

# **A MORAL ARGUMENT AGAINST MORAL REALISM**

**Melis Erdur**

## **I. INTRODUCTION: MORAL ANTI-REALISM VS. REALISM**

One of the central questions of meta-ethics is whether things are morally right or wrong, good or bad, or obligatory or permissible, ultimately because of the judgments we actually make, or independently of them.<sup>1</sup> Moral anti-realism (henceforth just anti-realism) is the view that the ultimate source of moral rightness and wrongness is the actual judgments that we make.<sup>2</sup> That does not mean that there is a one-to-one correspondence

---

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of brevity I will henceforth talk only in terms of moral right and wrong (as opposed to good and bad, or obligatory and permissible).

<sup>2</sup> Two qualifications: First, the label moral ‘anti-realism’ is used in the literature as applying not only to the views that construe rightness and wrongness as ultimately a function of our judgments about them, but also to the views that deny the existence of rightness and wrongness altogether. In this essay I am interested only in the question of whether moral rightness and wrongness, assuming that they exist, are ultimately *dependent* on, or *independent* of, our actual judgments. Hence, I will set aside views, such as error theory, that deny the very existence of moral rightness and wrongness. Therefore, my claims regarding anti-realism are not meant to apply to all views in the literature that identify as anti-realist. For more on the labels ‘realism’ and ‘anti-realism’, see, Crispin Wright,

between our judgments and moral truths. It does not mean, for instance, that murder is wrong because we think murder is wrong, or that stealing is wrong because we think stealing is wrong, or that hurting this person in this case is wrong because we think hurting this person in this case is wrong. It only means that an action is morally right or wrong *ultimately* because it is in some way licensed or forbidden by some of our fundamental judgments. If, therefore, our judgments were radically different, moral truths would also be radically different; if we *didn't make* any moral judgments, there *wouldn't be* any moral truths either – that's the view.

What many people find appealing in anti-realism is its metaphysical and epistemological economy. Anti-realism attempts to account for moral discourse on the basis of naturalistic states of mind – such as judgments, approvals, disapprovals, plans – which are relatively easy to make sense of from a scientific point of view. In particular, anti-realism refrains from postulating a realm consisting of *non-natural* entities, such as the distinctively moral properties of “rightness” and “wrongness”, or the distinctively moral state of affairs such as “the wrongness of murder”. It is, therefore, not encumbered

---

“Realism, antirealism, irrealism, quasi-realism.” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 12 (1988), pp. 25-49; and James Dreier, “Meta-ethics and the problem of creeping minimalism.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004), pp. 23-44.

Second, for the sake of brevity, I will mostly talk about moral *judgments*, rather than moral beliefs or attitudes, as the source of rightness and wrongness according to anti-realism.

with the difficult task of explaining the metaphysical status of a non-natural realm, and how we, who live in the natural world, can have access to it and have moral knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, anti-realism is often considered to have a fatal flaw: If what is right or wrong is ultimately a function of what we think is right or wrong, as anti-realism claims it is, then even the most reprehensible things such as genocide, slavery, and torturing babies for fun, would be permissible if most people approved of them!<sup>4</sup> But, surely, the objection goes, genocide, slavery, and torturing babies for fun would be wrong even if everyone approved of them. A world in which most people approved of genocide and slavery would not be a world in which those things were morally permissible, but rather a world in which most people were morally corrupt.

Many philosophers believe that the only way to avoid that kind of objectionable permissiveness that anti-realism leads to is to postulate the existence of a moral reality that

---

<sup>3</sup> For the difficulties regarding this metaphysical and epistemological task, see J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977); G. Harman, *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and “Moral explanations of natural facts: Can moral claims be tested against moral reality?” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1986), pp. 57-68.

<sup>4</sup> These are the actual examples that the critics of anti-realism frequently employ. See, Ronald Dworkin, “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe it”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25 (1996), p. 92, *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2011), p. 9, 27; and Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (New York: Oxford UP 2003), p. 27, for example. They are put forward as actions that virtually everyone will agree are reprehensible. Hence the severity of the cases – not even torturing babies, for instance, but torturing babies *for fun*.

exists *independently* of what anyone thinks. This postulation constitutes the core of moral realism. As I will explain later, the kind of “moral reality” posited varies from one version of realism to another. However, all realists believe that one way or the other an independently existing reality is the ultimate source of all moral truth.

To emphasize, what draws people to realism is the conviction that a moral reality that exists independently of what anyone thinks would provide a *firm ground for morality* – if we could philosophically account for it. However, that’s where the view gets into trouble: a realm of distinctively moral properties, which endow certain actions with an intrinsic to-be-done-ness, is argued by many to be too “queer” to be tenable.<sup>5</sup> This problem is especially poignant in the case of *non-natural* realism, which is arguably the most promising version of it.

The current predicament in meta-ethics, therefore, seems to be that we must choose between:

1) (Anti-realism) Simple and plausible metaphysics and epistemology coupled with an objectionably permissive ground for moral truth, and

2) (Realism) Firm ground for morality coupled with questionable metaphysics and epistemology.

In the rest of this essay, I will challenge this picture. First and foremost, I will argue that, contrary to the widely held assumption, moral realism does *not* constitute a firm ground for morality – and that by thinking that it does, realists are making a *substantive moral* mistake.

---

<sup>5</sup> For a classic statement of this objection, see Mackie’s *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.

## II. WHAT'S SUBSTANTIVE MORAL?

Substantive moral issues concern *whether* things are right or wrong as well as *why* they are right or wrong. Let me dwell on this, for it is critical for my argument.

Suppose someone, call him A, shot and killed someone else, call him B. Suppose that it was B who shot at A first, but then A shot back and killed B. In other words, A killed B in self-defense. Now, the first obvious substantive moral question is *whether* what A did was morally wrong.

For the sake of argument, let's assume that A's action was *not* morally wrong. If someone judges, therefore, that A's action was not wrong, then he delivers the correct overall moral verdict about the action. However, there is more to moral deliberation than correctly determining that something is, or is not, wrong. There is also the determination of *why* it is, or is not, wrong. In our case, for instance, if someone claims that A's killing of B is not morally wrong, and that it is not wrong because the action took place on a Tuesday – and *everything*, obviously, is permitted on Tuesdays! – then, clearly, he fails miserably in his moral evaluation of A's action.

*Why*-questions, therefore, constitute the heart of moral deliberation, and they come in various degrees of generality. Above I have hinted that A's killing of B was not wrong because it was self-defense (and not, for instance, because it took place on Tuesday). For the sake of argument, let's assume that this is so – the killing was not wrong *because it was self-defense*. Now that we know why A's action was not wrong, we have a deeper moral understanding of it than when we merely judged it to be not wrong. But we can do better than that: we can ask a *why*-question about the last step, about self-defense: Why does the

fact that A's killing was self-defense count against its wrongness? Or, in other words, why does self-defense matter morally?

At this level of generality, we may turn to the so-called theories of normative ethics. For instance, classic utilitarianism tells us that an action is right if and only if it maximizes total happiness (pleasure minus pain) in the universe.<sup>6</sup> Utilitarianism thus supplies us with an answer to our last why-question: the fact that A's killing of B was self-defense matters morally *because it makes a difference to the total pain produced by the killing* – killings in self-defense, a utilitarian could point out, lead to less pain than killings for other reasons. By contrast, according to the Kantian ethical theory, an action is permissible if and only if its maxim can be willed to be a universal law for all rational beings.<sup>7</sup> The Kantian view would thus also answer our question regarding the moral significance of self-defense: the fact that A's killing of B was self-defense makes a moral difference *because it makes a difference to the universalizability of A's maxim* – killing to save one's own life, a Kantian could point out, passes the universalization test, whereas killing for another reason might have failed it.

The point is that abstract theories like utilitarianism and Kantianism provide answers to the fundamental substantive moral question of *why right things are right and wrong things are wrong*, and in that sense they amount to general substantive moral claims.

---

<sup>6</sup> For more on classic utilitarianism, see, for example, J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Hackett Pub. 2002).

<sup>7</sup> For more on Kantian ethics, see, for example, Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge University Press 2012).

But we can go even further than that; we can ask why-questions about utilitarianism and Kantianism too: Why does (if it does) the universalizability of the maxim of an action render it morally permissible? Why doesn't (if it doesn't) the fact that an action maximizes total happiness in the universe make it right?

In fact, we can ask the *ultimate* why-question: in the end, why is *anything* the case morally? What is it that ultimately makes anything morally right or wrong?

We may, I suggest, see moral anti-realism and realism as competing answers to that ultimate why-question. Anti-realism states that anything is the case morally *ultimately because we judge it to be the case*. Realism, by contrast, states that anything is the case morally *ultimately because an independent reality dictates that it be the case*. Since these are answers to the fundamental substantive moral question of *why right things are right and wrong things are wrong*, anti-realism and realism, just like utilitarianism and Kantianism, amount to very general *substantive moral* claims.

The suggestion that anti-realism and realism are substantive moral views is not entirely new. But it is highly controversial. The controversy largely turns on the question of whether anti-realism and realism can *only* be understood as (first-order) substantive moral views, or whether there are other possible readings of them. Simon Blackburn, for instance, has long insisted that statements such as “The wrongness of cruelty depends on our attitudes” can only be understood as *first-order (substantive) moral* statements – in this case, a statement to the effect that our disapproval of cruelty is among the reasons why it is wrong. In other words, Blackburn claims that “dependency” in this context can only be first-order (substantive) moral dependency – having to do with the reasons why things are

right or wrong.<sup>8</sup> What is controversial in Blackburn's view is the "only" – namely, his claim that there is no second, "external" (external to first-order morality; metaphysical,) reading of "dependency". His critics claim that, even if it is possible to hear anti-realism and realism as substantive moral views, they are first and foremost *meta*-ethical in that they tell us "what it would *be*...for some moral judgment to be true or false"<sup>9</sup>. A similar objection may be raised against my argument in this section: anti-realism and realism, it may be said, may imply the substantive moral view that the ultimate reason why right things are right and wrong things are wrong is that we make some judgment to that effect, or that an independent reality dictates it, respectively; however, that doesn't necessarily mean that anti-realism and realism *are* substantive moral claims. Let me briefly respond to this objection.

Anti-realism and realism may indeed state more than what the ultimate moral reason is. However, that is entirely beside the point, at least in so far as my argument is concerned, and here's why. A claim is substantive moral if it has *some* substantive moral content – it does not have to have *only* substantive moral content. Consider, for instance, "A's killing of B was not wrong". That statement is clearly a substantive moral one

---

<sup>8</sup> This is precisely why Blackburn thinks he can endorse claims like "The wrongness of cruelty is independent of our opinions" without contradicting his expressivism: according to him, expressivism is a meta-ethical view that is devoid of substantive moral content, therefore it cannot possibly contradict any "independence" claim, which is substantive moral. For more on this, see his "How To Be an Ethical Anti-realist," in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford UP 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* Vol 2 (Oxford UP 2011), p. 397.



because it has substantive moral content: it states that some action is not morally wrong. However, it also implies that A killed B, which is an empirical matter. The fact that the statement has empirical, hence non-substantive-moral, content does not change the fact that it is substantive moral, because, once again, for a claim to be substantive moral, it is sufficient that it has some substantive moral content – it is not necessary that it has exclusively substantive moral content. Similarly, if anti-realism and realism have *some* substantive moral content – the former amounting to the claim that the ultimate reason why right things are right and wrong things are wrong is that we make some judgment to that effect, and the latter the claim that the ultimate reason is that an independent reality dictates it – then, whatever *else* anti-realism and realism may be, they are substantive moral views and thus subject to substantive moral evaluation.

But isn't it possible to understand realism and anti-realism as having no substantive moral content whatsoever? Isn't it possible to hear the "because" in "Wrong things are wrong ultimately *because* we think so" or "Wrong things are wrong ultimately *because* an independent reality dictates it" as a completely morally neutral "because"?<sup>10</sup> I find it very hard to conceive that such a fundamental claim about the nature of moral wrongness can be devoid of any substantive moral import, saying *nothing* about why in the end wrong things are wrong. We are, after all, talking about the property that every wrong action has – surely that must say *something* about *what is wrong* with such actions, about *why*, in the end, they are wrong. Consider slavery, for instance. Anti-realism and realism make crucial claims about the nature of this wrongness – the wrongness of slavery. They state that this

---

<sup>10</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will talk about only wrongness here.

action is wrong ultimately because it has a certain kind of property – a property which is derivative of our actual judgments, or the state of affairs in an independent realm, respectively. They say, in effect, that if slavery didn't have *this kind* of property, it wouldn't have been wrong. But that has to mean that the fact that slavery *does* have this kind of property is at least part of the explanation of why (in the substantive moral sense) it is wrong.<sup>11</sup>

### **III. MORAL ANTI-REALISM: A SUBSTANTIVE MORAL MISTAKE**

Anti-realism, I have argued, amounts to the claim that the ultimate reason why anything is right or wrong, why anything morally counts in favor or against anything, why, in short, anything is the case morally, is that we make some judgment to that effect. Anti-realism, therefore, is a *substantive moral universal generalization*. Now let's see in detail why it constitutes a substantive moral mistake.

---

<sup>11</sup> I grant that this is not sufficient to show that it is *impossible* to understand realism and anti-realism as morally neutral theses about the nature of moral rightness and wrongness. But I think it is enough to raise strong doubts about it. Another reason to think that realism, in particular, is *not* (supposed to be) a morally neutral thesis is the fact that the leading realists typically motivate their views by appeal to implicitly or explicitly moral considerations. David Enoch's *Taking Morality Seriously* (Oxford UP 2011), especially his Chapter 2, is extremely helpful in this respect. Russ Shafer-Landau's *Moral Realism: A Defence* is another good example. Also see Sharon Street's "What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics", *Philosophy Compass*, 5/5 (2010), pp. 363-384 for a discussion of anti-realism as a substantive normative view.

The standard objection against anti-realism, which I have mentioned at the beginning, is typically formulated in terms of counterfactuals: imagine, we are asked, a possible world in which most people approve of genocide; in such a world would genocide be morally right? Surely not! But, anti-realism, the objection goes, implies that it would be right because anti-realism makes the wrongness of genocide, like the wrongness of any other thing, ultimately dependent on our actual disapproval of it.

Now, anti-realism does seem to give the wrong result with regard to the above counterfactual scenario.<sup>12</sup> But how does that show that anti-realism constitutes a *substantive moral* mistake? Substantive moral views, as I have been explaining, have to do with the reasons *why* things are right or wrong. How does a counter-intuitive result concerning counterfactuals translate into a mistake about the reasons why things are right or wrong?

Thinking in terms of counterfactuals is a helpful way of testing substantive moral views. For instance, we may intuitively test the view that everything is morally permitted on Tuesdays by asking: what if such-and-such (a particularly horrible action) happened on a Tuesday, would it then be morally permissible? Or, we may test a view like utilitarianism by asking: what if such-and-such (something very demeaning done to an individual, say,) brought about more total “happiness” in the universe than any other alternative, would it then be morally OK? *However*, helpful as it is to use counterfactual language when we

---

<sup>12</sup> The real target of this essay is realism, so I will not say much here in support of the above objection against anti-realism. I will essentially take it for granted. For more against anti-realism along these lines, see Dworkin’s “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe it”, and *Justice for Hedgehogs*, and Shafer-Landau’s *Moral Realism: A Defence*.

test a view from a substantive moral point of view, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are really testing the view at hand with respect to what it says about the *reasons* why things are right or wrong, rather than what it might say about some metaphysical dependency relation between states of affairs. If we are asking, for instance, whether a genocide would be morally permissible had it maximized the total happiness in the universe in order to test the utilitarian view from a substantive moral point of view, we are not really asking about the metaphysics of some possible world – a world in which that particular genocide maximizes the total “happiness” – but, rather, whether some *actual* aspect of that genocide – that it did not in fact maximize the total happiness in the universe – is the reason why it was wrong. The substantive moral question, in other words, is really a *moral relevance* question about the actual world. Formulating it in terms of counterfactuals is a rhetorical tool. Consider the following.

2 plus 2 equals 4 – that is a necessary truth (let's assume); hence, there is no possible world in which 2 plus 2 does not equal 4. Suppose that someone claims (just to help me illustrate my point here) that the ultimate reason why anything is morally right or wrong is that 2 plus 2 equals 4. So, according to this person, genocide, slavery, and torturing babies for fun are all wrong ultimately because 2 plus 2 equals 4. It is an absurd moral view because clearly that mathematical truth is not morally relevant to the wrongness of any of these reprehensible actions: it is not among the *reasons why* the latter are reprehensible. We could express our objection to that absurd moral view by employing counterfactual language, asking “What if 2 plus 2 did not equal 4 – then genocide and slavery would be right??” If that question is effective intuitively, it is because it is another way of asking “What does that mathematical truth have to do with the wrongness of genocide or slavery?”

It would not work as a question involving the states of affairs in the possible world in which 2 plus 2 does not equal 4, because there is no such possible world.

Thus, sometimes we use counterfactual language in order to question the *moral relevance* of a fact in the actual world; and when we do that, we do not presuppose that the fact in question is contingent – because whether or not it is contingent has nothing to do with whether or not it is morally relevant. In raising the standard objection to anti-realism, therefore, by asking “What if most people approved of genocide – would it then be morally right?” we do not *have to* rely on the existence of a possible world in which most people approve of genocide – even though that assumption would be unproblematic. If we are asking that question in order to test anti-realism from a *substantive moral* point of view, our question has nothing to do with what is possible and what is not – it is about the moral relevance of some aspect of the actual world. We are really asking whether the fact that most people disapprove of genocide is the main reason why it is wrong. This point will be crucial when we discuss realism.

The presumption in questions like “What if most people approved of genocide – would it then be morally right?!” is that, *surely*, it would not be morally right (hence the exclamation marks). As I have said before, the real target of my argument is realism, so I will essentially take it for granted that the critics of anti-realism are right here about the moral irrelevance of our actual disapproval of genocide. What I would like to suggest is that a very similar case can be made against realism.

#### **IV. MORAL REALISM: A SUBSTANTIVE MORAL MISTAKE**

“Moral realism,” the realist Russ Shafer-Landau writes, “is the theory that moral judgments...when true, are so independently of what any human being, anywhere, in any circumstances whatever, thinks of them...At the simplest level, all realists endorse the idea that there is a moral reality that people are trying to represent when they issue judgments about what is right and wrong”<sup>13</sup>. Realists differ greatly in their understanding of “moral reality”: Some, (non-naturalist realists,) claim that it is a distinct realm of *non-natural* properties and states of affairs<sup>14</sup>; others, (naturalist realists,) claim that moral properties and states of affairs are identical with certain natural properties<sup>15</sup>; and, recently, there have been others who insist that an independently existing “moral reality” is not supposed to be understood in metaphysical terms at all.<sup>16</sup>

For the purposes of this essay, these differences in the metaphysical construal of “moral reality” do not matter much. What I would like to do is leave aside all metaphysical and epistemological issues surrounding a moral realm and evaluate the very idea of an

---

<sup>13</sup> Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, pp. 2-11.

<sup>14</sup> Such as Shafer-Landau, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> For a variety of naturalist views, see, for example, Richard Boyd, “How to be a Moral Realist,” in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.) *Essays on Moral Realism* (1988), pp. 187-228; David Brink, “Realism, Naturalism, and Moral Semantics,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18 (2001), pp. 154–176; Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford UP 2001); Peter Railton, “Naturalism and Prescriptivity,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 95 (1989), pp. 51–174.

<sup>16</sup> See Dworkin’s *Justice for Hedgehogs*, and Scanlon’s 2009 *Locke Lectures*.

*independent* moral reality underlying moral truths, from a solely substantive moral point of view. Bad metaphysics or bad epistemology isn't our concern here.

I have argued earlier that realism amounts to the following *substantive moral universal generalization*: a wrong (or right) action is wrong (or right) always ultimately because there is an independent reality that dictates that it is wrong (or right). The *moral bottom-line* for realists, in other words, is always the dictate of an independent reality. As I have explained earlier, the postulation of an independent moral reality may involve more than that general moral claim about why right things are right and wrong things are wrong. It may have metaphysical, epistemological, or semantic, dimensions. However, that realism has some substantive moral content makes it a substantive moral view, and therefore subject to substantive moral evaluation, which is what we are presently interested in.

Recall that the problem with anti-realism was that it made the wrongness of anything, even the wrongness of such reprehensible things as genocide and slavery, always ultimately conditional on our actual disapproval of it (in however complex ways). But notice that realism does something very similar: it makes the wrongness of anything always conditional on the existence of a dictate of some independent reality. Accordingly, we may ask: What if genocide and slavery involved all the pain and suffering they involve, but there were no independent reality that dictated that they were wrong – would they then *not* be wrong? Isn't the proper thing to say rather that genocide and slavery would be wrong *even if* there were no independent reality that dictated that they were wrong?

But, we may wonder, does that question even make sense? Moral reality, one may say, exists necessarily, if it exists at all; furthermore, moral truths are themselves necessary.

Hence, one may argue, the question “What if there were no independent reality that dictates that genocide and slavery are wrong?” is misguided because it rests on the *false* presupposition that it is contingent whether or not there is an independent reality dictating the wrongness of genocide and slavery. In fact, one may go on, that is precisely how realism differs from anti-realism: it is a contingent matter whether or not most people actually disapprove of genocide, whereas it is necessary whether or not there is an independent reality that dictates that genocide is wrong.

As I explained when we were discussing the objection against anti-realism, however, when we evaluate a view from a *substantive moral* point of view, we are concerned with the reasons why things are right or wrong – not with what is possible and what is not, even though we may employ counterfactual language. The “What if?” questions, if they are intended to challenge a substantive moral view, do not presuppose anything about possible worlds simply because whether something is possible or not has nothing to do with whether it is morally relevant or not. Necessary things may be as morally irrelevant as contingent things.

Hence, when we ask “What if genocide involved all the pain and suffering it involves, but there were no independent reality that dictated that it was wrong – would it then be morally not wrong?” in order to evaluate realism from a substantive moral point of view, what we really ask is whether it makes *substantive moral* sense to take the dictates of some independent reality to be the ultimate reason why genocide is wrong. To put it differently, what we really ask is whether the fact, if there is such a fact, that some independent reality forbids genocide is the aspect of genocide that counts *most* from a moral perspective. For, that is exactly what realism implies: that the *ultimate reason* why



genocide, just like any other wrong thing, is wrong is that some independent reality dictates that it is wrong.

But, surely, the existence of an independently issued verdict – if there is such a verdict – that genocide is wrong is *not* the main or ultimate reason why it is wrong. Genocide is wrong mainly and ultimately because of the pain and suffering and loss that it involves – regardless of whether or not the badness of such suffering and loss is confirmed by an independent reality. The mistake in realism, in short, is that it holds *independence from our judgments* in such high regard that everything else, including what really makes things right or wrong, diminishes in importance. That is a misjudgment about what morally matters, and thus it is a substantive moral mistake.

## **V. CONCLUSION: REALISM OR ANTI-REALISM?**

Does moral justification, we are often asked,

come to an end with objective principles whose validity is independent of our point of view, or do they come to an end within our point of view – individual or shared – so that ultimately even the apparently most objective and universal principles derive their validity or authority from the perspective and practice of those who follow them?<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford UP 2001), p. 3.

I have claimed that it is a mistake to think, as anti-realists do, that moral justification *always* “comes to an end within our point of view”, that conformity to our judgments and opinions is *always* the ultimate reason why right things are right and wrong things are wrong. I have claimed, in short, that anti-realism is a mistaken substantive moral universal generalization, and must be rejected.

Is the rejection of anti-realism the same as the endorsement of realism? The rejection of anti-realism means that moral justification doesn't *always* come to an end with our actual judgments. For instance, when we morally analyze A's killing of B (in our example), we can say: A's action was not morally wrong, and it was not wrong because it was self-defense; self-defense, in turn, counts in favor of the permissibility of the action because it renders A's maxim universalizable, and it is morally permissible to act on maxims that one can will to be universal. If we are then asked “But what about the last thing you said, the Kantian claim that it is permissible to act on maxims that one can will to be universal – why is that true? Because *we think* it is true?”, if we reject anti-realism, as I think we must, we must say “No, universalizability of a maxim doesn't render an action permissible because we think it does”.

Does that mean that we are now realists? If realism is just the rejection of the universal moral generalization that the ultimate moral justification is not *always* conformity to our judgments, then, yes, we are. However, realism, as it is commonly understood and defended, is not just the rejection of a universal generalization, but the endorsement of another universal generalization. Realists claim that in order for there to be genuine wrongness and rightness, it is necessary that there be an independent source that issues moral verdicts. Even the realists who don't, allegedly, regard the independent source in

question in metaphysical terms, think that independence of our judgments is a *universal* condition or feature of wrongness and rightness. They think, in other words, that nothing can be genuinely wrong unless it is wrong ultimately *independently* of our judgments.<sup>18</sup>

Now, when realism is understood as a universal generalization like that, we do not necessarily become realists just because we reject anti-realism, for the simple reason that rejecting one *universal* generalization does not commit us to another *universal* generalization. Hence, just because we deny that the moral bottom-line isn't always conformity to our judgments doesn't mean that we must accept that the moral bottom-line is always independence of them. I have provided reasons for rejecting the realist idea that conformity to an independent source is always the ultimate reason why right things are right and wrong things are wrong. Therefore, just as we reject anti-realism, we must reject realism.

So, how do we answer Nagel's question? Does moral justification “come to an end with objective principles whose validity is independent of our point of view, or...ultimately even the apparently most objective and universal principles derive their validity or authority from the perspective and practice of those who follow them”?

---

<sup>18</sup> So, it is really the positive claims the realists make regarding the nature of rightness and wrongness that, in my view, get them into moral trouble, because that amounts to introducing new (and morally implausible) universal conditions for anything to be genuinely wrong. But if someone just rejected anti-realism, and didn't say anything further to “bolster” her rejection of anti-realism, she would be fine. That is not, as I have said, what the leading realists do, however.

The thing is, this question presupposes that the fundamental principles of morality, which account for why right things are right and wrong things are wrong after all, must in turn be justified by either our judging them to be true, or their being somehow “judged” to be true by an independent source – however thinly the latter is understood. It presupposes, in other words, that what matters most in morality is either our judging something, or its being judged for, and independently of, us. But we can reject both of these alternatives; and in the light of the objections against both, I think that is what we must do.

Is this something philosophically frustrating? I think not. For, we have only been engaging in moral *justification*, and justification must stop somewhere. Whenever we make a moral judgment, say, that a case of killing is morally permissible, or that the fact that it is self-defense is the main reason why it is permissible, the question “Why?” is a legitimate question – because in moral deliberation our main task is to make a case for/against something. Equally important, however, is to make a *good* case. So, when we arrive at a point where anything further we say seems less plausible than what we have said so far, the best thing to do, from a moral perspective, is to dispense with the implausible additions and stop at the point where our case is strongest. I have argued that realism, as well as anti-realism, amounts to implausible additions to our justification of why right things are right and wrong things are wrong. Therefore we have a moral obligation to reject both.