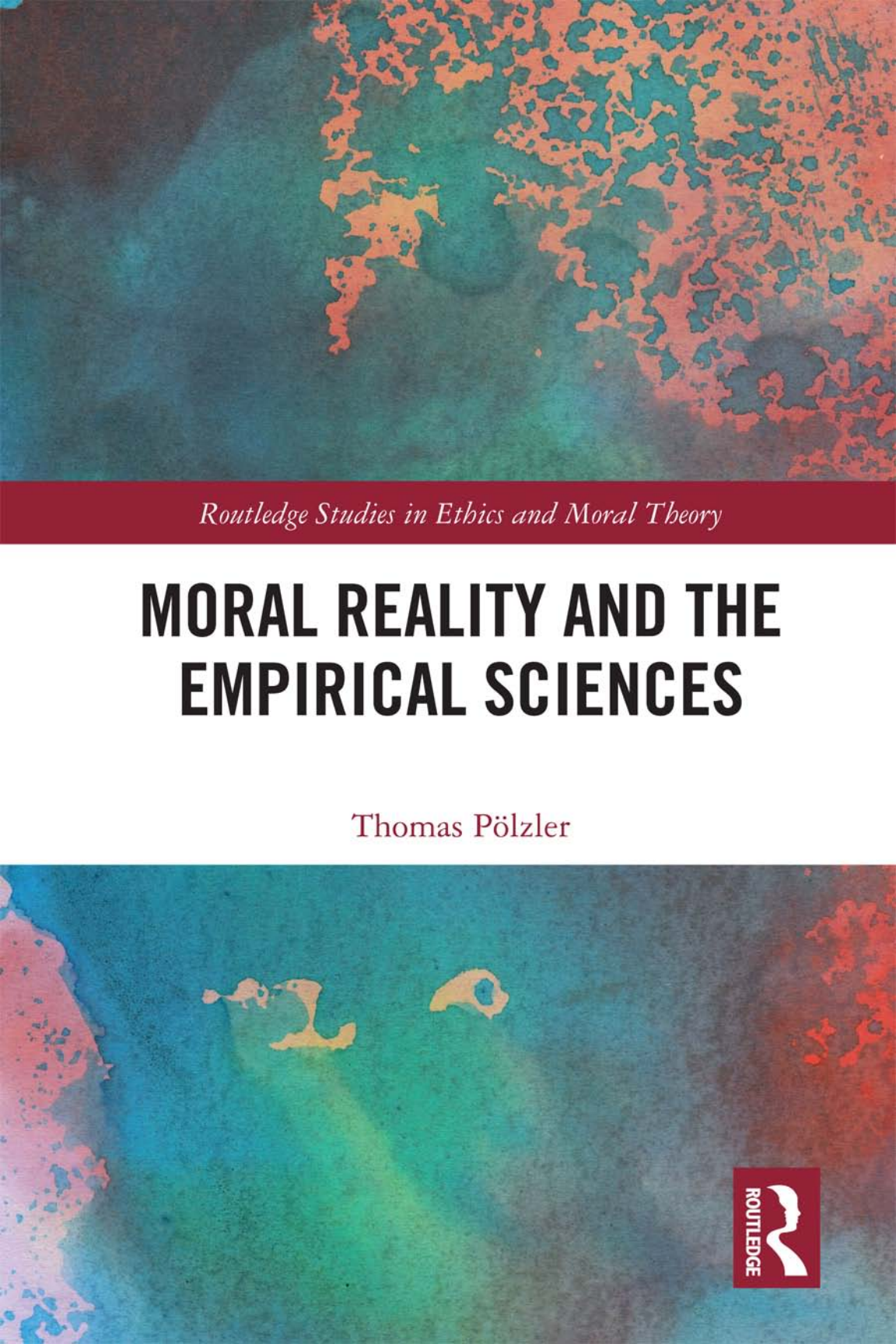




Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory

MORAL REALITY AND THE EMPIRICAL SCIENCES

Thomas Pölzler



Moral Reality and the Empirical Sciences

Are there objective moral truths (things that are morally right or wrong independently of what anybody thinks about them)? To answer this question more and more scholars have recently begun to appeal to evidence from scientific disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience, biology, and anthropology. This book investigates this novel scientific approach in a comprehensive, empirically focused, partly clarificatory, and partly metatheoretical way. It argues for two main theses. First, it is possible for the empirical sciences to contribute to the moral realism/anti-realism debate. And second, most appeals to science that have so far been proposed are insufficiently empirically substantiated.

The book's main chapters address four prominent science-based arguments for or against the existence of objective moral truths: the presumptive argument, the argument from moral disagreement, the sentimentalist argument, and the evolutionary debunking argument. For each of these arguments Thomas Pölzler first identifies the sense in which its underlying empirical hypothesis would have to be true in order for the argument to work. Then he shows that the available scientific evidence fails to support this hypothesis. Finally, he also makes suggestions as to how to test the hypothesis more validly in future scientific research.

Moral Reality and the Empirical Sciences is an important contribution to the moral realism/anti-realism debate that will appeal both to philosophers and scientists interested in moral psychology and metaethics.

Thomas Pölzler is a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Graz, Austria. He mainly works on moral psychology and metaethics. His articles have been published in journals such as *Synthese*, *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, and *South African Journal of Philosophy*.

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First published 2018
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pözlzer, Thomas, author.

Title: Moral reality and the empirical sciences / by Thomas Pözlzer.

Description: 1 [edition]. | New York : Taylor & Francis, 2018. |

Series: Routledge studies in ethics and moral theory ; 46 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018012540 | ISBN 9781138503090 (hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: Ethics. | Science. | Science—Moral and ethical aspects.

Classification: LCC BJ57 .P58 2018 | DDC 170/.42—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018012540>

ISBN: 978-1-138-50309-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-14521-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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Acknowledgments

This book has benefited greatly from the feedback, writings and support of numerous people. Its origins trace back to my PhD thesis in philosophy at the University of Graz. I am indebted to my supervisor, Johann Marek, for his helpful comments on this thesis and for having me allowed to develop my thoughts on metaethics and moral psychology so freely.

After the completion of my PhD, I transformed some of the thesis's chapters into independent articles. Parts of the book elaborate on or incorporate passages from these articles.

- Chapter 2: “Can the Empirical Sciences Contribute to the Moral Realism/Anti-Realism Debate?” (forthcoming in *Synthese*)
- Chapter 3: “Revisiting Folk Moral Realism” (published 2017 in *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 8 (2), 455–476) and “How to Measure Moral Realism” (forthcoming in *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*)
- Chapter 5: “Moral Judgements and Emotions: A Less Intimate Relationship than Recently Claimed” (published 2015 in *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 35 (3), 177–195)
- Chapter 6: “Are Moral Judgements Adaptations? Three Reasons Why It Is so Difficult to Tell” (published 2017 in *South African Journal of Philosophy* 36 (3), 425–439)

Most of these articles were published open access. The only exception is “Moral Judgements and Emotions: A Less Intimate Relationship than Recently Claimed.” I am grateful to the American Psychological Association for granting me permission to use material from this article.

For the last three years I have worked as a researcher and lecturer at the Section of Practical Philosophy at the University of Graz. The support that I have received from Lukas Meyer, the head of this Section, can hardly be overstated. Not only has he acted as a role model in philosophical and professional thinking, and has enabled me to invest much time in this book project; he also encouraged me to resynthesize my thoughts in the first place. In addition, I am also thankful to all my other great colleagues (from whom I have learned so much).

While most of the book was written at the University of Graz, I also had the opportunity to spend a month at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and another month at the University of Toronto; and I am currently an Erwin Schrödinger Fellow at the Psychology Department of the College of Charleston. For making all these wonderful experiences possible, I am thankful to my hosts as well as to the following funding institutions: the University of Graz's Faculty of Arts and Humanities, the University of Graz's Office of International Relations, the State of Styria (Austria), and the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) (J 4163-G24).

Earlier drafts of chapters were presented at conferences, workshops, colloquia and seminars around the world. I would like to thank the audiences at all these events for their helpful comments. Further and particularly important contributions have been made by Lieuwe Zijlstra, David Enoch, Jen Wright, Norbert Paulo, Kian Mintz-Woo and several anonymous reviewers for journals. Their feedback has allowed me to significantly improve my arguments and theses. Finally, I would like to thank all those who have supported me in private life: my family, my friends, and most importantly, Nadja Oswald. Without them I could never have finished this book.

1 Introduction

Is there a reality that some of our moral judgments correspond to—a moral reality that is “out there,” “waiting to be discovered”? In answering this question, more and more researchers have recently begun to appeal to evidence from scientific disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience, biology and anthropology. In this book, I will investigate this novel scientific approach in a comprehensive, empirically focused, partly clarificatory and partly metatheoretical way. I will argue for two main theses. First, it is possible for the empirical sciences to contribute to the moral realism/anti-realism debate. And second, most appeals to science that have so far been proposed are insufficiently empirically substantiated.

Claims about a “moral reality” and a “scientific approach” to this issue can be understood in different ways. Any investigation of these claims must therefore be preceded by clarifications of the particular understanding one assumes. This is the purpose of the following subsections, in which I will introduce you in detail to the scientific approach to the issue of moral reality. First, I will explain the philosophical debate about this issue, that is, the moral realism/anti-realism debate. Then I will sketch how and in which sense the scientific approach to this debate has recently become popular. Finally, I will specify my above main theses, identify ways in which this book advances our understanding of realist and anti-realist appeals to science, and outline the book’s content.

1.1 Moral Realism and Anti-Realism

Let us begin by getting clear about how to understand the question of moral reality. Moral realism (which affirms such a reality) and moral anti-realism (which denies it) are—quite obviously—views about morality. Morality involves questions like the following: Is it always wrong to break a promise? Ought we to maximize overall happiness? Are developed states morally responsible for mitigating climate change? Philosophers have addressed such questions from two different perspectives: the perspective of normative ethics and the perspective of metaethics.

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Normative ethicists (or first-order ethicists) provide and justify answers to moral questions. Immanuel Kant, for example, argued that it is always wrong to break a promise because if people were free to break promises the whole social institution of making promises would collapse. John Stuart Mill argued that humans ought to maximize overall happiness because happiness is the only thing that humans desire as an end in itself. And according to some climate ethicists, developed states are morally responsible for mitigating climate change because these states have been the main beneficiaries of greenhouse-gas emitting activities.

The above examples demonstrate that normative ethicists take a stance on what is morally right, wrong, good, bad and so forth. In engaging in metaethics (or second-order ethics), in contrast, philosophers purport to remain morally neutral. Their aim is not to answer moral questions. Rather, they step on a higher level of abstraction and propose philosophical claims *about* such questions. Depending on the particular nature of these claims, we can distinguish four main areas of metaethics (see Huemer 2005: 1–2):

- (1) *Moral Semantics* is about moral language, or more precisely about the meaning and reference of moral sentences and terms.
- (2) *Philosophical Moral Psychology*¹ is about moral thinking, or more precisely about the meaning and reference of moral judgments and concepts.
- (3) *Moral Epistemology* is about moral knowledge, or more precisely about the possibility and sources of moral knowledge.
- (4) *Moral Metaphysics* is about moral reality, or more precisely about the existence and nature of moral properties and facts.

While it has occasionally been argued that moral realism and anti-realism are views in normative ethics,² I will here—in accordance with the broad majority of philosophers—assume that they must rather be regarded as (at least primarily) metaethical claims. This means that in investigating the question of moral reality we cannot hope for (significant) knowledge about what we morally ought to do (about whether we may break promises, whether we are obliged to maximize happiness, whether we are morally responsible to mitigate climate change and so on). What is at issue in this debate is rather the philosophical nature or status of morality.³

Assuming that moral realism and anti-realism are metaethical claims, which particular metaethical issue/s are they about? Here philosophers' opinions diverge strongly. In fact, it is not even clear to which main area/s of metaethics the moral realism/anti-realism debate is most appropriately ascribed to. In light of my above characterizations ("moral reality," "out there," "waiting to be discovered"), the most obvious choice seems to be moral metaphysics. However, the moral realism/anti-realism debate has recently also been understood as a debate in moral semantics (concerning, for example, the truth-aptness and truth of moral sentences; Sayre-McCord 1988), in moral epistemology (concerning whether we have any moral

knowledge; e.g., Horwich 1998), and in several non-metaphysical areas of metaethics combined (e.g., Boyd 1988).

Many of my theses and arguments in this book will hold on most or all plausible understandings of the question of moral reality. My explicit focus, however, will be on the most natural and historically most prominent metaphysical way of understanding this question (see, e.g., Brink 1989: 7; Huemer 2005: 4; Joyce 2007a; Miller 2014). In particular, I assume that moral realism and anti-realism are about the existence of objective moral properties (properties such as moral rightness, wrongness, goodness, badness). Proponents of any variant of realism believe that there are such properties (even though they disagree about their nature). Proponents of any variant of anti-realism, in contrast, deny their existence (even though they disagree about why these properties do not exist).

Moral Realism: Objective moral properties exist.

Moral Anti-Realism: Objective moral properties do not exist.

Needless to say, claims about the existence of objective moral properties can themselves be interpreted in different ways. So let me also briefly explain my understanding of these claims' main concepts: "properties," "existence," "objectivity" and "morality."

Properties and Existence

Properties are entities that are ascribed to things in order to characterize them. One important metaphysical debate about properties concerns the question of whether there can be properties that are not exemplified (i.e., not had by any thing). For example, could there be redness without anything in the world actually being red? In the context of our discussion, we fortunately need not concern ourselves with this debate. This is because when moral realists and anti-realists talk about moral properties, they almost unanimously mean *exemplified* moral properties. In other words, their disagreement is not about whether such properties exist in some abstract realm but about whether anything in the world is actually objectively morally right, wrong, good, bad and so on. (Shafer-Landau 2006: 210).

A concept closely related to properties—and one that I will also often use in what follows—is the concept of facts. Facts consist in the exemplification of properties by things. For example, to say that it is a fact that breaking promises is always wrong is just to say that breaking promises always exemplifies the property of wrongness. Since the moral realism/anti-realism debate is about the existence of *exemplified* objective moral properties (as just pointed out), this means that instead of saying that moral realists and anti-realists disagree about the existence of objective moral properties, we can also say that they disagree about the existence of objective moral facts. While moral realists affirm the existence of objective moral facts, moral anti-realists deny them.

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Objectivity

In comparison to “properties” and “existence,” explaining the sense of objectivity that is at issue in the moral realism/anti-realism debate is a much more delicate matter. Different philosophical debates are based on fundamentally different accounts of this concept. In our particular context, objectivity is most often—and, I believe, most aptly—explicated as observer- (or mind- or subject- or stance-)independence (e.g., Huemer 2005: 2–4; Joyce 2007a; Miller 2014; Shafer-Landau 2003). For a property to be objective in this sense means that whether a thing has this property is independent from the mental states of observers—from what individuals believe about it, from what cultures dominantly believe about it, from how observers respond to it and so on.⁴

To better grasp the distinction between observer-independence and observer-dependence, it is helpful to look at some examples. A clear case of an objective property is squareness. Whether a thing is square is determined by whether it has four equal sides and equal angles. It does not matter whether any observer believes that the thing is square, desires that it is square, hopes that it is square and so on (Huemer 2005: 2). From our everyday lives we are familiar with subjective properties as well. Facts about what is “fashionable” or “red,” for example, do seem to depend on the mental states of observers. For a thing to be fashionable means that (particular) people believe it is fashionable, and for a thing to be red means that normal subjects under normal conditions respond to it by having red-experiences.⁵

The question of the objectivity of moral rightness, wrongness, goodness, badness and so on can be understood as asking whether these properties’ metaphysical status resembles that of squareness or rather that of fashionableness/redness. Suppose it were always wrong to break promises. Would breaking promises still be always wrong if I myself believed that it is not always wrong to break promises, if the culture in which I live dominantly believed that it is not always wrong to break promises, if humans did not respond with disapproval to breaking promises and so on?

Morality

Finally, understanding our metaphysical definition of the moral realism/anti-realism debate also requires considering the notion of morality.

What it means for a property to be moral depends on what moral sentences and judgments purport to refer to, and thus on what these sentences and judgments mean. This is a highly controversial issue. For example, must a judgment purport to refer to objective moral facts in order to qualify as moral? Must it be accompanied by corresponding motivation? Must it entail categorical reasons for action? Must it be about a particular subject matter, such as harm or fairness? One’s answers to many of these questions strongly affect the plausibility of the existence of objective moral truths.

Both moral realists and anti-realists have accordingly put great efforts into substantiating particular conceptual accounts of moral sentences and judgments (in particular, those accounts that are entailed by or fit well with their respective metaphysical views).

Most strongly and clearly, the plausibility of moral realism and anti-realism depends on the semantic/philosophically psychological question of what (if anything) moral sentences and judgments purport to refer to. Suppose, for example, moral sentences and judgments did not purport to refer to objective moral facts. Of course, this would not affect which kinds of objective facts exist. The world's inventory would remain unchanged. Yet such a non-objectivist moral semantics and philosophical moral psychology would imply that whatever objective facts do exist, none of them deserve to be called *moral*. This is because moral facts are those facts that we purport to refer to when we speak and think about morality (see Huemer 2005: 4–7; Loeb 2008: 355, 359–360; Shafer-Landau 2003: 17).

In what follows, it will be helpful to be able to relate moral realism and anti-realism most naturally and economically to their semantic and philosophically psychological presuppositions. I will therefore often state these claims in terms of objective moral truths (i.e., objectively true moral sentences and judgments). In particular, I will understand realism as the affirmation and anti-realism as the denial of objective moral truths. This alternative formulation does not betray the fact that moral realism and anti-realism are essentially about moral reality—or at least, it does not do so as long as one assumes what I take to be the most plausible conception of moral truth.

In this book I assume that moral truth is best understood in a “correspondence-theoretic” sense (see Huemer 2005: 38–44; Miller 2009: 138–140; Sayre-McCord 2015). According to this understanding, moral truth is about the correct representation of moral facts. A moral sentence or judgment is true if and only if it correctly represents such a fact. For example, the sentence “Breaking promises is always wrong” is (objectively) true if and only if it is an (objective) fact that breaking promises is always wrong, and the sentence “We ought to maximize overall happiness” is (objectively) true if and only if it is an (objective) fact that we ought to maximize overall happiness.

Assuming this correspondence-theoretic understanding of moral truth, the claims that objective moral truths exist or do not exist entail moral realism or anti-realism in the metaphysical sense. Suppose some moral sentences and judgments were objectively true. Then objective moral facts would have to exist. After all, objective moral facts are what make objectively true moral sentences and judgments true. If no moral sentence and judgment were objectively true, on the other hand, then there could be no objective moral facts either (otherwise, given plausible assumptions about the relation between moral metaphysics and epistemology, some of these sentences or judgments would actually be objectively true) (see Huemer 2005: 5; van Roojen 2013).⁶

1.2 The Scientific Approach

In this book, I do not argue for moral realism or anti-realism. As stated at the beginning, my aim is rather to assess recent attempts to support or undermine these views by appeal to scientific evidence. Let us thus also consider this scientific approach in more detail.

In some way or another, philosophers have thought about the existence of objective moral truths ever since the beginning of their discipline.⁷ For most of this time, they approached the issue in a predominantly non-scientific way. This means that in arguing for their views, moral realists and anti-realists either appealed to *a priori* evidence⁸ or to empirical evidence that had been acquired non-scientifically. For example, they reflected on the meaning of moral concepts (e.g., G. E. Moore's open question argument (1903)), conducted thought experiments (e.g., Plato's Euthyphro argument ([380 B.C.] 2010)), engaged in introspection and non-systematic observation (e.g., the sentimentalism of David Hume ([1740] 1978) and Adam Smith ([1759] 2002)) and appealed to common sense (e.g., contemporary realists' presumptive argument, as it will be addressed in Chapter 3).

This is of course not to say that scientific theories and hypotheses were not occasionally brought to bear on the moral realism/anti-realism debate as well. Arguably the most prominent example is Darwin's theory of natural selection. Darwin himself may have believed that his theory supports anti-realism. At least this is suggested by a passage in which he claims that if humans had evolved differently (such as bees) they would judge completely different things morally good (unmarried females would "think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers" ([1879] 2004: 122)).⁹ The theory of natural selection was also claimed to ground a social Darwinian version of (naturalist) realism (e.g., Spencer [1874] 2006, [1892] 2010). By and large, however, realist and anti-realist appeals to science for a long time remained rare and of only modest philosophical import.

It was not until the end of the 20th century that science gained more prominence in debates about the existence of objective moral truths. The resulting methodological extension or shift can be understood as part of a broader trend in analytic philosophy. From around 1970 onward, researchers in many areas of philosophy gradually began to ground some of their views in scientific findings. Willard v. O. Quine (1969), for example, informed his claims about knowledge by general psychological theories of his day and demanded of others that they do so as well; Thomas Nagel (1971) argued that neurobiological findings about patients with unconnected brain hemispheres undermine our common conception of the mind as a single, unified thing; and so on.

As suggested by the above examples, many early proponents of the scientific approach appealed to findings that had been obtained for independent scientific purposes. This way of proceeding has an obvious pragmatic downside. Scientists often simply do not conduct those studies that would

be needed to assess empirical hypotheses of potential philosophical import. So-called “experimental philosophers” have therefore recently also begun to conduct scientific studies themselves (or in collaboration with scientists)—studies which are specifically designed to illuminate philosophical questions. For example, they have investigated the interpersonal variation of intuitions about so-called Gettier cases (Weinberg et al. 2001) or people’s attributions of intentionality regarding the side effects of actions (Knobe 2003, 2006).¹⁰

Initiated by the above-mentioned arguments by Quine and Nagel, the scientific turn in analytic philosophy first took a hold in epistemology and the philosophy of mind. Little by little, it then spread to other disciplines as well, including metaethics, and finally also to the moral realism/anti-realism debate. Proponents of this novel approach to the debate typically do not reject (all) *a priori* and non-scientific empirical methods for determining the existence of objective moral truths.¹¹ However, they insist that scientific evidence carries weight as well, and rather significant weight. Richard Joyce, for example, notes, “I am [. . .] confident that empirical data [. . .] will contribute to a number of metaethical issues” (2008: 392). And according to Jesse Prinz, “[L]ongstanding debates between leading metaethical theories may ultimately be settled experimentally” (2015: 1).

The particular kind of scientific contribution that this book will focus on—and that the authors just quoted had in mind as well—takes the form of what I will henceforth refer to as “science-based arguments.” Science-based arguments attempt to show the (likely) truth or falsity of moral realism or anti-realism by scientifically supporting or undermining these views’ alleged empirical presuppositions. Such arguments thus involve both philosophical and empirical aspects (which are often closely intertwined). Philosophically, they require that moral realism or anti-realism entails or suggests a particular empirical hypothesis. Empirically, they require that the available scientific evidence supports or undermines this hypothesis.

1.3 Approach, Theses and Contents

Now that we have some understanding of the moral realism/anti-realism debate and the scientific approach to this debate, let me explain in more detail what awaits you in this book.

As just mentioned, my focus will henceforth be on scientific contributions in the form of science-based arguments for moral realism and anti-realism. In recent years, arguments of this kind have attracted significant attention. They have been the main subject of numerous journal articles and chapters (e.g., Doris and Plakias 2008; Fraser and Hauser 2010; Prinz 2006; Street 2006), and several books have been written about them as well (e.g., Joyce 2007b; Prinz 2007). This high (and still increasing) number of publications notwithstanding, however, I believe that our understanding of science-based arguments is still limited in at least four important ways.

8 Introduction

First, realist and anti-realist science-based arguments have so far mainly been discussed at the object-level. Researchers have addressed numerous specific issues with regard to them (e.g., Loeb 2007; Fraser and Hauser 2010; Vavova 2014). The arguments' more general assumptions (such as about the nature of metaethics and philosophy), however, have only rarely been scrutinized. This is a serious shortcoming. After all, some of these assumptions are quite controversial. By casting doubt upon them, critics have sometimes even attempted to show that it is (logically, metaphysically, nomologically or methodologically) impossible for the empirical sciences to contribute to the moral realism/anti-realism debate at all (e.g., Kramer 2009; Shafer-Landau 2006).

Moral realists and anti-realists have so far also mostly confined themselves to addressing one science-based argument or kind of argument at a time. Richard Joyce's (2007b) and Jesse Prinz's (2007) influential books, for example, both investigate the truth and metaethical implications of only one scientific hypothesis. Articles on such arguments have typically had an even narrower focus (e.g., Jones 2006; Mogensen 2015). Needless to say, detailed studies such as these are inevitable to making progress. At the same time, however, more comprehensive investigations of science-based arguments would surely be illuminating as well (for example, by providing an overview of these arguments, shedding light on potential logical relations between them and enabling the identification of shared assumptions and problems).

Another limitation of our understanding of science-based arguments arises from the fact that discussions have so far strongly focused on their philosophical claims (e.g., Enoch 2009; Loeb 2007; Shafer-Landau 2006, 2012; Street 2006). Their scientific well-foundedness, in contrast, has hardly been investigated at all. Nor have researchers conducted specifically designed scientific studies relating to these arguments or (properly) imported and integrated independently obtained evidence into the debate. This one-sided focus has left many science-based arguments unsatisfactorily hypothetical. While we may have good reasons to believe that *if* a certain empirical hypothesis were true *then* it would support or undermine moral realism or anti-realism, we often lack any clear idea about whether this hypothesis is actually true.

Finally, the specific content of science-based arguments' underlying empirical hypotheses has been neglected as well. These hypotheses typically only plausibly support or undermine moral realism or anti-realism if they are understood in particular senses. But what do these senses look like? Discussants of science-based arguments have often failed to properly answer this question. They have either provided insufficiently detailed explanations of their targeted empirical hypotheses (Prinz 2007) or have specified them in mistaken ways (i.e., in ways in which the hypotheses could not plausibly have metaethical implications) (see Street 2006).

If the above diagnosis is right, there are four significant gaps in our understanding of science-based arguments for moral realism and anti-realism.

My book can be understood as an attempt to fill these gaps. This means that I will investigate science-based arguments in a *partly metatheoretical, comprehensive, empirically focused* and *partly clarificatory* way: “partly metatheoretical” in that I will address general metatheoretical objections against science-based arguments; “comprehensive” in that I will investigate several arguments of this kind; “empirically focused” in that my focus will primarily be on these arguments’ underlying empirical hypotheses and “partly clarificatory” in that I will identify the particular senses in which the arguments’ empirical hypotheses would have to be true in order for the arguments to work.

By approaching science-based arguments for moral realism and anti-realism in the above way, my book promises to provide several novel insights. I will list and elaborate on these insights (which correspond to the above-mentioned gaps in the literature) in the concluding chapter. Most importantly, our considerations will suggest two concrete theses about science-based arguments. First, sound arguments of this kind are possible. And second, most science-based arguments that have so far been proposed are insufficiently empirically substantiated. Let me outline these theses and my arguments for them in more detail.

Above we learned that one way of responding to science-based arguments is to reject them as a whole, on the basis of general metatheoretical objections. My first main thesis is that this response is mistaken (Chapter 2). I will defend this thesis by refuting four particularly natural metatheoretical objections. According to these objections, science-based arguments for moral realism and anti-realism fail because (1) they impermissibly derive normative from descriptive propositions, (2) they beg the question against non-naturalist moral realism, (3) science cannot inform accounts of the meaning of moral judgments and (4) the conceptual is logically prior to the empirical.

Suppose I am right that it is possible for the empirical sciences to contribute to the moral realism/anti-realism debate. Have any such contributions already been achieved? My second main thesis is that as of now, most science-based arguments cannot justifiably be regarded as sound. This is not because they fail philosophically (in what follows, I will grant that the arguments are valid). It is rather because the available scientific evidence does not support their underlying empirical hypotheses. To substantiate and illustrate this worry, I will exemplarily consider four particularly prominent attempts to support moral realism or anti-realism by appeal to scientific findings.

The *presumptive argument* (Chapter 3), as it has been put forward by David McNaughton, is one of only a few prominent empirically grounded arguments for moral realism. Proponents of this argument assume that it seems to ordinary people that morality is a realm of objective truths (a hypothesis which has recently been claimed to be supported by psychological research on folk moral realism). From this hypothesis, they then infer that

there is a presumption in favor of moral realism (i.e., that ordinary people have a *prima facie* reason to believe that morality actually is a realm of objective truths).

The second argument that we will investigate is a science-based version of John Mackie's well-known *argument from moral disagreement* (Chapter 4). It has recently been claimed that results from cultural anthropology, psychology and other disciplines suggest that people widely disagree about matters of morality. Those who believe in the existence of objective moral truths seem to have problems accounting for this finding. A much better explanation, proponents of the argument from moral disagreement suggest, is that moral disagreements arise because people differ in their upbringings, cultures, psychological dispositions and the like, and that there are no objective moral truths at all.

Jesse Prinz's *sentimentalist argument* (Chapter 5) purports to show that moral judgments are likely constituted by dispositions to have emotions. This version of sentimentalism (which fits badly with moral realism) is likely true, he argues, because it best explains moral judgments' close empirical association with emotions. According to Prinz, recent scientific studies in particular suggest four such associations: emotions co-occur with, causally influence, are causally necessary and are causally sufficient for moral judgments.

Richard Joyce's *evolutionary debunking argument* (Chapter 6), finally, is based on the hypothesis that humans' moral judgments evolved by natural selection. Natural selection seems to be "off-track" with regard to moral truth. In other words, it seems to lead us to make moral judgments independently of whether these judgments are true. Given these off-track origins, Joyce argues, our moral judgments must be taken to be epistemically unjustified (which supports that there are no objective moral truths).

Arguing that the above science-based arguments are empirically unsubstantiated may be deemed rather uninteresting. Given my focus on a small number of specific arguments by specific authors, don't this book's conclusions fail to generalize? And isn't the thesis that these arguments are empirically unsubstantiated unsatisfactorily agnostic or negative (in that it does not bring us closer to knowing whether existing science-based arguments are sound and whether there actually are objective moral truths)? I will return to these worries at the end of the book. For now, however, enough with the preliminaries! Let us finally start to explore what the empirical sciences can and do contribute to the moral realism/anti-realism debate.

Notes

- 1 Philosophical moral psychology contrasts with empirical moral psychology, which addresses empirical (rather than philosophical) questions about moral judgments and concepts.
- 2 The view that moral realism and anti-realism belong to normative ethics has in particular been advocated by so-called "quasi-realists" (e.g., Blackburn 2000;

- Gibbard 2003) and “relaxed realists” (e.g., Dworkin 1996; Kramer 2009). It will be briefly discussed in Section 2.2.
- 3 Given that answering the question of moral reality does not yield any (significant) knowledge about what we morally ought to do, why care about this question at all? In my view, settling the issue is interesting and important for two main reasons. First, knowing whether there is a moral reality would increase our understanding of the world and our place in it (Huemer 2005: 248). And second, it would also be practically relevant, suggesting how we ought to behave toward persons who morally disagree with us (whether they can also be right, must be wrong, etc.), how we ought to go about seeking first-order moral knowledge (whether we should turn to the Bible, to custom, to science, etc.), and so on (see Bloomfield 2009: 298–302).
 - 4 I will explain this observer-independence account of objectivity in more detail in Section 3.2.
 - 5 Neither fashionableness nor redness are uncontroversial examples of subjective properties. By saying that something is “fashionable,” people may (sometimes) just express their feelings toward it. Moreover, some philosophers hold “color realism” (i.e., they believe that colors are objective features of things).
 - 6 This claim assumes that if there are objective moral facts, then at some point somebody has made judgments or uttered sentences which purport to represent these facts. In this book, I cannot defend this assumption nearly as extensively as it would deserve. However, in the context of our considerations about the argument from moral disagreement, I will sketch at least one argument which suggests that moral facts cannot significantly exceed our capacity to come to know about them (i.e., that unknowable moral facts are impossible or implausible).
 - 7 Needless to say, philosophers in earlier times did not use the terminology employed by contemporary analytic philosophers, and they often also did not distinguish the existence of objective moral truths as clearly from related philosophical issues as we do now.
 - 8 A *priori* evidence is evidence that has been acquired independently of experience (by pure thinking).
 - 9 Note that other passages contradict this attribution of moral anti-realism. For a discussion of Darwin’s metaethical views, see, e.g., Joyce (2007b: 228–230).
 - 10 Experimental philosophers have both attempted to support substantive philosophical theses (this is often called their “positive program”) and to undermine traditional philosophical methods (“negative program”) (see Kauppinen 2007: 96). In addition, they have also used scientific data to illuminate human cognition and to reveal patterns of intuitions that require explanation (see Knobe and Nichols 2007).
 - 11 That said, some early proponents of the scientific approach did suggest that appeals to scientific data will render traditional philosophical methods obsolete. Edward O. Wilson, for example, infamously proclaimed: “the time may have come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and biologized” (1975: 562).

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