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A Defense of Moral Realism

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Thesis

Morality is a concept that comes up in many facets of one's life. Everyone is familiar with the idea of morality, whether that be from parental teachings, in the court room, through school honor codes, or some other aspect of one's life. Moral dilemmas come up all the time, and we seem to intuitively know what is right, or at least what feels right to us, even though we have no blueprint for it. But what is morality at its core? Is it something that we as a society have made up to establish order? Are morals real, and do they hold true for all beings? There has been much debate over the topic of morality throughout history, with no definitive consensus. One of these debates has centered around whether morals are real and objective. In this paper, I will be defending the view known as moral realism against other views known as relativism and anti-realism. I will be attempting to show that morality applies to all rational beings objectively, it is non-naturalistic, and that it is real and must be understood as such for all moral beings.

Moral realism is the view that there are moral facts, these facts apply objectively for everyone, and that these facts are opinion independent.[1] It is not interpersonal discourse that makes them valid. Rather, moral laws are true of their own merit.[2] They are true independently of any outside force, but this does not mean that moral agents accept these objective moral laws. This distinction is very important to lay out because relativism and antirealism call these three points into question. I support moral realism because it purports truth on actions that we make and holds that they are universally applicable. This stance is advantageous because it holds moral actors accountable to a universal standard and because it treats morality as something real and not something that we have come up with for society. While there are objections to moral realism, I think that moral realism is the most complete. One of the reasons that moral realism is

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[1] Brock, Stuart, and Mares, Edwin 2006, *Realism and Anti-Realism,* London: Taylor & Francis Group, Accessed April 9, 2022, ProQuest Ebook Central., n.d., 113.
[2] Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15-16.

a strong theory, and why I feel it is the most complete, is because it does not rely upon any

outside intervention, such as human intervention or misconception about what is real. Moral

realism being independent from all else allows morality to remain applicable for all beings

throughout time, and thus allows us to rely upon the same moral judgements throughout time.

This is also held by some of the other positions, but it is the truth of morals that really sets moral

realism apart. Moral laws being true and real means that they are also unchanging no matter what

any actor may think is moral. This is important because it shows why there are moral

discrepancies in the world and there is no set moral standard. Just because there are discrepancies

amongst different societies does not mean that the same moral truths do not also hold truth for

them. If morals are objective and real, then these truths exist for them regardless of their stance

of them. It also means that we do not need to necessarily know what these truths are. It holds all

actors accountable because it is real and not some false idea that some individuals back. For

example, if we take killing to be a true and real moral wrongdoing, then it does not matter what

the circumstance, location, or time period is, it is still morally wrong. This is good because total

moral correctness is something that we can strive and try to achieve no matter when we finally

get there. With the other theories this is not obtainable and leaves us in a place of simply obeying

moral ideas because it is what we think we should do and not what ought to be done.

In this essay, I will defend Schafer-Landau's conception of moral realism. Shafer-Landau holds

that:

> The way I would prefer to characterize the realist position is by reference to its
> endorsement of the stance-independence of moral reality. Realists believe that
> there are moral truths that obtain independently of any preferred perspective, in
> the sense that the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by

virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective.[3]

In other words, realists believe that moral truths are correct independently of anyone holding them, that any moral agent may fail to recognize the moral truth regardless of their best efforts, and that moral truths may potentially be accessible to moral agents eventually, ideal or otherwise.[4] I like this description of moral realism because it really emphasizes the independence of morality from any subjective opinions. This set up also shows exactly the position of moral realism that he will be taking, so as to not lead to any confusion later in the piece.

The first position that I will be defending against is moral relativism. Moral relativism is the position that holds that there are moral facts but that they are opinion-dependent; right and wrong is determined by the society and do not apply outside the society's domain.[5] Social relativism is in direct opposition with moral realism because it denies every one of the aforementioned positions that are required to be a moral realist. Relativism raises a few questions about moral realism, but mainly because it does not require any of the metaphysical commitments that moral realism requires as a theory. Relativism is a very appealing theory because it requires none of the metaphysical baggage that comes with the other theories, and instead focuses on the actors in a society and what they say to determine what is right and wrong for that group.

Moral relativism is a theory backed by both Michel de Montaigne and David Hume, although both seem to not hold it with complete conviction. Montaigne was a French egoist

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[3] *Moral realism*, 15.
[4] Ibid., 17.
[5] *Realism and Antirealism,* 121.

philosopher who wrote his three *Essays* in 1580, 1588, and 1595.[6] Montaigne was interested in

presenting his thoughts about the world he was living in and offer explanations of them, most of

which were ideas that raised issues against the world. Montaigne was very skeptical about the

functions of the world and the thoughts at the forefront of society during his life. At the time,

Roman Catholicism was dominant in the Western World; thus, Catholic doctrine also dominated

moral thought. The moral thought that the Catholic Church preached was moral realism. The

form of moral realism the Catholic Church followed stated that these morals existed because God

created them, and they are objective because God is the source of morals for all.[7] Theists also

hold all the other ideas that non-theists realists follow.[8]

 Montaigne dedicated much of his essays to the calling into question the ideas of society,

and this included the predominant moral thought. Montaigne, through his questioning, began

defending a view that was later known as moral relativism. Montaigne argued that it is custom

that leads us to believe that there are moral truths that all hold.[9] We are led to believe that the

moral values we hold are true because everyone in that society also follows them, when in

reality, it is only that specific society that holds those exact moral grounds. Montaigne argued

that "the common fancies that we find in repute everywhere about us and infused into our minds

with the seed of our fathers, appear to be the most universal and genuine," but, he argues they are

not universal and apply only to the society that holds them.[10] Since morality is the product of

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[6] Michel de Montaigne, "Essays of Michel De Montaigne," ed. William Carew Hazlitt, trans. Charles Cotton, Essays of Michel de Montaigne (Project Gutenberg, September 17, 2006), https://gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm, intro.

[7] Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Objective Morality After Darwin (And Without God?)," The Heythrop Journal (The Heythrop Journal, June 6, 2013), https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=f50984b2-f753-4726-a7c0-42c1068864a4%40redis, 2.

[8] "Objective Morality After Darwin (And Without God?)," 2.

[9] "Essays of Michel De Montaigne," chapter xxii.

[10] Ibid., chapter xxii.

custom and belief, and these customs and beliefs vary by place and time, morality cannot be

universal, and so moral realism cannot be true. We are simply following the customs around us

that have no backing from any tangible proof and ignoring the reality of the differences seen in

different places in the world. One can clearly see why one would support relativism, especially

in today's society; moral relativism is tangible, is seen as more material, and is derived from the

people in the society. These are all things that are valued by today's society and are seen as more

concrete than abstract ideas. Custom is also a very important idea to make note of because it

influences our reasoning for acting in the ways we do, especially when it comes to our moral

actions.

       Moral realism must have an answer for the claims that Montaigne is making that do have

merit. I will start by saying that Montaigne himself did not fully endorse this viewpoint either.

His goal in writing the *Essays* is to call into question the beliefs of his time and to question the

reality of the universe and what drives actions, so as to not blindly follow the ideas that preceded

him. Montaigne did exactly as he set out to do and has influenced many later philosophers with

his line of questioning. Montaigne himself was also a devout Christian that believed in the

supremacy of God, and the rule of God's moral guidelines.[11] This shows that even one that gives

an argument for the position does not favor it because he recognized some of the flaws of it. This

does not prove that the moral relativism is not valid, only that there are flaws that even a

proponent of it recognizes. Shafer-Landau also noticed some of the major flaws that come with

moral relativism. Relativists either argue that morality is relative to the society or the individual.

This is a problem because, on the one side, if one believes that it is society dictating moral law,

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[11] "Essays of Michel De Montaigne," intro.

then it does not follow that the individual would follow society's morals. This is because it

assumes that morality had to have come from individuals at one point.[12] If society's moral laws

have been dictated by the masses, then it is clear that these ideas came from the individuals. On

the flip side, if morality is derived from the individuals, then why do we as a society value

similar moral ideals?[13] If it was only subjective to the individual, then rarely would one see a

repeat of the same values, much less in so many different areas of the world. Relativism cannot

make a decisive decision when it comes to how moral rule comes about because it is either

society or the individual, but it requires both in order to allow for subjective morality to be the

moral rule in a society. Relativism cannot have both, but it needs both to function. These are not

even the biggest issues with Montaigne's version of moral relativism though, specifically his

notion of custom and its influence on moral decisions.

Montaigne's conception of custom is the basis for his rationale for relativism, but this is

not foolproof either. He is claiming that our opinions, conduct, and references to universal truths,

like reason and morality, all are illusory and hold no truth.[14] He says all this, and yet, in his

Essays, he is very critical of some of the customs seen around the world. Instead of endorsing

that these views are morally correct according to the society they are found in, he instead makes

claims about some of them being incorrect. In his section *On Cannibals*, Montaigne first praises

them for holding true to their values, but then later on criticizes them for actions that are morally

vicious. When talking about the new world, Montaigne says that "he finds nothing barbarous and

savage about this nation"[15] and that:

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[12] *Moral Realism*, 30-31
[13] Ibid., 31-32
[14] "Essays of Michel De Montaigne," chapter xxii.
[15] "Essays of Michel De Montaigne," chapter xxx.

> They are savages at the same rate that we say fruits are wild, which nature
> produces of herself and by her own ordinary progress; whereas, in truth, we ought
> rather to call those wild whose natures we have changed by our artifice and
> diverted from the common order.[16]

In this statement he is clearly showing support for moral relativism because he feels that the

Native Americans are acting in accordance with how they are. They are not doing anything

wrong because they are choosing to act in the ways that they do, even if these customs do not fit

the European model. He then later states that "we may then call these people barbarous, in

respect to the rules of reason: but not in respect to ourselves, who in all sorts of barbarity exceed

them,"[17] clearly showing that he is appealing to some form of objective morality. This is not him

appealing to realism, but simply showing that he does believe in moral objectivity because it

does not make sense that a moral relativist would critique one culture's moral rules. Why does he

think this despite making an argument for moral relativism? Montaigne argues against relativism

because he sees commonalities between humans, nature, and animals that must be universally

respected. Montaigne says,

> I meet with arguments that endeavor to demonstrate the near resemblance betwixt
> us and animals, how large a share they have in our greatest privileges, and with
> how much probability they compare us together, truly I abate a great deal of our
> presumption, and willingly resign that imaginary sovereignty that is attributed to
> us over other creatures. But supposing all this were not true, there is nevertheless
> a certain respect, a general duty of humanity, not only to beasts that have life and
> sense, but even to trees, and plants. We owe justice to men, and graciousness and
> benignity to other creatures that are capable of it.[18]

Montaigne argues this because just by looking at the real world he can see that there are

objective rules that we follow regardless of our societal norms. We owe duty to our fellow

humans and other beings because it is a moral obligation that we have that is non-subjective.

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[16] Ibid., Chapter xxx.
[17] Ibid., Chapter xxx.
[18] Ibid., Chapter xi essay 2.

Montaigne himself disputes with moral relativism, even after bringing it up, because the whole

point of his essays were to bring up questions about the world; this does not mean that he does

not endorse some of his questioning, and that he does not need to be fully committed to it.

Montaigne is not the only philosopher that holds a moral relativist view. David Hume is another

philosopher that argues for moral relativism, but he seems to have more conviction to its truth.

David Hume is a later philosopher that also seems to endorse moral relativism, also on

the idea that it is custom that drives morality. David Hume is not normally seen as a moral

relativist, but I have found multiple articles that argue for him as one. David Hume published his

work titled *An Enquiry into the Source of Morals* in 1751, during the time of the Enlightenment,

where he refers to the idea of custom that Montaigne used. Hume uses custom in a way that is

slightly different to the way that Montaigne uses it. Montaigne uses custom to explain why we

act in certain way, specifically as to why we do certain things in a society, whether that be in

physical or moral action.[19] Hume does not use this notion of custom. Hume instead uses custom

to explain why we "know" anything at all. Hume goes over his view of custom in *An Enquiry

Concerning Human Understanding,* and his view of custom is as follows:

> It is sufficient satisfaction, that we can go so far; without repining at the
> narrowness of our faculties, because they will carry us no farther. And it is certain
> we here advance a very intelligible proposition at least, if not a true one, when we
> assert, that, after the constant conjunction of two objects, heat and flame, for
> instance, weight and solidity, we are determined by custom alone to expect the
> one from the appearance of the other.[20]

Hume is showing here that we make connections in the world because we follow causes and

effects and make connections between the two.[21] Custom is what we do after we realize this

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[19] "Essays of Michel De Montaigne," Chapter xxii.
[20] David Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," transcriber Peter Millican, Hume Texts Online (Hume Texts Online), accessed April 9, 2022, https://davidhume.org/texts/e/full, E 5.5 SBN 43.
[21] "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," E 4.4 SBN 26-7.

relationship between a cause and effect. There is no real truth to what we do; it is only us merely

following custom. For example, we only "know" the sun rises in the east and sets in the west

because we have made the connection that it does this every day. We then believe that this is

truth because it happens every day. Hume thinks that we are simply following custom and

trusting that this will always happen. We do not really know that this will happen, but we end up

putting our trust in it because it has always seemed to do that. This is how Hume argues against

moral realism and is showing the reasoning he has as to why it fails. If everything is out of causal

relations and we follow them due to custom, then there is no real backing for real and objective

moral principles because we have no proof of their existence. This is Hume's denial of moral

realism, and subsequent support of a seemingly moral relativist view, one that support moral

subjectivity.

　　　　After one has figured out what custom entails for that society, Hume argues that we use

utility to understand what is morally important for a society. Hume argues that what determines

if something fits in a societies moral code is if it provides utility to that society.[22] But why does

the utility of a moral principle matter? Hume says that it matters because we are driven to find

what is desirable to us through the use of sentiment or feeling.[23] If we feel that something is

undesirable, then we as a society deem that quality or action immoral. Feeling is what drives all

moral action in Hume's view. Hume wants to relate sentiment to morality by saying that feeling

drives us to desire certain qualities. We find utility in these qualities and make them the moral

rules of that society. These rules are then perpetuated by that society due to custom; elders in a

society instill these qualities in those younger than them and they become the moral code of that

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[22] David Hume, "An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals," transcriber Peter Millican, Hume Texts Online (Hume Texts Online), accessed April 9, 2022, https://davidhume.org/texts/m/full, M 5.3 SBN 214.
[23] "An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals," M 5.17 SBN 219.

society until some new feeling arises and replaces an old one. Utility and custom both matter in

context of determining what moral qualities a society deems desirable, but sentiment is the

ultimate factor for Hume when determining morals. Feelings are different for everyone and there

is no outside source that makes these truer for any one person over the other; thus, Hume is

arguing for relativism. He also does not have the issue that Montaigne runs into about the

individual and society because Hume clearly says that morality comes from the individual and

then is utilized by society due to the perceived benefits that everyone collectively agrees upon

produces the most utility.

Moral realism defends against Hume's claim by denying that sentiment is the main driver

of morality. Shafer-Landau states that moral realists support the view that moral truths are real

regardless of any particular attitude towards that moral standard.[24] A certain stance towards the

view does not make that standard wrong or right, but Shafer-Landau claims that in a particular

way, this still "accommodates the possibility that something's rightness or admirability depends

crucially on an agent's attitude."[25] The reason that he specifies that it is in a particular way is

because he is only saying that the two may align. Shafer-Landau specifies that:

> The realist could allow that there is a strong conceptual connection between the
> responses of a suitable characterized ideal observer and the content of moral
> reality. But, for the realist, that would be because the ideal observer would never
> fail to see what was right and wrong anyway. The responses of an ideal observer
> would not be constitutive of moral truth, but merely bear a very close (perhaps
> perfect) correlation with a set of truth whose conditions may be fixed without any
> reference to such an observer.[26]

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[24] *Moral Realism*, 15.
[25] Ibid., 15.
[26] *Moral Realism*, 16.

This is how moral relativism can fit in a moral realist view according to Shafer-Landau, and I

think that it has merit. He is not denying the connections that Hume makes, but instead showing

that these connections can only be made accurately if the observer of a society was perfect.

Shafer-Landau is essentially saying that moral relativists stop short of find the real moral truths

and instead assume that it is their beliefs that drive moral rules. Shafer-Landau holds that

"realists do see moral judgements as beliefs, some of which are true, and true in virtue of

correctly reporting moral facts,"[27] but they do not hold that these sentiments are what drive

morality. Feelings and beliefs maybe true, but they do not determine the truth of morals. I think

that Shafer-Landau's argument is more compelling because it accounts for Hume's thought

process while still maintaining his realist viewpoint. Hume's theory, on the other hand, still

struggles due to its account for utility. Hume still wants to account for morals according to

feelings of the individual. This leaves Hume's theory a little cornered because, on one hand,

utility may require one to do something that is wrong according to their feelings. This makes

Hume's theory complicated because it cannot have both if this is the case; if feeling is preserved,

then utility cannot be fully utilized. The same idea applies in the opposite case. If utility is fully

realized, then sentiment must take a back seat.

      This is similar to the case in the short story called *The One's Who Walk Away from*

Omelas. In this short story, there is a perfect city called Omelas where everything continues to be

perfect so long as one person suffers for everyone else.[28] Everyone continues to live perfectly as

long as everyone agrees to it, but those that do not have to leave and do not come back due to the

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[27] Ibid., 17.
[28] Ursula LeGuin, *The One's Who Walk Away from Omelas,* 1988, Heimir Geirsson and Margaret R.
Holmgren, *Ethical Theory: A Concise Anthology*, 3rd ed. (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2018), 181.Cite
the actual author of the story, Ursula LeGuin.

horror they have seen. This story is intended to be a commentary on how a story need some type

of adversity to be seen as plausible, but this is also very similar to the situation that is set up in

Hume's relativism argument. It could be argued that according to sentiment this is wrong, to

most people at least, but this produces the greatest utility for the society at large. Morals stem

from sentiment for Hume, but in the process of following sentiment, one may have to forgo the

utility produced because it goes against their beliefs. Hume has no answer for this discrepancy

because he must follow the idea that sentiment is where morality stems from, even though it

violates his notion of utility. Hume's notion still struggles with Shafer-Landau's issues with

Montaigne's view because it still requires a transition from the individual to the society, even

though it is through utility. This is the exact issue that is raised in *The One's Who Walk Away*

from Omelas. Although the individuals have certain sentiments, this does not mean that it is

reflected by the society, especially if utility is increased exponentially. This is something we still

see in today's society, namely the continued use of sweat shops by large corporations. They

know what they are doing is morally wrong, according to sentiment-based relativism or moral

realism, but the utility they get out of it is so large that they do it anyways. Hume's issue is that

he is unclear when it comes to situations such as this.

Some people, like Henrick Bohlin, argue that Hume has been misunderstood and is not

arguing for moral relativism at all. In his paper, "Universal Moral Standards and the Problem of

Cultural Relativism in Hume's 'A Dialogue,'" Bohlin argues that Hume is in fact a moral anti-

realist and not a moral relativist. Again, Hume is not traditionally seen as an antirealist either, but

Bohlin laid out a compelling argument that leads into a philosopher that fully endorses the view.

In *A Dialogue,* Hume discusses moral relativism and its problems, but Hume's work has been

dismissed by Simon Blackburn for "depending on the simplistic assumption that cultures differ

only in applying shared general principles to diverse circumstances."[29] Bohlin disagrees with

Blackburn's assertion. In *A Dialogue,* Hume narrates companions traveling to a foreign land

where the narrator is ultimately appalled by the barbarous and savage customs that go against

human nature.[30] Bohlin argues that Hume set it up in this way to show a distinct difference

between his view and relativism. He begins by talking about what he calls a rationally decidable

disagreement. Bohlin asserts that Hume is arguing that it is not only what people think is right

and wrong, but what is right or wrong that varies between cultures.[31] This is not relativism

because it is not based on what people think, but on what is objectively right or wrong in a

society.

       This is a view that moral anti-realists hold. Bohlin's next section is about what is a

rationally comprisable disagreement, or arguments in which both sides can agree to the rational

and moral correctness of the others argument and still not subscribe to it.[32] Bohlin says that there

are two types of rational comprisable disagreement: disagreement due to precision and minute

differences between some moral sentiments. Disagreement due to precision occurs in situations

where limits are not precise when it comes to what is morally right. A situation that Bohlin cites

is the limit to the closeness of family relations.[33] It is seen as morally wrong to marry close

family, but it does not say how close is too close. Minute differences between moral sentiments

occurs because individuals have different feelings to different morals at different times. Bohlin's

example to demonstrate this has to do with aesthetics. He shows how the Ancient Greeks would

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[29] Henrik Bohlin, "Universal Moral Standards and the Problem of Cultural Relativism in Hume's 'A Dialogue,'" *Philosophy* 88, No. 346 (2013): 593–606, Http://Www.jstor.org/Stable/24779098.," n.d., 593-94.
[30] "Universal Moral Standards and the Problem of Cultural Relativism in Hume's 'A Dialogue,'" 595.
[31] Ibid., 596.
[32] Ibid., 596.
[33] Ibid., 597.

find a woman with a low forehead and a unibrow as the pinnacle of beauty, but few eighteenth

century Britons would find this attractive.[34] This is the same with moral sentiments because one

age may think one thing is moral, but then a later one may not. Bohlin point is that although

there are disagreements that cannot be solved, this does not matter because anti-realists hold that

there is no truth value to moral claims. The third point the Bohlin makes is about rationally

uncompromisable disagreements. This occurs when someone has corrupted moral sentiments and

no argument can change the opinion of the other side. People get this corrupted view because of

the people they grow up around, their own self-interests, location and time period, and the

amount of people they have in their lives.[35] This is how Hume shows that objectivity is not

affected by contrasting beliefs. One side clearly has corrupted sentiments, thus does not ruin the

objectivity of moral sentiments. Bohlin argues that Hume shows objectivity, but not truth, in

moral sentiments. This is a form of moral anti-realism and not moral relativism, more

specifically error theory.

Bohlin's conception of Hume's moral theory is most akin to error theory. Error theorists

hold that when one uses moral language, they do talk about what is wrong and right, but they

deny that there really are any opinion-independent moral properties, even though we treat them

as if they are true.[36] Error theorists can be objectivists, but that does not mean that they think that

these objective properties are real or hold any truth value. Moral "truths" to error theorists are as

real as unicorns. They hold that there is no proof that moral laws exist according to any natural

sciences, there is no proof to uphold moral realists' idea for the non-natural properties they hold,

and thus they deny that they exist. Hume in Bohlin's interpretation takes an error theorist stance

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[34] "Universal Moral Standards and the Problem of Cultural Relativism in Hume's 'A Dialogue,'" 597.
[35] Ibid., 600.
[36] *Realism and Antirealism,* 120.

because Hume seems to deny that there are moral laws, but seems to insist that we follow as if

they do exist objectively. This stance is what an error theorist could hold regarding moral laws

and why we follow what moral laws we do.

The foremost proponent of error theory is John Mackie. In his book *Ethics: Inventing

Right and Wrong,* Mackie argues that there are no objective values, that "moral laws" do not

contain any goodness or value, and that they are not part of the fabric of the universe.[37] Although

Mackie appears to be a moral skeptic, he is not. A moral skeptic is one "who rejects morality and

will take no notice of it."[38] Mackie is not taking this stance. He is instead focused on how moral

laws fit into the world, even though he thinks these laws do not hold any real value. He rejects

moral law as being a real thing, but he is noticing how it affects the world regardless of it not

being real. We hold moral laws to be true and objective, even though they do not really exist

according to Mackie. One of the challenges that Mackie must answer is how moral laws can be

objective, even though they do not exist. Mackie says that objectivity has been misconstrued as

descriptivism. Descriptivism is the theory about the meaning of ethical terms in a descriptive

manner as opposed to prescriptive or evaluative.[39] When moral law is said to be prescriptive it

means that the claim the individual makes has no truth value and is merely the individual

providing their moral convictions. Moral laws, if they are to be seen as objective, must be

prescriptive and not descriptive, because they revolve around how things ought to be and not

how they are evaluated to be.[40] It is important to note this, because if moral laws are descriptive,

then we are not trying to understand moral laws as they should be. Instead, we are trying to

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[37] John Leslie Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong,* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1983), 15.
[38] *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong,* 16.
[39] Ibid., 23.
[40] Ibid., 23-24.

evaluate them for what we understand them to be, not as they ought to be. With this

understanding, moral laws can be objective under Mackie's moral error theory while still not be

real. If moral laws are understood to be prescriptive, Mackie's error theory can stand to say that

moral laws can seem to be objective.

　　　　This can appear to many to go against their common view of morality. Mackie knows

that his error theory seems to go against the common view, and it must be defended to the utmost

degree to convince others of its merit.[41] He gives to view of moral error theory, relativism and

queerness, in which he gives more merit to the latter due to its more general applicability.

Mackie states that it has two parts: a metaphysical part and an epistemological one. Mackie says

that:

> If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations
> of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.
> Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special
> faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways
> of knowing everything else.[42]

This is the iteration of error theory that he proposes; it shows why we follow moral laws

objectively while still allowing him to be able to claim that they do not exist. Formulating his

error theory in this way allows him to claim that we cannot know what is objective and what is

not. It allows him to define his own moral law while still allowing him to reject their objectivity.

If moral laws are objective and only knowable through "some special faculty of moral

perception," then there is no way to be sure that the moral laws we follow are not fictitious, and

we simply follow them because it is what we think are the correct moral actions in that

circumstance. They can be objective, but Mackie insists that we have made an error in assuming

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[41] *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong,* 38.
[42] Ibid., 38.

that they are a real part of the universe and not laws that we follow arbitrarily due to our own

thinking. This is not relativism, since Mackie is not saying that we follow whatever we

subjectively feel. Instead, we accept "an objective moral" and follow it how we think it applies

subjectively.

Mackie further argues that moral laws can be interpreted differently and still remain

universal. Mackie uses the example of the golden rule to illustrate this. The rule says, "Do not do

unto others as you would have that they should do unto you," but this leaves open many

possibilities for how to interpret it.[43] Not everyone has the same feelings about what happens to

them, and thus individuals have justification to do vastly different things depending on their

stance. Each individual will still be ruled by "an objective moral law," but they will not be

following it exactly the same as the other. His reflections on individuals' reactions/adherence to

morality explain Mackie's ideas regarding the differences in personal moral codes despite many

claiming that moral laws are objective. We have made an error, according to Mackie, in thinking

that moral laws are a real part of the universe with only one correct moral answer. Mackie

suggests that just because there seems to be a moral law that is applicable to all does not mean

that that law is actually a part of the universe, and it can be exploited however one desires.

Mackie does not subscribe to the idea that there is a moral law that truly binds us, there are only

objective ideas that we can use how we wish. Moral laws are not real for Mackie, and he argues

that they are able to be manipulated to best suit what we need or feel.

Moral realists obviously have qualms with Makie's analyses, because he directly denies

the existence of moral laws. Moral realists do not really have an issue with Mackie's conception

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[43] *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong,* 89.

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of morality being objective, as it is akin to how they view moral laws. However, realists reject

his claims that moral laws do not exist. Objectivity for a moral realist means that moral laws

apply to all moral agents in the universe. These objective moral laws must be prescriptive as well

because they describe how the universal moral law should be and not necessarily how it is in

actuality. These laws are seen as a part of the fabric of the universe in the moral realist view, so

they stand as the ultimate definition of moral truths. However, there are a few key differences

between the moral realist's conception of objectivity and the moral error theorist's conception of

it. As Shafer-Landau explains in *Moral Realism*: *A Defense:*

> The key virtues of a [moral realist's] objectivist views are three: they capture the
> impartiality of the moral perspective, preserve the categorical nature of moral
> demands, and provide a plausible view of the nature of moral error.[44]

What Shafer-Landau is saying is that moral realism's conception of objectivity in the moral law

must be prescriptive, but it also allows for a descriptive element as well. As mentioned above,

descriptivism is the theory about the meaning of emoral terms in a descriptive manner. [45]

Descriptivism is a way to describe how moral reasoning actually is, and not how moral reasoning

ought to be according to the moral law. This is important because moral realists are concerned

with moral laws being a part of the universe. One goal of moral realism is to eventually

understand and know these moral laws, and then be able to say what moral errors we have been

making as moral agents. As a moral realist, it is important to understand what moral errors we

have been making and try to rectify these mistakes if we wish to understand the moral laws. This

is distinct from error theory, because error theorists do not care about knowing what moral

reasoning is actually like in the world. They argue that morals are not real. For an error theorist,

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[44] *Moral Realism*, 40.
[45] *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong,* 23.

there is no point in trying to know what moral mistakes we are making, because technically

every moral action we make cannot be simply broken down into right or wrong. Shafer-Landau

uses the example of the Nazis in World War II to explain this issue. Moral error theorists do not

focus on the descriptive at all, and this can lead to ignoring actual moral mistakes being made.

As is the case with the Nazis, the horrible things that they did to the Jews and other minority

groups cannot be appealed to some higher moral standard, because they are not seen as real.[46]

Moral issues ought to be some way objectively analyzed, but there is not overarching moral law

that says what individuals are doing is wrong. Error theorists cannot appeal to these universal

moral laws because they do not think that they are real. Furthermore, they suggest that things like

what the Nazis did cannot be said to be wrong objectively. This objection to moral error theory's

idea of objectivity stems from the fact that morals are not real for them. This ultimately is the

biggest contradiction between moral realism and error theory.

Mackie thinks that no class of natural properties has any distinctive opinion-independent

feature that makes them worthy of being called "moral properties".[47] Thus, there are no moral

laws. Although we do make moral judgements, we are not actually making any judgement

according to error theorists. Statements like "John is good" or "Killing is wrong" ultimately have

no meaning for Mackie, because he thinks that there is no feature of the universe that makes

these ideals moral laws. He bases morality on opinions of what goodness is, and he thinks that

the moral laws cannot be opinion independent, thus moral laws are not credible.[48] They are only

opinions and not objective on their own, even though we treat them as such. Mackie argues that

we cannot know these moral laws, because they are intelligible to us, as moral realists hold.

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[46] *Moral Realism,* 41.
[47] *Realism and Antirealism*, 121.
[48] Ibid., 120.

Moral realists answer this by saying that just because we do not know these moral laws, since we

do not have the faculties for it, does not mean that these moral properties do not exist. These

moral laws are intelligible to us, and so it is very possible that they do exist even though we

cannot know them. Just because we cannot know these moral laws as humans, does not mean

that they do not exist.

  Moral error theorists also assert that there is nothing about these "moral laws" that makes

them worthy of being laws, mainly because they do not follow natural principles. This is wrong

to assert, because moral realists are not claiming that moral laws follow natural laws. Moral

realists hold that there is a domain in which moral laws exist that is non-natural or not

explainable by natural science, and that is why we have no access to them.[49] These maybe akin

to how number theory acts. It is not entirely natural, but still applies to our lives. The promote

the welfare of moral agents, and therefore we must care about following them. Mackie feels that

they are not worthy of being laws, as there is no evidence of them and they cannot be proven,

thus they lack credibility of universal governability. Although we cannot know them, they do not

necessarily lack credibility. Mackie would need to prove that they lack credibility through some

proof that these non-natural laws do not apply to moral agents. Mackie has not done so, and his

arguments do not demonstrate their lack of credibility. He simply denies their credibility due to

being non-natural. Mackie is looking at moral properties through an *a posteriori* lens, meaning

that we must be able to know and experience this knowledge through the five senses. Whereas

moral realists, like Shafer-Landau, hold that we can know these moral laws through an *a priori*

lens, meaning one that we can access through reason alone.[50] Mackie examines these laws

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[49] *Moral Realism*, 14-15.
[50] Ibid., 22.

through a naturalist lens that differs from non-natural moral realists like Shafer-Landau. His

perspective causes him to conclude that they are not credible when they actually do hold

credibility when analyzed through reason rather than the senses. Mackie makes a rash conclusion

based only on experience when we should be considering much more when studying something

that we do not understand fully, like moral laws and how they act on moral agents in the universe

Additionally, Mackie rejects realism. He concludes that his knowledge/understanding of

the world, experienced through his senses, maintains that there are many different cultures and

societies in the world and yet there are not many convergences of moral laws.[51] This emphasizes

Mackie's second view of error theory that originates from relativity rather than queerness and

focuses on how morals seem to be relative even as we deem them to be objective. This concept

differs from moral relativity, because he still holds that we appeal to moral laws as being

objective, but the laws seem to be relative in that there is no consensus on what they ought to be.

He concludes that there is no convergence or morality based on empirical fact, and therefore

moral realism is not true.[52]

Mackie relies on the fact that we do not see the same moral codes in all societies in the

world. This argument is not as strong, as there are some moral rules seen in different societies

that are similar to one another. It also stands to reason that some societies do not have the same

advancements that others do and so they cannot make the same moral decisions.[53] This would

greatly influence the way the society makes moral decisions and how they can perceive different

situations. This is like the ancient Spartans that would kill any infant that was seen as weak or

having a disability, since they were too weak for the society. Now-a-days we know that this is

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[51] *Realism and Antirealism*, 118.
[52] Ibid., 118.
[53] Ibid., 118.

not the case and is morally wrong, because we have progressed as a society to help those that

may have disabilities. Such changes in understanding have been possible due to the greater use

and advancement of social understanding that allows us to realize morally wrong actions. We

have used this growth to foster better understanding of one another, and this has caused us to

realize these actions were morally wrong. We could eventually be able to know the moral truths

Mackie questions if we keep improving our moral discourse so that we can know non-natural

truths of the universe. This change can be seen throughout time and all over the world. Societies

increasingly have begun to have similar moral codes, because we are becoming more attune to

these moral laws. We may never fully reach understanding of these laws, but we can try our best

to keep improving our knowledge and hope to find them through our reason.

Realists are committed to the use of reason to discover these moral truths. Realism is a

form of cognitivism.[54] Cognitivism, as Shafer-Landau puts it:

> [Cognitivism] allows for a central class of judgements within a domain to count
> as beliefs, capable of being true of false in virtue of their more or less accurate
> representation of the facts within the domain. Realists see moral judgements as
> beliefs, some of which are true, and true in virtue of correctly reporting moral
> facts.[55]

Shafer-Landau is saying that realists contend that there is a domain of moral laws that are

correctly reporting moral judgements. This is known as cognitivism. Every realist is a

cognitivist, but not every cognitivist is a realist. Realists hold that some of our beliefs are belong

to this domain, but we do not have all the correct beliefs or judgements so not all of them exist in

this domain. This is why we see moral error in the world and have not come to a collective

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[54] *Moral Realism*, 17.
[55] Ibid., 17.

agreement about moral laws. If we were able to use our reason to deduce these truths, then moral

error would not occur.

Furthermore, non-cognitivism opposes moral realism. Non-cognitivists, as the name

suggests, deny the cognitive element of moral realism, and by extension deny moral realism.

Non-cognitivists hold that when we make moral statements, in reality, we are not saying

anything with truth value at all, and we are not trying to aim at truth in the first place.[56] It is our

emotions that motivate us to act and thus incorporate our desires into our actions.[57] Moral

statements are thus inert and have no truth value in them. It is as if one is just making a statement

and not one with moral inclinations. Non-cognitivism functions on the idea that when one makes

a moral statement then they are trying to get the other to appeal to their emotional stance and

believe in their position.[58] They reject objectivity in ethical debates and thus also deny the actual

existence of these truths. I think that non-cognitivism will pose one of the more threatening

challenges of the positions that I have mentioned above. I think that it is the most threatening

because it denies everything that realism stands for, whereas the other views hold one thing or

another that realists also hold. Relativism holds that our moral ideas can become better as society

continues to develop and error theory holds that moral laws are objective, but non-cognitivism

denies both claims. I think this makes it more threatening because it denies everything that

realism stands for and it denies moral laws in a way that is significantly different from error

theory, the other anti-realist view.

Richard Gardner is a proponent of non-cognitivism, and he argues for it in his piece titled

"Abolishing Morality." He discusses how the idea of abolishing morality is a difficult

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[56] *Realism and Antirealism*, 123.
[57] Ibid., 123.
[58] Ibid., 124.

undertaking because moral language is so imbedded in every part of our lives.[59] It is a part of our

speech, our place in the world, and how we have solved major issues in the past like slavery and

torture.[60] Morality and the idea that we follow moral laws is hard to part with because it is so

integral to how we behave. Non-cognitivists, like Gardner, deny all moral laws and thoughts that

we have because it claims that none of these really exist. Gardner instead claims that non-

cognitivists:

> Are expressing our feelings, emotions, attitudes, or stances, and/or attempting to
> influence the attitudes or behaviors of others…. Non-cognitivists are rarely
> troubled by our use of moral language to express attitudes and behaviors of
> others.[61]

Non-cognitivists hold that when we claim something is a "moral rule/law" we are merely

expressing our opinions and not making any moral claims because there are none to appeal to.

Moral laws are nonexistent for non-cognitivists. Saying that, "John is a bad person because he

steals and this is morally wrong," would be equivalent to saying, "The dog would like a bone to

chew on." We are only making expressions of our ideals with no moral claims actually being

made. This also means that every claim we make is subjective and does not apply to every moral

agent universally. It is only the individual's opinions being expressed to others. This is a stark

contrast to moral realism because they claim there are no objective moral laws.

The basic formulation of non-cognitivism follows as such. Cognitivism holds that what

ought to be is based on belief in moral laws, beliefs are not intrinsically motivating us to act,

only desire does this.[62] Internalism, or what we desire from inside ourselves alone, holds that

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[59] Richard Garner, "Abolishing Morality," Ethical Theory and Moral Practice 10, No. 5 (2007): 499–513,
Http://Www.jstor.org/Stable/40602545.," n.d., 500.
[60] "Abolishing Morality," 500.
[61] Ibid., 500.
[62] *Realism and Antirealism*, 122-23.

moral judgments are intrinsically motivating, therefore cognitivist views and internalism cannot exit together.[63] Gardner, and other non-cognitivist, hold that because belief does not motivate us to act in certain manners, whether that be morally or not, that moral laws must not be true and it must be that it is our own wants and desires that make us act how we do. They also say that moral claims, by extension, also do not hold any weight because it is only the desire of each individual expressing themselves. Moral realists find issue with non-cognitivists because of their idea that belief does not motivate individuals to act.

This is an argument that dates back all the way to Hume who claims that "the passions" motivate and that reason, or belief, is motivationally inert.[64] This is known as Humeanism. Internalism and Humeanism put moral realists in a corner it seems because one either reject Humeanism and accepts that morals come from our desire, or you reject internalism and hold that belief is unmotivating alone. This is an interesting assertion because I think that it refuses to acknowledge the idea that it could be the other way around. A moral realist can reject both Humeanism and internalism. I think that it is belief and reason that incites us to act as well, but in a different way from the passions. Our reason makes us do certain things because we believe them to be the correct course of action. Passion makes us act because we feel that we must do something, not necessarily making the correct choice in the process because we are blinded by them. When we act according to the passions we simply do "things" because we cannot follow a defined idea due to overwhelming emotion. However, action through belief is because we have rationally thought about the action and realize we must carry it out in order to fulfill the goal before us. Passion can also force one to not act, due to being overwhelmed with our emotions.

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[63] Ibid., 123.
[64] Ibid., 123.

Moral realists understand that passion can be a useful tool to get to the moral law, but it is the

belief that they exist that motivates us to act so we can understand them. Shafer-Landau affirms

this position stating that:

> I reject Humeanism and am proposing to reject internalism as well. That is
> inconsistent. This is close but not quite right. Non-cognitivists have made an error
> in assuming that belief is unmotivating when it comes to action. Rejecting
> Humeanism entails that some beliefs are intrinsically motivating. But evaluative
> beliefs (including specifically moral beliefs) might be intrinsically motivating
> without being necessarily motivation. And internalism is a thesis about necessary
> motivation. So one may reject Humeanism without also embracing internalism. If
> Humeanism is false, then a belief, when it motivates, may motivate in virtue of its
> own nature and content, either entirely without the aid of ancillary affective states,
> or by means of generating such states.[65]

He is saying that belief can be motivating intrinsically, but it does not require the "necessary"

motivation of desire to be motivating in how we act. One may be intrinsically motivated by their

moral desires, but that does not mean that it is the desire that is making the individual act. This

also does not mean that they are only motivated because of their desires like Humeanism holds.

They are motivated because they intrinsically are acting because of the moral law itself and not

because of their desires. Non-cognitivism refuses to acknowledge this possibility and this is very

plausible. This is not the only issue with non-cognitivism.

There are more issues with non-cognitivism than just the idea that belief cannot motivate.

Non-cognitivism also falters because it does not have a straightforward analysis of moral

arguments. Cognitivism, and moral realism by extension, does not have this issue. When we

make a moral argument, we do assess whether the argument is sound or unsound, valid, or

invalid. This shows that when we make a moral argument and analyze it, we are concerned with

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[65] *Moral Realism*, 147.

truth-preservation as an aim of the moral argument.[66] Non-cognitivism cannot evaluate moral

claims based on truth-preservation like moral realism can. This issue is known as Frege's Abyss,

as first noted by Blackburn.[67] Non-cognitivists can make sense of sameness of meaning in

asserted and unasserted contexts, and they must do this if they are to remain logical validity in

moral arguments.[68] They run into issue though because moral argumentation utilizes assertions,

negations, disjunctions and conditionals. This is an issue because one's assertion of a claim

changes depending on whether they are using one of these argumentation techniques. Moral

predicates are meaningful and can describe the subjects they are concerned with.[69] This is a

natural and simple way of communication of moral talk that non-cognitivism cannot do. Shafer-

Landau gives a great example of this with his explanation of virtue deserving a reward. As he

explains, cognitivists acknowledge that there is "such a thing as virtue, and dessert, and

reward."[70] However, for non-cognitivists "we are not describing a virtue and saying of it that is

has some property that of deserving reward."[71] There is no such moral property for non-

cognitivists that would warrant dessert or punishment because everything is from the desire of

the individual. This causes a massive issue for the legal system as well because non-cognitivism

holds that reward and punishment for moral failing does not apply because it is simply desire of

the individuals. They do not have a concrete answer to this issue at all. They struggle with saying

that "x deserves y" because, even though they may be able to account for dessert, they cannot

account for other cases such as "wouldn't it be nice were x to get y?" or "it's good that x has

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[66] *Moral Realism*, 23.
[67] Ibid., 23.
[68] Ibid.,23.
[69] Ibid., 24.
[70] Ibid., 24.
[71] *Moral Realism*, 24.

y."[72] Even if they can somehow get past this issue they still have the problem with this because

they believe that virtue is inert, or it means nothing. So, even if they can get past the first issue,

there is nothing to serve as the object of such approvals in the examples above.[73] This dilemma

does not exist for moral realists because they talk about moral laws and actions in these types of

terms every time morality is in the equation. Moral realism clearly has an edge here the non-

cognitivism cannot answer.

       This has been a theme throughout the entirety of my thesis. Moral realism has answers to

moral questions in a simpler manner than the other three do. Not only is it simpler, it also is

expressed in a manner that seems more in tune with how the everyday person discusses morality.

Moral relativism struggles because of placing where morals come from and relying upon

sentiment as the driving force for why societies attach themselves to them without ever giving

clear reasoning for how or why this occurs. Error theory struggles because they rely all their

judgements on natural laws without considering the possibility of non-natural ones. Error theory

also falters because it relies on *a posteriori* observation and does not think that *a priori* ones

have the potential to explain moral laws. Non-cognitivism struggles because it goes about talking

about moral dilemmas in a manner that fails to explain some of the nuances in moral discussion.

Non-cognitivists cannot deal with certain moral questions because of their disregard of the moral

law altogether. All the problems that the other views struggle with are not an issue for moral

realism because it claims that the moral laws stem from a non-natural source, that is objective for

all, can be known through reason but does not discount the importance of sentiments, and it

allows for more natural discussion of "just desserts" because it acknowledges moral principles

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[72] Ibid., 25.
[73] Ibid., 25.

like virtue and vice. Moral realism can account for all these theories shortcomings and has

answers for its own.

Moral realism is the most consistent of the theories that I have brought up, and it is able

to refute the claims they make against it. Moral realists make up roughly 56% of all philosophers

when it comes to their moral views.[74] This is because it is the most convincing of all the

metaphysical moral stances. Moral realism has been around for longer than the other theories,

and thus has had the time to be more fleshed out and able to deal with its weaknesses better than

the other ones. Moral realism has stayed consistent throughout history and has maintained its

position that moral laws are objective for all moral agents and may be unknowable to humans,

but that we must still strive to make the correct moral decisions according to them. This has

shaped these other theories because they all have formed in opposition to it. Along this line of

thinking, it shows that moral realism has been the most dominant and compelling theory, the one

that the others have tried to dethrone. These other theories have popped up because of how

controversial and important of a topic morality is in one's everyday life.

Moral laws are what dictate the moral principles that we apply in our everyday live, and

moral realism is the theory that backs these laws and holds them as the standard that we, as

moral agents, must strive to achieve. Moral laws are objective for all moral agents, non-

naturalistic in nature, and are applicable to all these agents. Moral realism encapsulates all of

these and defends this view in a manner that is much stronger and more consistent than the other

theories. Moral relativism, error theory, and non-cognitivism all attempt to debunk this way of

thinking but each one falls short for different reasons. Moral realism as a theory encapsulated all

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[74] Moral Realism, 300.

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the parts of moral thought, and it can account for all the "flaws" within it making it the most

compelling and correct theory of moral thought. So, when one asks, "what is morality at is

core?" they must think of moral realism as the answer to this question.

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