

# MORAL REALISM AND MORAL OBJECTIVITY

## GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE

MASSIMO REICHLIN

*Facoltà di Filosofia,*

*Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele, Milano*

reichlin.massimo@univr.it

The discussion on moral realism and moral objectivity has always been a central issue for moral philosophers. In recent decades, it has been perhaps even more lively than ever. Part of the latest interest in this issue depends on the findings of empirical research, both in evolutionary biology and in neuroscience, that seem to many to provide evidence in favor of skeptical or relativistic attitudes to morality. That this is so is, of course, controversial, and some of the following contributions will provide arguments to question this assumption. Indeed, it can also be doubted that accepting a relativistic framework necessarily implies giving up all kinds of moral objectivity.

That there is a sense in which moral objectivism and moral relativism can be considered compatible is in fact the claim that Filippo Magni sets out to defend in his paper. After distinguishing different meanings both of moral objectivism and of moral relativism, Magni concentrates on meta-ethical relativism, defined as the theory according to which there are conflicting ethical beliefs that are equally valid, or true; and he insists that validity has both the epistemic sense tied to the morally detached perspective of an observer, and the normative sense suitable to the morally engaged perspective of an agent. These distinctions help to see the compatibility of relativism and objectivism. For one thing, some objectivistic moral theories may accept a sort of ethical indeterminacy, that ensures that more than one conclusion is epistemically valid. Moreover, some theories may accept that, although moral principles can be objectively tested for their validity, through the reference to rules and standards for adequate moral systems, these standards are local, and thus different for different groups and societies. In other words, acknowledging the epistemic meaning of 'validity', helps to understand how different moral

principles can be objectively true for different human groups, thus reconciling objectivism and relativism.

A very different stance is taken by Gabriele De Anna, who, starting from Elizabeth Anscombe's idea that an action requires a subject who takes responsibility for it, by giving reasons for it, defends a realistic view of normative reasons. According to De Anna, the content of a reason is not merely a fact, but a fact that is somehow deficient and needs improvement by an intervention that the agent is able to provide. Reality, therefore, is not merely a bundle of facts, but has an intrinsic order calling for completion, and this provides reasons for action. Practical reasons motivate, even though lack of relevant information and failure in subjective responses may frustrate their motivational power. From the subjective point of view, reasons are judged as appropriate or not by reflecting on the imagined responses of a flourishing human being in the same situation; and people, of course, differ in their sensitivity to this normative ideal. The peculiarity of moral reasons, among normative reasons, is that they call for some ways of completing the order of reality, to the exclusion of some other. To account for this peculiar obligation, a conception of what humanity requires in specific circumstances must be introduced; this is a conception of moral objectivity, though seen through the lens of an individual subject.

Some aspects of De Anna's discussion are picked up in Sarah Songhorian's paper, also devoted to discussing the notion of normative reasons for action. Starting from a definition of human action in which reasons feature as an essential element in determining the agent to exercise her causal role, Songhorian focuses on the ontological status of normative reasons. From this perspective, the distinctive feature of moral objectivism, in the different forms in which it actually comes, is to conceive of normative reasons as facts, or as referring to something really existing in the world. Even though we may sometimes fail to have access to these facts, due to our epistemic limitations, normative reasons refer to what objectively ought to be done. Sceptics like Joyce use empirical evidence of human deceit to substantiate the thesis that sees morality as a sort of collective illusion foisted on us by our genes. However, on one hand, their argument does not seem to provide a decisive refutation of moral objectivism, on the other, the upshot of the evolutionary argument against objectivism is the radical debunking of morality. In short, notwithstanding some opinion to the contrary, it is reasonable to foresee that repudiating the moral objectivism of common sense would not leave our moral practices unmodified, but would deprive us of our basic motivation to moral behavior.

The philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe features explicitly also in Sergio Cremaschi's paper, which aims to discuss the second of the three claims of *Modern moral philosophy*: this is the thesis according to which the Kantian 'moral ought' of modern and contemporary moral philosophy depends on a mistaken and outdated law-like conception of ethics, and should therefore be jettisoned. Showing that this critique draws on mistaken assumptions concerning the presuppositions of both Kantian and intuitionist moralities, Cremaschi discusses the kind of metaethical theory that Anscombe is offering, in exchange for the alleged 'moral facts' lying behind the emphatic jargon of 'duty' and 'ought'. His answer is that, notwithstanding her rejection of the strong, 'transcendental' realism of Kantians and intuitionists, she does accept a form of moral realism: this is a naturalistic one, which, however, has not much in common with more recent strands of ethical naturalism and their talk of moral properties, but that accepts, in a Wittgensteinian vein, that the human goods that we refer to in ordinary language are a sufficient basis for objective propositions concerning moral virtues and duties.

Paolo Costa follows on in a similar Wittgensteinian vein, offering a practical, non-representational defence of moral realism. According to him, the receptivity to values and the answerability to moral norms is a basic feature of the life-form of human beings, and is not the result of a representative stance to the world, leading to the discovery of certain *sui generis* facts. Values, in other words, have to do with our sense of reality, with the atmosphere in which we are immersed into all the time, and which cannot become the object of thematic, objective understanding. This sense of moral reality amounts to experiencing the impossibility of moral insensitivity, and to having pre-thematic awareness of being accountable to norms and values that simply cannot be reduced to our preferences. Centering on this basic sense of reality, according to Costa, has 'quietist' consequences, for it dissolves the anxieties that have surrounded the attempt to justify moral facts against the 'scientific view of the world', and helps us to see, in a Darwinian perspective, how the evolution of *Homo sapiens* resulted in the emergence of a new aspect of reality, tied to the space of reasons.

The compatibility of normative (and moral) realism with a Darwinian worldview is the direct object of discussion in Gianfranco Pellegrino's paper. Pellegrino provides a detailed presentation of what is now standardly called the 'evolutionary debunking argument', and offers a way to reject it by questioning two of its premises. According to the argument, in fact, evolution is the only factor determining the content of most of our normative beliefs; now, since beliefs are justified when they track their truth-makers, and since

our normative beliefs would not change in a world in which normative truth-makers were different, authors such as Sharon Street and Richard Joyce conclude that our normative beliefs are systematically kept off-track by evolutionary forces, and are indeed unjustified. Pellegrino's strategy is to challenge the claim according to which evolution uniquely determines the content of our moral beliefs: in particular, the principle according to which there are *prima facie* reasons to impartially pursue the good seems not to have been determined by its effect on our reproductive fitness, and may even be considered counter-adaptive, in certain contexts. This being so, the argument's premise must be reformulated as the claim according to which *some* of our normative beliefs are biased by evolutionary forces. When this is done, the evolutionary debunking argument ends up in threatening moral realism in ways that are no more alarming than the standard skepticism denouncing the mistake of some normative beliefs.

Finally, in my own paper, I attempt a defense of a moderate version of moral realism, according to which moral reality must not be conceived of as a sphere of moral facts existing independently of human existence and reflection; rather, it must be conceived as the set of truths that any human being can accept, when reasoning correctly and without the distraction of irrelevant factors. These truths express moral facts, which are not morally relevant because of the attitude that we take towards them, but are inherently relevant from the moral point of view, and require that we take them into consideration. These facts are relative both to evaluative properties and to deontic properties. Evaluative properties are properties of characters of people that supervene on their psychological traits and dispositions; deontic properties are properties of situations ensuring that some fact about human beings count in favor of a certain action. Normative properties, therefore, emerge from reflectively considering the circumstances and the morally relevant properties observable in them, that is, from taking into account the objective reasons for action. Moral obligation emerges from reflectively endorsing principles that acknowledge the normativity of these reasons. It can thus fairly be said that this approach couples realism about moral facts and properties with constructivism about moral obligation.

Many of the ideas developed in these papers, and the first versions of some of them, were presented at a meeting at the Faculty of Philosophy of San Raffaele University in Milan, in which all the authors took part. This meeting was organised in the context of the PRIN research project 2010-2011 devoted to *Realism and Objectivity*; these papers are part of the deliverables of that project.