

1. Introduction

In a recent interview, Nomy Arpaly delineates a distinction that, I want to argue, runs through the heart of moral philosophy:

...I suspect that there are two prototypes of philosophers who write about humans – I call them ‘celestials’ and ‘terrestrials’...The difference between these two types is not so much in their theories but in whether or not they would find it a very sad thing if it turned out that the only way a human is superior to a wolf is this: the human brain is significantly more capacious and complex. Celestials would much prefer it if it turned out, for example, that humans have something special called ‘autonomy’ which makes them categorically different from other animals. I, with a mostly terrestrial philosophical temperament, would be ok if I found out for sure that if I am in any way superior to a wolf it is simply in virtue of my brain’s higher capacity and complexity.¹

What I find so insightful about Arpaly’s idea is not simply the thought that there are two main camps among those who are interested in the foundations of ethics – terrestrials with a broadly naturalistic outlook on the one hand, and celestials given to inflationary metaphysical speculation on the other; terrestrials who accept a central role for emotions and desires in the formation of moral judgement against celestials who want to hold that legitimate moral thought is the province of special powers of reason, intuition or autonomy; terrestrials who view the development of moral norms in terms of invention, projection and convention, and celestials for whom ethics must involve the discovery of timeless, *sui generis* moral truths.

Rather, what I want to focus on is the sense of *sadness* that Arpaly mentions. It’s not just that terrestrials and celestials differ in their theories, but that celestials view terrestrial theories as somehow disappointing, as missing something vital that truly matters to ethics. By contrast,

¹ Nomy Arpaly interviewed by Richard Marshall, retrieved on the 17th January 2022 from <https://www.3-16am.co.uk/articles/in-praise-of-desire-and-some>

most terrestrials *don't* find their own theoretical claims about the nature of moral facts, moral judgement, and moral discovery to be disappointing in this way. So what I want to ask is this: *why do some people find terrestrial, but not celestial, theories to be disappointing?* What is missing from the terrestrial worldview – and why should we think that it matters?

Here's an example of what I have in mind. I think that moral norms are invented, not discovered – invented as a kind of social technology that allows us, as the sort of mutually sympathetic animals that we are, to solve the problems that we find in living together. Our contingent emotional tendencies towards mutual care, benevolence, empathy and sympathy are central to this story. Moral innovations are potentially neverending, as our problems evolve and we invent new solutions to them – there is no set of timeless, *sui generis* moral truths out there to be discovered. And there is nothing interesting to say about the normativity, authority or legitimacy of moral norms beyond pointing out their functional value in allowing us to live together and to help other people – an argument that will, of course, not seem very persuasive to those who don't care about other people or want to live with them.²

Now, I think that this story is roughly true as a matter of natural historical and psychological fact, when it comes to the origins and functioning of the moral norms that I accept. But more than this, I find this story *reassuring*. After all, at least some norms that have existed now and in the past have *not* helped us to live together in a mutually sympathetic way, and others have been quite clearly invented for less savoury purposes than those I have described. If at least *some* moral norms are functionally useful in facilitating a kind of benevolent social life, that sounds to me like a vindication of morality.

² This sketch is largely drawn from Philip Kitcher's "pragmatic naturalism", as sketched in his (2011) and (2012, Chapters 13&14).

What is striking is that other philosophers *don't* see this as a positive, vindictory, or otherwise reassuring account of the foundations of ethics. When I describe my views to the kinds of philosophers that Arpaly calls “celestials”, I’m often met with the assumption that I *don't really believe in morality*, that I must be some kind of moral sceptic or nihilist.

And this seems to be symptomatic of a widespread set of attitudes. This sense of disappointment with terrestrial offerings is often conveyed through “merely”s – celestials say that on views like mine, ethics is *merely* the product of benevolent emotions, *merely* a set of norms invented to deal with human problems, *merely* salient to creatures like us, with this particular biology, psychology, history and environment. And that is supposed to be a bad thing – somehow undermining of the seriousness or legitimacy of ethics. Often, the horror is left vague. But sometimes celestials make their fears quite explicit, as when Derek Parfit (urged that it would be “a tragedy” if his theoretical ambitions could not be realised, and that naturalistic and expressivist views in ethics are “close to Nihilism” (Parfit 2011, p368 & p410).

The purpose of this paper is to challenge this attitude. My thesis is this: there is no deep reason to be sad if morality lacks the features which celestial views attribute to it, but which terrestrial views deny. Ethical norms and values would still deserve to play their characteristic role of guiding our decisions and directing our interactions with one another even if they lacked non-natural truthmakers, even if they were invented, even they didn't “show up” from an objective perspective, even if they were not beliefs that any rational being would necessarily accept, even if they were ideas that could only be appreciated by creatures with particular desires and interests.

Of course, this is a normative claim – it is a claim about the relationship between certain metaethical, descriptive claims about what ethics *is*, and normative conclusions about what is valuable, what norms are worth obeying, what – as Parfit would say – *matters*. To say that things still matter even if a terrestrial account is true is to say something within the domain of the normative. And so I don't think that I can really *prove* my case. At some point, we reach normative bedrock. Some philosophers might just insist on the foundational meta-norm that moral or social norms need celestial foundations in order to be legitimate or worth obeying, and it's not clear to me how that can be refuted.

However, I do think that it is possible to offer a sort of argument, and that's what I aim to do here. The assumption that terrestrial accounts lack something vital for the vindication of ethics is a result of treating the theoretical desiderata of philosophers as though they were genuinely required in order to make sense of ethical life. It stems from a failure to distinguish between what we might *want*, and what we genuinely *need*. There are genuine questions that we do need to answer in order to vindicate our commitment to morality, but these questions can be answered by terrestrials just as well as by celestials.

True, if a terrestrial account is correct, then it has implications for the power of a certain kind of moral argument to address and persuade doubters, or to generate convergence and consensus. But this is really, I suggest, a disappointment not about *morality*, but about the prospects of moral philosophy. On the terrestrial picture, moral philosophy is not the kind of theoretical enterprise that some philosophers would prefer it to be – an investigation into necessary, radically objective, fundamental features of the world. And moral philosophy is unlikely to change the world – at least, in the absence of other tools of moral understanding and persuasion, from poetry to psychology. I think this is the sort of conclusion about which we

should remain sanguine. It would still make sense to grant ethical norms their characteristic place in our lives even if moral *philosophy* cannot do all that we might want it to do.

Nevertheless, my conclusion is a fundamentally optimistic one. For all that I argue, some celestial story may be true, as a matter of fact. There *might* be *sui generis* non-natural normative facts, moral conclusions *might* follow from rational principles that everyone simply has to accept. But once we distinguish the different disappointments to which terrestrialism could give rise, then we can see that it would not be a tragedy if this were *not* so. Moral *philosophy* might not be all that some want it to be, but the role of morality in our lives is not threatened.

2. The Celestial and the Terrestrial

It is hard to deny that there is something significant in the division to which Arpaly points. But we may wonder whether such a broad distinction – delivered, as it was, in the relatively informal context of an interview – can bear the theoretical weight I intend to place on it. Indeed, while Arpaly’s own explanation is relatively circumscribed – focussing on one disagreement between Kantian views and their naturalistic rivals on a specific question about the nature of the will – this paper follows her suggestion to generalise that distinction into a division of moral philosophers into two camps.

When I speak of “terrestrials”, I have in mind such views as the quasi-realist expressivism of Blackburn, Gibbard and Lenman, or their forbears such as Stevenson and Hare, naturalist realism in both its analytic (eg Jackson and Pettit) and non-analytic (eg Railton) forms, sophisticated forms of Humean subjectivism (eg Wiggins or Schroeder), GJ Warnock’s moral functionalism, Kitcher’s naturalistic pragmatism, some forms of quietism, and the historical precursors of these theories, including Hume, Smith, Mill, James and Dewey. These theorists

are all ontological naturalists. But beyond this purely *descriptive* thesis, they also subscribe to a normative view about what it takes to vindicate morality. Terrestrials believe that “the world is enough”³. Whatever is required for ethics to deserve its characteristic role in our lives can be realised given naturalistic materials whose existence is not seriously in question. In other words, this is a view not only about what morality is like, but about what is needed for the vindication of morality. (I should say here that I do not intend to discuss *all* these theories in detail; instead, I sketch a terrestrial theory drawing on Kitcher’s pragmatism and Blackburn’s sentimentalist quasi-realism to serve as a foil to celestialism. I aim to show that *at least* this theory can supply the necessary materials to vindicate morality; but I think that other terrestrial theories can do the job just as well.)

Celestials disagree, both about what morality is like, and about what it would take to vindicate morality. The accounts that terrestrials give, on their view, miss out a vital feature. It is not enough to say, for example, that moral norms function as solutions to the problems that mutually sympathetic people have in living together. We need to know some further fact in order to vindicate morality, in order to know that morality is “normative” or “authoritative”, or, to put the matter more simply, to show that morality is the sort of thing that we ought to obey.

Different celestial theories give different answers as to what this further feature must be. Non-naturalist realists (eg Shafer-Landau (2003) and Enoch (2011)) say that moral claims must correspond with, be made true by⁴, or be explained by, special, intrinsically and irreducibly normative, *sui generis* moral facts. But some philosophers (for example, Parfit (2011), Scanlon

³ As Howard and Laskowski (2019) memorably put it.

⁴ See Akhlagi (2022) for an excellent discussion of the differences between correspondence theory and truthmaker theory in developing non-naturalist accounts of moral truth.

(2014) and Nagel (1986)), who might be regarded as non-naturalist realists, have tried to distance themselves from what they regard as the unacceptably “ontological” account of moral reality offered by other non-naturalists. For example, Parfit says that there are irreducibly normative facts, but that these do not exist in an ontological sense. It is notoriously unclear how to understand such claims.⁵ However, given that these philosophers insist that naturalist and expressivist theories leave out something vital that is necessary to avoid nihilism⁶, we might agree with Street when she says of one of them “Parfit does not wish to call his meta-ethical position a brand of *realism* about normativity, but I believe that *non-naturalist realism* continues to be the least misleading term for it” (Street 2017).

Alternatively, we can see the Celestial’s demand for some further feature as concerning not the existence of *sui generis* moral *facts*, but, instead, the possibility of a distinctly robust form of moral *objectivity*. As Nagel says “Normative realism is the view that propositions about what gives us reasons for action can be true or false independently of how things appear to us, and that we can hope to discover these truths by transcending the appearances... We simply aim to reorder our motives in a direction that will make them more acceptable from an external standpoint” (Nagel 1986, p139). In other words, to vindicate our moral judgements is to show that they accord with the judgements that would appear as correct when viewing the world from an “impersonal standpoint” (p 140). If our moral judgements do *not* seem true when viewed from this external or impersonal standpoint, then they lack legitimacy: they are at best “partial and inaccurate” (p140).

⁵ For example, Akhlaghi says “It is an open secret, however, that [metaethicists] remain perplexed by Parfit’s positive view.” (2022, p1). Likewise, Shafer and Kremm write “as one presses Dworkin and Scanlon to explain their view, there is a temptation to think that their views occupy a fundamentally unstable position in the metaethical landscape”; they go on to make the same claim about Nagel (Kremm & Shafer 2018, p653).

⁶ For example, Scanlon says: “To identify a reason with a naturalistic property seems immediately to destroy its normativity” (Scanlon 2014, p. 46); Parfit explicitly says that both naturalism (2011 p368) and expressivism (p410) are “close to nihilism”.

Similarly, Kantians typically also insist that morality must exhibit a special kind of non-ontological objectivity in order to be vindicated. In this case, objectivity is construed not in terms of the view from nowhere, but rather of the perspective necessarily adopted by all rational beings in the exercise of their autonomous agency. As Bagnoli says “We can regard moral obligations as objective only if they are the deliverances of practical reason” (Bagnoli 2015 p5). Moral claims that are not deliverances of practical reason in this way are not objective, and lack vindication. This means that a worldview that does not make space for practical reason in Kant’s distinctive sense is one in which morality lacks vindications; as Shafer-Landau says, “For the Kantian, there is no moral reality – no genuine moral obligations or any justified moral claims – if there is no such thing as pure practical reason” (Shafer-Landau 2003, p14). And it is far from trivial whether pure practical reason, connected as it is to Kant’s distinctive conception of autonomy, actually exists; as Shafer writes: “Of course, Kant’s account of these matters appeals to a highly controversial metaphysics of appearances and things-in-themselves, which is anything but naturalistic.” (Shafer 2015b, p 707)

This is why I group most Kantian metaethical views alongside non-naturalist realism. Of course, some contemporary Kantians just *are* realists (and attribute realism to Kant), such as Langton (eg 2007) or Wood, who claims that Kant is “a moral realist in the most agreed-upon sense that term has in contemporary metaphysics and meta-ethics” (Wood 1999 p157). Others claim that at least the fundamental level of Kant’s ethics involves realist commitments. For example, Stern attributes to Kant a “realism about the value of rational agents” (Stern 2015, p4) and Shafer’s interpretation of Kantian rationalism “involves a non-trivial core of realism” (Shafer 2015b, p 707).

On the other hand, many Kantians are *constructivists*, who deny that their view contains any such commitment to realism. How we situate these philosophers with regard to the Terrestrial / Celestial dichotomy depends upon the details of their arguments. Some Kantian constructivists, such as Rawls, do not give a central place, in their account of the construction of morality, to controversial conceptions of pure practical reason or autonomy of the sort discussed above. Such views are at least compatible with a naturalistic worldview, and so can be counted as Terrestrial. On the other hand, some constructivists do appear to view the authority of morality as resting on the existence of pure rationality or undetermined freedom, where these are understood in ways that seem ultimately Celestial. Indeed, some Kantians who are critical of realism nevertheless seem to regard realists as fellow-travellers, as when Korsgaard, having spent much of her (1996) attacking non-naturalist realism, concludes the book with the concessive claim that “realism is true after all” (p108). Such Kantians may disagree with non-naturalists about the right way to demonstrate the “normativity” of morality, but they agree on the basic shape of the question, and agree that it cannot be answered given purely terrestrial resources.

Thus the celestial, in demanding some further feature over and above those given by a purely naturalistic description of ethical thought and practice, is effectively raising the stakes. According to celestial theories, we could know all there is to know about the natural world, our feelings for one another, and the means to solving our problems, and could combine this knowledge with cares and concerns borne of sympathy and benevolence, in order to develop a set of norms and pro-social motivations aimed at answering these concerns, and yet there would still remain a *further* question as to whether anything really matters. The reason that philosophers like Parfit accuse naturalists and expressivists of nihilism, even though those

philosophers do not avow nihilism, is because Parfit sets a more demanding standing for what would *count* as avoiding nihilism.⁷

My question, then, is: what is the question of moral authority or vindication supposed to be, such that celestial, but not terrestrial, theories are apt to answer it? The celestial says that, if there is no irreducible moral reality, or if moral norms don't show up from the objective standpoint, then ethics would be somehow defective or illegitimate. Should we accept this?

3. What is Vindication?

So the difference between terrestrials and celestials concerns the question of what is required in order to vindicate morality. But one of the challenges in conducting this debate is that the very *notion* of vindicating morality presents a shifting target. Sometimes philosophers talk as though demonstrating that moral norms are objective, or rationally required, or “true” *is just the same* as demonstrating that they deserve their role in guiding our deliberation and conduct.

Part of the confusion is that many of the terms which people use to describe the problem admit of both normative and metaphysical readings. When people say that moral norms are “objective”, they might have in mind the normative claim that even wicked people who are unmoved by the needs of others ought, nevertheless, to obey those norms. But it can also be read as the perspectival claim that moral norms are something that would “show up” when seen from the Nagelian view from nowhere. To say that some moral claims are “true” might

⁷ What about “error theory”? Error theorists typically accept the same naturalistic ontology as terrestrials do. And yet they hold that such a world is one in which morality is fundamentally misguided. Thus error theorists are temperamental celestials – they agree with celestials that the naturalistic terrestrial worldview lacks something vital. In this sense of “error theory”, Mackie was *not* an error theorist, as Berker (2019b) rightly argues, since he thought that first-order ethics would still make sense even if ethics could not be objective. William James was, in effect, the diametric opposite of an error theorist, since he thought that morality *did* have celestial underpinnings, but it would not undermine morality if these were absent: “Whether a God exist, or whether no God exist, in yon blue heaven above us bent, we form at any rate an ethical republic here below.” (James 1891, p341)

simply be to say that we ought to accept them, or it might be the proposition that they have *sui generis* moral truthmakers. To say that we have “reasons” to be moral could be the first-order claim that we should be moral, the psychological claim that everyone has some desires that will be satisfied by being moral, or the metaphysical thesis that “reality itself favours” (Eklund 2017) certain forms of conduct. To say that rationality requires us to be moral might be the claim that any being capable of coherent thought will arrive at moral conclusions, or the claim that moral conclusions follow from a fairly expansive and non-trivial set of structural requirements of thought (Shafer 2015a&b), or it could be elliptical for claims about reasons, in one of the many senses of “reason”. To say that morality has “authority” could be the normative claim that morality ought to be taken more seriously than other sets of norms (such as etiquette rules or the mores of unsavoury cults⁸) or it could be the claim that there exist resources to “refute” the moral sceptic or amoralist.

Often, when we run these questions together, we end up begging the question. That’s why I think it better to ask not whether terrestrials can demonstrate the authority or objectivity of morality, or show us why we have reasons to be moral, but, more minimally, whether they can make sense of the claim that morality deserves the place that we are wont to grant it in governing our lives. That leaves open the question of whether “objectivity” or whatever else is *needed* for morality to play that role. Whether any such features number among the requirements for vindication is part of the debate, not something to be presupposed in advance.

4. What We Need Ethics To Be

I said that the path to celestialism starts from a confusion between features that philosophers would *like* ethics to have, and features that ethics *needs* to have in order to play its characteristic

⁸ See Woods (2018) for an excellent discussion of the senses of “authority” in play here.

role in our lives. So, what features do *I* think we need ethics to have in order for it to play this role?

Ethical norms and values tell us how to live. They tell us what goals to aim at, what actions to perform and refrain from, and what characters we should aspire to have. Ethics sometimes demands things from us that are difficult or even unpleasant, and it often presents these demands as overriding of personal interests or attachments. So the fundamental thing that we need from any system of ethical norms is this: we need it to be something that it *makes sense* to listen to in this way.

Normally, explaining why this is so is straightforward. We remind ourselves why it makes sense to be moral by invoking *moral* values. We point out that ignoring morality's commands would lead us to be cruel or unjust, or that it would create more suffering than it relieved, or let down those who had legitimate expectations of us. Most of the time, this seems like a perfectly good answer to the question of why and whether we should listen to the dictates of ethics.

But in more reflective moments, vindicating ethics by such a direct appeal to our current moral values can seem inadequately circular. We all recognise that we have been wrong about ethics in the past, and come to change our views; we continue to confront the question of whether and how we ought to revise parts of our moral outlook going forwards. So we need to think that there is some standard by reference to which we can distinguish between correct and incorrect moral views, between those that are worthy of retention and those that ought to be dispelled. We need to think that moral change has constituted genuine improvement, not mere arbitrary change.

On the other hand, we need to dispel the dark suspicions that, far from being arbitrary, ethics has a deep purpose, but one which is fundamentally unsavoury – that it exists in order to allow the powerful to control the rest of society, or to vent their cruelty or resentment against those they rule. In other words, we have to confront genealogical questions of the sort with which Nietzsche presented us. We worry that morality might be in some way bad for us.

And finally, there may be cases where ethics will call upon us to sacrifice the interests of ourselves or of those we love, or to abandon the projects that give our lives meaning. We want to be reassured that there is some point to this, that in making these sacrifices we are not merely acting superstitiously or fetishistically, in thrall to rules that serves no good end.

So what we need is a vindictory story that speaks to all three of these concerns – whether morality is arbitrary, whether it is bad for us, and whether it serves any good purpose. The question is whether *that* vindication can be given within a terrestrial framework.

I think it can. Recall the account of ethics that I sketched in the introduction. Human beings have certain pro-social drives, including capacities for sympathy, empathy, benevolence and altruism. They want to live together in societies. However, when they attempt to do so, problems arise. There is strife and disagreement. So they *invent* a system of norms that allow them to overcome the problems that they, as mutually concerned individuals, have in living together. Ethical inquiry is the ongoing process of finding solutions to the ever-evolving problems mutually sympathetic humans have in living together.

If that is true, then ethics is not arbitrary. There is a difference between getting it right and getting it wrong in ethics – a moral innovation either does or does not help to solve the problem

which it was invented to address. Undoubtedly there are some moral norms and systems that have their origin in vindictiveness and the desire to control, but we needn't think that they are all like this. And moral motivation needn't be fetishism or rule-worship – morality can help us to realise goals that we really care about; it is good for us.

This story is inspired by Kitcher's (2011) account of "The Ethical Project", which in turn draws upon moral naturalism, the pragmatism of Dewey, and the sentimentalism of Hume and Adam Smith. And my understanding of vindication involves the "internalising" strategy adopted by Blackburn (1998) and other quasi-realists, of interpreting key questions about the status and legitimacy of ethics as questions internal to morality.

I do not claim that this story is true. Even more importantly, I must stress that it is not the *only* account that could address the questions I raised above: Terrestrialism is a large family of views, and it admits of a great variety of metaethical and normative ethical views. Kitcherian pragmatism has implications, including a commitment to a certain kind of moral pluralism, that some might find objectionable, and I hope that readers will be careful to distinguish their responses to my positive views from their verdict on my main goal in this essay, which is to resist the most powerful motivations for Celestialism.

My point is simply that such an account appears to give us what we *need*. It vindicates the claim that morality is worth obeying – at least, on one plausible understanding of what "vindication" is about. If moral norms are solutions to the problems that we, as mutually sympathetic creatures, find in living together, then it does make sense to grant morality the standing to govern our lives and actions. Yet this is a story devoid of celestial trappings: moral norms are

invented, in order to address needs that members of a particular species happen to have as a result of their affective makeup, and these norms are subject to ongoing revision.

Of course, this account is only sketchy, and there is plenty to be said about the challenge of working out its internal details and defending it from objection. For now, we can ask a different question. Is this enough? Is there something missing, some vital further feature that only celestial theories can offer? If so, then we might quite properly be disappointed if a terrestrial theory is true.

5. Internal Justifications and Amoral Agents

The first response objects that the pragmatic story which I have offered only seems vindicating to basically moral people who already care about one another and about living social lives together. But when we look about the world, we see vistas of cruelty, greed and vice. Some people just seem quite indifferent to the wellbeing of others – or, at least of many others. So we can expect that the kind of *internal* vindication sketched above, appealing, as it does, to substantive moral concerns or motivations such as sympathy or benevolence, just isn't going to gain any purchase on these people. Is there not something we can say, in justifying morality, that doesn't presuppose that our target audience has *already* accepted moral commitments? If not, we might worry that morality lacks a certain kind of authority, oomph,⁹ necessity, or reason-giving force that it needs.

Indeed, some have thought this is the central question of ethical theory – what can we say to the agent who simply rejects morality wholesale? Is there a reason or argument we can give to *this* individual which can show her why she should be moral?

⁹ As Joyce 2006, p8 puts it.

5.1 Necessity

Philosophers are often drawn to describing ethical demands in modal terms. To vindicate morality just *is* to show that there are commands which we *must* obey – as Korsgaard says, a moral law must be something which “is intrinsically suited to answer the question why the action is necessary” (Korsgaard 1996, p112).

It *might* be nice if that was literally true – if ethical norms didn’t just tell us what to do, but ensured that we did it; if ethical laws were somehow as unbreakable as the laws of nature.¹⁰ The amoralist asks why she should be moral, and the response is that she doesn’t have a choice. Of course, this is simply false – people are clearly able to do immoral things – but, historically, there have been attempts to believe something like this, by appealing to a distinction between genuine reality and mere illusion. To Absolute Idealists, wickedness itself could be dismissed as illusory – “The Absolute is the richer for every discord” (Bradley 1916, p204), which is to say that even apparently bad acts play a part in the inevitable progression towards the fulfilment of universal self-consciousness. For certain Christians or Platonists, the commission of evil acts is in a *sense* possible, but it leaves the wrongdoer herself mired in a shadow world of illusion – alienated from the higher reality of God or the Form of the Good. If one of these theories were true, there really would be a sense in which moral acts were necessary, since immorality ultimately belongs to the domain of the unreal.

Of course, very few philosophers still think in these terms. It’s not simply that Idealism or Platonism have fallen out of favour; it’s that the distinction between the real and the illusory

¹⁰ I say “might” because there is an important tradition according to which the ability to commit evil is a vital and valuable component of human autonomy; Alyosha’s prose-poem “The Grand Inquisitor” in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* is an excellent illustration of this view of freedom.

upon which these views are predicated can no longer do the relevant work for us. Unless we simply stipulate that “real” means “in accordance with the norms of ethics”, we cannot escape the sense that wickedness and immoralism are real, and real options for human beings. As William James said “the evil facts are as genuine parts of nature as the good ones” (James 1985, p126). It is not impossible to disobey ethics.

The point of mentioning these theories is not that I think contemporary celebrities endorse them, but rather because I suspect that a residuum of their orientation remains although the worldview that gives them significance has been rejected (as Anscombe said of the modern notion of obligation, “all the atmosphere of the term is retained while its substance is guaranteed quite null” (Anscombe 1958, p17)). If the “necessity” of ethics were something like the necessity found in Absolute Idealism or theism, we could see why it might be worth wanting.¹¹ But without such metaphysical underpinnings, it’s unclear why we should care whether morality is “necessary,” in any sense of necessity still available.

After all, whatever conception of necessity is in play when Kantians and their allies say that moral actions are “necessary”, it is clearly not one which makes wicked people disappear. If our worry was that the world is full of nasty individuals and that morality seems powerless to get them to better their ways, then Kant’s arguments offer little solace. Many intelligent and apparently rational people have studied Kantian ethics only to go on to lead lives filled with

¹¹ I say “might” again here, because we can still ask: “what is so good about occupying ‘genuine’ reality?”. After all, the supposedly illusory world is the one we call home, where our friends and loved ones and projects reside. To call the world “illusory” is not to deny that, in some sense, it exists. We need an *argument* to show that “genuine” reality is better than the world we are familiar with, and once we admit the need for such an argument, the whole appeal to reality as a vindication of morality appears as an unnecessary detour. The problem, I think, is that the identification of goodness and reality is so old, and so central to the history of Western philosophy, that it can be hard to even realise that it *is* an identification of two distinct ideas. This may be why contemporary realists are drawn to describing their view as one on which “reality itself favours” various courses of action, as though that must be some sort of gold standard of vindication – the question of why we should *care* about this barely even appears open to these philosophers. I return to this point below.

rapacity and injustice – a large portion of the British political establishment, for example, have degrees in PPE from Oxford, and presumably at least some of them were paying attention during their lectures on ethics. I doubt that there is any moral argument, Kantian or otherwise, that can, on its own, *compel* the amoralist to live a better life.

5.2 Refutation

If the “necessity” that celestials are looking for is not supposed to be the kind of literal necessity that could compel moral action, then what is it? Many ethicists have hoped that moral arguments, even if they cannot exact compliance from wicked people, might at least *demonstrate* to them that they are acting wrongly. As Blackburn writes, these philosophers retain “...a wish that the knaves of the world can not only be confined and confounded; but refuted – refuted as well by standards that they have to acknowledge...” (Blackburn 2010 p127).

In doing this, philosophers substitute the original question of whether we can use philosophy to get wicked agents to behave better, with another, rather different goal. Our target now is the “amoralist”: not a violent villain, but an intelligent moral sceptic¹², who asks calmly “Why is there anything that I should, ought to, do?” (Williams 2012, p3). As Williams says, the possibility of this character

...has been regarded by many moralists as providing a real challenge to moral reasoning... If morality can be got off the ground rationally, then we ought to be able to get it off the ground in an argument against him; while, in his pure form - in which we can call him the amoralist – he may not be actually persuaded, it might seem a comfort to morality if there were reasons which, if he were rational, would persuade him.
(Williams 2012 p4)

¹² Sometimes this character is simply called the “moral sceptic”, but some people use the latter term in more distinctively epistemological terms, to describe someone who believes that there are *sui generis* moral facts, but that we cannot *know* what they are. Thus, in order to avoid this confusion, I mostly avoid talk of scepticism.

On this view, so long as the amoralist is rational, ethics should provide us with arguments that will get her to see that she is wrong, even if she won't be moved to act on that fact. The very notion of "authority" can be identified with this: ethics is authoritative just so long as there is a fact or argument that we can appeal to in refuting the amoralist. And if we *need* ethics to be authoritative in this sense, we can see the appeal of celestialism. For if some celestial theory is correct, then all the amoralist has to do is to perceive the moral truths, or attain the objective perspective, or engage in pure reasoning, and she will see that she is mistaken in her amorality.

But whilst it may be true that the availability of such arguments may *seem* a comfort, as Williams says, we should ask whether this is really so. After all, if our initial worry was that the world is full of terrible people doing terrible things, then it's not clear why *refutation* should be of much interest, if refutation needn't compel a change in anyone's conduct. It is moral *action* we want.

Indeed, if refuting amoralists means providing them with arguments that, as Blackburn says, "they have to acknowledge", then it is not clear that even this is on the table. Kant says that the moral law "forces itself upon us", but this is false. At best we may hope that an amoral agent might come to see moral claims as true *if* she commits to carefully and open-mindedly thinking through Kant's arguments, or to adopting an objective perspective, or to allowing the non-natural truths to beam into her intuition. But if the acknowledgement of refutation is allowed to be conditional in this way – conditional, that is, on the amoralist *going along* with it – then we can ask why this sort of "refutation" is so much better than the sort of internal vindication offered above, which presupposes that our interlocutor is prepared to grant that human problems are worth solving, to employ moral conceptions in the manner of ethically committed people, or to empathise with the feelings of others.

We might conclude, then, that it is barely even worth being disappointed if we cannot answer the amoralist. Literally compelling knaves and banishing wickedness from the world with moral argument was never on the table. The second-best alternative of merely *refuting* the curious, rational amoralist – where such refutation needn't spur motivation, or even explicit agreement – is such thin gruel that it is hardly worth wanting. A cynic might charge that the search for refutation really has little to do with the practice of moral life, but simply reflects the peculiarities of the academic world which most philosophers inhabit, in which success is measured in being seen by our peers to have refuted our rivals, rather than in motivating others or changing the world.

5.3 Reasons

But this might be too hasty. Even if we cannot *convince* the wicked agent, we still want to be able to condemn her for her wicked behaviour. And if we accept that “ought implies can”, then such condemnation might presuppose that the wicked agent *could* have done better. The celestial may point out that, even if the wicked agent *refuses* to attend to them, there is still a sense in which moral reasons are available to her – by consulting the normative facts, adopting the view from nowhere, or exercising pure reason, she will come to see what she ought to do.¹³

¹³ Some philosophers make a similar point by appeal to a principle they call *Moral Rationalism*: “the view that moral obligations are, or entail, practical reasons” (Shafer-Landau 2003, p190). I avoid this approach for two reasons.

First, talk of “having practical reasons” admits of both motivational and normative readings. One way to argue for Moral Rationalism is simply to propose that we understand talk of reasons in normative terms, and then insist, as a moral claim, that whenever agents have a moral obligation they have moral reasons to perform it. This is, in effect, Shafer-Landau’s argument. But note that this response could also be offered by the Terrestrial who offers an internal vindication of morality. For example, a quasi-realist may be happy to say that agents always have reasons when they have obligations, because their talk of “having reasons”, understood normatively, will simply express their endorsement of the agent acting in accordance with the obligations in question. Appeal to the “ought implies can” principle, in the form that I have developed it, avoids this internalising move, whilst also not giving into the neo-Humean claim that reasons must *actually* motivate agents. Thus, I think the intermediate principle I offer is the best one for the Celestial, since it captures precisely the sense in which robustly objective reasons might be thought to be “available” to all agents.

My second concern is with this use of the term “rationalism”. I think it best to reserve that term for Kantian views which ground moral obligation in *rationality* or *reasoning*, rather than those that ground morality in *reasons*. See Shafer (2020) for the distinction between “reasons-first” and “reason-first” approaches to normativity, and Scanlon (2011) for the argument that Kantianism is best understood in terms of reasoning, not reasons.

On the other hand, if moral considerations are only apparent to those with certain sympathies or human concerns, then we might worry that history's very worst villains are just constitutionally incapable of appreciating moral reasons. And in that case, we might conclude that it is not the case that they *should* have done better, for they *could* not have done. So we cannot condemn them. And if our ethical theory implied that we couldn't condemn villains, then that would certainly be something worth being disappointed about!

But we should not assume that the inability to recognise moral norms undermines the possibility of moral criticism. Sometimes, we use moral criticism to persuade others to do better. In those cases, it matters not just what an agent physically can *do*, but what the agent can *see* that she has reason to do. In these cases, the "can" in the principle "ought implies can" really is tied to the apprehension of reasons. If emotionally deficient people were indeed unable to appreciate reasons, then it would make no sense to criticise them in *this* way.

But at other times, our goal in criticising is simply to condemn, to mark out the wicked as the degenerates they are. When an agent is considered irremediably deficient, then observers will frequently talk about how revolting he is, but rarely about what reasons he has. Many progressives hold precisely that view of Donald Trump – that he is so egotistical and cruel that he simply cannot be brought to care about ethics. And thus it is rare to hear his critics arguing that Trump *has a reason* to behave better. They simply condemned his wickedness. I don't think any of these critics assume that moral condemnation of Trump is contingent upon any assumption that Trump is capable of appreciating moral reasons.

In these cases, the sense of “can” in the principle “ought implies can” is purely behavioural – if turned out that Trump could *not* behave any differently, because he is being in some way controlled, then he might escape criticism. But if the defence is simply that Trump is insensitive to moral concerns, that would hardly blunt condemnation – for this is precisely the point the critics are making. It is for this reason that Williams, when he claims that the cruel man has no *reason* – in Williams’ preferred, motivational sense of reason – to be nicer to his wife, is at pains to remind us that:

There are many things I can say about or to this man: that he is ungrateful, inconsiderate, hard, sexist, nasty, selfish, brutal, and many other disadvantageous things. I shall presumably say, whatever else I say, that it would be better if he were nicer to her...What is the difference supposed to be between saying that the agent has a reason to act more considerately, and saying one of the many other things we can say to people whose behaviour does not accord with what we think it should be? (Williams 1995, p39-40).

Even where a certain way of talking about reasons is off the table, condemnation may remain apposite.

My conclusion then, is somewhat concessive to celestial disappointment. There is something sad in the conclusion that moral norms are not something that any rational agent could discover just by thinking clearly or adopting a more objective perspective – it implies a certain limit to the possible scope of the moral community and the power of reasoning alone to lead us to morality. It may be that there are some agents who simply cannot be brought to appreciate why morality matters, and that makes a certain kind of moral address pointless when dealing with such agents.

But this disappointment should be limited. Even if the moral truths were *in some sense* accessible to unsympathetic agents, acquiring those truths might still require powers of rational, objective or intuitive thought that are beyond the reach of most. It’s not as though Trump’s only

limitations are emotional – even if a Kantian picture of ethics were correct, it is dubious that Trump has the intellectual capacity to be able to appreciate it. The question of persuading highly rational but emotionless agents to be moral might be of interest to philosophers, but it is unlikely to figure much in our ethical lives.

Once we realise that, on *any* picture of ethics, there will be some agents who are constitutionally incapable of appreciating the significance of moral norms – whether because of emotional or intellectual deficiencies – then we should abandon the idea that the legitimacy of ethics is in some way contingent on the possibility of persuading the wicked or engaging the amoralist. Even if there are some agents who just can't be brought to be moral, that should not absolve *us* of the duty to care about our fellow humans. As Blackburn says, the wish to refute the amoralist:

...is still, tantalizingly, there as a goal or ideal, the Holy Grail of moral philosophy, and many suppose that all right-thinking people must join the pilgrimage to find it. We sentimentalists do not like our good behaviour to be hostage to such a search. We don't altogether approve of Holy Grails. We do not see the need for them. (Blackburn 2010 p128)

And he is right. We should not hold morality hostage to the response of knaves. Indeed, it strikes me as querulous to reject the call of morality just because I know that there are others who will not heed it. And so, I conclude, the question of addressing the amoralist or wicked agent is, ultimately, a distraction.

6. Arbitrariness, Objectivity and Reality

But even if we renounce the project of addressing the amoralist, it is still possible to find the picture of ethics that I have offered threatening or even undermining. Philosophers often like to see themselves as discoverers of a realm of facts that extends far beyond them, of timeless and transcendental truths. On the picture that I have offered, ethics is not really like this in any interesting way. When we engage in ethical thought, we are inventing solutions to problems

that are, in all likelihood, specific to beings like us with our particular biology, psychology and history. And when we try to vindicate ethics internally, by showing that moral norms are useful in solving the problems of mutually sympathetic creatures, it may feel as though we are begging the question: presupposing the legitimacy of deeper features of our evaluative viewpoint when it was precisely the legitimacy of our values that needed to be shown. The worry is that this is *just us*: it leaves ethics as nothing more than “merely” our own, contingent, human way of conducting and regulating our affairs, an arbitrary or parochial enterprise with no foundations that transcend the idiosyncrasies of our own interests.

Celestials will say that they can offer something better – that, on their view, the fundamental ethical principles somehow accord with deep features of the universe, that they are objective, or that they are deliverances of pure reason. But what the celestial needs to show is why this kind of grounding is supposed to do a better job of explaining why ethics matters than simply leaving the story where I leave it, with our basic human concerns for one another.

6.1 Arbitrariness and Realism

The strategy employed in section 4, of interpreting questions about the vindication of morality as internal, first-order moral questions, is borrowed from the quasi-realist tradition of philosophers such as Blackburn and Gibbard. However, realists have objected that we cannot thus appeal to foundational first-order normative principles in attempting to vindicate the rest of our moral views, if nothing deeper grounds *these* principles. In discussing this internalisation manoeuvre, Shafer-Landau says “Non-cognitivists ... rest their substantive moral convictions on arbitrary foundations” (2003, p37); similarly, Parfit writes: “On Gibbard’s view...[w]e could never be mistaken in our judgments about how it would be better or worse to live, since this

would just be a matter of arbitrary choice.” (2011, p409). Since I claimed above that one of the things that we need ethics to be is *not* to be arbitrary, this accusation deserves a response.

Normally, to say that a choice is arbitrary is to say that it has been made at random, without careful consideration. But when my terrestrial says that norms are vindicated because, and to the extent that, they help mutually sympathetic agents live together, she does so on the basis of extensive reflection: thinking about the role that we wish ethical norms to play in our lives; considering changes in morality that strike us as improvements over what went before; attempting to take into account the views and interests of as many people as possible. Judging from the perspective of someone who is already committed to ethical values, that seems as good a basis as any for identifying an overarching standard for moral success.

Rather, the celestial thought seems to be that *any* attempt to view the vindication of ethics as a first-order moral question must involve arbitrariness in a special sense. For either we will end up with some foundational value or set of values for which we cannot offer any further justification – say, a sympathetic concern for the well-being of others – or we find a circle of values which might be mutually justifying, but which, taken together, have no deeper justification outside of themselves. We may, as a psychological matter, point out that this corresponds with our deepest concerns and commitments, and that we cannot really stand back from these in order to ask whether they are *really* justified, since that would leave us with nowhere else to stand. But this simply explains why we value (say) well-being; it doesn’t, we are told, explain why it is valuable. As Shafer-Landau says:

When we reach a point of citing a ‘brute’ desire—a want or liking that is self-standing, whose warrant derives from no other pro-attitude—then we have identified something that lacks a justifying reason, and so is arbitrary... The arbitrariness ... is problematic because it infects all justificatory efforts. If our

evaluative attitudes rely for their justification on attitudes which themselves lack justification, then the whole network is corrupt. (Shafer-Landau 2003, pp29-30).

But this problem doesn't seem specific to theories like non-cognitivism that identify *desires* as central to moral judgement.¹⁴ It doesn't even seem like a special problem for morality. Rather, it seems that this problem attends to *any* attempt to end a justificatory chain. At some point, we will find ourselves appealing to considerations for which we can find no further justification – we reach bedrock somewhere. What is the better alternative that non-naturalists like Shafer-Landau think they can offer us?

According to non-naturalists, what licences us in terminating our justificatory chain is the existence of *sui generis* irreducibly moral facts can provide us with an “intrinsically normative standard by which to register justificatory superiority.” (Shafer-Landau 2003, p33). As such, Shafer-Landau says the realist “is in better shape here, because her ultimate moral commitments can avoid arbitrariness if they are *true*, and if she believes them because they are true” (Shafer-Landau 2003, p30). Of course, as an *internal* moral claim, quasi-realists and those inspired by them will insist that our deepest moral commitments *are* true and normative, but this does not satisfy the non-naturalist realist, since on this view there may be “no ‘external’ moral facts that moral judgements might accurately describe, nothing in virtue of which such judgements, when true, are true,” (Shafer-Landau 2003, p32) so that, as Parfit says “even if moral claims can be said to be true in some minimal sense, such claims cannot be true or false in the strong sense to which Moral Cognitivists or Realists appeal.” (Parfit 2011, p397).¹⁵

¹⁴ A similar challenge faces naturalist realism. The naturalist realist will say that goodness is a natural property on the semantic grounds that the word or concept “goodness” refers to a natural property. Non-naturalists will object that this arbitrarily assumes that our normative concepts are legitimate or authoritative – if “goodness” just means “welfare”, then we can ask, in Moorean style, whether goodness/welfare really is worth promoting.

¹⁵ Sepielli puts the point nicely: “The archetypical realist will also think there’s some domain-external or at least domain-general explanation you can give of a belief’s correctness conditions. By ‘domain-external,’ I mean that the explanation does not merely advert to facts internal to the domain that the belief is about. So, for example, an explanation of the correctness of the belief that causing pain is wrong that simply went ‘Causing pain is wrong,’ would not be domain-external, nor would an explanation that went ‘Causing pain is regarded as wrong by virtuous people.’” (Sepielli 2018, p583)

Is a story which allows for this “strong sense” of truth, according to which foundational moral principles don’t just seem right when viewed from within our moral perspective, but correspond with external, intrinsically normative standards, a better vindication of morality than a purely internal justification? Is saying that our moral principles accord with intrinsically normative facts a *better* explanation of why they matter and why it makes sense to listen to them than pointing out that they help us solve the problems we find in living together?

In a sense, it seems obvious that intrinsically normative facts, if such there be, would explain why we ought to act morally. As Enoch says, “*of course* the normative truths bear on what we have (normative) reason to do, after all, many of them *just are* truths about what we have reason to do” (2011, p. 239), or as Chappell (2019) claims “it makes no sense at all to question the normativity of a purely normative property”. So, if we have established that there are intrinsically normative facts, then this does seem like an especially compelling point at which to end the chain of normative justification: no further doubt is possible, and no further explanation or justification is needed. And this, non-naturalists say, is what their view provides.

But, as Dasgupta responds, this is too fast. When the non-naturalist – at least, a “robust” non-naturalist like Enoch or Shafer-Landau – talks of normative truths, she is not just making a claim *within* normative ethics. Rather, she is making a claim about the relationship of our first-order moral thought to an external reality, where this external reality is supposed to explain why our first-order thought is in good standing. As Dasgupta (2017) says, the non-naturalist is free to posit any “*sui generis* whatnots” she likes, but she should “play fair”¹⁶ in calling them moral facts. *Before* identifying any *sui generis* whatnot with a moral fact, we must *first* show that

¹⁶ Dasgupta borrows the phrase from David Lewis (1994).

these whatnots have the properties that moral facts are supposed to have. For example, if we want to say that goodness is some non-natural property P, we must *first* show that P is something that ought to be promoted. So, for the non-naturalist to earn her right to appeal to *sui generis* intrinsically normative facts in order to explain why it makes sense to do what morality tells us to do, she must *first* explain why these *sui generis* whatnots are things that it makes sense to listen to. And that was precisely the explanatory burden that appeal to intrinsically normative facts was supposed to discharge.

Dasgupta considers three strategies the non-naturalist might take in explaining why non-natural facts or properties deserve to be obeyed or promoted. If we take P to be the non-natural property we want to call *goodness*, we need to show that P should be promoted. We might try to get there via first-order ethics, by showing that the things that we ought to promote (for example, well-being) have property P. But that leaves the non-natural property explanatorily idle¹⁷: we have explained why we should promote P by appealing to the fact that we should promote well-being, when what was needed was an explanation of the reverse form. Or we might say that it is “in the nature” of P that it should be promoted.¹⁸ But, as Dasgupta points out, this is no better an explanation of why we should promote something than the pre-modern appeal to a *virtus dormitiva* explained why sleeping draughts work. It does not constitute an explanation to say that it is “in the nature” of some property that it explains the phenomena about which we are asking; it merely marks the place where an explanation might go, or where further explanation has been abandoned. Or we might say that it is part of our *concept* of

¹⁷ A different form of idleness objection is given in ground-theoretic terms by Berker (2019a). Plausible moral principles will be of the form “Natural fact N fully grounds normative fact M”. If that is true, then, even if the principle is *itself* non-natural, it will be explanatorily idle, since the moral fact is *fully* grounded in the natural fact.

¹⁸ Kantian realists make this move too. For example, Langton (2007) approvingly quotes Kant’s claim from the *Groundwork* that “Rational beings...are called persons because their nature already marks them out as an end in itself.” (Kant 1997, p428) And she would accept Dasgupta’s charge that realism cannot *explain* why the entities identified as intrinsically normative are worth caring about, as she also appears to endorse Kant’s claim that “For us men it is wholly impossible to explain how and why the universality of a maxim as a law—and therefore morality—should interest us.” (p461).

goodness that it refers to P. But that explains why we should promote P by presupposing that the moral concepts we happen to have are legitimate, which, again, was precisely what the non-naturalist was supposed to be explaining.¹⁹ Or, to add a fourth possibility to Dasgupta's list, we could join the "relaxed realists"²⁰ and interpret talk of the *sui generis* property P as an internal moral claim, in which case it may be clear that P is something to be promoted. But, of course, such an internalising move would place the non-naturalist in the same position as the quasi-realist with regards to the arbitrariness worry. Thus, Dasgupta concludes, the non-naturalist must hold that moral claims are explained by reference to *sui generis* non-natural whatnots, but that there is no further explanation of why *these* things are worth obeying or promoting.

This does not demonstrate that non-naturalism is false. Rather, it shows that the accusation of arbitrariness cannot explain why we should be disappointed with terrestrial offerings. In a standard sense of "arbitrary", there is no reason to think that terrestrial theories must be arbitrary. Alternatively, we can say that moral theories are arbitrary if we cannot offer a deep explanation of their basic principles. In that case, my terrestrial theory will be arbitrary, since we cannot in *this* sense explain why we ought to care about human problems. But non-naturalism will be arbitrary too, since it cannot explain why we ought to care about *sui generis* whatnots. The problem of normative explanation – the explanation of why the things we have identified as normative facts are things it makes sense to promote or obey – has simply been pushed to a deeper metaphysical level. If we must end up with normative principles which we

¹⁹ In any case, this is exactly the strategy that naturalist realists use to argue that we ought to promote some natural property, such as wellbeing or a "homoeostatic property cluster" (Boyd 1988); but non-naturalists dismiss this strategy as failing to show why these properties are "normative" – see footnote 14.

²⁰ Also called "minimal realism" (Golub 2021) or "quietist realism" (McPherson 2011) this is the view often attributed to non-naturalist realists who disavow the apparent ontological implications of their view, such as Parfit and Scanlon. As Kremm and Shafer (2018) point out, these philosophers do not self-identify using these terms, and indeed, this formulation of their views often involves a "charitable" reading of the things that Parfit and Scanlon say, given both that these philosophers vociferously reject minimalism about truth, and that Parfit rejects the internalisation strategy as arbitrary when it is employed by quasi-realists.

cannot explain in any deeper terms, why is it so much better if our unexplained explainers belong to a celestial order, rather than just being things we happen to care very much about?

6.2 Objectivity

Even if we admit that explanation must come to an end somewhere, and so in some sense the arbitrariness worry cannot be absolutely dispelled, some may still object that ending our explanatory and justificatory story within our own first-order moral outlook is unacceptably parochial. Even if we cannot ultimately explain *why* we should obey the dictates of ethics in a way that avoids taking for granted *any* substantive normative commitments, wouldn't it be better if the vindication of ethics didn't rest so heavily on the deliverances of a *particular* viewpoint? Indeed, once we have accepted that we cannot explain or justify all our basic normative standards, does it not become all the more important that we can identify certain standards or principles whose appeal transcends the contingencies of our own viewpoint?

In that case, the superiority of celestialism lies not in its greater explanatory power, but in making space for the thought that ethics is, in some important sense, *objective*. Indeed, many philosophers take the question of vindicating ethics *just to be* the question of showing that ethics is objective. As Nagel writes: "Objectivity is the central problem of ethics. Not just in theory, but in life....The subject matter of ethics *is* how to engage in practical reasoning and the justification of action once we expand our consciousness by occupying the objective standpoint." (Nagel 1986 pp138-139).

There is a fairly banal sense of objectivity in which terrestrial accounts *do* allow for objectivity in ethics. Our moral norms are concerned with the arrangement of natural facts: Is she in pain? Did he cause it? Did he foresee that his actions would have that effect? and so on. And terrestrial

standards for vindicating moral norms also admit of objective answers, as when we ask whether a norm solves certain social problems, or answers to deep human desires, or fits the extension of certain moral concepts. But the worry is that in *finding* these problems, or desires, or concepts, to be really worth bothering with, the terrestrial ethicist is simply reflecting her own psychological quirks, or worse, prejudices.

Of course, that needn't quite be true. When a terrestrial takes for granted some starting point in ethics – such as the importance of certain human problems or desires – this need not reflect only *her own* unreformed point of view. Rather, as in Hume's account of the General Point of View, or Smith's theory of the Impartial Spectator, the terrestrial can allow for the formation, within each of us, of a composite human perspective that takes as its starting materials the particular viewpoints of a wide range of actual people.²¹ Through the workings of empathy and sympathy, we can transform a range of subjective, individual moral perspectives into an intersubjective, human moral viewpoint, which we bring to bear in evaluating our own decisions. Because the mechanisms here are empathy and sympathy, the thought is not that we *transcend* human perspectives, but that we learn to combine them. Morality might be just *us*, but, at least on some terrestrial views, it needn't be just *me*. In that case, if our moral starting points are said to encode a prejudice, it will be a shared, human prejudice.

Nagel's vision goes beyond this. His question is whether, when we adopt a perspective that stands back from *any* subjective viewpoint, “a detached point of view towards ourselves and the world”, moral concerns still appear *as* morally salient. And his vindication of ethics consists precisely in attempting to show that, when we view the world from this perspective, we can still engage in first-order normative thought, and moral motivation: “Practical objectivity means

²¹ For an excellent overview, see Sayre-McCord (2013).

that practical reason can be understood and even engaged in by the objective self.” (Nagel, 1986 p140).

I don't wish to argue with Nagel's claim that we can engage in ethics from such a radically alien perspective, one that abstracts away from all the particularities of human nature. I am sceptical, since I think that, unless we endow the objective self with a range of desires, feelings and emotions (in which case it will no longer be truly objective in Nagel's sense), it will be quite unmoved by the sorts of things that we take as moral considerations. But what I want to question is whether this is really *needed* to vindicate ethics.

As far as I can see, Nagel just takes for granted that the detached, objective perspective is both superior to, and required for vindicating, the engaged, particular, human perspective. He says that to “discover” reasons for action, “instead of deriving them from our preexisting motives” is to “acquire new motives superior to the old”; the goal is to “reorder our motives in a direction that will make them more acceptable from an external standpoint.” (Nagel 1986 p139). Likewise, it is presupposed that it is only from a “a detached point of view” that it will be possible “to correct inclination and to discern what we really should do.” (p140). If the detached point of view is *not* one in which moral concerns appear as important, that implies a “nihilistic result” (p141) according to which morality is a “subjective illusion” (p143).

It just doesn't seem clear to me why we should think that Nagel's detached point of view is *superior* to any other point of view. It is simply one point of view among others. If, *contra* Nagel's hopes, it turns out that morality is something only experienced by those equipped with the full range of human concerns, who care about each other and want to live together, then it strikes me as a kind of contempt for humanity and for the human perspective to think any the less of

it on that score. Why insist that morality is only vindicated if it is discernible from a detached perspective? To be sure, the worry about prejudice is real. But in its most obvious form, the worry about prejudice is the worry that I am out of step with the other humans with whom I am attempting to build an ethical community, and so the means to addressing it is to engage with the kind of empathetic perspective-taking described by Hume and Smith. But if we fear that even *intersubjective* values might be unacceptably parochial, then I worry that the desire to avoid prejudices has transmogrified into a search to rid ourselves of all that makes us human.

The irony is that Nagel recognises precisely this concern. While he hopes that even partial and personal values can be discerned from an objective perspective, he acknowledges the possibility of “over-objectification”, and worries that there might be values which “cannot be objectively understood”. Nagel’s concern is that the objective perspective will resemble Sidgwick’s “point of view of the universe”, in which utilitarian impartiality will reject as illegitimate any distinctive values of partiality to self, friends or loved ones. If that is the case, then, he thinks, the solution is not necessarily to reject these more distinctively subjective values, but instead “we may have to modify our realist idea of value and practical reason accordingly” (Nagel 1986, pp162-163). And that seems right – the mere fact that partial values are local and particular is not *itself* an argument that they are illegitimate.

But once we admit this, we see that the marker of legitimacy is *not* correspondence with an objective, detached perspective. And so, if the terrestrial is right, and any detached perspective need not be one from which values are discernable, that need not constitute a demotion or debunking of ethics. If the worry is that ethics is “just us”, then I think the right response is: “Well, maybe it is. What would be so bad about that?”

Of course, Nagel's is only one conception of objectivity. Kantians will define objectivity not in terms of a view from nowhere, but the perspective of the rational agent as such. For example, Bagnoli says "The [Kantian] rationalist defends the view that moral claims are objective because they result from correct reasoning." (Bagnoli 2015 p3). The thought is that ethics is objective not when it shows up from a detached standpoint, but if it appears from the standpoint of agency that any rational being must adopt when she attempts to decide how to act, "To show that there are objective standards of practical reason requires us to show that such standards can guide all practical subjects." (p6). But if we insist that ethics *must* be objective in order to be legitimate, notice how this places a rather stringent requirement or condition on the vindication of ethics "In order to prove that moral claims are objective, Kant needs to prove that agents with interests and desires are capable of being bound by claims that are independent of such inclinations and interests." (p9)

And this is just the problem. It is one thing for the Kantian to argue that moral norms *are* objective, in the sense that all rational beings can will them and be successfully motivated by them. Of course, that would be very helpful if it were the case. But why should we assume that morality is *only* legitimate *if* it is objective in this sense?

To be sure, if we had not dispensed with the concerns of section 5.3, which held that agents must always be capable of being motivated by or otherwise appreciating the normativity of the principles that we appeal to in criticizing them, then we could see why. According to that view, it would be necessary for all agents to be capable of being guided by the moral law in order to show that the moral law was universal. But we have already dispensed with that condition. It does not undermine morality if there are some agents who are so degenerate that they are no longer capable of being guided by it.

And so, again, we might wonder why, if “objectivity” is the fact of morality being a possible source of guidance for *any* practical subject – perhaps even a subject *radically* unlike human beings – we should think that objectivity matters so much. Why does it not count as something nice to have, but ultimately inessential? And if we found that there were some values or aspects of moral life that were, and others that were not, possible sources of guidance to radically inhuman creatures, why should that constitute the demotion of the latter group? Again, it is unclear why this should be so. It would simply mean that there are some values that are more local and less universal than others. But more local does not mean less significant.

Again, the irony is that many Kantians recognise just this point. For example, Shafer admits that, if the criterion of objectivity and thus of legitimacy is taken to be agreement with rationality in a minimal or thin sense, then we may not be able to vindicate many of the moral norms that we generally accept. Rather, when it comes to “vindicating objective moral norms” (Shafer 2015b p702), he claims it is better to attribute to the Kantian “a thoroughly non-trivial conception of rationality” (p703). The use of the term “rationality” to refer both to very minimal requirements of consistent cognition, and to the rich array of structural norms for thinking and deciding that Shafer has in mind, can conceal how big a move this is. Rather than holding that morality is undermined if it cannot be justified to just any intelligent and coherent being, Shafer proposes that we should *narrow the scope* of the potential audience of moral appeal to creatures who already think, to a significant extent, like us. But once we have made that concession, then the terrestrial claim that we might have to limit the scope of the potential moral community even further, to creatures that don’t just think like us structurally but also share our feelings and concerns, whilst not irresistible, seems far less obviously objectionable.

6.3 Morality without Objectivity

We could spend a long time working through various extant conceptions of objectivity, but in fact my point is a general one. In both the Nagelian and the Kantian case, the insistence on objectivity rested in part on an under-motivated presupposition that a transcendental objective perspective must be *better* than a viewpoint that is more human, local, and particular. Philosophers often assume that a picture of the world as it is “in itself” or as it would appear to just anyone, must be more important than a picture of how the world appears to people with particular feelings and interests. But these objectivising presuppositions need justification. People who love, or who have passions or projects, are familiar with the idea that there can be values – perhaps the most important values in life – that simply cannot be appreciated by others. And whilst *morality* needs to have a certain publicity in order to play its social function, this needn’t, as we have already seen, go so far as including any possible cognizer or rational agent within the boundaries of the moral community.

And there is a second error that the objectivist makes. It is true that objectivity might be a nice thing, for the reasons given in section 5 – it might expand the potential reach of moral persuasion. If we can show that ethics is legitimate *if* it is objective, *and* that it is indeed objective, then that creates a path into the ethical perspective. But if we also insist that ethics is legitimate *only if* it is objective, then this does not shore up the edifice of morality, but rather opens up a new threat. For if we accept *this* condition, then we must worry about whether morality really is objective after all, for if it were not that would imply nihilism. The mistake, I think, comes from the fixation with addressing the amoralist. The amoralist says that morality matters if any only if there are objective values, and celestials rush to show that values are objective in the relevant sense. But we shouldn’t accept the terms of the amoralist’s challenge. Maybe morality

would be legitimate if it were objective. But it does not follow from this that it would *not* be legitimate if it were *not* objective.

However, I want to acknowledge that the terrestrial's embrace of moral localism comes at a cost. I don't think the absence of objectivity ought to undermine moral practices or our commitment to them. But it might have serious implications for how we understand moral philosophy. Michael Smith claims that our "preoccupation with moral argument" presupposes the prospect of achieving some kind of consensus in ethics:

What seems to give moral arguments their point and poignancy is the idea that, since we are all in the same boat, a careful mustering and assessment of the reasons for and against our moral opinions is the best way to discover what the moral facts really are. If the participants are open-minded and thinking correctly, such an argument should result in a *convergence* in moral opinion - a convergence upon the truth...The term "objective" here simply signifies the possibility of a convergence in moral views of the kind just mentioned. (Smith 1991, p199)

Smith, being naturalistically-minded, claims that the possibility of such convergence cannot be known *a priori*, but must be demonstrated in the course of history. Nevertheless, if it fails to manifest, that implies an important revision to our conception of what we are up to when we engage in moral argumentation.

If morality were objective in one of the celestial senses that I have discussed, then we could see how this convergence would be possible – intelligent, open-minded investigators could step back to a more detached perspective, or they could try to work out what pure practical reason requires of them, and so could come to consensus, so long as they thinking clearly and able to discover and agree on all the relevant natural facts. But on a terrestrial view, I think this sort of convergence is doubly blocked. First, as already mentioned, the very *question* that the terrestrial is asking is likely to be one that only seems interesting and important to creatures that are basically like us – those that are sympathetic, social, concerned to live together in community. The terrestrial asks about the extension of *our* normative concepts, or about what would fulfil

our basic desires, or about how to solve *our* shared problems. Other rational beings may not see these as questions worth answering. Not all rational beings are, in that sense, in the same boat.

But – and this is an issue specific to the particular flavour of terrestrialism that I have sketched – there may not even be much consensus among sympathetic, decent human beings. If our question is how to solve the problem of living together sympathetically, then it seems quite possible to me that there will be many different, equally good initial strategies for answering it. But, as society develops and problems change, these initial answers are likely to generate new problems, which will need new solutions. So we might face a degree of *divergence*, even among decent, well-meaning agents who share the same basic goals and concerns. Moreover, since the evolution of new problems never ends, there is no reason to think that there is any final limit point *towards which* all our ethical ideas might converge. We may simply have to continue revising our moral views forever. So, rather than being in the same boat, we might say that we are all equally at sea, but some of us have decided to build a raft, others a sailboat, others a catamaran, others a steamship: and all of us will continue to alter and improve our vessels in the face of new seas and new challenges, potentially without end.

If that is true, and we are not all sailing the same boat, to the same destination, then that may not rob our discussions about ethics of their point and poignancy, but it certainly has implications for the conduct of moral investigation, and the nature of moral debate. Williams famously claimed that there could be “no coherent hope” (Williams 1985, p136) of convergence meant that “ethical thought has no chance of being everything it seems” (p135). Of course, we have to be careful – whether or not it turns out that ethics cannot be all that it had formerly seemed depends on *how it seemed* to people. And it may well be that it seems rather different to different people. Someone unversed in the debates within moral philosophy which have

preoccupied this paper might find it rather unsurprising if there is no final truth to be had in ethics, if detached reasoning alone were not enough to generate consensus, and if ethical conceptions made little sense to non-human creatures. But I cannot deny that it would be a disappointment to many philosophers, and would change their conception of their entire field. Many celestials, like Scanlon and Parfit, like to compare moral philosophy to pure mathematics; but in my view, ethics is far more like *technology* than mathematics – an area where rigorous thought and empirical facts can be brought to bear, but where progress is a matter of invention rather than discovery, where innovation has no predetermined limiting point, and where the standard of success can only be understood relative to our interests.

If that is right, then perhaps it implies that we need to revise and even reform our entire methodology for pursuing ethical questions. But that is a question for another day.

9. Conclusion

Nothing I have said here is an argument *against* the positive claims of any celestial theory: be it non-naturalism, objectivism or Kantian rationalism. What I have sought to question are the presuppositions which have led so many philosophers so hastily to dismiss terrestrial approaches as concealed nihilism. These often ill-tempered debates rested on barely-discussed assumptions about what it would *be* to vindicate ethics. Philosophers have spent so much effort trying to demonstrate that morality *is* objective that they have often failed to ask whether it really matters if it is. Too often, they have mistaken a theoretical desideratum, a nice-to-have feature, for a pillar of the edifice, a *sine qua non* without which ethics would be utterly undermined.

At the least, I hope that this paper will prompt philosophers to debate these matters in a more-clear eyed manner: to ask whether the legitimacy of morality really does rest upon the possibility

of refuting the amoralist or achieving consensus. More optimistically, I hope to lower the temperature in some of these debates – once celestials realise that terrestrials differ from them not just in their views about what morality is like, but about what morality *needs* to be like in order to be vindicated, then they may cease to view their rivals as insidious enemies of ethics, as people who fail to take morality seriously. Most optimistically of all, I hope that I may have helped some people to feel a terrestrial equanimity when it comes to the foundations of ethics. Morality might not be quite how philosophers had imagined; but we should not be too disappointed if that is the case, for a terrestrial morality can still give us all we need.

But I have not, I realise, dispelled all disappointment. A friend of mine, on hearing these arguments, responded by telling the following story. A mutual acquaintance of ours (call him Arthur) was being interviewed by a border official at an American airport, where he had arrived in order to attend a conference. The official asked him why he was visiting the USA. Arthur responded that he was a philosopher, and was travelling to a philosophy conference. “Does the world really need more philosophers?” the official asked. “It’s a sad world,” Arthur rejoined, “that has only what it needs.” (The official seems to have been satisfied with this response.)

If the world is truly terrestrial, then the power of moral philosophy to change it for the better is inescapably limited. And the potential scope of the moral community may be far more limited than many have hoped. And that is, indeed, sad. But perhaps it is a sadness that we must be prepared to bear.

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