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Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty

Themes and variations in Kant's moral and religious philosophy

A.W. Moore

Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty

Is it possible for ethical thinking to be grounded in pure reason? In this bold and innovative new work, A.W. Moore takes a refreshing and challenging look at Kant's moral and religious philosophy and uses it to arrive at a distinctive way of understanding and answering this question.

Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty identifies three Kantian themes – morality, freedom, and religion – and presents variations on each of these themes in turn. Moore concedes that there are difficulties with the Kantian view that morality can be governed by 'pure' reason, but defends a closely related view involving a notion of reason as socially and culturally conditioned. In the course of doing this, Moore considers in detail ideas at the heart of Kant's thought, such as the categorical imperative, free will, evil, hope, eternal life, and God. He also makes creative use of ideas in contemporary philosophy, both within the analytic tradition and outside it, such as 'thick' ethical concepts, forms of life, and 'becoming those that we are'. Throughout the book, a guiding precept is that to be rational is to make sense, and that nothing is of greater value to us than making sense.

Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty is essential reading for all those interested in Kant, ethics, and the philosophy of religion.

A.W. Moore is Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy at St Hugh's College, Oxford. He is the author of *The Infinite* (2nd edition, Routledge, 2001) and *Points of View*.

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For Phil

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;
Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,
Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof, – and prov'd, a very woe;
Before, a joy propos'd; behind, a dream.
  All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
  To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

(William Shakespeare, Sonnet 129)

All men by nature desire to know.

(Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, Book A, Chapter 1, 98a)

Let a noise or scent, once heard or once smelt, be heard or smelt again in the present and at the same time in the past, real without being actual, ideal without being abstract, and immediately the permanent and habitually concealed essence of things is liberated and our true self which seemed – had perhaps for long years seemed – to be dead but was not altogether dead, is awakened and reanimated as it receives the celestial nourishment that is brought to it. A minute freed from the order of time has re-created in us, to feel it, the man freed from the order of time. And one can understand that this man should have confidence in his joy,... one can understand that the word 'death' should have no meaning for him; situated outside time, why should he fear the future?

(Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 'Time Regained', p. 906)

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Preface

Kant, in his moral and religious philosophy, provides the themes for this book. I attempt to do two things: to play out these themes; and to play out variations on them. At the end of the Introduction I elaborate a little on what I mean by this and on how it structures the book.

There is an analytical table of contents which charts the execution of this project through each section. Readers may find it helpful to read this before the rest of the book. Much of it, however, will make little sense on its own. It is intended primarily as an *aide-mémoire*, to be consulted retrospectively by readers whenever they want to take stock.

Many people have helped me with the writing of this book, despite being, in many cases, resolutely opposed to its main ideas. For comments on an earlier draft, and for guidance of various other kinds, I am extremely grateful to the referees appointed by Routledge, and to Pamela Anderson, Andrea Capovilla, Iskra Fileva, Gordon Davis, Katerina Ierodiakonou, Daniel Jones, Derek Parfit, Thomas Startup, Philip Turetzky, and Bernard Williams.

A.W. Moore

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In the course of the book I quote extensively from Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and from Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, translated and edited by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 1996). For permission to quote from the former, I am grateful to Betty Kiehl, Mary Gregor's literary executor; for permission to quote from the latter, I am grateful to Allen Wood and George di Giovanni; and for permission to quote from both, I am grateful to Cambridge University Press.

Analytical table of contents

Introduction

§1 How is it possible for us to make ethical sense of things?

§2 This question in turn raises questions about the objectivity of our ethical thinking. The fact that our ethical thinking engages us in the way it does can make the prospects for its objectivity look dim. But perhaps this is because we have in mind the objectivity of thinking that is about an independent reality. Do the prospects look brighter if we have in mind the objectivity of thinking that is constrained to go in a certain direction?

§3 It is not clear that they do. For how can thinking that engages us in the distinctive way in which our ethical thinking does be constrained to go in a certain direction? – Well, one way to answer this question would be by appeal to 'conative objectivism', the thesis that our ethical thinking depends on conative states that we all share. This would not be easy to demonstrate. But that does not mean that it is not true.

§4 Another, apparently very different way to answer the question would be by appeal to 'rationalism', the thesis that our ethical thinking consists in the exercise of pure reason.

§5 There are three principal objections to rationalism. First, it allows for ethical expertise. Second, it makes a mystery of socially grounded ethical disagreement. Third, pure reason cannot be 'practical': that is, pure reason cannot engage us in the appropriate way.

§6 Despite these objections, rationalism has considerable appeal. What follows is a study of rationalism.

§7 This study will have to be informed by the above, including the three objections to rationalism. It will be based on Kant's version of rationalism, and it will adopt a 'themes and variations' format.

First theme: morality

§1 Kant has a vision of the authority of reason that is in some respects deeply attractive, and in others deeply repugnant.

§2 He distinguishes between 'hypothetical imperatives', which apply to agents by virtue of ends they happen to have, and 'categorical imperatives', which apply to agents purely by virtue of their rationality. He further insists that the basic demands of morality are categorical imperatives. If they were not, they would have to be contingent on something, and Kant thinks that this would be intolerable. He is therefore a rationalist.

§3 He has more or less satisfactory responses to the first and second objections to rationalism. What about the third? One way to respond to this objection would be to argue that we could not put reason to practical use at all unless certain ways of acting commended themselves to us, simply as rational beings.

§4 If such an argument were to succeed, it would probably give us a characteristically Kantian loop, whereby it is a fundamental demand of pure practical reason to put pure reason to practical use. This connects with two strains in Kant's thinking: first, that the only thing that is good without qualification is putting pure reason to practical use; and second, that rational beings are to be valued for their own sake. The second of these leads to one formulation of the fundamental categorical imperative: 'So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.'

§5 A second formulation arises from the idea that rational beings regulate what they do by adopting 'maxims'. A maxim is a resolution of such a kind that to adopt it is to treat it as if it had the force of a categorical imperative, or as if it were a 'law'. If we were purely rational, we would only ever adopt maxims that really could be laws, granted what we are capable of willing. Hence the second formulation: 'Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.'

§6 Now among the reservations we might have about this is the following. There is no readily forthcoming substantive account of which resolutions count as maxims.

§7 The next chapter will be concerned to provide one, and thereby to provide a partial defence of Kant. Later we shall have to return to the third objection to rationalism. For, as Kant himself sees clearly, it is still nothing but an assumption that pure reason can be put to practical use.

First set of variations

§1 A starting point is the proposition that some concepts are action-guiding. That is, there are some concepts such that anyone who possesses one of these concepts thereby has certain reasons for doing things.

§2 'Some': there is no suggestion that all concepts are of this kind, though neither is that possibility excluded.

§3 'Certain': the reasons that a person has, by virtue of possessing one of these concepts, are reasons that everyone who possesses that concept has.

§4 'Doing': this is to be understood broadly enough to include 'omissions' as well as 'acts'.

§5 'Has': to have a reason, one does not have to acknowledge it, though one does have to be able to acknowledge it.

§6 'Reasons': the reasons in question are normative, they are general, and they may be defeasible.

§7 'Thereby': any dependence here is as much a dependence of possessing concepts on having reasons as of having reasons on possessing concepts, though in many cases the converse dependence holds too.

§8 'Possesses': this is to be understood in an unusually demanding way, including only the 'engaged' grasp of a concept. To possess a concept is to live by it.

§9 Let us say that an action-guiding concept 'requires' the practice of doing anything its possession gives people a reason to do. Let us say that a resolution 'involves' any concept that one must possess in order to adopt it. And let us say that a resolution 'is answerable to' any practice required by any concept it involves. Then a maxim is a resolution to do something that either counts as observing some practice to which the resolution is answerable or counts as violating some practice to which the resolution is answerable. If we further say that a 'law' is a resolution that qualifies as a maxim in the first of these two ways, then it is irrational to adopt a maxim that is not either already a law or capable of becoming a law through suitable developments in the concepts it involves, where this capability can be captured in the idea of what those who possess the relevant concepts can will. Here we have a reconstruction of Kant's rationalism.

§10 But does it yield full-blown categorical imperatives? Does it not at most yield imperatives which apply to agents who possess the relevant

concepts? And does it not therefore leave us with real questions about which concepts to possess?

§11 These concerns are reflected in the debate about whether it is possible to derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. Some proposed derivations can be resisted by anyone who does not possess the relevant concepts, but not by anyone who does.

§12 Yes; this reconstruction of Kant's rationalism does leave us with real questions about which concepts to possess, questions about how to assess our 'forms of life'.

§13 This will involve reflecting on what our forms of life have been.

§14 It will involve reflecting on what our forms of life are.

§15 And it will involve reflecting on what our forms of life may yet be; on what radically new concepts we may yet possess. But to possess a radically new concept, we must be able, collectively and individually, to get from here to there. And the question whether we can get from here to there is akin to the question whether our concepts can develop in such a way that some maxim can become a law. So assessing the concepts we possess is of a piece with assessing the maxims we adopt. Both are part of trying to make sense, that is of trying to be rational. So this reconstruction of Kant's rationalism is very close to Kant's own rationalism after all – though it does call into question the idea of 'pure' reason.

§16 In both this reconstruction and the original, rationality demands that we adopt no maxims that we cannot will to be laws, though in the reconstruction this 'cannot' covers a wider range of possibilities. Some of these possibilities have an empirical element, calling the idea of 'pure' reason further into question.

§17 In the reconstruction, rationality also demands that we seek concepts that enable us to make sense. We must realize that the world itself does not make sense: we have to make sense of it.

§18 The demand to be active in making sense of the world has its own echoes in Kant. In fact this variation brings us right back to the beginning of the first theme: the authority of reason.

Second theme: freedom

§1 It is still only an assumption, however, that pure reason can be put to practical use. Even if we can now see how pure reason is able to determine certain courses of action, there remains the question, 'So what?'

§2 Kant tries to answer this question by showing that the demands of pure practical reason are the demands of freedom. To act freely is to be subject to these demands. Of course, this leaves room for a further 'So what?' But does it not in any case have the absurd consequence – call this the Radical Conception – that nobody ever freely does the wrong thing, that is the irrational thing? No; being subject to demands is different from acting in accord with them. Kant does not accede to the Radical Conception – though he does come close to doing so.

§3 Now Kant accepts a physical determinism that is incompatible with freedom. So how can he also accept that we are free? Well, he thinks that our actions can be regarded from two points of view, and that the determinism in question holds only from one of these. Indeed, he develops this picture in such a way as to rebuff any possible threat to the belief that we are free. The price he pays is to concede that the belief can never be established either. For, on his developed picture, it is a belief about how we unknowably are in ourselves – in contrast to the determinism, which is a belief about how we appear.

§4 Kant further insists that we can never fully understand the relationship between these.

§5 Among the difficulties that Kant faces, the most serious is that the freedom-precluding determinism which he champions not only leaves him with a problem of reconciliation; it challenges our understanding of what needs to be reconciled.

Second set of variations

§1 Let us return to the Radical Conception. Is the Radical Conception really 'absurd'? What if we combine it with the idea – call this combination the Radical Picture – that we can incur blame for things that we have not done freely? Provided that blame is a 'superficial' concept, the Radical Picture is just a convenient way of capturing the idea that there is a nisus in all of us towards rationality.

§2 But does it leave enough room, within freedom, for creativity and unpredictability? Yes; for being rational, that is making sense, can include creating radically new concepts.

§3 Even if creating radically new concepts is properly thought of as discovering new possibilities, rather than creating new possibilities, it still enjoys a radical unpredictability. It is like seeing certain colours for the first time.

§4 Irrationality, on this picture, involves succumbing to non-rational forces.

§5 Let us now consider an idea that is crucial to this enquiry – call it the Basic Idea – that there is a nisus in all of us, more fundamental than any other, towards rationality.

§6 This means that nothing is of greater value to us than rationality.

§7 If the Basic Idea is true, it finally enables us to address the 'So what?' questions hanging over from above. It also makes rationalism a species of conative objectivism.

§8 But is it true? It is akin to Kant's notion that supreme and unqualified value attaches to the exercise of pure practical reason and therewith to those with a capacity to exercise pure practical reason, namely people. It may also share with that notion a basicness which prevents it, even if it is true, from being established.

§9 This connects with Kant's belief that we have a fundamental 'respect' for the moral law, and that our knowing how to put pure reason to practical use is a 'fact of pure reason'.

§10 The suspicion that the Basic Idea cannot be established is reinforced by the failure of various promising ways to establish it.

§11 But provided that it is true, then there are good practical reasons to accept that it is true; and, in the absence of any way of establishing it, to hope that it is true.

Third theme: religion

§1 Kant, despite not being entirely comfortable with religion, thinks it has an important role – albeit a role subordinate to that of morality.

§2 In particular, he thinks we do well to regard the demands of morality as divine commands.

§3 Now the role which he thinks religion has he thinks it has only because of our radical evil. But why does he think we are radically evil? For various reasons, though not, as we might have expected, for the reason that any irrationality in our behaviour indicates a timeless irrationality in how we are in ourselves. That would preclude the possibility of reform, and Kant is loath to abandon hope in this possibility.

§4 In general, Kant thinks that, because of our imperfection, we need non-rational props to sustain us in any commitment to morality; and that these props include the hope that we can reform, and, as a corollary, the hope that we enjoy an immortality that will enable us to work out our reformation. We must hope and believe that we are immortal, then, just as we must hope and believe that we are free (see above) and that God exists (see below). These three propositions Kant calls 'postulates of pure practical reason'.

§5 Why must we hope and believe that God exists? Because only God can guarantee that happiness is aligned to virtue, which is itself something we must hope and believe if we are to maintain any commitment to morality.

§6 Note: our immortality need not be understood in literally temporal terms.

§7 What status do these three postulates have? Although they are propositions that we must believe, in the relevant practical sense of 'must', none of them can be proved – or, for that matter, disproved, since each of them concerns how things unknowably are in themselves.

Appendix. Note that this account glosses over various developments in Kant's thinking.

Third set of variations

§1 Now we may hope that the Basic Idea is true. If it is, it is a deep contingency that rests on further deep contingencies such as the constancy of nature.

§2 There is, however, an unresolved issue about how the Basic Idea is to be understood – whether individualistically or corporately. One very direct way to avoid this issue is to assume that the distinction is never actually operative. This assumption is part of a larger assumption: that the Basic Idea is not just true, but 'secure'.

§3 Is this larger assumption an assumption to the effect that the world makes sense? No: it is an assumption to the effect that the world fosters and protects our own sense-making.

§4 Imperfect as we are, we must hope and believe this if we are to sustain any commitment to rationality.

§5 In particular, we must hope and believe that we are never forced, at some ultimate level, into irrationality.

§6 We must likewise hope and believe that nothing will ever be of greater value to us than rationality.

§7 As with Kant's three postulates, the 'must' here is a practical 'must' grounded in our imperfection. More generally, both the Basic Idea itself and the proposition that the Basic Idea is secure share many of the lineaments of Kant's postulates.

§8 There are other ways in which this picture connects with religion. Thus the hope and the belief that the Basic Idea is secure might be sustained by belief in God, where belief in God is to be understood as a kind of commitment that is not only distinguishable from belief that God exists but, arguably, impervious to incoherence in the concept of God.

§9 However that may be, there is something in this picture corresponding to each of Kant's three postulates. Corresponding to the first, there is the Basic Idea itself; corresponding to the second, there is that aspect of the security of the Basic Idea whereby we can always make sense of things; and corresponding to the third, there is that aspect of the security of the Basic Idea whereby the world is a home for our sense-making. It remains for us to make the sense.

Introduction

> When an ethical law of the form, 'Thou shalt . . .', is laid down, one's first thought is, 'And what if I do not do it?'
>
> (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.422)

§1 How can we make sense of things?

There are countless ways in which this question might be intended. In a suitably dramatic context, someone might be asking, 'How can you and I find anything worth living for – now that *this* has happened?' Even when the question is posed in a work of philosophy, with theoretical aspirations, there are many things that might be meant. It could be a question about preconditions of the human aptitude for discovering laws of nature. It could be a question about the meaning of life.[1]

Among the dimensions of ambiguity that help to give the question its versatility, there is one that is likely to ring certain philosophical bells. The question could be understood as a 'ground-level' question: *what* sense can we make of things? Or it could be understood as an 'upper-level' or 'meta-level' question: how is it possible for us to make sense of things (at all)?

This is likely to ring certain philosophical bells because there is a broader distinction that philosophers often draw between thinking about certain issues and thinking about thinking about those issues. Thus we can think about whether God exists, about whether positive discrimination is ever justified, about whether the square of one integer is ever twice the square of another, or about whether there are any words in English that contain the consonant pair 'mt'. But we can also think about what sort of question each of these is. Is there a simple algorithm for settling it? Does it leave any room for irresoluble clashes of opinion? To what extent can views about the matter be said to be straightforwardly true or false?

This sort of ground-level/meta-level distinction is not always easy to sustain, either in theory or in practice. Certainly that is true as far as the two ways of taking the question 'How can we make sense of things?' are concerned. Making sense of things can include making sense of making

sense of things. It can include establishing canons of authority and criteria of sanity for instance. Indeed, one of the reasons why I have begun with this question, and shall be using it in various ways to guide the whole enquiry, is precisely the fact that it can straddle the ground-level/upper-level divide. In so far as what follows counts as a work of ethics, I should be glad to think that it resists easy classification as either 'normative ethics' (ground-level ethics) or 'meta-ethics' (upper-level ethics). But still, I do recognize some sort of ground-level/upper-level distinction, and I do recognize the importance of something at the upper-level to orient and to motivate what follows. It is this that I shall be trying to provide in this Introduction.

How, then, is it possible for us to make sense of things? More particularly, what is involved in our being able to make ethical sense of things? What is the nature of our thinking about ethical issues?

§2 One of the first questions that anyone reflecting on these matters is likely to raise is this: 'Can our thinking about ethical issues hope to be *objective*?' But the word 'objective' is used in a bewildering variety of ways. If we are going to wield it at all, then we need to devote at least as much attention to clarifying it as to determining where it applies.

On any construal, objectivity has something to do with agreement. To say that our ethical thinking either is or can be objective is to say something positive about our chances of being able to reach ethical agreement, or of our being able to identify, explain, and eventually resolve ethical disagreement. Objectivity thus provides a kind of reassurance when it comes to broaching the corresponding ground-level issues. These issues are often, by their nature, of the utmost importance. It is reassuring to think that we can get the measure of disagreement in this way, because the apparent alternative is thoroughly alarming: namely, that disputes about these very important issues have the character, ultimately and dialectically, of a dispute about the relative merits of vanilla and chocolate ice-cream.

Nevertheless, it is very common, when people first reflect on ethical thought and confront these questions, for them to deny any such objectivity. It is common for them to think that disputes about ethical issues do indeed have the character of a dispute about the relative merits of vanilla and chocolate ice-cream; and that this sets them apart from disputes about scientific issues such as what the age of the universe is, or again from disputes about simple matters of fact such as who scored the winning goal in the 1969 FA Cup Final. In these latter cases, it will be said, one answer to the question can be 'proved', whereas, in the case of ethical disputes, 'proof' is not to the point.

This is an extremely familiar contrast. And it is an extremely dubious one, at least when it is stated so baldly. Much depends on what the criteria of successful proof are. Certainly, where the latter disputes are concerned,

there is no question of forcing the agreement of someone who is not appropriately receptive (that is to say, sane, intelligent, attentive, and suchlike). But if this does not automatically count against an answer's being provable in these cases, then it cannot do so in ethical cases either. Imagine that you are an employer and that you find yourself in dispute with a fellow employer about how much compassionate leave is appropriate for one of your employees who is suffering from a bereavement: your colleague's judgement is more severe than yours. And imagine, if you can, that he (your colleague) is unwittingly betraying a kind of *Schadenfreude* at the very idea of another person's having to cope with such grief – or, less fancifully perhaps, at the very idea of *that* person's having to cope with such grief. Then certainly you are dealing with someone who is not appropriately receptive. In fact you are dealing with someone who is sick. That he can disagree with you on *this* basis has no bearing on the 'provability' of your own view. But then, what is there to say that something similar does not hold of other, apparently more reasonable bases on which he might disagree with you? Or again, consider this: which would you find easier, to demonstrate the horror of the Holocaust to a young child, or to demonstrate its historicity? We still lack a clearly enough defined conception of objectivity to be able to draw any conclusions, from these reflections, about the objectivity of ethical thinking. But they do indicate that the matter is not as straightforward as it is apt at first to appear, and that there is at any rate no *simple* reason for thinking that taking an ethical stance is dialectically akin to stating a preference as to ice-cream flavour.

Even so, people continue to find the ice-cream analogy compelling. One very basic reason for this is that our ethical views *engage* us, just as our preferences as to ice-cream flavour engage us. Thus, it might be said, if I think that the universe is fifteen thousand million years old, this is unlikely to affect my behaviour, whereas if I think that Third World debt should be cancelled, then this will naturally incline me to do certain things, say to campaign, or to vote for a suitable party, just as, if I prefer chocolate to vanilla ice-cream, this will naturally incline me to select the chocolate rather than the vanilla ice-cream.

But this is a crude oversimplification. In all three cases – that of my belief about the age of the universe, that of my conviction about Third World debt, and that of my preference for chocolate ice-cream – the most and the least that can be said, at this level of generality, is that I shall naturally be inclined to respond in certain ways to certain situations when all else is equal. Thus I shall select the chocolate rather than the vanilla ice-cream when I have the choice, and when there is nothing to hold me back (for instance, there is not some baying child with menacing parents who is about to be deprived of the last scoop of chocolate). But similarly, I shall say, 'Fifteen thousand million years', when I am asked for the age of the universe, and when there is nothing to hold me back (for instance, my

answer does not give inappropriate assistance to someone in a quiz). By contrast, I shall not join in a campaign for the cancellation of Third World debt if I think that there are more pressing demands on my time, or if I am simply too lazy.

It is not just that our ethical views and our preferences engage us then. The point seems to be rather that there is something fundamental in common to the *ways* in which they engage us (however diverse these ways may otherwise be), something that makes a complete mystery of the idea that our ethical views are views about what is out there independently of us. Mackie captured this thought when he formulated what he famously called his 'argument from queerness' against the thesis that, as he put it, 'values are . . . part of the fabric of the world'.[2] The argument, in a nutshell, is this: if values were part of the fabric of the world, then 'they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe'.[3] Mackie was denying that the fabric of the world could contain anything such that, simply by knowing of it, you were impelled to act in certain ways. This was his way of denying the objectivity of ethical thinking.

Smith too has emphasized how the objectivity of ethical thinking seems to be precluded by its 'practicality'.[4] The way Smith puts it is in terms of the idea that how we think the world is is one thing, while how we want the world to be is quite another. If ethical thinking were objective, then this would suggest that our ethical views are a matter of how we think the world is; the practicality of ethical thinking suggests that they are a matter of how we want the world to be. Unlike Mackie, however, Smith does not proceed from there to a rejection of objectivism. No matter how natural or common it may be for us to reject objectivism when we first engage in meta-ethics, Smith thinks it is an unacceptable affront to our sense of what we are doing when we engage in *normative* (ground-level) ethics. We do after all argue with one another. We proceed as though there is a difference between getting it right and getting it wrong, and we fret about getting it right. So what Smith does is to reconsider the apparent incompatibility of objectivity with practicality. He argues – it is beyond the scope of this book to consider his argument[5] – that they are compatible after all. In effect, he tries to dispel any sense of queerness in ethical objectivism.

Others have tried to do the same. A striking example is Korsgaard, who writes:

> According to Mackie, it is fantastic to think that the world contains . . . intrinsically normative entities. For . . . they would have to meet certain impossible criteria. They would have to be entities of a very strange sort, utterly unlike anything else in the universe . . . [When you met one,] it would have to be – and I'm nearly quoting now – able

> both to tell you what to do and make you do it. And nothing is like that.
>
> But Mackie is wrong... [It] is the most familiar fact of human life that the world contains entities that can tell us what to do and make us do it. They are people ...[6]

This has important resonances for what is to come.

But neither Smith nor Korsgaard is trying to salvage the idea that our ethical views are views about what is out there independently of us. Here it is important to recall that objectivity can mean different things. To say that our ethical thinking is about something that is out there independently of it, or independently of us, is only one way of saying that it is objective. Here is another, quite different way: our ethical thinking is constrained to go in a certain direction. Call these two kinds of objectivity, respectively, *world-directed* objectivity and *conclusion-directed* objectivity. To see why they are different, consider our mathematical thinking. It is relatively uncontroversial that our mathematical thinking enjoys conclusion-directed objectivity. It is altogether harder to see whether it enjoys world-directed objectivity.[7] Conclusion-directed objectivity seems to be somewhat weaker than world-directed objectivity, and less vulnerable to the charge of queerness. Admittedly, neither the metaphor of being 'out there independently of us' nor the metaphor of being 'constrained to go in a certain direction' is completely transparent. If what counts in the former case is whether values, numbers, or whatever it may be are real in anything like the way in which physical objects are real, then this raises the question of what counts as being real in 'anything like' that way. If what matters in the latter case is whether we can in the long run reasonably expect consensus, then this raises the question of who 'we' are, and of what counts as a 'reasonable expectation'. (Think again about the impossibility of securing the agreement of those who are not appropriately receptive.) Still, in so far as people's initial recoil from ethical objectivism is a recoil from queerness, the idea that ethical thinking enjoys *conclusion-directed* objectivity looks as if it might be able to draw them back to such objectivism, and back to its reassurances. Can it?

§3 There is still room for doubt. Let us assume that the conclusions towards which our ethical thinking is supposed to be directed are conclusions about reasons we have for adopting certain courses of action or living certain sorts of lives. Then one consequence of this form of objectivism seems to be this. Someone can have a reason for doing something, and can indeed be forced to acknowledge that he has a reason for doing something, even though doing that thing contributes nothing to the satisfaction of any of his 'conative states' – even though it is not in any of his interests, promotes none of his values, furthers none of his projects,

realizes none of his aims, and makes none of his dreams come true. Many people find this idea baffling.

It is important here to distinguish between two ways of construing the notion of a reason. The notion can be construed explanatorily, and it can be construed normatively. Construed explanatorily, the notion of a reason is a matter of why someone does something: 'Your only reason for taking daily exercise is that you were nagged by your friends into doing so.' Construed normatively, the notion of a reason is a matter of why someone *should* do something: 'The benefits to your health give you a compelling reason to take daily exercise.' The idea that *explanatory* reasons can outstrip conative states in the way indicated is palpable nonsense. The issue is rather whether *normative* reasons can outstrip conative states in the way indicated. To say that they can may not be palpable nonsense. Even so, for many people it is still baffling. Why should anyone do anything that satisfies none of his conative states? If both he and his conative states are unlovely for one reason or another, then no doubt the rest of us will try to effect a change in him, through sanctions, blame, coercion, and the like, and no doubt this will include telling him that he should do things that he does not want to do and has no inclination to do. But however intelligible what we tell him may be as a piece of rhetoric, indeed however effective it may be, perhaps simply by virtue of registering our disapproval, there remains an unclarity concerning what purchase it has as a claim *about him* and about conclusions that he is forced to draw concerning himself. Conclusion-directed objectivity threatens to be as queer as world-directed objectivity. Is it?

As a first step towards answering this question, note that there is one extremely important way in which any queerness would in fact be dissipated. I have in mind the possibility that our ethical thinking should turn out to depend on conative states that we all share. If there were such states, and if these and these alone grounded the ethical reasons that we were supposed to have for adopting certain courses of action or living certain sorts of lives, then conclusion-directed objectivity would no longer involve normative reasons that outstripped our conative states in the supposedly objectionable way indicated. If, furthermore, the conative states in question were states that we not only shared but could not help sharing, then this would give the reasons a corresponding necessity; and this in turn would give suitable substance to the idea that our ethical thinking was 'constrained' to go in a certain direction. Since the conative states would also very likely lie deep, as would the connection between them and the reasons they grounded, it would also give substance to that powerful feeling which accompanies so much of our ethical thinking, namely that we are trying to *discover* something, something to which we are, moreover, beholden. What are the prospects for founding objectivity in *this* way? That is, what are the prospects, first, for there even being such conative