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A DEFENSE OF MORAL REALISM

by

Jason Lesandrini

Under the Direction of Andrew Altman

ABSTRACT

This thesis will explain in detail two closely related but jointly defensible moral realist positions. I show how each position responds to the initial dilemma of whether moral judgments are propositions. Following this discussion, I defend this combined position against an objection that the position is inherently contradictory. I conclude that one can coherently maintain both positions without a contradiction.

Index Words: Moral realism, Richard Boyd, David Brink, Moral relativism

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A DEFENSE OF MORAL REALISM

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Chapter One: The Metaethical Questions

This thesis will explain in detail two closely related but jointly defensible moral realist positions. I show how each position responds to the initial dilemma of whether moral judgments are propositions. The first position, defended by Richard Boyd, claims that a significant analogy exists between scientific realism and moral realism, such that if one can establish the plausibility of the former than one can draw similar conclusions about the later. The second position, defended by David Brink, describes at depth the nature of moral properties and our justification for believing that our moral judgments are in fact true. I will defend this combined position against an objection that the position is inherently contradictory. I show that one can coherently maintain both positions without a contradiction.

I. The questions of metaethics

A series of questions must be considered in order to determine what specific position one will take in the realm of metaethics, including the position I defend in this thesis.[1] One of the most fundamental questions, a question of meaning, is whether moral judgments state propositions that have truth-values. Almost all answers to this question are characterized as either non-cognitivist or cognitivist.[2] Non-cognitivists generally claim that moral judgments do not express beliefs; therefore they are not apt for truth-value. Emotivism, one species of a non-cognitivist position, purports to show that moral judgments express or recommend

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[1] Alexander Miller's "flow-chart" approach to delineating metaethics was the inspiration for my series of questions approach which follows. Although I do not claim the list is exhaustive or even fully adequate. See Alexander Miller's An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics. Cambridge: Polity, 2003.

[2] For a further explanation of why sometimes the line between metaethical positions is blurred see, Van Roojen, Mark, "Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2004 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed), URL=http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/Spring2004/entries/moral-cognitivism/.

attitudes and that these expressions of our attitudes are not true or false. So, when one utters the statement 'Burning cats is wrong', according to the emotivist, all we are really saying is 'Boo to burning cats' and I recommend this same attitude to you.[3] A.J. Ayer, e.g., claims that moral judgments contain no objective validity, but are

> "pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth or falsehood. They are unverifiable for the same reason as a cry or pain or command is unverifiable—because they do not express genuine propositions."[4]

Cognitivism, in contrast, claims that moral judgments do posses truth-values and thus moral judgments do express beliefs. Some claim that cognitivism is the common sense position in metaethics: David Copp states, "…it is natural to us, as we engage in moral thought, to have beliefs that commit us to the existence of moral propositions."[5] Cognitivism seems to capture our intuitions about moral judgments. For example, imagine that two adolescents are burning a cat. One of them thinks that the action is right and the other thinks that it is wrong. It seems that one of the adolescents must be mistaken. In order for one of them to be mistaken, the moral judgment 'Burning cats is wrong' must, by necessity, possess a truth-value. Furthermore, if moral judgments are capable of being true or false, their truth-value depends on whether they actually describe the way things really are.[6]

The issue of whether moral judgments possess truth-values leads us to the second question. If we take the cognitivist view that moral judgments have truth-value, we then must ask whether these moral judgments are at least sometimes true.

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[3] One thing to note is that the noncognitivist is not claiming that the speaker actually has to have that particular attitude. It could be that case that the function of moral judgments is only to evoke noncognitive attitudes from others towards an object or action.

[4] Ayer, A.J. "Critique of Ethics and Theology," in Essays on Moral Realism. Ed Geoffrey Sayre-McCord Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. 32.

[5] Copp, David. Morality, Normativity, and Society. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. 16.

[6] I am assuming a correspondence theory of truth here, although in chapter 2, we shall see a realist coherence theory.

At least one cognitivist, J.L. Mackie, claims that although moral judgments are apt for truth-value, in fact, all of them are false.[7] Mackie claims that moral judgments do state propositions; they are the types of statements that can be true or false, but they are all in fact false. He develops three independent arguments for believing that we are all in 'error' about truth of moral judgments. One argument is that if it were true that some actions were objectively good, then they would be inherently prescriptive; they would demand that any agent pursue the action. For such properties to exist, to be objective values, "they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe…[they would have] "not-to-be-doneness somehow built in."[8] Since the world does not contain these demands it follows that moral judgments are all false. The majority of cognitivists do not agree with Mackie. Rather, most cognitivists claim that at least some of our moral judgments are in fact true. In this thesis, I defend a cognitivist position that ascribes the value of true to at least some moral judgments.

The third question to consider is whether moral beliefs concern matters of fact that are independent of human opinion. David Brink asks whether ethics studies "real objects and events whose existence and nature are largely independent of our theorizing about them?"[9] Realism and irrealism are the two sides of this debate.

Brink characterizes realism in ethics as asking "us to take moral claims literally, as claims that purport to describe the moral properties of people, actions, and institutions—properties that obtain independently of our theorizing."[10] Irrealism or antirealism agrees with

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[7] See Mackie, J.L. "The Subjectivity of Values," in Essays on Moral Realism. Ed Geoffrey Sayre-McCord Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.
[8] Ibid, 112
[9] Brink, David. Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 6.
[10] Ibid, 7.

the realist that at least some moral judgments are truth-apt. Where irrealists disagree is whether those truths are dependent on human opinion or belief. Moral realists claim that moral facts are features of situations or actions or people in the way that facts about human physiology are objective feature of humans. A human's internal body temperature averages around 37° Celsius, independently of whether we perceive it or believe it. The objectivity the realist tries to achieve is one independent of belief, but it is not objectivity completely independent of humans. Just as it would not make any sense to talk about the temperature of humans if no humans existed, the moral realist claims that moral features depend on the existence of [human] beings. Peter Railton suggests, that "(G)ood and bad would have no place within a universe consisting only of stones, for nothing matters to stones. Introduce some people, and you will have introduced the possibility of value as well."[11] The notions of good and bad depend in some way on the existence of sentient beings.

Irrealism[12], by contrast, claims that the truth of moral judgments is dependent on what humans actually believe. For example, some irrealists such as moral relativists believe that moral judgments are truth apt. The moral judgment 'Burning babies is wrong' really is true or false but on the irrealist view, only for a given society. The truth or falsity of these propositions depends on the society where one utters the claim. So, in a society that believes that burning babies is wrong, the moral judgment 'Burning babies is wrong' is true. For relativists, it does matter what humans believe about a certain situation.

The fourth question one asks is what type of properties are the moral properties that moral judgments purport to describe? Three ways exist for answering this question. The first

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[11] Peter Railton. Facts, Values, and Norms: Essays Towards a Morality of Consequence. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 46.

[12] Some philosophers call Irrealism antirealism, but the distinction is not important for my purposes.

is naturalism. According to this theory, properties and facts are natural if they are those that are 'studied' by the natural and social sciences. Therefore, ethical naturalism claims that the moral properties that moral judgments describe are natural properties, "properties that are or will be mentioned in the best development of the natural sciences, including psychology and other social sciences."[13] The key element in all of the sciences, either natural or social, is that they determine the truth or falsity of their hypothesis a posteriori, i.e., through empirical methods. Thus, natural properties are ones who existence is empirically verifiable.

The second way to understand moral properties is supernaturalism. Supernaturalism purports to study supernatural facts and properties and identifies moral properties with such facts. Theological accounts of morality fit this model. Thus, according to one advocate of a theological morality, good consists in a sort of resemblance to God.[14]

The third approach is non-naturalism, which claims that the moral properties are neither natural properties nor supernatural properties: rather they are *sui generis*.[15] They are neither facts nor properties that we discover in either natural or supernatural inquiry. No method of science or theology will reveal to us whether these *sui generis* properties exist. Russ Shafer-Landau develops a non-naturalist position in which moral facts are not discoverable by either the natural or supernatural sciences. Rather, these facts are self-evident; we come to know them simply by knowing the content of the moral proposition.[16]

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[13] Adams, Robert Merrihew. Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 58

[14] Robert Adams defends this position in his book, Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

[15] Shafer-Landau, Russ. Moral Realism: A Defence. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003. 57

[16] Ibid, 8.

If one takes the naturalist option, for which I argue, then one must ask whether these moral facts are reducible to nonmoral facts. There are two approaches on this issue, reductionism and non-reductionism. According to a reductionist, moral properties are, or reduce to, properties we refer to in our natural sciences. As Shafer-Landau states, reductionist ethical naturalism "envisions moral properties as finding a place within an ontology whose contents are fixed exclusively by the outcomes of scientific investigation."[17] It is not as though reductionists do not believe in the reality of moral facts; rather they believe in moral facts because they are species of natural facts.[18]

Non-reductionists claim that moral properties are a class of natural properties that we cannot reduce to any other natural property. Alexander Miller states, "Moral properties are constituted by, supervene upon, or are multiply realized by non-moral properties."[19] Shafer-Landau describes non-reductionism as the thesis that "Moral properties are like geological or biological properties; natural ones themselves, dependent ultimately, for their realization on physical properties, but not identical to physical properties."[20]

Although the series of metaethical questions I have presented are not exhaustive, the answers to them give a general outline to the metaethical positions one can take. It is interesting to note that these questions are often not answered independently of one another. For example, if one claims to be a naturalist and a non-reductionist, then one logically has to be a realist and a cognitivist.

My intention in this chapter was to present briefly, the main questions of metaethics and the various kinds of answers philosophers have given to them. The position I take in the

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[17] Ibid, 63.
[18] Ibid, 19.
[19] Miller, Alexander. An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003, 139.
[20] Shafer Landau, 63.

succeeding chapters is one that claims that moral judgments are propositions and that some of them are in fact (approximately) true.

Chapter 2: Richard Boyd and David Brink's Moral Realism

My aim in Chapter One was to set the stage for examining in detail certain metaethical theories by outlining the available metaethical positions. In this chapter, I present the moral realist views of Richard Boyd and David Brink. In section I, I describe Boyd's three part moral realist thesis; in section II, I discuss how Boyd's epistemological claims establish scientific realism and explain his analogy between scientific realism and moral realism. In section III, I discuss Boyd's views on natural kinds, cluster definitions, and reference. Section IV explicates Brink's views on the nature of moral properties and finally, in section V, I discuss Brink's account of reflective equilibrium.

I. Richard Boyd's Moral Realism

According to Richard Boyd, moral realism maintains three theses: (1) Moral statements have truth values, (2) The truth value is largely independent of moral opinions, beliefs or theories, and (3) "Ordinary canons" of reasoning (whether moral, scientific or everyday) provide "a reliable method for obtaining and improving (approximate) moral knowledge."[21] As I will explicate it here, Boyd's case for realism is primarily analogical. He argues that moral realism is plausible because scientific realism is plausible, relying on a

[21]Boyd, Richard N. "How to be a Moral Realist." Essays on Moral Realism. Ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988. 182.

causal theory of knowledge and a semantics of natural kinds that invokes homeostatic clusters.

II. Epistemology, belief regulation, and the argument from analogy

Boyd bases his defense of scientific realism on epistemological claims about scientific reasoning. He asserts that not only are his epistemological claims realist and naturalist throughout, but also dialectical. In what follows I first, briefly, compare two contemporary theories of knowledge; foundationalist and causal. Second, I show why Boyd's epistemological theory fails to fit exactly into either category. Third, I will apply it to science and show how the theory establishes scientific realism. Finally, I will show how his epistemological theory supports moral realism.

Epistemologists generally conceive part of their enterprise as determining whether a given belief will count as knowledge. Boyd discusses two contemporary approaches to this enterprise, Foundationalism and Naturalized Epistemology (or causal theories of knowing). Foundationalist theories of knowledge claim that some beliefs are indubitable, thus holding an epistemically privileged place, and that they are known a priori. A prime example of a foundational belief is the belief that one is having a particular perceptual experience, say, the experience of the color red. For the foundationalist, paradigmatic instances of knowledge are these types of foundational beliefs. Furthermore, a foundationalist, such as Descartes, believes that the inferences made from these beliefs "are ultimately reducible to inferential

principles which can be shown a priori to be rational."[22] Therefore, a belief becomes knowledge when it is one of these 'foundational' beliefs or is inferred via appropriate rational principles from this class of foundational beliefs.

Whereas a foundationalist will claim some beliefs are incontrovertible, a causal theorist or naturalized epistemologist will deny this. Causal theorists, such as Goldman[23], argue that only when a reliable belief-making mechanism produces a belief does one have a claim to knowledge. Thus, no belief is incontestable since our belief making mechanisms are fallible.[24] Second, a causal theorist will deny inductive reasoning is justifiable on a priori grounds. Rather, causal theorists claim, inductive reasoning is justifiable only to the extent that it is reliable in the actual world. This means knowledge claims become a posteriori matters.

Boyd's view is similar to causal theories of knowledge in that he believes that knowledge is an a posteriori matter and that it includes no foundational beliefs. However, Boyd's view is distinct from causal theories in the causal mechanism related to belief. Whereas the causal theorist alleges that the causal mechanism is belief *production,* Boyd avers, "the crucial causal notion in epistemology…[is]…reliable regulation of belief."[25] Causal theorists, such as Goldman, are concerned with how a belief is produced. They want to know whether the belief is the result of, produced by, a reliable mechanism, e.g., perceptual apparatuses. For example, on Goldman's account, my belief that their is a book

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[22] Ibid, 191.
[23] See Goldman, Alvin. "A Causal Theory of Knowing," Journal of Philosophy 64 (1967): 357-372.
[24] Although it may be the case that some beliefs, according to the causal theorist, do have an epistemic privileged status, this status is merely contingent. For example, the belief of being in pain may hold an epistemic privileged status because it seems that the belief making mechanism that is the cause of this belief is very reliable. That is to say that it seems hard to doubt beliefs about our own recognition of pain sensations. But this is merely a contingent matter: an agent's internal mechanism, although highly reliable can turn out to be wrong. See Boyd, Richard N. in "Scientific Realism and Naturalistic Epistemology." PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association 2 (1980): 624.
[25] Boyd, Richard. "How to be a Moral Realist," in Essays on Moral Realism, 192.

on the bookshelf in front of me would count as knowledge so long as that belief was formed as a result of a reliable belief making mechanism; I see the book in front of me. On the other hand, a causal theorist of the Boydian type is not concerned with how a belief is produced rather he argues that we should focus on sustaining our beliefs over time such that we achieve a closer approximation to the truth.[26] The difference between Boyd and Goldman's theories is that Goldman's theory is a static theory whereas Boyd's is concerned with a process over time. For example, at time t_1 I produce the belief call it x, through a reliable beliefs making mechanism, e.g., my perceptual apparatuses. Under Goldman's theory, he would consider that belief knowledge because it was produced with a reliable belief making mechanism. Whereas Boyd, would claim that we could not tell whether that belief was knowledge. The reason Boyd believes this is because at time t_1 were are not able to tell whether this particular belief will lead to more accurate beliefs. Boyd states "[t]he natural phenomena in which knowledge is manifested involves a dialectical process of successive approximations to the truth, whose reliability consists in a tendency over time for the successive approximations to be increasingly accurate." On this interpretation, knowledge of a particular subject matter itself leads to further improvements both in the theory of the subject matter and its methodology, thus making the theory a closer approximation of the truth. This is the dialectical nature of epistemology.

At this point in the discussion a digression is necessary to explicate how progress in theories is dialectical. Theory progression is dialectical when the current theory omits errors from previous theories while at the same time incorporating the elements of truth from those theories. For example, Newtonian second law of mechanics dictates that force is equal to

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[26] Boyd, Richard N. in "Scientific Realism and Naturalistic Epistemology." PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association 2 (1980): 630.

acceleration multiplied by mass, $f=am$. However, the problem with Newton's theory is that it makes false predictions in situations dealing with objects moving close to the speed of light and with subatomic particles. To accommodate these new findings Albert Einstein developed the theory of relativity. The theory accommodated the new findings while still maintaining most of the Newton theory; Einstein kept the first two laws of mechanics. Rather than delete the whole theory, Einstein deleted the errors and replaced them with new theorems that could predict, accurately, the force of an object that moved near the speed of light. We arrived at the theory of relativity because Newtonian theory was close to being true such that it lead to further improvements in methodology and predictions. This is the dialectical process. We increase our knowledge about the world through this change in theory and the methods it uses for interpreting and collecting data, resulting in being able to explain more about the world.

Returning to the epistemological claims, Boyd notes that this dialectical process "involves…successive approximations to the truth, [and its] reliability consists in a tendency over time for the successive approximations to be increasingly accurate."[27]

Thus, to conceive of epistemology as providing a process of distinguishing claims of knowledge from non-knowledge is mistaken.[28] Rather than talk about whether a particular belief will count as knowledge, epistemologists should concern themselves with describing the causal mechanisms underling reliable belief regulation.

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[27] Boyd, Richard N. in "Scientific Realism and Naturalistic Epistemology." PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association 2 (1980): 631.

[28] Boyd states, "The aim of epistemology should be the naturalistic elucidation of the mechanisms of reliable belief regulation rather than the formulation of a general definition of knowledge." Boyd, Richard N. in "Scientific Realism and Naturalistic Epistemology." PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association 2 (1980): 635.

Boyd believes science exemplifies his notion of reliable belief regulation. For science, interaction between observation, theory, and methodology will lead to reliable belief regulation and increasingly accurate approximations of the truth about nature.

Based on Boyd's schema, we must satisfy two criteria for belief regulation. First, our initial theories must be approximately true. Second, the theory must lead to improvements in methodology and in the theory itself, thus exemplifying the dialectical process between past and current theories.

First, we need to discuss whether our initial scientific theories were approximately true. This amounts to asking whether our initial beliefs about the world were approximately true. Boyd believes that our initial scientific theories were approximately true. Our initial scientific beliefs, what I call our "folk theory of physics," were probably such beliefs as, trees exists; leaves fall from trees; there are objects in the sky; and that objects actually exist in space and time. It is simply a descriptive matter whether our initial beliefs about the world were approximately true and it has turned out that the majority of those beliefs were true. It is this starting point of these background beliefs, folk physics, which leads to the dialectical process of science.

Second, if they are approximately true, do the theories lead to improvements in the theory and methodology and exemplify the dialectical process? Take for example the theory of phlogiston: Was this theory approximately true such that it led to further improvements in our theories of combustion and in our methodology for learning about combustion? The answer is yes. Although, no such thing as phlogiston exists in an object, released when the object is burned, the theory and its methods for testing did lead scientists to discover that combustion requires oxygen. Even though the initial theory proved to be false, there was

enough truth in the theory and methodology such that it led to further theories containing more accurate knowledge about the world.

The following is a graphic representation of the dialectical process that occurs in science. This explanation abstracts away from the particular theories, e.g., phlogiston. Progress in scientific thought works along the following lines (see chart 1)[29]: First, a scientific theory (T1) will recommend a particular method (M1) for predicting observables (O1) and for hypothesizing about unobservables (U1).

Chart 1 Progession of Scientific Knowledge

Anything to the right of the line are things we do not know about →

T1	T2	T3	T4
M1	M2	M3	M4
O1	O2	O3	O4
U1	U2	U3	U4

Metaphysical Line

T=Theory
M=Scientific Method
O=Observables
U=Unobservables

Imagine that from our hypothesis of the unobservable (U1) we discover some other observable phenomena (O2). This in turn changes our method for predicting observables (M2), which in turn changes our theory (T3), (see chart 2).

[29] This discussion and diagram comes from a Metaethics Seminar with Dr. Altman in fall of 2003.

Chart 2 Progession of Scientific Knowledge

Anything to the right of the line are things we do not know about →

T1	T2	T3	T4
M1	M2	M3	M4
O1	O2	O3	O4
U1	U2	U3	U4

Metaphysical Line

T=Theory
M=Scientific Method
O=Observables
U=Unobservables

We increase our knowledge about the world through this change in methodology and theory, resulting in being able to explain more about the world. This is how science progresses. Our initial theory (T1) was approximately true such that its methodology led to more accurate beliefs about the world. We did not completely abandon our initial theory. Rather, we took what is true from our initial theory (T1), added our new methods for discovering unobservables and predicting observables and created a new theory (T2). At times, some unobservables fail to acquire the status of observables. But, that does not mean they do not play a role in progression of our scientific theories. For example, our theory (T2) postulates something about an unobservable (U3). Assume our postulate is completely wrong about the unobservable. It still may change our methods for discovering and predicting other unobservables. Therefore, in answer to our second question, scientific progression does exemplify this dialectical procedure. Furthermore, this interconnection and mutual influence

between our methodology, theory, observables and unobservables, reliably regulates our beliefs, which in turn leads to improvements in knowledge.[30] As Boyd claims,

> "[N]ew theoretical knowledge leads to improvements in scientific language and in methodology; better methodology leads to greater theoretical knowledge, and so forth."[31]

We come to know more about the world through this interaction.

Turning to how these epistemological claims establish scientific realism, one first needs to get clear on the meaning of scientific realism. Scientific realism is

> "the doctrine that the methods of science are capable of providing (partial or approximate) knowledge of unobservable ('theoretical') entities, such as atoms or electromagnetic fields, in addition to knowledge about the behavior of observable phenomena (and of course, that the properties of these and other entities studied by scientists are largely theory-independent)."[32]

If reliable belief regulation is what occurs in science, as Boyd claims, then we have to construe it realistically, because our theories and the methods they use are so reliable in their predictions about unobservables and observables that the entities and relations the theory postulates probably exist. Unlike the conventionalist theories of science, only a realistic conception of scientific practices explains the reliability of these methods.

Boyd believes that there is an analogy between moral reasoning and scientific reasoning and that if his epistemological claims account for progression in science, then they

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[30] For science a number of factors determine the reliability of belief regulation. Some of the features are "approximate truth of background beliefs, soundness of experimental design, emphasis on observational/experimental method, appropriateness of metaphysical hunches, freedom from prejudicial political interference, reliability of the indoctrination of graduate students with respect to the more "intuitive" and as yet unarticulated features of the "paradigm," etc." See Boyd, Richard N. in "Scientific Realism and Naturalistic Epistemology." PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association 2 (1980): 636. Note: There is no single method by which one can assess belief regulation.

[31] Boyd, Richard N. in "Scientific Realism and Naturalistic Epistemology." PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association 2 (1980): 615.

[32] Boyd, Richard. "How to be a Moral Realist," in Essays on Moral Realism, 188.

should work for morality as well. According to his epistemology, we began with approximately true beliefs, folk physics, that led to further approximations in scientific theorizing. Analogously he needs to describe what initial moral beliefs we had such that they led to further approximations of the truth as a result from our moral and nonmoral theorizing.[33] These initial moral beliefs I will call "folk morality," and they include what Michael Smith calls the platitudes of morality.[34] They include beliefs such as morality is concerned with, among other things, human needs and their satisfaction; burning babies is wrong; torturing someone for mere enjoyment is wrong; etc. Thus, the question becomes whether our initial moral beliefs, our folk morality beliefs, were approximately true enough that they lead to improvements in moral knowledge. The answer to this question will depend, in some sense, on the adherence to a particular substantive moral theory.[35] The substantive moral theory that Boyd develops is consequentialist theory that places an emphasis on human needs. This is not problematic because this belief is considered one of the folk morality beliefs, i.e., one of the given moral platitudes. Boyd merely focuses his attention on this platitude, although he could have focused on another. Thus, for Boyd, this question asks whether we have come to understand and further our knowledge of human needs? Boyd's response is affirmative: that our understanding of societal and individual needs does improve through this dialectical process.[36]

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[33] Ibid, 201.

[34] Smith, Michael. The Moral Problem. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1994, 40-41. Boyd does not need to assert that Smith's account of moral concepts, only that they both agree that there are some moral platitudes.

[35] Boyd does note that although the question will change depending on the particular theory of substantive morality, "the very powerful semantic and epistemic resources of recent realist philosophy of science could be effectively employed to defend moral realism on the basis of many of the alternative conceptions, [i.e., deontological and virtue theories.] Boyd, Richard. "How to be a Moral Realist," in Essays on Moral Realism, 202. A defense of different substantive moral theory could be given by placing the emphasis on different moral platitudes.

[36] Ibid, 207.

It seems clear that our understanding of human needs has improved throughout history. For example, we learned that it is important to engage in cooperative efforts. Robert Wright discusses the case of the Shoshone Indians of Western North America and needing to cooperate to survive. He states,

> "Although the Shoshone had no big game to hunt, jackrabbits were afoot…To harvest them, the Shoshone employed a tool too large for one family to handle—a net hundreds of feet long…On such occasions…More than a dozen normally autonomous families would come together briefly and cooperate under a 'rabbit boss'."[37]

The Shoshone recognized the need for cooperation for their survival. When these multiply family units came together to capture rabbits they learned that cooperating as a group allowed each of them to have an adequate amount of food for their survival thus satisfying their own needs. This is one example of many throughout history of the progressive recognition of our needs.

For Boyd knowledge acquisition in science and morality is a dialectical process that starts from approximately true beleifs and leads to further accurate accounts of the world through successive approximations. In the following sections I will discuss Boyd's views on natural kinds, property clusters and reference. In the subsequent section, I show that the theory of reference that Boyd develops for natural kinds also involves a process of successive approximations.

III. Natural Kinds, Property Clusters, and Reference

In the previous section, we saw how Boyd argues for a key analogy between science and morality. He focuses on how both exemplify a dialectical process of successive approximations to the truth. Because science is analogous to ethics, on Boyd's account, and

[37] Wright, Robert. NonZero: The Logic of Human Destiny, Pantheon Books: New York, 2000, 21

some scientific terms refer to "natural kinds," it is as plausible to think that moral concepts also refer to natural kinds.

Natural kinds, on Boyd's realist interpretation, are intended to 'cut the world at its joints' and exemplify the differences in nature. Because of the idea that natural kinds are to 'cut the world at its joints,' Boyd believes natural kinds require natural rather than stipulative definitions. We cannot decide by linguistic fiat on the essence of a natural kind; rather we discover the essence a posteriori. For Boyd, the term 'good' is a natural-kind term requiring a natural definition. The type of natural kind definition it requires is one involving "a kind of property cluster together with an associated indeterminacy in extension."[38]

Boyd offers two distinct ways of giving definitions for natural kinds. First, one can specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for that kind. This is what I will call the 'traditional' sense of defining natural kinds. For example, some object exemplifies the natural kind, water, if and only if it is made of H_20. This means that being two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen are the necessary and sufficient conditions for something being water.

The second way of defining natural kind terms, he calls the "property cluster definition." In giving such a definition we specify a "collection of properties such that the possession of an adequate number of these properties is sufficient for falling within the extension of the term."[39] Furthermore, Boyd claims that these cluster definitions will have extensional indeterminacy; there are failures of bivalence in which it is not possible to determine whether a particular object exemplifies the kind in question. Boyd does not reject the traditional method for defining natural kind terms. Rather, the traditional account is

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[38] Boyd, Richard. "How to be a Moral Realist," in Essays on Moral Realism, 196.
[39] Ibid, 196.

insufficient for particular cases, e.g., species, and his cluster method is way to define such natural kind terms in an adequate way.

A cluster definition involves properties having a homeostatic relationship. Homeostatic property clusters are sets of properties tending to be

> "contingently clustered in nature [and]…this co-occurrence is the result of what may be described as a sort of homeostasis. Either the presence of some of the properties…tend[s] to favor the presence of the others, or there are underlying mechanisms or processes which tend to maintain the presence of the properties."[40]

Homeostatic cluster definitions specify the properties of the kind, and an object is that kind when it possesses most of those properties. This is why the extensions of some terms are indeterminate. Some object may possess only some of the characteristics in the homeostatic cluster, and thus it is unclear whether to include the object in the kind.

Boyd offers the example of a biological species, often taken as a paradigm of a traditional natural kind, as a prime case requiring a homeostatic property-cluster definition. He claims that, "imperfectly shared and homeostatically related morphological, physiological, and behavioral features"[41] characterize a member of a particular species. Necessary and sufficient conditions are not possible to specify in such cases. For example, an animal could possess only the morphological and physiological traits but still qualify as a member of a particular species.

In conjunction with his account of natural kinds, Boyd develops a Kripke/Putnam type naturalistic causal theory of reference for these kind terms. According to this theory,

> "*Roughly*, and for nondegenerate cases, a term t refers to a kind (property, relation, etc.) *k* just in case there exist[s] causal mechanisms whose tendency is to bring it about, over time, that what is predicated of the term t will be approximately true of *k*…Such mechanisms will typically include

[40] Ibid, 196.
[41] Ibid, 198.

> the existence of procedures which are approximately accurate for recognizing members or instances of *k* (at least for easy cases) and which relevantly govern the use of t, the social transmission of certain relevantly approximately true beliefs regarding *k*, formulated as claims about t…, a pattern of deference to experts on *k* with respect to the use of t, etc…When regulations of this sort obtain, we may think of the properties of *k* as regulating the use of t (via such causal relations), and we may think of what is said using t as providing us with socially coordinated *epistemic access* to *k*; t refers to *k* (in nondegenerate cases) just in case the socially coordinated use of t provides significant epistemic access to *k*, and not other kinds (properties, etc.)."[42]

Thus, features of the world causally regulate our use of a term and these features fix the referent of the term in question. For example, the term 'tiger' will refer to the kind 'tigers' just in case our use of the term 'tiger,' our methods for picking out tigers and the spreading of approximately true beliefs about 'tigers' bring about over time that what we predicate of the term 'tiger' is approximately true of the kind, tigers. These causal mechanisms allow us to improve our knowledge of tigers and thus our beliefs about tigers become more approximately true.

We can now see that Boyd's theory of reference incorporates the dialectical process exemplified by scientific theories and methodologies. It is a dialectical process of successive approximations. Determining what regulates the use of a term is a process of refinements over time, such that we preserve the elements of truth from earlier uses of the term while eliminating errors from that previous use.[43] For example, we initially believed that our use of the term 'tiger' was causally regulated by the set of properties including being an animal that has stripes, live births and nurses its young. We also believed that it included being an

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[42] Ibid, 195.
[43] Boyd, Richard. "Scientific Realism and Naturalistic Epistemology." PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association 2 (1980): 615.

animal that only lives in a particular region of Africa.[44] We developed a new use of the term, through a dialectical process, when we deleted the property of living in a certain location after we found tigers in other areas.

Furthermore, this process of determining the causal mechanism underlying a term is a process of successive approximations; our terms "undergo a development…typically in the direction of a closer and 'tighter' fit between [our term in use] and the important causal features of reality."[45] In the tiger example, our beliefs about tigers become increasingly accurate as experience modifies our use of the term.

Given these claims about our scientific natural kinds and our history with being unable to offer a traditional natural kind definition of 'good,' perhaps a cluster property definition is reasonable to consider. In such a definition, the kind 'good' would ultimately depend on the substantive moral theory. Boyd's morality is consequentialist in essence but he renders the platitudes discussed in section into coherent picture. From this particular moral theory, he offers a definition of the kind 'good' in terms of basic human needs. He describes these as follows:

> "Some of these needs are physical or medical. Others are psychological or social…Under a wide variety of (actual and possible) circumstances these human goods (or rather instances of the satisfaction of them) are homeostatically clustered. In part they are clustered because these goods themselves are –when present in balance and moderation –mutually supporting."[46]

Thus, Boyd suggests that this cluster of contingent natural facts about basic human needs defines moral goodness. For Boyd, the key to moral realism lies in the idea of a homeostatic

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[44] This probably is not the first characterization of the kind tigers. But, the example does show how reference is a dialectical notion. It is reasonable to assume that something along these lines is true for the term 'tiger.'
[45] Boyd, Richard. "Scientific Realism and Naturalistic Epistemology," 614.
[46] Ibid, 203.

cluster conception of 'good.' If good actions are those actions satisfying basic human needs, a natural fact, then these actions will have the property of goodness objectively, i.e., the actions will have the property no matter what we believe about them.

Given Boyd's claims about natural kinds and the theory of reference for natural kinds, by analogy then, the term 'good' will refer to the homeostatic cluster of basic needs and in fact this cluster regulates our use of the term 'good.' As Boyd points out, "it is characteristic of what we recognize as moral discourse…that consideration to human well-being play a significant role in determining what is said to be 'good.'"[47] He does not claim that our conception of human well-being is correct, only that it is approximately true so that we are lead in the right direction for further knowledge of human well-being. If Boyd is right in his conception of 'good' as a homeostatic cluster concept, then the presence of certain parts of the cluster would tend to favor other parts of the cluster, e.g., the satisfaction of the need for some type of physical recreation might accompany a love for that recreation. The needs causally interact to sustain one another such that the cluster of these needs exhibits a particular kind of causal structure of natural properties. Thus, the term 'good' refers to that natural causal structure.

Boyd's main argument for moral realism rely on current theories in semantics and epistemology. What he does not offer is a detailed account of the metaphysical nature of moral properties, outside of saying that they are natural properties homeostically related to one another. However, a clear realist account of the metaphysical nature of moral properties is needed to complete the defense of moral realism. David Brink offers one such account. I now turn to that account.

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[47] Boyd, Richard. "How to be a Moral Realist," in Essays on Moral Realism, 211.

IV. Brink's Realism

Brink's realism is comprised of two main theses. First, moral facts or properties are simply "constituted by [or causally realized by], but not identical with, natural and social scientific facts and properties."[48] Brink means that certain arrangements of natural properties make up or realize moral properties. An analogy not involving moral terms helps us to understand the constitutive, or causal, relationship between the two different kinds of properties. For example, certain arrangements of parts, a muffler, engine, transmission, etc., make up or realize the property of being a car. So, being a car is nothing more than different arrangements of the individual parts; certain arrangements of parts will constitute a car. It is not the case that being a car is identical with a particular arrangement of parts because one can have different arrangements of parts but still be called a car. If a car was identical to a particular arrangement of parts, then only that arrangement of parts will qualify as being a car. Given that many different arrangements of parts qualify as being a car it follows that a car is not identical to a particular arrangement of parts.

The same relationship is true of moral properties or facts and natural properties or facts. The property of goodness is nothing more than certain arrangements of natural facts; social, biological, and psychological facts will 'make up' or realize the property of goodness. This does not mean that these natural facts are identical with the moral facts. They are not identical because completely different sets of natural facts can realize or constitute the same moral facts or properties.

Second, "moral properties are functional properties…[and]…what is essential to moral properties is the causal role which they play in the characteristic activities of human

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[48] Brink, David O. Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 156.

organisms."[49] Brink draws an analogy between the way functionalists in the philosophy of mind construe mental properties and how moral realists might construe functional moral properties. .

Functionalists believe that certain arrangements of facts make up mental states, which is why functionalists believe multiple physical systems can realize a single type of mental state. The example of pain demonstrates this idea. Humans realize pain via a certain structure of neurons and synapses. However, this is not the only way to realize pain. A Martian, for example, could be in pain even though it does not have the same structure as the human brain. The Martian could have some other physical substance that realizes pain. Furthermore, functionalists believe that these mental properties have causal powers. For example, being in the mental state of pain causes one to wince, grimace or groan.

In the same way that different physical systems realize the same mental state, different sets of natural facts realize the same moral facts or properties. For example, living a healthy life, having shelter and having friends are a set a facts that realize the property 'goodness.' But the property of goodness also could be instantiated in the set of natural facts comprised of having food, being able to listen to music and living in society that allows free speech. In either case, both sets of natural facts realize the same property, 'goodness.'

V. Reflective Equilibrium and Moral Theory

To construct a moral theory, Brink thinks that we should go through a process of 'reflective equilibrium.' He describes this process as a method of achieving coherence between our theoretical and particular moral judgments. We do this by identifying

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[49] Brink, David O. "Moral Realism and the Skeptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness" Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 6 (1984): 121.

> "[t]heoretical claims about value that will explain and support a number of our firmly held evaluative beliefs. We then (further) assess these theories by comparing their implications about the value of real and imaginary states of affairs, lives, activities and actions with our own independent assessments of the value of those states of affairs, lives, activities and actions."[50]

Through this process, we make changes in our theories or in our particular judgments until we converge upon a consistent moral theory that takes into account our different considered moral judgments. For example, Eric, an undergraduate philosophy student, believes in the principle that you should not cause harm to other animals, call this (P). Suppose also that he believes that it is acceptable to eat chickens; call this (E). It is likely that he will one day realize that his principle comes into conflict with his judgment about chickens. Eric has multiple options to resolve this conflict. First, he could alter (P) and hold that if is wrong to cause unnecessary harm to other animals; call this (P_1). Second, he could abandon the principle altogether choosing another that states: only the pain of those animals that have rationality count morally; call this (P_3). Third, he could change to the belief that eating chickens is not acceptable. In either situation, Eric changes his principles or particular judgments attempting to achieve a consistent moral theory. He thereby engages in the process of reflective equilibrium.

One distinction Brink implicitly makes is between narrow and wide reflective equilibrium. Narrow reflective equilibrium is an equilibrium established between our considered judgments when "one is to be presented with only those descriptions which more or less match one's existing judgments except for minor discrepancies…"[51] In this type of equilibrium one is not presented with drastically differing theories consulting with one's considered judgments. All that one looks for is a theory that calls for the fewest revisions to

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[50] Brink, David O. Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics, 65-66.
[51] Rawls, John. A Theory of Justice. Rev. ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, 43.

achieve consistency.[52] This method is distinct from wide reflective equilibrium. Principles accepted on grounds of wide reflective equilibrium are those that "people would acknowledge and accept the consequences of when they have had an opportunity to consider other plausible conceptions and to assess their supporting grounds."[53] In this type of reflective equilibrium, those involved in the process are presented with arguments for alternative theories. The agent chooses either to alter their considered judgments in light of these new theories or to keep their considered judgments in light of this new evidence. The key distinction to this type of reflective equilibrium is the scope of alternative theories considered: one considers all competing theories.

Boyd's dialectical method is an example of a narrow form of reflective equilibrium. As our theories progress, under this procedure, we do not consider drastic variations from our well confirmed beliefs, e.g., we do not consider theories that eliminate the belief that our galaxy is one among thousands because this belief is well confirmed. He states,

> "We, in fact, take seriously only those theories which relatively closely resemble our existing theories in respect of their ontological commitments and the laws they contain. [For example,] we prefer theories, [in science,] which quantify over familiar 'theoretical entities'--or at least entities very much like familiar ones…"[54]

We do not consider all alternative theories, as wide equilibrium requires, rather we only consider those that closely resemble our current theories and that maintain our well confirmed beliefs or our considered moral judgments. This is not to say that we never give up our well confirmed beliefs, only that we choose theories that maintain these beliefs or similar beliefs.

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[52] Rawls, John. Justice as Fairness: A Restatement. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001, 31.
[53] Rawls, John. "The Independence of Moral Theory." John Rawls: Collected Papers. Ed. Freeman, Samuel, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, 289.
[54] Boyd, Richard. "Scientific Realism and Naturalistic Epistemology," 618.

Brink also believes that the method of reflective equilibrium is truth conducive. So, when we undertake the process of (wide or narrow) reflective equilibrium, the theory that we converge will be the true theory of the subject matter. For example, if humans get together and bring their beliefs about the microstructure of matter into reflective equilibrium, then the theory they converge upon will be the true theory about the microstructure of matter. Brink believes that this process is truth conducive because the set of coherent beliefs achieved through reflective equilibrium coheres with what he calls second-order beliefs. These beliefs "include beliefs at various levels of generality about the nature and reliability of our belief-formation mechanisms."[55] These second-order beliefs include beliefs about when a particular belief or group of beliefs is true and why these beliefs are true. For Brink, these beliefs are about reliable belief making mechanisms and why these mechanisms produce true beliefs. Thus, if our particular beliefs about a subject matter are coherent themselves and cohere with our second-order beliefs, then we are justified in saying that our particular coherent set is also true.

Brink's realism is summed up as the thesis that moral properties are functional properties whose naturalistic base is specified by whatever moral theory emerges under reflective equilibrium. When one combines this with the theory of Boyd, a more robust realism results. This combined theory is summed in the following way: moral terms rigidly designate functional properties specified by a substantive moral theory achieved under reflective equilibrium. Furthermore, moral terms are causally regulated by and refer to the functional properties specified by the moral theory.[56]

VI. Conclusion:

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[55] Brink, David O. Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics, 127.
[56] A more detailed account of the conjunction of the two theories follows in chapter three.

My aim in this chapter was to give an account of the realist theories offered by Richard Boyd and David Brink. Boyd offers a naturalistic conception of epistemology and reference that are both dialectical processes of successive approximations to the truth. Boyd then uses these theories to defend scientific realism, showing that scientific knowledge is a dialectical process and that scientific terms exhibit this same process. He then draws an analogy between scientific realism and moral realism, showing that moral realism can be defended on the same grounds as scientific realism.

Brink's realism focused on the nature of moral properties and the justification procedure for moral theories. According to Brink, moral properties are constituted out of groupings of natural properties and this allows for multiple sets of natural properties to realize the same moral property. Furthermore, we are justified in believing our moral theories so long as they are the result of reflective equilibrium. In this process, one considers competing theories and selects the theory that best coheres with our considered moral judgments.

In the following chapter, I present an objection offered by Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons. The objection claims that there is a contradiction inherent in the combined views of Boyd and Brink. I then offer a response to this objection, showing why there is no contradiction between the two views. Accordingly, the realist theories of Brink and Boyd can be conjoined to provide a fuller and more persuasive form of realism than either theory provides alone.

Chapter 3: Defending Moral Realism

In a recent article, Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons claim that, by embracing a certain type of moral realism, David Brink and Richard Boyd have been "led down the garden path into the camp of the moral relativist."[57] This chapter addresses whether relativism actually follows from the views discussed in Chapter Two. In section I, I examine elaborations of the views of Boyd and Brink that Horgan and Timmons offer. In section II, I reconstruct the Horgan/Timmons argument for the thesis that Brink/Boyd realism leads to relativism. This relativism is a form of irrealism that contradicts the realism Brink and Boyd seek to defend. Finally, in section III, I offer a response to the Horgan/Timmons argument, casting doubt on its cogency.

I. Illuminating Boyd and Brink

It is interesting to note whether the realist positions of Boyd and Brink are consistent. A through going naturalist such as Boyd asserts that moral properties are identical with homeostatic clusters of natural properties; moral properties are identical with sets of natural properties. Whereas Brink claims that moral properties are not identical with natural properties rather they constituted out of sets of natural properties, i.e., moral properties supervene on sets of natural properties. These moral properties are not the natural properties themselves rather the moral properties are generated as it were, out of the set of natural properties. This dispute between whether moral properties are identical with natural properties is a large issue in contemporary metaethics that cannot be resolved in within this paper. In what follows I will assume with Horgan and Timmons that these positions are

[57] Horgan, and Timmons. "From Moral Realist to Moral Relativism in one easy Step." Critica Vol XXVIII 1996, 3-39.

compatible and show why the conjoined position of Boyd and Brink does not lead to a contradiction.

One key insight that Horgan and Timmons offer regarding Boyd's semantics is that, since Boyd construes moral terms as natural kind terms, it is reasonable to assume to that they are rigid designators. [58]A term is a rigid designator "if in every possible world [where the referent exists] it designates the same object."[59] The term 'water' is a rigid designator because in all possible worlds that term designates the same set of properties, H_2O. If 'good' is rigid designator, then in all possible worlds the term will designate the same properties. Furthermore, because moral terms are analogous to natural-kind terms, they will refer to natural properties; moral terms will rigidly refer to the same natural properties in all possible worlds. Using Boyd's definition of 'good', if 'good' is a rigid designator then in all possible worlds the term 'good' will refer to the cluster of natural properties that satisfy basic human needs.

The clarifying point that Horgan and Timmons offer for Brink has to do with his characterization of moral properties. As Brink himself notes, psycho-functionalism in the philosophy of mind motivates his account of moral properties. Functionalism characterizes mental properties as multiply realizable functional properties defined by a theory of psychology that humans arrive at after sufficient empirical research. Psycho-functionalists, in particular, assert that this theory, T, will allow humans to give determinate functional properties for mental states and these

> "Determinate functional properties are implicitly defined by T, presumably, because within the generalizations comprising T, mental

[58] One could argue that Boydian natural kind terms do not function as rigid designators. Nevertheless, that is not my main contention with Horgan and Timmons. I think they are correct in their assessment that Boyd's natural kind terms would function as rigid designators.
[59] Kripke, Saul A. Naming and Necessity. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980, 48.

> terms are interconnected in rich and numerous ways with non-mental terms describing sensory inputs and behavioral outputs. These rich interconnections provide the basis for 'pinning down' as it were unique functional properties. [Therefore,] mental terms [will] refer to these functional properties implicitly defined by the empirical theory T."[60]

To 'pin down' as it were the unique functional properties, the reader is to consider a complete psychological theory and define the mental states from that theory via inputs and outputs already known. In specifying these unique mental states one develops what philosophers call a Ramsey sentence, i.e., an existentially quantified sentence, for our particular mental theory. Jim Pryor describes this process as the following:

> "[S]uppose we have a theory about how our various mental states are causally related to each other, and to input and output: Mental Theory:[part of such a theory might be]...and **pain** is caused by *pin pricks,* and **pain** causes **worry** and *the emission of loud noises,* and **worry** in turn causes *brow-wrinkling*...[The bold terms represent the mental states needing to be defined. Whereas, the italicized terms are inputs and outputs we already understand.] Now, we [create] the Ramsey Sentence for our mental theory [by extracting from our theory the terms to be defined and represent them by existential quantifiers]: $\exists \mathbf{x_1}\ \mathbf{x_2}$ (...and $\mathbf{x_1}$ is caused by *pin pricks,* and $\mathbf{x_1}$ causes $\mathbf{x_2}$ and *the emission of loud noises,* and $\mathbf{x_2}$ in turn causes *brow-wrinkling*...). Next we define what it is to be in pain, and to be worried, as follows: A person is in pain = $\exists \mathbf{x_1}\ \mathbf{x_2}$ (...and $\mathbf{x_1}$ is caused by *pin pricks,* and $\mathbf{x_1}$ causes $\mathbf{x_2}$ and *the emission of loud noises,* and $\mathbf{x_2}$ in turn causes *brow-wrinkling*...) & the person has $\mathbf{x_1}$. A person is worried = $\exists \mathbf{x_1}\ \mathbf{x_2}$ (...and $\mathbf{x_1}$ is caused by *pin pricks,* and $\mathbf{x_1}$ causes $\mathbf{x_2}$ and *the emission of loud noises,* and $\mathbf{x_2}$ in turn causes *brow-wrinkling*...) & the person has $\mathbf{x_2}$."[61]

Therefore, a correlate Ramsey sentence specifies a unique functional property for each mental state, and these existentially quantified sentences specify an individual mental state.

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[60] Horgan, and Timmons. "From Moral Realist to Moral Relativism in one easy Step." Critica Vol XXVIII, 1996, 6-7.
[61] http://www.princeton.edu/~jimpryor/courses/mind/notes/ramseylewis.html

According to Horgan and Timmons, Brink would characterize moral properties in the same method. Suppose we have a theory about how moral goods causally relate to each other and to inputs and outputs such that: Moral Theory:…and **goodness** causes the *satisfaction of basic human needs*, and **goodness** causes **rightness** and the *fulfillment of wants,* and **rightness** in turn causes *flourishing of humans*. (The bold terms represent the moral terms needing to be defined. Whereas, the italicized terms are inputs and outputs we already understand.) Now, we create the Ramsey Sentence for our Moral Theory that will define each moral propertey (by extracting from our theory the terms to be defined and represent them by existential quantifiers:) $\exists x_1\ x_2$ (...and $\mathbf{x_1}$ is caused by *satisfaction of basic human needs,* and $\mathbf{x_1}$ causes $\mathbf{x_2}$ and *the fulfillment of wants,* and $\mathbf{x_2}$ in turn causes *flourishing of humans*...). Next we define goodness and rightness as: Something is good = $\exists x_1\ x_2$ (and $\mathbf{x_1}$ is caused by *satisfaction of basic human needs,* and $\mathbf{x_1}$ causes $\mathbf{x_2}$ and *the fulfillment of wants,* and $\mathbf{x_2}$ in turn causes *flourishing of humans*...). Something is right = $\exists x_1\ x_2$ (and $\mathbf{x_1}$ is caused by *satisfaction of basic human needs,* and $\mathbf{x_1}$ causes $\mathbf{x_2}$ and *the fulfillment of wants,* and $\mathbf{x_2}$ in turn causes *flourishing of humans).*

Given the discussion in Chapter Two and the substantive moral theory that Boyd supplies this characterization of moral properties matches well with Brink's view. It is consequentialist in nature and specifies the correlate Ramsey Sentences based on that theory. However, if the substantive moral theory were different the set of properties specified by the moral theory would be likely to change. For example, a deontological theory specifies a set of properties having to do with duty fulfilling rather than the fulfilling of human needs. Given this characterization, I now turn to the Horgan and Timmons objection to the views of Boyd and Brink.

II. Conceptual and Standard Relativity

As I suggested in previous chapters the views of Boyd and Brink seem compatible in that they present different aspects of a moral realist position. Horgan and Timmons believe that Boyd and Brink's views together yield the following view, which they call "New Wave Moral Semantics:"

> "moral terms [are] rigid designators of functional properties that are definable via the normative theory to which humans allegedly would converge if they did wide reflective equilibrium ideally well. These terms allegedly are causally regulated by, and thus allegedly refer to, those functional properties."[62]

This view, Horgan and Timmons claim, ultimately leads to a relativistic metaethical position rather than a realist view. To illustrate this claim Horgan and Timmons use the following hypothetical situation:

> Suppose there is indeed some single normative moral theory T^h to which humans in general would converge, were they to perform wide reflective equilibrium ideally well. For concreteness, suppose it is some consequentialist theory; call it T^c. Suppose too that the generalizations of T^c link moral terms to non-moral terms in sufficiently rich and sufficiently numerous ways that each moral term has [determinate natural properties specified by] T^c. Imagine a race of Martians who differ from humans in the following ways. First, being much like humans in their level of sophistication and their social institutions, Martians too employ moral terms and concepts; their moral vocabulary is intertranslatable with our own. Second, if Martians were to perform wide reflective equilibrium ideally well, they too would converge on some single moral theory –but a different one than T^c. For concreteness, suppose it is some deontological theory; call it T^d. Third, T^d links moral terms to nonmoral terms in such a way that each moral term has [determinate natural properties specified by] T^d.[63]

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[62] Horgan, and Timmons. "From Moral Realist to Moral Relativism in one easy Step." Critica Vol XXVIII 1996, 20.

[63] Ibid, 21-22.

It follows, according to Horgan and Timmons, that the martian term 'good' rigidly designates the set of natural properties specified by T^{d} and the human term 'good' rigidly designates the set of natural properties specified by T^{c}[64]. Thus, if the Brink/Boyd view is correct, and our moral terms rigidly designate a set of properties, then when both groups meet and appear to have a substantive disagreement, it turns out that they actually do not have a genuine disagreement.[65] This is because the "orthographically identical human and [Martian] words ['good'] have different meanings, as well as different referents."[66] In the scenario they construct, Horgan and Timmons simply specify that the referents, what is causally regulating the use of the 'orthographically identical' terms, are different sets of natural properties.[67] What regulates the use of the term is a set of natural properties specified by the specific and different moral theories. Furthermore, Horgan and Timmons believe that it follows from the conjoint views of Brink and Boyd that what causally regulates the use of a term will determine the meaning of that term. Thus, if two parties have 'orthographically identical'' terms that are causally regulated by different properties, then those terms will have different meanings. So, for example, on Earth, 'good' means those things that satisfy basic human needs. Whereas on Mars, the term means those things that have to do with fulfilling the categorical imperative because those are the things that regulating the use of the terms. Thus, the humans and martians differ in meaning.

If the humans and martians actually mean and refer to different things, then the Brink/Boyd view is committed to saying that when the two parties meet there is no

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[64] One assumption that Horgan and Timmons work from in their scenario is that when after both species undergo wide reflective equilibrium that their moral beliefs are still so divergent that they continue to assert the same moral utterances as they uttered prior to bringing their beliefs into wide reflective equilibrium.
[65] Horgan, T. and Timmons, M. "Copping out on Moral Twin Earth." Synthese 124 (2000): 140.
[66] Ibid, 141. I have changed the moral term from 'right' to 'good' to stay consistent throughout the paper.
[67] Ibid, 140.

substantive disagreement between the two parties. This is so because in order to have a genuine disagreement you need to have the same meaning between parties. Thus, the Brink/Boyd view is a form of conceptual relativism rather than realism.

This version of relativism holds that

> "terms used by different groups are sufficiently different in meaning as to be not intertranslatable...[and when]...groups of people appear to have radically different and incompatible moral views, there is actually semantic and conceptual incommensurability at work—so that their respective, apparently contradictory, claims actually are so different in meaning as to be effectively parts of different, non-intertranslatable, languages."[68]

The Martian scenario exemplifies conceptual relativity between the two uses of the term 'good' because Earthlings and Martians have different meanings for their terms. Thus, they have no disagreement because the two populations are not talking about one and the same thing.

III. Problems with Horgan and Timmons and the proper Boydian response

The core of Horgan and Timmons' conceptual relativity argument against the Brink/Boyd view is the idea that there is a contradiction between the rigid designation thesis and the reflective equilibrium thesis. The rigid designation thesis requires that a term in the same sense, e.g. moral, designate the same set of properties in all possible worlds. On the other hand, the reflective equilibrium thesis states that each of the species will converge on a different moral theory that specifies different properties for the referent of the term 'good.' The contradiction arises because the moral theories achieved under ideal wide reflective equilibrium specify that the 'good,' in its moral sense, rigidly designate different properties. However, this cannot be the case because a rigid designator designates the same properties in

[68] Horgan, T. and Timmons, M. "From Moral Realism to Moral Relativism in One Easy Step," 14.

all possible worlds; hence the contradiction. Thus, given the semantic thesis of rigid designation and the thesis of wide reflective equilibrium we cannot make sense of the competing moral senses of the term 'good.'

The following is detailed exposition of the argument.

> 1. For Earthlings a consequentialist normative theory achieved under (wide) reflective equilibrium specifies the determinate natural properties that regulates the use of the term 'good,' in its moral sense, on Earth.[69]
> 2. For Martians a deontological normative theory achieved under (wide) reflective equilibrium specifies the determinate natural properties that regulates the use of the term 'good,' in its moral sense, on Mars.
> 3. In either situation, the term 'good,' in the moral sense of the term, rigidly designates a different set of natural properties specified by the normative theory.
> 4. The rigid designation thesis claims that a term designate the same set of properties in all possible worlds.
> 5. Thus, there is an inherent contradiction between what the wide reflective equilibrium thesis requires and what the rigid designation thesis requires.

The problem is that premises one and two contradict premise four. The wide reflective equilibrium thesis contradicts the rigid designation thesis.

The best response for the Brink/Boyd position is to claim that the contradiction is nonexistent. This is because Horgan and Timmons fail to recognize a key aspect of Boyd's semantic/epistemological theses and a key part to Brink's reflective equilibrium.

In the scenario with the Earthlings and Martians, Horgan and Timmons would agree that both species are talking about the same subject matter of morality. Given this condition and assuming that the initial beliefs about morality held by both the Martians and Earthlings are approximately true, a contradiction does not follow. Both groups will converge, through

[69] I put the term 'wide' in brackets because Horgan and Timmons switch back and forth from reflective equilibrium to wide reflective equilibrium.

the process of wide reflective equilibrium, on the same true moral theory that specifies a set of properties that regulates the use of the term 'good' in all possible worlds.

Imagine that Earthlings have approximate true beliefs about morality. For example, they believe that unnecessary suffering is wrong, you ought to help others when it is no great cost to you, etc. Also, imagine that Martians have approximately true beliefs about morality. They believe that you should partake in those activities that promote the virtues, you should never treat another as means to an end, etc. In each situation, the beliefs are approximate truths about morality. When each species goes through the process of ideal wide reflective equilibrium, they will converge on the true moral theory.[70] The initial approximately true beliefs increase our chances that the species will converge on the truth though the process of wide reflective equilibrium because we know the direction to proceed, and if the process of reflective equilibrium is ideal then it guarantees that we have considered all of theories and converge on the truth.[71]

There is one case where different species would not come to the same conclusions about morality or about what causally regulates the use of the term 'good.' If either species starts with moral beliefs that were so far from the moral truth that their beliefs are not even approximately true, then we should expect the varying species to come to different moral theories specifying different moral properties regulating the use of the term. This is how Horgan and Timmons implicitly construe their scenario. They do not take into account the

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[70] This is true only at the end of the wide reflective equilibrium process. One can imagine that when martians and earthlings meet they could each be at different points in their respective wide reflective equilibrium process. The martians could be years ahead of us in their process because they are not victims, for example, of any bias. However, eventually both species would converge upon the same theory. I owe this comment to Dr. George Rainbolt.

[71] Horgan and Timmons grant for the sake of argument that Martians and Earthlings as species will converge on a different single moral theory and that the theory is the true theory because it is a result of wide reflective equilibrium. See Horgan, and Timmons. "From Moral Realist to Moral Relativism in one easy Step." Critica Vol XXVIII 1996, 21.

approximate truth part of Boyd's semantic and epistemological thesis, nor do they challenge the capacity of the method of reflective equilibrium to arrive at the truth if conducted ideally.

I believe that using a case not involving morality helps to show why the rigid designation thesis and the wide reflective equilibrium thesis fail to contradict. Imagine that Earthling astronomers and Martian astronomers both have theories about planetary motion. For simplicity, assume that the Earthlings start with a view about the heavens that includes Ptolemaic beliefs about epicycles, that the objects in the sky are really up there, that gods are not controlling the objects, that the objects actually move and so on. Also assume that the Martians start with a view that includes Keplerian beliefs about ellipses, that the objects in the sky are really up there, that gods are not controlling the objects, that the objects actually move and so on. According to Boyd's semantic thesis, both the Martians and Humans have enough approximately true beliefs about astronomy. The large group of ordinary beliefs helps species get a grip on the nature of the heavens such that when each of the species partakes in wide reflective equilibrium, they eventually converge upon the same true theory because their initial approximations start them in the right direction. It is not possible that both groups will come to different conclusions since they already have approximate truths about the one true theory about planetary motion. Unless, either the Humans or Martians start with a set a beliefs about planetary motion that are not approximately true, then it is not possible that they would come to different theories about planetary motion in ideal wide reflective equilibrium.

The case of morality is analogous to the case of planetary motion. If we both start with approximate true beliefs about a subject matter and then we proceed under ideal reflective equilibrium, we will converge on the same theory. Just as we converge on one

theory of planetary motion, we will converge on only one theory of morality. So long as the species start with approximately true beliefs about morality then it is not possible that they would come to different moral theories under ideal reflective equilibrium. They both would converge on the same moral theory that specifies a set of properties that causally regulates the use of the term 'good.' This shows that the Brink/Boyd view does not contain an inherent contradiction. Given the two theses of rigid designation and wide reflective equilibrium, the species will not converge on different moral theories that specify different sets of natural properties that causally regulates their uses of the term 'good,' i.e., conjoining the views of Boyd and Brink is logically possible without contradiction.

In this chapter, I have established that there is no inherent contradiction in the combined views of David Brink and Richard Boyd. I have done this by showing that both Martians and Humans would converge upon the same moral theory under wide reflective equilibrium assuming that they both start with approximately true beliefs about morality. My method has been to reconstruct the Horgan and Timmons Martian scenario arguing for relativism and show why it is not possible that this conclusion follows from the Brink/Boyd view.

IV. Conclusion

This thesis set out to defend a combined version of moral realism that suggests answers to the questions presented in Chapter One. The version I have defended is a combined view of David Brink and Richard Boyd. My aim has been to assess the claims made by Horgan and Timmons that there is an inherent contradiction between the views of Brink and Boyd.

The combined view of Brink and Boyd asserts that moral judgments are the types of statements that have truth-value. The Brink/Boyd view claims that at least some of our moral propositions are in fact true and that we should defend this version of realism on grounds analogous to that of scientific realism. As the scientific realist claims, the beliefs about scientific matters are about facts independent of those beliefs because we could not have the predictability in science that we do without it being the case. Since I have shown, through the exposition of Richard Boyd's position, that moral realism should be considered analogous to that of scientific realism then we should consider our beliefs about morality, as we do with science, as concerning facts that are independent of those beliefs. Furthermore, these moral facts should be characterized as natural facts defined by the moral theory we achieve under wide reflective equilibrium. Once I characterized moral realism in this fashion, I was able to show that the combined view of Brink and Boyd does not fall victim to the objection that Horgan and Timmons claim.

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