

## Gastronomic Realism—A Cautionary Tale

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Daniel Robinson's *Praise and Blame* offers a vigorous and ambitious new defense of *moral realism*, a position sometimes characterized as the view that there are moral facts that are independent of our beliefs about them.<sup>1</sup> As Robinson's discussion shows, the debate over moral realism has a long and complicated history. Much less has been said, however, about realism concerning *other* sorts of value. Perhaps one of the least initially appealing of these involves a commitment to the objective goodness and badness of various foods and beverages. Such a view, which we can call *gastronomic realism*, holds that there are facts about gastronomic value, facts which are similarly independent of our beliefs.<sup>2</sup> On the face of it, such a position seems highly implausible, even silly. "*De gustibus non disputandum est*" and "One man's meat is another's poison," are adages we have all heard many times, and these seem to suggest that there

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson contrasts moral realism with moral *relativism*, but notes that these terms "are laden with quirky and provincial connotations." In summing up the contrast between realism and relativism, he says that the moral relativist holds that, "the ultimate *validity* of moral judgments is determined by" factors such as "human tendencies, cultural values, contextual factors, historical forces, hereditary dispositions, and/or sentiment," while the moral realist holds that, "moral questions are questions about reality, and as such, are subject to correct answers." Daniel N. Robinson, *Praise and Blame: Moral Realism and its Applications*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University press, 2002), pp. ix-xi. But many moral irrealists, myself included, would deny that they are committed to any form of moral relativism. On my view, for example, moral judgments *have no* ultimate validity, as there are no moral facts or correct answers to our moral questions.

<sup>2</sup> Some might wish to add an epistemological claim, that we have reasonably good epistemic access to these properties, and a semantic claim, that these are the properties we refer to when we speak about matters of gastronomic value.

are no facts about how good or bad particular foods and drinks are. But surprisingly, many of the arguments that have been used to defend moral realism seem equally well suited for the defense of gastronomic realism. A good deal of this paper is devoted to making out the case for just such parity of treatment.

Now, as a moral *irrealist*, I find it very tempting to use the parallels between the two forms of realism as the basis for a *reductio ad absurdum* of moral realism. If gastronomic realism, though highly implausible, is just as defensible as moral realism, then perhaps we ought to reject moral realism along with it. Arguments that can be used to defend such an apparently ridiculous position, we might think, can't be very good ones after all. In the end, however, I am not sure whether the parallels actually do support such a *reductio*. In fairness, I might have to admit that gastronomic realism has more going for it than meets the eye. Instead of trying to decide which of these routes to take, however, I'll offer a suggestion of quite a different sort about what we might learn from the comparison. I'll argue that gastronomic and moral realism share an important but often neglected feature with their counterparts, gastronomic and moral *irrealism*. In both cases, the most plausible approaches leave room for the possibility that value facts of the sort defended can sensibly be ignored in a person's decision making, in favor of a course of action grounded in her own personal concerns and commitments. Bringing this common feature into focus, I will argue, can help to make *moral* irrealism a more palatable alternative to moral realism than has often been thought. But first, I shall try to be a little clearer about what gastronomic realism is.

## **I. What is Gastronomic Realism?**

We've all had the thought that some foods and drinks are simply *better* than others. Yet too little has been said by philosophers about the metaphysical status of these claims.<sup>3</sup> *Moral* realists like Robinson have helped us to see the plausibility of the claim that evaluative facts are possible within the moral realm. In so doing, they have opened the door to parallel claims about other sorts of evaluative realisms, and perhaps to gastronomic realism in particular. But what exactly *is* gastronomic realism?

At a minimum, it is the view that gastronomic value properties ("GVPs"), such as the property of *being an excellent Valpolicella Classico* or *being an inferior vichyssoise*, are real. Precisely what it means to claim that GVPs are real is a question that needn't trouble us here; gastronomic realism, like its counterpart, moral realism, is compatible with any number of plausible answers. Our rough characterization of it as the view that there are facts about gastronomic value that are independent of our beliefs about them should be precise enough for present purposes.

To get GVPs sharply into focus, however, it is necessary to distinguish them from other, less controversial properties in the neighborhood. No one doubts that there are any number of *non-evaluative* facts about how foods taste (for example that maple candy tastes sweeter to the average person than horseradish). Similarly, it is uncontroversial that certain foods taste better or worse *to* certain individuals. It is a perfectly ordinary psychological fact that I don't like the taste of green peppers, for example. Likewise, there are perfectly ordinary *social* facts about these matters of taste—facts about broad patterns of intersubjective response to certain types of

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<sup>3</sup> An impressive exception can be found in Peter Railton, "Aesthetic value, moral value, and the ambitions of naturalism" in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and ethics: essays at the intersection*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 59-105. Railton, a staunch moral realist, argues for a number of parallels between his own naturalistic form of moral realism and objective aesthetic value, including value of the gastronomic variety.

foods. Presumably, for example, “everyone likes ice cream,” is a fairly accurate generalization. The question is not whether facts like these exist, for surely they do.

We must also put aside *moral* questions surrounding food. Some people think that it is morally preferable to eat plants rather than animals, but even if this thesis were correct that would not make a veggie burger better than a *filet de bœuf en croûte*—not, at least, in the sense I have in mind here. Similarly, when I ask whether some foods are good or better than others, I do not have in mind the question of which foods are the most healthful, inexpensive, readily available, or beneficial to us in some other way. Even if tofu is better *for us* than *gratin Dauphinois*, that doesn’t make it *gastronomically* better. The question I’m addressing here is whether some foods are actually *better* than others. Not better for our health. *Better*.

As I suggested above, gastronomic realism, so understood, is likely to sound implausible to many of us. But for now I want to put its ultimate plausibility aside, and ask whether it is as similar to moral realism as I have been hinting. In the next four sections, I consider several of the arguments that have been used to defend moral realism, and argue that this is indeed the case.

## II. A Presumption in Favor of Gastronomic Realism?

What can be said in gastronomic realism’s defense? *Moral* realists often argue that moral realism should be our “metaethical starting point”—the default view unless decisive objections to it are found.<sup>4</sup> Gastronomic realists may wish to avail themselves of a presumption of just this

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<sup>4</sup> The quotation is from David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1989), p. 24. Among the many others who have appealed to moral experience as supporting a presumption in favor of moral realism are Jonathan Dancy, “Two Conceptions of Moral Realism,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Sup. Vol. LX, 1986, pp. 172, 175; David McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), Ch. 3; and Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University press, 1986), Ch. VIII. Even some prominent moral irrealists grant that the objective-seeming nature of our moral experience means that they have the burden of proof in the debate over moral realism. For

sort. In the spirit of their moral realist counterparts, they may ask why gastronomic realism *needs* a defense. To see whether it would be reasonable to privilege gastronomic realism in this way, we need to look at the moral case first, and ask what it is that makes so many moral realists think it reasonable to presume that their favored theory is correct.

Moral realists often begin by pointing to the nature of our *moral experience* (very broadly construed). Morality does not *feel* as though it is simply a projection from our own minds. It does not *seem* as though we are observing a value-bereft world and then overlaying it with some sort of subjective moral response. On the contrary, the world we observe seems to be full of moral value and disvalue. We feel the demands of morality pressing upon us as if “from the outside” and not as expressions of our own attitudes and feelings. We wonder what *it* requires, rather than what *we* will happen to emote next. We speak of it in the declarative mood, as if we mean to be making statements of moral fact. We think that we might be mistaken about moral questions and that we and everyone else have been mistaken in the past. These and other features of our moral experience are brought together in support of the claim that this experience has an air of objectivity to it, and this is what is thought to raise a presumption in moral realism’s favor.

But gastronomic experience proves surprisingly similar. For example, some foods clearly seem to be better than others. It is not as though we experience the taste of food non-evaluatively, and then overlay this raw experience with qualitative judgments reflecting our own

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example, Simon Blackburn says that “the most forceful attack faced by the moral projectivist “is that he cannot accommodate the rich phenomena of moral life.” “Errors and the Phenomenology of Value,” in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 158. See also, J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 35. Others claim that the objective-seeming nature of our moral experience supports *any* theory able to do justice to that nature. I take issue with all of these claims in “The Argument from Moral Experience” (unpublished manuscript).

gastronomic values. We sometimes wonder whether we have picked the best entrée and not just whether we will like it. We experience the *pad Thai* as good or bad. When we speak of these matters of gastronomic value, we do so in the declarative mood, as though we mean to be stating facts about them. For example, we often say things like “*El Alpolina’s* chimichangas are the worst I’ve ever eaten,” or “The snails were magnificent today”. In the absence of compelling considerations to the contrary, shouldn’t we take our gastronomic experience at face value, as moral realists tell us we should do with our moral experience?

Admittedly, the character of our gastronomic experience is not wholly and unvaryingly objective. But the character of our *moral* experience is not wholly and unvaryingly objective either. For example, as anyone who has taught ethics can tell you, many people when asked about morality say things like, “It’s all relative” or “I only know what’s right for *me*.” Conversely, it’s easy to underestimate people’s willingness to acknowledge the possibility of error in the gastronomic realm. In fact, claims about erroneous gastronomic judgments are rather commonplace. It would not be at all odd for me to say that only a philistine would fail to recognize the superiority of Vermont Grade A Fancy maple syrup to *Log Cabin Lite*, or that it is foolish to think that *chop suey* is anywhere near as good as Beijing duck.

But even if it were fair to say that on balance our experience of value in both the moral and the gastronomic contexts presents it as a matter of objective fact, we would still need to ask why that experience is supposed to support a presumption in favor of these sorts of value realism. Why is it an advantage for a theory to map onto our everyday experience? Perhaps insofar as that experience reflects widespread belief in moral or gastronomic facts or in propositions whose truth depends on the existence of these facts, the value realist is claiming that conservation of these everyday beliefs (or their implications) is an important desideratum of theory acceptance. Or perhaps the value realist thinks that the best explanation for our

experiencing the world of value as a realm of objective fact requires the assumption that there are such facts. But both of these claims are controversial and would need to be defended if we were to take our experience seriously as supporting a presumption in favor of value realism. Still, there seems to be little reason for taking the objective-seeming character of moral experience as better evidence for moral realism than there is for taking the objective-seeming character of gastronomic experience as evidence for gastronomic realism.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately for value realists of both stripes, however, serious objections to moral realism have indeed been raised, and these might as easily be directed at gastronomic realism.<sup>6</sup> Against the claim that the world of value seems to be a world of objective fact is the very widespread *disagreement* about matters of gastronomic and moral value. Although I cannot develop the argument from disagreement in great depth here, I can show how much of what has been said for and against moral realism on the basis of moral disagreement could be mirrored in a debate over gastronomic realism. I turn to that task next.

### **III. The Argument from Disagreement**

The argument from disagreement is perhaps the most prominent objection that has been raised against moral realism. If moral properties are real and we are somehow able to apprehend them, it is argued, then why is there so much disagreement, some of it apparently intractable,

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<sup>5</sup> One possible exception concerns the apparent *categoricity* of moral demands. Such demands appear appropriate regardless of a particular agent's own preferences. But gastronomic demands might ordinarily be thought to lack this dimension.

<sup>6</sup> Robinson discusses a number of objections to moral realism. *Praise and Blame*, pp. 7-8, 12-13, and 18-25. In fact, moral realists spend a good deal more time defending moral realism against objections than they do arguing more directly in its favor. Undoubtedly this phenomenon depends to some degree on the presumption I have been discussing here.

about their nature? The best explanation for the diversity of moral practices and opinions, the argument continues, is that we pick up our values from our cultures and not from actual awareness of any moral facts. But if so, why should we believe in the existence of moral facts at all?<sup>7</sup>

A similar argument can be directed at GVPs. Disagreements about which foods are good are notoriously common. My son insists that caviar is awful. I find it exquisite.<sup>8</sup> In an effort to demonstrate the correctness of my view, I have shown him several articles in *Gourmet* magazine. But he stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that my claims about caviar's high gastronomic value are correct. Would situations like this be so common if gastronomic realism actually *were* true?

Previous generations of gastronomic realists might have been troubled by questions of this sort. But, armed with the latest philosophical tools of the *moral* realist, the contemporary gastronomic realist can attempt to allay doubts stemming from disagreements over gastronomic value. In the moral case, first of all, we do not need to explain away *all* disagreement. That would be too much to ask in any discipline. Some questions are difficult, and we need not be overly optimistic about their ultimate resolution. Furthermore, we should not expect for there to *be* determinate answers to all moral questions, and when there are no such answers it is not surprising that disagreements persist. Some cases can be expected to involve borderline indeterminacy of a sort no less likely to be present in non-moral contexts, contexts in which we wouldn't think this a cause for abandoning realism with respect to the vast majority of cases.

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<sup>7</sup> A classic treatment of the argument from disagreement is found in Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, pp. 36-38. I discuss this argument at length in "Moral Realism and the Argument from Disagreement," *Philosophical Studies* 90, 1998, pp. 281-303.

<sup>8</sup> Okay, I'm lying, but some people really *do* seem to find it exquisite, as evidenced by their willingness to shell out vast sums of money for very small quantities of it.

There may be no answer to the question of whether a stool is a chair or a teepee a house, for example, and this may give rise to disagreements about how to characterize particular objects. But that doesn't--and shouldn't--worry realists about chairs and houses.

Other times there will be irresolvable conflicts among incommensurable but real moral values. Perhaps there is no metric for comparing the importance of preserving a forest with that of preserving a number of jobs in the timber industry, for instance. Or there may be cases in which two equally good answers to a moral question are available. It may be just as good to send you charitable donation to Oxfam as it is to send it to Unicef. In such cases too, partisans on one side or the other may fail to grasp the strength of the competing position, and thus may wind up sticking to their guns in these moral disputes. But even if disagreement in these sorts of cases persists, this disagreement does not threaten the claim that moral facts exist.<sup>9</sup>

Disagreements of these sorts should not trouble the gastronomic realist any more than they do the moral realist. For example, there may be no precise point after which one has put too much (or too little) anchovy paste in a Caesar salad, but that fact alone gives us no reason to reject the common sense view that there are clear cases at either end of the spectrum. Similarly, the gastronomic virtues inherent in *Cheese Doodles* may be of an entirely different sort than those of *Double Stuff Oreos*, making comparative evaluation impossible in principle, even though enthusiasts in each camp still think themselves possessed of the greater wisdom. And the *fun kor* and the *siu mai* may be equally good choices at the *dim sum* restaurant, leading to

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<sup>9</sup> For an instructive discussion of these and other moral realist responses to the argument from disagreement, see Brink, "Moral Realism and the Skeptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness," 62 *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 1984, pp. 111-25. In response to Brink, I have argued that we still ought to be able to agree that certain cases are such that it is unreasonable to expect a uniform answer, since *each* of the equally good answers (for example) should be accessible to us. See "Moral Realism and the Argument from Disagreement".

disagreements over which is the better choice. But the existence of disagreement of any of these sorts should be no more troubling to a gastronomic realist than it is to a moral one.

Of course there still appears to be a lot of gastronomic disagreement of the more troubling kind—cases in which we really *should* expect resolution if GVPs are real and we have reasonably good epistemic access to them. But a good deal of this, like a good deal of the residual moral disagreement, can be explained as owing to simple ignorance of ordinary, non-evaluative facts. Surely gastronomic irrealists can take nothing from the fact that a child who refuses to taste tripe thinks macaroni and cheese better. Until she has tasted the tripe, she is really in no position to make a comparative judgment.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, as moral realists often remind us, the ability to appreciate things of value (such as other people's rights and interests) may require a certain sophistication, developed over a long period of time, and we can expect disagreement among the less sophisticated, or between the more and the less sophisticated. But this sort of disagreement does not threaten realism about GVPs either.

Another argument that has been put forward by defenders of moral realism is that one's moral judgment can be distorted by too much of a focus on irrelevant non-moral facts (such as the fact that a given action will harm oneself rather than another), and that this is a source of much moral disagreement. Similarly, one's gastronomic judgment can be impaired by too much attention to facts irrelevant to questions of gastronomic value. My son, for example, thought haggis excellent until I revealed its provenance to him. Now he thinks it awful. But surely he was in a better position to appreciate its goodness *before* learning those irrelevant, but attention-grabbing, facts.

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<sup>10</sup> For a particularly vivid example of this phenomenon, see Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr. Seuss) *Green Eggs and Ham* (Random House, 1960).

We have not yet exhausted the moral realist’s store of tools for explaining why apparent moral disagreement does not threaten moral realism. And those tools that remain might also help the gastronomic realist in responding to the haggis case and others like it. For example, it is now widely recognized that there is no such thing as a pure observation—one that is not influenced by antecedently held theory. Thus, if my son thinks certain parts of the sheep are “gross,” that is likely to have a significant effect on his actual experience of haggis. It may seem bad to him, that is, not because it *is* bad, but because he in some sense *expects* it to be bad. Yet people in Scotland who hold different background beliefs are likely to think it just *bonny!*<sup>11</sup>

On a related note, the social nature of learning makes it likely that people from different cultures will have different gastronomic values, at least in the short run. Even scientific knowledge does not typically come in a flash of personal insight, and most such knowledge does not come from our own observations either. Instead we rely on a vast array of intellectual forbearers such as teachers and textbook authors, and differences in training may account for differences in perspective. It would be surprising if the way we learn about morality failed to

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<sup>11</sup> The great Scottish poet, Robert Burns, wrote a paeon to haggis in 1786 or 1787, calling it the “Great chieftain o the puddin race!”. *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, James A. Mackay, ed. (Alloway Publishing: Darvel, Ayrshire, Scotland, 1993), pp. 264-65. At one point Burns offers an invidious comparison between haggis and some of the foods thought by other Europeans to be delicacies:

Is there that owre his French *ragout*,  
Or *olio* that wad staw a sow,  
Or *fricassee* wad mak her spew  
Wi perfect sconner,  
Looks down wi sneering, scornful view  
On sic a dinner?

Poor devil! See him owre his trash,  
As feckless as a wither’d rash,  
His spindle shank a guid whip-lash  
His nieve a nit;  
Thro bloody flood or field to dash,  
Oh how unfit!

mirror the way we learn about science. Thus the hypothesis that initially seemed to support the argument of disagreement—that we pick up our moral values from our culture—far from being at odds with moral realism, is actually quite compatible with it. It should be no more surprising that people coming from different moral traditions sometimes have different views on moral questions than is the parallel fact about people from differing scientific (or prescientific) traditions. Similarly, in the gastronomic context it should come as no surprise if people from Thailand typically think Thai food better than Vietnamese. Their judgments are no less likely to be tied to cultural tradition than those we make in scientific and moral contexts. But the fact that our beliefs depend to some degree on cultural variables in no way counts against realism about the underlying subject matter.

Another tool comes from relatively recent advances in epistemology. During the first half of the Twentieth Century, ethics appeared to be saddled with a foundationalist epistemology, typified by certain intuitionists' claim that a small number of highly general moral principles can be apprehended directly, with the rest derived inferentially from these together with certain non-moral premises. The result, according to one contemporary realist, was that it seemed impossible to reason with one another about moral questions unless there was antecedent agreement about those foundational principles.<sup>12</sup> But we needn't accept this old-fashioned view of moral justification. Instead we can adopt an approach according to which more specific moral judgments and principles can also be used to undermine (or support) more general ones, in a give and take Rawls called the *method of reflective equilibrium*.<sup>13</sup> And once again, the same moves

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<sup>12</sup> Brink, 'Moral Realism and the Skeptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness'.

<sup>13</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 20-21, 51-52.

are available to the gastronomic realist. No longer must I throw up my hands when told by my son that fish is awful, forced to hide behind the unsatisfying thought that the boy just doesn't "see" the goodness. I can *reason* with him by pointing out that salmon, sturgeon, and pike are good, in the hopes that in this way I can change his mind about the more general question.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, just as it is important to avoid exaggerating the amount of moral disagreement that exists by overlooking the very extensive *agreement* that we find on moral questions, it is important to avoid exaggerating the amount of *gastronomic* disagreement that exists by overlooking the very extensive agreement that we find on gastronomic questions. Almost everyone thinks that fruits, sweets, and pasta are good, for example. And no one thinks this of sand, sulfur, or cow manure.

Of course, in neither the gastronomic nor the moral realm has anyone made any serious effort to canvass the disagreement we *do* find, with an eye to seeing whether it can be explained away in the ways discussed here.<sup>15</sup> Here I think Robinson is quite right in emphasizing the importance of empirical research for this area of inquiry. Until we know more, we can expect conflict among philosophers about whether disagreement is a significant problem for either sort of realism (and for that matter whether agreement is a problem for *irrealism*).

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<sup>14</sup> Of course he might stubbornly refuse to accept these more specific claims about gastronomic value as well, with the result being continued unresolved disagreement. Something similar can also frustrate attempts to resolve moral disputes in this manner.

<sup>15</sup> The need for such research was a main theme of my article, "The Argument from Moral Disagreement" And there has indeed been some progress along these lines. For two recent examples, see John M. Doris and Stephen P. Stich, "As a Matter of Fact: Empirical Perspectives on Ethics," In F. Jackson and M. Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming); and John W. Cook, *Morality and Cultural Differences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Still, if a presumption in favor of a particular form of realism is warranted, then the unresolved status of the argument from disagreement means that it cannot be used to dislodge our commitment to that form of realism. Irrrealists will have to turn to other arguments if they wish to defeat it. One of these, the argument from explanation, is the subject of the next section.

#### **IV. The Argument from Explanation**

Gilbert Harman's book, *The Nature of Morality*, contains an argument that has had a profound influence on metaethical thinking since its publication in 1977.<sup>16</sup> The argument stems from the view (very roughly) that it is sensible to believe in the existence of a kind of entity or property if and only if we can fit that entity or property into the best available explanatory schema. The challenge to moral realists, then, is to show us how moral facts can explain, and why we should believe that they do. If there is no place for moral facts in our best global explanatory picture, Harman's argument suggests, we would have no good reason to believe in them, and hence no reason to treat our moral intuitions as having any evidentiary force.

Several moral realists have taken up this challenge, arguing sometimes that moral facts *could* be fit into such an explanatory schema, and sometimes even that moral facts *do* figure in the best explanations we can come up with.<sup>17</sup> For an example of the former, Nicholas Surgeon

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<sup>16</sup> Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Oxford University press, 1977), Chs. 1 and 2. Robinson reviews this argument in *Praise and Blame*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> The *locus classicus* of moral realist responses to Harman's challenge is Nicholas Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations," first published in David Copp and David Zimmerman, eds., *Morality, Reason and Truth* (Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), pp. 49-78. See also, Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, pp. 182-97; McNaughton, *Moral Vision*, pp. 99-103; and Peter Railton, "Moral Realism" *Philosophical Review* 95, pp. 163-207. Thomas Nagel challenges the assumption that moral facts must figure in *causal* explanations in *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 144-46.

tells us that the bad character of a certain Passed Midshipman Selim Woodworth, one of the people who was expected to help rescue the Donner party, could explain why so little was done actually to help them. Midshipman Woodworth acted as he did, Sturgeon suggests, because he was “just no damned good”.<sup>18</sup>

Now it is true that we might have explained these facts in ways that do not appeal to moral facts of the sort hypothesized by Sturgeon. For example, we might explain Midshipman Woodworth’s inaction on the grounds that he cared more about himself than he cared about others, that he was lazy, and that he was a thief. But the mere existence of such non-evaluative explanations should not sour us on equally good evaluative explanations. Non-moral explanations,” says Sturgeon, “do not always compete with moral ones, and as often *corroborate* as *undermine* them.”<sup>19</sup> Speaking loosely, we can say that Midshipman Woodworth’s badness *supervened* on these ordinary psychological traits, and thus that his badness is compatible with both their existence and their explanatory power.<sup>20</sup>

Can *GVPs* explain? Of course they can, argues the gastronomic realist. Why do people pay such high prices to eat at *La Tour D’Argent*? Because the food is so good there. Why hasn’t *Ben and Jerry’s* come out with ketchup and onion flavored ice cream? Because that would be an

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<sup>18</sup> Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations,” p. 63, quoting Bernard De Voto, *The Year of Decision: 1846* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942)

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Sturgeon, “Nonmoral Explanations,” in James Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives 6* (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing, 1992), p. 98.

<sup>20</sup> Roughly speaking, supervenience involves a dependency relation between two properties, such that there can be no change in the supervening property (being a table, for example) without a corresponding change in the supervenience base property (being a certain collection of molecules). For further discussion of this important, but difficult, notion see Jaegwon Kim, “Concepts of supervenience” and other papers collected in his *Supervenience and Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

awful flavor. Why does Indian food seem better than English food? Because it *is* better than English food. *Much* better! We appeal to explanations of this sort all the time. If the availability of explanatory claims like these is enough to validate moral realism, then we would seem to have equally good evidence for gastronomic realism.

Once again the irrealist may try to point to alternative explanations for the phenomena in question—explanations making no mention of GVPs. For example, she might point out that we could explain the business decision at *Ben and Jerry's* by reference to the ordinary non-evaluative fact that people wouldn't *like* ketchup and onion flavored ice cream, even if they could be persuaded to try it. But, if non-moral explanations need not compete with moral ones, then similarly the existence of explanations not involving GVPs should not rule out explanations involving such properties. "Of course people wouldn't like that flavor," we can say, following Sturgeon. "That's because it would be awful! *Really* awful!"

Now, showing that explanations of these sorts are possible is not the same thing as showing that they support realism. It is not easy to establish that properties of either sort really do figure in the best global explanatory picture we can come up with. If, however, a presumption in favor of realism (in *either* realm) were warranted for the reasons sketched above, then the realist wouldn't need to claim that they do. A merely possible role in explanation undermines any attempt to argue that explanations of that sort are impossible, as Harman seemed to argue they are.<sup>21</sup> One might hold out hope for something more here—some positive reason for thinking that facts of a particular sort really *do* figure in the best explanatory theory we can come up with. But given the notorious difficulty involved in undertaking such a showing, moral

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<sup>21</sup> Harman actually argues that moral facts *do* figure in our best explanatory schema, but that only a relativistic account of such facts can do the explanatory evidence justice. See, for example, his contribution to Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

realists have often been content merely to give suggestive examples and rely on the presumption, rather than actually to defend the explanatory claims fully.<sup>22</sup> Gastronomic realists should be entitled to nothing less.

## V. The Argument from Queerness

As we have seen, realists have sometimes responded to the argument from explanation by claiming that moral facts can earn a place no different from that claimed by scientific facts in our best global explanatory theory. Attempts to demystify moral properties in this way might also help realists to respond to the so-called argument from queerness, another of the central objections to moral realism. Unfortunately, the queerness objection has never been entirely clear, in part because J. L. Mackie (who gave it the name) seemed to have several different, if loosely related, things in mind by it.<sup>23</sup> Thus, we can isolate a number of different complaints against moral realism that have sometimes been treated as falling under this heading. And once again, these complaints have natural counterparts in the debate over gastronomic realism. Mackie thought that if there were moral properties, they would have to be very odd sorts of entities, and that we would need a correspondingly odd means of epistemic access to them. Non-natural moral properties and an intuitionistic moral epistemology seemed to him perfect examples of the metaphysical and epistemological lengths people would have to go in order to defend moral realism.

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Railton and David Brink are somewhat more ambitious than this in their willingness to proffer putative moral explanations. For examples, see Railton's "Moral Realism" and Brink's *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, pp. 38-42. Robinson addresses the queerness objection in *Praise and Blame*, pp. 23-24.

There are other important dimensions to the queerness objection as well. One respect in which moral properties would be odd is that they would apparently have to combine two elements, the combination of which seemed hard to fathom. Mackie called these elements *objectivity* and *prescriptivity*. Conceptual analysis, he claimed, reveals that moral statements would have to both describe the world and at the same time authoritatively tell us what to do, and thus that for moral realism to be correct there would have to be properties corresponding to these complex and ambitious statements. Moreover the properties themselves would somehow have to supervene on ordinary natural properties (such as the property of being a violent attack on a child). And once again we'd face an enormous epistemic demand, awareness of not only the supervening moral properties, but also the natural properties on which they depend, as well as the “mysterious consequential link” between the two.<sup>24</sup> Finally, moral properties would have to be the sort of things awareness of which brought with it overriding motivation to comply—not in virtue of the peculiarities of anyone's individual psychology, but because the moral goals themselves have “to-be-pursuedness” somehow built into them. In this section, I consider what I take to be the three most important strands of the argument from queerness, and consider their applicability to the case of gastronomic value.

#### **A. Non-Naturalism and *Metaphysical* Queerness**

One aspect of Mackie's queerness objection rested on his assumption that moral properties would have to be *sui generis*—belonging in a special ontological category all their own: the *non-natural*. This claim raised a number of worries, perhaps the most significant of which was the apparent conflict with the widespread commitment to “ontological parsimony,”

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

the thesis (closely related to Ockham's Razor) that we would do well to avoid committing ourselves to the existence of additional ontological categories if we can reasonably do without them. In response, many contemporary moral realists have simply denied that moral properties must be non-natural. Moral properties, according to a widely held view, are *natural* properties just like any others.<sup>25</sup> Typically, it is added that these properties supervene on other natural properties, in something like the way the property of being a table supervenes on the property of being a certain kind of collection of molecules.

Gastronomic realists can take a similar position: Gastronomic properties are natural properties that supervene on other natural properties such as the property of being salty, crunchy, bitter, or sweet. (And these, in turn, supervene on various microphysical properties.) Thus, no special metaphysical problem arises for gastronomic realism, and no issue of ontological parsimony arises either.

### **B. Epistemic Queerness**

Another worry Mackie expressed was epistemological. How can we come to know particular moral facts, and hence have a basis on which to conclude that moral facts in general exist? This problem seems particularly acute for non-naturalists. If moral properties are *sui generis*, occupying their own ontological realm, how is it that we are able to gain awareness of

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<sup>25</sup> Robinson may appear to disagree:

[I]t is unclear just how a developed set of moral precepts could or should fit into an otherwise acceptable theory of what exists without begging the question. The moral realist affirms the existence of moral entities, taking them to be different from merely physical entities. The difference is essential, so the two cannot be expected to 'fit into' the same ontological framework. *Praise and Blame*, p. 25.

It is possible, however, to deny that moral entities are physical without claiming that they cannot be fit into or best naturalistic global explanatory theory.

them? Mackie thought that the best answer a realist could give here would be to fall back on a mysterious faculty of intuition, through which we are able directly to apprehend at least some fundamental moral truths. But that, Mackie thought, would be a very odd sort of faculty indeed. Moreover, it is not clear how the wrongness of an act could *cause* us to judge that the act is wrong. No conceivable mechanism can plausibly explain the link between the wrongness and our judgment of wrongness in a given case, he seemed to think.<sup>26</sup>

Similar arguments could as well be directed against gastronomic realism. We can tell a fairly straightforward story about how our taste buds (and other sense organs) are involved in our coming to recognize that certain food taste as they do. But what organs are employed in discerning the gastronomic *value* that inheres more in some foods than in others? As Mackie said, “‘a special sort of intuition’ is a lame answer, but it is the one to which the clear-headed objectivist is compelled to resort.”<sup>27</sup> There seems to be no conceivable mechanism for our coming to recognize true the gastronomic value of foods.

Contemporary moral realists deny that they are committed to such an odd epistemology, however. Since moral properties are natural properties, we have no reason to worry about the possibility of epistemic access to some apparently remote ontological realm. We can observe moral facts in much the same way that we observe anything else, relying on a combination of empirical input and background theory. My ability to recognize that an axe murderer is evil is no more difficult to explain than my ability to recognize that he is a Shriner. Even without some

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<sup>26</sup> Harman makes a similar point in *The Nature of Morality*: “But there does not seem to be any way in which the actual rightness or wrongness of a given situation can have any effect on your perceptual apparatus. . . . The explanatory chain from principle to observation seems to be broken in morality.” P. 8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, p. 39.

mysterious “Shriner-detecting faculty”, I am able, given my background knowledge about how Shriners behave, the sorts of hats they wear, the little cars they drive, etc., to see him for what he is. In either context, of course, my beliefs could turn out to be false, but the risk of error presents no special problem for the claim that these sorts of knowledge are possible.

Similarly, the gastronomic realist can claim that, GVPs being natural properties, knowledge of them (and of gastronomic value more generally) seems unproblematic. There is no more reason to think that we’d need some sort of gastronomic-value sensor to detect them than there is to think we’d need a similar sensor for detecting moral value. Informed by suitable background theory, one can easily tell a good hot dog from a bad one--more easily, in fact, than one can tell a good *person* from a bad one.

### **C. Normativity**

Perhaps most importantly, Mackie argued that moral properties would have to be the sorts of things knowledge of which produced in the knower an overriding motivation to act in accordance with their demands, a motivation not in any way contingent upon the psychology of the knower.<sup>28</sup> But claims about properties having this sort of magnetic power are highly implausible, and indeed, the idea that recognition of *anything* could somehow short circuit the operation of the laws of psychology has little to recommend it. Given its commitment to the existence of such properties, Mackie thought, moral realism is implausible. And if GVPs would have to be similar in motivational impact to moral properties, then we had best avoid crediting them as real too.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Once again, however, contemporary moral realists reject the claim that they are committed to entities of the sort Mackie imagines them committed to. Many alternatives are available: that moral facts motivate upon recognition but that they do not necessarily motivate overridingly, that moral facts needn't motivate on recognition but do provide us with reasons (overriding or merely *pro tanto*) for action. More boldly, some moral realists deny that there must be *any* non-contingent connection between our moral beliefs and our motivations, or between the moral facts and our reasons for action. It is enough, say these realists, that recognition of moral facts *typically* motivates and that we *often* have reason to do what morality requires. And *that* sort of connection is easy enough to find. Most of us want to be good, or want things (like friends) that being good can help us to get.

Gastronomic realists face a similar array of possibilities. They can deny that GVPs overridingly motivate upon recognition and that there is any necessary connection between a food's having high gastronomic value and one's having overriding reason to eat it. Or they can deny that there is any necessary connection between gastronomic value and reasons or motives for eating. So long as strong contingent connections among these things are present, the gastronomic realist can argue, we can still reasonably claim that there is real gastronomic value. And here again, the connection is not hard to see. People typically *do* want to eat good foods rather than bad ones.

## **VI. Lessons for *Moral* Realists?**

It might still be possible to find some relevant and important difference between moral and gastronomic realism. But if I am right in thinking the case for realism about GVPs to be about as strong as the case for realism about moral properties such as goodness and rightness, then we are left with only two possibilities. We can accept that there is reason to treat both sorts

of properties as real, or reject them both, perhaps treating the parallels between gastronomic and moral realism as the basis for a *reductio ad absurdum* of the latter. I confess that when I began this project I was more tempted by the possibility of such a *reductio* than I am now. On more careful reflection, I think it wiser to withhold judgment on that question.

But what is at stake when we ask whether to accept or reject one of these forms of realism anyway? Perhaps one lesson we can draw from this exercise is that it matters less than we might have thought. To show this, I will suppose for the moment that gastronomic realism is correct—that some foods really are better than others--and further that we have gotten to be pretty good at identifying GVPs when we see (or taste) them. How might I reasonably react to a realization that this is all true?

I might try reforming my diet. Health, moral, and economic concerns being equal, I might begin choosing the better over the worse whenever possible. And no doubt some aspects of my newly modified diet would meet with my immediate approval. I'd enjoy some of the things I had been reluctant to try, for instance, and I'd probably enjoy good food more than I would bad or mediocre food, for the most part. Given time and continued exposure, I might even come to take pleasure in good foods I had previously found distasteful. With food, familiarity can sometimes breed enjoyment.

But somewhere down the line, I might well run across foods that, although really quite good, taste awful to me, no matter what I do to try to learn to enjoy them. Does *anyone* think that it would be reasonable for me to continue choosing these foods over worse, but more enjoyable, alternatives? I suppose it's possible that I might have a strong preference for eating the good over the bad, such that the bad experience would be thought but a small price to pay to secure something I care a good deal more about. Although conceivable, however, this would certainly be an odd sort of preference, and not one that most people would ever find themselves

possessed of. When it comes to which foods to consume, I have to make my decisions on the basis of my *own* gastronomic values. That foods *actually* have gastronomic value is relevant to me only if I value eating what has it. There is nothing irrational about not caring a whit about what is really good, and eschewing it in favor of what one enjoys. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a person taking any other course of action seriously.

Of course, if there really are GVPs, then there may also be gastronomic oughts. Perhaps I ought<sub>G</sub> to eat what is good. But oughts of this kind are of no more interest to me than oughts governing which fork I eat the food with. There is nothing narrow minded, crazy, or even mistaken about ignoring them. If gastronomic realism is correct, then it would of course be possible to make mistakes about which foods *are* good or about how good they are. But it is hard to see how a (suitably informed) person could be mistaken in *preferring* worse foods to better ones. That decision is still up to us, and not just in the *political* sense that we are free to make it for ourselves, but in the *evaluative* sense that such decisions are not ordinarily subject to rational criticism.

We can call a decision whether or not to let one's conduct be governed by any particular sort of ought *fundamental*. When a fundamental decision must be made, the value system itself may tell you what to choose, but the fact that it does so is of no use in deliberations about whether or not to subscribe to that system in the first place. That there is more *gastronomic* value in good foods than in bad ones tells nothing about whether to choose those foods. Then how *are* we to make fundamental decisions? We have no real choice but to make them from the standpoint of what we value *now*.<sup>29</sup> Even if there are facts about what has gastronomic value,

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<sup>29</sup> We might, of course, value being governed by those values we *would* accept after careful reflection.

that is, one still must make a fundamental decision about whether to arrange one's conduct in accordance with such value.

The interesting thing is that the same is true in regards to *moral* value. Supposing for the moment that there are real moral oughts, one must still decide whether or not to govern one's conduct in accordance with them. No doubt it would be *immoral* not to; we ought<sub>M</sub> to do what morality requires. But there are likely to be conflicts between the oughts of morality and the oughts of prudence, law, or instrumental rationality, to name a few. Thus the fact that we ought<sub>M</sub> to behave in a certain way tells us nothing about whether we ought *all things considered* to do so. "I realize that my behavior makes me a bad *Kantian*," we can imagine someone saying, "but I don't see any reason for being a *Kantian* in the first place!" Settling what to do all things considered requires a fundamental decision in the moral realm just as it does in the gastronomic.<sup>30</sup>

Considerations like these in no way show moral realism to be wrong, but they do take some of the bite out of it. If correct they rob moral realists of one *ad hominem* argument that often emerges in their debate with irrealists. Moral realists often express puzzlement that moral irrealists take their own moral values seriously, given that the irrealists do not believe that these values are (or could be) objectively correct. An irrealist might be against dishonesty, for example, but why should she take that as providing her with a reason not to be dishonest? The irrealist answer, "She just does", seems to the realist to be arbitrary and unprincipled. After all, one *could* find oneself valuing just *anything* (such as collecting used matchsticks, sticking one's

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<sup>30</sup> This is at least true for externalist forms of realism of the sort I've been talking about here. Some moral realists (and others who believe in the objectivity of morality) argue that moral oughts *are* by their very nature overriding. But even if so, it would seem, a person must decide whether to do what she ought, all things considered, to do. And once again, the fact that she ought all things considered to do what she ought all things considered to do seems trivial at best, and it is hard to see how it could be helpful to her in making this decision.

head in the oven, never lifting one's little finger even if the alternative is the destruction of the entire world). That she happens to value honesty instead of these other things does not leave her commitment to it worthy of being taken seriously, any more than a commitment to the more unusual values would underwrite them if she happened to find them appealing.

But now it appears that the moral realist has no choice but to take his own values seriously in just the way that he's puzzled about irrealists taking theirs seriously. He must make a fundamental decision about whether to be governed by the moral values he takes to be correct, or instead to act on what he himself values insofar as it conflicts with that. True, he *might* value acting in accordance with morality more than he values anything else. But that is an entirely contingent matter in the moral case, just as it was in the gastronomic. Arbitrary or not, in the end we're all in the same boat. In this respect, moral—or gastronomic—irrealism is no harder to swallow than moral realism.<sup>31</sup>

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