

Atheism and Moral Scepticism

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Summary

Many philosophers have argued, and continue to argue, that if atheism is true – if there is no transcendent creator of the universe or parts of it (most importantly, no transcendent creator of life on earth and of human beings) – then there are no moral truths. In this essay, I argue for the related but different thesis that atheists have reason to accept the claim that all of their moral beliefs are unwarranted (or unjustified), a claim I refer to as “moral scepticism”.

After explaining atheism and providing some metaethical preliminaries, I consider some empirical findings that might be thought to support the idea that *everyone* should embrace moral scepticism regardless of whether they are atheists; I argue that they do *not* support that idea. Going on to discuss Darwinism and morality, I develop what I call *the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism*. While this argument gives *atheists* reason to embrace moral scepticism, advocates of theism – the most widely defended alternative to atheism – do not have reason to consider *their* moral beliefs unwarranted, or at least not the same reason that atheists do.

Acknowledging that atheists could avoid the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism if they can maintain an *expressivist* (or *quasi-realist*) understanding of the function of moral thought and discourse, I nevertheless argue that there is good reason to believe that expressivism is false. Lastly, I consider some consequences of atheists embracing moral scepticism, arguing against the *moral fictionalist* idea that moral sceptics can simply *pretend* to have warranted moral beliefs and carry on much as before. I also suggest that atheists will not be able to endorse two kinds of argument that many of them have wanted to endorse: the argument from evil against theism and moral arguments against purported divine revelations.

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Introduction and acknowledgements

Philosophers have long debated, and continue to debate, the relationship(s) between morality and the existence of God. One of the central questions debated is whether the existence of God is a necessary condition for the existence of moral truth - whether “everything is permitted” if God does not exist.

That God’s existence *is* necessary for moral truth has been maintained both by philosophers who accept theism (the thesis that God exists) and by philosophers who reject it. For example, theistic philosopher William Lane Craig maintains that, “If God does not exist, then it is difficult to see any reason to think that human beings are special or that their morality is objectively true” (1997), and the late atheist philosopher John Mackie held that, “objectively intrinsically prescriptive features, supervening upon natural ones,” which he understood our conception of moral truth to commit us to, “constitute so odd a cluster of qualities and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events, without an all-powerful god to create them” (1982, p.115). Other philosophers have likewise argued that moral truth requires the existence of God in order to be adequately intelligible (e.g., Mavrodes 1986; Budziszewski 2002), while some – such as Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) - have thought that God’s existence is necessary for the correct application of *some* central moral concepts, even if *others* might have correct application in the absence of God’s existence. The tight connection some have seen between morality and God’s existence has motivated moral arguments for God’s existence (arguments from the existence of moral truth to the existence of God) in philosophy past and present (Adams 1979; Copan 2003).

However, there is considerable disagreement on the matter. While some philosophers think that moral truth commits us to the existence of metaphysically

strange properties and something resembling a theistic story if those properties are not to remain unacceptably anomalous, it is clear that many other philosophers are not convinced. Some of these latter philosophers don't think that moral truth requires much by way of metaphysics, whereas others among their number think that it *does* but that nevertheless the properties and facts required can exist in a godless universe. The debate is alive and well in contemporary philosophy, as evidenced by the recent publication of a book on the topic featuring essays solicited from distinguished philosophers on both sides (Garcia and King 2009).¹

Surveying the debate, I doubt whether either side will be able to convince the other. However, I think that an argument for a different, but related, conclusion might be able to secure wider agreement. Rather than arguing that *if God does not exist, there are no moral truths*, my purpose in this essay is to argue that *atheists should embrace moral scepticism* (and to examine some consequences). By this, I mean that atheists should hold that all of their moral beliefs are *epistemically unwarranted* (or *unjustified*). (Note that other philosophers sometimes intend to signify different positions by their use of the expression "moral scepticism" than the position I will use that expression to denote.) This thesis I argue for is compatible with the different thesis that atheists have reason to consider all their moral beliefs to be *false* (a corollary of the thesis that God's existence is a necessary condition for the existence of moral truth), because atheists could have reason to consider their moral beliefs to be both unwarranted *and* false. So in arguing that atheists should embrace moral scepticism I am not denying that they may also have reason to consider all

¹ Also, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has recently released a book on the topic (*Morality without God?* Oxford University Press, 2009); unfortunately, it was published too late to be considered in this essay.

their moral beliefs to be false.² The thesis that atheists should embrace moral scepticism seems to me to be supportable by a convincing argument (though one that may require further elaboration and defence), and I hope that it may secure wider agreement.

The essay proceeds as follows:

In chapter 1, I explain what thesis I understand *atheism* to be, and I argue that atheists are committed to unguided Darwinism. I also discuss how moral thought and discourse are to be characterised, and I briefly rule out some metaethical positions as untenable.

In chapter 2, I consider some representative and influential challenges to moral belief which might be thought to render the moral beliefs of everyone (whether atheists or not) unwarranted; I argue that there is no reason to think they have that consequence.

In chapter 3, I argue that in virtue of their commitment to unguided Darwinism, atheists should embrace moral scepticism, on the assumption that moral belief is in the business of trying to track independent moral properties and facts. I develop *the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism*.

Chapter 4 considers a possible way atheists might avoid the argument developed in chapter 3 - by rejecting the assumption that moral belief is in the business of trying to track independent moral facts and instead adopting an *expressivist* (or *quasi-realist*) understanding of moral thought and discourse. I argue that such an understanding is mistaken.

² Similarly, Richard Joyce has argued for "error theory" – that all moral beliefs are false (2001) – yet has more recently argued for (what I call) moral scepticism (2006); in his recent work, he states: "I have not changed my mind; I am simply bracketing off those [previous] arguments here" (p.244, n.17).

The final chapter, chapter 5, considers the *consequences* of atheists accepting moral scepticism. If I am right, the consequences are significant: atheists will have to give up moral thought and discourse and there is reason to think that they will not be able to endorse some important arguments that many atheists have wanted to endorse and which are often included among their objections to theism (*the argument from evil* and “*Unholy Scripture*” arguments against purported divine revelations).

Although I think that the argument of the essay is correct – I think that if I accepted atheism, whether as a firm belief or a working hypothesis, I would be a moral sceptic for the reasons given - I acknowledge that in presenting it I need to rely on assumptions that I am unable to defend at length. For example, at the end of chapter 1 I reject some metaethical views with a dismissal that I am aware some might think too swift. Unfortunately, I lack the space to provide a detailed discussion, and, as I point out, the rest of the essay should be understood as being directed only toward atheists who accept that those metaethical views are not viable. My desire to produce a coherent and plausible case for an interesting metaethical conclusion (and, furthermore, to discuss its consequences) means that the essay covers a lot of ground and I am aware that at a number of points questions and objections could perhaps be raised which I have not been able to discuss or provide responses to (though I hope to have discussed and responded to a sufficient number). If the reader does consider the argument too swift in places, I would suggest that, as Peter van Inwagen has said with regard to some of his work, this essay is perhaps best viewed - at any rate, when it comes to the parts where I have offered less detailed discussion - as an “opening move...rather than a finished product” (1988, p.389).

A discussion of the relationship between atheism and metaethics will undoubtedly lead some to think of the *Euthyphro dilemma* for metaethical views that understand morality as depending upon God (e.g., on His will or commands): does God will or command what He does because of its moral status, or does it have its moral status because God wills or commands it? Many consider both horns of the dilemma unacceptable and appeal to it to dismiss the possibility of theistic metaethics (e.g., Brink 2007). The relevance of the dilemma to this essay doesn't appear great, since I am not arguing that theism rather than atheism is required in order for the possibility of moral truth; the challenge to atheism that figures in this essay is *epistemological*, not *metaphysical*. That said, at the end of chapter 3 I mention some possibilities for theists, and include the possibility of some kind of theistic metaethics, so I should point out that theistic responses to the Euthyphro dilemma can be found in the work of (among others) Robert Adams (1999), William Alston (2002) and William Lane Craig (see his contributions to Garcia and King 2009). Indeed, Mackie (1977, pp.229-232) noted long ago that theists can avoid the dilemma by understanding *some* values to be determined by God's will or commands but others to be determined by something else, e.g., His nature. So I will assume that theistic metaethics is not crippled by the Euthyphro dilemma, and I will not have anything more to say about it in this essay.

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Chapter 1 – Atheism, theism, and preliminaries on moral thought and discourse

As I stated in the introduction, my purpose in this essay is to argue that atheists should accept moral scepticism – the thesis that all of their moral beliefs are unwarranted - and to examine some consequences of this fact. It will be apt, at the beginning of the essay, to be clear on what I mean by “atheism”. I also need to provide a preliminary discussion of moral thought and discourse and to explain that I am going to assume that a family of metaethical views are unviable. Being clear on these issues, then, is the purpose of this first chapter. I will begin by explaining what thesis I take atheism to be, and I will explain why atheists are committed to an unguided Darwinian understanding of the development of life on earth (a point that will be important for chapter 3). After some brief but important comments on *theism* and Darwinism – which will also be relevant for what is said in later chapters – I will turn to consider how moral thought and discourse should be characterised, and I will briefly explain my assumption, operative for later chapters, that metaethical views that have no room for *stance-independence* are unviable.

1. Atheism

“Atheism” suggests a denial of a god or gods. It is sometimes intended to refer to the denial of only *some* gods. For example, the charge of atheism originated in ancient Greece to refer to the rejection of the particular gods of Greek myth and religion without implying the rejection of *all* gods – Socrates was famously executed for teaching atheism and corrupting the Athenian youth, but he didn’t reject the existence of *all* gods. (Similarly, the early Christians were called atheists by the

Romans on account of the Christians' rejection of the Roman pantheon and their refusal to worship the emperor, even though the Christians clearly believed in a god.) However, the word "atheism" is more often used, both within philosophy and outside of it, to refer to a thesis about *all* gods; and although it is sometimes suggested that the word should be used to denote simply a *lack of belief* in any god (e.g., Smith 1989), the word is more typically used to denote the positive thesis (or the belief) that *no god exists*.¹

Naturally, understanding atheism to be equivalent to the denial that any god exists only makes its content as clear as is one's understanding of what qualifies an entity (real or imagined) as a "god". If atheism is the denial of the existence of gods, what are gods? The first thing to notice is that atheism cannot be understood as the denial that everything that has been *classified* as a "god", or *called* a "god", exists. For according to some ancient religious systems, human beings could be or become gods (e.g., Roman emperors), and idols and images could sometimes be called "gods" even by those – such as the Hebrew prophets – who rejected the idea that they were identical with or indwelt by living beings. While such entities have been *called* "gods", contemporary philosophers and others who claim to be atheists don't deny the existence of Roman emperors or religious objects of worship; being *called* a god isn't the same as *being* a god. Indeed, we would expect an ancient Roman who thought the emperor was no different from other men to deny that he was *really* a god; in the same way, while sometimes referring to idols as "gods", the Hebrew prophets could nevertheless say *in the very same context* that their god is the only god and that the "gods" are not gods.²

¹ For a history and appraisal of atheism primarily understood as an influential *movement*, see McGrath (2004).

² E.g., Isaiah 45, especially v.20-22.

So what is needed is a conception of what it is to *be* a god, rather than simply a list of the entities that have been *called* “gods”. Here, the historical record bears witness to decidedly distinct conceptions. At one end of the spectrum are the gods of the polytheistic pantheons of the ancient Near East or the epics of Homer, who appear as human beings “writ large” – powerful agents with special abilities, yet limited in many ways just as humans are.³ At the other end is the decidedly different God (and a capital “G” is appropriate) affirmed in ancient Jewish belief⁴ and subsequent Jewish, Christian and Muslim tradition (the God of classical theism) who is understood to be all-powerful, to not engage in daily human routines or be subject to human-like limitations, and who is believed to have brought the whole universe into being and to sustain it in existence. Lying somewhere in the middle of these conceptions are the demiurges and partially limited gods of philosophers like Plato and John Stuart Mill, of belief systems such as Gnosticism, and many others.

Despite the variation, we see some shared features in these ideas of gods. At a minimum, it seems, a god must be an *agent*, a being with intelligence, and one that has greater powers and abilities than human beings acquire in the natural course of events. This minimum is almost enough for the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines a “god” as “a superhuman person who is worshipped as having power over nature and the fortunes of mankind; a deity.”⁵ However, adopting this as a definition would raise interesting questions. For example, if we were able to genetically alter some humans so that they were much stronger than the rest of humanity, having “unnatural” strength, and they came to be worshipped, would those who had been

³ “In pagan religion, gods are born and suckled, grow to maturity, contest for satisfaction of appetites and emotions, battle for prestige and power and mastery, indulge in sex, and are subject to failure, defeat, and death” (Walton 2006, p.102, quoting H. C. Brichto, *The Names of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.57).

⁴ “Israelites had to be constantly reminded by the prophets [in the Hebrew scriptures] that [their God] is *not* like a human and *not* like the other gods” (Walton 2006, p.110).

⁵ www.oed.com

enhanced then qualify as gods? Would an extraterrestrial alien with powers beyond those of human beings (perhaps such as ET in the Spielberg film, who can move objects with his mind and magically heal injuries) count as a god? If Superman existed and was worshipped by the residents of Metropolis, would he be a god? In addition, we might call into question the dictionary definition because it seems to imply that it is necessary for an agent to qualify as a god that he is recognised and worshipped. Couldn't there be gods that human beings are unaware of or who they simply fail to worship?

I suspect that, given the diverse ways in which humans have characterised the agents that they have viewed as gods, trying to get clearer on necessary and sufficient conditions for an entity to qualify as a god will not prove particularly fruitful. A better approach, I suggest, is to consider what contemporary avowals of "atheism" are intended to signify. For even if it is difficult to come up with an adequate dictionary definition of "god", we can perhaps see what a contemporary claimant of the label "atheist" most often intends to connote and communicate to others by their adoption of that label. And while a definition perhaps has to cover all the different conceptions of gods, from ancient times up to the present day, focusing on what contemporary claimants of the label "atheist" intend to signal their rejection of may leave us with a smaller subset of those entities. Indeed, I think we can identify a paradigm example of the kind of entity that they wish to signal rejection of: the main *point* of claiming to be an "atheist" or in arguing for "atheism" in philosophy has often been (and, with the decline of belief in the gods affirmed by ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman religion, has been with increasing frequency as one moves through history toward the present day) to signal rejection of the existence of *God* (with a capital "G") – an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly

good creator and sustainer of the universe – or any entity significantly similar to *God*; in other words, the understanding of God shared by Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition (the God of classical theism) and any entity that significantly resembles God. Although philosophers have differed in how they understand God’s attributes (Taliaferro 2003), it is *this* god whose existence has been affirmed, and argued for, by many philosophers down the ages; and it is *this* god whose existence is still affirmed, and argued for, by many philosophers today. Whereas any contemporary philosophers who believe in Zeus, Mars or Diana appear to be keeping quiet about it, prominent philosophers have written about their belief in God – both how they came to such belief and the role it plays in their lives and their philosophical work (Clark 1993; Morris 1994).⁶ Furthermore, both those who affirm and those who deny God’s existence have written about the resurgence or “resurrection” of belief in God among philosophers in recent years, though they understandably differ over whether they assess this as something to be celebrated (Craig 1991) or regretted (Smith 2001). The non-existence of the gods that graced the ancient pantheons, and the unreasonableness of believing in them, has become uncontroversial – at least among western philosophers - whereas it is *not* uncontroversial whether believing in the existence of *God* or an entity significantly like Him is similarly unreasonable.⁷ In short, it is typically *taken for granted* that the members of the ancient pantheons are rejected; claims to atheism are made in order to signal rejection of God and any

⁶ For similar essays but explaining other philosophers’ *atheism* and how that affects *their* lives, see the essays collected by Antony (2007).

⁷ As Jack Smart says, “The tribal gods...*are of little or no philosophical interest*. They were essentially finite beings, and the god of one tribe or collection of tribes was regarded as good in that it enabled victory in war against tribes with less powerful gods. Similarly the Greek and Roman gods were more like mythical heroes and heroines than like the omnipotent, omniscient and good God postulated in medieval and modern philosophy” (2009, my italics). James Lenman has pointed out to me that the claim that the gods of the ancient pantheons are no longer believed in needs to be qualified so as to apply only to *western* culture and philosophy (in order to avoid the false impression that Hinduism is no longer accepted). While this is true, I believe Smart’s comments about lack of philosophical interest may apply to the various gods of the Hindu pantheon as well, at least if they are understood as really being distinct gods.

entities significantly like Him. By “entities significantly like Him”, I have in mind intelligent transcendent creators of the universe or of significant parts of it (most crucially, life on earth). There are contemporary philosophers and theologians who believe in – and argue for - a transcendent creator but who don’t believe that the creator has the attributes of the God of classical theism, and I think that in claiming to be an “atheist” one signals their rejection of those creators too.

At any rate, it seems to *me* that this is what contemporary – and especially philosophical - claims to atheism are intended to *connote*, and therefore this is what I will take atheism to be. I will understand atheism to be the denial of the existence of God as understood by classical theism and also of any being significantly *like* God in that it would be a transcendent creator of the universe or parts of it.

I acknowledge that different philosophers may sometimes use terminology differently, but it seems to me that the term “God” is typically used in philosophy to denote the God of classical theism and that the thesis that God exists is typically called “theism” (e.g., Copan and Moser 2003) and that is how *I* will use those terms. I will understand a *god* to be a transcendent creator, and *atheism* to be the thesis that there is no God or gods. I realise that some might take issue with this. For example, advocates of views like *process theism* which differ from classical theism might still claim to believe in “God” and to endorse a version of “theism”. However, I suggest that unless the advocates of such views clarify and explain how their views differ from classical theism, they are heard as being classical theists because – like it or not – unless clarification is provided, the terms “God” and “theism” suggest classical theism. Process theists are indeed *theists* in one sense, but then so are *polytheists*; the word “theist” *on its own* suggests one who believes in the God of classical theism (or “theism”).

With the above understandings in play, atheism and theism are contraries but not contradictories; that is, they are incompatible and cannot both be true, but the falsity of one does not entail the truth of the other. Atheism as I understand it is false if theism is true, but it would also be false if there is a transcendent creator other than God. Nevertheless, because theism is the most common (and most widely defended) alternative to atheism, I may sometimes write in such a way that I give the appearance that atheism and theism are contradictories and not simply contraries. It should also be noted that I will assume in this essay that we can confidently reject the idea that life on earth has been created by an intelligent being that has arisen in the course of the universe's history (a non-transcendent creator). So far as I know, the idea that we have been created by an alien or aliens is not a popular one among atheists, and it faces grave problems.⁸

Atheism is certainly not a minority view within contemporary philosophy. Although philosophers working outside the philosophy of religion may not have much occasion in their work to announce that they are atheists, they often signal this commitment (along with some others) by announcing that they are *naturalists*. Naturalism is an extremely popular philosophical position, stance, or project, which has been described as *academic orthodoxy*, in philosophy departments and in universities as a whole (Rea 2002, p.1). Indeed, it has been said that the label "naturalism" is like the label "World Peace" in that they are both slogans that *almost everyone* wants to march under (Stroud 1996, p.22). And despite disagreement over what exactly naturalism *is*, it appears that by all accounts it is not consistent with

⁸ For example, since such aliens would be denizens of the universe, they would themselves need to somehow come to exist within the time constraints set by the universe's history, and they would have less time to evolve than us. Furthermore, they would have to evolve at a time when the universe was less hospitable to life. Added to that, they would need to be able to travel through space (with fast travel increasing the probability of serious damage to their spaceships caused by collisions with space debris) or somehow develop the ability to affect how things go on our planet. See Ross (2008, ch.4).

belief in the existence of God or a transcendent creator.⁹ Indeed, many naturalists are clear that naturalism rules out appeal to the existence of God *in principle* and not simply at present. As Simon Blackburn puts it, “we nearly all want to be naturalists,” and being a naturalist “is above all to refuse any appeal to a supernatural order” (1998, p.48), an order which God would clearly belong to; and as others have noticed in analysing and assessing naturalism, it “is especially...the rejection of theism...that unites naturalists” (Goetz and Taliaferro 2008, p.8). Indeed, I know of no philosopher who welcomes the label “naturalist” and also claims to be a theist or to believe in a transcendent creator of any stripe.

So to the extent that naturalism is popular in contemporary philosophy (and it is *very* popular) it would appear that atheism is also popular. Indeed, one can sometimes get the impression that atheism isn’t simply *a* commitment of naturalism but is rather its organising principle; one can get the impression that naturalism is a position or stance that is *primarily* atheistic and that the project of “naturalising” some given phenomenon chiefly consists in the attempt to provide a plausible, consistently atheistic account of the phenomenon in question, explaining away by elimination or reduction anything that might suggest activity or design by a superhuman mind. Indeed, I am sometimes inclined to suspect that one of the main

⁹ I think Michael Rea (2002) has provided the best account of what naturalism is: an approach to inquiry that limits the sources of warranted belief to the sciences and their methods and other sources of belief ratified by the sciences and their methods. However, I must demur when Rea claims that naturalism does not rule out belief in God or supernatural beings like God *in principle*, and that naturalists *qua* naturalists only insist that if God is to be believed in, His existence must be ratified by science. For it seems to me that many naturalists understand *science* to be *unable in principle* to provide evidence for the existence of God. For example, Mark Timmons allows that future science could provide support for the existence of immaterial Cartesian egos, which naturalists would then have to affirm, but he is sure that naturalism excludes (it is clear he means in future, not just at present) “supernatural, occult entities, facts and events, as well as the instantiation of any supernatural, occult properties” (1999, p.13). It seems clear that God or any transcendent creator would fall under this heading.

In fact, this essay began life as an essay on the metaethical consequences of *naturalism*, but has reached its current form in part because atheism seems a core commitment of naturalism and because it is the atheism that provides the interesting metaethical implications (moral scepticism) that I think naturalism also has.

reasons the label “naturalism” (rather than “atheism”) has such contemporary currency is that many atheistic philosophers share the sentiments of John Searle when he writes, “For us, the educated members of society, the world has become demystified...The result of this demystification is that we have gone beyond atheism to a point where the issue no longer matters in the way it did to earlier generations.”¹⁰ (It could also perhaps be due in part to the fact that “atheism” is a negative word, parasitic on “theism”, whereas “naturalism” sounds more positive and connotes an interest in the natural world.) Now Searle is wrong in suggesting that all educated members of society have “gone beyond” the question of atheism and theism, for - as I have already mentioned - many contemporary philosophers are theists. In addition, the question of whether there is good evidence for theism is a live one in philosophy: recent years have witnessed theistic philosophers putting forward sophisticated arguments for God’s existence (e.g., Copan and Moser 2003; Swinburne 2004) and engaging in high-profile debates with atheistic philosophers on the subject (Smart and Haldane 2003; Plantinga and Tooley 2008). There has also been one highly publicised conversion from atheism to belief in a god - that of Antony Flew, possibly the most famous philosophical defender of atheism in the twentieth century, who has come to belief in a transcendent creator (of a purely philosophical stripe; he doesn’t believe in divine revelation or an afterlife) and who attributes his philosophical conversion to evidence and reason (2007). So Searle is wrong; the philosophical debate over atheism is in fact a *live* one among “educated members of society” and in particular among philosophers. Nevertheless, Searle is right that *many* philosophers take atheism for granted in such a way that they can be said to have gone “beyond” it. And the fact that Searle can hope to get away with suggesting that *all educated*

¹⁰ The quote is from his book *Mind, Language, and Society* (Basic Books, 1998), pp.34-35; quoted by Feser (2008, p.18).

people have done so is surely testimony to how widespread atheism is in philosophy - Searle can make such a claim because even though there are many philosophers who are theists, nevertheless significantly more are atheists and many are so confident of atheism that they do indeed take it for granted.¹¹ If atheists should indeed accept moral scepticism – as I will argue – then this will have significance for many.

2. Atheism and Darwinism

If atheism is true, then life on earth has not been created by a transcendent being. Furthermore, as I have mentioned, I am assuming that a non-transcendent creator is not a live possibility. It seems to me that atheists are therefore committed to an unguided Darwinian understanding of the development of life on earth. I say an *unguided* Darwinian understanding because the word “Darwinism” is often used ambiguously. It is sometimes used to refer to an understanding of the development of life on earth that simply *does* not, or *need* not, make reference to the guidance of an intelligent agent. But at other times it is used to refer to an understanding of the development of life on earth that positively *excludes* the idea that there was guidance by an intelligent agent. Both understandings include the claim that life on earth has developed by way of small random heritable changes (mutations) in the replication of living creatures, and that these changes were preserved via their conferring an advantage on their possessors in their struggle for existence against other creatures and the non-living environment, accumulating via natural selection, which is what *I* will mean by “Darwinism”.¹² The latter understanding also includes the claim that no

¹¹ As I mentioned in a previous footnote, essays on “atheism and the secular life” by (mainly, at least) atheistic and secular philosophers have recently been collected and edited by Louise Antony (2007).

¹² For a modern account of Darwinism, patterned after Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, see Jones (1999).

intelligent agent has been in any way guiding this process, or supervising it so as to produce certain intended effects. (It may appear that Darwinism is equivalent to unguided Darwinism, but it will be seen that it *isn't* in due course.) Atheists are committed to Darwinism; also, and importantly for this essay, atheists are committed to unguided Darwinism. Note: I will sometimes use expressions like “atheistic Darwinist” to draw attention to someone’s acceptance of both atheism and (unguided) Darwinism. I should also be clear on the fact that I will use the word “evolution” with a broader range than Darwinism, let alone unguided Darwinism. As I use it, “evolution” refers to the idea that life on earth has come about via a process of development. This process can be appropriately called an “evolutionary” one whether it was gradual in nature or proceeded by way of large steps, and whether it was guided by an intelligent being or not. This breadth of use of the word “evolution” seems to me to be in line with standard usage both within and outside of biology; for example, we can talk about the evolution of manned aircraft or of the motor car, even though aircraft and cars are designed by intelligent beings.

I take it that it is clear why atheists will be committed to *unguided* Darwinism if they are committed to Darwinism. But why do I think that atheists are committed to Darwinism? I think that one can only be warranted in accepting atheism if one also accepts Darwinism.¹³ The reason why is simply that life on earth exhibits such overwhelming apparent design¹⁴ that unless one endorses an explanation for it that needn't appeal to an intelligent agent, it is difficult to see how one could be

¹³ This claim should not be confused with the claim that one can only be warranted in accepting Darwinism if one also accepts atheism, or understood to suggest that theism and Darwinism are incompatible.

¹⁴ Some speak of “design” in nature without implying that there was an actual intelligent designer, and in the same vein there is a long tradition in the history of philosophy of calling the teleological argument “the argument *from* design” (rather than “the argument *to* design”). However, I use the word “design” to refer to *actual* design and distinguish this from *apparent design* which may or may not be the product of intelligence.

warranted in believing that the apparent design isn't *actual* design, and it is exceedingly difficult to think of a plausible explanation meeting this desideratum *other than* Darwinism. This is why Darwinism has played the important role in the history of thought that it has. As Thomas Nagel says, "Darwin enabled modern secular culture to heave a great collective sigh of relief, by apparently providing a way to eliminate purpose, meaning and design as fundamental features of the world" (1997, p.131), and such is the overwhelming appearance of design in nature that as Richard Dawkins sees it, atheism was only really tenable after Darwin: "[A]lthough atheism might have been *logically* tenable before Darwin, Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist" (1986, p.7). There has not been another remotely plausible account of the apparent design in living things that doesn't invoke an intelligent agent.¹⁵

I don't mean to suggest that atheists are committed to the truth of *every detail* that those claiming the label "Darwinist" currently hold with respect to the emergence and development of life on earth; after all, there is disagreement about a large number of details – e.g., whether birds evolved from dinosaurs. Furthermore, Darwinism has undergone updating because of discoveries involving genetics and other factors (the neo-Darwinian synthesis). But I think that atheists are committed to the central, and most important, tenets of what Darwinists believe – and, as I have said, I take these to be that life on earth has developed by way of small random heritable changes (mutations) in the replication of living creatures, and that these changes were preserved via their conferring an advantage on their possessors in their

¹⁵ There have been other suggestions, such as the speculations that arise in the course of discussion among the protagonists of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Hume 1993), but some of them do not explain the apparent design (e.g. speculations that the universe and its contents have been generated from a previous one – see part VII of the *Dialogues*) and others are too vague or incompatible with our knowledge of the world. I assume that an appeal to simple "chance" – which isn't much of an *explanation* - is insufficient. Note also that unless one actually *believes* one of these other suggestions, one has no grounds for denying that the apparent design in the world is real design.

struggle for existence against other creatures and the non-living environment, accumulating via natural selection. I stress that Darwinism involves the idea that life has developed by way of *small* changes. It is important that the changes at each generational stage of living organisms are small and therefore their occurrence at the time and place at which they occur do not bespeak orchestration by an intelligent agent. This is particularly important to unguided Darwinism which *excludes* an intelligent designer but is also important in order that Darwinism not be understood as *requiring* appeal to such an agent. For example, a theory that posited that complex organs arose in a single step or that (e.g.) flight evolved by a wingless and featherless creature giving birth to offspring that had complete, feathered and aerodynamically efficient wings (which gave the offspring an advantage over its rivals) would not be Darwinian. Given the overwhelming apparent design of aerodynamic functional wings, such an occurrence would surely suggest that an intelligent being was guiding the organisms' evolution. If there is no intelligent guidance behind evolutionary change, one should expect large changes, such as those that affect the whole of a limb, to be harmful to the organism rather than beneficial. To be naturalistically respectable, as Darwinism has all along been intended to be, evolution will have to proceed in *small steps* which are accumulated.

While details about exactly how the fortuitous changes occur, or the precise history of evolution, might be understood differently in the future, there is good reason to think that one who wants to understand the history of life on earth without recourse to the actions of a powerful and intelligent agent – such as God – will be committed to a Darwinian evolutionary story (and, as the sum of their commitments, an *unguided* Darwinian evolutionary story). As Alvin Plantinga puts it, if you accept naturalism (which he takes to entail atheism), the Darwinian evolutionary story “is

the only game in town, the only visible answer to the question: Where did all this enormous variety of flora and fauna come from? How did it all get here" (1997)? As I have said, nobody has thought of a plausible alternative that doesn't appeal to an intelligent agent. And it is difficult to see how there could be a plausible no-design account of the apparent design of living things that didn't appeal to the idea of changes that don't suggest intelligent orchestration and a mechanism like natural selection for preserving them so that they can accumulate. It is therefore perhaps not all that surprising that among ancient thinkers who eschewed appeal to God or the gods in explaining the existence of the universe and its features we find Darwinian ideas in embryo (see Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* book 5).¹⁶

It might be wondered why I have argued that atheists *must* accept Darwinism (and therefore unguided Darwinism) when the fact of the matter is that many (all?) atheists in fact *do* accept Darwinism. If the conjunction of atheism and Darwinism is a conjunction that most or all atheists actually sign up to, why not simply see what follows from it rather than claiming that atheists are *committed to* Darwinism? The reason why I think it is important to note that atheists are committed to Darwinism is that it is possible in future that scientific evidence which is widely held to support Darwinism may be found by atheists to be problematic, reducing the amount of evidential support they consider Darwinism to enjoy. If so, then atheists could reject Darwinism and the main argument of this essay (especially the argument of chapter 3) *unless, qua atheists, they are committed to Darwinism for more than purely scientific*

¹⁶ James Lenman has suggested to me that perhaps atheists could be warranted in holding that apparent design in nature isn't real design *without accepting Darwinism* because so much of the rest of the world has been found amenable to naturalistic explanation. I disagree: we can indeed explain processes such as the motion of the tides or the falling of objects toward the centre of the earth without invoking design, but these regularities do not have the overwhelming appearance of design that living organisms do. To infer that the striking apparent design in organisms is merely apparent because natural processes and entities *that do not strikingly appear designed* have been explained naturalistically is surely not a good inference.

evidential reasons. So the fact that atheists are committed to Darwinism ensures that the main argument of this essay will remain relevant to atheists in future (or at least, for as long as there remains reason to view the idea that we were created by aliens as problematic).¹⁷

3. Theism and Darwinism

I mentioned above that one might think that Darwinism *is equivalent to* unguided Darwinism, and I have already pointed out that some in fact use the word “Darwinism” to denote the latter position. However, the two should be distinguished. Darwinism does *not* entail unguided Darwinism, at least if Darwinism is understood to be a *scientific* thesis. On the contrary, Darwinism is quite compatible with belief in a transcendent creator such as God and with the idea that God *guided* the course of evolution.

Now, it isn’t difficult to see why one might get the impression that Darwinism and unguided Darwinism are equivalent, for according to Darwinism the mutations that are preserved by natural selection (and therefore the path that evolution takes) are *random*, or they occur *by chance*, and it might be thought that these notions rule out the possibility that an intelligent being orchestrates the sequence of those mutations. However, as Peter van Inwagen explains, that is not so. It is worth quoting him at length:

“Let us consider mutations, the most important class of events to which Darwinists apply the word “chance.” It is of the essence of Darwinism to insist that mutations do not occur in response to changes in the environmental perils or opportunities that confront individuals or species. There is –

¹⁷ Even if atheists *did* think creation by aliens a live possibility, moral scepticism might perhaps follow. For if atheists thought it most likely that such aliens would *themselves* exist via unguided Darwinism, the considerations to be discussed later in chapter 3 might make it a very live possibility that, even if the aliens *tried* to create us to have true moral beliefs, they *failed* because *they* have evolved to have moral beliefs that are *false*.

Darwinists insist – simply no correlation whatsoever between the “usefulness” to a particular species of a possible mutation and the likelihood that it will occur...It is, however, consistent with the thesis that all mutations (and, more generally, all events of evolutionary significance) are due to chance in this Aristotelian sense that God has been guiding evolution – by deliberately causing certain mutations (and other events of evolutionary significance). If God has been doing this, it does not follow that the history of terrestrial life would reveal anything inconsistent with the Darwinian thesis that all mutations are due to chance” (2003, pp.360-361).

As a scientific theory, Darwinism does not make statements about whether a supernatural, transcendent intelligent agent could be guiding the course of evolution. The notions of *chance* or *randomness* that are invoked are empirical and are to be understood with reference to the needs or functioning of the organism, not with reference to the idea of intelligent guidance and orchestration. As Plantinga puts it, “According to Darwin (or at any rate the neo-Darwinian synthesis), the sense in which variation is random is this: it is not called for by the design plan of the creature to which it accrues, and it does not occur because it is beneficial for that organism...the needs of the organism to which it accrues plays no part in its causation. But clearly a mutation could be both random in this sense and also intended and indeed caused by God” (2006, p.206).¹⁸ Darwinism as a scientific theory does not rule out the idea of intelligent guidance and orchestration as *unguided* Darwinism does. Therefore Darwinism does not imply unguided Darwinism and the two should be distinguished. Theists may not accept *unguided* Darwinism, but they can nevertheless accept Darwinism and they can hold that God plays an active role in determining the outcome of the Darwinian process.

¹⁸ For an excellent discussion of the different ways in which God or an intelligent being could design organisms via a process of Darwinian evolution, see Ratzsch (1998). One of Ratzsch’s interesting proposals involves God standing ready to alter the course of evolution but in fact not needing to since evolution naturally unfolds in a way that He finds acceptable. On the compatibility of Darwinism and theistic explanation, also see van Woudenberg (2004).

So, theists can embrace Darwinism as describing God's method of creation. However, theists do not have the same *need* to endorse Darwinism as atheists have, since theists are not in need of an account that needn't make reference to the guidance of an intelligent agent. Furthermore, I suggest that it is not clear that theists have strong *empirical* reason to embrace Darwinism. For even if there is good evidence that the history of life on earth is characterised by some kind of evolutionary development (and I take it that there *is* good evidence of that), it is by no means clear that theists should accept the Darwinian claim that this development has proceeded by way of *small steps*, by way of the accumulation of small changes between the generations. It is nowadays generally admitted by palaeontologists (including those who are Darwinists) that the fossil record does not furnish evidence of a general pattern of gradual transformations of living forms involving many steps during which the accumulation of small changes occurs. This fact about the nature of the fossil record has been widely admitted since palaeontologists Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge brought it to light in the 1970s.¹⁹ Gould (1990, p.151) drew attention to two features of "the history of most fossil species" which didn't tally with the expectations one might bring to the fossil record if one believed that evolution proceeded gradually by way of the accumulation of small changes:

- “1. Stasis. Most species exhibit no directional change during their tenure on earth. They appear in the fossil record looking pretty much the same as when they disappear; morphological change is usually limited and directionless.
2. Sudden appearance. In any local area, a species does not arise gradually by the steady transformation of its ancestors; it appears all at once and “fully formed”.”

¹⁹ It was not well known at the time; Gould said that the “extreme rarity of transitional forms in the fossil record [persisted] as the *trade secret* of palaeontology” (my italics) and that, “the evolutionary trees that adorn our textbooks have data only at the tips and nodes of their branches; the rest is inference, however reasonable, not the evidence of fossils”(1990, pp.150-151).

As Eldredge put it, “[t]here is probably little wrong with the notion of natural selection as a means of modifying the genetics of a species through time, although it is difficult to put it to the test. But the predicted gradual accumulation of change within species is seldom (if ever) encountered in our practical experience with the fossil record.”²⁰

Darwinists, believing that the evolution of life on earth has proceeded by way of the accumulation of small changes, have ways of accommodating such facts about the fossil record. For example, they can perhaps accept Gould and Eldredge’s idea of “punctuated equilibrium”, according to which evolutionary change often occurs in isolated communities where it is unlikely to be preserved in fossil sequences. However, such a strategy involves *reconciling* Darwinism and the fossil record, not finding *support* in the fossils for Darwinism’s proposed accumulations of small mutations. Given this lack of evidence for Darwinism (as opposed to some kind of non-Darwinian evolutionary development), I think that the belief that life has evolved as Darwinism states – by the accumulation of small random changes – is not rationally mandated for *theists*. Note that I am not claiming that the evidence of biology or palaeontology is *against* Darwinism, or that theists (or atheists, for that matter) have good reason to believe that life has *not* evolved by way of the accumulation of small random changes.²¹ My point is simply that empirical evidence

²⁰ The quote is from his 1980 paper “An Extravagance of Species” in *Natural History* (American Museum of Natural History) 89, no.7, p.50. Quoted as part of a long quote by Hunter (2001, p.78). Note that the claim – which I make – that it is generally accepted that the fossil record does not provide evidence of a general pattern of gradual change should not be understood as a denial of the fact that many Darwinists point to particular fossil sequences as providing examples of evolutionary change that is more gradual than the fossil record as a whole reveals.

²¹ As is well known, others *do* make that argument. For criticisms of the claim that there is good evidence for the various elements of Darwinism, and/or arguments that Darwinism is false, see Denton (1986), Johnson (1993), Wells (2000), Berlinski (2004; 2008), van Inwagen (1993), and the essays edited by Dembski (2004). Cornelius Hunter argues that much of the “evidence” for Darwinism consists in deductions from dubious theological propositions about what God would or would not create (2001; 2007). For recent defences of Darwinism, see Ruse (2006) and Kitcher (2007). A vital detailed history of the recent debate is provided by Woodward (2006).

that it *did* is lacking and that therefore theists are free to refrain from believing that it did. Atheists, on the other hand, need to believe that evolution proceeded as Darwinism states in order to have an explanation for the apparent design inherent in living organisms that need not appeal to an intelligent agent.

I suppose that one could respond to this line of thinking by suggesting that the idea that God created life via an evolutionary process without the evolutionary process involving the accumulation of small random changes is an *ad hoc* idea and suggests an objectionable divine “interference” in the evolutionary process that even theists should reject. However, it is not clear to me that such an objection has any weight. While many theists have found the general idea of a Darwinian unfolding of life to be one that exhibits a certain genius or harmony in its simplicity, and therefore to be something that God might well bring about,²² it seems to me that an evolutionary process able to lead to a great diversity of life, or to intelligent beings like ourselves, might – for all we know - *require* large changes at various stages. As I see it, God wouldn’t be at fault if the requisite transformations involve a *required* amount of orchestration – whether by divine “intervention” or, perhaps, by some sort of “pre-programming” of organisms’ DNA. It has also been suggested that God might well create a universe that He wants to be involved with, more like a musical instrument to play than like a machine that runs perfectly efficiently on its own (Wiker and Witt 2006).

In summary, while atheists are committed to Darwinism (and *unguided* Darwinism), it seems to me that theists have little reason to believe that the development of life on earth has proceeded by way of the accumulation of small changes as Darwinism claims. On the other hand, if theists disagree they can accept

²² I register my agreement with van Inwagen who, although he believes Darwinism to be false, nevertheless says of “the widespread opinion that there is something about natural selection that unfits it for use as a divine instrument” that he has “never been able to see this” (2003, p.353).

Darwinism and understand God to have guided the course of evolution. If a theist judges that the evidence for Darwinism is strong, she can accept Darwinism without having to take the further step of accepting *unguided* Darwinism.

This will be important for the argument of later chapters, as will be made clear in chapter 3. As I will argue, atheists have reason to embrace moral scepticism because they are committed to unguided Darwinism. By accepting Darwinism but holding that God guided the sequence of mutations, or by accepting that the history of life is characterised by an evolutionary process but failing to accept a Darwinian account of that process, theists can avoid being in the same boat as atheists, for theists' commitments will not lead them to moral scepticism (at least not for the same reasons). This asymmetry between the position of theists and that of atheists will be important when I come to consider the significance of the fact that atheists should embrace moral scepticism in chapter 5.

4. Moral thought and discourse and some preliminaries

In arguing that atheists have reason to embrace moral scepticism, I am arguing that their atheism has implications for their moral thought and discourse and the practices that depend upon them. So it is important at the beginning of this essay to be clear about what moral thought and discourse *are*.

Notoriously, there is substantial disagreement among philosophers as to how moral thought and discourse should be characterised. For example, philosophers disagree over what kind of psychological state one is in when one has a moral opinion; some philosophers hold that the psychological state is *belief*, whereas other

philosophers hold that the psychological state is more akin to *desire*.²³ (The latter say that we *call* them “beliefs” and I will in general write of “moral belief” and “moral judgement” in a way that is intended to be neutral with respect to these positions.) However, we can provide a characterisation of moral thought and discourse that is minimal and non-controversial, and which cuts across such disagreements. Moral thought and discourse can be identified by reference to moral sentences (with which we are familiar): moral discourse consists in the uttering of moral sentences and moral thoughts are the psychological states that are expressed by the utterance of such sentences. As I am thinking of moral sentences, they are sentences that contain (1) *thin* moral predicates such as “good”, “bad”, “right”, or “wrong”, or (2) a moral “ought” or a moral “should” (or moral “ought not”, or moral “should not”, etc). However, I think that my argument in this essay will also apply to judgements that involve sentences containing *thick* moral predicates such as “courageous” or “cruel”, which express both moral and non-moral (sometimes called “descriptive”) content. When I mention moral thought and discourse, I will generally have in mind *declarative* moral sentences (e.g., “stealing is wrong”, “pain is bad”) and the thoughts those sentences express rather than moral sentences in other moods; after all, I am going to argue that atheists should accept moral scepticism, according to which all of their moral judgements are epistemically unwarranted (or unjustified), and it is the psychological states that are expressed by *declarative sentences* which are the kind of psychological states that can be epistemically warranted or unwarranted.

By identifying moral thought by way of moral sentences (moral thoughts are the psychological items – whatever they may be – that are expressed by moral

²³ This issue will be discussed in chapter 4. It should be noted that I will assume that there is one true account of the nature of all moral thought and discourse, an assumption which has been denied (MacIntyre 1981) but which is generally assumed by philosophers working in metaethics and seems justified by the fact that when we have moral discussions and disagreements we do not appear to be talking past each other but really agreeing or disagreeing.

sentences), controversy is avoided. However, the argument of later chapters will depend upon some metaethical assumptions that are *not* uncontroversial. I will assume that when it comes to moral thought and discourse we are committed to the idea that the correctness of moral sentences (or we might more naturally say, what the moral facts are) is subject to an important *mind-independence*, similar to what Russ Shafer-Landau has termed “stance-independence” (2003, p.15).²⁴ He understands “the stance-independence of morality” as the view that “there are moral truths that obtain independently of any preferred perspective, in the sense that *the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective*” (p.15). I think that we should understand our moral thought and discourse to be committed to this claim (with a nuance I mention below), at least so long as the perspectives in question are understood to be *human* ones.

Shafer-Landau understands the affirmation of stance-independence to be the affirmation of *moral realism*, construing moral facts *realistically* as entities that exist and are what they are independently of what we think they are. He intends it to contradict all “anti-realist” views which construe moral facts along objectionable *stance-dependent* ways, making the correctness of moral claims depend too strongly on the opinions endorsed from actual or hypothetical perspectives. However, as will become clear in chapter 4, there are some sophisticated anti-realist metaethical views that Shafer-Landau would characterise as contravening the thesis of stance-independence but which nevertheless try to leave space for us to say things which appear identical to the affirmation of stance-independence.²⁵ Here is not the place to

²⁴ He attributes the phrase to Ron Milo.

²⁵ The metaethical position is expressivism/quasi-realism, and the most famous discussion of mind-independence from such a perspective is Simon Blackburn’s discussion of whether it would be right to kick dogs if we had different moral sentiments (1984, pp.217-220).

explain such metaethical views, but it is important that I mention that I want to endorse the idea that our moral thought and discourse is committed to an idea like stance-independence without ruling those metaethical views out in a way that seems to me too quick. So *I* will use the expression “stance-independence” without the implication that they are excluded. As I see it, our moral thought and discourse involves a commitment like that which is cashed out in terms of stance-independence; it is a further question whether that commitment can be plausibly explained and justified on a foundation that actually turns out to be *mind-dependent*. In addition, I will assume that it is the independence from hypothetical *human* perspectives that stance-independence is concerned with.

Unfortunately, space precludes a detailed discussion of the reasons why we should hold that our moral thought and discourse is committed to stance-independence. (For that reason, the rest of this essay should be understood as only addressing the moral beliefs of those atheists who agree that it does.) However, a few brief comments are in order.

I don't think it is difficult to see, as many philosophers have seen, that the idea that the standards that fix the moral facts are made true by their ratification from one or more given *actual* human perspective(s) is problematic. For one thing, it raises the problem of *whose* perspective. People disagree in their moral beliefs. Does one human being get to fix the moral facts for everyone? Does a group of people? *Which* person or group? Sometimes appeal is made to the idea that individuals or individual groups have their own moral truths that pertain to them and these are fixed by what each of them individually takes the moral facts to be. But the idea that the moral facts are different for different individuals and depend upon what individuals take them to be fits badly with how we think about morality and the ways in which

we think we acquire moral knowledge: we don't think we need to investigate a person's particular set of valuations in order to judge a particular action of theirs right or wrong.²⁶ An account of moral truth that doesn't fit with how we think we gain knowledge of the moral truth is not a good one. And when it comes to the suggestion that the standards that fix the moral facts are made true by their ratification by the group we belong to, there is also the problem of identifying the relevant group, for we all belong to many groups and it isn't clear which membership would determine what the moral facts are for us and why (Oderberg 2000, p.22). Importantly, we simply don't think in these ways - theoretically-motivated protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. We think that it is *possible* that all human beings could be completely out of touch with moral truth. Furthermore, the idea that the standards that fix the moral facts are correct simply because some individual humans happen to endorse them strikes us as rendering morality arbitrary, for they might have endorsed something different – what is so special about *their* perspective? (If appeal is made, in circular fashion, to the perspectives of people who are *morally good* or *good judges of morality* nothing is gained because for such notions to be intelligible we need to appeal to moral standards that are *not* fixed by actual perspectives.) In short, we believe that there are true moral claims and their truth does not depend on what actual human beings happen to think they are or what actual human beings happen to endorse or disapprove of (Shafer-Landau 2003, p.41).

²⁶ In a recent paper, Sharon Street (2008) puts forward a metaethical “constructivist” theory according to which the moral reasons we each individually have (in fact, what reasons of any stripe we have for action, belief, etc) depend upon what reasons we each individually *believe ourselves* to have. Our valuing (which includes judging, say, our actions to be right or wrong) can be correct or incorrect, but its being so is solely determined from the perspectives of other values we hold – “[t]he standards of correctness determining what reasons a person has are understood to be set by *that person's* set of judgements about her reasons” (p.224). But this does not fit at all well with our picture of the moral knowledge we have. We judge that it is wrong for somebody to commit murder or rape or child abuse or all manner of things (and that other things are right for them to do) without needing to be aware of what reasons *they take themselves* to have. (This problem with Street's view was pointed out by Matthew Chrisman at a conference on constructivism at the University of Sheffield in March 2009.)

How about appealing to the perspectives of idealised hypothetical people (given, say, full non-moral information, perfect means-end reasoning capabilities and impartiality)? I think that they are likewise insufficient for fixing the standards that fix the moral truths. Again, there is a problem with moral epistemology. We believe that we know or are warranted in believing that some actions are right and some wrong without having to know whether they would be endorsed from an idealised perspective. When we take idealisation seriously (really seriously), it seems difficult to be confident about what an idealised person would actually approve and disapprove of – why think that their preferences would fortuitously dovetail with our confidently-held moral beliefs that are formed *without* reference to idealised perspectives (Shafer-Landau 2003, p.42)? What grounds are there for that? (Maybe a theist or one who believes we have been created by an intelligent being could have such grounds, but what can atheists base such a happy coincidence on?) Of course, if we characterise the idealised perspective *morally* - the perspective of the hypothetical person is itself informed by awareness of moral facts – we might have such grounds, but we would need to appeal to moral facts *not* rendered such by their ratification from the idealised agent’s perspective, in which case appeal to idealised agents’ perspectives is otiose (Shafer-Landau 2003, p.42; Joyce 2008, p.18).

For these sorts of reasons, then, I will assume that metaethical views that reject stance-independence (in the sense of “stance-independence” that is compatible with the sort of anti-realist metaethical positions to be discussed in chapter 4) are not on the table.²⁷ These reasons are by no means original to me, and it is clear that a sizeable number of philosophers agree that they are strong reasons. However, as I have already stated, my comments have been very brief and so the rest of this essay

²⁷ For a fuller case and some more objections to views that reject stance-independence, see, e.g., Shafer-Landau (2003, p.41-43) and Joyce (2008, pp.254-265).

should be understood to only be directed toward the atheism of atheists who agree that views that reject stance-independence are untenable.

5. Looking back and looking ahead

In this chapter, I have explained what thesis I take atheism to be – the claim that neither the universe nor parts of it (most importantly, life on earth) have been created by a transcendent creator – and I have pointed out that even though theism is not the contradictory of atheism, it is the most popular alternative among philosophers. I have argued that atheists are committed to an unguided Darwinian understanding of the development of life on earth, and that theists can accept a Darwinian account (and hold that God guided the course of evolution) but need not. This will be important when we turn to chapter 3. I then provided a minimal account of moral thought and discourse and ruled out some metaethical positions that construe the moral facts as depending upon what we – or idealised versions of us - take them to be. (That those understandings are ruled out will also be important for the argument of chapter 3.)

In chapter 3, I will argue that an unguided Darwinian understanding of our origins gives atheists reason to embrace moral scepticism - a reason for moral scepticism that theists do not share. However, before doing so, it will be important to consider some reasons that might be thought to support moral scepticism *regardless of whether one is an atheist*. For if moral scepticism can be supported by such reasons, then the argument of chapter 3 may be redundant; in addition, there will - or at least might - be reason for atheists *and theists* to embrace moral scepticism. So I will turn to consider some reasons that might be thought to support moral scepticism – reasons that are independent of atheism – in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 – On some potential empirical support for moral scepticism¹

My purpose in this essay is to argue that atheists have reason to accept moral scepticism and consider their moral beliefs to be unwarranted (and to examine some consequences). However, before I argue that *atheists* have such reason, it will be apt to consider some recent empirical challenges to moral belief that might be taken to support moral scepticism quite apart from the question of whether one accepts atheism or not. There are two main reasons why this is important. Firstly, if these challenges do support moral scepticism then the main argument of this thesis – that *atheists* should embrace moral scepticism – may be redundant. Secondly, it would apparently follow that *theists* should embrace moral scepticism, or at least give up many of their moral beliefs as unwarranted.² And if it can be shown that theists and atheists *both* have reason to embrace moral scepticism, then some of the consequences for atheists that I discuss later (in chapter 5) will not follow.

In this chapter, then, I will examine some empirically-based challenges to the warrant of moral belief. In particular, I will focus on empirical considerations raised by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and the duo Jonathan Haidt and Fredrik Bjorklund. I will argue that the considerations fail to adequately support moral scepticism.

¹ A fair amount of the material in this chapter features in my paper on Sinnott-Armstrong's case against moral intuitionism (Smith forthcoming).

² Some theists consider themselves to have good reason to believe they have a divine revelation that includes some moral truths, and their moral beliefs gleaned from it might potentially be untouched by the challenges to be considered in this chapter. However, the challenges would still have the potential to support scepticism about their moral beliefs that do *not* figure in purported divine revelation.

It should be noted that the arguments that are typically put forward for *error theory* – the view that all of our moral beliefs are *false* – tend not to provide great problems for theists. For example, John Mackie argued that moral facts are too “queer” to exist in a non-theistic universe, but he acknowledged that if theism were true then such facts could exist (1977, ch.10). As I see it, arguments for *moral scepticism* pose a greater potential threat to theists' moral beliefs than arguments for *error theory* do.

The empirical study of moral judgement is something of a rapidly developing field, and I acknowledge that the considerations covered in this chapter do not exhaust the sorts of challenges to moral thought and discourse (or elements thereof) that have been raised.³ To cover all such challenges would require a book-length treatment, or even several book-length treatments. Nevertheless, there are two good reasons to focus on the particular challenges that I discuss. The first reason is that the work of both Sinnott-Armstrong and Haidt (including work produced by Haidt in collaboration with various colleagues, such as Bjorklund) has become well-known and influential⁴ and the considerations they raise therefore deserve critical attention. Secondly, although the failure of these empirical challenges to undermine moral belief does not show that all similar challenges – either now or in the future – must likewise fail, an examination of these challenges will nevertheless make clear the sorts of problems facing empirical arguments for moral scepticism that are directed at the moral beliefs of atheists and non-atheists (such as theists) alike.

The chapter will proceed as follows. Firstly, since Sinnott-Armstrong directs his challenge at *moral intuitionism*, I will consider why it might be thought that his case's success would support *moral scepticism* and not simply the falsity of the position he explicitly targets; I will then turn to discuss the considerations he raises and criticise his views. Afterwards, I will turn to briefly consider Haidt and Bjorklund's work, arguing that it likewise provides no reason to consider our moral beliefs to be unwarranted.

³ Another influential challenge to some common elements of moral thought and discourse – in particular, to those elements which involve the ascription of moral character traits – has been widely advocated in recent years (Doris 1998; Harman 1999). There have also been many criticisms of the empirical basis of the challenge and the reasoning based upon it (e.g., Kristjánsson 2008).

⁴ For example, Richard Joyce believes that Sinnott-Armstrong has succeeded in pointing out considerations that render moral beliefs unwarranted (Joyce 2006, p.218). Michael Huemer (2008) holds that the considerations raised by Sinnott-Armstrong (and others) call into question many of the moral beliefs that we might think are most clearly true and only leave viable a *revolutionary* moral theory.

1. Moral intuitionism and moral scepticism

As I have mentioned, the empirical challenges to moral judgement that Sinnott-Armstrong presents are put forward in the course of criticising *moral intuitionism*; he understands this to be the claim “that some people are adequately epistemically justified in holding some moral beliefs independently of whether those people are able to infer those moral beliefs from any other beliefs” (2006a, p.341).⁵ Some philosophers use the expression “moral intuitionism” to denote a metaphysical thesis, but Sinnott-Armstrong uses it to denote a purely *epistemological* thesis: some of our beliefs are properly basic or foundational, warranted (or “justified” – Sinnott-Armstrong’s preferred term) without being inferred from other beliefs, moral or non-moral. Thus understood, it is a minimal thesis, compatible with a range of broader views about the epistemology of morality.⁶ One could just as easily use the label “moral foundationalism” instead of “moral intuitionism”, since *foundationalism* about the structure of warranted belief in general (and/or knowledge in general) envisages a structure of warranted beliefs as consisting of (1) beliefs at the foundation that can be warranted without needing to be supported by further beliefs, and (2) beliefs above the foundation whose warrant traces back to the foundations either immediately or via other beliefs. According to foundationalists, if we ask how it is that a particular belief has come to have the status of being warranted, the answer is that the belief is either itself one of the basic or foundational beliefs, or else it is a member of a chain of beliefs which enjoy relations of inferential support and

⁵ Unless stated otherwise, references will be to the presentation in his initial paper (2006a); the same considerations feature in chapter 9 of his book of the same year (2006b). In section 6 his more recent development of his work will be considered.

⁶ Robert Audi, one of the leading defenders of moral intuitionism, also understands it to be an epistemological thesis and is explicit that although he prefers what he calls a “rationalist intuitionism”, there are other “versions”; for example, “an empiricist account of the relevant kind of non-inferential justification and knowledge can also be given (one on which such knowledge is either empirical or analytic)” (2008, p.483).

whose warrant can be *traced back to* the basic, foundational beliefs. The foundational beliefs themselves stand in no need of support. (Foundationalists typically say that the fact that they *seem to us to be true* may be grounds enough for our being warranted in holding them.) It is this position with respect to the structure of warranted *moral* belief that Sinnott-Armstrong sets out to criticise. (I view the work of Haidt and Bjorklund to be a potential threat to the warrant of moral belief in the same way as Sinnott-Armstrong's.)

The way Sinnott-Armstrong seeks to refute moral intuitionism is by providing *epistemic defeaters* for the moral beliefs that moral intuitionists think are at the foundation (our warranted "moral intuitions"), the beliefs they consider to be warranted without requiring inference or support from other beliefs. Roughly, an epistemic defeater for a subject S and a belief B that S holds is another belief D, such that S comes to believe D and S's doing so means that S can no longer reasonably continue to believe B. For example, someone I make small chat with tells me about their exciting holiday in the Alps and I form the belief that they had such-and-such a holiday (belief B). However, I later discover that that particular person has been known to have made up very convincing stories about their holidays more than once in the past. Given this new belief I acquire – that they have made up convincing holiday stories in the past (belief D, the defeater) – I can no longer reasonably believe that the person had the holiday they told me about (belief B). I don't have reason to believe they *didn't* have such-and-such a holiday, but I do have reason to give up my belief that they *did*. Similarly, Sinnott-Armstrong's challenge to moral intuitionism proceeds by way of presenting information which will provide us with new beliefs that will defeat our allegedly foundational moral beliefs - not information

that suggests that those beliefs are *false*, but information that calls them into question and renders us unreasonable in continuing to hold them.

If the considerations raised by Sinnott-Armstrong (or Haidt and Bjorklund) *do* render us unwarranted in endorsing our allegedly foundational moral beliefs, and if a *foundationalist* construal of the structure required for there to be warranted moral belief is correct – as moral intuitionists think – then it seems that *all* of our moral beliefs become unwarranted and we end up with a conclusion of moral scepticism. (Similarly, if one removes the foundations of a house, all of the floors that had rested upon those foundations – either immediately or by being supported by other, intermediate floors – will have nothing to hold them up, and the whole house will collapse.) However, foundationalism is not the only potential structure for warranted beliefs. Its most prominent alternative is *coherentism*, according to which warrant is *holistic* and every warranted belief is warranted solely in virtue of its relations to other beliefs in the structure of beliefs that it occurs in. According to coherentism, *no* belief is warranted in virtue of being in a privileged class of basic or foundational beliefs. Coherentism has been defended by epistemologists as stating the correct structure of warrant (and/or knowledge) for beliefs in general, and has been defended with regard to *moral* belief (Brink 1989, pp.122-143). Coherentism has also been argued to be *mistaken* with regard to belief in general (Plantinga 1993, pp.178-182), and has been argued to provide an incorrect account when it comes to *moral* beliefs (for discussion of some objections, see Sinnott-Armstrong 2006b, pp.237-250). While space precludes a discussion of the merits of coherentism and foundationalism with respect to moral belief, since foundationalism is accepted by many atheists and many non-atheists (such as theists), an argument for moral scepticism that depends upon the premise that moral intuitionism or foundationalism gives the correct

account of how a structure of moral beliefs acquires warrant will be an argument that many philosophers will find threatens their moral beliefs. Furthermore, it is possible that the considerations raised by Sinnott-Armstrong (and Haidt and Bjorklund) could potentially support moral scepticism even if *coherentism* is true of moral belief. For it seems to me that the considerations that Sinnott-Armstrong appeals to (which will be treated shortly) – that our moral beliefs are subject to partiality, disagreement, distorting emotion, illusion and that they might have dubious origins – are considerations that could potentially be applied to *all* of our moral beliefs and not simply the ones Sinnott-Armstrong targets (those that moral intuitionists hold to be foundational). Indeed, this may be all the more so if the various considerations are considered *collectively*. So even if we have a coherent system of moral beliefs which mutually support each other, and even if the initial warrant of the system is due solely to that coherence, it might nevertheless be the case that the considerations raised by Sinnott-Armstrong render that system of beliefs *as a whole* unwarranted. That said, in what follows I will treat the considerations raised as problems posed for moral intuitionism, the position Sinnott-Armstrong explicitly seeks to refute.

In seeking to undermine moral intuitionism, Sinnott-Armstrong does not explicitly argue that moral scepticism follows from the considerations he raises; he instead claims that the moral beliefs moral intuitionists hold to be foundational require *confirmation*, which may or may not be forthcoming. Nevertheless, there is reason to think that if his case against moral intuitionism succeeds, such confirmation is not possible and so moral scepticism *does* follow. For it seems that any confirmation for the moral beliefs in question would have to come at least in part via *other moral beliefs*, for non-moral statements on their own do not support moral

statements.⁷ But if *all* of our moral beliefs are in doubt because the foundational ones are, then we have no warranted moral beliefs we can appeal to in order to confirm or support others. Unless we were mistaken about the considerations that we thought rendered them unwarranted, we will be unable to have warranted moral beliefs.⁸

In short, it is highly plausible that the success of Sinnott-Armstrong's challenge would imply not simply that we require confirmation for our moral beliefs that moral intuitionists think are foundational, but that all of them are (and will remain) unwarranted. If so, then we will have reason to embrace moral scepticism.

2. Sinnott-Armstrong's challenge in outline

According to Sinnott-Armstrong, many of our moral beliefs are formed and held in dubious circumstances where either (1) we are partial, (2) others disagree with us and there is no reason to prefer our moral judgement to theirs, (3) we are emotional in a way that clouds our judgement, (4) the circumstances are conducive to illusion, or (5) the source of our moral beliefs is unreliable or disreputable. Because of this, we cannot be justified in holding any moral beliefs simply on the basis of their *seeming to us to be true* rather than on the basis of their being supported by other beliefs; the allegedly foundational beliefs that moral intuitionists aver require

⁷ Sinnott-Armstrong points out that when people seem to reason acceptably from a non-moral premise to a moral conclusion, what is really happening is that they are endorsing a suppressed *moral* premise; such premises would clearly be in doubt if all of our moral beliefs are in doubt (2006b, pp.135-151).

⁸ There is the possible exception of moral beliefs based on testimony – from the premises that (1) Frank told you that it is morally wrong to perform action A, and (2) information from Frank is usually reliable, it follows that you have evidence for (3) it is morally wrong to perform action A. But if the considerations Sinnott-Armstrong raises render *your* moral beliefs dubious, they will also render Frank's dubious, and your trust in his testimony on moral issues will no longer be warranted (see Sinnott-Armstrong 2006b, pp.145-151).

no support from other beliefs *do in fact* require such support, because (1) to (5) remove any non-inferential justification that they might otherwise have enjoyed.⁹

In the discussions involving (1) to (5), Sinnott-Armstrong argues from analogies involving *non-moral* beliefs. Scenarios are provided in which non-moral beliefs are formed or held in dubious circumstances and it is judged that they are unjustified and require confirmation in order to be justifiably held. Epistemic principles governing justification and the need for confirmation for beliefs *in general* (moral and non-moral) in such circumstances are then inferred and applied to moral beliefs. As will be seen, I believe that Sinnott-Armstrong's challenge to our moral beliefs goes wrong in various ways. I will discuss each of (1) to (5) in turn.

3. Sinnott-Armstrong's appeal to partiality

In the case of Sinnott-Armstrong's first contention – that partiality renders our moral beliefs unjustified – he chiefly appeals to the non-moral example (which I will call “Piano”) of his being partial when judging his daughter's performance in a piano-playing competition where he forms the judgement that his daughter played excellently and her rival was mediocre. By saying that he is “partial”, Sinnott-Armstrong means that the truth or falsity of his judgement has a bearing on his self-interest, not that he in fact judges unfairly. He is partial because he has a stake in the outcome of his judgement. Sinnott-Armstrong asks whether he is justified in maintaining the judgement that he makes; his answer:

“...not if all I can say is, ‘Her performance sounded better to me.’ I am too biased for such immediate reactions alone to count as evidence. I still might

⁹ Although I prefer the term “warrant” to “justification”, I will generally use the latter when assessing Sinnott-Armstrong's arguments, since it is his preferred term and appears in the quotations from his work.

be justified, if I am able to specify laudable features of her performance, or if I know that others agree, but some confirmation seems needed” (p.343).

From Piano, Sinnott-Armstrong infers the following epistemic principle: confirmation is required for a believer to be justified when the believer is partial. This lesson learned from Piano is then applied to the moral case. We have a *huge* stake in morality; the truth or falsity of the various moral judgements we make has an immense bearing on our self-interest. If we judge that some moral claims are true, we will face potentially large costs (e.g., if we form the judgement that we have a duty to give considerable amounts to the poor, it may cost us materially); if others, we will reap benefits. Since we are partial, we require confirmation for our moral beliefs, including those that moral intuitionists think properly basic or foundational – those that we hold to be true solely on the basis of their *seeming to us to be true*, in the same way that Sinnott-Armstrong’s judgement in Piano is based solely on his daughter’s performance *sounding better* than her rival’s. Moral intuitionism is false.

I agree with Sinnott-Armstrong that he is unjustified in believing that his daughter played excellently and her rival was mediocre in Piano as it is described. However, I think the example is flawed. The first thing to note is that it is very plausible that what inclines us to view Sinnott-Armstrong’s judgement as unjustified is the fact that we think a good judge of piano playing performances should be able to provide further reasons for their judgement, and not necessarily his *partiality*. Sinnott-Armstrong perhaps hints at this when he states that his judgement might be justified if he “could specify laudable features of her performance” (p.343). I think that if Piano is modified so that Sinnott-Armstrong was judging the performances of two children *both of whom were unrelated to him* and judged one to be excellent and

the other mediocre – without being able to provide reasons for his judgement other than that one “sounded better” to him - we might *still* consider his judgement to be unjustified, even though there would be no *partiality*. I think we would suspect that he wasn’t listening properly, or that he doesn’t know what a good piano performance consists in, etc - we expect a good judge of a piano playing competition to be able to provide more reasons for their verdict than, “It sounded better to me.” So it really isn’t clear that *partiality* is doing the work in the example.

Secondly, Sinnott-Armstrong’s judgement in Piano is clearly intended to be analogous to the moral judgements that moral intuitionists hold to be foundational. However, Piano doesn’t seem to be a good example to provide a lesson about allegedly foundational moral beliefs, since a piano performance is a somewhat *complex* event which has many parts and that explains why – as I have suggested – we think one *should* be able to provide reasons for their assessment of it, reasons that make reference to the different parts and how they related (perhaps that the performer played too quickly, etc). However, moral intuitionists typically hold that the foundational moral beliefs are *not* judgements about *complex* events or states of affairs. For example, some moral intuitionists hold the foundational moral beliefs to involve the recognition of prima facie duties such as the duty not to steal or the duty not to harm or the duty to keep one’s promises (Audi 1996, pp.34-35; 2008, p.476). The use of Piano as an example suggests that moral intuitionists aver that we can be justified in holding foundational moral beliefs about *complex* events or states of affairs (in their totality), but that is not something that prominent moral intuitionists accept, nor does moral intuitionism entail it. An example more in keeping with what moral intuitionists believe might involve Sinnott-Armstrong’s daughter and a rival each producing a single *note* on the piano in an attempt to reproduce a third note, and

Sinnott-Armstrong judging that his daughter's note was closer to the target note because, "It sounded more like it to me." However, unlike the judgement in Piano, it isn't clear that the judgement in this case would be unjustified.

So, it is very plausibly the fact that Sinnott-Armstrong's judgement in Piano fails to be backed up by the sort of reasons we think a comparative judgement about piano-playing performances should be (reasons which, as moral intuitionists see it, make the example dissimilar to the case of foundational moral belief), rather than his *partiality*, that inclines us to render the verdict that his judgement is unjustified. This should lead us to be cautious about inferring the broad epistemic principle that Sinnott-Armstrong infers.

Furthermore, I think we can be confident that the principle Sinnott-Armstrong infers is too broad, for there are cases where a believer is partial with respect to the formation or maintenance of a foundational belief (or one that is very plausibly foundational) but nevertheless they are surely justified in holding it. Consider memory and perceptual beliefs with non-moral content, which many moral intuitionists will also take to be foundational.¹⁰ In the same way that I might be justified in believing that the last (unsuccessful) invasion of Britain occurred in 1797 simply because I remember the date, surely a parent might be justified in believing that they heard their child's teacher say that the child's performance in the school play was excellent on the basis of their remembering that such was the teacher's verdict, even though they were partial and would very much like it to be the case that the teacher rated their child's performance as excellent. Or a parent might observe their child being first across the finishing line in a race and be justified in believing that their child was first across, simply on the basis of perceiving it, even though they

¹⁰ Plantinga (1993) defends foundationalism for a range of different kinds of belief, including memory beliefs.

wanted it to be the case – even desperately wanted it to be the case – that their child would finish first. There is partiality, but nevertheless confirmation doesn't seem required. Examples could be multiplied. Now, it seems that Sinnott-Armstrong would disagree; he claims that direct perceptual judgements are also unjustified when there is partiality and that this “partly explains why we prefer umpires, referees, and judges not to be parents of competitors” (p.344). However, that is wrong. We might worry that partiality will lead to incorrect judgements in *some* cases – for example, where it all happens so fast, or the judge's view is obscured, or when there was barely a gap between the first and second child to cross the finishing line. But there nevertheless are cases that are by no means close calls; in some cases, it really is obvious that a particular child finished first, the judge has a clear view, and it doesn't all happen too fast. Maybe a parent can't be justified in believing their child won the race when the gap between their offspring and the child supposedly in second place was barely perceptible; but surely a parent is justified in so believing when the child in second place is a good number of seconds behind.

This shows that the principle Sinnott-Armstrong draws – that partiality creates a need for confirmation if one is to be justified in holding a belief – is too broad. In some cases, partiality might create such a requirement. But in other cases, it doesn't. Sinnott-Armstrong hasn't shown that partiality always creates a need for justification in the case of those moral beliefs that moral intuitionists hold to be foundational, for those moral beliefs might be more similar to the perceptual clear cases than the less clear ones. Indeed, people certainly sometimes report some actions, etc, as *clearly* having a certain moral status (e.g., *clearly* being wrong).

Even in cases where we are partial and might be somewhat less confident about our moral judgement, much more needs to be done to show that our beliefs are

unjustified. We might well be susceptible to being led astray in our moral judgements by our stake in what we consider the moral truths to be, but the mere fact that this is a *danger* does not render our beliefs unjustified. We can try hard to screen out self-interest in morality; for example, by considering the morality of an act undertaken by, and affecting, nobody we particularly care for, or by trying to understand the situation from all perspectives. Overcoming self-interest might sometimes be very difficult, but we can try to judge fairly and accurately and there is good reason to think that sometimes we can succeed (recall the case of judging which child won the race). At any rate, the important thing to note is that Sinnott-Armstrong has not given good reason to think that *the moral judgements moral intuitionists construe as foundational* are unjustified due to our being partial.

4. Sinnott-Armstrong's appeal to disagreement¹¹

On the subject of disagreement, the chief non-moral example Sinnott-Armstrong draws attention to involves you and me adding a column of figures and arriving at a different total (call the example "Column"). He says:

"Maybe I would be justified in believing that I am right if you were my child and I was helping you with your homework. However, if you are just as good at arithmetic as I am, then when we get different answers, we need to check again to find out who made a mistake before either of us can be justified in believing that his or her answer is the correct one. We owe each other that much epistemic respect" (p.344).

A second example offered has us disagreeing whether a person we see on the pavement looks like Tom Cruise or not. These examples are offered as support for

¹¹ Some philosophers argue from the phenomenon of moral disagreement to an *error theory* – that all our moral beliefs are *false* – or some other anti-realist metaethics. However, my focus is on moral scepticism and not error theory, and I cannot consider such arguments here. I find Brink's (1989, pp.197ff) criticism of such arguments persuasive.

the principle that confirmation is required for a believer to be justified when people disagree with no independent reason to prefer one belief or believer to the other.

Sinnott-Armstrong admits that the *extent* of genuine moral disagreement (moral disagreement that doesn't derive from disagreement over the *non-moral* facts) is not obvious (p.348).¹² Nevertheless, he maintains that there definitely *is* genuine moral disagreement, too; some moral disagreement would persist in the face of agreement on all of the non-moral facts. He provides the example of disagreement between his students on the morality of sometimes deliberately killing someone in order to save others. When we become aware of this sort of moral disagreement, Sinnott-Armstrong argues, we require confirmation for our beliefs if we are to be justified in retaining them because there is no reason to prefer the moral belief of one student over that of the other.

I agree with Sinnott-Armstrong's verdict about Column. Sinnott-Armstrong is surely correct in saying that if I have no prior reason to view you as being mathematically inferior to me, I will not be justified in believing that my sum is correct rather than yours. The thing to do in that situation would indeed be for both of us to recalculate and see what totals we obtain on a second attempt.¹³ However, the example is not a good one for making a point about beliefs claimed to be

¹² As Andy Elga (2007, pp.493-497) points out, much actual moral disagreement involves participants who believe that they are not epistemic peers (that is, not antecedently as likely to be correct on the issue at hand) because they know that they disagree on other non-moral and moral issues. However, in cases where one judges their interlocutor not to be an epistemic peer because of *other* moral disagreement, Sinnott-Armstrong might push the challenge back and argue that the belief that one is right in that *other* moral disagreement (and therefore that one is better than one's interlocutor at perceiving the moral facts) is itself unjustified.

¹³ In this connection, see Elga (2007, p.491) and Christensen (2007, p.193). Both discuss an example of two-person disagreement over the calculation of a restaurant bill where each of the participants in the disagreement holds the antecedent view that they are both as good at arithmetic and therefore equally likely to make a mistake. Elga and Christensen agree that the thing to do is suspend judgement and recalculate, at least when it isn't the case that one of the participants' totals is *clearly* wrong - for example, by being significantly above the amount that one would expect a restaurant bill to come to.

foundational, because when I have added a column of figures, my belief that the sum is such-and-such has been arrived at on the basis of *inference*. Adding a column of figures doesn't produce a *foundational* belief; rather, the belief is the output of several stages of addition and the result – the sum – is inferred, not accepted solely on the basis of the number seeming to be correct. One doesn't simply look at the column and see that a proposed sum is correct; rather, one has to go through a reasoning process which may be very quick for some people (depending upon the length of the column) but is a process nevertheless.

The moral beliefs that moral intuitionists claim are foundational are not like the belief that the sum of a column of figures is such-and-such; we are supposed to be able to *see* that they are correct solely upon (carefully, attentively) considering them. A more accurate analogy, therefore, would involve disagreement in very simple mathematical beliefs, mathematical beliefs that foundationalists typically construe as foundational – ones that one can *see* are true without having to go through steps of reasoning. So suppose we alter the example accordingly. I have reason to believe, or to suppose, that you are an epistemic peer when it comes to mathematics. However, one day you disagree with me when I am engaged in an arithmetical exercise. You take issue with “ $3 + 4 = 7$ ” which is written on the pad in front of me (I have decided to make clear every step, however elementary, on the pad in front of me), and you instead claim that three added to four makes eight. Suppose, furthermore, that we cannot resolve this disagreement; I am utterly convinced that the sum of three and four is seven, while you maintain that it is eight. Call this example “Elementary”.

What are we to make of such a case? It would be an extremely bizarre occurrence, and I might well think that you don't mean what you are saying. Let us

suppose, however, that you are able to convince me that you are not pretending – you really *believe* your utterance “ $3 + 4 = 8$ ” – and that you don’t mean something different to me by “3”, “+”, “4”, “=” or “8”. We have a case of genuine disagreement. It seems to me that in such a case I would have no reason at all to consider my belief unjustified. For I can *see* that $3 + 4 = 7$; and I can *see* that your belief is simply wrong. I have no need for further confirmation of my belief in order to be justified in holding it. Furthermore, even though before our disagreement I had reason to believe or suppose you to be an epistemic peer as far as mathematics is concerned, I seem to have now *acquired* a reason to think that you are *not*; our disagreement has itself yielded such a reason.¹⁴

If in Elementary one *acquires* a reason not to view the other as an epistemic peer when it comes to mathematics, might it not be the case that even if I have no *prior* reason to think that I am better at perceiving the *moral* facts than you are, I could *acquire* such a reason as a result of our disagreement? Sinnott-Armstrong has provided no reason to think that such isn’t the case. Furthermore, it seems very plausible; if I believe that it is *prima facie* wrong to inflict pain on someone, and believe this confidently on the basis that it seems to me to be *clearly* so, and then discover that you claim either to see that inflicting pain is *not* *prima facie* wrong or to at least fail to see that it *is*, I will very probably conclude that you and I are not on a par when it comes to perceiving the moral facts.¹⁵

Indeed, it seems to me that Elementary and the example of moral disagreement I have just described are on all fours, and therefore moral disagreement when one has no prior reason to prefer one participant’s view to the other’s does *not*

¹⁴ For what it’s worth, Elga agrees: “When a friend disagrees about whether $1 + 1 = 2$, one may well not count her as a peer. For one’s views on such a simple problem are closely linked to one’s basic reasoning” (2007, p.500).

¹⁵ Audi (2008, p.490) agrees that another’s disbelieving what appears to one as self-evident provides reason not to consider them an epistemic peer.

rob one's moral belief of justification when the belief is foundational and confidently held. Furthermore, quite apart from the Elementary analogy, there are good reasons why one can be justified in trusting a moral intuition in the face of disagreement with others whom one has no *other* reason (other than the fact of this particular disagreement) to think is less than an epistemic peer. As Audi states, "we are better positioned to make a critical appraisal of our own evidence and of our responses to it than of anyone else's evidence or responses to that evidence" (2008, p.490). We cannot be as well positioned to know that others have or haven't experienced propositions as *seeming* true and their responses to such intuitive "seemings" (e.g. rejecting them as illusory). It is hard to have evidence that others are in as good an epistemic situation as we are with respect to the belief we disagree about. So it can be reasonable to maintain our foundational belief, and to believe that we are right, when others disagree.

In Column, disagreement *does* render one's belief unjustified, but that fact seems to depend upon the belief not being foundational, as comparison with Elementary reveals. I think that the reason the belief in Column seems more susceptible to becoming unjustified might well lie in the fact that non-foundational beliefs involve a derivation or inference; there are more places to go wrong in arriving at one's belief. Adding up a column of figures involves reliance upon memory and the performance of calculations, whereas such are not relied upon in recognising the truth of simple mathematical statements. When I add up a long list of numbers, the sum I end up with does not seem to be clearly the correct total in the way that simple mathematical propositions strike me as clearly being true, and I am aware that I could have made a mistake at several places. The opposite holds with a foundational belief: no reasoning was involved, so error couldn't have entered by

such means, and furthermore the proposition really does *seem to be true* when one considers it.

So we can allow that in the moral case, too, peer disagreement might often be quite successful in rendering one's *non-foundational* moral beliefs unjustified. One might then have to go back to one's foundational moral beliefs and try to carefully reason again from the foundational moral beliefs and non-moral information, to see if a mistake was made; nevertheless, this is fully consistent with moral intuitionism – one may still have foundational moral beliefs that require no inferential support.¹⁶

5. Sinnott-Armstrong's appeal to emotion

People's emotions can lead them to make errors of judgement; as Sinnott-Armstrong points out, “[w]hen people get very angry...they tend to overlook relevant facts. They often do not notice excuses or apologies by the person who made them angry,” and, “this explains why jurors are dismissed from a case that would make them too emotional” (p.344). The principle that is inferred is that confirmation is required for a believer to be justified when the believer is emotional in a way that clouds judgement.

Is there reason to think that emotion clouds our judgement in the moral case, and especially in the case of moral beliefs that moral intuitionists hold to be foundational? Sinnott-Armstrong thinks so. He briefly mentions psychological and neurological research that suggests emotions play a very large role in the production of our moral judgements; according to some studies, parts of the brain associated with emotions show greater activity when the experimental subject considers

¹⁶ I have omitted discussion of the example involving the purported Tom Cruise lookalike, since it seems to me to be badly underspecified. For example, did I get a good look at the man? And *how great* do I judge the likeness to be? I find it hard to believe that if I had a sufficient look at the man and judged that he looked virtually identical to Tom Cruise this belief would nevertheless be undermined by your disagreeing.

sentences with *moral* content than they do when the subject considers sentences with *non-moral* content (p.351). He also provides “additional evidence” from some experiments performed with hypnotised subjects, which will be discussed below.

An immediate problem with Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument arises, for while emotions can cloud judgement, including *moral* judgement (consider anger, for example), it is a bit of a stretch to conclude on that basis that *any* emotion that figures in moral judgement, or which causes it, *clouds it*. That is highly controversial. As Sinnott-Armstrong himself notes, the extent to which moral judgements (in particular, *accurate* moral judgements) are based on reason or emotion has been the subject of philosophical disagreement for a long time (p.350). A large number of philosophers, while not denying that *some* emotions cloud moral judgement, nevertheless hold that *other* emotions enable and facilitate accurate moral judgement (e.g., Little 1995; Zagzebski 2003). (I might add that not a few non-philosophers would also agree with this thesis.) For example, feelings of compassion may lead one to assess a situation in such a way that one pays proper attention to all relevant features of the situation. If these philosophers and non-philosophers are correct, then the discovery that sections of the brain associated with emotions are active when one is engaged in moral consideration will be neither surprising nor disturbing.¹⁷ Before coming to the empirical research, many already believe both that *some* (it isn’t even clear that *most*) emotions cloud moral judgement and that some emotions facilitate moral judgement. Other emotions may neither cloud nor facilitate. Unless we have reason to believe that *all* or *most* emotions cloud moral judgement, we have no reason to think that an emotion occurring at the time a moral judgement was made

¹⁷ As James Lenman has pointed out to me, Sinnott-Armstrong would presumably not want to say that the judge of a piano-playing competition makes unjustified judgements about performances if we discover that he has areas of his brain associated with emotions activated when he makes his judgements; after all, being a good judge of music will involve emotional responses to it. Why can’t it be similar in the moral case?

will have clouded it. So the empirical research Sinnott-Armstrong points us to is interesting but poses no clear threat to moral belief.

Nevertheless, even if a general correlation between moral judgements and brain states associated with emotions is insufficient to render our moral beliefs unjustified, Sinnott-Armstrong provides other evidence. He discusses psychological research involving subjects considering the famous “trolley cases”. Trolley cases involve situations where there is a runaway trolley on some tracks, heading toward a group of people (who it will kill if it hits them), and you have to form a decision about how to act. In the “side trolley case”, you can divert the trolley onto another track, where it will still hit and kill people, but it will hit and kill fewer people (e.g. one person) than it will do if you fail to act and the trolley remains on the original track. In the “fat man trolley case”, you do not have the option of diverting the trolley onto another track, but you can push a fat man off a platform into the path of the trolley, knowing that this will kill the fat man but stop the trolley, thus sparing the people who would otherwise have had the trolley hit and kill them. Sinnott-Armstrong cites research suggesting emotions figure differently when people consider one kind of trolley case than when they consider the other. In the fat man trolley case (and not in the side trolley case), “subjects showed significant activation in brain areas associated with emotion and under-activation (below the resting baseline) in areas associated with working memory” (p.351). Sinnott-Armstrong goes on to say:

“It is not obvious what to make of these results. Brain scientists do not know how to interpret under-activation in general. Nonetheless, one natural speculation is this: When asked about pushing the fat man, subjects react, ‘That’s so horrible that I can’t even think about it.’ Emotions stop subjects from considering the many factors in these examples. If this interpretation is correct, then many pervasive and fundamental moral beliefs result from emotions that cloud judgement” (p.351).

The idea is that because acting in the fat man trolley case involves directly causing harm to somebody (unlike the side trolley case which involves deflecting an already existing threat onto others), it jars more with our emotions, resulting in our failure to carefully assess all the factors operative in the scenario. Despite admitting that his interpretation of the data is “speculation” (p.351), and despite acknowledging that the results of the experiments need to be “replicated and interpreted much more carefully,” Sinnott-Armstrong concludes that, “such brain studies seem to provide some evidence that many moral judgements result from emotions that cloud judgement” (p.352). That conclusion seems to me to be completely unwarranted on such an admittedly speculative basis.

There are other possible, and I think reasonable, interpretations of the data. Sinnott-Armstrong himself anticipates an objection based on another. One might suggest that in the fat man trolley case one’s emotions prevent one from carefully considering (note: not necessarily from considering *at all*) or dwelling on all the various factors the case involves, but nevertheless it doesn’t follow that this will lead to one’s moral judgement being *clouded* and unreliable. Rather, there is *no need* to dwell on factors in addition to the pushing of the fat man; one should be able to tell that it is morally wrong to push the fat man without having to carefully consider the other factors. Indeed, it is plausible (I think significantly so) that too much considering of the other factors, such as the different number of deaths if one pushes the fat man - “But all those lives would be saved...” - might lead one *away from* the correct moral judgement by diverting one’s attention away from what is determinative of the morality of one’s action. If we find all of this plausible, we might also suggest that the subjects’ responses may have been more along the lines

of, “That’s so obviously immoral that the case is closed; there’s no need for further consideration,” rather than Sinnott-Armstrong’s construal of their responses - “That’s so horrible that I can’t even think about it” (p.351). There would be less activation in certain areas of the brain, such as those associated with working memory, because it isn’t difficult to work out what one should or shouldn’t do.

Sinnott-Armstrong dismisses this sort of reply, because he believes it “begs the question”. He asserts that, “when asking whether a moral belief is justified, we should not assume that the only relevant factors are those that would be relevant if the belief were true” (p.352). In other words, we cannot appeal to the correctness of the judgement – assume it *is* wrong to push the fat man - in order to show that failing to dwell on other aspects of the situation will not result in one’s judgement going astray.

However, one need not actually confidently assert that the explanation of the data suggested above in response to Sinnott-Armstrong’s explanation is the *correct* one in order to rebut his challenge. So long as we do not tacitly assume that moral judgements such as the judgement that it would be wrong to push the fat man cannot be justifiably held in the foundational way, or cannot have much justification (which *would* beg the question, since moral intuitionists hold that such beliefs *can*), Sinnott-Armstrong’s admittedly speculative interpretation of the empirical data has no bite. Why? Well, suppose we begin with the assumption that the moral belief enjoys prima facie justification in the foundational way, and then turn to the empirical evidence and find that it can be interpreted (a) in a way that renders the moral belief dubious, but also (b) in a way that renders it not so; suppose, furthermore, that neither interpretation is better supported by the evidence. In that case, I think we should conclude that the moral belief remains justified. For consider a perceptual

belief that you are very confident about and therefore consider to be justified. Then suppose that you are informed that sketchy data from brain studies might be interpretable (a) in a way that would suggest distorting influences on the formation of your belief, but that it can also be interpreted (b) in such a way that would not suggest distorting influences, and that at the moment there is no reason from the experimental data alone to prefer one interpretation over the other. It doesn't seem that you should consider this to undermine the justification of your perceptual belief. I suggest that if one considers Sinnott-Armstrong's speculative interpretation enough to render a moral belief unjustified, one is tacitly treating that belief as lacking any or much justification to begin with (that is, even before the belief is challenged). One is tacitly treating that belief as having much less justification than perceptual beliefs. But that appears to beg the question against moral intuitionists.

Sinnott-Armstrong also considers the "additional evidence" of experiments involving hypnotised subjects who had it suggested to them – while under hypnosis – that they would feel disgust when they saw the words "take" and "often" (words which do not, for non-hypnotised subjects, connote anything moral). The subjects were then asked to make moral assessments of characters and actions in stories that included those morally neutral words. The results showed that subjects were more likely to express stronger moral condemnation of acts in the stories if the story contained "take" and "often", even if those acts were acts that subjects would – when not under the influence of hypnosis – take to be completely morally neutral (see Wheatley and Haidt 2005). Sinnott-Armstrong concludes that emotions clouded their judgement and that, "because independently caused emotions can distort moral beliefs in such ways, moral believers need confirmation in order to be justified in holding their moral beliefs" (p.352).

What problem exactly does this pose for our moral judgements? The idea might be that moral judgements are dubious because accurate moral judgements would not be based on disgust. Disgust is a non-moral feeling, and discovering that moral judgements are triggered by it would undermine those judgements. However, I am not convinced. For the word “disgust” is ambiguous; although we sometimes *feel disgust* or *are disgusted* without us in any sense issuing a moral verdict (e.g., I might be disgusted by the slime trail left behind by a slug), we sometimes say that we are disgusted by someone’s behaviour and *do* render a moral verdict. For example, I might say I am disgusted by your rude attitude or behaviour, or even that your cruelty is “sickening”, by which I express that I find your actions to be morally wrong. Since “disgust” has this ambiguity, it would be a mistake to assume that by hypnotising subjects to experience “disgust” at certain words the experimenters have hypnotised those subjects to form feelings typically unrelated to moral evaluation. Rather, subjects may have understood the command to feel “disgust” as the command to respond a certain way *morally*. If so, the fact that when they heard the words “take” and “often” they made *moral* evaluations should not be surprising. Now, it might be argued that this isn’t a very plausible reading of the data, for the experimenters report participant responses such as, “When ‘often’ appeared I felt confused in my head, yet there was turmoil in my stomach. It was as if there was a problem with the story yet I didn’t know why” (Wheatley and Haidt 2005, p.783). It might be argued that turmoil in the stomach indicates that the subjects, under hypnosis, understood “disgust” to refer to non-moral disgust. However, from the evidence I have seen, it seems to me that other possibilities can accommodate such responses: hypnotised subjects may have understood “disgust” under hypnosis to be ambiguous, and they may have understood it as a command to form *both* kinds of

disgust, or they may have simply been confused and had inclinations towards both. There seems to me to be no reason to think that these experiments show moral judgements to be unjustified because they result from *non-moral* disgust.

In addition, the understanding I am opposing is possibly in tension with something else Sinnott-Armstrong also reports, from another set of experiments by different researchers, which is that “brain tissue associated with emotions becomes more activated when subjects think about simple sentences with moral content (e.g. ‘They hung an innocent’) than when they think about similar sentences without moral content (e.g. ‘Stones are made of water’)...*or disgusting non-moral sentences* (e.g. ‘He licked the dirty toilet’)” (p.351, my italics). If our moral judgements rest upon non-moral disgust, then we might expect that the emotions thought to correlate with moral judgement (and the activity of the relevant parts of the brain) would also correlate with considering the sentences which elicit non-moral disgust. But that isn’t what is reported. So it seems to me that no great conclusions should be drawn about non-moral disgust greatly influencing moral judgements (which Sinnott-Armstrong implicitly acknowledges by pointing out how much more work needs to be done).

But perhaps these experiments are thought to pose another problem for our moral judgements. As Sinnott-Armstrong says, “moral judgements were...affected by elements of the story that could not determine the accuracy or acceptability of those moral judgements” (p.352). Here the concern seems to be not so much with the idea that moral judgement rests upon disgust, but rather that it was elicited by elements of the story that were irrelevant to the morality of what was described – the presence of the words “take” and “often”. However, it is difficult to see why this is significant. It is indeed the case that subjects *as a result of hypnosis* formed moral judgements in response to irrelevant elements of the story, but that is what they were

primed to do. Unless the suggestion is made that this provides reason to consider our moral judgements *not formed as a result of hypnosis* unjustified, it is difficult to see what the significance is. And if that suggestion *is* made, then things are no better, because the suggestion is implausible. For what would the worry be? That because people can be primed to form particular moral judgements concerning an action on the basis of the action being described with the words “take” or “often”, then my moral judgement that, for example, someone acted wrongly in robbing a shop (the account of which I read in the newspaper) might perhaps result from the presence of the word “shop” rather than “retail outlet” instead of the fact that it is an example of theft? Such sceptical scenarios are extremely implausible and it is difficult to see why the evidence from hypnosis would increase their plausibility. The fact that the formation of beliefs can be manipulated so that they result from evidentially irrelevant factors in certain circumstances (importantly, perhaps only where we willingly agree to hypnotism and manipulation) provides no reason to worry that our beliefs *formed outside of those circumstances* might likewise result from evidentially irrelevant factors. Indeed, it has been found that undergoing hypnosis tends to increase the likelihood of forming false memories (Kihlstrom 2003). Yet this fact clearly doesn’t render less justified the trust in our memories that we who have not been hypnotised have; it in no way suggests that a memory formed by someone who has not been hypnotised is more likely to be false than we would otherwise have thought.

Given all of this, it seems to me that the experimental data Sinnott-Armstrong takes to have such great significance actually have very little. The fact that people might be triggered under hypnosis to form certain beliefs is insufficient to render unjustified our beliefs not formed under hypnosis, whether moral or non-moral. None

of the experimental research Sinnott-Armstrong cites provides reason to think that many of our moral judgements – and especially those that moral intuitionists hold to be foundational – are formed in circumstances where we are emotional *in a way that clouds judgement*.

6. Sinnott-Armstrong's appeal to illusion

According to Sinnott-Armstrong's fourth principle, "confirmation is needed for a believer to be justified when the circumstances are conducive to illusion" (p.345). As non-moral examples to support the principle, Sinnott-Armstrong mentions illusions due to context, illusions due to generalisations, and illusions due to heuristics. As an example of the first, he gives the fact that objects look larger when they are placed next to smaller objects and vice versa. As an example of the second, he gives the example of an oval that is shaded on top looking concave, whereas an oval that is shaded on the bottom looks convex. As an example of the third, he gives the example of people being asked to estimate how many seven-letter words in a passage of one thousand will have the form "____ing" and how many will have the form "____in_"; most people estimate that there will be more words of the former sort, though on reflection this is clearly false (pp.344-345). Turning to the moral case, Sinnott-Armstrong's main example is of "framing effects" from a study by Kahneman and Tversky in 1979. They asked a group of subjects the following question:

"Imagine that the U.S. is preparing for an outbreak of an unusual Asian disease which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to fight the disease, A and B, have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the consequences of the programs are as follows: If program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. If program B is adopted, there is a 1/3 probability that 600 people will be saved, and a 2/3 probability that no people will be saved. Which program would you choose?"

They gave another group of subjects the choice between programs C and D:

“If program C is adopted, 400 people will die. If program D is adopted, there is a 1/3 probability that nobody will die and a 2/3 probability that 600 will die.”

Among those in the first group, most chose A as the program to be implemented. In the second group, most chose D, despite the fact that, “it should be obvious that programs A and C are equivalent, as are programs B and D” (p.344). It is concluded that subjects were risk averse when choices were framed in ways that are positive – such as “lives *saved*” – and were more willing to take risks when the choices were framed in ways that are negative – such as “people will *die*”. Sinnott-Armstrong says:

“[T]he subjects had different moral beliefs about programs A and C and about programs B and D. The only difference within each pair is how the programs are framed or described. Thus, descriptions seem to affect moral beliefs. Descriptions cannot affect what is really morally right or wrong. Hence, these results suggest that such moral beliefs are unreliable” (p.354).

In a more recent publication, Sinnott-Armstrong has provided further evidence of framing effects on moral judgement, extending his argument and urging that the fact that varying the description of a situation can lead to variances in our moral judgement about it (when the situation itself is unchanged) renders the beliefs that moral intuitionists consider to be foundational unjustified; once we are aware of our proneness to being led astray by verbal descriptions of situations (as well as some other factors such as which order we consider the situations in, and which position each situation occupies in that ordering), we need confirmation for our moral beliefs if we are to be justified in holding them. We need evidence for them in

order to overcome the possibility that our moral judgement is unduly influenced by the way in which the situation was framed.

It has been argued by some that the sorts of experiments claimed by Sinnott-Armstrong and others to demonstrate problematic framing effects actually do *not* (Kamm 1998); however, examining this line of criticism would require a very long treatment, much too long to be undertaken here. Instead, I will grant for the sake of argument that distortion due to framing effects has indeed occurred in the experiments Sinnott-Armstrong cites and explains. Even granting this, it seems to me that his appeal to framing effects and illusions fails to undermine moral intuitionism. Firstly, as with Sinnott-Armstrong's appeal to studies involving hypnotised subjects that I considered in the previous section, there is the problem that the circumstances in which the experimental subjects were affected may be circumstances in which we hardly ever find ourselves.¹⁸ As Shafer-Landau points out, the experiments "are all conducted in one basic kind of circumstance – that of a controlled experiment situated in someone's lab. There may be difficulties with extrapolating from questionnaires administered in such situations" (2008, p.87). If we only know that framing effects distort moral judgement in laboratory conditions, or when filling out questionnaires, and not in the circumstances we tend to find ourselves in, it is hard to see why that should undermine the justification of our foundational moral beliefs *in general* rather than just those formed in laboratory conditions, etc. In the same way, the fact that we are in some circumstances subject to visual illusions surely doesn't imply that our visual beliefs formed outside those circumstances are unjustified.

¹⁸ We hardly ever – for most of us, we *never* - find ourselves in a situation where we have been hypnotised and primed to respond to certain words.

Sinnott-Armstrong has very briefly replied to Shafer-Landau on this score; he says that, “there is no reason to think that we should not extrapolate from lab to real world here just as we successfully do in other areas of psychology” (2008b, p.103) – we should assume that framing effects occur outside of the laboratory, too. However, I am not convinced. For one thing, Sinnott-Armstrong himself admits that, “[m]any subjects do not think carefully about scenarios in experimental conditions. They just want to get it over with, and they do not have much at stake” (2008a, p.70). Of course, it is possible that many people do not think carefully about morality as they go about their lives, and if so then such people’s moral beliefs formed *outside* the laboratory may well be pertinently similar to the beliefs formed *in* the laboratory. On the other hand, while people have little at stake when answering questionnaires in laboratory conditions, recall that, as Sinnott-Armstrong stressed in his appeal to partiality, we have a high stake in morality due to its effects on our lives. So maybe many people are more careful and reflective outside of laboratory conditions. At any rate, we have reason to think that at least *some* people are more careful and reflective, taking time to form their moral views. Sinnott-Armstrong realises that moral intuitionists may hold that one has to be careful and reflective in order to be justified in holding their foundational moral beliefs, and it may be the case (whether or not is currently debated, with empirical studies claimed to support both sides) that taking more time and care to form one’s moral beliefs reduces the effects of framing (2008a, p.70). Sinnott-Armstrong believes that this fails to help moral intuitionism, since, “then the question just shifts to whether I have reason to believe that I have reflected adequately in a particular case” (2008b, p.104). However, Sinnott-Armstrong doesn’t elaborate on *why* this is supposed to be a problem for moral intuitionism, and it seems to me that it *isn’t* a problem. It seems that one *could* be justified in believing

that they have reflected carefully enough, or taken a sufficient amount of time, in coming to their moral judgement. In the same way, I can go wrong in performing a mathematical calculation by performing it too quickly, but surely I can be justified in believing that I have spent enough time performing a calculation and can be justified in believing the result I obtain. Or I know that if I try to see how many items are placed on a table by glancing at the table for only an instant, my glance may well have been too quick for me to be justified in believing that I saw just what I think I did; however, surely I *can* be justified in believing that I have looked at a table long enough to see what is on it. So there seems to me to be nothing absurd or problematic about the notion that one can have reason to believe that they have reflected adequately on a particular case when making a moral judgement about it. We can reflect carefully enough and for long enough to be justified in being confident that more reflection is unlikely to lead to a change in our moral judgement.

As I have stated, Sinnott-Armstrong does not elaborate on why he thinks that raising the question of whether we have reason to believe that we have reflected adequately in a particular case is problematic for moral intuitionism. However, in several places he makes the mistake – clearly pointed out by Tolhurst (2008, pp.81-82) – of confusing reasoning that undermines a potential defeater for a belief with reasoning that *supports* that belief, and that confusion may be lurking in the background here also. Indeed, earlier comments by Sinnott-Armstrong suggest that he has *at least* this problem in mind.¹⁹ Sinnott-Armstrong thinks that if one has the belief that they have reflected carefully on the matter at hand, then that is a belief that provides an inference to the correctness of their moral judgement, which is not in

¹⁹ He clearly seems to have *more* in mind, since he says the question shifts to, “whether I have reason to believe I have reflected adequately in a particular case” (2008b, p.104), not simply to whether *drawing upon* such a reason is consistent with the claims of moral intuitionism.

keeping with moral intuitionism's claim that people can be justified in holding some moral beliefs without needing to infer them from other beliefs. Similarly, in response to the idea that we might discover that some people are not subject to distortion due to framing effects, Sinnott-Armstrong says:

“[S]uppose we do figure out which people are not subject to moral framing effects. Moral intuitionism still faces a dilemma: If we can tell that we are in the group whose moral intuitions are reliable, then we can get inferential confirmation [of our moral belief]; if we cannot tell whether we are in the group whose moral intuitions are reliable, then we are not justified. Either way, we cannot be justified independently of inferential justification” (2008a, pp.70-71).

As Tolhurst points out, Sinnott-Armstrong is wrong to think that the belief that one is not subject to framing effects is a belief that provides *support* for one's moral belief. Rather, as moral intuitionists see things, (1) the moral belief is justified without inference, (2) the considerations about framing effects form a potential defeater for our moral beliefs, and (3) knowing that one is not subject to framing effects prevents the potential defeater from doing its work (the knowledge is a defeater-defeater), so that the potential defeater cannot rob the moral belief of its initial justification. The defeater-defeater doesn't provide the basis for an *inference* to one's moral belief (Tolhurst 2008, p.82). Sinnott-Armstrong is wrong in thinking that it is inconsistent with moral intuitionism to accept that we may only be justified in holding to our moral beliefs given good reason to believe that we have been adequately careful and reflective; a moral intuitionist can happily accept that claim.

Now, as I have stated, at present the research into whether careful reflection and taking time to make moral judgements helps with accuracy is reported as being inconclusive. So this might pose a problem for the idea that one could know from the fact that they have reflected carefully that their moral judgement is *not* subject to

distortion from framing effects. Nevertheless, we might have other reasons why we can reasonably believe that our moral judgements are not subject to framing effects. For example, it seems to me that we have a fairly good understanding of the sorts of cases in which framing effects arise. We can understand how they might be more likely to cause distortion when hurriedly filling in a questionnaire, and we can readily see why people may be led astray by examples such as Kahneman and Tversky's Asian disease example, since such examples involve numbers and probabilities and we know that people are prone to err about such things when not being particularly careful – and *quite apart* from forming moral judgements. Perhaps we can understand the framing effects in *moral* cases like the Asian disease example as following the pattern of distorting effects in *non-moral* cases. And it isn't clear that many of our moral beliefs (especially those that moral intuitionists hold to be foundational) are judgements formed hurriedly or judgements about situations described via probabilities (or both). For example, Shafer-Landau urges that many of our foundational moral beliefs concern prima facie duties (see also Audi 1996, pp.34-35; 2008, p.476), and he claims that such beliefs are not subject to framing effects and so are not in any way called into question by the research Sinnott-Armstrong cites and explains. Shafer-Landau also appeals to entirely uncontroversial moral beliefs, such as the belief that it is wrong to torture a child for fun; these are beliefs that are not affected by the different ways in which the action or situation might be (accurately) described. (In addition, as Tolhurst points out, in many cases the experiments that reveal framing effects were designed to elicit them (2008, p.80), and we have no reason to believe that the world outside the experiments is likewise conspiring to present the facts in such a way as to evoke distorted moral judgements.)

In response to Shafer-Landau's point, Sinnott-Armstrong argues that such beliefs are *also* unjustified, since they form part of a class which contains a large percentage of falsehoods (the class of everyone's moral beliefs, or everyone's moral intuitions) and so are called into question along with the class as a whole (2008b, p.104). However, even if the class of *everyone's* moral beliefs contains a lot of falsehoods, it isn't clear why an individual should be concerned with that class rather than the class of *their own* beliefs. And the class of their own beliefs (or the narrower class of their own *moral* beliefs) may not contain a large percentage of falsehoods; or at any rate, they may have no reason to think that it does. Sinnott-Armstrong goes on to make comments about this sort of reply being an appeal to an inference to support one's moral belief – and thus incompatible with moral intuitionism - but, as I have pointed out, he is mistaken about that.

These points are quite general, and I am wary of giving the impression that I think that the evidence of framing effects isn't important. However, at the same time, it seems to me that Sinnott-Armstrong overstates their consequences for our moral beliefs. It isn't clear that framing effects distort our moral beliefs in many circumstances, especially those of everyday life (as opposed to when answering questionnaires). Reflection and taking one's time *may* reduce the prevalence of distortion due to framing effects, and it seems one may be justified in knowing that they have adequately reflected on the matter in hand. Furthermore, moral intuitionists can hold (and many *do* hold) that the foundational moral beliefs are ones that – in fact – are *not* subject to framing effects, at least for many people. Sinnott-Armstrong's replies to these sorts of considerations mistakenly take evidence that removes an epistemic defeater for a belief to be evidence that *confirms* the belief. Furthermore, although he himself appears to think that the probability that our beliefs

are in error need not be very large in order to render our beliefs unjustified, it isn't clear that that is the case. In this connection, it should be noted that although Sinnott-Armstrong's non-moral analogies involve visual illusions and his principle is that "confirmation is needed for a believer to be justified when the circumstances are conducive to illusion" (2006a, p.345), he doesn't say that the phenomenon of visual illusions means that we can have no foundational *visual* beliefs. When mentioning visual illusions, he restricts the "circumstances conducive to illusion" to those in which we have good reason to believe that the illusions tend to be prevalent, rather than *all* circumstances in which we are forming visual beliefs; when we turn to the moral case, however, Sinnott-Armstrong seems to take "circumstances conducive to illusion" to cover *every* situation in which we form a moral belief, and not simply those in which we have discovered we are subject to framing effects. But this difference in treatment seems unmotivated, and I believe it shows that Sinnott-Armstrong is too eager to consider our moral beliefs unjustified. If the phenomenon of visual illusions doesn't spell disaster for foundationalism about visual beliefs and call into question visual beliefs formed outside the circumstances that we have found illusion occurs in, then why should the phenomenon of *moral* illusions spell disaster for foundationalism about *moral* belief and call into question our moral beliefs formed outside the circumstances that we have found illusion occurs in? As I said in the previous section, it seems to me that behind Sinnott-Armstrong's challenge may lie the tacit assumption that moral beliefs have comparatively little justification to begin with and so it isn't hard for them to be rendered unjustified; it is much easier than with *non-moral* perceptual beliefs. But Sinnott-Armstrong has provided no reason to think that this is the case. So it seems to me that his appeal to illusion fails to call moral intuitionism into question.

7. Sinnott-Armstrong's appeal to unreliable or disreputable sources

Lastly, we have the principle that confirmation is needed for a believer to be justified when their belief arises from an unreliable or disreputable source. The non-moral example Sinnott-Armstrong presents is your believing that George Washington never told a lie. This belief results from accepting a legend that was spread by Washington's allies in order for them to gain power. According to Sinnott-Armstrong, although it might in fact be the case that the belief is *true*, the fact that it was spread for such-and-such a reason renders it unjustified. Turning to the moral case, Sinnott-Armstrong brings up some different ideas about the origins of our moral beliefs, such as Nietzsche's speculations concerning the origins of Christian morality, Michel Foucault's view that moral beliefs express or result from power relations, and Gilbert Harman's speculation that the common belief that harming is much worse than failing to help may have come from societal agreement between people with unequal quantities of wealth. The truth of any of these accounts would mean that our moral judgements, or a sizeable or significant number of them, have dubious origins. Nevertheless, each of these accounts is somewhat speculative, as Sinnott-Armstrong notes, saying:

“These speculations about the origins of moral beliefs are mere armchair psychology. Perhaps more support could be obtained from the literature on socio-biology or evolutionary psychology. Still, these explanations are likely to remain very controversial. Luckily, I don't need to prove them here. I claim only that these undermining accounts are live possibilities. They seem plausible to many people and have not been refuted” (2006a, p.357).

Despite the fact that these “speculations” are “armchair psychology”, Sinnott-Armstrong considers them to undermine the justification of our moral beliefs because they are “live possibilities”. I find this wholly unconvincing. According to the

principle Sinnott-Armstrong puts forward (and the George Washington example), lack of justification occurs when the belief's source *is* unreliable or disreputable.²⁰ But all of a sudden Sinnott-Armstrong is claiming that the *possibility* of a belief's source being unreliable or disreputable is enough to undermine its justification. That is neither stated by the principle nor supported by the example the principle is inferred from.

Sinnott-Armstrong states that the undermining accounts are "live possibilities" which seem "plausible" to many people. But while a genuine live possibility is a cause for concern, something has to be added to a *mere* possibility to make it a *live* one. After all, the accounts each have a non-zero probability, but the story according to which I am a disembodied brain in a vat being stimulated by scientists to form the perceptual beliefs I do likewise has a non-zero probability; if the latter fact doesn't rob all my foundational perceptual beliefs of justification, it is hard to see why the former fact should rob all of my foundational *moral* beliefs of justification. So a *live* possibility must be significantly more than a *mere* possibility. Sinnott-Armstrong seems to cash out the idea of a live possibility as a possibility that seems plausible to many people and has not been refuted. However, that seems insufficient for a possibility to count as *live*. It is hard to see why the fact that "many people" find such accounts to be plausible should undermine the justification of my moral beliefs. Maybe if somebody judges such explanations to be plausible or probable then *their* moral beliefs are unjustified; however, I don't see why their assessment should result in *my* beliefs being unjustified. It might do so if I have reason to think that such people are in a particularly good place to assess the probability of the explanations (perhaps because they are privy to evidence that I am

²⁰ Depending on how one thinks of justification, one might prefer to say that lack of justification occurs when one *believes* or *discovers* the source of the belief in question to be unreliable or disreputable. This doesn't affect the points made in the text.

not), but I might well lack such a reason. Indeed, I know (as Sinnott-Armstrong himself says) that the explanations are armchair speculations. And I might think that armchair speculation is a method that is unlikely to yield correct explanations; I might consider it unlikely that one would hit upon the true explanation by such means. In addition, I might not consider others' judgements about plausibility to carry much weight because I might well suspect that their finding various debunking explanations of moral belief plausible results from their first embracing the view that morality has *some* sort of debunking explanation, or that they very much want some sort of debunking explanation to be true.

The central problem is that Sinnott-Armstrong assumes that it is very easy to rob moral beliefs of their justification, even if we hold them very confidently and they play a highly important role in our cognitive economy; but as I have pointed out, the actual epistemic principle he advances doesn't state that a belief's justification is undermined simply by the possibility or plausibility in others' eyes that it has an unreliable or disreputable source. As I suggested was the case with Sinnott-Armstrong's appeals to emotion and to illusion, it seems to me that the argument here may rest upon the tacit assumption that moral beliefs have little justification *even before* they are challenged. For one thing, the belief figuring in Sinnott-Armstrong's example – that George Washington *never* told a lie – is a belief that, due to our knowledge of ourselves and of human nature in general, we could never be justified in believing, or which could at most only have *little* justification; I doubt moral intuitionists will consider it a fair analogy for our moral intuitions. Furthermore, suppose that many others came to find plausible the thesis that many conscious human beings (including me) are connected disembodied brains in vats, being stimulated to form various perceptual beliefs, like in the film *The Matrix*.

Suppose further that I lack any reason to think that those who find the thesis plausible are privy to more relevant information than me, or that they are better at reasoning than I am. Clearly the thesis that I am a disembodied brain in a vat is not one that I can refute in the sense of providing evidence inconsistent with it. So it would be a belief that seems plausible to many people and has not been refuted. Nevertheless, surely others' coming to find the brain in vats thesis plausible in such a case would not rob all of my perceptual beliefs of justification. But if so, then the idea that others' finding plausible a certain dubious origin of my *moral* beliefs robs *them* of justification seems to rest upon thinking that moral beliefs, including those moral intuitionists hold to be foundational, have considerably less justification than perceptual beliefs before being challenged. But Sinnott-Armstrong has provided no reason for us to think that that is the case. Therefore, Sinnott-Armstrong has failed to provide reason to think that the origin of our moral beliefs (and especially those plausibly thought to be foundational) robs those beliefs of justification. Appeal to *possible* origins is not enough to undermine our moral beliefs.²¹

So Sinnott-Armstrong's empirical challenge to moral intuitionism fails; philosophers who accept moral intuitionism and think that the correct structure for warranted moral belief is a foundationalist one have not been given good reason to *reject* moral intuitionism. Furthermore, and most importantly for my concerns in this chapter, Sinnott-Armstrong's challenge has not provided reason for such philosophers to consider their moral beliefs unwarranted and embrace moral scepticism. And I think that the sorts of criticisms I have provided will also provide

²¹ However, in fairness to Sinnott-Armstrong, he does mention that evolutionary psychology might provide reason to think that moral beliefs have a dubious origin, and this – an appeal to *believed* origins rather than *possible* origins – may give him what he is after. Whether that is the case or not will be discussed in the next chapter.

reason to think that the considerations Sinnott-Armstrong raises are insufficient to support moral scepticism if a *coherentist* account of the structure of warranted moral belief is correct.

8. The challenge from Social Intuitionism

I turn now to consider more briefly the challenge posed to moral thought and discourse by experimental research conducted by Jonathan Haidt and Fredrik Bjorklund. Haidt's experimental work – produced with various collaborators including Bjorklund - has led him to develop a model of how moral judgement takes place that he terms “social intuitionism” (Haidt 2001; Haidt and Bjorklund 2008). Unlike the position dubbed “moral intuitionism” just considered in this chapter, social intuitionism is a purely descriptive model that simply concerns how we form moral beliefs, not a thesis about the *warrant* of moral beliefs. There are a number of claims that go into the model – called the Social Intuitionist Model (SIM) - and I will only focus on those that are relevant to my purposes here. According to the model, “moral judgement is a product of quick and automatic intuitions that then give rise to slow, conscious moral reasoning” (Haidt and Bjorklund 2008, p.181), and this moral reasoning is presented (and takes place) in a social setting, with an aim to persuade others. What is significant about the model, as far as the possibility of undermining moral belief goes, is its claim that many moral beliefs are accepted on the basis of intuition and not reasoning but, once a moral belief has been accepted via intuition, our brains go to the effort of looking for reasons in support of the belief; we then present these reasons to others as *our reason why* we hold the belief and – if I understand the model correctly - *we* really think (wrongly) that they are the reasons why we hold the belief. According to the SIM, “moral reasoning is an effortful

process (as opposed to an automatic process), usually engaged in after a moral judgement is made, in which a person searches for arguments that will support an already-made judgement” (Haidt and Bjorklund 2008, p.189). Although Haidt and Bjorklund acknowledge that people can in fact sometimes reason honestly about morality, they hold that *most people's* moral reasoning consists in a biased search for reasons in support of the judgement that they have already made. It might be thought that this poses a problem for our moral beliefs similar to the considerations advanced by Sinnott-Armstrong that have been covered in this chapter. For although, as I say, Haidt and Bjorklund acknowledge that *sometimes* people can engage in “open-minded, not-post hoc moral reasoning” (p.193), nevertheless if such open-mindedness in trying to reason about morality is very *rare* then this may provide us with reason to doubt that our moral reasoning has really been performed in an open-minded search for the truth. But if we have reason to think that our moral views have not been formed as the result of an honest search for the truth, then surely we must consider them to be unwarranted. Furthermore, it might be thought that a problem is posed by the idea that we come to believe that we accept a given moral judgement for such-and-such reasons when in fact, unbeknownst to us, the moral judgement is really an intuition and we haven't accepted it for the reasons that we come to think we have. This sort of discovery may have the potential to provide us with a defeater of our moral beliefs. At any rate, it would seem to provide us with a reason to doubt our beliefs about *why* we believe as we do, with all of the ramifications this could have for moral discourse (if we cannot be warranted in believing that we in fact hold the belief for such-and-such reasons, then we cannot honestly communicate to others that we do).

Haidt and Bjorklund offer three lines of evidence for the SIM. I think that the most significant, and the most likely to offer support for their view, is evidence from interviews and the phenomenon that they call “moral dumbfounding”. (The other evidence they cite comes from neurological studies and studies of subjects under hypnosis such as were briefly discussed in section 5 of this chapter (on Sinnott-Armstrong’s appeal to emotion).) In experiments, subjects were asked to give their moral views about a number of behaviours which did not involve issues of *harm* or *fairness*, such as a family eating its pet dog after the dog was hit and killed by a car, a woman using a flag to clean a toilet and a man using a chicken carcass for masturbation and afterwards cooking and eating the carcass. They explain:

“Most subjects gave their initial evaluations almost instantly, but then some struggled to find a supporting reason. For example, a subject might say, hesitantly, “It’s wrong to eat your dog because...you might get sick.” When the interviewer pointed out that the dog meat was fully cooked and so posed no more risk of illness than any other meat, subjects rarely changed their minds. Rather, they searched harder for additional reasons, sometimes laughing and confessing that they could not explain themselves” (p.197).

They report of further experiments:

“[T]he experimenter presented...and then played devil’s advocate, arguing against anything the subject said. The key question was whether subjects would behave like (idealised) scientists, looking for the truth and using reasoning to reach their judgements, or whether they would behave like lawyers, committed from the start to one side and then searching only for evidence to support that side, as the SIM suggests” (p.198).

When examples involved harm or fairness, subjects could appeal to the harm or fairness as the reasons why they made the decisions they did, and the experimenters would not be able to “dumbfound” the subjects. However, when examples discussed did not involve issues of harm or fairness:

“Very quick judgement was followed by a search for supporting reasons only; when these reasons were stripped away by the experimenter, few subjects changed their minds, even though many confessed that they could not explain the reasons for their decisions” (p.198).

What are we to make of these results? The first thing to note is that the fact that *many* people perhaps do not engage in an honest, open-minded search for moral reasons does not show that *nobody* does. Indeed, the results suggest that some people (Haidt and Bjorklund mention “a few”) were willing to have their minds changed. So it would be wrong to conclude that *everybody* is in the situation of not being honest in their moral reasoning. And if someone is in a position to know that their search for the moral truth has in fact been an honest and open-minded one, then even if *others* face a defeater for their moral beliefs, such a person may not. However, as I have mentioned, if such honesty is very rare then that might put pressure on one’s moral beliefs. It depends upon how reasonably confident someone can be that they are, and have been, honest when it comes to forming their moral beliefs.

Rather than pursuing that issue, however, I think it best to point out that it isn’t clear that the experimental results actually show that many people *are* mistaken about the reasons why they hold the moral beliefs they do, or that when they engage in moral reasoning they in fact only engage in a one-sided search for considerations in support of their moral intuitions. It seems plausible to me that the experimental subjects provide the explanations for their moral beliefs that they do solely because of pressure supplied by the experimenters. The experiments are reported to be understood as proceeding as follows. (1) Subjects form their beliefs on the basis of intuition, not reasoning. Then (2) the experimenters demand a reason for the belief, (3) the subjects offer a reason, (4) the experimenters “play devil’s advocate” and criticise the reason offered, and (5) the subjects are dumbfounded and cannot provide

another reason, but (mostly) do not retract their original moral claim. As I see it, it is very significant that after having made a moral judgement, subjects are placed under pressure by the experimenters to justify that judgement *to the experimenters*; they are placed under pressure to make their moral judgement appear reasonable to others. Because of this fact, I submit, we can offer a different, plausible, understanding of the data.

The first thing to note is that when it comes to justifying one's belief *to others*, people don't always appeal to the reasons why they hold the belief themselves. For example, someone who accepts a moral view on the basis of grounds that others don't accept (e.g., a believed divine revelation) might, if asked for a public justification of the moral view, appeal to reasons *other than* those grounds. This is a strategy that makes sense because it may be the best way for others to come to see your belief as reasonable. So, the subjects may not be putting forward what they think are the reasons why they hold the belief. Turning to the experiments with this in mind, note that if the moral judgement in question is one that the subject thinks they can *see* is true ("Can't you just *see* that it's wrong to eat your pet dog?") the subject might well expect others to be able to just *see* that, too. In such a circumstance, a demand for an additional reason to believe that the action has the moral status in question would plausibly lead the subject to search for reasons *other than* the reason that was actually responsible for the subject's moral belief, since the experimenter may be considered to be disallowing simple appeal to the action's *clearly* having the believed moral status; that is, by demanding reasons and playing "devil's advocate", the experimenter may easily be understood as expecting a more sophisticated, or more impressive, justification of the subject's moral judgement, not simply an appeal to the idea that the action in question *seems to be wrong*. If so, we

would expect subjects to look for such justifications and offer candidates. The fact that their reasoning is one-way and involves only looking for *support* for their judgements would not be surprising, since they have understood the situation to be one where it is precisely considerations *in support of their belief* that have been demanded. There would be nothing dishonest about such a search. By the end of the experiment, grounds that are considered acceptable *by the experimenter* have not been found, but subjects could still be reasonable in retaining their moral opinion, since it seems to them to be true. Some subjects might change their minds; perhaps they are led to believe that the experimenters are experts on morality and that if a reason is not accepted by them (and that the behaviour just *clearly* has such a moral status seems to be a reason that the experimenter will not accept) then it cannot be much of a reason. Or perhaps they just *report* that they have changed their mind because they don't want the experimenter to think that they hold moral beliefs on grounds that the experimenter seems to think are inadequate.

So it seems to me that the data can be explained in a different way, one in which there is no *dishonest* search for support for one's moral views and which gives us no reason to think that people are mistaken about the reasons why they hold the moral beliefs they do. Now, it might be worried that the sort of explanation I have offered just seeks to explain away the data, but I think such a worry is misplaced. The explanation I have offered draws upon an awareness of how we respond to the charge to provide justifications acceptable to other people in other circumstances and, I submit, is plausible for that reason. As far as I can tell, Haidt and Bjorklund have not performed their experiments in such a way that this explanation is shown to be implausible. But until that is done, I don't think that much confidence should be placed in their model of how moral judgement takes place. The experimental results

seem to me inadequate grounds for holding that the moral reasoning of most people consists of mistaken views about why they hold the moral opinions they do or a dishonest and biased attempt to prop up those moral opinions.

I conclude, therefore, that Haidt and Bjorklund's work, unless extended and modified to rule out the sort of explanation I have provided above, does not reveal that we are massively mistaken about the reasons why we hold the moral beliefs we do and does not offer adequate support for moral scepticism (and/or for scepticism about why we hold the moral beliefs we do).

9. Conclusion

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the field of empirical investigation into morality is a rapidly developing one and future work in the area will no doubt be employed in support of the claim that moral belief in general is unwarranted or undermined in some way. Indeed, the challenges that I have been able to consider in this chapter are only a sample of the empirical challenges currently being raised, although they are prominent ones in the literature. Nevertheless, revealing why these challenges possess less bite than some have thought, and showing the ways in which sceptical lessons drawn from them are mistaken, reveals the difficulty in using empirical studies as a basis for arguing for moral scepticism. For the sorts of responses I have given may well be applicable to other challenges.²² For example, descriptive claims about how *most* or *many* people are unreflective or biased in various ways when they make moral judgements leaves open the possibility that some people can be subject to less bias and be more

²² Michael Huemer has recently briefly criticised a host of experimental results that various philosophers draw upon in claiming that our moral beliefs are clearly unreliable and distorted by many factors and which some philosophers take to support moral scepticism (2009, pp.13-15).

reflective; after all, the belief that in order to make correct moral judgements we might need to be unbiased and carefully attend fully to the matter at hand is surely one that we held *before* the advent of recent empirical research, and one might well expect that some people will have taken it on board. Furthermore, Sinnott-Armstrong's challenge to moral intuitionism draws upon a *range* of considerations and so in showing – as I hope to have done - that disagreement, emotion, illusion, etc, do not clearly pose large problems for moral belief, more has really been done in the reply to Sinnott-Armstrong than refuting *one* challenge.

In the next chapter, however, I will argue that a different kind of challenge *does* support moral scepticism insofar as it reveals that *atheists* should accept moral scepticism. Although I have argued in this chapter (in section 7) that Sinnott-Armstrong is wrong to think that appeal to a merely *possible* dubious origin of moral belief is sufficient to render our moral beliefs unwarranted, in the next chapter I will argue that accepting atheism and unguided Darwinism as an *actual* account of our origins *does* render one's moral beliefs unwarranted.

Chapter 3: Unguided Darwinism and atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism

In chapter 1, I explained that I am taking atheism to be the thesis that there is no transcendent creator of the universe or of parts of it – no God or gods – and I argued that atheists are committed to Darwinism and, furthermore, to *unguided* Darwinism. In this chapter, I will discuss the metaethical implications of atheists' embrace of unguided Darwinism and develop an argument for the conclusion that atheists should embrace moral scepticism. (I will call the argument for this *the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism*.)

Before proceeding, some important comments about the nature of moral thought and discourse are in order. At the end of chapter 1, I explained my assumption, operative throughout this essay, that viable metaethical views must accommodate *stance-independence*: the idea that, in Shafer-Landau's words, "there are moral truths that obtain independently of any preferred perspective, in the sense that *the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective*" (2003, p.15). I understand our moral thought and discourse to be committed to stance-independence, at least when the perspectives in question are (idealised or non-idealised) human ones. I also pointed out that there are some sophisticated metaethical views that try to explain and justify the commitment to stance-independence on an anti-realist (we might say, ultimately *stance-dependent*) foundation. Such views will be the subject of the next chapter, but in this chapter, I will assume that the commitment to stance-independence should be understood as *moral realists* understand it: when we form moral beliefs and make moral claims, we aim to track and report on moral facts that

are real independent features of the world - that are what they are independently of what humans take them to be. Moral beliefs are beliefs in the existence of independent moral properties and moral facts, and moral practice typically involves (not only, but centrally) an attempt to get one's beliefs about the existence and distribution of moral properties and facts in line with how those properties and facts *really are* distributed. Talk of "truth" and "falsity" in moral discourse is used to signal the success or failure of such an endeavour.

Atheistic moral realists, who believe that there are independent moral properties and facts that answer to (at least some of) our moral beliefs fall into two camps: *naturalistic* moral realists and *non-naturalistic* moral realists. The important differences for the purpose of this chapter are as follows: naturalistic moral realists believe that moral properties and facts are similar to the properties and facts that figure in the natural or social sciences (or even that they are *identical* to, or *constituted* by, some such properties and facts) in that they are causally productive and make things happen in the world (Boyd 1989; Brink 1989; Sturgeon 2006). Non-naturalistic moral realists (or "non-naturalists") by contrast believe that moral properties and facts are *not* similar to the properties and facts that figure in the natural or social sciences and that they are *not* causally productive (Shafer-Landau 2003; 2006; FitzPatrick 2008). Some philosophers build in different nuances and intend to signify considerably more when they use the labels "naturalist" and "non-naturalist" (e.g., they mean to signal concerns about the ontological reduction of normativity), but these brief characterisations are in line with widespread usage and will suffice for my purposes here. I will argue that, mainly due to commitment to unguided Darwinism, atheists cannot reasonably believe in the existence of natural *or* non-natural moral properties and facts.

The chapter will proceed as follows. After situating the discussion of Darwinism and *moral* belief in a wider context of philosophical thought about Darwinism and belief, I will turn to consider Sharon Street's recent "Darwinian dilemma" argument against moral realism and raise some criticisms of her argument. I will then turn to a recent Darwinian argument for moral scepticism advanced by Richard Joyce. I will modify and extend Joyce's argument to provide the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism. I will also point out how theists can avoid being victims of these Darwinian arguments, which will be important for the discussion in chapter 5.

1. Unguided Darwinism and true belief

In recent years, a number of philosophers have voiced the thought that a Darwinian or an unguided Darwinian account of human origins (sometimes it is called "Darwinian" but reflection reveals that the philosopher actually has *unguided* Darwinism in mind) is in tension with the notion that we have beliefs that are mostly *true*. Sometimes the worry is with beliefs across the board, although more commonly worries concern certain *domains* of putative knowledge. As will be seen, one such thought that a number of philosophers have endorsed is the thought that unguided Darwinism renders problematic the idea that our *moral* beliefs are mostly true.

The general thrust behind worries that Darwinism or unguided Darwinism sits uneasily with the idea of us being accurate truth-trackers is the observation that natural selection - the engine of Darwinian evolution - can be expected to select for beliefs that are connected to organisms' behaviours that are *adaptive* (behaviours which increase the probability that the organisms exhibiting them will leave offspring), but the beliefs that lead to adaptive behaviour may not be beliefs that are

true. As Stephen Stich voices the problem, “natural selection does not care about truth; it cares only about reproductive success” (quoted in Plantinga 1993, p.222). Or in the words of Patricia Churchland:

“Boiled down to essentials, a nervous system enables the organism to succeed in the four F’s: feeding, fleeing, fighting and reproducing. The principle chore of nervous systems is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive...Improvements in sensorimotor control confer an evolutionary advantage: a fancier style of representing is advantageous *so long as it is geared to the organism’s way of life and enhances the organism’s chances of survival*. Truth, whatever that is, definitely takes the hindmost” (1987, p.548, Churchland’s emphasis).

Stich should perhaps have said that natural selection *might* care about truth, depending upon whether truth is linked to adaptive behaviour and reproductive success. But the worry is that it isn’t clear that truth always *will* be linked to such behaviour and reproductive success. To accept unguided Darwinism is to accept that human beings and other organisms have been cobbled together by a process that ultimately “cares about” producing creatures that survive. *False* beliefs – in combination with appropriate desires – might be just as capable of leading to behaviour that will help their possessor to survive. So natural selection might well provide and preserve false beliefs instead of true ones.

Some philosophers have taken the lesson of these considerations to be that unguided Darwinism renders *all* of our beliefs unwarranted (or renders our beliefs unwarranted if we *accept* unguided Darwinism). For example, in his much-discussed *evolutionary argument against naturalism*, Alvin Plantinga has argued that on the assumption of unguided Darwinism, the probability of an organism’s having mainly true beliefs (in *any* domain of belief) is not high, and that therefore all of the atheistic Darwinist’s beliefs are defeated and unwarranted (see chapter 2, section 1 for a brief explanation of defeaters), including her beliefs in atheism and Darwinism. Thus,

according to Plantinga, atheism (which he calls “naturalism”) is *self-refuting* and cannot rationally be accepted; the one who accepts it thereby obtains reason to give it up.¹

Other philosophers have thought that a Darwinian process (implicitly unguided) is likely to yield creatures with mainly *true* beliefs in some domains, if not in others. They have thought that Darwinian evolution will probably yield creatures with mainly *true* beliefs about everyday objects and their spatial relations and causal powers (the sorts of beliefs that play a crucial role in giving rise to one’s behaviour), even if perhaps not about more abstract and metaphysical issues. For example, when it comes to our inductive beliefs (both those about everyday objects and those that figure in science), Quine held that natural selection would lead to organisms that are reliable, since, “Creatures inveterately wrong in their inductions have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind” (1969, p.126). On the other hand, Thomas Nagel seems less sanguine than Quine about the likelihood that Darwinism will produce organisms that engage in accurate scientific reasoning; he registers his belief that, “[w]ithout something more, the idea that our rational capacity was the product of natural selection would render reasoning far less trustworthy...beyond its original “coping functions”. There would be no reason to trust its results in mathematics and science, for example” (1997, p.135).

Philosophers working in metaethics have also draw upon Darwinism (again, it seems, implicitly *unguided* Darwinism) and argued that the idea that humans have evolved to reliably track objective, independent moral facts is problematic. A little

¹ See Plantinga (1993, ch.12), the essays collected by Beilby (2002), and Plantinga’s debate with Michael Tooley (Plantinga and Tooley 2008). That atheists have reason to embrace moral scepticism is a trivial consequence of the conclusion of Plantinga’s argument, since his conclusion is that atheists have reason to be sceptics about *all* their beliefs. However, Plantinga’s controversial argument will not be assessed here; I provide a *different* argument for the conclusion that atheists should embrace moral scepticism.

over twenty years ago, Michael Ruse urged other philosophers to “take Darwin seriously” and realise the consequences Darwinian evolutionary theory has for metaethics (among other philosophical areas and topics). Ruse argued that Darwinism supports moral error theory – that all of our moral beliefs are false – since in the light of Darwinism, the best explanation of our moral practices is that, “morality is a collective illusion foisted upon us by our genes” (1986, p.253; also see Sommers and Rosenberg 2003). While not necessarily agreeing with Ruse that Darwinism supports *moral error theory*, a sizeable number of philosophers working in metaethics have nevertheless heeded, and are heeding, his advice to take Darwin seriously. A prominent recent example is provided by Allan Gibbard, who voices his concern that Darwinism appears to offer no “deep vindication” of our capacity for making moral judgements: while science provides the resources for us to tell a Darwinian story about why perception (say) might be reliable - organisms that have a great preponderance of true perceptual beliefs over false ones may be more likely to find food, find mates, avoid predators, etc - it doesn’t provide the resources to tell a Darwinian story about why organisms like us would do well to make true *moral* judgements (2003, p.265). As a result, Gibbard counsels, we must simply have a kind of trust, or “faith” that we are good at making true moral judgements (or as he puts it, “judging what is the thing to do”) even though we cannot see how or why we would have evolved to be reliable when it comes to forming beliefs in the moral domain. Other philosophers have made appeals to Darwinian considerations in the course of commending or making plausible their metaethical views.² Indeed, there appears to be something of a growing consensus that Darwinism (or *unguided* Darwinism) does not sit too comfortably with the notion that we are reliable at tracking objective,

² For example, see Blackburn’s essay “How to Be an Ethical Anti-Realist” (in Blackburn 1993, pp.166-181), and Joyce (2001).

independent moral facts. The sorts of considerations many philosophers have appealed to have recently featured (in fresh and improved presentations) in arguments developed at some length by Sharon Street (2006) and Richard Joyce (2006), so their arguments will be considered before Joyce's is modified and shaped into the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism.

2. Sharon Street's Darwinian dilemma

Before engaging with Street's Darwinian dilemma (2006), it will be helpful to provide a summary. The structure of Street's argument is as follows: for *reductio*, assume that there exist objective, independent moral properties and facts such as moral realists believe in, whether *non-natural* properties and facts (as non-naturalistic moral realists maintain) or properties and facts that can figure in causal relations and can or could play a role in causal explanations (as naturalistic moral realists hold). Then reflect on our Darwinian origins (implicitly, I think, *unguided* Darwinian origins), realise the extent to which natural selection has shaped our moral beliefs, and consider the question of what the relation is between (a) those independently existing moral properties and facts and (b) our evolving to form the moral beliefs we have. Is there a relation between them or not? Have we evolved in such a way that our moral beliefs have *tracked* those independent moral truths? If there *is* a relation between the objective moral facts and our evolving to have the beliefs we do, then what *is* it – *how* did moral truth constrain the evolutionary process? According to Street, there is no scientifically respectable answer to this question. So it must be held, she insists, that we have evolved to have moral beliefs in a way that is *unconnected* to the truth of those beliefs. But surely it would be a miraculous and inexplicable coincidence if, given this lack of connection between

the moral facts being what they are and our moral beliefs evolving as they have, we have evolved such that our moral beliefs are mainly *in line with* the independent objective moral truths; it is literally unbelievable. So although we assumed that there are objective moral facts, we must conclude that we are in all likelihood massively mistaken about them. (And in that case, I take it, there isn't much point in thinking they exist – once it has been conceded that if there is a moral realm then our beliefs about it are saturated with error, what reason do we have to think that there *is* such a realm?) So we end up rejecting moral realism, and instead hold that there are no independent moral properties or facts.³ Given the assumptions in play in this chapter, the conclusion to draw is that our moral beliefs are most probably *false*.

That is the outline of Street's argument. I will now consider the argument in greater detail, beginning with the shape that a Darwinian explanation of the origin of moral belief will take.

Street and Joyce (in Joyce 2006) both argue that a Darwinian understanding of our origins (in connection with some empirical work on moral judgement) leads us to think that we make *moral* judgements because we have evolved a biologically-determined (some say "innate") capacity and tendency to do so; furthermore, that this capacity and tendency evolved because of the connection between forming moral beliefs and being motivated to act (especially in being motivated to act in adaptive *cooperative* ways). This doesn't mean that they endorse moral judgement *internalism*, the thesis that it is necessarily true that one who has a moral belief has some motivation, however slight or outweighed by other motivations, to act in accordance

³ Street doesn't conclude that all of our moral judgements are *false*, because she endorses an anti-realist metaethical view she calls *constructivism* (2008), which makes the moral truths depend upon our beliefs about what the moral truths are (and therefore rejects stance-independence). I believe that it suffers from the general problems that views that reject stance-independence suffer from (see my brief comments, and note 26, at the end of chapter 1).

with that belief.⁴ And such a strong thesis is not needed for it to be plausible that our capacity for moral belief evolved because of the role moral belief plays in motivating behaviour (especially adaptive cooperative behaviour); it is enough that moral belief *tends to* influence behaviour with some regularity, as it surely does. The capacity for moral belief may boost all kinds of adaptive behaviours; by thinking that certain behaviours (ones that are adaptive) are morally good or obligatory, and that others (ones that are maladaptive) are morally bad or wrong, organisms are more likely to engage or not engage in the respective behaviours. Therefore, we can understand why natural selection might favour a capacity and tendency to form moral beliefs.

Street believes that we have reason to think that natural selection has indirectly shaped the *content* of our moral beliefs, in addition to giving us the *capacity* for moral belief. The way evolution has done this, Street surmises, is by way of shaping our “proto moral judgements”, where proto moral judgements are somewhat *like* moral judgements but are more primitive and might be shared with apes; they are the sorts of things that cognitively and affectively underlie and constrain (or maybe are evolutionary precursors of) moral judgements. The proto moral judgements then influence the content of our moral judgements, perhaps by constraining what content they can have, or providing a raw base upon which natural selection can go to work. So, via the proto moral judgements, we have inherited a biological tendency to make particular moral judgements.

In support of this contention - that natural selection has had an enormous influence on the *content* of our moral beliefs – Street first draws attention to the different effects on one’s reproductive success that making moral beliefs with

⁴ There is a substantial literature on the question of whether such internalism (sometimes called *motivational* internalism or *appraiser* internalism) is true. For arguments that it is *false*, see Svavarsdóttir (1999) and Zangwill (2008).

different content can have, on the (reasonable) assumption that one's behaviour is at least fairly strongly influenced by the moral judgements one makes. As she puts it:

“It is clear...how fatal to reproductive success it would be to judge that the fact that something would endanger one's survival is a reason to do it, or that the fact that someone is kin is a reason to harm that individual. A creature who accepted such evaluative judgements would run itself off cliffs, seek out its predators, and assail its offspring, resulting in the speedy elimination of it and its evaluative tendencies from the world. In contrast, it is clear how beneficial (in terms of reproductive success) it would be to judge that the fact that something would promote one's survival is a reason in favour of it, or that the fact that something would assist one's offspring is a reason to do it” (p.114).

It is certainly very plausible that natural selection could take an interest in the content of our moral beliefs, or those of our ancestors. Nevertheless, is there any reason to think that it *has*? In support of the view that natural selection has put “relentless” selective pressure on the content of our moral (and other evaluative) judgements, Street lists some judgements, or types of judgements, that she considers to be widespread, both across times and across cultures (p.115):

- (1) The fact that something would promote one's own survival is a reason in favour of it.
- (2) The fact that something would promote the interests of a family member is a reason to do it.
- (3) We have greater obligations to help our own children than we do to help complete strangers.
- (4) The fact that someone has treated one well is a reason to treat that person well in return.
- (5) The fact that someone is altruistic is a reason to admire, praise, and reward him or her.
- (6) The fact that someone has done one deliberate harm is a reason to shun that person or seek his or her punishment.

Street asks what the best explanation of the widespread human tendency to make these judgements is, and answers that, “evolutionary biology offers powerful answers to these questions, very roughly of the form that *these* sorts of judgements

about reasons tended to promote survival and reproduction” (p.115). (Note that Street prefers the language of *reasons*, but everything she says can be stated in terms of moral *obligations*, or what we *ought to do* or *should do*, or what is *good* or *right*, etc.) Human beings have a widespread tendency to make these sorts of judgements (rather than others) because the content of our judgements has been shaped by natural selection.

It is perhaps easiest to see the plausibility of this claim in the case of judgements (1) to (3), for it seems rather obvious how making such judgements, and behaving in accordance with them, would increase the probability that one would have offspring and that those offspring would survive. However, the cooperative behaviours that would be expected as a result of making judgements (4) to (6) are also behaviours that evolutionary biologists and others have explained could be adaptive (see Joyce 2006, pp.13-73).

So, according to Street, the best explanation of why human beings have a tendency to make such judgements is biological and appeals to natural selection: biology has conferred upon us a capacity and tendency to make moral judgements, moral judgements with certain content, because making those judgements is adaptive.

3. First horn of the dilemma

Having established to her satisfaction that the *content* of our moral judgements has been significantly shaped by natural selection, Street goes on to offer moral realists (and realists about *all* value) a dilemma – how do they construe the relation between (a) the independent realist moral facts and (b) the judgements that natural selection has bequeathed us? One way is to affirm some kind of relation; I will return to that strategy in due course. The other way to go is to say that there is *no*

relation: there are independent moral facts and we have evolved to make moral judgements, but our evolution in this matter was unconnected to the moral facts being what they are; the moral facts play no part in the explanation of how we have evolved to make the moral judgements we do. (It seems that the *non-naturalistic* atheistic moral realist would be committed to this view, since he understands the moral facts to play no causal role in what takes place in the world.) But in that case, there is no reason to think that natural selection would provide us with *true* moral beliefs rather than *false* ones. There is reason to think that we would evolve tendencies to make moral judgements that are *adaptive*, but there is no reason to think that we would evolve to make moral judgements that are *true*. Indeed, we should think our moral judgements are probably *false*.

According to Street, the number of possible configurations and patterns of the moral facts that *could* be actual (or *could have been* actual) is vast. To see this, just think of extremely bizarre moral claims. Consider the claims that it is morally wrong to ever speak, or that we have moral reason to wear red, that something's being purple is a reason to scream at it, or that it is a morally bad state of affairs that there are clouds. According to Street, presumably these are real metaphysical possibilities given moral realism – presumably, however values have come to be part of the world and received the pattern and distribution they have, they could have been distributed such that it is morally wrong ever to speak, or that it is morally bad that there are clouds, and so on. There is a veritable ocean of possible moral truths. Contrast this ocean with the relatively small subset of moral judgements that will be adaptive for beings like us humans and which (Street says) we should expect natural selection to provide us with, and which (she also says) we have good reason to think natural selection *has* provided us with. Given all the different moral truths there could have

been, the likelihood that we are lucky enough to live in a universe where the moral truths are happily in line with the judgements we have evolved to make – quite independently of those moral truths – is very small.

As I understand her argument, Street would have us imagine all those possible worlds containing bizarre (to us) distributions of moral properties, in each of which we (or counterparts of us) evolve to make more or less the same moral judgements that we do in the actual world. In the vast majority of those possible worlds, our moral judgements (or, those of our counterparts) will be greatly out of alignment with the distribution of moral properties and facts. So, on the assumption that all the other possible distributions of moral value we can think of really *are* metaphysical possibilities, it is exceedingly more likely that we have evolved to make *false* moral judgements. That is, even if there are independent, objective realist moral facts, it is exceedingly more likely that one of the possible distributions of moral value *other than* the one we have evolved to believe in obtains. So, according to Street, the result of taking this horn of the Darwinian dilemma is the conclusion that most of our moral beliefs are, “in all likelihood mostly off track...[w]e should have been evolving towards affirming the independent evaluative truths posited by the realist, but instead it turns out that we have been evolving towards whatever evaluative content tends to promote reproductive success” (p.122). Furthermore, Street will have no truck with any realist reply that even *if* our moral judgements are “mostly off track”, we can nevertheless correct them by rational reflection and so get at the moral truth *that way*. The problem is that rational reflection - though it plays an important role in forming our moral beliefs – consists in evaluating some moral beliefs in the light of *others*, and if the correctness of the latter have been called into question (as is the case here) then any moral beliefs that are accepted on the basis of

reflection on them will also be in doubt; any appeal to rational reflection involves trying to separate the good judgements from the bad with a tool that is probably contaminated (p.124). So if the realist takes the first horn of the Darwinian dilemma, and holds that there is *no* relation between the realist moral truths and our evolving to make the moral judgements we do, the conclusion is that all of our moral judgements are probably *false*.

4. Second horn of the dilemma

Suppose, then, that the other horn of the Darwinian dilemma is taken: the moral realist avers that there *is* a relation between the independent moral facts and our making the moral judgements that natural selection has bequeathed us. Our complete answer to the question, “Why do we have a widespread tendency to make moral judgements with the content that we do?” is going to appeal to more than the fact that natural selection conferred such judgements upon us; it will include the proposition that we evolved to make those judgements *because they are true*. Somehow, we have evolved such that our moral judgements track the moral truth. However, Street argues that this explanation is untenable, and so this horn cannot really be taken. She raises separate problems for naturalistic and for non-naturalistic moral realism, with the problems for non-naturalism first.

Why, on the assumption of non-naturalism, is the second horn untenable? For one thing, Street says, the explanation that we have evolved to make the judgements we have *because they are true* is obscure: once we have explained, in Darwinian fashion, how we evolved to have a strong tendency to make the moral judgements that we do, how does the alleged explanatory point that we evolved to make such judgements *because they are true* do any additional explaining? Street contrasts this

with explanations about why we have evolved to make the *perceptual* judgements that we do. In the case of perceptual judgements, the best explanation of why we come to make such judgements – e.g., judgements concerning material objects – is plausibly going to involve the *truth* of those judgements. We form perceptual beliefs about rocks and trees, predators and other people (etc) because natural selection has crafted us a certain way; but it has crafted us in the way it has because there *are* rocks and trees, predators and other people, and we can explain the truth of our perceptual judgements by appealing to the fact that having *true* beliefs about such things was more reproductively beneficial to our ancestors than having false ones would be.⁵ (Creatures having many false beliefs about predators or objects that might affect one's chances of living long and finding mates might not live long enough to have many descendants.) In the case of perception, the typical evolutionary explanation of our judgements makes reference to the reliability of those judgements. Things seem very different in the moral case. At least according to the non-naturalistic moral realist's picture, moral facts seem to be of a rather different kind to rocks and trees and predators, objects with spatial extensions and positions which we interact with and might interact with in more adaptive ways if we have true beliefs about them.

In addition, Street claims, taking this horn of the dilemma results in substituting one explanation – the Darwinian one that we have evolved a tendency to make certain moral judgements because making such judgements is adaptive – for a more complicated one: that we have evolved a tendency to make certain moral

⁵ As noted earlier in this chapter, it is a bit contentious whether unguided Darwinism would most likely lead to creatures with true perceptual beliefs – there is Plantinga's argument, after all. Nevertheless, Street's point clearly stands inasmuch as we *understand* what it is to evolve to form certain perceptual beliefs *because they are true*; there remains the contrast with moral beliefs and the idea that we evolved to have *them* because they are true, which certainly seems more obscure (at least on the assumption of non-naturalism).

judgements because making those judgements is adaptive *and because such judgements are true*. Because taking this horn results in an explanation that is less parsimonious (in addition to its being more obscure), it should be rejected. Therefore, the realist is back on the first horn of the dilemma (and ends up with the result that even if there *are* realist moral facts, our judgements about them are probably mostly off track). Even if the existence of such facts is granted, the explanation that we non-accidentally evolved to make moral judgements in line with those facts is too extravagant and obscure to accept.⁶

When it comes to *naturalistic* moral realism (or, as Street calls it, “value naturalism”), the proponent of such a view holds that moral facts exist and can figure in causal relations, often suggesting that moral facts are identical with, or constituted by, other natural facts (Boyd 1989; Brink 1989; Sturgeon 2006). Naturalistic moral realists hold that moral facts *are* the sorts of facts we can bump into and interact with. So the reason that Street has thus far provided for holding that natural selection cannot be expected to provide us with true moral judgements – that moral facts are importantly different from facts about rocks, trees and predators (etc) - seems impotent against naturalistic moral realism. Natural selection might have bequeathed us accurate moral beliefs because we causally interacted with moral facts. This isn’t to say that naturalistic moral realists have a good argument that natural selection *did* or *would* provide us with true moral judgements; rather, it is to say that, if naturalistic moral realism is viable, Street would have failed to show that it *didn’t* or *wouldn’t*.

⁶ There is something a bit strange about Street’s appeal to parsimony, for it seems that if parsimony (and obscurity, for that matter) is such a powerful consideration, her argument against moral realism (or at least non-naturalism) could have been briefer and didn’t need to appeal to Darwinism at all: it is more parsimonious to deny the existence of moral facts (or non-natural moral facts), so they should be rejected. I should also note that I don’t think that the mere fact that believing in moral facts might give one a fuller ontology provides adequate grounds for denying their existence or for embracing moral scepticism. To think otherwise would seem to be too unfair towards moral facts – scepticism about other minds or an external world (say) doesn’t follow from the mere fact that rejecting them could reduce our ontology.

Street argues that the naturalistic moral realist faces a slightly different, but ultimately similar, dilemma. The dilemma has the same structure as the earlier dilemma, but now the dilemma isn't with regard to whether there is a relation between our *moral beliefs* and their truth; it concerns whether there is a relation between the naturalistic moral realist's *beliefs about the identities or constitution relations between moral facts and naturalistic facts* and the truth of those judgements about identities and constitution relations. So whereas the first dilemma found problematic the idea that our moral judgements reliably track the independent moral facts, this modified dilemma finds problematic the idea that naturalistic moral realists' judgements about identity statements involving moral properties and natural properties accurately track the truth about such identities. Again, moral realists (in this case, *naturalistic* moral realists) can either assert or deny that there is a relation between their judgements about identities and the independent truths concerning the identities. If they deny that there is a relation, then they end up with the result that most of their judgements about the identities or constitution relations between moral and naturalistic facts will be "mostly off track". If they assert that there *is* a relation, Street says, they are no better off:

"[I]f the tracking account [that judgements track the truth] failed as a scientific explanation when it came to arguing that we were selected to track independent evaluative truths, then it will fail even more seriously when it comes to arguing that we were selected to track independent facts about natural-normative identities. For it is even more obscure how tracking something as esoteric as independent facts about natural-normative identities could ever have promoted reproductive success in the environment of our ancestors" (p.141).

So, Street argues, finding the second horns of their respective dilemmas unacceptable, moral realists of both naturalistic and non-naturalistic stripes are forced onto the first horn. But that horn leads to the conclusion that, in all probability,

our moral beliefs are massively mistaken. Therefore, moral realism is untenable. Darwinism (or unguided Darwinism) renders utterly implausible the idea that we humans reliably track moral truths that exist independently of what we think about them. Given this chapter's supposition that when we make moral judgements we are indeed trying to track such truths (and that in making moral assertions, we are in part claiming some success in the endeavour), the lesson to draw from Street's argument seems to be that unguided Darwinism implies that all of our moral judgements are probably false.

However, I think that Street's argument fails, and I will explain why in the next few sections. The main reason it is important to see what is wrong with Street's argument is that it perhaps isn't so interesting to argue that atheistic Darwinists should embrace moral scepticism (my main purpose in this chapter) if Street has provided a convincing argument for the stronger conclusion – given the assumptions in play in this chapter - that atheistic Darwinists should embrace *error theory* (according to which all of our moral beliefs are *false*). As I see it, there are at least three problems with the Darwinian dilemma.

5. First problem with the Darwinian dilemma

My first concern centres on Street's claim that natural selection has not simply provided us with a *capacity* (and tendency) for making moral judgements, but has also shaped the *content* of our moral judgements by giving us a biological tendency to form certain ones. In support of this claim, Street provides some examples of types of judgement that are widespread and that, she claims, we would expect natural selection to provide us with because acting upon such judgements

would be adaptive: that the fact that something would benefit a family member is a reason to do it, that we have greater obligations towards our children than we have toward complete strangers, etc (see section 2 above). Street contrasts them with a set of judgements that we humans do *not* have a widespread tendency to make and which, she claims, we would expect Darwinian evolution *not* to provide us with because they wouldn't be adaptive (p.116):

- (1') The fact that something would promote one's survival is a reason against it.
- (2') The fact that something would promote the interests of a family member is a reason not to do it.
- (3') We have greater obligations to help complete strangers than we do to help our own children.
- (4') The fact that someone has treated one well is a reason to do that individual harm in return.
- (5') The fact that someone is altruistic is a reason to dislike, condemn, and punish him or her.
- (6') The fact that someone has done one a deliberate harm is a reason to seek out that person's company and reward him or her.

According to Street, the best explanation of why we humans exhibit a widespread tendency to form the judgements on the first list but not the list above will appeal to evolutionary biology. Darwinism predicts one set of judgements over the other.

However, it isn't clear to me that the set of judgements (1') to (6') couldn't be adaptive. Of course, if we simply consider one or two of the judgements and think of adding those to the set of judgements *we in fact make*, then we will probably do less well evolutionarily. Nevertheless, it doesn't follow from this that a given judgement in the set will be maladaptive within the context of making all of the judgements in *that set*. The set *as a whole* could be adaptive. This is somewhat hard to see, because it is difficult to imagine creatures that think so differently from us that they have a strong tendency to make the judgements in the set above; furthermore, these are only *some* of the judgements that the creatures would make

(just as the judgements Street draws attention to are only *some* of the judgements that we make). Nevertheless, consider a society of creatures that have a widespread tendency to make – and act upon – judgements (2') and (3'). Such creatures shun their own offspring and family members but perhaps have a tendency to help the offspring of others. If all, or many, of the creatures in that society make the same judgements, then all the youngsters in the society might well get looked after, even if each has its interests cared for by elder creatures that are not its family members. A society of such organisms, making those judgements, might do just as well in surviving as a society of organisms who have a strong tendency to look after their *own* offspring. Suppose that the creatures in the hypothetical society we are considering also make judgements (4') and (6'); could the combination of those judgements be adaptive? In such a society, helpers would be treated badly in return for their help and would then do good to those who treated them badly, thus those who were originally helped have had good done to them twice. It might not lead to a very *egalitarian* society, but it isn't clear that the society wouldn't *survive* well. To a large extent, it depends upon how *often* one does good to another and in what circumstances. I think that all we can say is that we would expect natural selection, if it has shaped the content of moral judgements, to provide us with *some* set that is adaptive (or some set that *was* adaptive in the ancestral population). We cannot say that the particular stock of moral judgements that we in fact have a widespread tendency to make is exactly what Darwinism would *predict*.

In addition, even if we can nicely explain why natural selection might favour the judgements that Street draws attention to, others point out that there are *other* widely-held moral judgements that are difficult to explain in terms of natural selection giving us a biological tendency to make them because it isn't clear how

they would be beneficial for our reproduction – e.g., “the widespread belief that it is morally wrong to kill or neglect senile elderly people who cannot survive without great help and who cannot reciprocate adequately or have more children” (Sinnott-Armstrong 2006b, p.43).

Furthermore, there are *alternative* explanations of why we make the moral judgements that we have a widespread tendency to make. For example, the content of moral beliefs may not be biologically determined but rather transmitted culturally through being taught to youngsters and instilled from a young age. It wouldn't be surprising that those societies which have survived have been ones that have taught and passed on moral beliefs that are adaptive. Some contemporary philosophers argue for the plausibility of elements of this sort of story. For example, Jesse Prinz (2008) has argued that there is no good reason to think that the content of our moral judgements is determined by natural selection or biology; and Philip Kitcher has speculated that we might have evolved a capacity for normative guidance, but that the content of moral beliefs may have been broad enough to allow for a number of “experiments in living” (2006, p.173). If a story of this kind is true, we should perhaps expect the moral judgements we have a widespread tendency to make to be ones that are adaptive, just so long as we and our ancestors have been making moral judgements for some time. Therefore, the evidence does not appear to favour Street's account over it.

Given the above, it seems that Street's dilemma for the moral realist disappears. Recall that the dilemma the realist faced was to assert or deny a relation between our evolving to make the moral judgements we do and the truth of those moral judgements. If the content of those moral judgements *isn't* in fact the result of our biology, then it might be the case that our methods of forming moral judgements

are in fact more likely to be reliable. Or to put it another way: according to Street, the problem with viewing our judgements as being greatly influenced by natural selection is that natural selection is not primarily interested in producing *true* belief (hence it would be monumentally lucky - *unacceptably* lucky - if our moral judgements turned out to accurately reflect the independent moral facts). However, if the content of our moral judgements isn't greatly influenced by natural selection, but rather is determined by some other means, then it would seem to be left open that the method by which they are determined *is* conducive to tracking the truth about moral matters.

6. Second problem with the Darwinian dilemma

The second problem centres on what Street calls the "huge universe of logically possible evaluative judgements and truths" (p.122). The assumption is that there are numerous ways in which the moral properties could have been distributed. (Recall bizarre examples such as the fact that something is purple being a reason to scream at it, or it being morally wrong to ever speak.) Once this huge pool of possibilities has been conceded, Street concludes that it is highly unlikely that we happen to find ourselves in a world where we have the happy coincidence that the independent moral truths just happen to match the moral judgements that we have evolved to make.

However, it isn't clear to me that a moral realist must agree with Street here. For while the bizarre scenarios Street draws attention to – e.g., an object's being purple providing a reason to scream at it – are *logical* possibilities (their description involves no contradiction), it nevertheless doesn't follow that they are *metaphysical* possibilities, ways the world really could have been. While logic alone doesn't rule

out the possibility of an object's being purple being a reason to scream at it, or it being morally bad that there are clouds, *logical* possibility and *metaphysical* possibility can come apart. For example, there is no contradiction involved in the idea of entities popping into existence completely uncaused; nevertheless, a good many philosophers think that such a logical possibility is nevertheless a metaphysical *impossibility*. So, granted that the bizarre possibilities Street draws attention to are *logical* possibilities, why should the moral realist grant that they are *metaphysical* possibilities?

Nothing in Street's argument suggests a reason. Furthermore, I think that the realist is unlikely to hold that all of the logical possibilities really are metaphysical possibilities. For one thing, many moral realists – including non-naturalists - hold to the *supervenience* of moral properties on non-moral ones such that, necessarily, actions and states of affairs (etc) that have all *non-moral* properties in common will also have all *moral* properties in common (e.g., Parfit 2006). If so, there are constraints on how moral properties can be distributed. There may be no logical contradiction involved in the idea that there exist two actions exactly alike in their non-moral properties while differing in their moral properties, but nevertheless the moral realist is unlikely to grant that the world really could have been such that this sort of thing actually happened.

Furthermore, there are other reasons for doubting that moral realists will be eager to affirm Street's assumption that there are countless ways in which the moral values really could have been distributed. Moral realists understand moral values to be tethered to actions, persons, states of affairs (etc) in ways *that make sense*. For example, only *agents* can be suitable objects of blame; it doesn't make sense to blame a non-agent object or state of affairs, or to say that something that isn't an

agent (my car, perhaps) did something morally wrong. Furthermore, the connection between moral properties and the objects that exemplify them must be intelligible to us. We cannot understand how an object's being purple *could* (in itself) provide a reason to scream at it (at least, *I* can't). But it seems intelligible to many of us that (e.g.) an action's causing distress to others might (in itself) make it wrong to perform. If this is so, then it isn't clear why moral realists must grant that the moral properties they affirm really could have had any manner of distribution. On this score, compare moral properties and moral reasons with *epistemic* properties and *epistemic* reasons. Suppose one holds that there are objective reasons to believe certain propositions in certain circumstances. Must one who grants this also grant that there are all manner of bizarre ways in which epistemic properties and reasons really (metaphysically) *could have been* distributed? For instance, might it have been the case that perceiving an apple in itself gives one reason to believe that one has a headache? Could my belief that I am sitting at a desk have had the property of supporting (all on its own) the belief that there exists intelligent life on other planets? It really isn't at all clear to me that an epistemic realist has to grant such bizarre logical possibilities as real metaphysical possibilities. Likewise, I suggest, for the *moral* realist.

Indeed, not only might moral realists *not* accept that there is a vast number of diverse ways in which the moral properties could have been distributed, they might also consider the continued existence of us or our species to be obviously a good thing and think it couldn't have failed to be (unless, perhaps, the goodness of survival was outweighed by other factors). If so, realists might not be troubled by the idea that we have the moral beliefs we do because of their adaptive value, since they would expect that the *true* moral beliefs will by and large be ones that positively evaluate behaviours that are adaptive and negatively evaluate behaviours that are

maladaptive. At least, realists might not be troubled to the extent that they consider themselves to have reason to believe that the moral judgements we have a widespread tendency to make are in all likelihood *false*. Street might well reply that the limitation on which distributions of moral properties the moral realist finds intelligible, possible, or probable has *itself* come about by way of Darwinian evolution and that therefore such considerations can carry little weight; indeed, perhaps she would urge a *new* dilemma concerning the metaphysically possible distributions of moral properties and *our beliefs about such possibilities* - after all, it is difficult to see why it should be evolutionarily advantageous for us to be able to accurately track the truths about which distributions of moral properties are possible. However, although I cannot develop and assess such an argument here, I suggest that an argument along these lines is going to be most convincing if its conclusion is not that most of our moral judgements are *false*, but rather that their being false is such a *live possibility* that (given the assumption of unguided Darwinism) moral scepticism is to be embraced. After all, if we cannot trust our beliefs about metaphysically possible distributions of moral properties, then the claim that there *are* vast numbers of possibilities (which Street's argument currently employs) cannot be accepted. At the same time, moral realists who accept unguided Darwinism might lose any grounds for holding that there *aren't* vast numbers of ways in which the moral properties could have been distributed. As I say, I suspect that this line of argument may lead to a conclusion of moral scepticism - the atheistic Darwinist may not have reason to hold that all of her moral beliefs are probably *false*, but she might have reason to consider that a very live possibility.

7. Third problem with the Darwinian dilemma

The third problem with Street's argument concerns her modified dilemma for naturalistic moral realism. As I explained, Street's challenge centres upon our ability to accurately grasp the truths about natural-normative identities. However, I think that her argument fails here, because the claim that we are able to recognise natural-normative identities doesn't appear to be a claim that naturalistic moral realists must endorse. According to naturalistic moral realism, moral properties and facts are natural properties and facts; it doesn't follow from this that we *know*, or even reasonably believe, what the natural-moral (or natural-normative) identities *are*. Indeed, Street actually acknowledges this earlier on in her paper, writing that according to naturalistic moral realists, "we may or may not ever be able to provide a reduction telling exactly which natural properties evaluative properties are identical with" (p.112). In addition, she mentions in a footnote that prominent naturalistic moral realists Nicholas Sturgeon, Richard Boyd and David Brink "think that such reductions may not be, and need not be, forthcoming" (p.157, n.6). Furthermore, some naturalistic moral realists hold that not only might we never be able to identify natural-moral identities, but we might in fact have no *non-moral* terms that pick out the moral properties (in other words, there may not *be* natural-moral identities).

According to Sturgeon:

[“I]t seems extravagant to assume that we have nonethical terms for all natural properties. To take just one consideration, the paradigm examples of natural properties are those dealt with by the sciences...But a standard feature of scientific progress has been terminological innovation, in which new terms are introduced for properties not previously recognised, and there is no reason to think that this process is or ever will be at an end. So there is no assurance that, if “good” or some other transparently ethical term stands for a natural property, this must be a property that we can (or even: will be able to) also represent with nonethical terminology” (2006, p.99).

If naturalistic moral realism can be viable in the absence of any warrant for accepting natural-moral (or natural-normative) identities (and Street has not argued otherwise), then the naturalistic moral realist is free to respond to Street's original dilemma by *affirming* a relation between the independent moral truths and our moral judgements. For example, the naturalistic moral realist can endorse an account whereby our ancestors evolved in circumstances where (a) there were causally productive moral properties, (b) the moral properties were salient and of interest to them so far as their survival and reproduction was concerned, and so (c) it became evolutionarily beneficial to be able to make judgements that accurately tracked those properties. According to such an account, part of the explanation why we evolved to make those moral judgements would indeed be *because they are true*.⁷

In summary, Street's Darwinian dilemma is problematic as she states it. So we have not been given reason to think that unguided Darwinism suggests the *falsity* of all of our moral beliefs. I suspect that Street's argument can be improved by tweaking it and making it an argument for *moral scepticism*; however, I think that it would probably need to be tweaked in the direction of a modified version of Richard Joyce's argument, to which I now turn.

8. Richard Joyce's Darwinian argument

Joyce's argument (2006, ch.6) is in some ways similar to Street's. In the chapters leading up to it, he explains the different sorts of helping and cooperative behaviours that could or would be adaptive, and argues that we have evolved a

⁷ This isn't to say that such accounts don't face other problems; e.g., when it comes to adequately accounting for moral semantics (see Timmons and Horgan (1992)). However, such objections are different from the Darwinian dilemma.

capacity for making moral judgements as a biological adaptation which boosts the likelihood of engaging in such behaviours due to moral judgements' motivational contribution (judging that an action is right or obligatory, etc, raises the probability that we will perform it). However, Joyce's argument differs from Street's in that it does not involve the claim that natural selection has provided us with a biologically-based widespread tendency to make moral judgements with a *particular content*. (This isn't to say that Joyce *denies* that natural selection has shaped the content of our moral beliefs (2006, pp.13-73), only that such a claim doesn't appear necessary for his argument.) Joyce does claim that there is good reason to hold that natural selection has given us a faculty of moral belief and that we have a biologically-based (or innate) tendency to employ moral concepts.⁸ Appealing to evidence such as the widespread occurrence of moral evaluation throughout societies - both contemporary and down the ages - and studies on children's development (pp.134-139), he argues that a biological explanation of our capacity for moral judgement and our tendency to evaluate morally is the "best story we have" (p.139).

Joyce's argument differs from Street's in that he directs it towards non-naturalistic moral realism but *not* naturalistic moral realism. Indeed, Joyce supplements it with *independent* arguments against naturalistic moral realism. So as I explain Joyce's argument, it should be borne in mind that he presents it against *non-naturalistic* realism.

Earlier I documented that Street provides a contrast between a Darwinian explanation of our beliefs in objects like rocks and trees – which would also hold for our having the *concepts* "tree", "rock" and other material object concepts – and an evolutionary explanation of our *moral* beliefs. The existence of material objects

⁸ At least, in his (2006); see below.

features in the explanation of why we have beliefs about material objects, but we can explain *moral* beliefs without needing to appeal to the existence of moral properties and facts. This general point goes back to Gilbert Harman, who in an influential argument against the existence of objective moral properties and facts (1977, ch.1) contrasted our explanations of (a) somebody's making a *moral* judgement based on observation and (b) a scientist making a *scientific* judgement based upon observation. Harman argued that in order to explain the scientist's judgement (e.g., that there is a proton in a cloud chamber), we will appeal to the truth of the judgement. In the moral case, he claimed, we do *not* need to appeal to the truth of the judgement, or allow that there are *any* moral properties and facts; we need only appeal to facts about how the moral sensibility of the person who makes the judgements came into being (facts about the agent's upbringing and history, etc). According to Harman, unless moral facts can be reduced to facts that figure in the psychological history of the person making the judgement, we have no reason to believe in their existence, because we can do all of our explaining without them.

Joyce's argument is very similar to Harman's, and draws its inspiration from it, as he himself acknowledges. It differs in that it appeals (as Street appeals) to the *evolutionary* history, rather than the *psychological* history, of the person making the judgement. Whereas, on the assumption that when we form moral beliefs we at least in part attempt to track independent moral facts, the conclusion of Street's argument is that our moral beliefs are likely to be *false*, Joyce argues that our moral beliefs are *unwarranted*. The reason for this conclusion is that the Darwinian account of why we have a capacity for moral judgement shows that we would have evolved to employ moral concepts *whether any non-naturalistic properties correspond to them or not* and that therefore we must treat it as a very live possibility that we have evolved

such a capacity but there *aren't* any non-natural moral properties. (That is, we obtain a defeater for our moral beliefs – see chapter 2, section 1 for a brief explanation of defeaters.) We have evolved to attribute moral properties (to employ moral concepts) as a consequence of our biology, and this may well be mere “projection” with no properties out there to correspond to our beliefs. Joyce goes on to argue that the existence of this live possibility provides us with a reason to withhold belief in moral claims (at least, if *naturalistic* moral realism isn't an option); all of our moral beliefs are epistemically unwarranted.

In arguing to the conclusion that all of our moral judgements are epistemically unwarranted - or moral scepticism⁹ - Joyce appeals to non-moral analogies involving “Napoleon belief pills”. The idea is that such a pill provides the person who swallows it with beliefs about Napoleon. Suppose that you are going about your life with the belief that Napoleon lost Waterloo, but then come to realise that you previously swallowed a Napoleon belief pill. All that you know about the pill is that it will have given you some belief or beliefs about Napoleon; you don't know which one(s). Furthermore, you have no independent reason to believe that a Napoleon belief pill is more likely to give you a *true* belief about Napoleon than a *false* one. All you know is that one or more of your beliefs about Napoleon will have been caused by the pill.

In the light of your newfound awareness that you swallowed such a pill, your belief that Napoleon lost Waterloo becomes suspect. You haven't been given reason to think that it is *false*, but you have lost reason to believe it is *true* and you have been given reason to withhold assent to it. After all, one or more of your beliefs about Napoleon is the result of swallowing the pill, and who knows whether it will

⁹ Joyce is happy for this to be called “error theory” (p.223), although he has elsewhere (2001) used that name for the position that all of our moral judgements are false, which is the more usual meaning.

have given you a true belief or a false one? Furthermore, you realise that as a result of swallowing the Napoleon belief pill, you would have at least one belief about Napoleon even if he didn't exist, even if the name "Napoleon" didn't have any real existing referent. In the light of this, if you can't remember *learning* your particular belief about Napoleon, or if you don't know that you held it *before* you swallowed the pill (perhaps from a coherent set of memories in which you told someone about Napoleon, evincing prior knowledge), your Napoleon belief is surely unwarranted. According to Joyce, the thing to do in such a case is to give up your belief about Napoleon as too dubious and go to the history books to gain beliefs about Napoleon that you can be warranted in accepting.

On the assumption that for our moral judgements to be true they have to correspond to *non-naturalistic* moral facts, Joyce believes that our position with respect to our moral judgements is relevantly similar to the position of someone who has taken a Napoleon belief pill. Our moral beliefs aren't *caused by* moral facts, just like our belief about Napoleon that results from the pill isn't *caused by* facts about Napoleon. In both cases, we have reason to think that our beliefs of a certain sort result from a process that would provide us with beliefs of that sort even if their objects (moral properties, Napoleon) were (or are) non-existent. In the Napoleon belief pill example, when we realise that we would have had beliefs of the sort in question even if their object (Napoleon) did not exist, we have reason to give up our Napoleon belief as unwarranted and go to the history books to look for confirmation for it; likewise, when we realise that we would have had moral beliefs even if there were (or are) no non-naturalistic moral facts, we have reason to give up our moral beliefs. An important difference is that in the moral case there is no independent source that we can consult in order to confirm our moral beliefs. Even if we were to

ask other people, their moral beliefs are as much in doubt as ours, since their capacity for making moral judgements has the same origin as ours - it is as though we had swallowed a Napoleon belief pill and in addition knew that all the history book authors had, too, before writing their books.¹⁰

9. Joyce's argument modified and extended – the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism

Given the assumptions of unguided Darwinism and that the best explanation of our tendency to engage in moral evaluation and employ moral concepts is that it is biologically determined (or innate), rather than resulting from our learning from our environment and being taught, etc, I think that Joyce's argument is convincing. However, this crucial latter assumption it depends on has recently been challenged; it has been argued that all of the evidence Joyce cites in favour of that claim can be explained in other ways (Prinz 2008, pp.221-224). In response, Joyce seems to have relinquished the claim that a biological explanation of our tendency to engage in moral evaluation is the *best* explanation, although he argues that there is nothing to support the *denial* of the hypothesis (Joyce 2008, pp.245-254). But without the claim that the *best* explanation of our engaging in moral judgement is that our doing so is determined by our biology (or is innate), the Napoleon belief pill example seems inapt, since in that example you have good reason to think that you will have a belief about Napoleon *that has been* produced by a pill.

¹⁰ For a similar argument to Joyce's, see Ruse (1986, pp.250-256) . Ruse asserts that a Darwinian explanation for why we have moral beliefs makes "an objective foundation for morality" (or, independent non-natural moral properties and facts) redundant and that the idea that morality is objective is "illusory". However, it might well be thought a bit quick to move from objective moral facts not being *necessary* for explaining why we have moral beliefs to the idea that *there aren't any*; Joyce's approach – arguing for moral scepticism – seems to be a strategy more likely to convince.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the argument can be modified so that it remains convincing and makes atheists' embrace of both non-naturalistic moral realism and naturalistic moral realism untenable. In what follows, I will explain how, developing *the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism*.

The important thing to note is that although Joyce's argument is admittedly weakened by the loss of the claim that the *best* explanation of our capacity to evaluate morally is biological, it can nevertheless be *strengthened* (at least if directed at atheists) by drawing upon the "queerness" of moral facts. While there is nothing that seems strange, on the face of it, about the putative fact that Napoleon lost Waterloo or about typical putative facts about Napoleon, the same is not true when it comes to putative *moral* facts. Many philosophers have found moral properties and facts to be suspicious entities because the attribution of moral properties brings with it a strange kind of authoritative bidding. I think this is the most important element of the queerness of moral properties and facts; the classic statement is provided by Mackie (1977, ch.1), but it is perhaps put best by Richard Garner:

"Moral facts are not just unusual in the way that facts about quarks and black holes are unusual, they are unusual in an unusual way – they demand. If a moral fact obtains, then we have a duty or a right to do something, which is to say that there is a legitimate and justifiable directive that *applies to* us, a directive that we can ignore or disobey, but one from which we cannot escape" (1990, p.143).

The world may contain many strange entities and surprises, Garner says, but the strangeness of putative moral properties and facts goes beyond typical strangeness. He goes on to note that it "is hard to believe in objective prescriptivity because it is hard to make sense of a demand without a demander" (p.143), a particularly important point when what is at issue is whether *atheists* can believe that such prescriptivity is a real feature of the world (this is sometimes given as a reason

for thinking that moral obligations are best explained as directives from God). While “[e]ven the most vile of poisons does not say, ‘Don’t drink me’” (p.137), if there really are moral properties and facts then it is almost as if actions - to take one example of an object of moral evaluation - come along with a tag that says, “Don’t do this”. This strange nature of putative moral properties and facts is one of the reasons metaethics exists as a branch of philosophy devoted to trying to make sense of them in the first place.

Some philosophers have considered this reason enough to *reject* the existence of moral properties and facts: they are too strange and alien in an atheistic universe – as Garner says, they seem like demands, but atheists don’t believe in a demander who could have issued them.¹¹ However, it is clear that there are many atheistic moral realists who are not convinced that moral facts are *unacceptably* strange, and I find it difficult to see how Garner (say) could convince atheists who have that reaction that they are wrong. If they do not find moral properties and facts *too* strange to be *possible* entities in an atheistic universe (and thus do not see that they should believe that there *are no* moral properties and facts), what more can be said to show them that they *should* deny the existence of such entities? However, it does seem to me that the queerness of putative moral facts at least makes them *very suspicious* on the assumption of atheism. And I think that this is a claim that atheists

¹¹ Joyce (2001) has argued that there are no moral properties or facts on the basis that (1) moral facts would give us reasons regardless of what desires we have (*categorical*, or *external* reasons), and (2) we cannot make sense of such reasons. (I think his arguments have been effectively criticised (see Shafer-Landau 2005).) Joyce has also drawn on the first point to argue against metaethical accounts that try to reduce moral facts to non-moral facts (2006, pp.190-209). The queerness of moral facts that I am drawing attention to is that, whether or not we think they provide us with categorical or external reasons, we take moral facts to issue a kind of prescriptivity and to *apply* to us or be *directed* at us (like demands) regardless of our desires. Furthermore, I am not arguing that the queerness of morality provides a reason for atheists to *deny* the existence of moral properties and facts.

Sinnott-Armstrong also discusses Darwinian considerations and the queerness of moral facts (though, strangely, he doesn’t discuss quite the kind of queerness that Garner points to) and claims that these *at most* yield grounds for moral scepticism without arguing that they in fact *do* (2006b, pp.40-53).

who believe that moral properties and facts are not *unacceptably* queer can more plausibly be brought to agree with.

Suppose that Joyce's Napoleon belief pill example is modified to take the considerations I have mentioned in this section into account. Since it is not clear that the *best* explanation of our applying moral concepts is a biological one (as Joyce originally argued), the example will not involve having good evidence that you *did* take a pill that would give you such a belief whether it is true or false. However, it will leave that *a live possibility*; you will not judge it at all *unlikely* that your belief had that cause (so as to reflect the atheist's acceptance of unguided Darwinism, the motivational role of our moral beliefs, and how the other evidence regarding the cause of our moral beliefs appears to stand – compare Prinz (2008) and Joyce (2008)). In addition, your belief about Napoleon will be one that is strange and puzzling in the same way that putative moral facts are queer. Although you are inclined to believe a certain thing about Napoleon, that belief nevertheless puzzles you; it looks odd and suspicious given your other beliefs about the world. Unfortunately, it is difficult to think of a putative fact about Napoleon that would really be strange in the way that moral facts are (and yet not so strange that you would immediately believe that it was *false*). I think that a putative fact involving strange behaviour might be the best that we can do:

Suppose that you are merrily going about your life holding a few beliefs about Napoleon. One of the beliefs you have is the belief that Napoleon once killed a camel with his bare hands because of the way it looked at him. When you consider the putative fact of Napoleon's having done so, it strikes you as bizarre behaviour and a putative fact that you would be doubtful of if you hadn't learned of it through

reliable channels, as you assume you have done (you don't remember). Perhaps it is one of those facts reflection on which sometimes leads you to the thought that the truth can be stranger than fiction. One day, you gain some information about an event that transpired several years earlier. You remember that, at the time in question, you accidentally swallowed a pill. At the time, it didn't have any obvious effects. What you now learn about that event is that it is a live possibility – you do not judge it at all unlikely – that the pill you swallowed was a Napoleon belief pill. You know that if you swallowed a Napoleon belief pill, then it would provide you with a belief about Napoleon that could be true or false. Your thoughts turn to your belief – which you have considered strange on more than one occasion when reflecting on it – that Napoleon once killed a camel with his bare hands because of the way that it looked at him...

It seems to me that in the example above, (a) the strangeness of the Napoleon belief you have, combined with (b) the fact that you consider it a *live* possibility (not simply a *mere* possibility) that your belief has a certain origin that you have no reason to think is more likely to give you a true Napoleon belief than a false one (and which therefore nicely explains why you might hold a *false* Napoleon belief) means that (c) you should consider it a very live possibility that your belief in this strange putative fact about Napoleon is *a false belief that has resulted from taking a Napoleon belief pill* and you should be a sceptic with regard to that belief.

I believe that atheistic Darwinists are in a similar predicament. They face (a) the queerness of putative moral properties and facts. They should (b) consider it a *live* possibility (much more than a *mere* possibility) that their moral beliefs have resulted from a biologically-based tendency to form such beliefs that has been

shaped by unguided Darwinism, given their belief in unguided Darwinism and the motivational role of moral beliefs (which makes it very plausible that we have them because of their connection to adaptive behaviour). If unguided Darwinism gives organisms a biologically-based tendency to form moral beliefs, we have no reason to think it is more likely that those beliefs will be true than that they will be false (recall Churchland's comments about truth "taking the hindmost") – only that having them will be *adaptive* - and therefore such an explanation can nicely explain why we might hold moral beliefs that are all *false*. Given all of this, (c) atheists should consider it a very live possibility that our moral beliefs are *false beliefs that have resulted from a biology shaped to produce moral beliefs for reasons of adaptive behaviour rather than truth*.

Although this may not be enough to provide reason for atheists to believe that there *are no* moral properties or facts, I think that it robs atheists' moral beliefs of warrant and provides reason for them to accept moral scepticism.¹² Given unguided Darwinism and atheism, the motivational role that moral beliefs play, and the queer nature of putative moral properties, the idea that we have evolved to believe in moral properties in a world that is actually devoid of them - or we can say, to *project* moral properties onto a world devoid of them - is just too live a possibility for atheists to be warranted in believing that there *are* moral properties and facts. (I will call that live possibility the "streamlined evolutionary story" – it is streamlined because it rejects the existence of moral properties and facts.)

¹² It might be wondered whether this is in tension with my criticisms of Sinnott-Armstrong in chapter 2, where I argued that he treats moral beliefs as being too easily rendered unwarranted. I don't think so. Although Sinnott-Armstrong appealed to the mere possibility and plausibility *in others' eyes* of dubious origins for moral belief, the atheist faces more than that: there is the acceptance of unguided Darwinism, the way in which the motivational role of moral belief fits in with a biological account, and (very importantly) the queerness of putative moral properties and facts; note that this important latter point did not figure at all in Sinnott-Armstrong's challenges.

As I see it, the above gives atheists reason to embrace moral scepticism regardless of whether they are initially inclined to non-naturalism or to naturalistic moral realism - whether they are inclined to view moral properties and facts as being causally productive entities or not. Even if one is *inclined* to think that we have evolved to accurately track causally productive moral properties and that the correct explanation of why we form moral beliefs *would* make reference to the existence of moral properties and facts, absent an *argument* that this scenario is significantly more plausible than the streamlined evolutionary story, it seems to me that atheists have reason to be moral sceptics – the streamlined evolutionary story is too live a possibility. I don't think that any additional argument that naturalistic moral realism is *false* is needed; it is enough that there isn't good reason to think that naturalistic moral realism is significantly more likely to be *true* than the streamlined evolutionary story.

However, it may be replied that my modified Napoleon belief pill example is not analogous to the situation the atheist is in with her moral beliefs, and that there is reason to think that naturalistic moral realism *is* more plausible. For, whereas in the Napoleon belief pill example you initially hold your belief simply because it seems to you to be true, naturalistic moral realists often hold that moral beliefs and a belief in naturalistic moral realism can be warranted in a further way, making reference to the phenomenon of *moral explanations*. The most prominent philosopher who appeals to moral explanations in order to argue for naturalistic moral realism is probably Nicholas Sturgeon. In a number of places, he has over the years appealed to the fact that we can – and do – explain why people act in various ways by referring to moral character traits (e.g., that they were evil) and that we can – and do - explain examples like the unrest within a society by appealing to its injustice (see, e.g.,

Sturgeon 1985). He has tried to counter the work of Gilbert Harman and his argument (briefly mentioned in the previous section) that we do *not* need to appeal to moral facts in order to provide satisfying explanations.¹³

Those who argue that we do *not* need to appeal to moral properties or facts in order to provide adequate explanations typically point out that moral properties are taken to supervene upon bases of *non-moral* properties and aver that the causal, explanatory work is really done by the non-moral supervenience bases and not the putative moral properties. (For example, an instance of alleged injustice will involve people in a particular situation, and it can be argued that it is only the *non-moral* facts about the people and the situation that are actually causally productive.) It should be noted that it is doubtful whether an ability to explain without referring to moral properties provides good reason to *reject* the claim that moral properties exist and are causally efficacious, for – as many naturalistic moral realists have noted – parity of reasoning would support the problematic conclusion that, if everything ultimately supervenes upon the basic properties of physics, *only the basic properties of physics* exist and are causally efficacious.¹⁴ However, *if* adequate explanation could be provided by only appealing to the supervenience base of putative moral properties, this would seem to remove the possible warrant for favouring the view that there *are* moral properties and facts over the streamlined evolutionary story, according to which there aren't any. And the mere fact that we engage in offering moral explanations would not be surprising if we mistakenly project moral properties and facts onto a world devoid of them.

¹³ The debate between Sturgeon and Harman had several episodes. Brad Majors (2007) provides a good account of the debate; see also Miller (2003, pp.140-149).

¹⁴ Majors says: "It would surely be quite absurd to regard only basic physics as causally efficacious, on the grounds that only basic physical properties do not supervene upon other properties. And this would appear to be the ultimate result of thinking employed here by the opponent of moral explanations" (2007, p.9). Many others have made the same point.

Although the treatment must be brief, I believe that the arguments of those who claim that there is an explanatory need for us to believe in moral properties and facts *fail*. I will illustrate by way of a recent example. Brad Majors has recently argued that adequate explanation *cannot* be provided by appealing to the non-moral supervenience bases of (putative) moral properties *alone*. He provides the example of explaining a society's revolt by appealing to the injustice manifested in the society beforehand, and draws attention to the counterfactual claim *if the society had not been unjust, there would have been no revolt*. Not only is this counterfactual one we are initially warranted in believing is true (let us suppose), Majors argues that it cannot simply be replaced with a counterfactual that makes *no reference* to a moral property (the moral property in this case being injustice). He writes:

“Suppose that the injustice of the society supervened upon naturalistic [non-moral] properties N_1, N_2, \dots, N_n . It is not true that had these naturalistic properties not been instantiated, the revolt would not have occurred. This is because the property of being unjust is multiply realizable” (2007, p.10).

If Majors is right, we have a counterfactual claim we are initially warranted in accepting, and which suggests that a moral property (injustice) is responsible for a causal outcome – a revolt. The injustice *explains* why the revolt occurred. Furthermore, we cannot explain the occurrence of the revolt *without* reference to the injustice (by appealing to the non-moral properties the injustice is taken to supervene upon), because we will not have a true counterfactual if we replace its mention of injustice with mention of the non-moral properties in the supervenience base. This is because we can alter the non-moral properties a little (e.g., suppose a poor member of the society had 1p more than they actually do) and the revolt would still occur. If we alter the *moral* properties (so that there would not be injustice), then the revolt would *not* occur. If belief in the property of injustice is eschewed or withheld, we

will not be able to explain as well as we can, because we will lose this counterfactual and have nothing suitable to replace it with. Therefore, we should believe that there is a causally and explanatorily relevant property of injustice. The same will apply for lots of other moral properties in other explanations.

As I see it, the problem with Majors' argument is that, although he thinks he has discovered a counterfactual that cannot be adequately replaced with a counterfactual that does *not* make reference to a moral property, a counterfactual that makes reference to psychological properties may be sufficient. I think that instead of appealing to the property of *being unjust*, we could appeal to the property of *being considered unjust by the members of the society*, or *causing the members of the society discontent*, or some such non-moral property as that (depending on exactly how the scenario is envisaged). It seems to me that such a counterfactual would be as explanatory as the one Majors provides. For example, if we change the circumstances of society so that a poor member has 1p more, the physical supervenience base changes but the fact that *the society is perceived to be unjust by its members* or the fact that *the members of the society experience discontent* will *not*. And we would expect psychological facts such as these to co-vary with the (putative) facts about injustice; after all, it is hard to envisage an injustice *that is not believed to be an injustice* or *that does not lead to any discontent* causing a revolt. But if these putative facts co-vary, then it appears that whenever an explanation that makes reference to moral facts is offered, it could be replaced with an explanation that instead makes reference merely to *psychological* facts. Majors is right in thinking that the counterfactual *if the society had not been unjust, there would have been no revolt* is true while it is not true that *if the non-moral supervenience base N_1, N_2, \dots, N_n had not occurred, there would have been no revolt*, and therefore appeal to

N_1, N_2, \dots, N_n does not provide as good an explanation as does appeal to moral properties and facts. However, alter N_1, N_2, \dots, N_n in such a way that (we think) the injustice remains and, I suggest, the psychological facts about believed injustice and/or dissatisfaction will also remain. But in that case, we *can* do the explaining by way of non-moral properties, and so there is no reason to favour naturalistic moral realism over the streamlined evolutionary story. What is really true may simply be that *if it hadn't been believed that the society was unjust, there would have been no revolt* or *if there hadn't been widespread discontent, there would have been no revolt*.¹⁵

In summary, then, on the assumption that our moral beliefs try to track independent moral truths, atheists have reason to embrace moral scepticism. Given the acceptance of unguided Darwinism, according to which we have come into existence via a process that is primarily “interested in” adaptive behaviour rather than truth, given the motivational role that moral beliefs play (making it plausible that they result from our biology and that we have them primarily because of their survival value), and given the suspicious nature of moral properties and facts in an atheistic universe, atheists should view it as a very live possibility that the streamlined evolutionary story is true and that we have evolved to project moral properties and facts onto a world devoid of them. No doubt *some* will think that all of this – or even just some of it - provides reason for atheists to *endorse* the streamlined evolutionary story. However, as I have mentioned when discussing Garner’s

¹⁵ I owe this line of thinking to Carson (2000, ch.7), who provides other non-moral explanations - many of which make reference to people’s beliefs and psychology - in response to the claims of naturalistic moral realists that *moral* explanations are indispensable or more powerful than *non-moral* ones. For example, Sturgeon has appealed to the explanation that large-scale moral opposition to slavery arose when and where it did because slavery was *worse* in such times and places; Carson provides an explanation that appeals to humans’ moral beliefs about slavery and to human sympathy (pp.194-195).

comments on the queerness of morality, it is difficult to see how one could convince atheists who are not persuaded that moral properties and facts should be rejected as *too* queer. My claim is that the very real possibility of this story given atheism provides reason for atheists to embrace moral scepticism. Furthermore, since atheists are committed to the idea that we have come about by way of a process that fundamentally “cares about” reproductive success (and truth only insofar as it is connected to that goal), with no other plausible atheistic explanation on the horizon, it seems to me that the idea that we have evolved to have moral beliefs that are evolutionarily beneficial but *false* will *remain* a very live possibility for atheists and it can be expected that they will not lose these grounds for moral scepticism.¹⁶

10. Theism and Darwinian metaethical arguments

A few comments about theism and the arguments surveyed in this chapter are in order. I have explained in chapter 1 why I don't think it is epistemically mandatory for theists to embrace Darwinism. If I am right about that, then theists do not have to see our capacity for moral judgement as something that has a very good chance of having come into existence primarily because of its motivating effects and adaptive value rather than a capacity God has created us with because it is a means of acquiring true beliefs. (Theists can happily hold to the idea that true moral beliefs are also adaptive; it might be surprising if God created us such that we were unlikely to

¹⁶ Sinnott-Armstrong (2006b) believes that the idea that there are no moral facts – which he calls “moral nihilism” - isn't taken seriously in everyday contexts and that moral beliefs are justified (or warranted) out of a “modest contrast class” that contains the scenarios we take seriously in everyday contexts even if they are *not* justified out of a contrast class that contains moral nihilism. (He is sceptical about which contrast class is “relevant” for *real* justification.) However, it seems to me that even if we don't treat moral nihilism as a serious possibility without motivation (just like we don't treat brain-in-vats hypotheses as serious possibilities without motivation), the live and very real possibility (to the atheist) that there are no moral facts is one that could and would be taken seriously in everyday contexts if it became *widely acknowledged* as a live possibility, and I see no reason to think it isn't able to rob atheists' moral beliefs of warrant in everyday contexts.

survive by acting in accordance with correct moral judgements.) Likewise, theists who accept Darwinism can suppose that God guided our evolution so that we came to have moral truths that match a pre-existing moral reality, at least much of the time (e.g., when suitable reflection and lack of distortion takes place). Or if God is able to render many of the moral facts what they are by His will or commands,¹⁷ He could even render them what they are *after*, or *because*, we have evolved the tendencies we have, in the light of those tendencies. If any such proposal (or a combination of them) is available, then theists can embrace the second horn of Street's dilemma: they can hold that there *is* a connection between our evolving to make the moral judgements we do and the truth of those judgements - God provides the connection. And while Joyce has claimed that proponents of theistic metaethics (he mentions divine command theorists) face the same problem as non-naturalists, in that moral facts are not needed to explain our moral beliefs and so can be economically shaved from theists' ontologies, providing theists with no reason to believe in them (2006, p.210), this assumes (1) that theists must embrace Darwinism (which I have suggested is false), and (2) that theists cannot gain warrant for their moral beliefs from their theistic beliefs. But this second assumption is doubtful: many theists believe that there is good reason for them to accept theism (see, e.g., Plantinga 2000; Copan and Moser 2003; Swinburne 2004; Abraham 2006; Craig 2008), and it is not clear that theism will sit comfortably with the idea that God may well have created us so that we suffer from a massive illusion when it comes to beliefs that strike us as so important and significant to our understanding of human life as our moral beliefs do. So if there *are* good reasons for theists to be theists, it seems that theists will have

¹⁷ See the introduction for some brief comments on the "Euthyphro dilemma". For a recent defence of a natural law approach – another option for theists – that takes into account evolutionary biology and psychology, see Boyd (2007). See also Haarsma (2004) on the compatibility of Darwinism and theistic approaches to ethics.

good reason not to embrace moral scepticism, even though the rejection of moral truths corresponding to our moral beliefs would reduce their ontology. Furthermore, to my knowledge nobody argues that moral properties or facts are objectionably or suspiciously queer and bizarre in a *theistic* universe. Whether theists *do* have good reason to be theists is not something that can be covered in this essay. But at any rate, theists who take themselves to have good reason to be theists will not – or at least, I think, should not – take Joyce’s Darwinian argument, or the modifications to it that I have provided in developing the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism, to provide *them* with good reason to embrace moral scepticism.

11. Conclusion

I have argued that, on the assumption that moral beliefs are in the business of trying to track independent moral facts, atheists have reason to embrace moral scepticism.¹⁸ I have also argued that theists do not have such reason. However, atheists might be able to avoid the argument of this chapter if they can reasonably hold that moral beliefs *aren't* in the business of trying to track independent moral facts. It is to that possibility that I turn in the next chapter.

¹⁸ Scott James (2009) has very recently defended an account that seeks to combine Darwinism (I think implicitly *unguided* Darwinism) with “moral realism”. However, his “moral realism” identifies moral facts with facts about what behaviour idealised others would approve or disapprove of, and so rejects stance-independence and therefore I believe it is untenable (see my comments at the end of chapter 1). I note that Joyce (2008) has actually criticised an earlier statement of James’ view, put forward with Peter Carruthers (Carruthers and James 2008), but Joyce’s criticism is not included in the bibliography of James’ most recent paper. (I presume that this is because James’ 2009 paper was accepted for publication before Joyce voiced his criticisms.) Joyce’s objections apply to the most recent statement of the view as well.

Some brief additional comments: James argues for his account of moral facts by stressing that the approvals and disapprovals of others - at first *real* others but later *hypothetical* others - would be something we would expect our ancestors to have a great deal of interest in. Maybe so; however, it does not follow that moral beliefs would be beliefs *about* the approvals and disapprovals of others, rather than beliefs that are perhaps *influenced by* such approvals and disapprovals. Furthermore, James appears concerned to argue that moral facts can *fit in* with a Darwinian story, in opposition to those who claim that Darwinism rules out the existence of moral facts. However, even if he succeeds in doing *that*, I don’t think that he would be able to sidestep the argument for atheistic Darwinian *moral scepticism* – even if there could be moral facts in an atheistic Darwinian universe, it doesn’t follow that belief in them is warranted.

Chapter 4: Avoiding atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism?

Expressivism/quasi-realism

In chapter 3, I argued that atheists have reason to embrace moral scepticism and accept that all of their moral beliefs are unwarranted. However, the argument crucially depended upon adopting a certain view of one of the main functions of moral thought and discourse; it relied upon the idea that moral judgement is in the business of trying to accurately track independent moral properties and facts and that talk of the *truth* and *falsity* of moral beliefs signals the perceived success or failure to meet that goal. So if it could be reasonably maintained by atheists that moral beliefs do *not* have the function of attempting to track independent objective moral properties and facts, the argument of the previous chapter could be sidestepped. In this chapter, I will examine the account of moral thought and discourse that meets this desideratum known as *expressivism* or *quasi-realism*.¹ While expressivism would provide a way for atheists to avoid the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism, I will argue that there is good reason to believe that expressivism is false.

The chapter will proceed as follows. Firstly, I will explain what expressivism is, focusing on Simon Blackburn's particular account for a tidy exposition. I will then explain how expressivism would provide a way for atheists to avoid the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism. After some brief comments on the case *for* expressivism, I will present and defend two recent arguments *against* expressivism –

¹ "Quasi-realism" is Simon Blackburn's term for his version of the metaethical view that typically goes by the name "expressivism", although he has also used the former expression to refer to his anti-realist approaches to modality and causation, among other things (1993). Since contemporary expressivists appear united with Blackburn in their desire to "save the ethical appearances" as Michael Ridge puts it (2006b), I will use the term "expressivism" with the understanding that it implicitly includes that (quasi-realist) ambition.

by Terence Cuneo (2006) and Andy Egan (2007) – that I believe are formidable and that I think will be successful against all versions of expressivism.

1. Expressivism explained

Unfortunately, the question of how exactly to characterise expressivism can be a contentious one, due to the expressivist project (sometimes dubbed “quasi-realism”) of trying to maintain the *realist appearances* of morality while trying to account for such appearances on an anti-realist foundation. The difficulty is that when it comes to explaining their position, expressivists deny some claims if those claims are understood in a *realist* sense, but are perfectly happy with those claims if they are understood in an *anti-realist* sense, and there is lack of agreement on whether the realist or the anti-realist sense is the natural one.² I suggest that in the light of this, the best way to understand contemporary expressivism is via beginning with its precursors.

The first thing to be clear about is that expressivism is a metaethical account that seeks to *describe* moral practice, providing an accurate account of the nature of *actual* moral psychology and *actual* moral language and moral semantics. Earlier ancestors of contemporary expressivism, such as the emotivism of A.J. Ayer (1946), claimed that moral predicates in moral sentences do not stand for moral properties and that moral thoughts, claims and sentences are not truth-apt – that is, not the sort of entities that can be true or false. Unlike the thought or utterance “Swans are white”, which attributes the property of *being white* to swans and is true or false depending upon whether swans are in fact white, according to Ayer moral thoughts and utterances such as “Murder is wrong” do *not* attribute a property (being wrong)

² See Dreier (2004) for how difficult explaining expressivism has become because of this.

to the object of evaluation (murder) and are *not* rendered true or false depending upon whether the object of evaluation has such a property. Ayer held that, rather than attributing properties, moral predicates have the function of being vehicles for expressing our emotions. When someone claims, “Murder is wrong,” they express their negative emotions towards murder; they do not express a *belief* about murder. Their utterance is to be understood as something akin to “Boo to murder!” and the claim “Giving to charity is good” as akin to “Hooray to giving to charity!” Instances of booing and cheering are not the sorts of items that can be true or false. Furthermore, booing and cheering do not express the psychological state of *belief*, which represents the world as being a certain way, but rather express different, *non-cognitive* psychological attitudes towards the objects booed or hoorayed. Ayer and his metaethical descendants have disagreed over whether it is *emotions* that are expressed by moral claims, but they are all agreed that moral claims express *being for or being against* various things - having a psychological state which is really in the family of desires rather than the family of beliefs (that is, in the family of psychological states which seek to *affect* the world rather than *report* on it). For this reason, the ancestors of contemporary expressivism were dubbed versions of “non-cognitivism”, a label that is still sometimes used to refer to expressivism. Expressivists often refer to the attitudes we have when we make moral judgements as “approval” and “disapproval”.

Modern expressivists – the most prominent probably being Simon Blackburn (1993; 1998) and Allan Gibbard (1990; 2003) – put forward a picture that is substantially the same as Ayer’s but modify the details in a desire to find space for (and vindicate) the *realist appearances* of morality. As I have explained, according to Ayer’s view moral sentences are not truth-apt and the psychological attitude of

accepting a moral claim is not belief. One problem with such a view is that everyday thought about morality appears to hold that the attitude of accepting a moral claim *is* belief (we talk of our moral “beliefs”), and also that moral opinions *can be* true or false (we call moral opinions “true” and “false”). Ayer’s emotivism commits us to the view that people are systematically mistaken about their psychological attitude towards moral claims and about the nature of moral sentences. It also has the consequence that when people worry about whether their moral opinions are *true*, or wonder *which* moral claims are *true*, they are deeply confused – moral opinions aren’t the sort of things that *can be* true. But the idea that we are so mistaken and confused in this way strikes many philosophers as implausible, more implausible than the denial of emotivism. Furthermore, signing up to emotivism might bring with it a pressure to *jettison* our thought and talk of moral belief, and of moral truth and falsity, since emotivism construes such thought and talk as mistaken. Jettisoning such thought and talk strikes many as unattractive. So for these reasons – the implausibility that we are in such error, and the looming pressure towards jettisoning a practice that plays such a central role in our lives – a view that is *essentially* emotivist but which avoids these apparent consequences of Ayer’s emotivism (as expressivism is intended to do) is attractive to many philosophers.

So, expressivists have sought to provide room for thought and talk of moral “belief” and moral “truth” on a foundation that is essentially the same as that of Ayer’s emotivism. Indeed, they have not stopped there but have tried to find space for deeply entrenched intuitions and thoughts about morality which many moral realists have appealed to in order to defend the idea that moral judgement has the function of tracking independent moral facts. Blackburn’s “quasi-realist” strategy proceeds by drawing attention to the distinction between moral claims - that we make

when we are “moralising”, engaged in moral thought and talk - and theoretical claims *about* morality, and construing moral talk and intuitions that might *seem* to favour a realist account of morality as falling into the former category rather than the latter. For example, although one might think that thought and talk of moral claims being “true” or “in accordance with the facts” is *theoretical* talk about morality – a metaphysical idea that some moral opinions accord with or correspond to how things are independently of our opinions - Blackburn adopts a *deflationary* or *minimalist* account of talk of moral “truth” and moral “facts” according to which everyday talk of moral “truth” is *not* theoretical but rather is simply used to express one’s moral commitments (approval and disapproval). In making the claim that some moral opinion is “true” or that it is in “in accordance with the facts”, one is simply expressing the moral opinion in a more flamboyant way; talk of “moral facts” and “moral truth” deflates into moral claims (not theoretical claims about morality) which are, according to Blackburn, expressions of our non-cognitive attitudes of approval and disapproval. In addition, talk of moral “belief” is not in error, since although the attitude we have when we accept moral claims differs importantly from the attitude that we normally call “belief” (the former is actually more akin to what we call “desire”), thought and talk of moral “belief” isn’t theoretical thought and talk but again occurs within moral practice rather than from the outside looking in. If we have the attitudes and call them “beliefs”, then that is simply what we call them; and there is no *error* in our so calling them.³

³ Other expressivists maintain that the psychological attitude of accepting moral claims *is* belief and should be labelled such from a *theoretical* stance towards morality, too - Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons hold that it is *non-descriptive* belief, a hitherto unrecognised category of genuine belief (Timmons 1999; Horgan and Timmons 2006). They have called their position “assertoric non-descriptivism”, “nondescriptivist cognitivism”, and (most recently) “cognitivist expressivism”. However, I don’t think anything is gained by such a move; as Dreier points out (2004), everyday moral thought contains the idea that one can *describe* an object of moral evaluation as satisfying a moral description, e.g., that one can *describe* an action as wrong. So even if their view allows everyday talk of moral belief to be about *real* belief (non-descriptive belief) their view will

Perhaps the best way to make the contrast between moral claims and theoretical talk about morality is to imagine extra-terrestrial aliens who lack any sense of morality and who are interested in examining and describing the activities of human beings. Blackburn's theoretical picture⁴ has us human beings evolving by Darwinian means in a world that is – the aliens would report – devoid of the objective moral properties and facts that moral realists claim exist. The aliens discover that humans develop various non-cognitive attitudes towards various objects (including actions, character traits, and states of affairs). The aliens perhaps find that humans' attractions and aversions toward such things were significantly shaped by the evolutionary process, it being adaptive to seek and promote some things and to shun and avoid others. They report that the humans' attitudes are desires (even though humans don't call them desires), states of *being for* or *being against* certain objects – or, approval and disapproval - rather than beliefs which represent the world as being some way. However, the aliens also report that humans *call* such attitudes “beliefs” and that they express these attitudes by way of uttering sentences that have the surface *appearance* of predicating properties of their objects. The aliens observe that humans talk and think of moral “truth”, and “facts”, but that when they do so they are just giving voice to those same attitudes; such talk does not signify anything metaphysically significant. The aliens would not convict humans of making an *error*

nevertheless convict everyday talk of error when it comes to the idea that moral claims can describe - unless they adopt a deflationary or minimalist approach towards “describing”, in which case why not just introduce the deflationary or minimalist strategy for “belief”, as Blackburn does?

Expressivists' agreement that we at least *call* our moral judgements “beliefs” renders ill-conceived a recent argument against expressivism by Joyce, who says that since it is “Moore paradoxical” to say, “Murder is wrong, but I don't believe it” (2006, pp.55-57), “Murder is wrong” should be understood as expressing a belief. (Although Joyce directs this criticism at “pure non-cognitivism”, his remarks in context clearly show that he means it to refute expressivism, as do his later taxonomy of “global naturalist” metaethical options (p.209) and his sense of which metaethical views have been adequately criticised by the end of his book.) Expressivists can easily explain why the sentence is paradoxical – since we at least *call* moral judgements “beliefs”, in uttering the sentence one is stating a moral opinion but then disavowing that opinion.

⁴ See Blackburn's “How to Be an Ethical Anti-realist” (in Blackburn 1993, pp.166-181).

in engaging in moral thought and discourse, since although the world humans evolved in does not contain independent moral properties or facts, humans' moral judgements do not represent the world as containing such. They would also see that humans make moral claims which "contradict" each other (by expressing attitudes, such as desires, that can be in tension with each other) and that humans accuse each other of "error". Each such accusation is made from the standpoint of another human with their own commitments; from their morally detached perspective, the aliens have no verdict on the issue except to say that no error results from a mismatch between judgement and the world, since describing the world isn't something that those judgements that humans call "moral" are *for*. The aliens can see that all that is going on involves attitudes being endorsed and brought to bear against each other in (as the humans see it) relations of clashing and supporting. Whereas humans' talk about "truth" in *science* signals the correspondence between their (genuine, descriptive, representational) beliefs and the world, humans' *moral* claims and talk of moral "truth" and "facts" do not aspire to make reference to anything outside of the web of human approvals and disapprovals.

The aliens adopt a purely theoretical approach to human morality. However, we humans are ourselves participants in moral thought and discourse. So, when we are engaged in such, *we* talk of "moral truth", "moral fact", and the like. *We* say and think that there are moral "facts", and there is no mistake along the lines of a mismatch between the world and our judgements when we accept and assert such claims. There *is* room for the thought that we or others have made an "error" and have "false" views – for example, if another's judgement conflicts with one that we accept then we will think their view "false" – and we may (from our morally engaged perspective) quite properly claim that they are wrong and that their view isn't "in

accordance with the facts". Moral realists (and other non-expressivists) are wrong to think that such talk is theoretical or that it signifies real belief that seeks to describe the world and track independent moral facts.

This is, in broad strokes, how Blackburn and expressivists like him seek to satisfy the desiderata of having a view that would be called "anti-realist" by traditional labels but which also finds room for thought and talk about moral "belief", moral "truth", moral "facts" and the like that involves no error. As I have mentioned, expressivists have also tried to account for further moral commitments and intuitions that might appear to favour the idea that moral judgement is really in the business of trying to track independent moral truths. For example, it might seem that expressivism will make trouble for the *mind-independence* (or *stance-independence*) of morality (discussed briefly at the end of chapter 1). If there are just us and our attitudes, which don't attempt to track independent moral facts, doesn't that make moral "facts" and moral "truth" dependent upon what attitudes we have? And doesn't that get deeply held beliefs about morality back-to-front? It seems to imply that if I held different moral views, even moral views that I and most people *actually* view as egregiously mistaken, then those moral views would be correct. However, Blackburn believes that his expressivism *can* accommodate the mind-independence (or stance-independence) of morality. In demonstrating this, and holding that it is wrong to kick dogs, he takes as his example the thought (1984, p.218):

(1) If we had different sentiments [different moral attitudes], it would be right to kick dogs.

Blackburn believes that his expressivism is *not* committed to claims such as these, and indeed he rejects it. The way he does so is by holding that (1) is not a *theoretical* claim about morality, but rather voices *a moral view*. (That is, he follows the same strategy he adopts with regard to thought and talk of moral “truth”, etc.) To say that if we had different sentiments, kicking dogs would be morally okay is to have a moral sensibility that only disapproves of kicking dogs in circumstances where people disapprove of it. While some people may have moral sensibilities like that, there is nothing in expressivism *per se* that commits one to it. For his part, Blackburn *rejects* it; he maintains that kicking dogs would be wrong even if everybody (himself included) had sentiments that endorsed such action, and he understands this claim to involve the expression of a moral sensibility, or outlook, that disapproves of kicking dogs in the (non-actual) circumstances in which everybody approves of doing so. Many philosophers find this an unpersuasive account of what thoughts about the mind-independence (or stance-independence) of morality come to (e.g., Zangwill 1994) – they insist that such claims and the common intuitions behind them are *theoretical* claims and intuitions and not simply moral commitments - but Blackburn insists that, “[a]ccording to me, ‘moral truths are mind-dependent’ can *only* summarize a list like ‘If there were no people (or people with different attitudes) then X...’ where the dots are filled in by some moral claim about X” (1998, p.311).

There are other thoughts and intuitions about morality that it might be thought expressivism cannot account for, eschewing as it does the idea that our moral judgements are in the business of tracking independent moral facts. For example, if my thinking or asserting that my moral opinion is “true” is nothing more than my thinking or asserting the opinion, how do we make sense of my worry that some of

my moral opinions (which I hold, and I know I hold) *might not be true*? Blackburn's answer to this question – his account of the everyday idea that there might be a mismatch between our moral beliefs and the truth – appeals to *other* attitudes of ours.

He writes:

“The problem comes with thinking of myself (or of us or our tradition) that I may be mistaken. How can I make sense of fears of my own fallibility? Well, there are a number of things I admire: for instance, information, sensitivity, maturity, imagination, coherence. I know that other people show defects in these respects, and that these defects lead to bad opinions. But can I exempt myself from the same possibility? Of course not (that would be unpardonably smug). So I can think that perhaps some of my opinions are due to defects of information, sensitivity, maturity, imagination, and coherence. If I really set out to investigate whether this is true, I stand on one part of the (Neurath) boat and inspect the other parts” (1998, p.318).

Blackburn explains (and tries to accommodate) the thought that one's current moral “beliefs” may not be true by construing it as the worry that one's moral “beliefs” might not be endorsed from a perspective that one approves of (or, perhaps, would come to approve of). Unable to explain the idea of a gap between one's moral belief and the truth along the lines a non-expressivist would (a mismatch between the moral belief's representational content and the world it is representing), it appears that expressivists *only* have recourse to a mismatch or tension with *other attitudes*. (Later in this chapter, I will defend Andy Egan's argument against expressivism that focuses on this expressivist strategy of explaining error.)

More could be said in explaining expressivism, as well as the different nuances that are exhibited by various philosophers' particular brands of it, but the above sketch (to be supplemented in the course of examining objections) should suffice for my purposes here.⁵

⁵ In addition to the works already referenced, see also Michael Ridge's version (2006a; 2007). Although I focus on Blackburn's work, I think that the objections to expressivism defended in this chapter will apply to all versions.

2. Expressivism and atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism

If expressivism is true, atheists can avoid the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism advanced toward the end of the last chapter. That argument crucially depended upon the idea that moral beliefs are beliefs in the existence of independent moral properties and facts and, furthermore, that such properties and facts are suspicious, or *queer*, in an atheistic universe. However, according to expressivism, (1) moral “beliefs” are not in the business of trying to accurately track independent moral properties and facts (they are really desires or desire-like), and (2) therefore, moral “beliefs” are not beliefs in the existence of properties and facts that are suspicious or *queer* in an atheistic universe. Rather, when people talk of “moral truth” and “moral facts”, they are understood to use these terms in a deflationary, minimalist sense to express their attitudes, without intending anything *metaphysically weighty*.

It isn't simply that expressivists can't find room for the *possibility* of moral scepticism. For, although expressivism claims that moral judgement involves a psychological attitude other than (real, descriptive) belief, and that talk of the “truth” of moral “beliefs” isn't connected to the idea that our “beliefs” are trying to match an independent reality, it nevertheless construes moral judgement as *mimicking* (real,

Mark Kalderon has argued for a non-cognitivist position he dubs “moral fictionalism” (2005). He holds that the attitude of moral judgement is not belief but also that moral predicates *do* stand for moral properties and that therefore moral sentences represent the world as containing moral properties and facts. Moral thought and discourse, in Kalderon's view, consists in our having a non-cognitive attitude towards factual statements. The position has a number of problems which preclude the need for it to be considered here. For one thing, the arguments offered in support of it are problematic (Finlay 2006). Most importantly, although Kalderon does not explicitly develop an account of moral “truth”, his position appears to imply that our moral sentences would only be appropriately called *true* if they accurately represent moral facts. That is, it seems that moral sentences have robust truth-conditions (the existence of moral properties and facts) and moral claims will be true if and only if those conditions are met. The account of moral “truth” and “facts” expressivists like Blackburn appeal to will not be available to him; therefore, I don't think his position could sidestep the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism. Finally, Kalderon's account, unlike Blackburn's, is not intended to *vindicate* morality or to show that moral practice embodies *no great error*. Rather, Kalderon thinks that it *does*, and that morality may be inherently unstable. Kalderon's account has been well-discussed in a recent book symposium (Kalderon 2008a; Chrisman 2008; Friend 2008; Lenman 2008; Kalderon 2008b).

descriptive) belief in important ways. Our moral practice clearly involves norms that govern the acquisition, retention and rejection of moral attitudes – norms that appear the same as those that govern the acquisition, retention and rejection of non-moral and indisputably fully descriptive, genuine beliefs. Importantly, moral practice includes the idea of *epistemic defeaters* for moral “beliefs” (see chapter 2, section 1, for a brief explanation of defeaters). For example, suppose that I hold a moral view but come to realise that I hold that view solely because it is a remnant of my religious upbringing in a religious tradition that I no longer accept. Realising that this is the origin of my moral view may provide me with a defeater for it and render it unwarranted. Or, suppose that I have formed a moral judgement about a particular situation but then realise that when I formed my judgement I wasn’t aware of all the non-moral facts pertaining to the case. Again, it seems that when I learn this I have reason to consider my judgement unwarranted. Expressivists must agree we take such norms to govern our moral “beliefs”. But in that case, although expressivists will hold that doubt cannot be cast on the truth of all of our moral “beliefs” when *truth* is understood in a *realist sense* - moral beliefs have nothing to do with *that* – they will hold that it can nevertheless cast doubt upon its “truth” when that is understood in a deflationary way. As Sinnott-Armstrong says:

“Once expressivists admit that they *need* to mimic realists, they have only two options: either expressivists fail to capture all of the apparently realist elements in common moral language and thought, in which case expressivism is inadequate, or expressivists succeed in capturing all of the apparently realist elements, in which case expressivists can go on to do moral epistemology in exactly the same way as realists” (2006b, p.31).

Indeed, as already seen, Blackburn would explain the thought that a certain origin renders one’s moral belief less likely to be “true” by appealing to other attitudes one has; he mentions his concern for information, sensitivity, maturity,

imagination, and coherence (1998, p.318). So, for example, the realisation that my moral opinions have not been formed in the light of all of the non-moral evidence may call them into question even if expressivism is true because I value, or *approve of*, forming moral opinions on the basis of all the non-moral evidence. So it is possible that there may be arguments for moral scepticism that would work even if expressivism is true.

However, while Sinnott-Armstrong is right that expressivists can “do moral epistemology in exactly the same way as realists” insofar as expressivists will have to allow that the same epistemic concepts, properties and relations (e.g., warrant, support, defeat) that can apply to non-moral, genuinely descriptive and representational beliefs can *also* apply to moral “beliefs”, and that moral “beliefs” will *in general* behave in the same way as genuine beliefs, this shouldn’t be understood to mean that expressivists must hold that there are defeaters for moral beliefs in all and only the cases that moral realists do. For example, given the considerations discussed in the last chapter, it can be seen why atheistic Darwinian origins may cause trouble for the claim that our moral beliefs are *true* if our model of moral judgement is a “tracking” one. However, it is hard to see why *expressivists* would be troubled by the idea that our moral “beliefs” may have been greatly influenced by natural selection and that we have them because of their adaptive value rather than because they accurately track independent moral facts, since expressivists *already* reject the idea that our moral beliefs are in the business of trying to accurately track independent moral facts. Also, as I have mentioned, Darwinian origins – implicitly, unguided Darwinian origins – are an explicit part of Blackburn’s wider theoretical picture of which his expressivism is a part, so such origins are not among those which are such that he would disapprove of moral “beliefs” that result

from them (as he looks dimly upon moral “beliefs” formed with insufficient information, sensitivity, etc).

So, expressivists may be able to find room for the possibility of moral scepticism – that all of our moral “beliefs” are “unwarranted” and that we must give up the claim that they are “true”. And there may be arguments for moral scepticism that would be effective even if expressivism is true. However, the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism is not one of them. Therefore, it is important to see why there is good reason to believe that expressivism is false.

3. First problem for expressivism – traditional religious believers

Although I will present and defend two arguments others have offered against expressivism, space precludes a detailed discussion of the alleged reasons in support of expressivism (it also precludes a detailed discussion of *all* of the reasons against it). However, this should not be problematic. For, although I can here only state my view on this matter, the case *for* expressivism is pretty weak. For example, one consideration expressivists often appeal to in support of expressivism is *moral judgement internalism*, the idea that one who accepts a moral claim necessarily has some (possibly outweighed) motivation to act in accordance with it; it is claimed that moral judgement internalism is both true and best explained by the thesis that moral “beliefs” really are motivational states which belong to the family of desires. The main problem with this argument is that there may be good reason to believe that moral judgement internalism is *false*, and there is at any rate insufficient reason to believe that it is true (see, e.g., Svavarsdóttir 1999; Zangwill 2008).⁶ Expressivism

⁶ Teemu Toppinen (2004) has responded to Svavarsdóttir. His response makes, and crucially depends upon, the claim that it is appropriate to convict someone of having a “fetish” about morality (an obsession with doing *the right thing*) if their desire (DA) to act in a certain way (A) - where A is

also faces the formidable (and well-known) challenge of accounting for the logical behaviour of moral sentences and in particular making sense of the function and logical behaviour of moral sentences that are less plausibly construed as expressing attitudes than are simple declarative moral sentences such as “Murder is wrong.”⁷ It is not clear that expressivism can really account for all the features of moral sentences that *non-expressivists* have *no need* to explain since *they* believe that moral sentences are straightforwardly representational, just like everyday *non-moral* sentences.

While detailed discussion of such well-known issues would, I believe, show expressivism to be subject to severe challenge, I want to focus on a couple of more recent arguments that, due to their lack of vintage, have been less discussed. I begin with an original argument advanced by Terence Cuneo (2006). According to Cuneo, *charitable interpretation* of the moral thought and discourse of traditional religious believers provides reason to believe that expressivism is false and that moral sentences and claims *do* represent the world as containing moral facts and properties (on a non-deflationary understanding of “facts” and “properties”).

Cuneo’s argument is best understood by first setting out (as he does) to undermine an alleged - and possibly overlooked - reason why some philosophers embrace expressivism. It appears that one reason why some are attracted to expressivism is that they hold (for various reasons) that there are no realist moral

judged to be morally right - is causally produced by a more general desire to act in ways that are right (DR), as opposed to desiring to A for its own sake. Responding to Svavarsdóttir, Toppinen maintains that a person has a problematic moral fetish even if they don’t *reason* from DR to DA and the causal production takes place outside their consciousness. If successful, this claim would cause trouble for some of Svavarsdóttir’s argument, but Toppinen simply states it without any argument and I see no reason to think it is true.

⁷ For important recent papers on the “Frege-Geach” problem, see Dreier (1996), Unwin (1999), and Sinnott-Armstrong (2000). For the first book-length treatment of the problem, see Schroeder (2008). Although I cannot enter into the debate over this matter in this essay, I think that the realist-seeming nature of moral sentences warrants a strong presumption against expressivism. For a different but related objection to expressivism, see Dorr (2002); for an expressivist reply, see Lenman (2003).

properties and facts and they also think that it is *uncharitable*, and violates the canons of interpretive methodology, to interpret the moral discourse of people such that it turns out that their thought and discourse embodies a widespread and deep error (the belief that there *are* realist moral facts). Blackburn has said on at least one occasion that the “essence” of expressivism is “to protect...against the descent into error theory” (2002, p.167), and Cuneo thinks that considerations about charitable interpretation may be part of the reason why Blackburn (and others) thinks there is reason to protect against this descent. Cuneo argues that adopting expressivism because of such motives is unreasonable, drawing attention to the fact that charitable interpretation of a body or sample of discourse does not require interpreting the discourse so that it is rendered not false, or contains no error; rather, it involves something along the lines of interpreting it in such a way that the speaker’s commitment to what is said in the discourse makes sense in the light of their other beliefs and commitments. To illustrate, Cuneo uses the example of Anselm’s theological arguments. Charitable interpretation of Anselm’s theological discourse doesn’t involve interpreting it in such a way that it comes out not mistaken, but rather interpreting the discourse in such a way that it makes sense in the light of Anselm’s other beliefs and commitments; it involves interpreting what Anselm says as being about God as God was understood by medieval theists and not by Egyptian polytheists, for example (p.60). But in that case, one shouldn’t opt for expressivism on the basis that charity involves interpreting moral discourse such that it is rendered not false – there is no reason to think that attributing error, even large error, is in conflict with interpreting charitably.

I think that Cuneo’s point about charitable interpretation is right, and that he has undermined what may well be a consideration that plays a large part in some

philosophers' embrace of expressivism. Furthermore, once it is realised that charitable interpretation involves interpreting in the light of a speaker's other beliefs and commitments, it is hard to see how a good argument for expressivism from charity could possibly be in the offing. For what background beliefs and commitments do people have that fit better with the idea that they are acting as expressivism says than they fit with the idea that people believe the world contains (realistically-construed) moral properties and facts? I don't see any promise for an expressivist argument there.

Cuneo's argument *against* expressivism takes off from this discussion of charitable interpretation. He draws attention to the real-life example of the "traditional religious believer":

"[A] traditional Jewish, Christian, or Muslim theist, a person who believes such things as: that a personal God exists; that God has various characteristics such as being the creator of the world, being perfectly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing; that God acts in human history and has revealed God's self in various ways to human beings; that a sacred text (or texts) such as the Bible or the Koran or a particular religious tradition is authoritative on matters of faith and morals; and so forth. Thus described, the traditional religious believer is a theological realist; she rejects all 'naturalistic' accounts of the nature of reality. She is also a moral realist...the traditional believer needn't have a very well worked-out account of the nature of [moral] facts; she usually believes that they in some way depend on God's nature or will" (p.61).

In addition to pointing out that the number of traditional religious believers is vast, Cuneo cites some sociological evidence in support of the view that, "the moral views of religious believers do not float free from their theological convictions, but are deeply affected by them" (p.61). In light of this, Cuneo suggests, charitable interpretation of the moral discourse of traditional religious believers requires interpreting their moral utterances *not* as expressions of psychological states that do not seek to describe the world as containing realist moral properties and facts (as

expressivism teaches) but rather as putative descriptions of realist moral facts believed to be in some sense dependent upon God's nature or will. This seems to fit best both with traditional religious believers' avowed theological beliefs about the dependence of morality upon God (beliefs which – Cuneo notes – philosophers who are traditional religious believers often claim are beliefs in moral realism) and the fact that their moral behaviour is so affected by what they claim to believe that God has authoritatively commanded. Considerations of charity, far from *supporting* expressivism, actually provide reason to believe that it is *false*: it doesn't accurately describe the moral thought and discourse of traditional religious believers.

Now, one could allow for the possibility that traditional religious believers and others (call them non-believers) simply talk past each other when they engage in moral discourse and debate. Traditional religious believers and non-believers might literally mean different things when they use moral terms such as “good” and “right”, etc. If so, then it could be the case that (as charity suggests) *traditional religious believers'* moral discourse is in accordance with a moral realist construal, but that (at least some) *others'* moral discourse is accurately described by expressivism. Although some philosophers might be happy with such a state of affairs where theists, atheists and others are literally talking past each other, most have wanted to avoid such a conclusion, as Cuneo notes.⁸ Cuneo suggests that we think of all parties to moral disputes as describing the world as containing realist moral properties and facts, and the traditional religious believer simply having a further belief about what those facts consist in or why they are there (appealing to God) that the non-believer denies or lacks (p.68). This proposal interprets traditional religious believers' moral discourse charitably; it also doesn't seem to *uncharitably* interpret the moral

⁸ Also, as I mentioned in chapter 1, note 23, in this essay I am following the common approach to metaethics that eschews the idea that different descriptive metaethical accounts may be true of different people's moral thought and discourse.

discourse of non-believers. Therefore, it seems, we should accept this interpretation. But if this charitable interpretation is correct, then expressivism is false. So we should hold that expressivism is false.

4. How expressivists could perhaps reply

It seems to me that Cuneo's argument is possibly vulnerable as it stands; I think that there are things that an expressivist might be able say in reply. Before discussing such things, however, I must point out that, whereas Cuneo describes traditional religious believers as being moral realists in such a way that that appears to become part of the *definition* of "traditional religious believer", I am in the remainder of this chapter going to use the expression "traditional religious believer" to refer to someone who fits the *rest* of Cuneo's description without it being assumed that such a person really is a moral realist.

Cuneo says that traditional religious believers hold that the moral facts "in some way depend upon God's nature or will" (p.61). As stated, this belief is rather vague. However, suppose we take it as the claim that there are only right and wrong actions, or good and bad states of affairs, because of God. All of the moral facts depend on God, and if God didn't exist, nothing would be good or bad, or right or wrong. (Taking the claim in a weaker sense – e.g., as the claim that *almost all* of the moral facts depend upon God – would not significantly alter this reply.) In other words, suppose that what traditional religious believers are assenting to is:

(2) If God didn't exist, there would be no moral facts.

While I do not know of any expressivist treatments of claims exactly like (2), earlier in this chapter I showed how Blackburn accounts for a claim very much like

(2) - the claim that *if we had different sentiments, it would be right to kick dogs*. According to Blackburn, the claim that kicking dogs would be right if our sentiments were different amounts to having the disagreeable attitude of approving of kicking dogs in circumstances where everyone approves of it. So it seems that Blackburn would understand the traditional religious believer's commitment to (2) as consisting in their having a moral sensibility that neither approves nor disapproves of any actions, persons, states of affairs, etc, in which God does not exist. The traditional religious believer imagines the world being different from how it actually is (as she sees it) in that God's existence is removed, and when she does so, she does not approve or disapprove of anything that she imagines taking place. It doesn't follow that if traditional religious believers come to reject belief in God then they *will* stop approving and disapproving; nevertheless, their sensibility is one that expects to.

Now, some philosophers will believe that this is an implausible construal of the traditional religious believer's thought that if God does not exist, then nothing would be right or wrong; such a construal appears to share the plausibility or implausibility of Blackburn's account of the kicking dogs sentence, and his account has been criticised as implausible (e.g., Zangwill 1994). However, I don't want to rely on this reply here. Cuneo's argument is presented as a new, independent argument against expressivism and is not supposed to rest on the strength of another argument against expressivism. So I will suppose that another sort of reply is required.

One might reply that the proposed expressivist understanding of (2) fails for more reasons than the account of (1) – the kicking dogs sentence – does. For there is perhaps something *more* to the traditional religious believer's claim; there is perhaps something that the expressivist account suggested above doesn't capture. The

traditional religious believer doesn't just believe that the moral facts only exist if God exists, as if their doing so might just be a matter of accidental correlation; rather, she believes that the moral facts *depend on* God, that He is their source, that He creates them by His commands, etc.

However, I think that the expressivist might be able to account for that aspect of what traditional religious believers think, too. The expressivist might tell a story which accounts for the traditional religious believer's view that the moral facts depend upon God. Such a story might go something like as follows:

Expressivism is true, and the moral judgements human beings make are expressions of approval and disapproval, desire-like states; they are not attempts to describe *moral facts* as realists think of them. Some human beings – who become traditional religious believers – come to believe (for whatever reason) that there exists a very powerful and intelligent divine person, God. They come to believe that God has done special things for them such as creating them and showing favour to their ancestors. Before coming to the belief that God exists, these human beings already made moral judgements, by which they expressed approval and disapproval of various things. One thing many of them approve of is reciprocating favours rendered to them. This, in conjunction with their new belief that God has been overwhelmingly generous and favourable towards them, results in their approving of reciprocating towards God. One of the beliefs they come to acquire about God is that He Himself approves and disapproves of certain things, and also that He commands them to do certain things, and promises rewards or punishments depending upon whether they act in accordance with His commands. Since they approve of repaying favours rendered to them, these humans approve of obedience to what God commands and so what He Himself is taken to approve of; they disapprove of what

God disapproves of and of what He commands not to be done. (This results in a re-shaping of some or many of their moral commitments.) Their moral language that was in use before the advent of their religious beliefs is still used in the same way as before; they express their approval for the things God approves by saying that whatever God commands or approves is “right” or “good” and their disapproval of what God disapproves of by saying that whatever He forbids or disapproves of is “wrong” or “bad”. It is but a short step from there to them saying things like, “What’s morally right or wrong depends on God’s commands,” or, “The moral facts depend upon God’s will.”

I am not sure that this expressivist story of the moral thought and discourse of traditional religious believers is implausible in itself, or that it is *uncharitable*, at least when it comes to accounting for what Cuneo has mentioned about traditional religious believers in his paper. It explains why traditional religious believers derive their morality from sacred texts – they want to learn what God approves and disapproves of so that they can approve and disapprove of those same things - and why, if they subsequently came to doubt that God has commanded some action, their approval for that action would diminish. In other words, it explains why “the moral views of religious believers do not float free from their theological convictions, but are deeply affected by them” (p.61). There is a giving over to God of the authority to determine what one approves of and disapproves of. Furthermore, the expressivist can perhaps explain the traditional religious believer’s holding to (1) - that if God didn’t exist there would be no moral facts - as follows. After giving over to God the authority to determine what one approves of, traditional religious believers are so consumed with the religious form of life and their relationship to God that they judge

that if they discovered that God doesn't exist, they wouldn't approve or disapprove of *anything*; life would have lost its meaning for them. (The suggestion is that this is what traditional religious believers *now* think they would do if they came to believe that God doesn't exist. It might be the case that, if they *in fact* came to believe that God doesn't exist, they *wouldn't* cease approving and disapproving; instead, their moral sensibilities might change.)

I see no reason to believe that the expressivist story I have given above is *true*. Nevertheless, I am not sure that it is clearly *uncharitable*, and it seems it might be able to explain the data about traditional religious believers and the relationship between their theological and moral views that Cuneo draws attention to. (It might be suggested that it is implausible because philosophers who are traditional religious believers tell us that they and other traditional religious believers are *moral realists*. But mightn't they have misunderstood what their moral thought and discourse comes to? After all, non-expressivists hold that *expressivists* have misunderstood what *their* (and others') moral thought and discourse comes to.)

So I think that, in the light of this expressivist explanation of the commitments of traditional religious believers that Cuneo mentions in his paper, the argument that their moral thought and discourse is a problem for expressivism might need elaboration and improvement.

5. Improving the argument

Nevertheless, I think that the argument *can be* improved, by being more *specific* about the commitments of traditional religious believers. When this is done, I believe, expressivism is seen to provide an implausible account of their moral

thought and discourse. Indeed, in an email communication to me,⁹ Cuneo has elaborated on the argument in light of some of the things I have said in the possible expressivist reply I have provided above, and I find part of what he has said convincing. In what follows, I draw on some of his explicit comments and develop some thoughts that seemed to me less explicit but nevertheless *implicit* in, or suggested by, his comments - thoughts which seem to me to be good ones. So it should be noted that I am indebted to him in what follows.

The expressivist account of the moral beliefs of traditional religious believers that I have provided may be *possible*, or judged possible if we only consider some such believers. However, it doesn't follow that it is really *plausible*, or that it is the *most probable* account. The first point to note is that influential theologians have, down the ages, put forward doctrines inconsistent with expressivism. (It isn't just modern philosophers, who may have less influence or be less connected to ordinary traditional religious believers - and who might misconstrue traditional religious believers' moral thought and discourse just as non-expressivists think *expressivists* misconstrue it - who have done so.) They haven't just had a *vague* belief that morality depends upon God, or a "belief" in moral "facts" that expressivism plausibly accommodates, but have clearly been moral realists. A particularly important example is Thomas Aquinas, whose doctrine of divine simplicity identified all of God's properties (including God's *moral* properties) with each other and with God Himself. For expressivism to accurately capture Aquinas' thought and talk on this matter, it seems, we would also have to understand his *theological* talk as consisting in the expression of non-cognitive attitudes; but that is wildly implausible and to my knowledge nobody advocates such an understanding. Furthermore, since

⁹ Personal email communication, 15th November 2006.

Aquinas' position in this regard is the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which many traditional religious believers sign up to and accept, and given Aquinas' influence on subsequent medieval and post-medieval Christian theology, interpretive charity gives us reason to believe that ordinary traditional religious believers who are influenced by, connected to, and committed to such tradition (and by tradition influenced by and connected to such tradition, and those connected to tradition that influenced Aquinas – and Jewish and Muslim medieval theology are relevant here also) are using moral thought and discourse to describe moral properties and facts, and not merely expressing attitudes as expressivism claims. Indeed, there are scores of influential theologians whose lives and work have been connected to the lives and thoughts of ordinary traditional religious believers (e.g., by influencing religious confessions) and who have clearly been moral realists, endorsing moral realist theories such as divine command theories or natural law theories (Holmes 1997, pp.1-83). So there is good reason to think that those who are connected and committed to these theological traditions – both the theorists and more ordinary traditional religious believers - are using moral thought and discourse to describe moral properties and facts. That is more plausible than an expressivist construal.¹⁰

Many theologians down the ages have clearly held understandings of moral thought and discourse that are inconsistent with expressivism (and in addition to the metaethical views of theologians like Aquinas, think of philosophers' views like

¹⁰ In response to these sorts of considerations, James Lenman has raised the example of the late Richard Hare, a Christian philosopher who was also an expressivist. However, the example of Hare in no way calls into question the argument above. I don't see reason to think that Hare has had much *influence* on traditional religious believers. Furthermore, to the extent that his understanding of moral properties and facts clearly differs from that of earlier thinkers in religious traditions, he may not qualify as a *traditional* religious believer. In any case, it would be implausible to think that Hare's believing that Christianity and expressivism could be reconciled means that expressivism stands a good chance of being true of traditional religious believers.

Plato's doctrine of the Forms). How plausible is it that *so many* thinkers have (as expressivists see it) misunderstood the nature of their moral thought and discourse? *Why* have they done so? Of course, one might push the question back at the non-expressivist and ask how the non-expressivist explains the fact that (as the non-expressivist sees it) *expressivists* have misunderstood the nature of moral thought and discourse. But that question isn't hard to answer. The first thing to note in answering it is that, unlike views which construe our moral thought and discourse as seeking to describe independent moral properties and facts, the expressivist account of moral thought and discourse appears to be a relatively recent idea. Some claim to find the origins of expressivism in Hume in the 18th century, while others have argued that Hume was *not* a precursor to modern expressivism (Sayre-McCord 2008), but at any rate it appears that the origins of expressivism and its precursors are to be found at most a few hundred years ago, and it was only really in the 20th century that expressivist (or emotivist) positions started to become popular, with the work of philosophers like Ayer.¹¹ So the error that needs to be explained by the non-expressivist isn't one that is so widespread. Furthermore, it appears that the *primary* reason philosophers endorsed expressivist views was not due to reflection on moral psychology or our moral practices but rather their commitment to empiricism and naturalism. For example, since Hume *may* have been a non-cognitivist, it is worth stressing that his whole approach to philosophy was characterised by empiricism, and his approach to morality was driven at least in large part by the inability to detect moral properties by empirical means. As he famously put it in the *Treatise*:

¹¹ Of course, there have been metaethical anti-realists throughout the history of philosophy; it is the lack of a clear endorsement of a *non-cognitivist* or *expressivist* anti-realist view before the last few centuries that is important. In addition, as far as I am aware the idea that talk of "truth" or "facts" in morality typically doesn't even *purport* to signify anything metaphysical is only found since the 20th century.

“Take any action allow’d to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights...In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but ’tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar’d to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind[.]” (1978, pp.468-469 - Book 3 "Of Morals", part 1).

Ayer, likewise, was motivated by empiricist commitments. He accepted the *logical positivist* doctrine that utterances are only cognitively meaningful if they can be verified, and held that moral claims could not be verified because of disagreements over moral intuitions. So it is easy to explain why expressivists have come to hold an incorrect view of the nature of moral thought and discourse. But why should so many non-expressivist theologians (and philosophers) have done so? And why wasn't the error realised earlier? If in making moral judgements they were basically just expressing desires, why didn't they realise that? It seems more plausible that *expressivists* are the ones who are in error about moral thought and discourse.

Although these comments are brief, it seems to me that these sorts of considerations provide good grounds for holding that the *best* explanation of the moral thought and discourse of traditional religious believers is one that is non-expressivist and that therefore the possible expressivist story I told in the previous section is inadequate. (And if the moral thought and discourse of traditional religious believers is best explained that way, then so is the moral thought and discourse of contemporary non-believers.) So this seems to me to provide good evidence that expressivism is false.

6. Second problem for expressivism – fundamental moral error

In the course of explaining what expressivism is earlier in this chapter, I briefly explained Simon Blackburn's approach to accounting for the everyday thought that one's current moral beliefs might be mistaken. On the face of it, it isn't obvious that an expressivist *can* account for that thought. There would appear to be no difficulty for an expressivist in explaining what it is to think that *someone else's* moral view is wrong (it is to *approve of* what they *disapprove of*, or *disapprove of* what they *approve of*) or what it is to think that *you used to* hold a mistaken moral view (it is to now *approve of* what you once *disapproved of*, or *disapprove of* what you once *approved of*), but the thought that you might be mistaken in the moral views you hold *now* cannot be explained in such a way. And given expressivism, what more *can* there be to the "truth" of your current moral views than your endorsement of them? Blackburn's deflationary view of moral "truth" maintains that to say that a moral claim is "true" or that it "corresponds to the facts" is just to endorse it: what room, then, for worries about the possibility that they *aren't* true? However, as I have already stated, Blackburn has an answer to this problem; it will be appropriate to quote it again:

"The problem comes with thinking of myself (or of us or our tradition) that I may be mistaken. How can I make sense of fears of my own fallibility? Well, there are a number of things I admire: for instance, information, sensitivity, maturity, imagination, coherence. I know that other people show defects in these respects, and that these defects lead to bad opinions. But can I exempt myself from the same possibility? Of course not (that would be unpardonably smug). So I can think that perhaps some of my opinions are due to defects of information, sensitivity, maturity, imagination, and coherence. If I really set out to investigate whether this is true, I stand on one part of the (Neurath) boat and inspect the other parts" (Blackburn 1998, p.318)

Andy Egan (2007) has recently argued that Blackburn's explanation of fears about fallibility (of thoughts of the sort "I believe moral claim M, but I could be mistaken") is problematic because it provides you with an *a priori guarantee* that you are immune to a certain kind of error that others can suffer from, thereby failing to capture the important thought that, unless we have good *evidence* that we are better placed than others when it comes to forming moral judgements, we cannot have a guarantee that others are more likely than us to be prone to moral error. In what follows, I will lay out the argument and then criticise Blackburn's recent response to it. I will conclude that the argument is strong and provides good reason to believe that expressivism¹² is false.

In Blackburn's quote above, he accounts for the worry that I might be mistaken in my moral views by construing it as an acknowledgement of the possibility that I might no longer endorse those moral views if my epistemic situation changed in ways that I admire. Egan phrases this as the acknowledgement that I might no longer endorse those moral views if my epistemic situation changed in ways that I view as *improvements*.

Egan firstly points out that Blackburn's proposal on this score is sensible, in that it does seem to provide a plausible account of what worry about the possibility of current error could come to (p.211). He furthermore points out that this looks like the sort of account that Blackburn and other expressivists will *have to* endorse. For while non-expressivists can explain my worries about the truth of my current moral views as worries about a possible mismatch between (a) my judgements and (b) the moral facts that my judgements represent as being a certain way, expressivists don't have recourse to this explanation since they eschew the idea that moral "beliefs"

¹² Egan differentiates between expressivism and quasi-realism, and directs his argument at the latter. However, as already explained, I am using "expressivism" to refer to theories that include the quasi-realist ambition of capturing the realist-seeming nature of moral thought and discourse.

really seek to represent moral facts. (Expressivists will want to leave room for the thought that one's moral "belief" might fail to "represent the facts", but they will understand these expressions in a deflationary or minimalistic way and so cannot appeal to such notions when *explaining* moral thought and discourse.) Without an "external" world of moral facts for moral beliefs to fail to match up to, it seems that expressivists will *have to* explain worries about fallibility by appealing to "internal" concerns – the worry or acknowledgement that the "belief" might in some way clash with other "beliefs". Furthermore, as Egan says, "Some story about stability under a course of improving changes seems to be the only sensible way to cash this out" (p.212).

However, Egan doesn't think that Blackburn's proposal will work. Call someone's moral beliefs that would survive a course of changes that they judge to be improvements their *stable moral beliefs*. Call the error that someone is subject to if their stable moral beliefs are false *fundamental moral error*. The person who is subject to fundamental moral error is in the undesirable situation that no epistemic change that they regard as improvement will get them to the moral truth. As Egan notes, it seems pre-theoretically possible that someone could be so unfortunate that they are subject to fundamental moral error; it is possible that somebody could have such mistaken moral beliefs, and such a mistaken view of what constitutes an improved epistemic condition, that all of their stable beliefs are false. To see this, imagine someone who holds completely contrary moral views to those that you think are correct, and who also has very different beliefs about what constitutes improvement (e.g., perhaps they think that more information is likely to lead them astray in their moral views and therefore think that greater ignorance is an improvement). No doubt we don't think that many people *are* like this (we think

some of *our* moral views are true and that they would survive our undergoing the epistemic changes we believe are improvements, and we perhaps typically think that others who we disagree with could be “brought around” to the right way of seeing things), but we should acknowledge that fundamental moral error is a *possibility*, even if a remote one. Egan stresses how important it is that we pre-theoretically think that there is a symmetry between the possibility of error – even fundamental error – in our own case and in the case of others. We have no *a priori guarantee* that we are immune to a possible error that may inflict others; our stable beliefs could be false, just as others’ could. To think otherwise would be, as Blackburn himself put it, “unpardonably smug”. It would undermine a deep conviction about morality. As Egan puts it, it “really does seem extremely implausible that I have a special, a priori guarantee against some sort of (very serious) moral error to which you are vulnerable” (p.216). He quotes the rhetorical question, asked by Michael Smith in conversation, “What’s supposed to make me so [darn] special?” and stresses that it is “part of our ordinary moral practice that I’m *not* so [darn] special. Or at least, that if I am, I don’t have an a priori guarantee of it, which I can find out just by thinking about the nature of ethics” (p.216). Expressivists want to *accommodate*, not *undermine*, our deep convictions about morality; they need to in order that expressivism provides an adequate and plausible account of our moral thought and discourse. If expressivism undermines our beliefs about the symmetry of the possibility of moral error, we have reason to think expressivism is false.

But, Egan argues, expressivism *does* undermine this conviction, at least if Blackburn’s account of fears of our own fallibility is accepted. Given Blackburn’s account, I *can* have an *a priori guarantee* that I am immune to fundamental moral

error; I *can* have an *a priori guarantee* that my stable beliefs are true.¹³ If Blackburn's account is true then, simply by virtue of knowing that it is true, I can be sure that my stable moral beliefs are true and that *I* am not subject to fundamental moral error. For when I worry that one of my moral beliefs might be mistaken, I know from Blackburn's account that I am worrying that that belief may not be among the stable ones; I am worrying that it would be rejected if I underwent a series of changes in my epistemic circumstances that I regard as improvements. If worries that my moral beliefs might be *false* are worries that they would be rejected after those changes and are not stable, then the beliefs that I would retain after those changes must be *true*. Therefore, I can know for certain that my stable moral beliefs are true; I have a guarantee that *I* am not subject to fundamental moral error. At the same time, I have no guarantee that *others* are not subject to fundamental moral error. Indeed, it seems clear that some of others' stable beliefs could be false (for example, they might contradict *my* stable beliefs, which I have a guarantee are true).¹⁴ As stated, this sort of asymmetry is unacceptable since it conflicts with deeply ingrained thinking about the possibility of moral error; it gives the one who knows that expressivism and Blackburn's account of fears of fallibility are correct an *a priori guarantee* that they are immune to an error that others may well be subject to. Therefore, since this is a consequence of Blackburn's account of what the thought that one might be mistaken in their moral belief comes to, that account is untenable. Furthermore, since expressivism appears committed to an account at least *very much*

¹³ It doesn't follow that I have a guarantee that any *particular* belief is true, since I have no guarantee that any *particular* belief is stable. The guarantee I have is of the truth of the claim *my stable moral beliefs are true*.

¹⁴ Egan points out that not only do *I* have a guarantee that I (and not others) am immune to fundamental error, but everybody else has their own guarantee that *they* (and not others) are immune to fundamental error! All they need do is accept Blackburn's account and they acquire such a guarantee.

like Blackburn's in order to be able to explain such thoughts, expressivism is untenable.

7. Blackburn strikes back

Blackburn (2009) has recently replied to Egan's argument. Significantly, he is candid about his agreement with Egan that *if* expressivism is committed to an asymmetry in *a priori guarantees* of immunity to error, then expressivism is "indeed in trouble," and, "since we will not believe this [that stable beliefs are true] a priori of other people, it certainly violates my own 'no smugness' requirement, which requires me to think of myself and other people as symmetrical, so far as any a priori guarantee against error goes" (p.203). Nevertheless, Blackburn argues that his account *doesn't* provide one with such a guarantee.

Blackburn's criticism of Egan's argument is rather simple. He holds that Egan has run together and conflated two distinct ideas. They are (pp.205-206):

(M) If something is entrenched in my outlook, in such a way that nothing I could recognise as an improvement would undermine it, then it is true.

(I) If something is entrenched in my outlook, in such a way that nothing that *is* an improvement would undermine it, then it is true.

According to (M), one's stable beliefs (if one has any) are true. This is the claim that Egan says I can know *a priori* if Blackburn's account is true and I know it is true. It is the claim that Egan thinks Blackburn's account of fears of our fallibility allows me to know. However, Blackburn argues that his expressivist account does not commit him to the idea that I have an *a priori guarantee* that (M). At most, an expressivist like him will endorse (I). And (I) poses no problem for expressivism,

since it generates no asymmetry between how I must view myself and how I must view others. It may well be *a priori* for me that if a belief of mine would survive complete improvement in my epistemic circumstances then it is true (after all, if the belief is false then my epistemic situation could be improved by replacing the belief with its negation), but nevertheless it is *also a priori* for me – for the same reason - that if *someone else's* beliefs would survive complete improvement in their epistemic circumstances then *their* beliefs are true. So (I) poses no problem for expressivism.

Why does Blackburn's account commit him to my having at most an *a priori guarantee* that (I) and not an *a priori guarantee* that (M)? Blackburn points out that we are able to doubt whether everything we regard as an improvement *is* an improvement:

“A very small tincture of self-doubt would entail silence, on my own part, about whether everything that *is* an improvement is something that *I regard* as an improvement, or conversely. And an even smaller tincture is enough to enable me to interpret others as intelligibly supposing that although something is one of my stable commitments, it is untrue, which is enough to dismiss an *a priori* status for the denial of this” (pp.206-207).

After his brief criticism of Egan's argument, Blackburn goes on to diagnose Egan's error. The problem, Blackburn surmises, lies in Egan's taking Blackburn to have *an account of moral truth*. In response, Blackburn stresses that he has no account of what moral truth *is*, or what it *consists in*; indeed, the whole expressivist project eschews such notions. Rather, expressivism provides an account of what we are doing when we use words like “truth” in our moral practice. Similarly with “improvement”: the expressivist project is not to provide an informative analysis or reduction of such thought and talk, nor to ask the metaphysical question of what improvement *is* (the expressivist eschews such an idea), but rather to explain the function of the thought and discourse. Blackburn reminds us:

“[E]xpressivism and quasi-realism present themselves as *theories*, as more than mere deflationary platitudes...but not by finding ‘truth-conditions’ for moral statements. The extra theory is a theory of the overall practice and the emergence of content. We try to explain the emergence of the propositions that serve as the counters of thought, out of the necessary conditions for this practice to take place” (pp.207-208).

Egan’s crucial error lies in thinking that expressivists endorse sentences like (M), which provide *truth-conditions* for moral sentences and “beliefs”, whereas expressivists eschew the project of providing truth-conditions in the moral domain. Rather than seeking to provide an account of moral truth or error, what Blackburn offers is “an account of a state of mind and a process – the state of mind of worrying whether oneself is in moral error, and of the process of seeking to root out any hidden error” (p.207), nothing more.¹⁵

8. A reply to Blackburn on improvement

There are a number of problems with Blackburn’s reply. The first thing I want to draw attention to concerns the indented quote from Blackburn that I have supplied on the previous page. There Blackburn draws on the fact that we can doubt whether what we think to be improvements *are* improvements and that we can doubt whether our stable moral beliefs *are* true. However, it isn’t clear that Blackburn *can* legitimately draw on this. Blackburn thinks he can, or that at any rate it needs to be shown that he *can’t*; indeed, after drawing attention to the fact that we can have such

¹⁵ Blackburn’s direct reply to Egan is supplemented with what he considers a parallel case to the deflationary account of “truth” his expressivism incorporates: judgements about singular case probabilities (pp.208-210). However, it isn’t at all clear to me that a deflationary account of the truth of such judgements should be accepted; rather, judgements like “the probability of singular event E is 0.5” may have some kind of reduction, perhaps to claims about rational expectation and credence, and therefore be able to be *true* in a realist sense. (Blackburn would presumably want to understand talk about what is “rational” in an expressivist way, but no argument has been given that we *must*.) So I don’t see that expressivism’s deflationary account of moral “truth” is rendered more plausible, or unproblematic, by appealing to the example of singular case probability judgements.

doubts, he says that, "To sustain his charge, Egan must now try to deny that [an expressivist] should be able to say the things I have just said" (p.207). However, this seems to me to put onto Egan a burden that Blackburn actually shoulders. I don't think the burden lies upon Egan, or the non-expressivist, to show that expressivists *can't* accommodate our beliefs about error, stable beliefs and improvement. Rather, the burden lies on expressivists to show that they *can*. No doubt we do think that our stable beliefs could be false and that we might be mistaken in our ideas about what constitutes improvement; however, it is another question entirely whether these thoughts are consistent with *expressivism*. Expressivists need to *show* that. This explanatory burden is faced by expressivists because they claim that moral beliefs (or "beliefs") are desire-like, motivational states that belong to the family of desires rather than the family of psychological attitudes which contains non-moral (or non-normative), genuine beliefs. For this reason, expressivists are unable to simply *help themselves* to (for example) the idea that moral beliefs can be true or false; first appearances suggest that, if our moral "beliefs" really are what expressivists say they are, that idea is mistaken. In general, expressivists need to *show* that our having the thoughts and worries about morality that we do is consistent with expressivism.

Now, Blackburn certainly realises that he faces this burden at times. After all, he feels the need to explain how expressivists can make sense of fears of one's own fallibility; he doesn't just say that fears that our moral beliefs might be false are, well, fears that our moral beliefs might be false (and then say that it is for the non-expressivist to try to deny that expressivists can legitimately say such things). But when he appeals to the fact that we can worry that our ideas about which epistemic changes are improvements could be false, he simply helps himself to the thought that what I judge to be an improvement might not actually be an improvement; he just

assumes that expressivism can make sense of this thought. But the problem with such a move is that the notion of a possible difference between *one's beliefs about improvement* and *actual improvement* looks suspiciously like the notion of a possible difference between *one's moral beliefs* and the *moral truth*. The reason why is as follows. It seems that the expressivist needs an account of what it is to judge a series of changes to constitute "improvement" that makes reference to our having an approving attitude of some sort towards those changes. A non-expressivist could say that we have beliefs that attribute to changes properties like *being an improvement* or *enabling one to get to the moral truth* or *increasing the likelihood that one's moral beliefs will be true*. But the expressivist cannot say this (that is, the expressivist cannot say this in his theoretical account; the aliens mentioned earlier would have no place for such talk). So it seems that the expressivist needs to explain the idea that some epistemic changes are improvements in terms of our *having an attitude of approval* toward those changes (which is what Blackburn's words suggest when he mentions that there are things he "admires"). But in that case, the problem of finding room for a possible gap between one's current moral "beliefs" – what one approves – and the "truth" returns with respect to our current ideas of what constitutes *improvement*: how do we make sense of our having the thought of a possible gap between the changes we believe are improvements (those changes that we currently approve) and the changes that are *really* improvements? It is strange for Blackburn to simply help himself to our everyday thoughts about the possibility of a gap – and to employ such in his reply to Egan - when he realised that he couldn't just help himself to the everyday thought that our moral beliefs might be mistaken but realised that the expressivist owes us an explanation of *that*. It seems to me that unless a plausible expressivist explanation of our thought of a possible gap between our beliefs about

improvement and *actual improvement* is offered, Blackburn has no right to draw upon such a thought in his reply to Egan and suggest that the burden is on Egan to show why expressivists *can't* account for such thoughts.

That said, my second point in response to Blackburn is that I think we actually have reason to believe that expressivists *can't* sensibly account for the thought that our stable moral beliefs might be false or the thought that we might be mistaken about what constitutes improvement. Note that in order to explain worries about *current moral error* (worries about the possibility of a gap between our moral “beliefs” and the “truth”), Blackburn appealed to a possible difference between our attitudes *now* and our attitudes *in another circumstance*, a circumstance where we have changed in ways that we judge to be improvements (more information, greater sensitivity, etc). Given that the *non-expressivist* explanation appealing to a possible gap between our moral beliefs and the *truth* is unavailable to an expressivist, it seems that this possible difference between our attitudes as they are now and as they would be after we have undergone changes we approve of is the only sensible way for an expressivist explanation to go: we need to appeal to another set of our attitudes, so that there is something for the attitudes we have *now* to possibly be in disagreement with; that set of attitudes will have to consist of attitudes we would have *if we underwent changes* from how we are now; and it makes sense for the changes in question to be *changes I approve of* (after all, I know full well that my moral beliefs might change if I simply underwent *some change or other*; there's no cause for any worry *there*). It looks like this is the sort of explanation of worries about current moral error that an expressivist will have to endorse. However, what about fears that *our beliefs about what constitutes improvement* might be mistaken? As with the explanation of worries about current moral error, the *non-expressivist* can again

appeal to a possible gap between our beliefs and properties such as *being an improvement* or *enabling one to get to the moral truth* or *increasing the likelihood that one's moral beliefs will be true*. But for the expressivist to provide the same sort of explanation for fears about mistaken views of improvement as *he* did before (that is, as he did for worries about current moral error) leads to problems.¹⁶ It may be plausible to explain worries about current moral error by way of worries about the attitudes we might have after “improvement”, but it isn't so plausible that worries that *our idea of improvement* might be wrong can similarly be explained by way of worries about the attitudes we might have after “improvement”. It appears that such a strategy would cash out the worry that we are wrong about *improvement* as recognition of a possible gap between the changes we actually approve of and the changes we would approve of if we underwent improvement. But that seems to amount to our recognising that there is a possible gap between the changes we actually approve of and the changes we would approve of if we underwent...those changes we actually approve of! That isn't a plausible construal of fears that we might be mistaken about improvement. If the improvement-status of the changes that we actually approve of is in doubt then it is hard to see why our worry is about what we would endorse if we underwent *them* – such an explanation seems to have us *assuming* that our current ideas of improvement are *correct*, since it portrays us as caring about what we would endorse if we underwent them.¹⁷ But it is difficult to see how else such worries could sensibly be explained. In short, the problem is that in

¹⁶ I have realised that this challenge is similar to one raised recently with regard to expressivists' ability to explain moral certainty and uncertainty (Bykvist and Olson 2009, p.210).

¹⁷ Perhaps it might be suggested that we *are* worrying about whether we would endorse our current ideas of improvement if we underwent those changes we think are improvements, and that the reason why is that we are worried that our ideas of improvement are “self-refuting” – we are worried that if we underwent those changes we would no longer think them improvements. However, although all self-refuting ideas of improvement might be false, we don't think that *all false ideas of improvement must be self-refuting*; worries that our ideas of improvement might be false do not amount to the worry that they might be self-refuting in this way.

order to explain thoughts of a difference between current moral beliefs and the moral “truth”, Blackburn appealed to a gap between our current moral attitudes and our moral attitudes after we have undergone certain changes (improvements) and have gained a better perspective. In order to explain the worry that our idea of *improvement* might be wrong, we likewise need a gap between our current attitudes and the attitudes we would have after undergoing some changes such that we have a better perspective. But what better perspective can there be than that which we have after we have undergone *improvement*?

So it seems to me that although Blackburn has provided an arguably plausible account of what worries about *current moral error* amount to, expressivists cannot so plausibly explain what worries that *our beliefs about improvement might be mistaken* amount to (despite Blackburn’s helping himself to the fact that we can have such worries). At any rate, even if they *can* offer a plausible explanation, I suggest that a presumption against expressivism is warranted until they do so. Indeed, it seems to me that there is here a further good argument against expressivism in addition to that which Egan has pressed.

9. In defence of Egan

Specifically in defence of Egan, Blackburn’s response is inadequate because even *if* expressivists can make sense of worries that we might be mistaken about which changes are improvements, or that our stable beliefs might be false, and even *if* we do *in fact* think that we could be wrong about improvement and have false stable beliefs (as Blackburn draws attention to), it simply doesn’t therefore follow that Blackburn’s account lacks the implication that I can have an *a priori guarantee* that my stable beliefs are not mistaken. By pointing out that *he* can doubt the truth of

(M) and saying that therefore it isn't something he knows *a priori*, Blackburn misses the point: the point at issue isn't whether Blackburn or an expressivist is psychologically able to doubt (M) or whether they feel themselves personally committed to it; the question is whether *it is a consequence of Blackburn's account* that each of us can know *a priori* that (M) is true of ourselves. And it seems to me that that *is* a consequence of Blackburn's account, and that Egan's challenge succeeds.

If expressivism is true and if Blackburn's account of worries about the possibility of current moral error is accepted, then I have access to a theoretical account of what I am doing when I worry that my current moral beliefs might be false - I know that I am worrying that I might not endorse the moral "beliefs" I now do if I underwent changes that I approve of. (This is the account of what I am up to that the aliens would provide.) The thing to notice is that there is nothing to stop me from reflectively consulting that theoretical account when I am engaged in moral thought and practice. If I take a theoretical perspective (that of the aliens), then I can know that when I have the worry that my moral beliefs might be false, I am worrying that they wouldn't survive if I underwent particular changes that - still looking at it from a theoretical perspective - I consider to be improvements. I am worrying that they are not among my stable beliefs. But in that case, by bringing in the theoretical account, I can know that worrying whether *my stable beliefs* might be mistaken is to worry about the possibility of an *impossible* situation - that situation being that my stable beliefs are not among my stable beliefs. So I have an *a priori guarantee* that my stable moral beliefs are not mistaken, because to worry that they might be mistaken is to worry about a situation that is impossible. (Blackburn's response that we don't in fact think that we have such a guarantee is irrelevant; the fact is his

expressivist account gives us such a guarantee.) But I don't have a guarantee that *your* stable beliefs aren't mistaken. So, as long as I can bring what I know from the theoretical perspective into my moral thought and discourse (and why not?), I can see that there is an asymmetry between us. Any worry on my part that *my* stable beliefs might be false is confused; however, my worry that *your* stable beliefs might be false is a fair one to have.

Blackburn's reply to Egan suggests that he thinks that Egan has mistakenly taken Blackburn's expressivist account to provide an account of truth-conditions for moral sentences, as if mention of "truth" figured in the theoretical account and not simply in moral thought and discourse; in reply, Blackburn stresses that he rejects that idea. However, I think that Egan understands that. The point is not that *the theoretical account* will include claims along the lines of (M) – claims that our moral beliefs are or are not true, false, mistaken, etc – but rather that when the theoretical account is in hand, and it can be seen what our different thoughts amount to, we can bring what we glean from that account *into moral thought and discourse* and realise that certain worries just don't make sense (that is, we can bring what we learn from the theoretical account into our moral thought and discourse and *then* see that we can be sure of claims along the lines of (M)). Once I know what worries about current moral error amount to, I can see that my stable beliefs can't be mistaken and that worrying that they are mistaken is to worry about the possibility of something impossible. At the same time, I can see that my thought that your stable beliefs might be mistaken is one that does make sense for me to have. So it seems to me that Egan's argument is successful.

One further note: it seems to me perfectly possible that an expressivist account of worries about moral error might have the consequence that we can have

an *a priori* guarantee that some of our moral beliefs are *true* while *at the same time* it also being possible that they are *not true*. Why? Well, notice that Blackburn's account seems to imply that there are at least two distinct uses of the truth predicate in moral thought and discourse. On the one hand, it is used in connection with *moral* approval (to think or say that a moral claim is "true" is to endorse it). On the other hand, it is related to the approval we have towards epistemic changes when we consider them improvements (we think that the moral opinions we would have after the changes we approve of would be "true"). Without a unified explanation of such uses of "true" (such as a non-expressivist can provide by appealing to our thoughts of the property of *being true*, which non-expressivists believe moral claims can have), we seem to have no guarantee that these aren't two different uses of "true" that can come into conflict. So I think that even if expressivists somehow manage to show that it *does* make sense to worry that our stable beliefs might not be "true", it doesn't follow that they have shown that Egan's argument goes wrong – we might *also* have a guarantee that they *are* "true".

In summary, as Egan says, many people find it intuitive that if our moral beliefs are really desire-like rather than genuine representational beliefs then the idea that they might be *mistaken* is itself a mistake. Expressivists have shown that they *can* find room for the idea that moral "beliefs" are erroneous in some cases – they can find room for my thought that *you* are mistaken, and my thought that *I was* mistaken. But in the end, if expressivists really live up to their explanatory burden, the common intuition is found to be fundamentally correct. Expressivism leads to asymmetry in how one views others and how one views oneself; one has a guarantee about immunity to error in one's own case but not in the case of others. And as

Blackburn himself acknowledges, this provides strong reason to believe that expressivism is false.

10. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained expressivism and why atheists could avoid the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism if expressivism were viable; nevertheless, I have argued that expressivism is *false*. Although the focus has been on Blackburn's version of expressivism, I think the arguments defended here will be effective against any version of expressivism (perhaps with small modifications to render them appropriate to the particularities of each). Cuneo's argument should be effective against any expressivist view because it offers direct evidence for construing moral thought and discourse in the non-expressivist way that moral realism does. Egan's should be effective because any version of expressivism that is adequate to capture moral thought and discourse will – if it is to be plausible – have to provide an explanation of what our thoughts and worries about the possibility that our moral “beliefs” are in error comes to; it will need to say what possible circumstance we are worrying about. With such an account in hand, it seems, the savvy expressivist will be able to learn that they are guaranteed to be immune from afflictions that others may well be subject to, because they will have a guarantee of immunity for their “beliefs” that would survive in those circumstances worried about, yet those “beliefs” could possibly be different to others', and therefore others' could be “false”.

So it seems that the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism cannot be sidestepped. In the next chapter, I will suggest that interesting consequences follow from this fact.

Chapter 5 – The consequences of atheists' acceptance of moral scepticism

So far in this essay, I have argued that atheists have good reason to embrace moral scepticism; that is, to consider all of their moral beliefs to be epistemically unwarranted. To some, this may seem to be an obviously *negative* conclusion for atheists, and one that they will wish was otherwise. However, it isn't obvious that that is in fact so. Some philosophers think that the embrace of positions like moral scepticism may have very few costs, if any. In this chapter, I will examine whether the fact that atheists have reason to embrace moral scepticism *is* bad news for atheists and what some of the costs are.

I will argue that embracing moral scepticism will have consequences that *many* atheists should view as undesirable. Firstly, I will criticise the *revolutionary moral fictionalist* proposal, according to which accepting moral scepticism isn't costly for atheists because even if they have to accept that their moral beliefs are unwarranted, atheists might nevertheless be able to *make-believe*, or *pretend*, that they have *warranted moral beliefs* and carry on with their moral life pretty much as before. Secondly, I will suggest that even if revolutionary moral fictionalism *is* generally viable, atheists still face costs. It appears that atheists will be unable to rationally endorse certain arguments that many of them have wanted to endorse, arguments that they don't want to just *pretend* to endorse. Perhaps ironically, atheists have sought support for *atheism*, and particularly for viewing atheism as *more probable than theism*, in such arguments; if atheists' moral beliefs are undermined and rendered unwarranted, therefore, it seems that these arguments for atheism are likewise undermined and that atheism loses any support it might have enjoyed from

such arguments. I will argue that there is reason to think that atheists will not be able to endorse *the argument from evil* (traditionally called “the problem of evil”) and that they cannot reasonably take what they consider to be moral error in a purported divine revelation (such as the Bible) to *be* moral error and provide evidence against the claims that it is a good depository of moral truth and that it owes its origin to the claimed divine source.

1. Introducing moral fictionalism

I have said that some will view the conclusion that atheists should embrace moral scepticism as obviously bad news for atheists, and it isn’t difficult to see why. To accept moral scepticism is to accept that all of one’s moral beliefs are epistemically unwarranted, and we usually think that beliefs that are unwarranted - and especially beliefs that we ourselves *acknowledge* to be unwarranted - should no longer be held. Indeed, we often expect that someone who acknowledges that they lack good reason to hold a belief (to be distinguished from thinking that they *have* good reason but being unable to articulate or remember what their reasons are) *will* no longer hold the belief, although their shedding the belief may be difficult if it is habitual or deeply ingrained or is a belief that we are biologically “wired” to have (and in that case, even if the *belief* is difficult to give up, we would probably expect the person in question to stop *asserting* the belief). So isn’t it the case that if the atheist’s moral beliefs are unwarranted, and especially if she *acknowledges* them to be such, she should give them up? Or that she should *try* to give them up? At the very least, in the interests of truth, shouldn’t atheists stop making unwarranted moral *assertions*?

If the answer is yes, then – assuming the argument of this essay thus far is correct - it appears that many atheists face bad news. Of course, there may be some who find dispensing with moral evaluation to be liberating, giving them a greater sense of freedom in deciding how they will live; in addition, some have suggested that getting rid of morality would be beneficial for the satisfaction of our desires because moral thought and discourse arouses and entrenches conflict and reduces the likelihood of compromise with others (Garner 2007, pp.506-507). However, I suspect most atheists would view having to dispense with moral thought and discourse as very costly. For one thing, it may result in the sense of a loss of (e.g.) our actions' significance, triggered by our no longer thinking of the objects of our evaluation as having the kind of value (moral) that we used to think they have. For another, there is the practical problem of how we go about restructuring our ways of evaluating so that we avoid evaluation that is *moral*. And even if the restructuring project succeeds, even if atheists manage to rid themselves of moral evaluation, will the kinds of evaluation that replace it be adequate for the job? For example, it might be possible to rid ourselves of moral evaluation and instead just evaluate according to our *non-moral* desires and preferences. But evaluating just by our preferences would plausibly lack the force and authority of moral evaluation - will others be as impressed or moved by appeals to our desires as by appeals to the rightness or goodness of a course of action? It isn't hard to see, then, why some might think that the fact that atheists should embrace moral scepticism is *clearly* bad news for atheists, at least those atheists who have a fondness for morality and its benefits.

Does atheist acceptance of moral scepticism suggest that atheists should try to dispense with moral evaluation and give up their moral views? A number of philosophers would presumably hold that it does, since they have held that such

would be the right response if we come to acknowledge that there are no moral truths or that certain of our moral concepts are problematic.¹ However, other philosophers have argued that even if we have good reason to think that all of our moral beliefs are *false* (plausibly a more severe conclusion than that they are *unwarranted*), we can nevertheless substantially retain our moral thought and discourse. These philosophers claim that even if we should stop *believing* the moral claims we have believed, nevertheless we can *in effect* continue to hold them and *more or less* continue to assert them. We may not strictly *believe* the moral claims, but we can have an attitude towards them that is significantly similar to belief – we can *make-believe* them, or pretend they are true.² Likewise, we can pretend to assert them. If these philosophers are correct, then although atheists may have to “give up” their moral opinions in the sense of *no longer believing* them, nevertheless they can at the same time *not* “give up” their moral opinions – they can *make-believe* them. This position – that we should make-believe, or pretend, moral claims - is called *moral fictionalism*, or *revolutionary moral fictionalism* (hereafter simply the former).³ It is a proposal for reforming-yet-essentially-retaining moral thought and discourse.

Richard Joyce (2001) has been the most prominent spokesman for moral fictionalism, advocating it in the wake of arguing for error theory (that there are no

¹ See Anscombe (1958, p.1) and Blackburn, “Errors and the Phenomenology of Value” (in Blackburn 1993, pp.149-165), p.149.

² Could atheists acknowledge that their moral beliefs are unwarranted but continue to hold them as literal *beliefs* (not pretence) and literally *assert* them? I don't think so. The first thing to note is that the fact that we normally think one should give up, and stop asserting, a belief one acknowledges to be unwarranted at least provides a presumption *against* the reasonableness of such an idea - why should atheists' moral beliefs be an exception? In addition, there is something unstable about holding a belief, and therefore thinking it *true*, without thinking it *warranted*; so, I think that in order to retain literal moral *belief*, atheists would need to also have the false belief that their moral beliefs are warranted. But if atheists have in fact accepted that their moral beliefs are *unwarranted* - because of the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism - then it seems that, in order to maintain their moral beliefs, they will have to *deceive themselves* about this. I assume that most atheists will not find the proposal that they thus deceive themselves (however exactly the deception might proceed) an attractive one.

³ Although proponents have largely simply called it “moral fictionalism” (as indeed I will mainly do in this chapter), it should be distinguished from the distinct position that Mark Kalderon (2005) has also called “moral fictionalism”, mentioned in the previous chapter (in note 5).

moral facts and so all of our moral beliefs are false), although there have been other proponents (Nolan et al. 2005).⁴ If moral fictionalism is a viable strategy for people to adopt in light of the realisation that their moral beliefs are false or unwarranted, then there perhaps need be few costs to atheists who embrace moral scepticism. Although they will have to replace belief with make-believe, they may be able to carry on with morality pretty much as before.

In the next few sections, I will explain moral fictionalism in a bit more detail by explaining Joyce's account of it – which is the most thorough account in the literature. I will explain the advantages that Joyce considers moral fictionalism to have (or to *plausibly* have, since he stresses that he is not *certain* about its viability). I will also argue that moral fictionalism will *not* be a viable strategy for atheists to adopt upon realising that they have reason to consider all their moral beliefs to be unwarranted.

2. Richard Joyce on moral fictionalism

Moral fictionalists called their position moral *fictionalism* because it is supposed to have certain affinities with fiction. We are all used to fictional claims; we come across such claims in books we read, in films we watch, and (although they aren't generally called "fictional", but rather "make-believe" or "pretend") in utterances made by children playing games such as "Cops and Robbers". Fictional claims may be *false* (or, such that we do not believe that they are true) but they are nevertheless not thereby disqualified from discourse; it can be perfectly proper and correct to make fictional claims despite the fact that they would be dubious or

⁴ In addition to advocating moral fictionalism in response to error theory, Joyce seems to have advocated moral fictionalism in response to *moral scepticism*; I say he "*seems* to have advocated" because his discussion is very brief and he doesn't mention moral fictionalism by name (2006, pp.227ff).

mistaken if they were genuinely asserted claims about the real world. Suppose that I am an actor in a play and I play a character called Bernard who is married to a woman called Clarissa. In the play, I introduce Clarissa to another character and say, "This is my wife." Now, in acting out this part of the play I have spoken falsely – for I am not married to the actress who plays Clarissa. However, I am not *really* asserting that she is my wife; rather, I am pretending, or making-believe, that I am Bernard, and I am making-believe that the actress is Clarissa, and I am making believe that she is my wife. What I have said is, strictly speaking, *false*; however, it is nevertheless perfectly proper and correct. If someone in the audience stood up and proceeded to correct me because in fact the actress *isn't* my wife, they would be very confused indeed. The moral fictionalist's suggestion is that we can likewise perfectly properly pretend when it comes to moral thought and discourse.⁵ Although we no longer *believe* the moral claims we did, we can decide to *pretend* – in our thoughts, utterances and actions - and carry on pretty much as before. Indeed, if we have a desire to continue with the framework of morality (or a desire for the benefits of doing so), then we have *reason* to adopt the pretence – not a *moral* reason, but a practical reason generated by our desires (we have reason to pretend because doing so will fulfil our desires).

What exactly is the attitude that the person engaged in moral make-believe has towards moral claims? According to Joyce, the answer is *thoughts* (2001, p.197). Instead of believing that (say) murder is wrong, one entertains the *thought* that

⁵ Some fictionalists might construe fictional utterances as *true*, or believed to be true, but as containing an implicit "In the fiction" prefix. For instance, if we are talking about Star Wars and I say, "Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father," then it might be held that what I have said is *true*, because my utterance is to be understood as equivalent to, "In the Star Wars story, Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father," and *that* statement is true. However, although this is plausible when we are talking *about* a fiction from a standpoint outside of it, it seems less plausible as an account of our utterances when a fiction requires a higher level of engagement (such as acting or playing a game does); see Joyce (2001, pp.199-202). Nolan (2005) provides a good discussion of ways to understand fictional attitudes and claims.

murder is wrong. Now, one might worry that if the fictional attitude is simply thought, then the pretence will be too shallow. Will simply entertaining thoughts really provide a foundation for moral practice? Indeed, will engaging in moral pretence really just involve talking in a certain way – *as if* we believe moral claims – and going through the motions, and nothing more? For, one might think, that is the case in examples like acting in a play: there are some words to say, and some actions to perform, but not much more. One might worry that this will be a poor substitute for moral *belief* and that it will lack the seeming authority and the motivational contribution to our behaviour that our current moral beliefs have. However, Joyce points out that we can have emotional responses to fiction, and that these emotions and feelings can sometimes be quite powerful (p.197). We sometimes cry during films or when reading books; at other times we get angry at characters that we really know don't exist. (Indeed, actors can really “get into” their role and “lose themselves” in it.) Engaging in pretence when it comes to morality may well employ the range of emotions we currently experience in forming real moral beliefs and making real moral assertions, and in that case moral make-belief may still have a seeming authority about it and the power to greatly influence our behaviour and motivate us to act, like our moral beliefs do.

Someone might now have the *opposite* worry. They might wonder: if moral make-believe manages to mimic moral belief well, in what ways would it really differ? Of course, Joyce says that make-believe *isn't* (or wouldn't be) belief, but one might suspect that if it can guide our behaviour and thinking to the extent Joyce hopes it can (mimicking real moral belief) then it would actually *be* belief. Indeed, Joyce doesn't envisage the person who makes-believe finding themselves in a given situation and there and then consciously and explicitly deciding to engage in moral

pretence in that situation. Rather, he understands them to make the decision and then to lose themselves in the fiction, such that when they come across a situation which calls for moral action (or which, when they had moral beliefs, they *believed* calls for moral action) they engage in the pretence but without there and then explicitly considering that that is what they are doing. In that case, one might worry that such supposedly pretending moral agents would actually *believe* the moral claims they make and act on.

To get around this worry, Joyce appeals to the notion of critical contexts. These are contexts of discussion or inquiry in which one considers the question of what they believe. Someone who embraces the moral fictionalist proposal will in some contexts make all kinds of moral claims (when she is pretending). In other contexts – for example, when delivering a metaethics lecture or writing a book arguing that all of our moral beliefs are dubious – the very same person will either deny, or refuse to assent to, the very same claims. Joyce holds that whether someone is engaged in a fictional practice depends upon what she assents to in the *most critical context* she finds herself in. One critical context C1 is more critical than another C2 “if and only if C1 involves scrutiny and questioning of the kinds of attitude held in C2 but not vice versa” (p.193).⁶ When discussing metaethics or writing a book defending moral fictionalism, moral fictionalists scrutinise and question everyday moral attitudes; they ask questions about the moral judgements that they and others make (say) when at the supermarket or watching the news or in other everyday activities. There is an asymmetry - when in the supermarket, watching the news, or engaged in other everyday activities, people do *not* scrutinise and question the kinds of attitude they have and judgements they make *when doing*

⁶ I have changed the numbering to make it clearer.

metaethics. Therefore, the context where metaethics is being engaged in is the more critical context, the context that reveals our *real* beliefs. In that context, the moral fictionalist concedes that moral claims are dubious and admits to not having any moral beliefs. Therefore, her claims that such-and-such is right, wrong, good or bad in the everyday contexts – where metaethics doesn't arise - should be understood as pretence.

One might worry that implementing the moral fictionalist proposal will lead to doublethink, and that the person who does so will end up self-deceived or desperately confused, but Joyce doesn't think that such must be the case. He nicely illustrates his understanding of moral fictionalism and the question of self-deception with the example of an enthusiastic Sherlock Holmes fan:

“A...[Sherlock] Holmes fan takes great pleasure in pretending that the stories are veridical. She visits the London sights that Holmes is said to have visited; she says, “If Holmes saw Moriarty *here*, and then lost track of him *there*, then he must have followed him down *this* street”; she pictures Holmes being there. For the space of the day, perhaps, she gives in to the fiction and “forgets” all about Conan Doyle...To call this character “self-deceived” is unfair, since she can, at any time, readopt the critical perspective from which she knows very well that it's all fiction...The moral fictionalist is in important respects like this...He is not self-deceived, since it is within his grasp to enter the “critical mode” should he care to...When the context of discussion shifts towards the more rigorous, philosophical end of the spectrum – when the person is asked about what he *really* believes – then the maker of the fictive judgement can, but the victim of self-deception cannot, move with the context” (pp.195-196).

However, Joyce doesn't believe that one who engages in moral pretence can be quite like the Holmes fan. He holds that for moral make-believe to be viable, it needs to be the case that a *group* adopt it - not just the odd isolated person. The reason for this is that, given that at the moment people are forming *real* moral beliefs and asserting those beliefs when they make moral claims, one who simply started pretending on their own - Joyce terms such a person a “lone fictionalist” (p.203) -

would fail to properly communicate, and their utterances would be deceptive because people would take them to believe the moral claims they utter. So, while he doesn't say exactly *how many* people need to embrace it, he holds that, "if [the fictional attitude] is to be viable, it must be an attitude that a *group* may take towards a hitherto believed theory" (p.204).

Joyce is hopeful that *if* a large enough group were to adopt moral fictionalism and engage in moral make-believe (such that it became viable) it would deliver many of the benefits of full-fledged moral belief. He doesn't claim that moral make-believe will have *all* of the benefits of moral belief, but he is hopeful that it will prove significantly better than simply dispensing with moral thought and discourse. He argues that moral make-believe may be able to motivate us as moral belief does, which would be useful because often moral judgements dissuade us from doing things that would be imprudent and frustrate the satisfaction of many of our desires. On this note, he provides the example of having the desire to steal sweets from a shop; moral belief and moral make-believe can help one not to act on that desire, which means that one doesn't get caught shop lifting and end up having a lot of their other desires frustrated (p.223). He acknowledges that it is *possible* that the moral fictionalist will at that moment reflect on what they are doing and find themselves so confronted with reality (that they really don't believe any of this morality stuff) that they will thereby be unable to engage in make-believe to the extent that it can overrule their desire to steal, which they think (possibly wrongly) they can get away with doing. But Joyce doesn't think that this is a particular problem for moral fictionalism, since even if one really *believes* that it is wrong to steal, they still might find themselves suffering from weakness of will and give in to their desire to steal. In short, there is no guarantee that one will act in accordance with their make-believe,

but there is similarly no guarantee that one will act in accordance with moral *belief*; so moral fictionalism isn't at a great disadvantage on that score (p.227).

It should be noted that while Joyce does not argue that moral fictionalism will be *just as good* as full-fledged moral belief when it comes to satisfying our desires, that is nevertheless a view a moral fictionalist could adopt. And a great benefit of moral fictionalism would be that those who adopt it could evaluate actions, persons, states of affairs (etc) with a framework that routinely influences others and that is already habitual and completely familiar.

3. General problems for moral fictionalism

Although moral fictionalism has a number of advocates, it nevertheless also has its detractors. One major problem it faces is that it is hard to believe that moral make-believe will actually be able to motivate adequately when it comes to *difficult* moral decisions and dilemmas. As I have mentioned, Joyce presents us with the example of making-believe that stealing is wrong when in a shop; by engaging in the moral make-believe, we dissuade ourselves from stealing. However, while it might be plausible that engaging in moral make-believe could help one to resist stealing sweets, it is doubtful whether it will be able to provide real authoritative guidance in other cases where doing what morality requires is more difficult. As Hallvard Lillehammer says:

“For the sake of pretence, I will happily fetch the water, cook the paella, wash the dishes, or even kill the ants (much like children undertake make-believe obligations when playing house). In other cases, the fictionalist strategy will only succeed if someone is literally taken in by the fiction...Moral thought

frequently prescribes costly sacrifices, such as the abandonment of basic personal projects or the involuntary termination of life" (2004, p.101).⁷

It is difficult to see why, when the moral demand is costly, the moral fictionalist won't bring to mind the fact that morality is dubious and satisfy her non-moral desires instead. After all, there is no reason to think that bringing to mind the dubious status of morality, and the fact that she is pretending, will be particularly difficult; indeed, her belief that moral claims have a dubious status might force itself upon her involuntarily. But, once she has brought that to mind, it is hard to believe that she will be able to carry on with the pretence.

Joyce could perhaps reply that, in many situations, including ones where morality prescribes very costly behaviour, an agent will need to act quickly and will be so immersed in the situation that she will have no real opportunity to bring to mind the problematic status of morality and the fact that she is pretending. For example, suppose that a moral fictionalist is looking after somebody else's children, children she isn't particularly fond of, and the children have fallen into a fast-flowing river. She knows that to jump in and attempt a rescue will involve putting her own life in great danger, but feels the moral demand of a duty to the children and their parents to attempt a rescue. In such a case, she has to think and act quickly, and it might seem unlikely that she will bring to mind the metaethical considerations she has thought about in her study and which led her to a conclusion of error theory or moral scepticism.

However, while I grant that it is possible that *some* or even *many* cases of morality's demanding costly sacrifice may be cases where there simply isn't time to bring to mind one's considered metaethical views (although I am less than *convinced*

⁷ Lillehammer has in mind a different moral pretence – that if we managed to rid ourselves of all non-moral disagreement then our moral views would converge on a single view – but his point is pertinent to Joyce's fictionalism too.

about that), there will nevertheless be *many* cases where agents have a lot of time to deliberate and carefully consider which action to perform, removed from the scene where the effects of their action (or of their inaction) will be felt. A good example would be charitable giving. Although it is perhaps plausible that a moral fictionalist would be too distracted to reflect on her metaethical views when (e.g.) accosted and asked for money by a needy person or somebody collecting for charity on the street, it is hard to see why she won't bring them to mind when she is alone in her study with (e.g.) a charity's request for financial aid in one hand and her chequebook in the other. There is no pressure to act *immediately*; she can fully reflect on the situation and bring her considered metaethical views to bear upon it. In such a case, it would be strange if she nevertheless continued to pretend that she is required to give to charity. It seems to me that in the quiet of the study, the moral fictionalist will be able to prevent metaethical thoughts from intruding only if she is very forgetful or – to put it bluntly - a bit dim (which seems inconsistent with her following the reasoning that makes moral fictionalism an attractive prospect in the first place). So it seems to me that adopting the moral fictionalist's proposal will lead to a restricting of morality's demands, as moral decisions formed in circumstances that allow reflection fall by the wayside (that is, the moral pretence is abandoned in such circumstances) and only moral decisions formed in more urgent and immanent circumstances remain. (This isn't to say that people might not continue to sometimes *act* in accordance with morality's demands in situations that allow for reflection, only that they will do so out of *prudence* or to satisfy *non-moral desires* rather than from moral belief or moral make-believe.) Of course, it is difficult to be *sure* about this, since in the final analysis it is an *empirical* matter to what extent moral fictionalism can mimic moral belief, one that depends upon the psychology of actual

agents. Maybe the pretence *won't* be abandoned in such circumstances. Nevertheless, the prospects do not look good to me.

I have suggested that moral make-believe will be a poor substitute for moral belief because it will fail to mimic moral belief in important ways (it won't be maintained in all of the situations in which moral belief currently exists) However, suppose that moral make-believe instead apparently does an excellent job of mimicking moral belief in every way. I think that if that is so, then another worry arises. It isn't clear that we *really will* have a case of moral make-believe mimicking moral belief. Plausibly, the supposed moral fictionalist will be in the situation of really believing that morality has dubious credentials and also *really believing* the moral claims that they are meant to be *pretending* are true. As I have mentioned, Joyce's way around this worry is to appeal to different critical contexts and claim that the fact that the purported moral make-believer disavows her moral judgements in the metaethical context reveals that the moral attitudes she has in other contexts aren't *really* beliefs. The problem is, it is possible that moral make-believers are (or would become) *believers* in moral claims when they are in everyday, less critical contexts and *non-believers* in moral claims when they are in the more critical, metaethical context. For while it is implausible to suggest that (e.g.) the Sherlock Holmes fan *believes* that Holmes really had been in the London locations where she makes-believe he had when she is engaged in her pretence, it is not so implausible to suppose that moral fictionalists might believe the moral claims they purport to pretend when *they* are engaged in *their* "pretence". In no way does it *appear* to the Holmes fan as if Holmes had been there; plausibly, however, it will continue to *appear* to moral fictionalists that certain actions (say) have certain moral qualities - after all, they have been trained for a long time to evaluate morally and doing so has

become habitual. It is plausible, then, that whereas the Holmes fan can lose herself in the fiction without thereby falling into belief, a moral fictionalist who loses themselves in the fiction *will* fall into belief, with the help of habituation (and perhaps also biology). Indeed, to the extent that her moral judgements provide as great motivation as they did before she came to view morality as dubious, I would suspect that she still *believes* moral claims, even if she disbelieves them in other contexts.⁸ In that case, failing to discard moral judgement and discourse may lead to “moral fictionalists” actually being in the undesirable state of falling in and out of moral belief.

There is another reason why Joyce’s appeal to critical contexts is problematic.⁹ Here the problem is with moral *discussion*, rather than action. Suppose you and I are considering and talking about the morality of a certain action; say, a pre-emptive military strike. While it *might* be the case that one of us simply states what we think, or that we both agree, it wouldn’t be all that unusual if we disagreed with each other. Or at any rate, we might talk about those who disagree with *us*. It would be very easy for the discussion to move to consideration and scrutiny of our moral *beliefs* and not simply of the military strike. We might discuss moral feelings and reasons and putative sources of moral knowledge. I might say that you are being too emotional; you might say that I am being too cold and detached; I might criticise the weight you give to moral “hunches” and say that to really know if the action is right or wrong, we need to consider the wider situation; you might disagree. Suddenly the context is not only one where the moral propriety of the military strike is being scrutinised (or pretended about, if we are moral fictionalists); in addition, the

⁸ Richard Garner also realises such a possibility, especially if the more critical contexts where one acknowledges they engage in pretence are rare (2007, p.509).

⁹ My already-mentioned objection concerning moral pretence when one has time to reflect *also* concerned critical contexts – there the worry is that when one has time and space for reflection, the context will *become* one that is critical (via the intrusion of metaethical thoughts).

status of our moral judgements, moral feelings, and moral reasoning is in question. Even if I don't scrutinise *my own* moral judgements and sensibility too much, perhaps simply taking them for granted, nevertheless if you disagree with me I may wonder about possible illegitimate influences on *your* moral sensibility. But as soon as this happens, we are in a context where the status of our moral judgements has arisen, as has the issue of potentially illegitimate influences leading us to think as we do. And this looks like a very critical context. It is a context in which we are questioning the status of our moral judgements and feelings and therefore a context in which the reasons why moral belief has been thought dubious, which have prompted the adoption of moral fictionalism in the first place (such as the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism), could be expected to rear their heads and join other possible reasons to think our moral judgements might be dubious on the table for discussion. It looks like a critical context in which the moral fictionalist, if they really *don't* believe moral claims and *do* consider all moral judgements to be false or unwarranted, will say so.

If I am right about this, then it seems that moral fictionalism will not be viable. Moral fictionalism depends upon there being distinct contexts in some of which metaethical claims are on the table (and so morality will be renounced) and in others of which moral but not metaethical claims are on the table (and moral make-believe can be engaged in). But it looks like it is too easy for the latter sort of context to collapse into the former, especially when it comes to moral discussion and disagreement. *Moral* contexts can too easily become *metaethical* contexts.¹⁰

¹⁰ Garner agrees: "Any time we find ourselves involved in some difficult question of applied ethics, questions of metaethics inevitably arise. It is often reasonable to ask if some disagreement may be based on a semantic misunderstanding, and it is customary for both sides of any moral argument to display and demand reasons" (2007, p.505). And: "Joyce may believe that...metaethical excursions would be rare, but I suspect that questions about meaning and justification will turn up as soon as we disagree about anything that really matters to us. Since very many things do matter to us, frequent

I will consider one more general problem for moral fictionalism. As has been seen, Joyce explicitly says that, to be viable, moral make-believe needs to be embraced by a *group*. The problem with a lone ranger fictionalist is that they are engaged in pretence when everybody else really *believes*, and so they either fail to communicate, or are deceptive, or both. Such problems make lone ranger fictionalism unattractive. However, I think that there will be difficulties in avoiding lone ranger fictionalism, at least in an interim. For the conclusion that we all (or, a sizeable number of us, such as those who are atheists) should view our moral beliefs as having dubious credentials is one that people may only accept gradually. The same holds true for the claim that moral fictionalism should be embraced; it may take atheists, for example, time to be persuaded that there are sufficient benefits to retaining moral thought and discourse as make-believe. Joyce's arguments for error theory and his advocacy of moral fictionalism can be taken as an example. Suppose that every member of every philosophy department found Joyce's arguments for error theory *and* for moral fictionalism convincing. We might all agree among ourselves that we will engage in moral make-believe with each other. Nevertheless, we all have to venture outside and deal with those who aren't philosophers and who haven't (yet) signed up to moral fictionalism – the checkout staff at the shop, the bank manager, the people at the tram stop, family members, etc. Although we and

metaethical digressions will remind us of our belief in the error theory [or our moral scepticism], and that will make it increasingly difficult to stay immersed in our fiction" (pp.508-509).

James Lenman has suggested another worry to me – is moral fictionalism consistent with doing ethics as a philosophy subject? After all, if the philosophy classroom is the *most* critical context, then won't the moral fictionalist when delivering their ethics lectures have to avoid moral claims? And in that case, wouldn't trying to work out what is right and what is wrong – the business of ethics – be an impossible exercise? However, I think that even if we all embraced moral fictionalism, philosophers could nevertheless continue with ethics, albeit in a modified form. Instead of asking and considering questions like, "Is euthanasia wrong?" they could ask questions like, "Would moral make-believe sufficiently in tune with our moral feelings and the moral beliefs we used to have consider euthanasia to be wrong?" or something along those lines. That said, one might suspect that in working out their answers to such questions, supposed moral fictionalists would in fact be consulting and refining (unofficial) moral *beliefs*.

our colleagues may have embraced the moral fiction, we will nevertheless each day rub shoulders with many people who *haven't*. Our discussions and interactions with them may require moral claims or moral action, in which case we adopt our pretence but either fail to communicate or else act deceptively (since others will take our moral claims to be genuine assertions of belief, whereas we do not in fact *believe* the moral claims we utter). We might be able to inform non-fictionalists about our metaethical views, and perhaps even convert them to the moral fictionalism that we embrace, but it seems this will only be possible in small steps. It might *end up* the case that a huge number of people adopt moral fictionalism and that when we engage in moral make-believe in our daily lives we are neither deceiving nor failing to communicate since enough of us are well aware of what we are all doing. However, it can't *start* there. It seems that if moral fictionalism is to be embraced, it will require a period of its advocates being lone ranger fictionalists, or belonging to a relatively small group who, while they communicate non-deceptively with each other (since they are all aware of the fact that they are engaged in moral make-believe), nevertheless *fail to communicate*, and *are deceptive*, when it comes to the wider society and the larger groups they find themselves part of.¹¹ If we are error theorists or moral sceptics, we will be unconvinced that such deception would be *morally* problematic, but nevertheless I think it is something that would be uncongenial to many atheists' wishes and desires. Also, even if moral sceptics don't *believe* that deception is wrong, and so don't face a problem on that count, it seems it would be impossible (at least at first) to live faithfully in accordance with a moral pretence

¹¹ This is another problem for moral fictionalism that Richard Garner has also noticed: "If we are to be...moral fictionalists we will either have to speak "morality" only with the members of our group, or bring it about that the larger group accepts a convention to the effect that uttering a moral judgement triggers a withdrawal of assertoric force" (p.509).

which includes *pretending* that deception is wrong – if one pretends, one deceives and so does something that one pretends is wrong.

Given these problems for moral fictionalism, it seems to me that it is not viable.

4. Special problems for atheist moral fictionalism

In addition to the problems with the moral fictionalist proposal that I have discussed above, I think that there are additional problems when it comes to the suggestion that *atheists* embrace moral fictionalism in response to the realisation that they should accept moral scepticism. Earlier in this essay I have argued that, while *atheists* have reason to embrace moral scepticism, it is by no means clear that *theists* have reason to; there are problems with arguments for moral scepticism that draw on empirical considerations apart from the question of atheism (see chapter 2), and the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism (in chapter 3) applies to atheists but not theists. This is important, because although many atheists might think that theists should embrace *atheism* and therefore accept moral scepticism too, theists themselves will not acknowledge this. Many theists hold that theism, or a particular theistic tradition, has significant evidential support in its favour (e.g., Copan and Moser 2003; Swinburne 2004; Craig 2008), and others hold that warranted theistic belief doesn't require as much evidential support as many have assumed (e.g., Plantinga 2000; Abraham 2006; Peters 2009). Therefore, we end up with the following situation: assuming the agreed cogency of the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism, atheists will acknowledge that all of *their* moral beliefs are unwarranted (and theists will agree), but theists will not acknowledge that *their* moral beliefs are all unwarranted. Because of this asymmetry, even if all atheists

embraced moral scepticism and also agreed to adopt moral make-believe, it nevertheless is very implausible that theists would join them in embracing moral scepticism or take up moral fictionalism. But in that case, the potential *group* that the moral fictionalist hopes will come to embrace moral fictionalism – thus rendering moral make-believe something that doesn't involve a lack of communication and isn't deceptive - will not include theists, the number of which is significant.

So far, my remarks simply call into question the plausibility of the idea that the circle of moral fictionalists might expand until moral fictionalism is generally accepted, and others have also noticed that the implausibility of this poses a problem for moral fictionalism.¹² Perhaps this will not be too much of a problem if *enough* atheists embrace moral fictionalism; if there are a sizeable number of moral fictionalists then it may constitute a group large enough for moral fictionalism to *not* involve deception and lack of communication, or at least to not involve *too much* of it. Indeed, we can suppose that it could come to be the case that a large body of atheists embrace moral fictionalism and that *everybody* – theists included – *knows that* atheists have done so. In that case, it seems that atheists' engaging in moral make-believe need not involve deception at all. Everybody would know that they don't *believe* the moral claims they make.

Nevertheless, I think that a problem would remain for atheists, and this is where my points about the atheist-theist asymmetry above are significant. For theists would have the ability to bring metaethical considerations to the fore in any moral discussion or disagreement with atheists, thus making the context of discussion a more critical one and one in which atheists will be unable to maintain their moral pretence. If it were the case that *everybody* embraced moral fictionalism, then I

¹² Again, Garner has noticed the same problem; he points out that the number of people who are likely to accept Joyce's error theory for the reasons he gives (and to then embrace moral fictionalism) will be small, at least at present (p.512).

suppose this *might not* happen. If we *all* face the problem that raising the metaethical issues spoils our engagement in the moral fiction and reminds us that we have no warranted moral beliefs, then we might *all* refrain from raising metaethical issues when engaged in moral discussion or disagreement – I might not raise an issue (the dubiousness of moral judgements) that frustrates what *you* want to say if it also frustrates what *I* want to say. Maybe. But theists are not in the same boat, or at any rate will not *consider* themselves to be in the same boat, as atheists when it comes to moral scepticism. (And theists won't be moral fictionalists.) So if atheists become atheistic moral fictionalists, theists could potentially frustrate their engagement in the fiction by continually raising the metaethical issues, reminding atheists of the argument for atheistic Darwinian moral scepticism and drawing attention to the fact that atheists are engaged in pretence. In the same way, I suspect that one can wreck a children's game of make-believe by (a) stressing to them that they don't *really* believe that (for example) they are a cowboy and their friend is an Indian, and (b) pointing out and making them acknowledge what they really believe – that they are children who have dressed up, and that they are in a garden in England and not the Wild West, etc. By drawing attention to atheistic moral fictionalists' pretence, and thereby wrecking it, theists would frustrate the benefits that atheistic moral fictionalists seek to derive from engagement in the fiction. Furthermore, it seems that theists would have motive to do so. On the one hand, theists might object to the hijack of terminology and sentiments that were used (and, theists might think, were *intended by God* to be used) to state beliefs and make genuine important assertions. Theists might view *moral* make-believe no more highly than they would view *religious* make-believe. In addition, there are certain areas of moral disagreement where many atheists are on one side of the debate and many theists are on the other

(e.g., the debate over the morality of abortion).¹³ At present, such debates involve moral claims and moral reasoning being deployed by both sides. If the atheists who engage in such debates were to adopt moral fictionalism, theists would surely want to point out and draw attention to the fact that when the atheists make and defend moral claims contrary to theists' moral views, the atheists don't actually *believe* the claims they are making. Theists can make the context a critical one and get their atheist opponents to admit (if they are honest) that they do not have any moral beliefs, or at least not officially - not any that they believe are warranted. Such an opportunity in debate would be too good – and theists will think too *important* - to miss. But in that case, the moral pretence would be ruined. Deprived of the use of moral claims, atheists participating in such debates would have to either exit the debates or else change their contribution so that their position does not concern the *morality* of the issue being debated but rather something else (such as appeal to the satisfaction of our non-moral desires). Naturally, it would be open to the atheist participants in such debates to argue that the theist's position is untenable because it involves inconsistency or appeals to a false empirical claim, or because theism is false or unwarranted. However, leaving aside the questions of consistency and empirical veracity (which will depend upon the particularities of each debate), the problem with the appeal to the falsity of theism, or its lack of warrant, is that it is unlikely to persuade theists; after all, many theists are familiar with the arguments against theism but find them unpersuasive. Again, the fact remains that there is an asymmetry between how atheists and theists will consider the warrant of their moral beliefs, and such asymmetry would be expected to disadvantage the atheist. The fact

¹³ The abortion debate is a particularly apt example, since (whether or not it is in fact true) it appears to be widely held that only theists are against abortion at *all* stages of development from conception to birth.

that the atheist considers the theist's theism to be false or unwarranted (or both) will not be of help in the envisaged circumstances.

So, given the arguments of this section and the previous one, it seems to me that embracing moral fictionalism will not be a viable strategy for atheists to adopt upon accepting moral scepticism. It appears that atheists will have to abandon moral thought and discourse (or at the very least *try* to abandon moral belief – trying not to endorse any moral beliefs which perhaps might at times be formed involuntarily - and certainly stop making *moral assertions*) and perhaps replace it with a different kind of evaluation; for example, evaluating solely by reference to non-moral desires.¹⁴

5. Moral scepticism and real truth-seeking inquiry

I have argued that moral fictionalism won't be a viable strategy for atheists to adopt to mitigate the effects of accepting moral scepticism. If I am right about that, then when atheists acknowledge that their moral beliefs are unwarranted, they will be unable to continue engaging in moral thought and discourse. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that even if moral fictionalism *did* prove viable, I think that the fact that atheists have reason to embrace moral scepticism would still bring in its wake consequences that will be unwelcome to many atheists.

¹⁴ This is what Garner – who accepts moral error theory – advises.

What about the possibility that atheists adopt an expressivist approach not as a *description* of actual moral thought and discourse, but as a *reformation* of it? I have argued in chapter 4 that expressivism is false, and that our moral beliefs represent the world as containing moral properties and facts; given that, I do not think it is at all clear that we *could* use moral sentences and claims to express desire-like attitudes and not genuine beliefs. (At any rate, it isn't clear that we could use them that way without that constituting a *massive departure* from moral thought and discourse that wouldn't *really* count as a way of more-or-less retaining it.) However, even if we could, I think that some of the objections to moral fictionalism considered in this chapter would apply; for example, there are the problems of deceiving the larger population as to what is being done when moral judgements are voiced and the proposal appears vulnerable to the problems concerning moral debates with theists that I have discussed.

Even if atheists were to adopt the moral fictionalist proposal, it is clear that there are some contexts in which the pretence will be acknowledged to be such (if there weren't any contexts of this sort, moral fictionalists couldn't argue for moral fictionalism or suggest that atheists accept it). In the philosophy classroom, engaged in real truth-seeking inquiry into the nature of the world, or when writing philosophy books defending moral scepticism or moral fictionalism, atheistic moral fictionalists will want to come clean and acknowledge both that they have no warranted moral beliefs and that in the course of their everyday lives they are engaged in moral make-believe; the person who still endorses their moral opinions in the context of a metaethical discussion in a philosophy classroom is no moral sceptic. Therefore, even *if* (contrary to what I have maintained) moral fictionalism is viable, there will still be contexts where atheists cannot make moral claims. So, if atheists *want* to endorse moral claims in such contexts, moral scepticism incurs a cost, even *if* moral fictionalism is generally viable. Given that the philosophy classroom looks like a very critical context, it seems that atheists will not be able to accept arguments that have moral premises that are put forward in such a context. And indeed, not only will atheists *have to* fail to engage in pretence in such contexts, engaging in moral pretence may be wholly inappropriate because atheists may really *care* about whether the conclusions of arguments with moral premises that they consider in the philosophy classroom are true or not. They might not find it much comfort if they could *pretend* that the premises are true or warranted and on that basis *pretend* that the conclusion is true or warranted. Many atheists *have* wanted to endorse arguments with moral premises in the context of the philosophy classroom and real inquiry into the nature of the world; perhaps ironically, many atheists have endorsed such arguments and considered them to provide evidence for the claim that atheism is

more likely to be true than theism. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider two such arguments (or families of arguments), which are currently endorsed by many atheistic philosophers but, I suggest, atheists will no longer be able to reasonably endorse once they have embraced moral scepticism: *the argument from evil*, and “*Unholy Scripture*” arguments.

6. The argument from evil

The argument from evil is more traditionally called “the problem of evil” (since it is thought to pose a *problem* for theism) and is a rubric for arguments that reason from premises that assess features of the world in a morally negative way – that is, premises that describe the world as containing bad states of affairs or “evils” – to the non-existence of God, or the reduced probability of God’s existence, or the greater probability of atheism than theism. In short, it is argued that the world contains bad features that an all-good and all-powerful being would not (or probably would not) allow to exist and that, since the world exhibits those features, such an all-good and all-powerful being (God) *doesn’t exist* (or *probably* doesn’t exist). Versions of the argument from evil are probably the best-known, and oldest, anti-theistic arguments in philosophy. They are widely endorsed; for example, in a recent collection of essays by (mainly) atheist philosophers on atheism and the secular life (Antony 2007), many of the contributors cited the argument from evil as an important consideration in support of their atheism.

As I have suggested, the argument from evil comes in different versions, and space unfortunately precludes much more than a brief overview of them here. The argument as originally formulated claimed that the existence of God is logically incompatible with the existence of any amount of evil at all. It was held that the

propositions *God exists* and *there is evil* are inconsistent, the idea being that (a) if God is omnipotent then He *could* prevent there being any evil, and (b) if God is perfectly good, He would *want to* prevent there being any evil, so (c) if God exists, He *will* prevent there being any evil. Since there is evil, God doesn't exist. One instance of evil was considered enough to refute God's existence. However, contemporary philosophers of religion appear unanimous in holding that the argument in that form is a failure (Hasker 2008, pp.55-69); the reason why, in short, is that neither God's omnipotence nor His goodness would be compromised if He allowed the occurrence of *some* evils such that (1) the existence of the evils secured the existence of a greater good that could not be had without the corresponding evils, or (2) the genuine *possibility* that the evils might occur was necessary for the sake of a greater good. More recent versions of the argument from evil (often labelled the "evidential" or "probabilistic" argument from evil) do not appeal to the simple fact that *there is evil* but rather reason from the character of the evils the world contains. They claim that there is *too much* evil for God to have allowed, or that God wouldn't allow evil to be *distributed* in the ways we find it to be, or that He wouldn't allow the *types* of evil we find, or (pointing to a particular example of evil) He wouldn't permit the occurrence of *that* evil. Furthermore, the claim made is that various features of the evils that we find provide *evidence* against God's existence, although the evidence is often taken to be more or less conclusive. It is acknowledged (in contrast to the original version of the argument) that God might allow the evils in question if He had *a good reason* to allow them, but it is argued that we are warranted in believing that He would have no such good reason; we are warranted in believing this because we cannot think of any good reason, such as a greater good the existence of which is secured by the existence of the evil. Furthermore, whereas the cogency of

the older version would make the theist's theism untenable and the atheist's atheism warranted (that is, it would demonstrate that the possibility of reasonable theistic belief was ruled out for *everyone*), if evil is taken to provide less-than-conclusive evidence against theism then whether it makes theistic belief unreasonable will depend upon what *other* evidence one has. If someone has good evidence for theism then they might be reasonable in believing that God has a good reason for allowing the evils we find even if they can't think of what such a reason could be. Therefore, while some have directed the argument from evil against theists and argued that it makes their theism untenable (Mackie 1982), other atheists allow that some theists could possibly have an outweighing reason to accept theism but maintain that the evil we find in the world warrants *their* atheism (Rowe 1979).

While space precludes much more than this overview, it will be helpful to have at least one instance of the argument from evil in front of us. William Rowe's influential version is as follows (Rowe 1979, p.2):

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

Rowe supports the first premise with the example of a fawn dying slowly in great pain after suffering severe burns in a forest fire. Unable to think of a greater good that the fawn's suffering secures, or a worse evil that it prevents, Rowe concludes that there is good reason to believe premise 1. In addition, he takes premise 2 as more or less self-evident. So, he concludes that there is good reason to believe the conclusion – 3 - and deny that God exists.

Theists have defended a range of responses to different versions of the argument from evil, and just as space precludes much more than a brief overview of arguments from evil, so space likewise precludes saying much about *them* here.¹⁵ However, I will consider one *kind* of theistic response to the argument from evil, which is to offer a theodicy.¹⁶ Although theists disagree about the requirements that a theodicy must have in order to be successful, a theodicy is an attempt to “justify the ways of God to man” by providing reasons why God might well allow the bad states of affairs the atheist points to – reasons that would or might justify an omnipotent, omniscient being who allowed them to occur; that is, that would or might render such a being *not less than morally perfect* in allowing them to occur. Although the expounder of a theodicy (a theodocist) doesn’t usually claim to be confident that she is giving God’s *actual* reasons for allowing bad states of affairs to occur (to do so is sometimes viewed as presumptuous), nevertheless she offers them as reasons that are *live candidates* for God’s actual reasons. Sometimes theodocists claim that the reasons they identify *would* (or *do*) justify God in allowing the identified bad states of affairs; other theodocists make the more modest claim that we should not be at all confident that the reasons they identify *don’t* justify God in allowing those states of affairs, and that therefore the argument from evil still fails because it will not be reasonable to believe all of the argument’s premises. Some theodocists argue that, for every bad state of affairs that occurs, God has a specific reason tied to that state of affairs – some outweighing good is secured by the existence of that particular bad state of affairs – and they try to identify what that good could be. (Such a strategy involves attacking or rejecting premises of arguments from evil like the *first* premise

¹⁵ William Hasker’s recent book (2008) provides a good overview of the history of the debate and its current state.

¹⁶ The most popular theistic response at present may be the “sceptical theist” response, which claims that no theodicy need be offered; see the essays collected by Howard-Snyder (1996). However, for criticism, see Hasker (2008, pp.180-187).

in Rowe's argument above.) Other theodicians argue that God might have a good reason to create a world where bad things occur *without* each individual evil's occurrence always being necessary for the existence of an outweighing good; for example, some argue that God may have good reason to create a world where many bad things occur more or less at random in that their pattern of occurrence is *not* closely tied to securing the existence of any particular good (van Inwagen 1988; 2006; Hasker 2008, ch.7). (That strategy involves attacking or rejecting premises of arguments from evil that are like the *second* premise in Rowe's argument above.)

If a theodicy is successful, then the argument from evil fails because the claim that God would have no sufficient reason to allow the occurrence of the evils in question has been shown to be false or at least such that it should not be accepted. Naturally, atheists who continue to press the argument from evil argue that the proposed theodicies are *not* successful - that the proposed reasons for God to allow the evils we find would *not* be sufficient to justify the occurrence of the evils - and that theists are wrong in suggesting otherwise. The debate often ends in a stalemate with a clash of differing moral judgements between theodicians and theodicies' detractors. As theistic philosopher Richard Swinburne writes in the context of presenting a theodicy:

"I have almost always found in discussion of these matters that my opponents are usually happy to grant me, when I bring the suggestion to their attention, that the states which I describe as "goods" cannot be had without the corresponding evils, and quite often happy to grant that the former states are indeed good states and even that a world is not on balance worse for containing a few of these goods in the mildest of forms with the corresponding evils than it would otherwise be. *But my opponents usually object to the scale – there are, they claim, too many, too various, and too serious evils to justify bringing about the goods which they make possible...* I suggest that the reluctance of my opponents to see [the true value of the goods] arises primarily from overestimating the goodness of mere pleasure and the evil of mere pain, and grossly underestimating the value of being of use and being helped" (1996, p.44, my italics).

Theists like Swinburne develop their theodicies and, in the light of them, consider the argument from evil to have been adequately answered. Their opponents, disagreeing with theodicians' moral assessment of various states of affairs, either consider the theodicies presented to be unacceptable for *theists* (holding that theists are unwarranted in believing the moral claims that figure in their theodicies) or at least consider *themselves* to have good reason to reject the theodicies as inadequate – and therefore good reason to maintain their acceptance of the premises of the argument from evil and to endorse the conclusion that God does not exist - on the basis of *their* warranted rejection of the moral claims that the theodicies employ.

7. Moral scepticism and the argument from evil

If atheists have reason to accept moral scepticism and consider all of their moral beliefs unwarranted, what bearing will this have upon how they should view the argument from evil and the debate over it? The first thing to note is that the premises of versions of the argument from evil include *moral* claims. Note, for example, the premises of Rowe's argument above – they make reference to the idea of things that are *good* and things that are *bad* ("evil") and to what a *wholly good being* would do. Therefore, it seems that - at least in contexts of real inquiry into the nature of the world – atheists will be unable to affirm the premises of versions of the argument such as Rowe's. And it seems that atheists will be in the same position with regard to all versions of the argument from evil - if you don't believe that there *are* bad states of affairs (or evils) because you accept moral scepticism, it seems that you cannot hold that there exist bad states of affairs that wouldn't exist, or probably wouldn't exist, if God does. Atheists will be unable to believe that there are bad

states of affairs or that a wholly good being would do such-and-such. Furthermore, atheists will not be able to criticise theodicies in the sorts of ways that Swinburne notes his theodicies' detractors do – by rejecting his moral claims and putting forward evaluations of their own.

However, while I think that this is correct, it would be too quick to leave the discussion there. This is not the first place where philosophers have considered the question of how one's metaethical views (such as moral scepticism) might affect what one should think about the argument from evil.¹⁷ For example, an instructive example of a philosopher doing precisely that occurs in an essay by naturalistic moral realist Nicholas Sturgeon (1995), who considers John Mackie's embrace of both moral error theory (according to which all of our moral beliefs are *false*) and the opinion that the argument from evil provides a powerful objection to theism. Sturgeon's discussion of Mackie is instructive and relevant for a number of reasons. Firstly, since Mackie doesn't (officially) endorse any moral opinions, being an error theorist, Sturgeon points out that he initially looks to be in the position that I have suggested above that moral sceptics are in – if you don't believe that there *are* bad states of affairs (or evils), then it seems you cannot hold that there exist bad states of affairs that wouldn't exist, or probably wouldn't exist, if God does.¹⁸ Secondly, Sturgeon points out that there is a way – even quite an obvious way – in which, one might think, Mackie could nevertheless *still* think that the argument from evil poses a severe problem for theism; and if successful, that would be a way that atheistic moral

¹⁷ Although, it has recently been stated that discussions of the argument from evil “presuppose and appeal to axiological and metaethical assumptions, but seldom pay adequate attention to those assumptions” (Carson 2007, p.349).

¹⁸ Sturgeon (1995, p.159) notes that one might think that error theory would itself provide a reason to think theism and theodicies false, since they posit values and according to error theory there *are no* values. However, he also points out that Mackie was clear that his case for error theory depended upon theism being rejected beforehand, since his main argument for error theory (that moral facts and properties are objectionably queer) would not be cogent if God exists (facts and properties would not be so queer if they were to be understood as created by God).

sceptics could *likewise* think that the argument from evil poses a severe problem for theism. Thirdly, Sturgeon's discussion of Mackie is instructive because Sturgeon maintains that, despite the *promise* of this way in which (it might seem) Mackie can continue to think the argument from evil is a severe problem for theism, it seems that error theorists like Mackie actually *can't*; and it looks like the same will be true for the atheistic moral sceptic.

So, what is the perhaps obvious way in which Mackie might, despite his error theory, be able to think that the argument from evil poses a severe problem for theism? Sturgeon notes that, "the nihilist about value [Mackie] might press [the claim that there are evils] only dialectically, as a purely *ad hominem* objection to theism" (p.160), or *partially* dialectically by relying on the theist's *moral* beliefs and his own *non-moral* beliefs. Given that *theists* believe or claim that there are evils, even if *error theorists* (or, I add, *atheistic moral sceptics*) are not warranted in believing that there exist evils, they can perhaps nevertheless hold that the beliefs and claims about evil *that are endorsed by theists* make God's existence unlikely. (Of course, in order to be fair and to the point, such a challenge has to take into account the theodicies theists have developed, since those are explicitly developed in order to show that theists' beliefs about evil do *not* make God's existence unlikely; I mean these to be included when I mention theists' beliefs.) Theists' beliefs that are pertinent to the argument from evil (e.g., those that figure in theists' theodicies) may themselves be inconsistent, or they may contain non-moral claims that there is good reason to reject. If such a strategy is adopted and successful, Mackie could consider theistic belief to be seriously challenged by the argument from evil. (Atheistic moral sceptics might be able to do likewise.)

Indeed, Sturgeon notes that Mackie takes himself (at least in part of his work that Sturgeon cites) to be engaged in such an *ad hominem* strategy,¹⁹ stating that it is for the *theist* and not him (Mackie) to declare what counts as good (Sturgeon, p.161).²⁰ As Mackie sees it, it seems, the problem of evil is exactly that – a problem – a problem for *theists*, due to inconsistency in *their* beliefs. And he intends to point the inconsistency out. However, as Sturgeon shows, while apparently officially implementing this strategy of launching an *ad hominem* attack on the beliefs of theists and theodicians, Mackie in fact draws upon moral opinions *of his own* (even though he officially doesn't have any). For example, Mackie endorses John Stuart Mill's complaint against theists whose view can be represented by the slogan "God's goodness is not ours" – the objection being in effect that such people *call* God "good" but their description is really one that makes Him out to be *bad* – and dismisses the view, held by various Christian theists, that "sin plus repentance is, as an organic whole, better than sinlessness" as one that is "hard to endorse" (Sturgeon, pp.162-164), by which he means there is reason to reject it.²¹ Mackie also "takes several strong stands about the value, or lack of it, of various imagined forms of free will, with no indication of how he might be arguing by his opponents' standards" (Sturgeon, p.165).

I think Sturgeon's discussion of Mackie is instructive because the fact that Mackie in fact draws upon (unwarranted) moral opinions of his own, despite apparently realising that he couldn't, seems to reveal the difficulty of successfully implementing the suggested *ad hominem* strategy in practice. Indeed, although there unfortunately isn't space here to consider specific theodicies and possible criticisms

¹⁹ I give page references to Sturgeon's paper in the text, and references to Mackie's work that Sturgeon refers to - (Mackie 1982, ch.9) - in footnotes.

²⁰ (Mackie 1982, p.173).

²¹ (Mackie 1982, p.156, 159).

of them, it seems to me that there are theodicies which are such that the prospects of atheists criticising them and rejecting them as inadequate without relying on their own (unwarranted) moral opinions are not good. For, although many theodicies incorporate the claim that human beings have libertarian free will, and so criticism of them could perhaps proceed by way of arguing that such free will does not exist or is even incoherent, whether the notion of such free will is incoherent is highly contentious and the possibility and actuality of libertarian free will have many defenders (Hasker 1999, ch.4; Moya 2006). Furthermore, *other* grounds for thinking that libertarian free will does not exist tend to be narrowly scientific (Unger 2002) in a way that, it could be argued, appear to assume the falsity of theism and so seem question begging in the context of the argument from evil. In addition, even if atheists consider themselves warranted in rejecting libertarian free will as non-existent and/or incoherent, theodicies are defended that do not appeal to it, or *which appear not to need to* given the other claims they advance (see, e.g., Plantinga 2004). I find it hard to see how the atheist could criticise such theodicies without having warranted moral opinions of her own.

Now, my comments have been very brief and I haven't been able to discuss or explain any theodicies. Even if I *had*, it would be very bold - too bold - to claim that atheists definitely *won't* be able to reject theists' theodicies as inadequate without relying on their own (unwarranted) moral opinions. However, it seems to me that, as Sturgeon's discussion of Mackie illustrates, there are grounds for thinking that the prospects are not good. (Perhaps Swinburne's stated experience that opponents of his theodicies often grant that the "goods" he points to *couldn't be had without* the corresponding "evils" - important non-moral claims - and that they take

issue with his *moral evaluations* is also instructive here.) So I tentatively suggest that that is the case.

If that is right, then it seems that atheists are unlikely to be able to hold that theism is false (or probably false) and/or that theistic belief is unreasonable *due to considerations of evil*. Furthermore, to the extent that an atheist bases her atheism upon the argument from evil, we seem to have reason for thinking that the grounds for her atheism will be undermined: because of her atheism, she acquires a reason to adopt moral scepticism, which in turn undermines the grounds for her atheism, possibly even rendering it such that she should consider it unwarranted (if she takes most of her warrant for her atheism to come from the argument from evil).

8. The argument from evil unbowed?

I have suggested that, upon accepting moral scepticism, atheists will be unable to endorse the argument from evil. The *ad hominem* appeal to theists' beliefs seems unlikely to work and moral sceptics don't have warranted moral beliefs that can contradict those of the theodist. However, one might think that the argument from evil can be salvaged, and that there are other possibilities available to the moral sceptic (and, for that matter, to the error theorist like Mackie). I will assess two ways in which one might seek to preserve atheists' ability to endorse the argument from evil despite the claims of the last section.²² I call these possibilities "going conditional" and "the argument from lack of love" respectively.

I will consider *going conditional* first. One might reason as follows. Atheistic moral scepticism results from the fact that the streamlined evolutionary story is (to atheists) a very live possibility, because if the streamlined evolutionary

²² Thanks to James Lenman for drawing attention to these sorts of strategies.

story is true, then there are no moral facts (see chapter 3, section 9). But what if the streamlined evolutionary story *isn't* true? Even if the moral sceptic cannot be warranted in believing *there are moral facts* or *the moral facts are such-and-such*, could she be warranted in believing that *if the streamlined evolutionary story is false, then there are moral facts* and *if the streamlined evolutionary story is false, then the moral facts are such-and-such* (where “such-and-such” *contradicts* the claims of the theodist)? Or, since she can be warranted in believing that *if theism is true, then there are moral facts*, could she be warranted in believing that *if theism is true, then the moral facts are such-and-such* (again, where “such-and-such” *contradicts* the claims of the theodist)? If so, it appears, she would still be able to endorse the argument from evil. She would be able to hold that if theism is/were true, or if the streamlined evolutionary story is/were false, then the moral facts are, or would be, such as to render problematic the theodist’s proposal.²³

Call the belief *if the streamlined evolutionary story is false, then there are moral facts and they are such-and-such* – where “such-and-such” *contradicts* the moral beliefs of the theodist - “the conditional claim”. The question is whether atheistic moral sceptics can be warranted in believing the conditional claim when, due to the live possibility of the streamlined evolutionary story, they aren’t warranted in believing any straightforward moral claims. I think that the answer is no.

The first thing to note, I think, is how strange such claims appear in a debate. There seems to me to be something intuitively strange about somebody who is

²³ It should be noted that it is insufficient for the atheistic moral sceptic to rely on the claim that *if she believed there were moral facts, she would believe them to be such-and-such*. She needs to be warranted in holding that her envisaged belief that they are such-and-such would be *true* or likely to be true. Furthermore, it is not enough that she can hold that *if she believed there were moral facts, she would be warranted in believing them to be such-and-such*, for the question is whether she is *now* warranted in believing that those envisaged opinions would be *right* - an error theorist can hold that she would be warranted in having certain moral opinions if she wasn’t an error theorist (and had no good reasons in favour of error theory), but given that she *is* an error theorist, she will hold that her beliefs in the imagined circumstances would be warranted but *false*.

agnostic about whether there are any moral facts, and therefore agnostic about *whether she is reliable when it comes to detecting moral facts*, but who nevertheless is confident that if there are moral facts then they are thus-and-so when there is disagreement on that. If Swinburne (say) is asked why he endorses the particular moral claims that he does in his theodicy, he can reply that as he considers the claims, he can *see* that they are true; he simply finds himself believing them. Others may disagree with him, but what more can he do than believe what seems to him to be true? The moral sceptic who wants to *go conditional* does not hold any moral beliefs and so cannot say (or should not rely on the fact) that she just finds herself believing that the moral facts are otherwise than Swinburne thinks them to be. Swinburne can suggest that he can just *see* that the moral facts are thus-and-so. It would be very strange for the moral sceptic to claim that she can just *see* that the moral facts are otherwise than as Swinburne says, for she doesn't believe that there *are* any moral facts.

However, we can go further than this intuitive strangeness. (Perhaps you do not share the intuition.) When engaged in inquiry into the nature of the world, we generally start out with the assumption that things are as they appear to us to be, and normally only relinquish this assumption when it gets us into inconsistency or a related problem. This is so in the moral domain, but also in others – e.g., when it comes to our beliefs in an external world, in other minds, in material objects, etc. Following this reasonable epistemic strategy, which requires a measure of confidence in our epistemic reliability, we form moral beliefs on the basis of how things appear – moral “appearances”. We are warranted in accepting the moral appearances at face value, and I think we can be so even in the face of disagreement (see chapter 2, section 4). However, one who embraces moral scepticism no longer believes the

appearances or trusts her epistemic faculties (when it comes to moral belief), and has given up the assumption that she is reliable at forming moral beliefs; the warrant of her moral beliefs and of her belief in her reliability has been removed. The problem with this warrant being removed is that conditional beliefs of the form *if there are moral facts, then they are such-and-such* appear to be most naturally understood as deriving their warrant from straightforward beliefs of the form *the moral facts are such-and-such*. (In the same way, our beliefs of the form *if there are other minds, then such-and-such a body has a mind* are best understood as deriving from our simple beliefs that other human bodies in fact have minds.) Whereas Swinburne and other theodiscists will have beliefs of the form *if there are moral facts, then the moral facts are such-and-such*, which I think are best understood as being based on beliefs of the form *the moral facts are such-and-such*, it is hard to see how the moral sceptic can have warranted beliefs of the former sort because she has no warranted moral beliefs of the latter sort.

Another way of looking at the problem is as follows. The moral sceptic who wants to reject theodiscists' theodicies has given up the presumption in favour of her own reliability, but still wants to believe that *if there are moral facts then she is reliable at detecting them* (and, note: more reliable than the theodiscist is). But what grounds does she have for thinking that, absent the initial presumption in favour of her reliability? Her taking herself to be reliable in forming moral beliefs – and her trusting herself when she disagrees with others without further grounds for thinking them wrong (again, see chapter 2, section 4) – is a starting point for inquiry; she doesn't have additional evidence for it, and she cannot reject it but remain warranted in believing that *if there are moral facts, then she is reliable* (and, importantly, more reliable than the theodiscist).

Now, this isn't so with *all* kinds of belief. There are many cases in which, due to the presence of some plausible hypothesis, one is not warranted in believing in the existence of some class of entities but one *is* nevertheless warranted in believing that if such a class exists, then a certain identified entity belongs to that class. For example, suppose that, for whatever bizarre reason, you come to believe that it is a live hypothesis that there are no cats in a particular neighbourhood and that all appearances to the contrary are due to the presence of *mechanical, robot cats* that someone has made and sometimes lets out of their house. According to the live hypothesis, the robotic cats are extremely lifelike. So when you see what appears to be a cat, you do not believe that it is. Nevertheless, it seems you would be warranted in believing that *if the no-cats-in-the-neighbourhood-and-robotic-cats hypothesis is false, then what I saw was a cat*. On a similar note, suppose that visiting a widget factory, you notice that all of the products on the assembly line appear red and you naturally believe that they are in fact red.²⁴ However, suppose that you overhear two factory employees disagreeing about whether the widgets *are* red. One employee claims that they *are*, mentioning that so-and-so told him; the other employee insists that the items appear red because they are all irradiated with lighting - in order to detect possible defects - which makes them appear red regardless of what colour they are; he adds that so-and-so told *him*. They continue to disagree, and you have no reason to trust one rather than the other. In such a case, you surely have a defeater for your initial belief that the widgets you saw were red, due to the live possibility that they are irradiated with light that simply makes them *appear* red. However, it seems you would be warranted in believing that *if the widgets aren't being irradiated with light that makes them appear red, then the widgets I saw were red*. In these examples,

²⁴ The widgets example was introduced into the literature on epistemic defeaters by John Pollock (Plantinga 1993, p.230).

it seems that you are warranted in believing conditional claims even though you are not warranted in believing straightforward claims about the entities in question.

However, it seems to me that these examples are importantly different from the atheistic moral sceptic's situation. For in the widget example, although you are not warranted in believing that the widgets are red – that belief is defeated - you have a host of *undefeated* beliefs that support the conditional. Importantly, you have the belief that when entities appear red to you, they usually are; this belief is not called into question by the presence of the hypothesis that the *widgets* are not red. Similarly in the other example: even if you are not warranted in believing that the small furry thing you saw was a cat, nevertheless you are warranted in believing that you are usually good at recognising cats. You still have warranted beliefs about what cats look like, and warranted beliefs about human behaviour and motivations which support the claim that it is very unlikely that there be appearances as if of cats without such appearances being veridical. Although in the particular case you think it a live possibility that somebody is generating misleading appearances as if of cats (by creating their robot cats), you are warranted in believing that such activity is nevertheless unlikely in general. You are warranted in believing that whether or not mechanical cats have been created in the neighbourhood, it is very unlikely that many other people are up to the same sort of thing.

As I see it, the atheistic moral sceptic does not have similar warranted beliefs to support the conditional claim. Given the live possibility of the streamlined evolutionary story, she is not warranted in believing that there are any moral facts. She is not warranted in believing that she is generally good at detecting moral facts. Unlike the above examples, which involve scepticism about a *subset* of one's beliefs about a certain type of object or property (scepticism about *some* of one's beliefs

about red things, and scepticism about *some* of one's beliefs about cats), *all* of the atheistic moral sceptic's moral beliefs, past and present, are called into question. So the atheistic moral sceptic cannot be warranted in believing that she is generally reliable, or more reliable than the theodist, when it comes to detecting moral facts. Furthermore, unlike how things stand with our beliefs about cats – who leave behind fur, dead mice, waste, etc -, our conception of moral facts does not give us reason to think that they will leave behind a certain causal pattern or something that we could detect without relying on the *appearance* of the entity in question (moral truth); it seems that we can't be warranted in believing conditional moral claims *without* being warranted in holding actual straightforward moral beliefs.

Because the argument for atheistic moral scepticism is not an everyday example of epistemic defeat but is a kind of *global* scepticism (global with respect to moral belief), it is difficult to find real-world analogies to it. Furthermore, due to how ingrained and habitual moral belief is, it may be difficult to imaginatively put ourselves in the shoes of someone who really doubts all their moral beliefs to see what we would be confident about (certainly I find this difficult). Indeed, I suspect that if one thinks that upon embracing moral scepticism they *would* be warranted in believing conditional claims of the form *if there are moral facts, then they are thus-and-so* (where thus-and-so contradicts the claims of the theodist), this is only because they have not actually embraced moral scepticism. They believe that they would be warranted in believing the conditional claim because they actually believe lots of straightforward moral claims and find it difficult to really imagine not believing those claims. However, for the reasons I have given, I suggest that atheistic moral sceptics *cannot* reasonably endorse the conditional claim.

So I suggest that the strategy of going conditional does not work for the atheistic moral sceptic. She cannot be warranted in rejecting the moral claims that figure in theodocists' theodicies as false.

The second way atheistic moral sceptics may hope to sidestep the argument of the previous section is by advancing the idea that the argument from evil does not really depend upon the application of *moral* concepts at all. Instead, the argument could be reformulated as *the argument from lack of love*. According to the theist's beliefs, or perhaps a theistic tradition, God is all-loving. But the suffering we find in the world calls the existence of such a God into question, since we would expect a loving God to create a world with much less suffering (or lacking suffering of the kinds, distribution, etc, we find). Since the atheistic moral sceptic's *beliefs about what love involves* are warranted even if her *moral beliefs* aren't, she can draw on them to run a powerful argument just like the argument from evil.

However, I think such a strategy is unlikely to work. The first problem is that God is said by theists and theistic traditions to be loving in a sense that is not unrelated to, or independent of, moral considerations. The concept of love that figures in theistic traditions plausibly involves the concept of what is good for someone (Carson 2007, p.366): if you love someone, you desire and try to promote their good, what is in their interests (which isn't simply what they desire). To the extent that it is difficult to separate this notion of what is good *for* someone from moral considerations - e.g., it is good for someone to live a moral life and to be treated in a morally right way - it seems that moral sceptics will plausibly have to be sceptics about the notion of what is good for someone *as well* and will not be able to reject the claims of theodocists on this score.

In addition, even if *atheistic moral sceptics* are sceptical about moral claims, theists claim that God acts from love *and* from moral considerations. So even if the atheistic moral sceptic claims that God is not loving if (say) He allows a certain instance of suffering to occur, the theist can claim that He has – or may well have – morally good reasons which also need to be taken into account and which alter the picture. The extra information about morality may be important to the assessment of whether God acts or has acted in ways that are consistent with Him being loving, even if the atheistic moral sceptic can have no warranted beliefs about it. This can certainly be the case with human actions. For example, if I learn that a man who is a strong swimmer and doesn't fear water didn't jump into a river to save his wife, I may consider this to call into question his love for her. But if a moral reason is introduced into the equation – for example, he didn't jump into the water to save his wife because a group of children were in need of his rescue for their lives to be saved – then the previous verdict that he appeared not to have much love for his wife is undermined. According to mainstream theists, God acts out of love *and* for moral reasons, including reasons that appeal to justice and deserved punishment and other considerations that one might not immediately think of as loving. Atheistic moral sceptics cannot reasonably ignore such theistic claims, otherwise they will attack a straw man understanding of God's motivations that theists do not actually endorse. But in that case, the argument from lack of love will fail because atheists will not be able to contest theodocists' claims that an all-loving and *good* God might nevertheless allow suffering for such-and-such *moral* reasons.

In summary, I conclude that there is reason to think that atheistic moral sceptics will be unable to continue to endorse the argument from evil either by *going conditional* or by running *the argument from lack of love*; it seems that the argument

of the previous section stands. Given the number of atheists that endorse the argument from evil, this is a significant consequence of the fact that they have reason to accept moral scepticism.

9. Moral scepticism and “Unholy Scripture” arguments

I have suggested that even if they embrace moral fictionalism, atheists will not be able to accept the argument from evil or to think that it poses a severe problem for theism. The context of that argument is the philosophy classroom and real honest-truth seeking inquiry into the nature of the world - atheists presumably don't want to just *pretend* to endorse the argument from evil – and, having accepted moral scepticism, atheists cannot reject as false the claim that theodicians' theodicies provide reasons that would justify God in allowing the world's evils. It seems to me that a similar conclusion holds with respect to another argument, or set of arguments, that many past and present atheists have endorsed, which I term “*Unholy Scripture*” arguments.²⁵ According to this kind of argument, a purported divine revelation, such as the Bible, contains moral claims and moral teaching that is *false* and so the purported revelation should be rejected as either a good depository of moral truth, or as a revelation from God, or both. (Sometimes it is simply stated or suggested that the purported revelation contains false moral teaching and others are left to draw the further conclusions themselves; such conclusions nevertheless seem to be implied.) The false moral teaching might consist in commanding things that are actually bad or wrong, or describing someone's actions (e.g., God's) contained therein as good when actually they are bad. In the remainder of this chapter, I will only consider “Unholy Scripture” arguments which have as their conclusion that *the Bible* is not a divine

²⁵ After the title of Gerd Lüdemann's book (1997) on “the dark side of the Bible”.

revelation, although such arguments are also pressed against other purported revelations.

Sometimes it isn't obvious whether the proponent of an "Unholy Scripture" argument is pressing the argument that the Bible isn't *divine revelation*, or whether they are making the case that it contains defective moral teaching but intending to leave open the possibility that it is nevertheless divine revelation (albeit flawed divine revelation). However, "Unholy Scripture" arguments seem to be generally aimed against the doctrines of scripture held by traditional Jews and Christians, according to which the Bible is a divine revelation and (not coincidentally) does not contain moral teaching that is in error. They are generally advanced in support of the claim that atheists have good reason to reject the Bible as not being a divine revelation, and often in support of the claim that *theists* have good reason to do likewise.

How important are "Unholy Scripture" arguments to atheists? Some atheists may consider them relatively *unimportant*, thinking that there are no remotely plausible grounds for taking a purported divine revelation such as the Bible to actually be such, since – surely – scholarship has shown the Bible to be historically unsound or inconsistent quite apart from any errors in its *moral* teachings. However, those who advocate this view (e.g., Kitcher 2007, pp.134-140) appear unaware of the fact that the historical reliability and theological consistency of the Bible are in fact still defended at a high academic level,²⁶ and philosophers have developed cumulative case arguments for the rationality of believing in the proposition that the Bible is a divine revelation (e.g., Swinburne 2007; see also Menssen and Sullivan

²⁶ For example, Kenneth Kitchen, Professor Emeritus of Egyptology at the University of Liverpool, has recently written a massive defence of the historical reliability of the Old Testament (Kitchen 2003); see also Provan, Long and Longman (2003) and Howard and Grisanti (2003). There have also been recent defences of the historical reliability of the New Testament gospels (Eddy and Boyd 2007; Blomberg 2008). All critically interact with scholarship arguing for the opposite view.

2007). I am not here claiming or arguing that such a case succeeds, but I do suggest that the fact that there is still scholarly defence of the historical reliability and consistency of the Bible, and of the reasonableness of believing that it is a divine revelation, means that those who want to be warranted in believing that it *isn't*, or warranted in believing that traditional Jews and Christians are *unreasonable* in believing it to be so, may have a significant stake in the success of “Unholy Scripture” arguments.

At any rate, “Unholy Scripture” arguments have been very popular among those who reject the Bible as divine revelation. They go back at least as far as the 1st century AD (the Jewish historian Josephus wrote to rebut some in his *Against Apion*, book 2). They enjoyed prominence during the Enlightenment, being expounded by the English deists and spread abroad by freethinkers such as Thomas Paine and Robert Ingersoll. Today such arguments are standard fare in books or on websites promoting atheism or criticising theism. They also appear in the works of atheistic philosophers. Recent examples can be found in work by philosophers Elizabeth Anderson (2007), Louise Antony (2009), Simon Blackburn (2003), Raymond Bradley (1999), David Brink (2007), Evan Fales (2007), John Mackie (1982), Michael Martin (1991; 2002), Erik Wielenberg (2005) and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2009). They can also be found in the work of some Biblical scholars, such as Gerd Lüdemann (1997), and in more popular anti-theistic writings such as those by George Smith (1989), Richard Dawkins (2006) and Christopher Hitchens (2008). Here I will provide two examples from the writings of philosophers. The first one is from John Mackie:

“If there were not only a benevolent god but also a reliable revelation of his will, then we might be able to get from it expert moral advice about difficult issues, where we could not discover for ourselves what are the best policies.

But there is no such reliable revelation. Even a theist must see that the purported revelations, such as the Bible and the Koran, condemn themselves by enshrining rules which we must reject as narrow, outdated, or barbarous” (1982, pp.256-257).

The second is from Elizabeth Anderson, who explicitly says that false moral teaching in the Bible undercuts any evidence that it otherwise could provide for the existence of God, holding that, “if we take the evidence for theism with *utmost seriousness*, we will find ourselves committed to the proposition that the most heinous acts are permitted. Since we know that these acts are not morally permitted, we must therefore doubt the evidence for theism” (2007, p.217). In addition, many of the Bible’s moral teachings “must be categorically rejected as false and depraved moral teachings” (p.222). Anderson considers such false moral teaching to be clear evidence against any form of Jewish or Christian theism that has a traditional view of the Bible.

It needs to be acknowledged that “Unholy Scripture” arguments are often unsound due to resting on a false belief about what the Bible teaches, and in fact all of the authors mentioned above evince some severe misunderstandings on that score.²⁷ Furthermore, it needs to be said that there is sometimes a misunderstanding of what the traditional Bible-as-divine-revelation position claims about the Bible’s moral teachings. As philosopher Paul Copan points out, it is often “assume[d] that the ANE [ancient Near East] categories embedded within the Mosaic Law are the Bible’s moral *pinnacle*. They are, instead, a *springboard* anticipating further development – or, perhaps more accurately – pointing us *back* toward the loftier moral ideals of [texts that] affirm the image of God in each person, lifelong monogamous marriage, and God’s concern for the nations” (2008, p.16). As Copan

²⁷ For engagement with texts that are often misunderstood and drawn on in “Unholy Scripture” arguments, see Kaiser (1991), Kaiser et al. (1996), Wenham (1994), Wright (2004) and Copan (2008; 2009).

draws attention to, the theological claim is not necessarily that all the moral commands are the *best possible* or that they would all be *good* or *right* today or in any society whatever. Criticism of many commandments, to be to the point, needs to take the form of arguing that they were mistaken and morally unjustified in the ancient Near Eastern context and society in which they originated and for which they were intended.

Nevertheless, it must also be acknowledged that not all “Unholy Scripture” arguments rest upon such misunderstandings. In other cases, their proponents do accurately understand what the traditional Bible-as-divine-revelation view teaches morally and find fault with it. Naturally, it could be that the proponents of such arguments are mistaken in their moral beliefs; after all, there are others who disagree with them (such as theists who accept the Bible) and we find philosophers arguing for the reasonableness of the Bible’s (and the Church’s) moral teaching that others allege to be morally problematic (e.g., Swinburne 2007, pp.289-332). However, to the extent that the proponent of an “Unholy Scripture” argument considers her judgement to be warranted, she will consider herself warranted in believing that the Bible is not a divine revelation or a good moral guide on the basis of moral error in it. And to the extent that she considers Bible-believers’ moral judgements to be unwarranted, she will consider those who accept the Bible to be unreasonable because of the Bible’s moral error.

“Unholy Scripture” arguments are arguments that are presented in the context of real truth-seeking inquiry into the nature of the world, and have conclusions the truth of which atheists care about; atheists want to really endorse such arguments and to be warranted in doing so, not to *pretend* that they endorse them and that they are warranted in doing so. Therefore, if atheists should accept moral scepticism (as I

have argued), then even *if* moral fictionalism is a viable strategy for atheists (and I have argued it *isn't*), it seems atheists will not be able to accept or offer such arguments. The atheist might not have reason to think that her moral belief which disagrees with the Bible is *false*, but she does have reason to consider it *unwarranted*, and so it seems that atheistic moral sceptics will have to give up “Unholy Scripture” arguments.

It would potentially still be open to atheists to advance “Unholy Scripture” arguments that follow a strategy similar to that Mackie adopted in pressing the argument from evil – arguing that the Bible contains moral teachings that are *contradictory* and that therefore part of it (some of its moral teachings) provides reason to reject other parts of it (other of its moral teachings). Likewise, atheists could perhaps argue that theists who accept the Bible as a divine revelation or a depository of moral truth are unreasonable in their doing so because it contains moral teachings that conflict with the moral beliefs of *those theists*. And it should be noted that many who criticise the Bible’s moral teachings do indeed often argue that they are *contradictory*. However, while the debate over this cannot be entered into here, I think that all of the examples of this that I have seen fail because their proponents misunderstand what the Bible’s moral teachings *are*.²⁸ And the fact that many Bible-believing theists are well-aware of such charges of moral contradiction but aren’t convinced should at least make one doubtful that such a strategy will succeed.

Finally, it seems to me that, for the same reasons that were discussed in the previous section, other strategies to try and nevertheless still advance “Unholy Scripture” arguments such as “going conditional” and running “the argument from lack of love” (or, we might call it, the “*Unloving Scripture*” argument) will fail.

²⁸ Again, see the sources referenced in the previous footnote.

10. Conclusion

I have argued that moral fictionalism will not be a viable strategy for atheists to adopt after accepting moral scepticism and considering their moral beliefs to be unwarranted. In that case, atheists will have to stop accepting and making moral claims, with all the costs and upheaval that entails. Even if I am wrong about that, however, and moral fictionalism *is* viable, it appears that atheists will still face the costs of being unable to rationally endorse the argument from evil and “Unholy Scripture” arguments. Furthermore, to the extent that atheists consider their atheism to be warranted on the basis of such arguments, their grounds for their atheism may be undermined. If atheists have reason to accept moral scepticism, and if such an acceptance brings these consequences in its wake, then that is surely significant.

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