

# W. D. Falk's Alternative to Moral Realism and Anti-Realism

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In light of recent developments in the moral realism debate, it is particularly worthwhile to re-examine the moral theory of W. D. Falk. While there has been a great deal of activity in that debate, little has been said about the possibility of developing a moderate alternative to moral realism and anti-realism—in spite of the many difficulties encountered by defenders of extreme views on both sides of the issue. I will argue, however, that Falk has provided us with such an alternative, and that it is a promising one. More specifically, I will show that: (a) in responding to some of the central problems with G. E. Moore's ethics, Falk moves toward a middle ground between realism and anti-realism; (b) his movement toward a moderate position enables him to deal successfully with the Moorean problems to which he responds; and (c) non-Moorean realists and anti-realists may have difficulty, like Moore, in responding to those problems as adequately as Falk does.

Several of the most serious difficulties with G. E. Moore's ethics may be traced to his claim that goodness is an "intrinsic kind of value," but is nevertheless *not* an "intrinsic property." The intrinsic property/ intrinsic kind of value distinction is described in "A Reply to My Critics" as "the very same distinction which I should have expressed in *Principia* as the distinction between intrinsic properties which were 'natural' and intrinsic properties which were *not* 'natural.'"<sup>1</sup> It is not clear, though, how either version of the distinction is to be understood. Moore himself conceded that he was unable to adequately explain it. We can get a rough idea of what he had in mind, however, by considering some of his remarks concerning the kinds of properties in question.

An intrinsic kind of value, according to Moore, is one which does not depend on any circumstances which are external to the object which possesses it: it depends only on what is internal to the object, its internal nature, and would be possessed by the object even if the object existed in absolute isolation. Goodness is an intrinsic kind of value in this sense. But Moore indicates that goodness differs from the (natural) intrinsic properties of the object which possesses it in the following respect: it is dependent on *them*, while they are not dependent on *it*. Goodness, that is, is dependent on the natural intrinsic properties of the object in the sense that the goodness of a thing "*follows* from the fact that it possesses certain natural intrinsic

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<sup>1</sup> G. E. Moore, "A Reply to My Critics," in *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court, 1968), p. 582.

properties;"<sup>2</sup> but the natural intrinsic properties do not depend upon the object's goodness in this way.

An epistemological approach to the distinction is suggested by Moore's insistence in *Principia Ethica* that while we can have empirical knowledge of natural properties, goodness belongs to a class of properties which, though they can be known, are not *empirically* knowable.<sup>3</sup> And in the Reply, Moore characterizes the distinction in linguistic terms. Ascriptions of *natural* intrinsic properties to objects *describe* those objects, he claims, in a sense in which ascriptions of intrinsic properties which are *not* natural, do not. Elaborating on this point, he says that "if you could enumerate *all* the (natural) intrinsic properties a given thing possessed, you would have given a *complete* description of it, and would not need to mention any predicates of value it possessed; whereas no description of a given thing could be *complete* which omitted any (natural) intrinsic property."<sup>4</sup>

Moore's attempts to come to terms with the distinction between the two kinds of properties leave many familiar problems unresolved. If goodness depends on the natural intrinsic properties of the object which possesses it, *why* does it do so? Why is it that a complete description of the object which possesses goodness need not mention it, though all of the *natural* intrinsic properties must be mentioned? Also, if goodness is not natural, what kind of thing is it? Can any positive characterization of its ontological status be given? And finally, if the nonnatural property of goodness is not accessible to perception, and not, therefore, known empirically, *how is* it known?

Falk addresses these problems in the essay entitled "Fact, Value and Nonnatural Predication."<sup>5</sup> He thinks Moore was on the right track when he claimed that goodness is a characteristic which (1) is not an intrinsic property, and (2) is dependent on the intrinsic nature of the object which possesses it. The intrinsic properties of an object are, on Falk's interpretation, its constitutive properties: those which between them make up or constitute the intrinsic nature of the object. They are the properties we would normally enumerate if asked "What is X like?" To say that goodness is not an intrinsic property is therefore to say that it is "nonconstitutive": it does not add anything to, or further specify, the nature of the object which possesses it. And to claim that goodness is dependent on the intrinsic nature of that which possesses it is to assert that goodness is a resultant or supervenient characteristic—it is "parasitic" on the intrinsic properties of the object which possesses it, in the sense that it is possessed *because* those properties are present.

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<sup>2</sup> Moore, "A Reply to My Critics," p. 588.

<sup>3</sup> G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> G. E. Moore, "The Conception of Intrinsic Value," in *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), p. 274.

<sup>5</sup> W. D. Falk, "Fact, Value, and Nonnatural Predication," in *Ought, Reasons, and Morality* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 99-122.

Thus far Falk takes himself to be essentially in agreement with Moore. But he diverges from Moore in his explanation of how and why goodness depends on constitutive properties. Goodness or value results from or depends upon constitutive properties, according to Falk, by way of a process of "taking account of" those properties. The process includes two parts. The first is the cognition of the constitutive properties, the exploration and comprehension of what the object is like. In the second part, the facts known in the first part of the process are evaluated or "taken to heart": that is, they are reflectively attended to, and affectively responded to. This dual process of assessment may be enacted with varying degrees of skill and thoroughness. We might, for instance, respond favorably to something without acquiring extensive knowledge of what it is like, or without patiently attending to the knowledge we do possess. Or we might respond on the basis of an assessment which approaches much more closely what Falk calls the "ideal limit" of the process: the point at which "the favor bestowed on something would no longer be corrigible by any more discriminating and sustained experience of its properties or by any more knowledgeable or imaginative assessment of them."<sup>6</sup> Only by way of an ideal assessment does the value of something result from its constitutive properties. Goodness or value on Falk's view is a dispositional property of things as ideally assessed, a power to evoke favor by way of an ideal assessment.

Falk's response to Moore involves, I believe, a movement away from moral realism, toward a moderate position. This point may be clarified by a discussion of a central aspect of the moral realism debate: the subject-independence issue. The traditional realist conviction that reality is discovered—rather than invented, constructed, or constituted—through its apprehension by the mind, is reflected in the moral realist's claim that moral value is subject-independent. The notion of the subject-independence of value varies among different moral realists. But they are generally committed to the view that the moral value of things is not determined by the way in which we evaluate them: the responses of evaluating subjects to an object or action have no bearing on the moral value of that object or action.

Anti-realists reject this subject-independence claim. They regard moral value, on the contrary, as thoroughly subject-dependent. Thus while the realist's subject-independence claim suggests that value is, as Hare and Mackie put it, built into "the fabric of the world,"<sup>7</sup> anti-realists generally maintain that our evaluative responses to the world create, or are constitutive of, value. Mackie, for instance, argues that we "invent" right and wrong. And Blackburn believes that we "project" our evaluative

<sup>6</sup> Falk, "Fact, Value, and Nonnatural Predication," p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> R. M. Hare, "Nothing Matters," in *Application of Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 47. See also J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 15.

responses onto the world—or, as he expresses it in terms of Hume's "gilding" metaphor, that we "gild" or "stain" the world with our sentiments and other reactions to it, "by describing it as if it contained features answering to these sentiments, in the way that the niceness of an ice cream answers to the pleasure it gives us."<sup>8</sup>

Moore clearly accepts the subject-independence claim described above—not surprisingly, since he is generally and uncontroversially regarded as a moral realist. The moral value of an object, according to Moore, is independent of anything which is external to the object, anything other than the internal nature of the object itself. And it is therefore independent of evaluating subjects and their responses. In responding to Moore, however, Falk proposes, as we have seen, a conception of value as a dispositional property: a power of an object to evoke favor in a subject, by way of an ideal assessment of what the object is like. And on this conception the value of an object *does* depend, at least in part, on evaluating subjects and their responses. It depends on the favorable responses which would be involved in or culminate an ideal assessment process, and on subjects, therefore, who would respond in that way—subjects, that is, with a nature which is "receptive" to the object experienced or contemplated.<sup>9</sup>

Falk's adoption of his dispositional conception of value, therefore, commits him to the rejection of the subject-independence claim. He does not, however, go to the opposite extreme of taking value to be thoroughly subject-dependent, in the anti-realists' sense. He makes no claims, for instance, to the effect that value is created or invented by evaluating subjects. Instead, he emphasizes that the object "evokes" favor, or that it may or may not be "fitted" to "command" favor. This language reflects his belief that value depends, in part, on the object. It depends, specifically, on what the object is like, on the constitutive properties in virtue of which the object would evoke favor if ideally assessed.

On Falk's view, therefore, denying or neglecting the dependence of value on either the subject or the object, as realists and anti-realists do, is a mistake. Value is neither entirely subject-independent nor entirely subject-dependent—not built into the fabric of the world, but not simply bestowed on it either. Instead, value depends partly on the things to which we respond, and partly on the way in which we respond to them. It is analogous in this respect to properties such as "digestibility." The digestibility of an object does not depend solely on its "internal nature," or solely on the digestive responses of beings who might consume it. It depends on both: it is possessed by an object, for certain beings, as a result of both the nature of the object and the digestive capabilities of those beings. Similarly, value is dependent on both the nature of the object, and the receptive nature of the subject. It is possessed only by objects which, in

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<sup>8</sup> Simon Blackburn, "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value," in *Morality and Objectivity*, ed. Ted Honderich (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Falk, "Fact, Value, and Nonnatural Predication," p. 120.

virtue of their constitutive properties, would evoke favor in ideally evaluating subjects; and only for, or in relation to, subjects who would respond in that way. In other words, value is essentially relational: it is possessed when a relation between subject and object obtains such that the former would respond favorably to the latter on an ideal assessment.

Since Falk carves out a position between the extremes of the realist view that there is a subject-independent moral reality, and the anti-realist conception of moral value as thoroughly subject-dependent, it is appropriate, given the central place which the subject-independence issue has occupied in the moral realism debate, to describe him as a moderate rather than a realist or an anti-realist. And his movement toward a moderate position allows him to respond plausibly to the difficulties encountered by Moore which were mentioned earlier. Moore was struck by the distinction between goodness and intrinsic or constitutive properties, but was unable to adequately explain the dependence of the former upon the latter. Falk, however, by rejecting the subject-independence claim and adopting his dispositional, relational conception of value, is able to provide an explanation. Goodness depends upon the constitutive properties of the object which possesses it, according to Falk, because it is a disposition of the object to evoke favor on an ideal assessment, and it is in *virtue* of those constitutive properties that the object would evoke favor on such an assessment. Moore's sense that goodness need not be mentioned in a complete description of an object which possesses it, can also be explained by Falk. Goodness may be omitted from such descriptions because, unlike constitutive properties, it does not belong to the intrinsic nature of the object: it *results* from that nature, by way of the process of ideal assessment.

While Moore was driven toward a problematic nonnaturalism by his difficulties with the goodness/intrinsic property distinction, Falk avoids that nonnaturalism, and the ontological and epistemological mysteries it generates. The value of an object does differ from its constitutive properties, for Falk, in the sense that it results from or depends upon these properties. But it is not nonnatural or ontologically mysterious: "there is nothing . . . ontologically 'nonnatural,'" he says, about the fact that some things are, in virtue of their nature, more fitted than others to command the favor of human beings."<sup>10</sup> Nor is value epistemologically inaccessible, or accessible only in some unexplained non-empirical way. We learn about the value of things, about their dispositions to evoke favor, by engaging in the process of assessment described above—that is, by finding out and reflectively attending to what things are like, and responding affectively to them.

Falk's moderate position, then, allows him to deal with the difficulties which arise from Moore's goodness/intrinsic property distinction more

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<sup>10</sup> Falk, "Fact, Value, and Nonnatural Predication," p. 121.

effectively than Moore himself is able to, on the basis of his realist position. And even non-Moorean realists may be unable to respond to those problems as successfully as Falk does. Defenders of naturalist versions of realism will no doubt claim that their views, like Falk's, avoid the ontological and epistemological difficulties to which Moore's nonnaturalism gives rise. But even if they manage to avoid those problems, they must still explain how and why moral properties supervene on other properties. Falk has proposed that this explanatory problem can be solved by giving up the subject-independence claim, and by conceiving of value as a disposition to evoke certain sorts of evaluative responses. Naturalist realists, however, must solve the problem while *preserving* the emphasis on subject-independence central to moral realism—and it is not easy to see how they can do so.

Anti-realists may argue that the problems stemming from Moore's goodness/intrinsic property distinction do not arise on their views. C. L. Stevenson, for instance, avoids the difficulties of explaining how goodness is related to intrinsic properties, what kind of a property it is, etc., by denying the existence of Moore's nonnatural property of goodness, and maintaining that moral statements such as "X is good" do not describe or identify any moral property at all. They are primarily emotive rather than descriptive in meaning, for Stevenson, expressions of the attitudes of the speaker. A consequence of this way of escaping Moore's problems, however, is that moral statements are not regarded as truth-claiming or cognitive, at least insofar as their primary, emotive function is concerned. And the noncognitivism of Stevenson and many of his anti-realist descendants has attracted as much criticism as Moore's nonnaturalism. Falk's response to Moore, on the other hand, does not have those problematic noncognitivist consequences. Moral statements are truth-claims according to Falk. "X is good," for instance, is taken to be a truth-claim to the effect that X does possess a certain feature—namely, a disposition to evoke favor by way of an ideal assessment. And to acquire moral knowledge about an object or action is just to find out whether it possesses such a disposition.

I have argued that Falk's view is a moderate one, which: (1) allows him to provide a solution to an explanatory problem which is troubling for both Moorean and non-Moorean realists, and (2) does so without committing him either to a version of nonnaturalism, or to the noncognitivism for which anti-realists are so often criticized. If my argument has been sound, then we have grounds for believing that Falk has provided a plausible, moderate alternative to moral realism and anti-realism.