescription are more successfully achieved by upholding moral claims in a categorical manner. Thus, persons tend to assert moral claims in a categorical fashion.

Persons furthermore perceive others who hold contrary moral beliefs as being in direct opposition (rather than relativizing those beliefs), and will often insist on their own moral views as being ones which everyone ought to accept. So, even though moral outlooks are uniquely relative to the individuals who possess those outlooks, the manner of assertion is categorical or universal, and the style of discourse tends to proceed in this way. Individuals tend to assert their moral beliefs over and above the beliefs of others, and regard contrary beliefs as categorically, not relatively, wrong (Timmons, 142-143). Additionally, in conjunction with the serious nature of moral discourse and its resultant categorical style, most persons usually regard moral claims as possessing a non-subjective truth-value (but recall, this truth-value only depends on the existence of realist metaphysics if moral claims are interpreted descriptively and opulently!).

From outside of any moral outlook, there is no truth or falsity to moral claims. Morals do not exist objectively, Timmons points out. Metaethical irrealism is correct in spite of the

categorical nature of moral assertion originating from one's moral outlook. Traditionally, realists and irrealists alike have thought of the "non-existence of objective morals" as automatically leading to the position that all moral statements are either false or lack truth-functionality (lack truth-values). But diverging from the typical irrealist, Timmons argues that denying moral realism does not commit one to deny the truth-functionality of moral discourse. Moral claims, made from within a moral outlook, do have truth-values! Timmons calls this unique metaethical semantics "*assertoric non-descriptivism*": moral judgements or moral claims make genuine, truth apt, assertions (thus assertoric), but are not used to report or describe objective moral facts or objective moral properties (thus non-descriptive). Recall rather that the primary purpose of moral claims according to Timmons is *evaluative* or action-guiding. Which also brings us back to the perplexing question I delayed earlier: if not based on objective facts, in virtue of what, then, are moral claims true or false (and not merely regarded as such *erroneously*)?

#### **Section IV: Truth Aptness and Minimalism of Truth**

Remember that Timmons is an irrealist, so he cannot point to some feature in the world that makes moral claims true or false. As such, I find it curious why he wants to preserve truth-aptness and how he plans to do so. Let's take a look at what he writes:

"The realist critic wants me to tell a story about error that would directly address the question, '*In virtue of what* is a moral sentence mistaken, erroneous, or false?' And, of course, as [Crispin] Wright points out, the sort of irrealist who supports a minimalist treatment of moral discourse is not going to try to tell a story that is a direct response to this sort of question. After all, the question really loads the dice in favour of the realist, since it demands that one tell a story about 'truth makers' for

moral discourse – that one indicate some interesting truth conditions (presumably descriptive ones) that make true moral statements true.” (Timmons, 169)

The minimalist treatment of moral discourse that Timmons refers to in the second sentence of the above quotation, and which he himself adopts, allows him to preserve the use of truth-talk without committing himself to any kind of reductive or referent truth. Adopting Alfred Tarski’s semantic theory of truth (1956), Timmons is able to claim as Tarski did that ‘p’ is true if and only if p (Timmons, 137). Though Tarski did not intend this sort of semantics for moral claims in particular, Timmons and others such as Wright have adopted it for such use. So, for Timmons’ moral semantics, ‘p’ can be a moral sentence or moral claim; Timmons can say that the moral claim ‘apartheid is wrong’ is true if and only if apartheid is wrong. This allows him to avoid having to provide reductive truth conditions or some alternative substantive content for ‘p’. To summarize, ‘apartheid is wrong’ is true not in virtue of any descriptive conditions, and furthermore, the content of ‘apartheid is wrong’ is apartheid is wrong (Timmons, 147).

In reflection, Timmons concedes that persons with “realist proclivities” will not be satisfied by the above reply (Timmons, 169). This is likely due to realist tendencies of interpreting moral claims opulently. If one is already committed to giving a metaphysically-loaded reading of moral claims such as “x is wrong”, then it should be no surprise that this person will desire a concrete substitute for descriptive moral truth. Timmons is unlikely to satisfy the realist by eliminating the realist’s descriptive truth-makers or notion of objective moral truth. Non-realist substitutions may seem fickle and one may be accused of simply discarding the realist notion of objective, descriptive truth in favour of some watered-down notion of minimalistic “truth”. These are realist preconceptions at play, and trying to provide a substitute

“truth-maker” or eliminate moral truth-makers altogether: ‘p’ is true if and only if p, will result in an unhappy realist.

So, why not just scrap the notion of truth in connection with morals? If morals do not exist objectively, why should one attempt to vindicate and preserve the use of moral truth? The answer lies in Timmons’ commitment to explain, and have his theory comport with, common presumptions of typical moral discourse; i.e. the internal accommodation project (Timmons, 12). His conception of truth will be in conformity with widespread notions regarding the correctness of ascribing truth or falsity to moral discourse, as long as most persons do not have the sorts of deeply rooted realist proclivities that would lead them to reject Timmons’ minimalistic notion of moral truth. This brings us back to the debate between whether austerity or opulence is the default way of interpreting moral claims, and, as I have claimed, it is unclear which style of interpretation is the most widespread. Furthermore, we need to know what typical persons actually believe if we’re going to try to accommodate their deeply embedded assumptions.

If it turns out that most persons have strong realist commitments, and that these realist commitments inform their moral claims, then Timmons’ minimalistic use of truth will be in violation of deeply embedded assumptions that most ordinary persons share. Of course, for Timmons to succeed, no ordinary person actually needs to explicitly endorse Tarski’s semantic theory of truth as tailored for moral assertions. But most ordinary persons will need to utilize moral terms in austere ways; if not, then Timmons will not have succeeded at accommodating deeply embedded assumptions about morality or moral discourse since his semantic theory of truth does not comport with opulent moral claims. In turn, if he cannot accommodate these features, then Timmons may be better off abandoning any attempts to preserve the positive truth-functional element of ordinary moral discourse and instead embrace a version of error theory.

However, when taken in conjunction with Timmons' claims about ordinary moral semantics, which he argues are contextual semantics, it is obvious that he does indeed believe that austerity is the default interpretation and that utilizing a Tarski-equivalence schema for moral claims ('p' if and only if p) can explain the fact that most persons regard claims such as "slavery is wrong" as foundationally basic moral truths.

### **Section V: Context-Determined Basic Moral Truths**

A basic truth, for the purposes of this paper, is a truth which is not founded upon another truth; justified by another truth; or reducible to another truth. Thus if I say that "slavery is wrong" is a basic moral truth, what I am expressing is my commitment to a *brute fact* regarding slavery, not founded according to a particular moral theory and not based on a broader species of moral claims. In other words, if "slavery is wrong" is a basic moral truth, then it is in a sense a *starting point*. I can then presumably use the fact that "slavery is wrong" to conclude that "it is wrong to enslave George", since I can embed this fact/truth into a *modus ponens* syllogism: slavery is wrong; if slavery is wrong, then it is wrong to enslave George; therefore, it is wrong to enslave George. An important thing to note about the above example is that since "slavery is wrong" is a basic moral truth, the syllogism presented above captures the whole picture behind the wrongness of enslaving George; it is not part of a larger argument where "slavery is wrong if there is some metaphysical moral truth which prohibits it", nor does it reduce to a more basic reason along the lines of "slavery is wrong because it violates human dignity and rational autonomy". The short syllogism, with slavery being a case in point, is presumably how many ordinary persons reason and argue in moral discourse. Thus, an austere interpretation is apt and would seem to be the default.

So, for Timmons, the broadness of claims such as “slavery is wrong” is indicative of the kinds of general moral claims that ordinary persons (i.e. non-philosophers and non-academics generally) use as foundations for moral reasoning. Timmons explains that persons defer to general moral “truths” similar to the type that W.D. Ross explicated in his theory, i.e. using what Timmons calls “mid-level” moral generalizations (Timmons, 214). These are also the same kinds of non-specific basic moral truths that are crucial to Shafer-Landau’s non-naturalist theory (Shafer-Landau, 267). However, ordinary persons do not seem to consistently adopt the same general moral truths in each case. According to Timmons, most persons do not persistently advocate moral truths such as “lying is wrong”. Such sweeping claims may not be able to account for situations where, for instance, the wrongness of lying is not the most pertinent thing to draw attention to. In fact, there seem to be situations where the wrongness of lying is inconsequential compared to some other factors.

Some basic moral truths, such as ‘lying is wrong’ in the sentence: “tell your father the truth about what happened, remember that *lying is wrong*”, will be seemingly violated in other cases, such as: “lie to that would-be murderer and tell her that her victim is not here, because *one must save lives whenever possible*.” The context of the situation can invoke a different basic moral truth or principle. The particular basic moral truth that is adopted depends on various considerations of the situation or context, and these considerations are made from within one’s outlook. Such considerations may include taking into account relevant agents’ intentions, and/or trying to conform to prescriptive social norms pertaining to the particular context. This context-based moral reasoning is what defines Timmons’ moral theory as *ethical contextualism*. In a nutshell, it can be summarized as follows.

**Ethical Contextualism:** Justified moral beliefs (such as “it is wrong to enslave George”) are ultimately based on other beliefs which themselves are not justified (such as “slavery is wrong”). The content of the unjustified justifiers, i.e. basic moral truths, differs between contexts. Choosing an unjustified justifier is done from within one’s moral outlook. Among various within-outlook considerations, persons typically defer to perceived norms of moral behaviour and moral evaluation when operating in common contexts.

I should point out that Timmons’ *ethical contextualism* differs from Ross’ 1930 theory about prima facie duties in that, for example, when one chooses to lie to the murderer at the door, one does not typically acknowledge that “lying is prima facie wrong, but in this case the prima facie duty of beneficence or saving someone’s life trumps (is more urgent than) the wrongness of lying”. Instead, one simply does not refer to the wrongness of lying at all, and adopts an entirely different basic moral truth to justify lying to the murderer. This is partly because, in deciding or justifying a course of action, persons do not usually think about all of the moral considerations that they have acknowledged before, or even about all of the moral considerations that could have a direct bearing on the moral status of the action in question.

However, it is a common practice to challenge others’ moral reasoning by citing moral considerations that those others may not have taken into account. By doing so, one introduces potential defeaters to the justifying reasons or justificatory practices that others utilize, and this sometimes forces others to consider the situation or action more comprehensively. Indeed, the summoning of almost every conceivable relevant moral consideration when addressing a particular moral matter is a staple of moral philosophy, and intellectuals in general tend to be

held to a higher standard when asked to morally justify a course of action.<sup>6</sup> For all moral agents, a sort of defeasibility – the chance of there being relevant counterpossibilities – is an important part of moral reasoning and moral dialectics.

Perhaps as a consequence of the defeasible nature of moral claims, any reflective participants in engaged (within outlook) moral reasoning will recognize that many moral claims or supposed moral truths could turn out to be erroneous. One thereby conceives of the possibility both of moral error and moral progress.

With the ability to account for moral error and moral progress (judged within one's moral outlook), we should now see that Timmons' use of truth-talk is not just for show; he writes:

“My proposed way of handling issues about moral error and moral progress perhaps captures a sense in which the notion of truth here is both immanent and also transcendent. Truth is immanent because truth ascriptions to moral statements are morally engaged. As explained earlier in this chapter, to assert that some moral statement is true is (normally) to do so from one's own moral outlook, whereby one uses one's outlook as a touchstone of moral truth. But, as I also noted, the fact that truth ascriptions are in this way immanent does not commit us to some form of relativism. Far from it. Our notion of truth is also transcendent in that it cannot be identified with one's current moral outlook [...] When it comes to moral assertions,

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<sup>6</sup> In determining what defeaters one is expected to account for, Timmons has a long story to provide, but one enlightening citation he provides is a quote by Stewart Cohen, who writes: “the standards in effect in a particular context are determined by the normal reasoning powers of the attributor's social group” (Cohen, 579). This, in part, explains why philosophers are typically held to a higher standard. To provide a more general account of moral justification within context, Timmons tries to make his way toward a basic norm which can govern the responsibility for checking relevant counterpossibilities (potential defeaters). But I am not going to cover Timmons' account of moral justification in detail, instead – in the next chapter – I focus on whether or not the irrealist can vindicate the realist's notion of objective justification, i.e. what some philosophers like to call capital-J Justification (which is based on capital-T moral Truth – something the irrealist gives up).

we make them from some particular view (there is no moral view from nowhere), but we can also judge that we might be wrong, thus envisioning the possibility of moral progress and an improved moral outlook.” (Timmons, 169-170)

In summary, according to Timmons, ascriptions of truth to moral claims reflect the categorical nature with which most persons address moral matters. If one regards ‘slavery is wrong’ as a moral truth, one tends to treat it as categorically, not relatively, true. Additionally, persons who make moral claims with an attitude of humility are able to recognize the possibility that their moral claims may be wrong, and consequently admit that their moral outlook may be improved. For Timmons, this is the key to dealing with the very challenging task of explaining moral progress and moral error as an irrealist, and of (internally) accommodating other reported features of commonplace moral discourse. But does he succeed? In the next chapter, I examine and evaluate several objections against certain aspects of Timmons’ moral theory.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Objections and Rebuttals**

#### **Critical Objection A: Relativism about Moral Truth**

In his review of Timmons' book, Russ Shafer-Landau writes:

“In the context of morally disengaged investigation, Timmons is a moral nihilist—there are no truths at all (p. 244). We have to be speaking and thinking within a moral outlook in order for moral judgments to be true. And within a morally engaged context, the statements I rightly take to be correctly assertible will not relativize the force or applicability of a moral injunction just to those who share my views. In other words, when thinking from a moral perspective, the norms I correctly assert will not be relativistic norms.

This strikes me as true. But it does not seem sufficient to fend off the worry that Timmons's view is a form of ethical relativism. Since there is nothing that makes moral judgments true, according to Timmons—no “external” moral facts that moral judgments might accurately describe—then there is no basis other than one's own outlook for evaluating the competing moral claims made by others with different outlooks. Though few will judge their own views to be true only relative to their own outlooks, nevertheless, the absence of any moral facts outside particular outlooks makes it the case that the judgments rendered within one outlook are no more justified or true than those of a competing outlook. The views of each outlook are equally (un)justified, equally (un>true. This is relativism.” (Shafer-Landau, 829)

Objecting along a similar strain, Basil Smith writes:

“[Timmons] insists that moral semantic norms dictate what it is appropriate to do, but the truth of moral statements is always “categorical,” which outstrips any relativity (p. 150). Timmons then says that different cultures and odd situation adopt completely different contextual basic moral beliefs, that these take the form of generalizations. This implies that these basic beliefs are also ‘categorical,’ and so only takes moral relativism to a deeper level.” (Smith, 272)

In addressing these worries, we first need to figure out what kind of relativism we are talking about. If Shafer-Landau is correct about Timmons, then Timmons is a nihilist about the existence of objective moral truths – there are no objective moral truths. Interestingly then, considering the fact that there are no real moral facts, what is Timmons a relativist about?

Moral outlooks are belief-driven perspectives that persons adopt in order to understand the world in a moral sense. According to some moral outlooks, it is “true” that stealing is wrong; to other moral outlooks, it is “false” that stealing is wrong; and yet to others, it is neither “true” nor “false” that stealing is wrong. Does this constitute a form of *relativism about ontology*? No, since the treatment of stealing as a moral truth is only viable from within a moral outlook, viz. it is a *belief* that ‘stealing is wrong’ is true. Now consider other instances of belief. Some persons believe that O.J. Simpson killed his wife, and some persons believe that he did not kill his wife. Is this relativism? No, for it is ontologically (in reality) the case that either O.J. Simpson killed his wife or he did not. A divergence in opinion about Simpson’s actions does not constitute ontological relativism. Similarly, the fact that different persons adopt different moral outlooks, and within those outlooks regard certain things as moral truths, does not change the fact that there are no ontological or objective moral truths.

What Shafer-Landau and Smith seem to claim is that while there are no objective moral truths according to Timmons, his view is a recipe for relativism because there is nothing other than one's own moral outlook for evaluating moral content. This means that there are no additional standards by which to adjudicate competing moral views made by different persons. There are only outlook-relative standards; subjective standards. So, the relativism that Timmons is being accused of is not a relativism of realist moral truth, where "x is the right action for you but x may be the wrong action for someone else in the same situation as you". Rather, the relativism comes in because person A thinks that x is the right action and B thinks that y is the right action, and there are no authoritative external standards by which to determine whether x is better than y. I agree with the critics that this *is* a form of relativism, despite Timmons' many protestations, but it is unclear how this form of relativism is a problem, or else a problem specifically for moral irrealism. I see two distinct dimensions, conceptual and practical, from which his view may seem problematic, but I will argue that in each case it is either not a real problem, or else not a problem that is unique to irrealists like Timmons.

Let's begin from the conceptual dimension of the disagreement. The conceptual dimension is concerned with possibility and consistency in what we think. The existence of square circles is conceptually impossible; and arguing that we can accurately report objective moral truths while also claiming that there are no extant moral truths is inconsistent and conceptually problematic.

Realists conceive that there is an objective moral truth that, when appropriately formulated, constitutes a moral standard for thought and behaviour. Irrealists deny that there is any such truth or objective moral standard. Is there a reason to doubt irrealism on the basis of this disagreement alone? As ideal as it would be if there existed easily-known objective moral

truths, the attractiveness of the notion is not a defense for it. Conversely, the intuitive repugnance of a competing view is not an adequate argument upon which to conclude that the view is false. Therefore, even if the denial of objective moral standards is regarded as counter-intuitive, and not in conformity with most persons' beliefs about such matters, this is an insufficient basis upon which to conclude that Timmons' view is a conceptually troublesome moral relativism.

The only way to press the conceptual objection is to indicate an inconsistency or impossibility. I have already clarified that Timmons does not believe that there are ontological, "real", moral truths that are relative to specific individuals. He points out that there are no such ontological morals, but only moral beliefs – in particular, beliefs formulated from within one's moral outlook. The claim that different persons have different moral outlooks, and, correspondingly, different moral beliefs, is not in any evident tension with our best empirical knowledge, and it furthermore does not present any conceptual difficulty when we try to imagine this as a serious possibility for how the world really is (I can easily imagine that all there is to it are subjectively-laden moral outlooks). So, moral irrealism, or at least Timmons' brand of irrealism, is not conceptually impossible. However, Shafer-Landau might agree that it is not impossible, but instead insist that it is not as plausible or that it is a poor explanation.

Whether Timmons' view presents the best possible explanation is debateable, and I think that there is a strong bias stemming from tradition and our acculturated intuitions on behalf of the conclusion that realism is a better explanation of our moral phenomenology, i.e. the way we regard moral truth (I demonstrate this more clearly in the last chapter). But simply because realism *seems* like a better explanation, and would be more ideal than irrealism, does not adequately support the conclusion that it is the correct explanation. To establish its correctness, we would need strong evidence on behalf of moral realism. In other words, we need evidence

that goes beyond merely establishing that realism is more palatable, and I have strong doubts that any unambiguous evidence exists on behalf of moral realism (but, unfortunately, I do not have the space to fully argue for this here).

Having claimed that Timmons' view does not result in a conceptually problematic form of relativism, I will now inquire as to whether his view presents a false account of moral practice or leads to unacceptable practical consequences. I believe that Timmons is innocent on both of these charges.

First, he does not have a defective view about how moral discourse and moral practice proceed. According to Timmons, and in fact many realists as well, ordinary persons tend to regard their most treasured moral beliefs as categorically correct; unshakeable by relativistic retorts; and as providing sufficient reason for action. Let's posit a practical scenario and evaluate the practical dimensions of Timmons' view from there.

Imagine two persons, Jonathan and Monica, who have conflicting moral beliefs and practices. Jonathan believes that the holocaust was unjustified, that Hitler was evil, and that all persons have a basic inviolable dignity which makes it the case that they ought not to be killed or oppressed on the basis of their ethnicity. Conversely, Monica hates Jewish persons on the basis of their religious background (not even because of their particular religious beliefs), she believes that the holocaust was justified, and she argues that Hitler was doing the right thing. Jonathan does not revise his beliefs when he is exposed to Monica's moral beliefs; the existence of competing moral ideals does not motivate Jonathan to cast his own ideals into doubt. Furthermore, if Monica tried to physically harm a Jewish person because of her prejudiced beliefs, Jonathan would be more than willing to stand up and defend that person against Monica's attacks.

I think that so far I've constructed a scenario that both Timmons and most realists can accept. Now, let's introduce the disagreement. Timmons is going to point out that there is no objective outlook or otherwise objective standpoint from which Jonathan's beliefs can be evaluated against Monica's. Most realists are going to disagree, and say that one of them is objectively correct and the other is objectively incorrect (because, after all, either killing Jews on the basis of their religious background is morally right and justified, or it is not).

As I already pointed out in regard to the conceptual dimension of the objection, simply because it is more palatable to assume that Jonathan is *objectively*, rather than subjectively, correct in his beliefs is not enough to show that he is in fact objectively right. Most persons may *believe* that he is right and that Monica is wrong; in other words, most may judge that Jonathan's outlook is superior to Monica's. But persons make this judgment or evaluation from within their own moral outlooks. The realist cannot straightforwardly show that persons are not making this judgment from within their moral outlooks. Therefore, Timmons' view does not evidently paint a false picture of moral practice.

Secondly, his view does not lead to unacceptable practical consequences. Or, at least, his view does not create a unique problem for moral practice that only the irrealist has to deal with. Let's compare. The moral realist may try to explain moral deliberations, or the methodology of social policy, as attempted approximations of objective moral truth (Boyd, 339). Most of us are still searching for the moral truth, and we engage in various debates and deliberations to figure out how to best regulate social policy and social behaviour given that we do not all have univocal access to a singular moral truth. Realists have a very serious epistemological issue with their metaethics and how it relates to moral practice: there may be an objective moral truth, but

coming to know it is a messy and arduous task, thus moral practice is imperfect and progress is sometimes a result of trial and error.

Likewise, for Timmons, persons undergo a long and arduous journey that constantly and dynamically changes their moral outlooks time and time again. Furthermore, for Timmons, deliberations about group policy and behavioural regulation are not undertaken with the aim of ascertaining the objective moral truth. Rather, the demands of the deliberation are contingent upon the accepted aims of the deliberation. For example, a representative amidst a gathering of the United Nations is likely to view positive international relations and foreign policy as the goal of the deliberations being held, and thus will reason and prescribe courses of action toward this end. On an ethics review board, participants try to come up with a standard or a protocol that is in conformity with social norms regarding what sorts of trials and treatments are permissible and what sorts are not. The individual on a research ethics review board is not tasked with coming up with a brand new moral theory and protocol for research trials, but rather of applying the generally understood, and sometimes implicit, moral norms regarding research protocols to the particular case or trial in question. Context is very important in such matters, and as Timmons points out in his book, moral idealism does not get in the way of such practical deliberation since in many cases there is an apparent and shared aim (see Timmons, 221).

However, in cases where two persons disagree, it is an open and important practical question as to how to settle the disagreement. Problems concerning morality and real-world issues of practice and policy are important issues to which no obvious and straightforward solution is available for either the realist or the idealist. Applying a realist conceptual framework to the debate does not solve the issue. As I pointed out: for moral realists, there is an epistemological barrier between moral truth and moral practice, thus one's theory about moral

truth – i.e. realism or irrealism – does not simultaneously address issues of practice and policy. Evidently, the way that realists and irrealists *describe* the aims and goals of moral discourse and moral practice may differ. For instance, realists may frame moral deliberation as an inquiry into moral truth: we are trying to figure out a moral truth that has authoritative bearing on how to morally behave and perhaps also on how to regulate others' behaviour. Meanwhile, Timmons will claim that moral deliberations are aimed at coming to a conclusion about how to conduct oneself and how to treat others, in spite of there not being any authoritative objective moral facts. But both views have an equally troublesome task of identifying the best, or most agreeable, way by which to settle moral disagreements.

Next, I address a related worry about the ontological moral nihilism that is part of every moral irrealist theory: i.e. the denial of the existence of moral or normative objectivity.

### **Critical Objection B: Nihilism about Normativity**

Shafer-Landau writes:

“Indeed, Timmons does the best job anyone has yet done in making the case that irrealism can account for those features of morality that incline many people toward realism. But I don't think that the accommodation succeeds, in the end. Not just because of the worry about relativism but because of a related, deeper problem that besets all forms of irrealism. Irrealists are attracted to their position because of an allegiance to philosophical naturalism. No queer entities in their ontology. This desideratum is in tension with another feature of irrealism, namely, its reluctance to offer naturalistic reductions of the normative. According to irrealists, normative

concepts, facts, and truths do not really exist—they aren't *sui generis* items, and they aren't identical or otherwise reducible to items that are verifiable by the best sciences. This combination of naturalism and antireductionism should lead to a thoroughgoing nihilism about the normative. But irrealists pepper their thinking with normative concepts—indeed, it is hard to see how we might be entirely rid of them. Yet if irrealism is correct, what are we to make of an apparently well-argued case to any normative conclusion—that we *ought* to refrain from harming innocents, that modus ponens inferences are *valid*, that certain of our empirical or moral beliefs are *warranted*? These terms, according to irrealism, never refer. We are not describing any feature of acts, inferences, or beliefs when we speak this way. There are no objective standards for assessing the merits of such claims. This really is contrary to a deeply held view that most of us share about ethics and normative matters generally.” (Shafer-Landau, 829)

In this second criticism, Shafer-Landau is drawing attention to one of the most troublesome aspects of moral irrealism as viewed from the eyes of many morally engaged individuals. The issue concerns the way we *conceptualize* about normative reasons and the applicability of normative concepts such as consistency and epistemic warrant.

To clarify, I don't think that the force of Shafer-Landau's second objection is rooted in the claim that moral irrealism makes normative deliberation and moral practice impossible. One could give any array of allegedly principled answers or personal preferences to motivate an action. In my conception of what it means to provide 'reasons', reasons which are not objectively based and thus not objectively normative, even the claim that “it might stain my shirt, and I want a clean shirt” counts as a potential reason for not harming innocents.

Given that Shafer-Landau's objection is most plausibly not about the consequences of moral practice and of real-world motivation, I understand Shafer-Landau as arguing that moral realism and the use of objective justification (understood in a realist sense) are the most cogent explanations for *why* persons regard themselves and others as having various moral and, in general, normative obligations. These obligations, according to realists and perhaps according to most persons, hold regardless of one's mood or opinion. But if there are no objective normative truths or normative obligations – something outside of ourselves to which we can refer – then how are we to explain why we feel obliged to refrain from harming innocents, feel obliged to accept valid arguments, and feel obliged to believe what is warranted? Irrealism would deny that there is any actual obligation here; it would say that the obligation is self-imposed. “This seems so problematic!” the realist might claim.

However, to solidify this contention and to urge irrealists to see this is a serious burden, the realist would have to explain what it is about the loss of objective justification or “objective standards” that is so problematic. To achieve this, one might accuse irrealism of resulting in a subjective enterprise about normative beliefs and normative reasons: I have my subjective standards for assessing the merits of various normative claims and normative arguments, and you have your subjective standards – and neither of our standards are more justified than the other, in fact, neither are robustly justified at all since objective justification cannot be had with moral irrealism. Yet, as Shafer-Landau points out, it often seems like irrealists put forward arguments that they take to be valid and sound regardless of one's opinion and any realist proclivities one may have. Irrealists can certainly acknowledge that persons with strong realist leanings will not be persuaded by various irrealist arguments, but it seems like they would regard

these realists as factually or objectively wrong; not just subjectively predisposed to affirm realism over irrealism.

However, for irrealists, when it comes to defending the academic philosopher's obligation to believe moral irrealism if it is true, one can give a straightforward appeal to the importance of truth in philosophy and academia (but as we shall see in a couple paragraphs, there is no universal appeal which applies to all persons). First, the irrealist should explain that moral irrealism is not true in the way that normative moral claims (such as "it is morally wrong to harm persons") are regarded as true. Under this line of response, moral irrealism is viewed as an ontological query that possesses a non-subjective truth value, since it is more akin to factual investigation than to normative investigation. And as a factual proposal, either moral irrealism is true or it is not (either there are, in reality, moral facts or there aren't). If irrealism is true, the realist's reluctance to accept moral irrealism is simply a non-issue. It isn't a conceptual problem for irrealism if the realist isn't going to be motivated to accept that there are no moral facts. What is at stake here is ontological truth, not normativity.

The irrealist claims that metaethical irrealism provides a true ontological account. But interestingly, the irrealist denies that there is an objective normative fact such that everyone ought to accept some view or doctrine in sole virtue of it being true; in this sense, there is what we can call a *value for truth*. This value for truth (feeling obliged to accept true/valid arguments, etc.) is distinguishable from truth itself. The irrealist argues that moral irrealism is ontologically true, but it is a further substantive step to argue that there is an objective normative fact such that everyone ought to accept irrealism. However, as I said earlier, in addressing the *academic* moral realist, the moral irrealist does have a convincing normative argument to give: as philosophers and as academics generally, our main objective should be to discover truth and fact, and if,

theoretically speaking, irrealism is proven true, then professional moral realists who continue to deny it would be failing in their academic obligations (and vice-versa if realism is proven true).

Fair enough, Shafer-Landau might say, but how is the irrealist going to explain such normative obligations in general? Why should non-academics believe what is true; why should everyone remain consistent in their practices or beliefs; why should everyone care about harming innocents? Here is where the locus of the objection lies. I agree that the irrealist cannot provide any simple answer to these concerns. There are *no* normative reasons in themselves, according to the moral irrealist, but only reasons insofar as persons care about, or are attentive to, those “reasons”. In this sense, there seems to only be a reason not to harm innocents insofar as one cares about not harming innocents, and only a reason to accept valid conclusions insofar as one cares about adhering to so-called rules of logic. So, for those who do not care about harming innocents or about other seemingly important normative obligations, there is no real reason not to harm innocents. Even the alleged reason that one might end up in jail is not a reason to those who do not care about being imprisoned.

The irrealist must admit that this analysis is correct. However, luckily, it is generally well known that persons do typically care about the well-being of others; do fear going to jail; and do believe that it is important to remain consistent in their logical reasoning and moral practices. Though these are not universal reasons or obligations, as they purportedly are according to a realist construal of objective normative reasons and objective normative obligation, the irrealist can still make educated guesses about what people believe and how they will act. Thus, though the irrealist claims that these normative reasons are only reasons insofar as persons are subjectively sympathetic to those reasons, the irrealist can, in most cases, safely assume that others wish to remain out of jail; that others care about their friends and fellow citizens; and that

most others have no pressing desire or subjective reason to harm innocents. According to the irrealist, there is nothing logically binding about these normative reasons, so that persons could theoretically not be sympathetic to any reason or justification whatsoever for not harming innocents, and may consequently even go on to harm innocents. The benefit of this conception of normative reasons and normative obligation is that it comports with the data: in rare cases, there *are* people who are not sympathetic to any anti-harm reasoning and there *are* people who go on to harm innocents.

I anticipate that by giving this response to the realist, it will lead him to shift the matter of controversy to another facet of irrealism, namely this: if irrealists are nihilists about objective normative facts, then irrealists are unable to show that acts of harming others, including rape and murder, are normatively wrong in themselves. There are no objective normative facts for irrealists, so there is also no normative or moral fact about mass infanticide; such acts are not objectively right or wrong according to irrealists. The realist will then say that acts such as infanticide are clearly wrong, and wrong regardless of what murderers and pedophiles might believe. In other words, according to the realist, persons *ought* not to harm innocents even if they do not care about those innocents.

Indeed these stark examples present difficult cases to argue with, as most irrealists will not commend harm, rape, or murder. But is the fervour with which we regard the wrongness of such acts sufficient proof in and of itself that the wrongness is objective or mind-independent? Of course not, the irrealist will respond. We feel strongly about many matters, but regardless of how passionate we might be, it does not change the fact that our moral prescriptions are subjective; outlook-dependent. But crucially, the fact that our moral evaluations are outlook-

dependent does not undermine the importance of social and practical deliberation, or the importance of coming to an agreement about laws and policies.

Furthermore, the fact that others may disagree with us is not normally a sufficient basis upon which to reconsider our own position, or to allude to moral relativism. In conjunction with this, there exist different ways to impose one's personal will, or a society's collective will, upon others who are not sympathetic to the same types of reasons. For instance: when enough like-minded persons come together and have enough political power, they agree on and establish laws that deter and punish persons who seek to harm or rape others.

Even on an individual basis, the fact that normative reasons are not categorical or universally-binding does not undermine the importance of those reasons or moral deliberations. I may not think that, for example, bullying is *objectively* wrong, but I wouldn't hesitate for a moment to save a child from being the target of bullying. And even though many persons may believe that bullying is objectively wrong no matter who you are or what you believe, there is no way to support this as an objective normative conclusion. Objectivity is not guaranteed. Perhaps the reasoning will go along these lines: bullying is wrong because it is physically and emotionally harmful; no one should be physically or emotionally harmed through bullying; thus, no one should be bullied and no one should be a bully. Unfortunately for the moral realist, it is logically possible, and indeed perfectly coherent, to deny that physical and emotional harm are morally or normatively bad in the case of bullying, or in any case at all. Furthermore, there are persons who like to bully others. To argue that bullying is, objectively speaking, normatively wrong, is, according to an irrealist like myself, tantamount to believing that one's own reasons or sentiments on behalf of not bullying have more objective normative authority than another person's reasons or sentiments on behalf of bullying. My observation is that there is simply no

way to prove that anti-bullying reasons have this kind of status or are objectively-binding normative obligations. But, of course, a reason or sentiment need not be objective in order to be backed by laws or social policies; bullying need not be objectively wrong in order for us to disapprove of it and restrict it.

Luckily, despite there not being any objective or ontological status to normative obligations, in most cases there is enough convergence of normative beliefs and normative sympathies that we can often succeed at pressing others to accept standard rules of logic and ethics. We can typically get others to accept valid arguments with all true premises, get them to believe what is ‘warranted’, and do what is ‘justified’. We can motivate them by saying things like: “Everyone knows not to harm innocents.” When reasoning or arguing, Timmons explains that we typically defer to *norms* of normative and logical reasoning.

However, there are times that we argue for our beliefs or our societal norms without any success; times where we cannot persuade everyone in favour of our own position or of the norm. This is a stark reality of normative debate and ethical discussion. I think that most of us have been involved in moral or normative arguments where our dialectical opponents have been quite obstinate and unwilling to yield their position or come to a compromise. Though in these cases the fervour with which the commitments are held can bring rational debate between two or more parties to a standstill, sometimes others are listening to our arguments and can still be swayed. This thesis is itself an example of this: for I do not believe that I can convince thorough-going realists such as Shafer-Landau of moral irrealism. I do not believe that there is any simple objective normative argument to be given to Shafer-Landau according to which he absolutely has to abandon moral realism and get on board with irrealism. I do not regard my arguments or

analyses as objectively normative, and I do not believe that every person in the world has an objective reason, whether they know and care about it or not, to accept my conclusions.

The moral irrealist Simon Blackburn has his own thoughts about normative disagreement and conflict. He uses the example of how he would argue that women should be provided education. To start off, he acknowledges that there may be persons that disagree with him, such as members of the Afghan Taliban, but he does seem at all deterred by this; he explains:

“The relativist will say ‘it is your attitude against his and *neither of you can show that the other is wrong*’.

[...] I can show that the Taliban is wrong by the simplest means: any educated female is a perfectly good illustration of his error. My wife shows how wrong he is, and so do millions of other women.” (Blackburn 1999, 215)

As we can see, Blackburn is certainly confident that his moral beliefs about women and education are ‘right’, and that converse moral beliefs are ‘wrong’. What allows him to make such a claim as an irrealist, and what should have already been apparent from reading his remark, is the fact that he is arguing from within his moral outlook.

According to non-descriptivists such as Timmons and Blackburn, claims made from within one’s moral outlook can consistently contain normative arguments, and utilize normative terms such as ‘wrong’, even though there are no objective facts to solidify this ‘wrongness’ on an objective scale (or “objective measure” as Shafer-Landau says). Whether an objective measure is available or not, normative arguments will continue unabated: the Taliban member will argue that women should not be educated, and Blackburn will argue that the benefits of education for women are evident in the contributions, intelligence, and lifestyles of educated women, as well

as the persuasive history that led up to the importance of equality and respect for women that is taken seriously by many nations and individuals today. So, though there is no objective measure by which we can “resolve” the conflict between the Taliban member and Blackburn, there are still normative arguments that can be made for and against the education of women, and these arguments can persuade some others in favour of one’s own attitude about the matter. Furthermore, the fact that this is a conflict about attitudes (or outlooks), as Blackburn claims it is, does not trivialize the debate; Blackburn comments:

“[T]he relativist will say: ‘well, it is *merely* your attitude against his’. And part of this is right: it is indeed my attitude against his. That is what ethical conflict is. The part that is wrong is the ‘merely’. What is ‘mere’ about a conflict of attitude? The world’s worst conflicts are those of policy, choice, and practice. They are the most important conflicts there are.” (Blackburn, 215)

So, to address Shafer-Landau’s concern about the loss of objectively-binding normative facts or obligations, irrealists like Blackburn, and Timmons as well, explain that matters of ethical disagreement – or any remotely normative disagreement having to do with what one ‘ought’ to believe or do – are fundamentally differences in opinion/attitude/outlook, and not differences of the kind that are caused by one or more parties not accurately perceiving or intuiting the ‘real’, or objective, normative truth. In the world we live, there are no clear objective normative reasons to which everyone can refer and which everyone must follow. Though realists might claim that persons in fact *must* follow and abide by objective normative obligations such as those of consistency, epistemic warrant, and moral goodness, Blackburn points out that this ‘must’ is empty: that the world does not have its own ways of “tripping up” people who do not prescribe to various normative rules (Blackburn, 222). Rather, any time

someone is “tripped up” for not affirming a valid argument, or for not being fair and virtuous, that person is tripped up by other members of society or by other societies. For example: one won’t pass an introductory logic course if one does not affirm valid reasoning; one will be socially looked down upon and be legally sanctioned if one harms innocents; and other countries will (sometimes) intervene if one uses military force to commit mass genocide.

After all, real-world ethical conflicts are conflicts of attitude or outlook. And they have an important practical dimension. As a result, many conflicts do not get resolved by unveiling objective normative truths to one’s objectors. Some conflicts are only resolved or suspended by taking legal action, resorting to violence, or walking away. For instance, if someone refused to affirm the norms of logical reasoning that I believe in; i.e. if that person denied the law of non-contradiction, the demands of consistency, the force of argument validity, etc., then, in the majority of cases, I would just cease all argumentation with this person and walk away.

Here, the realist may say that my dialectical opponent is simply denying objective normative truths which have to do with the obligations of logical reasoning. The realist might claim that as a consequence, my irrealist construal of the debate begs the question by calling this normative dispute a conflict of outlook or attitude. The realist may insist that contrary to irrealists like Timmons and Blackburn, it is not a conflict or disagreement that has to do with attitudes or moral outlooks, but rather a conflict about who is correct as it pertains to the objective normative truth of the matter. Furthermore, the realist will explain, there (a) is a truth to whether the law of non-contradiction holds (spoiler: it does hold), and (b) if it’s true, everyone ought to believe it.

Such a conception, I would say, then begs the question in favour of realism. To be more precise, the irrealist is not taking issue with the logical necessity of the law of non-contradiction.

The irrealist is taking issue with the claim that one ‘ought’ to do, or believe, anything, in any kind of objective, inherent, or mind-independent sense. These normative obligations are only obligations insofar as we believe that we ‘ought’ to affirm truth, abide by the rules of logic, not burn cats, etc. – the world does not contain in itself these values; *we* are ultimately the normative judges of these things. In other words, there are no moral features or properties, which are already in the world itself, for us to report or describe.

But the realist might reply by trying to get our intuitions fired up and asking our opinion about some visceral moral topic. Let’s take the wrongness of slavery as a case in point. A realist may claim, “It should be apparent to anyone in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that slavery is wrong. This is an objective, justified, moral assertion and anyone in ancient Greece, Egypt, or the Ottoman Empire who thought that ‘slavery is good’, or that ‘slavery is acceptable’, was wrong.”

But now let’s look deeper at the mechanism of this argument. First, the realist is relying on the fact that most persons in contemporary societies regard slavery as wrong. The realist is then trying to support a realist rendering of this wrongness by juxtaposing the currently shared belief that ‘slavery is wrong’ against the backdrop of certain ancient civilizations where ‘slavery is wrong’ was an uncommon or idiosyncratic moral belief. Given that the anti-slavery belief was idiosyncratic back then, the realist is trying to point out that the wrongness of slavery is not dependent on attitudes or social customs. However, according to an irrealist like me, what our attention is really being drawn to is the convergence of moral beliefs: the fact that most persons in contemporary societies believe that slavery is wrong. Yet both the commonness of the anti-slavery belief and its social evolution into the present day are accountable for by irrealists, who can attempt to provide convincing historical accounts.

Moral realists, on the other hand, point to *moral progress* as a plausible explanation for the contrast between the rareness of the ancient anti-slavery moral attitude and the commonness of the contemporary anti-slavery moral attitude. But an irrealist would claim that if we look deeper into the argument, we see that we are not isolating moral truths from moral attitudes. Instead, we are focussing on patterns of moral belief. And an explanation of moral beliefs does not need to invoke realist metaethics. Thus, the realist's postulation of moral progress (i.e. progress toward objective normativity), in the context of slavery, does not support the truth of realism or the notion of objective justification without simply begging the question.

Having said all of that, I agree with Shafer-Landau that most persons regard the realist notion of objective justification as the natural-seeming explanation of why slavery is wrong, and furthermore regard the contemporary commonness of the anti-slavery belief as indicative of positive moral progress, generally or societally speaking. According to irrealists, this widespread contemporary anti-slavery attitude is simply a change from the past, not objectively good or bad. For most irrealists, the change is a welcome one – it is subjectively “good”.

When adjudicating between the two metaethical conceptions, it should be plain to see that irrealism *is* counter-intuitive from the standpoint of tradition and convention. It appears that most persons regard acts such as infanticide as objectively and unequivocally wrong; as being wrong completely independent of moral outlooks or subjective sentiments. I think that to most persons it really seems as though there is something objectively or inherently obligatory in various matters of reasoning and practice, such as having *objective* commitments to remain consistent with one's logical reasoning and to accept valid arguments with all true premises. And I know that it seems natural for people to think that everyone has a reason not to harm innocents, regardless of whether one is sympathetic to such reasons or not. Irrealists like Blackburn,

Timmons, and I deny that there are any normative reasons which are objectively binding or inherently obligatory. We believe that persons must care about certain things in order for those things to count as reasons and in order for persons to be motivated to act on them.

I do not deny that this way of conceiving of normative reasons and normative obligations diverges from the norm, and is counter-intuitive in relation to the norm. But this counter-intuitiveness does not present an impasse for irrealists. The fact that most persons may have “realist proclivities” does not disprove moral irrealism, and thus is not severely detrimental to the philosophical coherence of irrealist metaethics.

Additionally, I might point out that Blackburn tries comfort our intuitions about there really being objective evaluations, or objective justifications. In attempting to salvage the notion of objective justification for use by irrealists, he claims that objectivity has to do with being free from the flaws of bias and the flaws of blindness (Blackburn, 220-221). For example, if one rejects the admission of a student into a PhD program because of considerations of the applicant’s age and gender, then that constitutes a bias and is not objective. And if one only hears one side of a conflict and proceeds to make a judgment, then one is probably not taking enough relevant information into consideration: this constitutes blindness and is not objective.

However, Blackburn’s notion of objectivity and objective justification are not fully compatible with their realist counterparts. His definition of objectivity can more accurately be described as "a move away from the subjective and biased". It never completely reaches moral realist objectivity, but Blackburn does not believe that such objectivity exists – and realists do. Thus, they are in disagreement about what objectivity is and what it requires. And since I want to address the realist on his or her own terms, I do not adopt Blackburn's characterization of objectivity. This leads me to conclude that there is no objectivity in the way that the realist

envisions, at least when it comes to normative reasoning. But I agree with Shafer-Landau that irrealism strips away a *widespread* notion of realist-framed objective justification and objective normative obligation, and that it is counter-intuitive to many persons as a result. But the fact that advocating an irrealist conclusion about moral justification may be counter-intuitive, viz. it may be “contrary to a deeply held view” that many individuals share, is not a deathblow to the truth or even to the philosophical merits of an irrealist metaethics. It may serve as an observation for why many individuals with strong realist proclivities will be dissatisfied with irrealism; but that does not mean that irrealism is wrong. Conjointly, my primary goal in responding to Shafer-Landau was to defend the strength and coherence of irrealism, not to show that it is compatible with realist intuitions.

As it relates to Timmons and his project of internal accommodation, Timmons would claim that not an overwhelming majority of persons have realist proclivities, and thus his irrealism (with his particular theory of moral semantics and contextual moral truths) is not evidently opposed to commonplace notions or intuitions about metaethics and moral matters generally. I, like Shafer-Landau, am doubtful about the empirical correctness of Timmons’ remarks. As a person who was an adamant moral realist for most of my life I think that I understand what it is like to have a moral realist frame of mind, and based on my experiences with other individuals I believe that a great many persons possess such a frame of mind. Consequently, I do not deny that moral irrealism is traditionally and conventionally counter-intuitive, and it seems to me that Timmons is too hopeful when he believes that he can successfully accommodate or reconcile moral irrealism with the commonplace understanding of moral truth and moral justification. I continue to press this worry in the next critical objection.

### **Critical Objection C: Austerity and Opulence**

Timmons argues that the moral claims of ordinary individuals ought to be interpreted austere: without being undergirded by any metaphysical, i.e. realist, assumptions. Graham and Horgan insist that there are pragmatic evolutionary reasons for why an austere interpretation is sufficient, and Timmons concedes that he knows of no better way to support their conclusion (Timmons, 176). The argument is basically as follows: (1) the role of moral claims and moral discourse is to guide action; (2) making a claim in a categorical manner, i.e. “ $x$  is wrong, period”, is a better way to guide behaviour than making a seemingly weaker qualified claim such as “I don’t think that  $x$  is morally right, I want you to think so too, please don’t do  $x$ ”; but, (3) moral claims such as “ $x$  is wrong”, in order to effectively guide action, need not to be interpreted as actually bearing the sorts of metaphysical commitments that many realists read into it. Using this sort of explanation, we can understand why people make moral claims categorically: because it is an efficient way to prescribe actions (Timmons, 172). While at the same time, we can recognize that a categorically-made statement need not be backed by any sort of metaphysical commitment to objective moral truths: if we take a minimalistic approach, it is apparent that the postulation of metaphysical moral facts is unnecessary for prescribing a course of action.

The inclination toward austerity stems from the claim that “the commitments of statements employing these concepts will normally be no more opulent than is required by the purposes for which the concepts are employed in thought, in discourse, and in social practices and institutions” (Graham and Horgan, 232). If moral concepts are employed for the purpose of guiding or prescribing action, and the successful fulfillment of the action-guiding role of moral statements does not require any metaphysical, i.e. realist, basis, then, given Graham and Horgan’s main claim, moral concepts themselves need not be interpreted opulently. Therefore,

according to Timmons, moral claims should be interpreted austere since the moral terms and concepts that persons use for the purpose of regulating behaviour need not necessarily have an objective referent or other metaphysical basis in order to successfully guide action. However, all of this crucially hinges on the assumption that the primary role of moral discourse is, typically, to guide action.

Yet even if we grant that the point and purpose of moral claims is to incline persons to do, or refrain from doing, certain actions, it is still highly speculative to suppose that an austere reading of moral claims would be the default. We need to think about which interpretation would be more successful. Consider the following. Suppose I want every person in my community to refrain from stealing. Would I be more successful at accomplishing this goal simply by telling every person not to steal, or would I be more successful if I could somehow convince everyone there was an eternal objective truth, far greater than any mere opinion, that stealing is wrong? I think that the answer is obvious: the latter would be more efficient at preventing others from stealing, for if they are truly convinced that there is an objective basis behind the wrongness then they will be more likely to refrain from doing what is objectively wrong – insofar as they have a regard for truth and objective goodness (also note that such a regard can be encouraged and eventually become engrained within the society).

To provide a more concrete example: if I were to get every person to be sincerely convinced that a great God has imparted knowledge of a divine, objective, moral code, then *ceteris paribus* those persons will be far less likely to violate that moral code than a moral code which they believe was devised by some human being who they do not know. For the sake of keeping all other things equal, let's stipulate that there will be no punishment for transgression with either the divine code or the subjective code. Still, it seems that persons would be more

respectful of the objectivist, divine moral code, and will consequently be more inclined to abide by it. Furthermore, one of the most effective ways to persuade others of the existence of such a moral order, and of a deity who could impart knowledge of that order, would be if I were convinced of it myself. Thus, every person involved, *including me*, would be interpreting moral claims in an *opulent* manner. I am not trying to imply that this is actually how religions begin, but I think it is a reasonable assumption that the force of a widespread belief in an objective moral basis outstrips the potential action-guiding power of subjective advice. Therefore, if an opulent interpretation were the default, it would likely be more successful at achieving Timmons, Graham, and Horgan's alleged role of moral discourse: guiding action.

However, in speculating about what sort of interpretation, austere or opulent, persons normally make and what interpretation persons ought to make, the debate can go either way since both interpretations can be plausibly supported. Despite the coherence of my story, there is not enough convincing information available to determine what path a social evolution of moral discourse would take. Therefore, the intended austerity or opulence of ordinary moral claims is currently indeterminable by means of (unsupported) evolutionary account. As a result, Timmons takes austerity for granted.

With taking austerity for granted, Timmons aims to be a moral irrealist, steer clear of error theory, and still account for all of the most powerful moral intuitions that people have. He believes that he can achieve these aims by drawing a distinction between (i) the meaning of moral claims as made from within subjective moral outlooks (according to Timmons, these moral claims are made austere and non-descriptively); and (ii) the (incorrect) thesis of moral realism and its associated semantics: according to which there exist descriptive and opulent moral truths. Part of his goal is to make it doubtful that moral realism is widely endorsed, by

arguing that ordinary moral semantics are not indicative of commitments to the opulence and semantic descriptivism of moral realism.

However, both the claim that austerity is the default and the claim that moral realism is not widely endorsed are speculative claims. Taking austerity for granted will prove to be problematic for Timmons' moral semantics, since austerity is important for defending a moral semantic thesis of non-descriptivism while positively retaining truth-aptness. Remember, moral irrealists maintain that all descriptive and opulent moral claims are erroneous/false. Thus positive moral truth cannot be of an objective, descriptive, and/or opulent kind, since irrealists by definition cannot support metaphysically-based moral truth, only falsity. Yet Timmons argues that moral truth is possible: according to one's moral outlook a moral claim can be meaningfully, but non-opulently, true. Timmons wants to conserve the idea that a moral claim can be true primarily because he believes that most persons regard many moral claims and moral beliefs as true and therefore also truth-apt. Thus, his attempt to preserve the truth-aptness of moral claims (i.e. cognitivism) is motivated by his desire for a *positive* internal accommodation project.

In what follows, I will argue that the stringency with which Timmons regards the internal accommodation project is disproportionate to its actual importance. He wants to make his semantics compatible with the way that he believes most non-philosophers engage in moral reasoning and debate. His central semantic claim is that persons do not typically utilize moral claims to achieve a descriptivist aim; people, according to Timmons, are not normally trying to report opulent moral truths when they say that  $x$  is wrong. With reference to Shafer-Landau, I have tried to plant a seed of doubt about Timmons' semantic claims and have indicated my realist sympathies on behalf of the (current-day) futility of a *positive* internal accommodation project within moral irrealism. But by doing so, I don't take myself to have diminished the

coherence or conceptual strength of moral irrealism. What is more important than accommodating widespread assumptions about the nature of moral facts, is to figure out whether those widespread assumptions are actually correct.

Unfortunately, we do not currently have the necessary resources or techniques to conclusively settle ontological debates about “real moral truths”. But should we then choose realism or irrealism? In the next two chapters, I indicate that much of the intuitive and popular appeal that moral realism gets is a result of its dominance as a long-prevailing tradition and accepted convention. In arguing that the persuasiveness of moral realism is supported in part (I think in large part) by tradition and convention I strive to show that irrealism does not bear the burden of proof against realism on the basis that realism is more prevalent; more intuitive; or because it best conforms with a rendering of conventional moral semantics as descriptivist and free of error. The conclusions of my arguments will be as follows: (a) irrealists have a hard time with positive internal accommodation; because (b) what they are trying to accommodate is best accommodated by realism; but (c) it is best accommodated by realism because what one is trying to vindicate in the positive internal accommodation project are characteristics of moral discourse that have been shaped over centuries or millennia; and (d) these characteristics developed mostly under realist pretences since, in the distant past, few persons were moral irrealists. I thereby attempt to undermine the importance of positive internal accommodation in defending moral irrealism. Consequently, I urge that there is no need for a moral semantics as innovative and complicated as Timmons’, and I explain how his view can be improved in light of taking internal accommodation less seriously. In particular, I argue that his view can be improved by adopting a descriptivist moral semantics and therefore being a descriptivist error theorist.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Cognitivist and Descriptivist Moral Semantics**

To recap, cognitivism is the metaethical semantic thesis that moral claims are propositionally truth-apt, and descriptivism is the metaethical semantic thesis that moral claims attempt to describe or report ontologically real, i.e. mind-independent, descriptive moral facts. Descriptivism entails cognitivism because according to descriptivists moral claims are truth-apt: a moral claim is true if it accurately reports the ontological/objective moral fact of the matter, and is false if it fails to do so.

When talking about the purpose of moral claims and how they are generally used, irrealists attempt to (internally) accommodate important features of widespread moral judgement or phenomenology, and commonplace moral semantics. Typically, irrealists explain these commonplace features in one of two ways.

In the first way, irrealists adopt a descriptivist error theory; they agree with most realists that the grammar of moral claims is cognitivist and descriptivist, meaning that when people make moral claims they attempt to truth-aptly report descriptive moral facts. But in virtue of being irrealists, error theorists claim that there are no ontological-descriptive moral facts and that consequently all moral claims aimed at reporting such facts are erroneous. The biggest problem for error theory is that its proponents are committed to maintaining that typical moral claims are descriptively erroneous, which appears to be a very counter-intuitive position.

The second alternative for irrealists is to adopt a non-cognitivist, and hence non-descriptivist, moral semantics: a use of moral language that is free from error because moral claims understood in a non-cognitivist and non-descriptivist way are neither truth-apt nor attempt to report mind-independent facts. The problems for non-cognitivists consist in making sense of

moral terms and moral statements in both assertive and non-assertive contexts; these issues are adequately captured by the famous “Frege-Geach Problem”. I begin by outlining the semantic issues for non-cognitivist moral theories and concluding that irrealists should choose the semantic option of descriptivist error theory. I then defend error theory.

### **Section I: The Frege-Geach Problem**

The Frege-Geach problem (hereafter the FG problem) attempts to highlight the accepted grammar and usage of moral claims in order to pose a burden against non-cognitivist moral semantics. Proponents of the FG problem claim that the apparent use and grammar of moral claims is cognitivist and descriptivist. Turning to non-cognitivists, such as expressivists like Blackburn or Gibbard, there is a demand for both (a) an explanation of the meaning of non-cognitivist moral claims, and (b) an account of the validity of moral arguments which utilize those claims. The challenge can be posed as a question: if moral terms are not descriptive terms (so, Hitler cannot be *evil* similar to how my hair is *brown*; ‘evilness’ not being a property or feature which real entities can possess), then what do moral terms mean in all of the various instances in which they are normally employed, and how can irrealists explain the fact that moral terms seem to be used – embedded, negated, and conjoined – like descriptive terms and in ways which appear to be truth-apt? The most concrete way to press this challenge is to take up a non-cognitivist (and therefore, not truth-apt) moral semantics and see how it fares. Since the Frege-Geach problem is often directed at expressivism – a popular form of non-cognitivism – let us take a look at the moral semantics of expressivists and see the challenge.

If I am an expressivist, then I am (loosely-speaking) a person who believes that moral claims such as “*x* is wrong” express one’s attitudes towards *x* rather than making a factual

statement (e.g. Blackburn 1984). To call something wrong, then, would be to express a kind of disapproval of it, i.e. if I claim that “stealing is wrong” then that means I have a negative/disapproving attitude toward stealing. So, we have here a translation for “I think that stealing is wrong” as “I disapprove of stealing”. However, as Unwin (2001) points out: what then is the meaning of “I think that stealing is *not* wrong”? And as Schroeder (2008) inquires: what is the meaning of “Max hopes that this is good”? Though these are only two rather simple examples, they are part of an indefinite constellation of various complex moral sentences whose meaning would be questionable within expressivist semantics. The expressivist needs to provide a semantic account for each of the following sentences, since it is not clear how the meaning of ‘stealing is wrong’ as disapproving of stealing can be transposed to explain the many other complex instantiations of moral terms in, for example, negated instances. Realists that adopt a descriptive semantics for moral terms, as most realists do, certainly have the upper-hand here, since moral terms such as ‘good’ when interpreted similarly to other descriptive or attributive terms have a pretty clear meaning in all of the common ways that moral terms are utilized.

There is furthermore a second facet of the objection that is pressed, which has to do with the validity of argument forms that employ moral claims. Cognitivists (realist or irrealist) seem much better equipped to explain the apparent truth-functionality of moral claims and the ways in which they are embedded in arguments and syllogisms. A typical example is the following:

1. Lying is wrong.
2. If lying is wrong, then lying to one’s teacher is wrong.
3. Therefore, lying to one’s teacher is wrong.

According to expressivists, premise 1 is an assertion of one’s disapproval of lying. However, the antecedent in premise 2 (“if lying is wrong”) does not necessarily contain the same meaning or

function as the statement in premise 1. There is no evaluative or expressive assertion present in premise 2; one does not need to disapprove of lying in order to understand or believe premise 2. Thus, the meaning of “lying is wrong” in premise 1 when understood as an expressivist assertion might differ from the meaning of the antecedent in premise 2, since premise 2 is meant to be understood in an unassertive or non-expressive context, and so the argument above is invalid when in accordance with expressivist semantics (Sinnott-Armstrong 2000, 679). The meanings in premise 1 and the antecedent in premise 2 must be commensurate, otherwise the validity of the above argument is not ensured.

Without the kind of truth-aptness for moral claims that most realists maintain, which outlines descriptive truth conditions for the content of moral sentences, non-cognitivist irrealist theories (expressivism being the exemplar) do not seem able to explain the meaning of “if lying is wrong” in premise 2 and, consequently, cannot show that this meaning is consistent with that of “lying is wrong” in premise 1. This inconsistency between the meanings in premise 1 and the antecedent of premise 2 makes the argument (1-3) invalid. Yet the argument is obviously valid (Sinnott-Armstrong, 679). This creates a burden on expressivists, and non-cognitivists in general, to explain both the meaning of moral terms and the validity of argument forms (such as *modus ponens* above) that utilize non-cognitivist and non-descriptivist moral terms.

Sinnott-Armstrong further argues that even if expressivists are able to establish a sense in which 1-3 is valid, they still would not provide a comprehensive semantic theory that enables us to understand the meaning of the antecedent in premise 2. So, for instance, expressivists might argue that some claims involving “is wrong” can have *minimal* truth values (Sinnott-Armstrong, 684); or they might give an account of the conditional (“if, then”) in premise 2 by referring to the antecedent as an exclusion of possible worlds where “lying is not wrong” and explaining that

when such worlds are excluded, so are possible worlds where “lying to one’s teacher is not wrong” (Sinnott-Armstrong, 686). But despite such interesting attempts to establish validity, we still do not get an adequate understanding of “if lying is wrong” in premise 2. Therefore, conventional moral semantics still presents a burden against non-cognitivists.

Moral irrealists, expressivists and other non-cognitivists in particular, have put a great deal of thought into trying to address this concern. Some have tried to address the challenge while retaining non-cognitivism, e.g. Blackburn and Gibbard with the notion of *quasi-realism*, which has an irrealist underpinning yet attempts to vindicate the common realist-like usage of moral terms. Others have concluded that the irrealist need not deny the truth-functionality and embeddedness of moral claims in order to argue that moral terms are not descriptive terms. As we have seen, Timmons provides such an account, and he attempts to support cognitivism while denying descriptivism; he calls this position *assertoric non-descriptivism*: moral claims are assertive and truth-apt (thus they can be used in truth-functional ways and embedded in arguments), but they are not true or false in relation to whether they accurately describe/report objective moral facts (thus Timmons is a non-descriptivist). Another example is Horgan and Timmons 2006, who have attempted to establish a position they call *cognitivist expressivism*.

Unfortunately for non-cognitivists like Blackburn and Gibbard, establishing a consistent meaning for moral claims *and* accommodating the validity of argument forms employing those claims is an extremely challenging task. As Sinnott-Armstrong rightly argues, non-cognitivists have not been able to persuasively succeed in both of these feats.

Timmons rejects descriptivism but endorses cognitivism, in his attempt to provide a truth-functional moral semantics and thereby address or bypass the FG problem. According to Timmons, moral claims are genuine truth-apt propositions and moral claims are not all false (so,

he is not an error theorist). This move allows him to explain validity because, for him, moral claims are truth-apt and can straightforwardly be embedded into arguments in truth-functional ways. But in order for persons to make true moral claims their moral claims must not be reporting descriptive ontological facts, facts whose existence irrealists like Timmons deny. So, Timmons retains the possibility of moral truth by arguing that moral claims are not used descriptively. However, with this move, Timmons only manages to bypass the FG “embedding problem”, which is concerned with argument validity. He has not evaded the deeper semantic challenge of providing a clear and consistent meaning for moral terms. By rejecting descriptivism, he must still provide an account of the meaning of moral terms.

Timmons’ account of the meaning of moral terms is minimalistic. As the reader may recall, according to Timmons the meaning and content of ‘p’ is p. So, the meaning of ‘lying is wrong’ simply is that lying is wrong. But why does Timmons defend minimalistic-truth semantics for moral claims? One reason may be that providing a semantic account for moral claims and moral truth which is non-minimalistic is very difficult and would load the dice in favour of realism. But, obviously, just because that sort of semantics seems to favour moral realism is not a justification for rejecting that semantics. Rather, the real reason Timmons seems to give is in accordance with his internal accommodation project: he argues that persons tend to make moral claims austere (without a metaphysical backing or descriptivist truth-conditions), and that a minimalistic-truth semantics best accommodates this.

However, there is reason to doubt that persons typically make claims in non-descriptivist ways, as the realist and descriptivist Geoff Sayre-McCord claims:

“[I]t is pretty clear that people do generally regard their moral claims, and the moral claims of others, as purporting to report facts, and to the extent they themselves

sincerely advance such claims they seem to be regarding at least some such claims as actually true. The burden is on the anti-realists about morality to argue that this involves a mistake of some sort.” (Sayre-McCord 2009)

I agree with Sayre-McCord that people do generally regard their moral claims as cognitivist (“regarding at least some such claims as actually true”, and therefore truth-apt) and descriptivist (“as purporting to report facts”). But the general acceptance of this usage is not a burden for irrealists; rather, I have pointed out that the real burden involves technical difficulties with the meaning of moral terms in alternate moral semantics, and furthermore a burden of accounting for the validity of argument forms that employ non-cognitivist moral claims. Thus, the real issues for alternate moral semantics are posed by the Frege-Geach problem.

Timmons and descriptivists such as Sayre-McCord can both agree that persons sometimes make unqualified moral assertions, such as “lying is wrong”. But descriptivists argue that the most sensible interpretation of such moral claims is to regard them as attempted references to an objective moral fact of the matter. Timmons cites Graham and Horgan in arguing that this descriptivist interpretation is unwarranted because it is too opulent (metaphysically loaded), and he argues that persons typically make moral claims in a more austere manner (where the wrongness of lying is not contingent upon there being any objective fact of the matter). I discussed the plausibility of both interpretations in “Critical Objection C”, and I concluded that it is unclear whether persons generally regard moral claims austere or opulently – there is not enough available empirical or historical information to warrant generalizations about the austerity or opulence of commonplace moral claims.

However, to support a cognitivist rendering of truth-minimal moral semantics, Timmons constructs a very complex view that he calls *ethical contextualism* – a moral semantics and

theory of moral justification that utilizes unjustified justifiers (what I have called basic moral truths) which are determined according to context. But many of Timmons' claims about how persons engage in moral discourse appear to be empirically unsupported. Austerity is not the only thing that seems to be taken for granted. For example: it is unclear that most persons would not attempt to provide descriptive or reductive truth conditions for their moral claims if pressed to reflect on their views (so, "slavery is wrong" would not be a basic moral truth, rather the condition of its wrongness may be based on the fact that it violates rational autonomy, and violating rational autonomy is what is fundamentally wrong). It is also unclear whether persons adopt different basic truths in different contexts, some may instead judge moral claims in a way more akin to W.D. Ross' 1930 moral theory: which maintains that there are a number of prima facie duties (viz. a handful of moral considerations to take into account), and that moral agents must evaluate which prima facie duty is more urgent in a certain situation.

Given the unsupported, and even contentious, nature of Timmons' semantics, I believe that Timmons would be better off abandoning his innovative and tricky contextualism and minimalism of moral truth. As a consequence of rejecting the use of contextually basic, non-descriptive moral truth, Timmons' options appear to be (1) to give up cognitivism and embrace a non-cognitivist and non-reductive theory of moral semantics, or else (2) to retain cognitivism, but accept descriptivism and defend error theory. As I have just argued, typical non-cognitivist accounts are subject to semantic burdens and the FG problem. So, descriptivist error theory may be preferable as a semantic account if it has fewer problems and invokes fewer worries. Since I want to show that error theory is preferable to non-cognitivism, I will defend the merits of descriptivist error theory by addressing two major concerns. The first concern is that error theory makes it seem pointless for irrealists to use moral claims, since they argue that moral claims are

erroneous. The second concern is that it is very counter-intuitive to maintain that all typical moral claims are descriptively erroneous.

## **Section II: Descriptivist Error Theory**

When I say that moral claims are descriptively erroneous/false, all I mean by this is that they attempt to report descriptive moral facts and such facts do not exist. I do not mean to imply that moral claims are erroneous because they attempt to report internally-motivating features or something along those lines; as I explained in chapter one, realists can be motivational externalists who deny that the moral truths people try to report are inherently-motivating moral truths. For me, there are reasons to accept irrealism (such as motivational and reason externalism, with ontological minimalism), and there are different reasons to retain descriptivist semantics within an already accepted irrealism.

The main incentive to maintain an overarching descriptivist moral grammar or purpose is two-fold: first, descriptivist moral semantics are supported by the very persuasive Frege-Geach problem; or rather it is that non-cognitivist and non-descriptivist semantics are persuasively attacked by the Frege-Geach problem. Secondly, most persons do seem to be typically trying to report some objective moral facts or moral truth when they make moral claims. So non-descriptivists (including non-cognitivists) would be using moral claims in a different way than the conventional norm. This could invite ambiguity to moral discourse.

To support my second point, let's take as an example the moral claim that "lying is wrong". I do not believe that "lying is wrong" in an objective sense, though I believe something similar in a subjective sense: i.e. lying is not typically something that I enjoy doing or enjoy

having done to me. If I were a non-descriptivist, the act of me saying that “lying is wrong” and not qualifying or explaining what I mean may make it an ambiguous statement to some. Realists will be prone to interpret the claim differently than how I would mean it if I was an irrealist who genuinely believed that lying is wrong. For instance, if I were a Blackburn-type expressivist, then when I genuinely assert that “lying is wrong” I am expressing my disapproval of lying; but a realist who is a descriptivist and a cognitivist may interpret my claim as implying that I believe that there is an objective fact of the matter such that lying is wrong, regardless of whether I would approve or disapprove of lying if there were no such objective moral fact. This ambiguity in interpretation invites confusion into moral discourse since irrealists who believe that lying is wrong, in some non-cognitive or non-descriptive sense, would be talking past realists, who tend to be cognitivists and descriptivists. The solution is to settle on one meaning and surface grammar: if we take the semantic issues associated with the FG problem seriously, then this will be a descriptivist surface grammar.<sup>7</sup> However, accepting descriptivism does not preclude irrealists from fruitfully engaging in moral discourse or utilizing moral claims.

To challenge my last statement, I anticipate two major rebuttals. The first is an objection about the sensible use of moral claims as an irrealist: if one believes that all moral claims are descriptively erroneous, then why continue making erroneous moral claims? The second

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<sup>7</sup> The original proponents of the Frege-Geach problem, and many of its contemporary defenders, saw the FG problem as a serious blow against non-cognitivism. The argument was often made under the assumption that accepting descriptivism goes hand in hand with accepting cognitivism; which Hare and Timmons have denied: one can be a cognitivist but a non-descriptivist (but not a descriptivist and a non-cognitivist). However, I pointed out that Timmons’ move to non-descriptivism is based on a number of speculative empirical generalizations about how persons use moral claims and what sorts of deeply-embedded moral assumptions they have. By problematizing his non-descriptivism, I have extended the semantic issues associated with the FG problem to non-descriptivism as well; not just non-cognitivism. Most persons regard moral claims as truth-apt because they base this truth-aptness on a descriptive aim. Denying this descriptive aim while trying to retain cognitivism (propositional truth-aptness) creates the challenge of trying to salvage positive moral truth in some other way, and Timmons, as I argued, is unpersuasive in his rendition of moral truth as minimalistic and contextually basic. His version of moral truth leaves much to be desired. As such, descriptivist error theory is preferable since it invokes fewer worries, as I continue arguing.

objection takes the form of a crippling worry with intuitiveness: it seems so counter-intuitive to say that all moral claims are erroneous in some way. I accept the implication of counter-intuitiveness, and in the next chapter I explain why irrealism and error theorist semantics are counter-intuitive. In that chapter, I will also argue that irrealism and error theory are not philosophically undermined by how counter-intuitive they may seem. But before that, I tackle the worry of coherence and sensible use of moral claims; I debunk the idea that it is inconsistent or otherwise problematic to use moral claims in a way that one knows is descriptively false or erroneous. To do so, I will argue that descriptivist error theories can still highlight the importance of the *prescriptive* or *evaluative*, i.e. action-guiding, element of moral discourse and moral assertion. This is relevant to Timmons since he is strongly committed to the evaluative function of moral claims. I conclude that Timmons ought to accept descriptivism and defend error theory.

As realists such as Sayre-McCord and supporters of the Frege-Geach problem point out, the meaning of moral terms is most sensibly understood as descriptive and the validity of moral arguments is best accounted for by cognitivist (truth-apt) moral semantics. An irrealist can deny either of these claims and try to defend non-descriptivism and/or non-cognitivism. Otherwise, an irrealist would be committed to arguing that moral claims attempt to report non-existent (or inaccessible) moral facts, and thus that all moral claims are erroneous in some way. However, the fact that all moral claims are descriptively erroneous does not undermine the fact that they are also often used to convince and coerce persons; persons often try to encourage certain social behaviours by saying that such behaviours are morally virtuous, or try to get others to refrain from a certain behaviour by saying that it is morally wrong (to this extent, Hare and Timmons are spot on). But one need not deny the descriptive function of moral claims in order to stress

their evaluative element; moral claims may possess both functions. So, even if moral claims are descriptively false, they may effectively guide action nonetheless, and it is on this basis that even irrealists can fruitfully utilize descriptively erroneous moral claims.

In my case, I don't believe that "lying is wrong" is a descriptively true statement, yet for practical purposes the statement will work just fine, consider the following: I don't want Bob to lie, I know that Bob is a realist, and so I tell him: "Bob, lying is wrong." If he believes me, then he will be more likely to refrain from lying. Remember that my goal was to convince him that lying is not an appropriate social behaviour (at least in the given context). So, if he affirms my statement, then mission accomplished. I may not endorse realism, or even traditional moral semantics, but moral statements are undoubtedly effective at guiding *most* persons' actions. Therefore, though I agree with Sayre-McCord and other descriptivists that many persons make moral claims with the aim of reporting objective moral facts, and even though I do not believe that there are any objective moral facts that can be reported, I can still utilize realist moral semantics in an evaluative way. In other words, claims such as "lying is wrong" are incompatible with my metaethics (I do not believe them in the way that realists do), but are otherwise well-suited to prescribe courses of action. Thus, the claim that one must always avoid descriptively, factually, or ontologically erroneous statements is short-sighted, because even if the surface grammar and accepted purpose of moral claims is descriptive, moral claims can still perform other functions as well; moral claims are not limited to *only* one purpose, even if the default or "main" purpose is descriptive rather than expressive or evaluative.

Non-cognitivist semantics, such as expressivist semantics, might render moral claims as being free of error, and might most fruitfully get to the gist of moral claims as irrealists intend to use them (i.e. to guide action or to express one's sentiments, rather than to make descriptively

false statements). However, in considering the semantics of moral terms, especially in terms of the internal accommodation project, it is of crucial importance to take into account the commonplace and conventional meaning of moral terms as persons typically understand them: what can be called folk moral language use. If the conventional understanding is cognitivist and descriptivist, as I have argued that it is, then non-cognitivists and non-descriptivists may be creating an insulated moral semantics, and might risk simply talking past descriptivists.

In most scenarios, descriptivists and non-descriptivists will make commensurable moral claims, and the difference in meaning will not be of a significant detriment to the discourse. However, there are some instances where non-descriptivist moral assertion, such as an irrealist genuinely claiming that “torture is morally wrong”, will be ambiguous in a largely descriptivist discourse. The easiest example, I think, is of philosophy students debating the rightness or wrongness of an act such as torture. An irrealist who is a non-descriptivist may claim: “of course it’s morally wrong to torture people for fun”, and the realist participants will agree. Then the non-descriptivist might assert their moral irrealism: “but there is no objective fact about the matter”. At which point the realists will turn their heads with baffled looks and ask: “how can torture be morally wrong if there is no fact of the matter?” The non-descriptivist might try to respond by saying: “well, I didn’t mean morally wrong in that sense...”, and to persons thoroughly entrenched in descriptivist semantics, as I have argued most persons are, the obvious follow-up inquiry is: “well, what other sense is there?”

All of this confusion and need for clarification could be avoided if an irrealist, in earnest moral discussion, more fully explained what they really meant: e.g. “torture is not objectively right or wrong, but the way it dehumanizes persons by inflicting unfathomable amounts of pain and horror is reason enough for considerate and caring human beings to refrain from such acts,

and reason enough for liberal communities, which advocate and protect the civil rights and freedoms of their members, to agree to legalize and sanction such acts.” Actually, I would recommend that an irrealist utilize such explanations as much as possible, rather than trying to manipulate the behaviours of others by convincing them of realist moral beliefs which the irrealist him/herself does not hold. But there are cases where fully developed explanations are not suitable or practical. For instance, when a child is hitting another child it will be much more practical to simply say: “don’t do that, that’s wrong”. If the child affirms the reasoning, it seems that he or she will believe that there is a fact such that hitting other children is wrong, and that this fact is a moral restriction which applies to all children, not just to the child whose parents disapprove of violence. Of course, irrealists who judge from their moral outlooks that children should refrain from hitting other children will rarely believe that it is okay for children with violent moral outlooks to hit others, so they do not relativize what others should do to those others’ moral outlooks, as Timmons points out. But few adults, let alone children, have the patience or understanding to sit and listen to an irrealist while she explains her metaethical stance, her practical beliefs, and her notion of non-relativizing moral outlooks. “Don’t do that, it’s wrong” is typically sufficient for practical purposes, despite it being descriptively false.

So, in debating the commonplace meaning of moral claims I have sided with realists, and error theorists (such as Mackie and Joyce), by arguing that the conventional understanding of moral terms is both cognitivist and descriptivist. But even with the adoption of a cognitivist and descriptivist semantics, it would be desperately hard to deny that moral claims typically also have a motivational force, whether intrinsic or extrinsic. In other words, when persons genuinely regard some action as wrong they tend to refrain from performing it. Thus if my aim is to prescribe a course of action in a non-philosophical or non-metaethical context, it will still be

fruitful for me to make technically erroneous moral claims. And in prescribing a course of action to an irrealist who eschews all talk of morality, one may be better off saying “don’t do  $x$ ” and providing practical reasons.

To recap, the surface grammar of moral claims is indeed cognitivist and descriptivist, as is illustrated by the fact that persons traditionally and conventionally regard moral terms as attempting to report ontological truth and furthermore they embed moral claims into arguments that almost everyone regards as valid form. I have urged that irrealists can fruitfully utilize ontologically erroneous descriptive moral claims in order to fulfill other goals, since moral speech-acts are not limited to only one function at any given time. Earlier I argued that Timmons ought to discard his truth-apt contextual moral semantics. Currently I have attempted to show that Timmons ought to then adopt a descriptivist error theory, and that he can do so without undermining the *evaluative* component of moral assertion (which he holds dear). Having adopted a descriptivist error theory, and therefore a descriptivist moral semantics, the Frege-Geach problem does not present a burden or problem.

However, the worry that error theory is poignantly counter-intuitive, or that irrealism in general is too counter-intuitive, is a worry that irrealists cannot put to rest. Furthermore, the convention-relative counter-intuitiveness of moral irrealism is the primary reason why Timmons, and other irrealists, are (currently) unable to positively and comprehensively accommodate commonplace features of morality into a fundamentally irrealist metaethics. In the next and final chapter of the paper, I explain why irrealism and error theory are counter-intuitive to most individuals. But by giving a debunking explanation, I will implicitly attempt to invalidate reference to the “natural pull” of realism, and undermine the importance of positive internal accommodation for moral irrealism.

## Chapter Five

### Popular Belief and Widespread Language Use

In both the historical and contemporary metaethical literature, moral realism has been upheld as the most intuitive and *prima facie* plausible metaethical position. Some have tried to deny or to question whether realism really is more intuitive (e.g. Joyce 2007). I disagree with Joyce and I believe that moral realism is initially more attractive and seemingly intuitive. But I will explain why it is so, and point out that many of the reasons for the initial plausibility and default position of moral realism are not good philosophical reasons for rejecting moral irrealism. My explanation will be as follows. Traditional and conventional ways of understanding moral claims are cognitivist and descriptivist, and realists seem best equipped to account for this surface grammar of moral claims. However, irrealists can accept both cognitivism and descriptivism, and advocate a descriptivist error theory. This descriptivist error theory is counter-intuitive to many individuals because many persons believe that moral claims can be descriptively true (that moral claims are descriptively *non-erroneous*). This feature of moral phenomenology is grounded in tradition and has managed to maintain its status as a widespread convention. Having explained that much of the appeal of moral realism, including its non-erroneous descriptivist semantics, is due to popularity and roots in tradition, I conclude that deference to the natural or intuitive “pull” of moral realism is inadequate as an argument or as a justification for placing a burden of proof against irrealism or descriptivist error theory.

#### Section I: The Roots of Dominant Moral Semantics

I begin with a concession: I admit that moral claims such as “lying is wrong” do seem quite natural and unproblematic to me, and also appear to be sufficient premises for the

wrongness of all particular cases of lying. But the way it appears to me is not a result of there being something fundamentally correct about the realist metaethical view that is implied by realist semantics; rather it has to do with linguistic tradition and convention.

The traditions and conventions that have shaped the way moral terms are commonly used in the west have been moral realist conventions. Irrealism was hardly popular before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the norms of moral language use were cemented before that, thus those norms of moral semantics reflect a realist outlook. The irrealist can try to positively accommodate those norms in an irrealist doctrine, as Timmons seeks to do, or they can try to use moral terms in ways that are more compatible with irrealism, such as purposely making erroneous descriptivist moral claims or otherwise making moral claims without truth-functional embedding (as expressivists try to do). Either way, one can recognize that many persons adopt a moral semantics born out of a realist metaethics while remaining cognisant of the fact that those moral semantics are out of date and do not reflect the wider array of metaethical positions that are more commonly adopted today. In other words, our current moral semantics and the way we embed moral claims are a result of long-prevailing traditions. Additionally, the ways in which we speak about morals typically accords with a *conventional* way of speaking, i.e. the manner of speaking that most ordinary persons understand. But the semantic conventions that are widely adopted today (which are conventions thoroughly saturated in a long tradition of moral realism) simply reflect the traditions from which we came – and do not necessarily reveal anything about the actual nature of morality; they do not reveal any deep truth about metaethics.

My sentiments here are largely owed to the writings of G. E. M. Anscombe about other aspects of moral semantics, namely about many moral terms themselves. For example, Anscombe writes the following about moral terms such as “ought”:

“But they have now acquired a special so-called “moral” sense—i.e. a sense in which they imply some absolute verdict (like one of guilty/not guilty on a man) on what is described in the “ought” sentences used in certain types of context: not merely the contexts that Aristotle would call “moral”—passions and actions—but also some of the contexts that he would call “intellectual”.

The ordinary (and quite indispensable) terms “should,” “needs,” “ought,” “must”—acquired this special sense by being equated in the relevant contexts with “is obliged,” or “is bound,” or “is required to,” in the sense in which one can be obliged or bound by law, or something can be required by law.

How did this come about? The answer is in history: between Aristotle and us came Christianity, with its *law* conception of ethics. For Christianity derived its ethical notions from the Torah. [...]

In consequence of the dominance of Christianity for many centuries, the concepts of being bound, permitted, or excused became deeply embedded in our language and thought. [...]

Naturally it is not possible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as a law-giver; like Jews, Stoics, and Christians. But if such a conception is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the concepts of “obligation,” of being bound or required as by a law, should remain though they had lost their root; and if the word “ought” has become invested in certain contexts with the sense of “obligation,” it too will remain to be spoken with a special emphasis and a special feeling in these contexts.” (Anscombe 1958)

Anscombe has explained that moral terms such as “ought” can have roots in Christianity, be outmoded with the fall (in popularity) of Christianity, and still retain popular usage in moral semantics. I have attempted to make the same case about descriptivist moral semantics. The way moral terms are used is prone to remain unchanged for a longer period than the metaethical conceptions that render such moral semantics most sensible. Thus, many of the key characteristics of widespread moral semantics, which I see as realist characteristics, will continue to be used even as more persons become moral irrealists. It may be just as difficult to discard the way moral claims are used as it is to discard the moral “ought”.

## **Section II: Grammar and Intention**

Contemporary moral semantics, especially the way that moral claims are typically used, are more precisely a reflection of realist traditions than a reflection of some fact about persons and their metaethical conceptions, i.e. that they think morals are real and mind-independent. After all, many of the persons who embed moral claims in syllogisms, and use them in other truth-functional ways, are moral irrealists. Some, as I mentioned, have argued that they are being genuine while doing so – viz. that irrealists can reconcile these moral semantics with their irrealist metaethics and make moral claims without falsity. I do not think that they can, and I have argued for this in the previous sections and in my analyses of Timmons’ view, where I outlined the difficulties with non-cognitivism and non-descriptivism. The alternative is to make descriptively false statements, which seems counter-intuitive, but is not a problem if one believes that it is okay, as Berkeley claimed, to “think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar”.

George Berkeley advocated a radical view about the physical world of beings and objects. He claimed that the commonplace conception of the *material* world, a Lockean world of

material objects and particles, is incorrect. Berkeley famously advocated his theory of *Idealism*, claiming that the world consists solely of ideas and Spirits (perceivers of ideas). If Berkeley's view of reality is correct, then it cannot be true that a material object possesses heat, since there is no material object which can possess material properties. Heat is an idea or perception. This would mean that the conventional way of speaking about fire and heat: i.e. "don't touch the stove, it is hot!" would be incorrect when interpreted literally and descriptively. In response, Berkeley did not suggest that we must abandon the conventional ways of speaking about the world. Indeed, he may have claimed quite the contrary. In *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley writes:

"51. Seventhly, it will upon this be demanded whether it does not seem absurd to take away natural causes, and ascribe everything to the immediate operation of Spirits? We must no longer say upon these principles that fire heats, or water cools, but that a Spirit heats, and so forth. Would not a man be deservedly laughed at, who should talk after this manner? I answer, he would so; in such things we ought to "think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar." They who to demonstration are convinced of the truth of the Copernican system do nevertheless say "the sun rises," "the sun sets," or "comes to the meridian"; and if they affected a contrary style in common talk it would without doubt appear very ridiculous. A little reflexion on what is here said will make it manifest that the common use of language would receive no manner of alteration or disturbance from the admission of our tenets."

(Berkeley 1710)

If we extend Berkeley's remarks to moral semantics and embedding, then we can further support descriptivist error theory. As I explained, an error theorist can use moral claims without

regarding them as literally true. This usage is still effective because it can have an action-prescribing or action-proscribing effect regardless of the claim's descriptive falsity (i.e. its inability to report non-knowable or non-existent objective moral truth). "But surely this usage is contentious", one might object, because it is so counter-intuitive and unwarranted to purposely make claims that are descriptively false. However, this is not so. As Berkeley has pointed out, we make descriptively false claims all the time, such as: "the sun sets" or "the sun rises"; and even atheists say "oh my god" and "bless you". In accordance with Berkeley's remarks, one reason to continue using moral claims that are descriptively false is that one will appear very ridiculous or be thought of as a loon if one did not. More importantly, there are strong conventional reasons for partaking in the widely accepted descriptivist style of moral semantics, whether moral claims can be descriptively true or not. This goes hand in hand with my claim that everyone ought to adopt a descriptivist moral semantics in commonplace contexts for the sake of consistency and accepted meaning.

But very importantly, the deference to conventional, i.e. descriptivist, moral semantics can be *sufficiently* motivated by consistency in meaning and the retaining of a semantics that most persons understand. It need not be motivated by the acceptance of moral realism and the idea that we can actually report real descriptive moral facts. Similarly, the usage of cognitivist and descriptivist moral claims need not imply that one endorses moral realism; just as in the contemporary understanding, the expression "the sun sets" does not necessarily imply the adoption of an archaic and false cosmological conception.

Additionally, descriptivist usage is still pragmatically useful because it is typically effective at guiding most persons' actions. This is because, I believe, most persons do have realist sympathies and they view the moral wrongness of an action as a reason on behalf of not

performing that action. For irrealists that emphasize the prescriptive or evaluative component of moral discourse – as Hare, Timmons, and I do – a very significant part of moral discussion and debate is concerned with guiding, regulating, and coordinating behaviour. This sort of deliberative process is undertaken by providing reasons for and against a certain course of action, with the aim of convincing others towards a particular practical goal. If realists consider the wrongness of an action as a good reason for not performing it, then providing that reason to them is a legitimate and effective part of guiding behaviour – regardless of whether or not the error theorist who provides that reason literally believes it him/herself. Thus the descriptivist grammar of a moral claim, which would render it erroneous or false according to moral irrealism, is not one and the same as the action-guiding intent with which an irrealist makes the claim to a realist.

Between two irrealists in practical discourse, the objective wrongness of an action should not be regarded as a reason on behalf of not doing that action, and descriptivist error theory makes sense of the fact that it would seem very strange if two irrealists were disagreeing about whether an action is morally right or wrong. This is because, for irrealists like me, figuring out whether one should or should not do something is a separate issue from determining whether it is morally (objectively) right or wrong. I do not believe that anything is objectively right or wrong. Thus, it wouldn't make sense for me to motivate the behaviour of a thorough-going moral irrealist by providing “the descriptive objective wrongness of  $x$ ” as an imperative for not doing  $x$ ; it works for realists because most realists derive the prescriptive (action-guiding) effectiveness of a moral claim from the moral claim's truth or falsity. In other words, for most (but not all) realists, if  $x$  is morally wrong, then this is a reason for why “one ought not to do  $x$ ”.

Actually, many of the genuine moral assertions of certain others will motivate irrealists as well. Most moral irrealists, like most persons generally, respect the opinions of those they care

about. Thus, if my mother says to me: “ $x$  is morally wrong”, I will not acknowledge the content of the claim itself as providing a reason for me not to do  $x$ . But the fact that my mother believes that it is morally wrong, and other things being equal I want to make my mother happy, gives me an incentive to refrain from doing  $x$  in order to please her, in conjunction with other reasons I may have for not doing  $x$ . But even if no one I care about ever believed that, for example, rape was morally wrong, it does not follow that I, as an irrealist, have no reason to refrain from it. This is because moral assertion or evaluation is only one part of the broader picture of providing reasons for actions; at least for irrealists, and also for realists who have a deflationary view about moral reasons (meaning that these realists do not view “ $x$  is wrong” as supreme and authoritative over every other possible reason or consideration on behalf of doing  $x$ ).

Thus, there are still many reasons to be provided on behalf of performing, or refraining from performing, some act. For instance, facts about rape, such as that rape inflicts physical and emotional pain, diminishes one’s confidence and self-esteem, and violates one’s rational autonomy and one’s civil right to consensual sexual partnerships, are all reasons for not raping someone. Realists provide many of the same considerations in explaining or justifying why rape is, objectively speaking, wrong. Irrealists deny that this act is objectively wrong in the realist’s sense. Yet the fact that most of us perceive acts such as rape as harmful, and we have an interest to protect ourselves and our loved ones from rapists, adequately explains why we put laws into motion which imprison rapists and why we also socially disapprove of rape with the implicit intent of engraining a widespread anti-rape sentiment. But rather than providing full-fledged explanations every time a descriptivist error theorist engages in moral discourse, it will often be more suitable to partake in simple moral assertion for evaluative or practical purposes. Ultimately, I want to convince persons that they should never rape others. Whether the reasons

they accept on behalf of this normative conclusion are the same reasons that I accept is, at least in this very important case, secondary. Thus, rather than engaging in deep metaethical discourse about how it's not objectively wrong but how, as persons with certain kinds of sympathies and social policies, we should refrain from raping, in most cases it will work much better to just say "rape is morally wrong, don't do it." Even if, semantically speaking, the moral sentence is descriptively false, this falsity (again, at least in this case) is secondary to the evaluative function of the moral assertion.

### **Conclusion**

The underlying aim of this thesis was to argue that, in the present day, irrealists are unable to *positively* accommodate the commonly presumed features of moral judgement and moral truth within a fundamentally moral irrealist framework. Unfortunately, all irrealist moral semantics are either (a) problematic – like non-cognitivism, (b) overly speculative – like many of Timmons' empirical claims about typical moral discourse, or (c) counter-intuitive from the standpoint of moral tradition and moral convention – like descriptivist error theory. I have argued that the third option is most preferable, since it can be understandably explained.

Common features of moral phenomenology and moral discourse are primarily objectivist in metaethics and descriptivist in moral semantics. The descriptivist semantics that is associated with moral realism remains the dominant moral semantic convention. Thus, successful internal accommodation requires a descriptivist moral semantics, as I argued. This means that irrealists should take a descriptivist error theorist stance toward typical or conventional moral discourse, and will have to bite the bullet of counter-intuitiveness when they conclude that all typical moral claims are descriptively false or erroneous.

However, I urged that this counter-intuitiveness is not burdensome upon the philosophical merits of moral irrealism. Moral objectivity and descriptivist semantics became engrained in our language and culture as a result of long-prevailing realist paradigms, including the dominance of religions such as Christianity. These traditions are no longer as prevalent and widespread in certain cultures as they were before, but descriptivist moral semantics remain for a variety of reasons. One possible reason is that brands of moral realism may (still) collectively be more popular than brands of moral irrealism; as I quoted Sayre-McCord, it seems to be the case that the majority of persons regard their moral claims as descriptively true and aimed at reporting real objective moral facts. Another possible reason why descriptivism remains is that it is pragmatically unproblematic; i.e. descriptivist moral assertion is retention-worthy since it often succeeds at guiding or recommending actions (what is referred to as the *evaluative* nature of moral discourse).

The persistence of descriptivism makes all irrealist semantics problematic in one way or another. But in light of technical semantic issues, such as those of meaning and embedding which are associated with the Frege-Geach problem, non-cognitivism and non-descriptivism have serious difficulties explaining the meaning of moral terms or accounting for the validity of argument forms which employ moral claims. Whereas, descriptivist error theory only has one major problem, and that is the counter-intuitiveness of saying that all typical moral claims are erroneous. But, again, this counter-intuitiveness can be ameliorated if we are aware of the fact that it only seems so counter-intuitive because error theory stands in stark contrast to tradition and convention; which only circularly support realism since most traditions and conventions have largely been based on realist beliefs.

Historically, irrealists who maintained that moral claims can be truth-apt also maintained that all moral claims are descriptively false. These irrealists were known as error theorists, arguing that (a) moral claims are meant to report descriptive moral facts that exist objectively (independently of human beliefs); and (b) that no such moral facts exist<sup>8</sup> thus all moral claims are erroneous. The alternative to descriptivist error theory was non-cognitivism: maintaining that moral beliefs are not propositionally truth-apt. Non-cognitivists are able to say that moral claims are not erroneous, and they do this by disagreeing with realists and error theorists about the meaning and purpose of moral claims. According to expressivism, a popular form of non-cognitivism, moral claims are meant to express the attitudes of the utterer. According to R.M. Hare's moral theory, "universal prescriptivism" (1952), moral claims are meant to prescribe or proscribe courses of action; to guide or regulate behaviour. He referred to this component of moral claims as the "*evaluative*" component. Timmons deeply sympathizes with Hare, and argues that the primary point and purpose of moral discourse is *evaluative*. He therefore rejects the descriptivist semantics of realists and error theorists. However, being aware of the various problems with non-cognitivism, Timmons has a very innovative semantics that rejects descriptivism but accepts cognitivism. He therefore argues that moral claims can be true or false (many of them true), but that their truth or falsity is not dependent on accurately reporting some descriptive moral fact.

Throughout the thesis, I disagreed with many of the empirical claims that Timmons makes about prototypical moral discourse, viz. I claimed that Timmons is overly speculative in some of the observations he makes about how ordinary persons engage in moral discourse. His retention of cognitivist truth-aptness is motivated by his observation that persons typically

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<sup>8</sup> Or are otherwise unknowable; which is a much less popular variation of error theory.

believe that their moral claims are true. To accommodate this feature within an underlying irrealism, Timmons argues that moral claims are typically made austere and non-descriptively, and also that their truth is minimalistic and non-reducible. These are all dubitable remarks about how persons typically regard their moral claims and how moral discourse typically proceeds. Nevertheless, there are many claims in Timmons' view that I think are very insightful and also quite accurate: namely, about moral claims guiding action, about moral outlooks, and about the importance of context. These are claims that metaethicists should accept or otherwise grapple with. By reinforcing his view with descriptivist semantics, I tried to strengthen Timmons' moral semantics. My aim was to establish and defend a moral irrealist view with a moral semantics that is committed to reliance on what is conceptually and scientifically sound, and which may stand in contrast to what appears to be conventionally accepted. So, a more philosophically water-tight irrealist position than Timmons' will be conventionally counter-intuitive and will "explain away" commonplace features of morality rather than trying to vindicate or accommodate them.

Therefore, in conclusion, the irrealist's internal accommodation project is best accomplished by adopting a descriptivist error theory as one's account of moral semantics. One can still emphasize the importance of the *evaluative* or *expressive* component of moral assertion within an overarching descriptivism; as I have argued that Timmons ought to do with regard to the evaluative element (there is a significant wave of contemporary metaethical semantic attempts to hybridize descriptivism and expressivism, e.g. Copp 2001; Ridge 2007; Svoboda 2011, this is a topic for another time). The worry that it may seem counter-intuitive for moral irrealists to use conventional, i.e. descriptivist and cognitivist, moral semantics is explained by the fact that moral irrealism itself is traditionally counter-intuitive – but this is not a detriment to the ontological and philosophical merits of moral irrealism. As such, irrealists should not be

afraid to admit that their metaethical views diverge from conventional norms and appear counter-intuitive, since these norms were primarily shaped in conjunction with moral realist views and are thus based on erroneous metaethical conceptions to begin with.

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