

# *What do our critical practices say about the nature of morality?*

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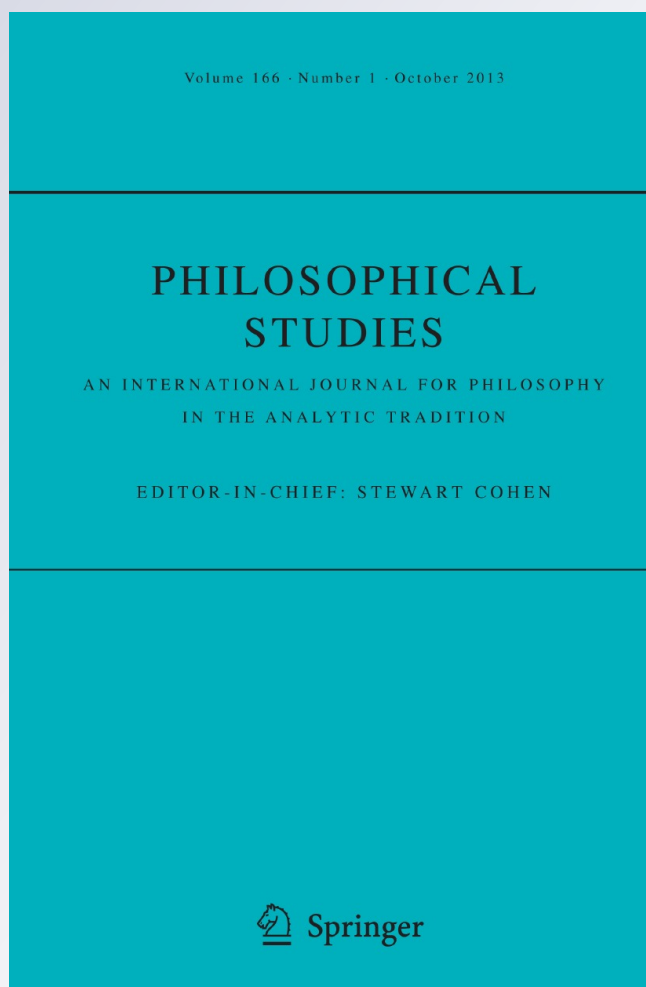
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## What do our critical practices say about the nature of morality?

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**Abstract** A prominent argument for moral realism notes that we are inclined to accept realism in science because scientific inquiry supports a robust set of critical practices—error, improvement, explanation, and the like. It then argues that because morality displays a comparable set of critical practices, a claim to moral realism is just as warranted as a claim to scientific realism. But the argument is only as strong as its central analogy—and here there is trouble. If the analogy between the critical practices of science and morality is loosely interpreted, the argument does not support moral realism—for paradigmatically constructivist discourses like fashion display the relevant critical practices just as well. So if the argument is to have force, the realist must say more about why the critical practices of morality are sufficiently like those of science to warrant realism. But this cannot be done—moral inquiry differs from scientific inquiry in too many important ways. So the analogy with the critical practices of science fails to vindicate moral realism. But there are further lessons: in looking closely at the critical practices of our moral discourse—and in comparing them to the critical practices of science and fashion—we gain insight into what is distinctive about morality objectivity and moral metaphysics.

**Keywords** Moral realism · Moral constructivism · Critical practices · Analogy argument · Moral objectivity

Looking to scientific inquiry reveals that an appreciation of the critical practices that a discourse supports—error, improvement, explanation, etc.—has implications for metaphysical issues. After all, it's in large part because science supports such robust critical practices that we find scientific realism so plausible. More specifically,

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scientific inquiry presumes, for instance, that genuine error and disagreement are possible; it takes scientific properties and facts to provide feedback that both shapes our thoughts and explains why we observe what we do. Not only do we take these critical practices as evidence of science's objectivity, but we also take them to lend support to a realist account of scientific properties and facts. Yet science isn't the only discourse that supports robust critical practices, and so—presumably—it's not the only place where reasoning of this sort could be used to make a case for a realist metaphysics.

This line of thought lies behind a prominent argument for moral realism. The argument—call it the analogy argument—maintains that because morality displays a set of critical practices that is on par with what we find in science, a claim to moral realism is just as plausible as a claim to scientific realism.<sup>1</sup> Moral realists find this argument attractive since, to the extent that the scientific inquiry provides insight into how we should understand the nature of morality, they can set aside concerns about the “queerness” of their underlying metaphysical and epistemological commitments.<sup>2</sup> But the argument is also attractive because it allows realists to build from an intuitive picture of the relationship between observations about the critical practices that an objective discourse like science supports, and the plausibility of a realist rendering of its underlying properties.

However, I will argue that the realists' analogy argument faces a dilemma. The question that gets the dilemma going asks what the critical practices of morality must be like if an analogy with the critical practices of science is to be capable of supporting conclusions about moral realism. The first horn supposes, in line with the comments of some moral realists, that a simple and intuitive understanding of these practices will suffice. But I show that on this picture the analogy argument fails to vindicate moral realism. The reason is that paradigmatically *constructivist* discourses—like our talk about what's fashionable—display a comparably simple and intuitive set of critical practices. The conclusion of the first horn of the dilemma, then, is that realists need a more substantive account of what the relevant critical practices are. The second horn demonstrates that the most promising strategies for addressing this need fall short—the critical practices of morality just differ from those of science in too many important ways.

Learning that realists are caught in this dilemma is significant for a number of reasons. For starters, it confirms existing suspicions about the implausibility of analogies between the critical practices of science and those of morality.<sup>3</sup> But, in so doing, it also helps explain why the analogy argument fails to warrant a claim to moral realism. Yet there are additional lessons for our understanding of the nature of

<sup>1</sup> The analogy argument is employed by realists like Brink (1984, 1989), Railton (1986a, 1989), Boyd (1988), Bloomfield (2001), and others. Slote (1971) employs a similar analogy argument to make the case for aesthetic realism.

<sup>2</sup> Witness Brink on this point: “the metaphysical and epistemological commitments of moral realism are very similar to, and so no less plausible than, those of realism about commonsense physical theory and the natural and social sciences” (1989, p. 12). c.f., Bloomfield (2001, pp. 28–29, 74), Boyd (1988, p. 184).

<sup>3</sup> Arguments raising concerns about analogies between the critical practices of science and the critical practices of morality are most prominent in the literature on moral explanation, though it can be found elsewhere. Arguments of this sort are made by, for instance, Harman (1977), Mackie (1977), Crispin Wright (1992, Chap. 5), Nichols (2004, pp. 149–154, 161–164), and Rubin (2008). Hallvard Lillehammer (2007, esp. Chaps. 5–7) develops a more general critique of analogy arguments in debates about the objectivity of our moral and evaluative discourse. For realist replies, see (e.g.) Sturgeon (1985), Brink (1989), and Railton (1986a). Also see Loeb (2003).

morality. When we look closely at the critical practices of morality—and when we compare them to what we find in discourses like science and fashion—we see that there are interesting differences and affinities in the forms of error, improvement, explanation, and the like that these discourses support. This not only sharpens our understanding of the form of objectivity that is particular to ethics, but it also provides us with reason for thinking (against the realist) that moral objectivity and moral realism needn't go hand-in-hand. In fact, it suggests that morality may be better understood on a constructivist model.

## 1 Moral realism and the analogy argument

The analogy argument finds its place in the work of naturalistic moral realists like Peter Railton, Richard Boyd, David Brink, Paul Bloomfield, and others. But before taking a closer look at how they develop their argument, it will be helpful to highlight some of the distinctive features of their version of moral realism.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.1 Naturalistic moral realism

We can see these realists as sharing a commitment to three claims: (i) moral properties are higher-order functional properties, (ii) these functional properties are constituted by certain natural properties, and (iii) the relevant natural properties are constitutive of the moral properties because there are certain causal mechanisms that allow these natural properties to fulfill their higher-order functional (moral) roles. Some examples will help illustrate these commitments. Consider Boyd. He takes moral goodness to be a higher-order property that both functions to promote well-being, and that is constituted by (the satisfaction of) certain human needs. Moreover, he takes these needs to constitute goodness because there are homeostatic mechanisms regulating the interactions of groups of individuals in ways that tend to contribute to well-being (1988, pp. 203–204). We find something similar in Railton's account. He takes moral rightness to be a higher-order property that functions to secure social rationality. And he takes the social rationality that is constitutive of rightness to be a complex natural property. Though Railton initially glosses social rationality as what would be approved of the social point of view, he also gives a more substantive account: socially rational acts are acts that, though the operation of certain group-level social-psychological mechanisms, tend to bring the subjective wants of the individuals in a group in line with the objective interests of the group as a whole (1986a, pp. 22–23, 26). Thus, for Railton, an act is right because it is socially rational—because it engages social-psychological mechanisms that work to bring subjective wants in line with objective interests.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A couple points: (1) While the discussion that follows is framed in terms of moral *properties*, these realists typically endorse a similar picture for moral *facts*. (2) Though there are a variety of subtle and interesting difference in the accounts that these realists offer, they will not affect the arguments below.

<sup>5</sup> Though Brink and Bloomfield speak in more general terms, they also take moral properties to be higher-order functional properties constituted in virtue of the causal relations holding among various human needs, wants, capacities, etc. See, for instance, Brink (1984, pp. 121–122) and Bloomfield (2001, p. 19).

For the discussion that follows, it is important to understand why these proposals count as versions of moral realism and not moral constructivism. To do this, let's compare Railton's proposal with an absolutist ideal observer variety of constructivism (e.g., Firth 1952). While both accounts talk of moral rightness as the product of a distinctive form of idealized approval, they differ over what actually makes it the case that a particular set of natural properties is constitutive of rightness. So even though Railton's proposal loosely characterizes rightness in terms of idealized approval, the real metaphysical work is done by something that is (in the relevant sense) mind-independent—namely, the operation of the various social-psychological mechanisms that function to bring subjective wants in line with objective interests. Thus, acts aren't right because we approve of them; rather, we approve of them *because* they're right. By contrast, the constructivist takes the metaphysical work to be done by something mind-dependent—namely, the approval of the ideal observer. Certain natural properties are constitutive of rightness *because* they would be approved of by the ideal observer.<sup>6</sup>

With this understanding of the distinction between moral realism and moral constructivism in hand, we can see that the case for realism turns on the ability of these realists to demonstrate that there are causal mechanisms of the sort they posit. Why should we follow Railton in thinking that the operation of interpersonal social-psychological mechanisms determines what is morally right? Why should we accept Boyd's proposal that explains moral goodness as the upshot of some group-level homeostatic property cluster? As we will see, their response gives central place to the analogy argument.

## 1.2 The analogy argument

Advocates of the analogy argument start with the observation that we are happy to accept a realist construal of the distinctive, higher-order properties that we find in the natural as social sciences (e.g., the property of being an ionic bond, the property of being a nation). They then argue by analogy that higher-order moral properties merit a similar, realist construal. More specifically, the analogy argument proceeds like this:

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Street (2006, pp. 136–138) denies that the account of non-moral goodness that Railton gives in his 1986b counts as a version of realism. While (oddly) she does not discuss Railton (1986a) account of moral rightness, it's worth briefly explaining why it would be implausible to try to extend her argument here. For starters, Street's claim that Railton is not a realist is based on an understanding of the realism/irrealism distinction that is different than the one I have employed. While I discuss the distinction in terms of the traditional Euthyphro contrast, Street does not. Rather, she maintains that a view is irrealist if the evaluative facts could change were our moral/evaluative attitudes (e.g., our desires, attitudes, evaluative tendencies) different (p. 136). Moreover, my use of the Euthyphro contrast, and the realist interpretation of Railton that it brings, is preferable to Street's reading. Not only does Railton himself employ the Euthyphro contrast to draw the realism/irrealism distinction (1986a, p. 12; 1986b, pp. 62–63), but he declares himself to be defending “stark, raving moral realism,” not some kind of irrealism (1986a, p. 5). A final point: even if we suppose that Railton is better understood as an ideal observer constructivist, the argument that follows would still have full force against other advocates of the analogy argument who are not plausibly understood as advocating a constructivist moral metaphysics (e.g., Bloomfield, Boyd, Brink, and Sturgeon).

- (1) There are certain features of the natural and social sciences that, on the whole, give credence to a realist construal of the underlying properties of those discourses (call these the “telling features”).
- (2) Moral discourse, on the whole, displays similar telling features.
- (3) Therefore, we have good reason to endorse realism about the properties underlying our moral discourse.

Premise (1) is a claim about the critical practices of science that, when present, sanction a realist construal of the underlying properties. These critical practices—the telling features of science—include things such as: (i) The sciences support notions of error and improvement. (ii) Scientific discourse allows for the possibility of substantive disagreement. (iii) Inquiry within science is viewed as reasoned (*a posteriori*) deliberation. (iv) Scientific properties and facts contribute to explanations of certain states of affairs. (v) Claims about the underlying properties of a science admit of predictive testing. And (vi) scientific properties and facts provide feedback—they have shaping influence on our thoughts about the area of science in question.<sup>7</sup>

We can get a picture of how realists deploy the analogy argument by looking at Railton's version of it. Railton begins by noting that the presence of rich explanatory power in a field like chemistry tells for a realist construal of its properties and facts. For instance, he notes that

[w]e are confident that the notion of chemical valence is explanatory [in a way that tells for realism] because proffered explanations in terms of chemical valence insert explananda into a distinctive and well-articulated nomic nexus, in an obvious way increasing our understanding of them. (1986a, p. 17)

The driving thought here is that it's *because* of this rich explanatory power that we're inclined to be realists about the property of valence. In fact, the case for realism about valence grows stronger once we notice that it exhibits other telling features. For instance, our scientific account of what valence is entails that water molecules form stronger ionic bonds than do molecules of ethanol. This allows us to predict that water will have stronger surface tension than ethanol, and we can run experiments to confirm this prediction. We can also see that chemical properties provide feedback. These properties have a shaping influence on our perceptions, thoughts, and actions in the sense that our thoughts (etc.) about valence are shaped by our perceptions: it's because we *see* that the water-spider can walk on the lake surface, but sinks on the oil slick, that we *come to think* that different fluids have different surface tensions.

Having demonstrated that the presence of rich explanatory power via the telling features warrants realism in science, Railton turns to argue that moral inquiry works in the same way. To do this, he sets out to show that the higher-order moral property

<sup>7</sup> These telling features can be found, in various forms, in the works referenced in note 1. It is worth mentioning that the “telling features” cited in the text are those that naturalistic moral realists appeal to in order to vindicate their *realism*. These features can be distinguished from other features of our moral discourse—e.g., declarative syntax, assertoric form, embedding within unasserted contexts—that realists point to in order to vindicate a more general claim to moral *cognitivism*. Since my concern is with the debate between realists and constructivists, in what follows, I will focus on the features that tell for realism.



of rightness that he characterizes in terms of approval from the social point of view (§1.1) has the same explanatory power that we find for scientific properties like valence. To demonstrate this explanatory power, Railton appeals to the critical practices of moral inquiry. For instance, he notes that his account entails that when the interests of a group are compromised, various inter- and intra-personal social-psychological mechanisms will incline the society toward unrest. This means that Railton's account predicts that social-political arrangements that would not be approved of from the social point of view will tend to spawn discontent. He then shows that the histories of oppressed societies provide evidence that confirms this prediction. Railton also demonstrates that rightness and wrongness as he characterizes them participate in informative explanations. For instance, to explain the storming of the Bastille, we cite the fact that the political arrangement in France was wrong. He also maintains that his account of rightness gives a prominent role to feedback mechanisms: The discontent generated by, say, an oppressive political arrangement can produce feedback (via various social-psychological mechanisms) that "promotes the development of norms that better approximate" what would be approved of from the social point of view (p. 24). Railton again points to historical cases—e.g., the suffrage and civil rights movements—as evidence for these social-psychological feedback mechanisms leading to better moral/political arrangements. Railton takes the upshot of his investigation to be that we have good evidence for the claim that moral inquiry exhibits critical practices that are on par with what we find in the sciences. So, in virtue of the analogy, he concludes that we're warranted in endorsing realism here as well.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 The realists' dilemma

A common objection to arguments like Railton's holds that the critical practices of morality are importantly disanalogous with what we find in science. In its most sophisticated form, the objection first notes the high degree of abstraction at which the realists' analogy operates. It then maintains that the resulting claims of morality

<sup>8</sup> Though there are variations in the details, versions of the analogy argument are used by the other naturalistic moral realists cited in note 1. For instance, Boyd explains that his "general strategy" for defending moral realism will be to "[s]how that moral beliefs and methods are much more like our current conception of scientific beliefs and methods (more 'objective', 'external', 'empirical', 'intersubjective', for example) than we now think" (p. 184). Moreover, when he later claims that moral thought is like scientific thought in being shaped by causal feedback mechanism, he explains that he intends "the analogy between moral inquiry and scientific inquiry to be taken *very* seriously" (p. 204, original emphasis). Similarly, Bloomfield acknowledges his reliance on the analogy argument when he explains that the "[t]he central thesis of this book is that moral goodness has the same ontological status as physical healthiness, so that if we are realists about the latter, then we ought to be also about the former" (p. 28). Moreover, Bloomfield points to telling features like fallibility as part of what inclines us toward realism about healthiness, and thus as part of what ought to incline us to realism about goodness as well (p. 38). It's also worth noting that while these realists use the analogy argument to provide a positive case for their realism, they also use it as a tool for countering various objections. But as Brink (1989, p. 12) explains, these negative uses of analogies with scientific practice also have positive argumentative force: "In defending moral realism against objections, I shall stress the parallels between the metaphysical and epistemological commitments of ethics and those of other disciplines that we do or should regard as realist [e.g., the sciences]. If these parallels are as frequent and important as I claim, we have further reason for accepting moral realism".



displaying critical practices akin to the telling features of science are just too thin to do the needed work. But realists seem to have a ready reply. Railton, for instance, considers the complaint that the examples that he provides in defense of his moral realism are insufficiently robust. His response is two-fold: First, he acknowledges that his account has but a “breezy plausibility”—by which he seems to mean something like ‘an intuitive fit within our larger picture of the world’ (p. 15). But, second, he denies that this is a problem because we’re willing to endorse comparably “breezy” accounts in the sciences. For instance, he maintains that his evidence for the claim that moral properties display feedback mechanisms “has about the same status...as the more narrowly biological argument that we should expect the human eye to be capable of detecting objects the size and shape of our predators and prey” (p. 15). Given this similarity, Railton concludes that there’s no reason to think his analogy is too superficial to support a claim to realism.<sup>9</sup>

However, while a reply like this indicates that the realists’ can provide examples where morality displays critical practices comparable to the telling features of the sciences, it also reveals a dilemma. The question that gets the dilemma going asks how closely the critical practices of morality must resemble the telling features of science if the analogy is to be capable of warranting a claim to moral realism. In the sections that follow, I will demonstrate that if the standard is something like Railton’s “breezy plausibility,” then paradigmatically constructed discourses like fashion display the relevant critical practices in a manner that is on par with what we find for our moral discourse. So the analogy with science fails to support moral realism. I then consider whether the realist could provide a more robust standard. Here we will see that the most promising alternatives are unable to deliver the needed analogy with the critical practices of science. In fact, learning why these proposals fail demonstrates that other proposals are also likely to fail. So again, the analogy argument proves unable to vindicate moral realism.

### 3 The challenge from fashion

Fashion offers a sharp contrast with science. While science is the paradigm of a descriptive and realist discourse, fashion—as a discourse that is both prescriptive and constructed—marks out the other extreme. That fashion is both prescriptive and constructed is readily apparent: when we say that a style is fashionable, we (typically) intend to commend it; we take fashion to be a paradigmatic example of a human construction because facts about what’s fashionable are so intimately tied to our thoughts, tastes, and conventions. I believe this picture of our fashion discourse captures our primary use of predicates like ‘is fashionable’ and ‘is chic.’ But to help demonstrate that a paradigmatically constructivist discourse like fashion can exhibit critical practices with the same breezy plausibility that Railton and others realists point to as evidence of their moral realism, it will be helpful to take a closer look at our fashion discourse.

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<sup>9</sup> See Brink (1989, Chap. 7), Sturgeon (1985), and Bloomfield (2001, Chap. 1) for the makings of similar lines of response.

### 3.1 A fashion model

We can start by asking what the point and purpose of fashion is. At its core, fashion functions as a means of expression: adopting a distinctive style of dress is both a way of asserting individualistic aspects of one's personality, and a way of expressing one's membership in a particular social group. Consider: Preppies have distinctive styles that are exemplified by the Izod and Polo brands. To dress in accordance with the fashion conventions that characterize this style is both a way of asserting (part of) one's personality—namely, one's identity as a preppy—and a way of expressing one's membership in the preppy group.

This understanding of the function of fashion tells us much about the constructed nature of fashion properties and facts. For one, given that fashion is a means of expressing one's *membership* within a particular group, we should expect that facts about what's chic are a function of the distinctive conventions of those social groups. However, since fashion functions not only to express group membership, but also *individuality*, we should expect fashion facts to be the product of factors that are particular to the agent in question as well (e.g., his tastes, desires, sentiments, etc.). But notice that these two functions can conflict: for instance, the styles that convey membership in a particular group may not afford one enough room to express one's individuality. Seeing fashion as involving these potentially competing social and personal functions indicates that we should take fashion facts to be facts about the styles that the relevant group would accept as balancing the demands of membership against the need for individuality. That is, we should take fashion facts to be the product of some (suitably informed) judgment.

Though more would need to be said to flesh this account out, we have enough to draw several important conclusions. First, because fashion facts are best explained as the result of (suitably informed) *judgments*, we have an account that clearly counts as a variety of constructivism (§1). Moreover, this account of fashion facts also captures the central features of our fashion discourse noted above. In particular, it captures the sense in which we take fashion facts to be the upshot of both fluid social conventions, and individual tastes and preferences. Moreover, seeing fashion facts as facts about the balance between competing concerns of group membership and individual expression explains how fashion judgments function prescriptively. With this fashion model in hand, we now have what we need to understand why our fashion discourse is a problem for the realists' analogy argument.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> As noted in the text, our primary use of terms like 'fashionable' and 'chic' aims to pick out constructed properties and facts. However, there are a couple of secondary uses where one might think that a realist construal is plausible. Because my argument builds on a notion of fashion that is constructed, it will be worthwhile to briefly explain why these secondary uses are not appropriate for the discussion that follows. First, there may be a secondary use of 'fashionable' that is more or less equivalent to judgments of beauty (e.g., when we talk of a style that is "timelessly fashionable"). While this secondary use might have some claim to a realist construal, that claim would be at least as controversial as the associated claim to realism about the beautiful—and likely more so. More importantly, this fashion-as-beauty use is ill-suited for capturing central features of our fashion discourse: as noted, predicates like 'is fashionable' and 'is chic' are typically used to pick out properties that are intimately tied to *fluid* social/group conventions and individual *tastes*. As such, a realist construal of them is generally thought implausible (see Railton 1997 for a similar point). Second, there is a wholly sociological/descriptive use of 'is fashionable' that tracks

### 3.2 Fashion and the telling features

Though fashion properties and facts are constructed in the above sense, they can still support critical practices with the same breezy plausibility that we find for moral properties and facts. Consider the explanatory/predictive power and feedback mechanisms on which Railton and others rely: We can explain why George Clooney made *People* magazine's annual best dressed list by citing the fact that he is a fashionable dresser. And, given that he dresses so well, we can predict that he will make the list again next year.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the accolades and condemnations that are elicited by instances of chic and unfashionable dress provide feedback that can shape thought and action. For instance, given that fashion functions to express individuality and group membership, comments and criticism from friends can influence the style of dress that one deems fashionable.<sup>12</sup>

But our fashion discourse doesn't just support substantive explanations, predictive testing, and feedback mechanisms. It also supports notions of error and improvement. Notice, for instance, that we say things like "Bob used to have terrible style [error], but since he started dating Jessie, he's really learned how to dress more fashionably [improvement]." The above account of fashion facts helps us see that such talk is not merely metaphorical. First, the model allows that at least two dimensions of fallibility are possible: one can fail to accurately perceive the fashion conventions of a given group, and one can also be mistaken about the significance that one places in being able to express one's own individuality. Moreover, because we can get better at identifying both fashion conventions and our own need for individuality, the above model explains how our fashion judgments can improve.

Moreover, our model also demonstrates that substantive inquiry, deliberation, and disagreement are possible in fashion. Because it can be difficult to figure out what the relevant fashion conventions are, and because one might not be sure what sort of statement a particular outfit might make, it's not surprising that we find inquiry and deliberation in our fashion discourse. Not only do we ask for advice about what to wear, but we also tend to give reasons to substantiate our critical judgments or to justify the styles we've adopted (e.g., Coco wears it, so it must be chic). Moreover, because fashion facts are facts about how to best balance group

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Footnote 10 continued

things like what individuals or cultures regard as fashionable, and how fashion norms evolve and get transmitted. But because this notion is descriptive, it fails to capture the normative function that is central to our fashion discourse. While there are interesting questions about how this secondary descriptive use is related to the primary prescriptive one, I will not take that up here.

<sup>11</sup> It's worth noting that fashion properties and facts pass the counterfactual test that some naturalistic realists (e.g., Sturgeon 1986; Railton 1986a, Brink 1989) take as evidence for the robustness of a particular explanation or prediction. For instance, the claim 'were Clooney not so fashionable, he would not have made all the stylish clothing choices that he did' seems just as true as Sturgeon's claim 'were Hitler not morally depraved, he would not have done all the evil that he did'.

<sup>12</sup> It's significant that this shaping needn't be conscious: I might deliberately decide to change the way that I dress because I believe your critical comments are correct; but your comments might also cause me to unknowingly start to mimic your style. c.f., Brink (1989, pp. 188–189).

membership and individual expression, it also makes sense that we find substantive disagreement about what's chic.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly such results are highly problematic for the moral realist's analogy argument: If the properties and facts of paradigmatically constructivist discourses like fashion display the relevant critical practices just as well as morality does, then the analogy to the telling features of science does nothing to help establish the truth of moral realism. In light of this, the realist might grant that fashion displays critical practices with the same breezy plausibility that we find in our moral discourse, but deny that fashion does so across a sufficiently *broad* range of phenomenon. More specifically, he might claim that moral properties do, but fashion properties do not, play a role in explanations that range across a diverse array of subject matters—e.g., psychology, sociology, political science, economics. And because fashion properties lack sufficient breadth, the analogy argument stands.<sup>14</sup> However, the fact that fashion properties are human constructions does not prevent them from figuring in explanations of a diverse range of phenomena. Witness:

Psychology	The fashionableness of exotic items explains why hats with feathers from rare birds were desired by women of the UK during the early 1900s.
Biological	That these brightly feathered hats were fashionable helps explain the decline in species of birds with florid plumage.
Economics	The fashionableness of these hats also helps explain why an entire industry developed to manufacture them.
Socio-political	The concern with the decline of bird species used to make the hats explains why the British outlawed commercial hunting of certain exotic birds. <sup>15</sup>

So the hope of dismissing the challenge from fashion through an appeal to explanatory breadth falls short. In sum, if breezy plausibility is our standard, then the critical practices of fashion turn out to be on all fours with the critical practices of morality. But this conclusion shouldn't be surprising. Given the high level of abstraction at which we're working, breezy plausibility is easy to get. It can be

<sup>13</sup> Consider the following exchange from the *New York Times* blog coverage of the Fall 2009 Prada fashion show (Horyn 2009):

*Post 1:* [I]f Miuccia Prada is doing fishing waders in her show, you know she's not just doing any old waders. And this is not just any collection. I loved the equal treatment, the equal value, she gave to the [fishing waders] and to posh fur, or to glossy velvet and practical country tweeds. ... What made this collection work so well—energetically, brilliantly—is that Prada applied the thinking across the board. Everything was consistent

*Post 2:* I see no designs at all...just mad-cap random styling of pre-existing items.

Notice that not only is there disagreement about whether Prada's fall collection is fashionable, but both commentators offer reasons to substantiate their claims ("equal treatment" of different elements in a "consistent" manner vs. "mad-cap random styling of pre-existing items").

<sup>14</sup> Railton (1986a, 39 note 24) gives the makings of this sort of reply. C.f., Wright's (1992, pp. 196–199) discussion of "wide cosmological role".

<sup>15</sup> Holland (2007).

secured by any discourse—morality to fashion—that plays a broad, regulative role in human social interaction.

#### 4 The search for a more substantive standard

If the analogy argument is going to work, the realist needs to move beyond breezy plausibility. More specifically, he must (i) identify features of critical practices like explanation, error, and improvement the having of which would help substantiate a claim to realism, and (ii) demonstrate that these features are had by both morality and science. In what follows, I will consider three candidates that figure prominently in the literature: the potential for belief independent explanations, the possibility of robust forms of error and disagreement, and the presence of inquiry that leads to improvement and progress. Looking at these possibilities will be instructive in a variety of ways. First, we will see that all three proposals fail—the features identified either do not support a claim to realism, or are not plausibly understood to be part of our moral discourse. Moreover, seeing why these proposals fall short both reveals that alternative proposals are also likely to fail, and helps us understand what's distinctive of the form of objectivity that we find in ethics.

##### 4.1 Belief independent explanation

The first possibility appeals to belief independent explanations. In explanations that tell for realism, the facts in question have explanatory power even when nobody has any beliefs about those facts: Facts about chemical valence explain why we observe the water-spider sinking once it gets to the oil slick. But they would do so *even if* we did not believe that the two fluids had different surface tensions. Moreover, these facts would also have explanatory power even if we didn't have *any* antecedent beliefs about ionic bonds, surface tension, and the like. The capacity for robust belief independent explanation of this sort is part of what inclines us to realism about valence. So the realist might seek to revive the analogy argument by showing that morality exhibits a comparable belief independence.

To do this, realists draw on thought experiments. The stock example focuses on explaining why an unjust society will have a tendency for unrest. The realist maintains not only that moral facts about the unjustness of the society explain why it has the potential for unrest, but that we can explain this tendency for unrest even on the assumption that no one there believes that their society is unjust. Consider Railton's version:

Suppose that a given society is believed by all constituents to be just. This belief may help to stabilize it, but if in fact the interests of certain groups are being discounted, there will be a potential for unrest that may manifest itself in various ways—in alienation, loss of morale, decline in the effectiveness of authority, and so on—well before any changes in belief about the society's justness occur, and that will help explain why members of certain groups come

to believe it to be unjust, if in fact they do. (1986a, p. 23; c.f., Sturgeon 1986; Brink 1989, p. 189)

Realists like Railton can explain the society's tendency for unrest without appealing to beliefs about the unjustness of the society because they take moral properties to be a function of certain causal mechanisms—mechanisms that on their own are sufficient to explain how the regime's actions led to unrest.

But do we really have a moral explanation that is belief independent in a way that would tell for realism? If the moral case is to be like the above case of the water-spider, then we must have an explanation not just on the assumption that the individuals in the society lack the *specific* moral belief that their society is unjust (a weak belief independence), but also on the assumption that they have no related *general* moral beliefs—e.g., general beliefs that their society could be morally better, or un(der)specified beliefs that there's something morally amiss in their society (a robust belief independence). To see why weak belief independent explanation is not enough, notice that such explanations are possible for fashion. For instance, in order to explain why Bob hasn't been accepted by his preppy peers, we can cite the fact that he is an unfashionable dresser. But we needn't add that his peers *believe* that he's unfashionable. Rather, given that fashion functions to balance expressions of both individuality and group membership (§3.1), and given that constructed fashion facts can have a subconscious shaping influence on people's thoughts (§3.2), our explanation can be given solely in terms of the conflict between Bob's (subconscious) preference for individual expression and his peers' (subconscious) preferences for conformity.

Now here's the problem: while it might be reasonable to think that morality supports weak belief independent explanations, claims about robust forms of moral explanation are much less plausible. They are less plausible because they rely on very strong psychological claims. In particular, it must be possible for unrest to develop in a society *even if* the individuals there have radically impoverished belief sets—they have *no* specific beliefs about the unjustness of the society, *no* general beliefs about the comparative value of the social arrangement of their society, and *no* unspecified assessments that something is wrong. But why think this is true?

Yet even if we set this aside, there is a further problem: for notice that belief independent moral explanations tell for realism only if comparable belief independent explanations are not available to the moral constructivist. But there's no reason to think this is so. To see why, consider (again) an absolutist ideal observer constructivism that takes facts about rightness (wrongness) to be the product of an ideal observer's (dis)approval of particular social-psychological facts. Given that the ideal observer agrees with the realist that moral facts are constituted by certain social-psychological facts, he can also agree both that the tendency for unrest in the society can be explained by the causal mechanisms that underlie these facts, and that such an explanation would be possible even if individuals in the society had no beliefs about the unjustness of the regime. But—crucially—in doing this, the ideal observer constructivist would *not* be committed to accepting a realist moral metaphysics. That is, he can still maintain that the regime isn't unjust *because* of the operation of the causal mechanisms underlying the social-psychological facts;

rather, it's unjust *because* the ideal observer would disapprove of those social-psychological facts. But this means that moral constructivism can provide belief independent explanations that are on par with those that we get from the moral realist. So the first strategy fails to support a claim to moral realism.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4.2 Error and disagreement

A second realist strategy focuses on the nature of scientific error and disagreement. More specifically, the idea is to vindicate the analogy argument by identifying forms of error and disagreement that both science and morality display, and that give us reason to favor a realist metaphysics. This move has promise. As the following examples indicate, science and morality seem to involve special forms of error and disagreement that support a claim to realism.<sup>17</sup>

First, there's genuine disagreement. In science and morality, many disagreements seem to entail that at least one of the disagreeing parties must be wrong. But disagreements in constructed discourses like fashion are not like this—we're more inclined to take fashion disagreement to be indicative of fashion preferences than fashion error. Michael Smith makes this point nicely:

Suppose A says 'Φ-ing is worthwhile' and B says 'Φ-ing is not worthwhile'. If the value in question is moral value, then we seem immediately to conclude that at least one of A or B is *mistaken*. ... Indeed, this seems to me to be partially constitutive of moral value, as against values of other kinds. Suppose A and B disagree over some [matter of fashion]. ... In this case we seem much happier to rest content with bafflement at why someone likes what we can't stand; much happier to admit that, since 'there's no accounting for taste', we have a mere difference in taste. (1989, pp. 98–99, original emphasis)

Similarly, in science and morality, we take disagreements across times and cultures to indicate that someone is mistaken. But for a constructed discourse like fashion, it's hard to even make sense of diachronic or cross-cultural disagreement, much less error.

Second, there's the possibility of unnoticed error. In science, morality, and fashion, we can identify errors that we have made, but that we have only recently come to notice. That is, for all three discourses there are true claims of the form

- (a) I thought that my judgment that  $x$  is  $F$  was correct, but I now realize that it is not.

<sup>16</sup> This discussion points to a more general lesson: belief independent explanations are most plausible as evidence for realism when they are not about social-psychological phenomena. The examples in the text suggest that when we have a social-psychological phenomenon, it will (typically) be possible to develop plausible belief independent explanations that nonetheless presume a constructivist metaphysics. But when the phenomenon is not social-psychological in nature—as we have in the case of the water-spider—explanations that presume a constructivist metaphysics will be more difficult to develop. So while the moral realist is right to think that belief independent explanation can support a claim to realism in some discourses, he's wrong to think that such explanations are possible for morality.

<sup>17</sup> Arguments to this conclusion are made by, for instance, Sturgeon (1985), Railton (1986a, pp. 4–5), Brink (1989, pp. 31, 88–89), and Bloomfield (2001, pp. 3–23).



However, only for science and morality does it seem that we could be mistaken, but *never* notice it. More specifically, only for science and morality does a claim of the form of (b) also seem legitimate:

(b) My judgment that  $x$  is  $F$  could be incorrect even if I never realized that it was.

Presumably, the reason why (b) only makes sense for science and morality is that only these discourses involve a realist metaphysics.

Finally, there is the prospect of deep error. While constructivist discourses like fashion make some distinction between the *truth* of a belief and the *justification* that one has for it, they must hold that there is at least some tie between the two. After all, the constructivist takes the facts in question to be constituted by some (perhaps idealized) set of beliefs, conventions, or responses. This is important because it seems to limit the forms of error that the constructivist can accommodate. In particular, a constructivist about (say) fashion can hold that one's fashion judgment is incorrect just in case it fails to correspond with the set of beliefs, conventions, or responses that are constitutive of the relevant fashion facts. But while the constructivist *can* explain fashion errors that result from not having one's fashion judgments conform to the relevant set of beliefs/conventions/responses, he *cannot* explain the possibility that one could be mistaken in the beliefs/conventions/responses that make up that set. This sort of deep error—error which allows that *any* of one's views might be mistaken—only seems possible for realist discourses like science and morality that take the truth of a belief to be *completely independent* of the justification that one has for it.<sup>18</sup>

The realist is right to notice that our intuitions about both disagreement and error reveal important differences between science and morality on the one hand, and fashion on the other. But he's wrong to assume that these differences are best explained by taking science and morality to be realist discourses. To see why, let's return to the realist's claims about genuine disagreement and unnoticed error. Here the realist's argument moves from intuitions about the types of critical practices that science, morality, and fashion support, to the conclusion that morality warrants a realist construal. More specifically, the argument goes something like this:

- (1) Our intuitions about genuine disagreement and unnoticed error reveal that science and morality support more robust critical practices than fashion does.
- (2) Science is the paradigm of a realist discourse, fashion the paradigm of a constructed one.
- (3) So morality should be seen as a realist, not a constructivist, discourse.

Implicit in this rejection of moral constructivism is the assumption that a constructivist account of morality would be incapable of accommodating our intuitions about genuine disagreement and unnoticed error—it seems to assume that moral constructivism would need to look like fashion constructivism. However, this assumption is misguided. Not only are there different versions of constructivism, but these different versions vary in the extent to which they appeal to mechanisms

<sup>18</sup> Thus while arguments from unnoticed error are consistent with there being *some* connection between truth and justification, arguments from deep error are not.

of idealization and abstraction, and so they vary in the critical practices they can support. Moreover, committing to one form of constructivism for fashion—say, a non-idealized response-dependence account—does not commit one to using the very same account for morality.

Combining these points reveals the core problem with the realist's argument: The appeal to genuine disagreement and unnoticed error does not support a claim to realism because there is a general constructivist picture that also explains these phenomena. Consider, for instance, a general constructivism about the evaluative that combines an absolutist ideal observer variety of moral constructivism, and a non-idealized fashion constructivism.<sup>19</sup> First, it's because moral facts are constructed from an ideally informed point of view that we take moral disagreement to entail that at least one party must be wrong. But because fashion facts are not constructed from a similarly unique perspective, we're generally less inclined to see fashion disagreement as entailing that someone must be mistaken. Second, it's because we—as we actually are—are likely to have some trouble approximating the perspective of the ideal observer that we're inclined to think that unnoticed error is possible for our moral beliefs; but because fashion facts are more directly tied to our actual (i.e., non-idealized) judgments, we find it more difficult to countenance unnoticed fashion error.<sup>20</sup> So we can explain the asymmetry that we find in our moral and fashion discourses *without* presuming a realist moral metaphysics.

But while an appeal to an absolutist ideal observer variety of moral constructivism is sufficient to undermine the realist's claim that explaining genuine disagreement and unnoticed error requires a realist metaphysics, it is clearly inadequate as a response to the claim that deep moral error is possible. After all, if deep error is possible, then even our *idealized* moral beliefs might be mistaken. Thus, the realist might hope to revive the analogy argument by maintaining that the ability to support deep error is what warrants taking science and morality to be realist discourses. But this realist line has force only if it is reasonable to think that deep moral error is plausible. And here we find trouble. Once we investigate what makes deep scientific error seem possible, we see that there's no reason to accept a comparable conception of morality.

As we noted, to say that a discourse allows for deep error is to say that the truth of one's beliefs is completely independent of the justification that one has for them. So what is it about science that makes us think that it possesses this robust independence? Well, for starters, science is full of examples of theories that were thought to be correct at one point in time, but were later completely abandoned (e.g., Aristotelian medicine, phlogiston theory, the Ptolemaic model of the universe).

<sup>19</sup> Is it *ad hoc* to see morality and fashion as employing different forms of constructivism? No. As will become apparent below, looking to the distinctive functions that morality and fashion play can provide the constructivist about the evaluative with a principled account of why morality should be seen as employing one type of construction procedure but fashion another.

<sup>20</sup> One might try to resist the argument in the text by questioning whether the ideal observer account really explains genuine disagreement and unnoticed error. But given the significant similarities between this proposal and Railton's, I don't see how such a move could avoid also undermining his realist proposal. Whether the accounts of Boyd, Brink, and others would be spared is less clear given the more schematic nature of their proposals.

Because we have these examples, we have some indirect support for the thought that the truth of our scientific beliefs could be completely independent of the justification that we have for them. But claims about the independence of science gain more direct—and so more compelling—support from the observation that science supports robust belief independent explanations. After all, the ability to explain scientific phenomena without *any* appeal to our scientific beliefs is indicative of the *complete* separation between truth and justification that makes deep error possible.

Given the nature of the realist's analogy argument, we should expect these two phenomena to be nicely replicated in our moral discourse. But this is not what we find. For one, we have seen there's no reason to think morality supports belief independent explanations comparable to what we find in science. This is significant. It indicates that there is an essential connection between truth and justification in morality, and so it indicates that lacks the independence necessary for deep error. While I take this point to tell strongly against the possibility of deep moral error, it's worth noting that the realist gains little from an appeal to the thought that morality, like science, has examples of claims and theories that have been completely abandoned. This is because ideal observer varieties of moral constructivism can also explain our intuitions about moral inquiry leading us to abandon various claims and theories (more on this in §4.3). So the argument offers no support for realism. The upshot is that the appeal to error and disagreement—like the appeal to belief independent explanation—fails to provide the realist with a way to revive the analogy argument.

### 4.3 Progressive inquiry

A distinctive feature of scientific inquiry is that it leads to progress in the sense that it tends to improve our beliefs so that they more closely approximate facts that are, in the relevant sense, mind-independent. Moreover, it's because we take science to support progressive inquiry that we're inclined to be realists about scientific phenomena. By contrast, in constructed discourses like fashion, we see inquiry as *merely convergent*—it only functions to bring our beliefs into a state of greater coherence or reflective equilibrium. These observations point to a third strategy that the realist might employ to revive his analogy argument. He could maintain that moral inquiry is progressive, not convergent.

However, just pointing to cases where our moral judgments and norms have improved—e.g., the abolition of slavery, the acceptance of equal rights for women—is insufficient to demonstrate that our moral discourse supports the progressive inquiry that is unique to paradigmatically realist discourses like science. This is because these cases can be accommodated just as well by moral constructivism. Consider: as our societies have grown more inclusive, and as we have become more knowledgeable about the (non-moral) facts of the world, the perspective from which we make our moral judgments has come to more closely approximate that of the ideal observer. Because of this, it's not surprising that we have come to see that slavery is wrong. So the moral constructivist can, like the realist, capture the intuition that moral inquiry tends to lead to improvement. Granted, the constructivist and the realist will understand this improvement

differently: for the constructivist, it amounts to (say) convergence with the judgments that would be made by the ideally informed observer; for the realists, it means coming to better approximate something mind-independent. But the realist cannot use this difference as a reason to favor his account without begging the very question at issue.

In light of this, some realists have tried to do more to establish that moral inquiry is progressive. Here Railton (1986a, pp. 25–29) offers the most worked out argument. He maintains that his proposal not only predicts that we should see patterns where (say) marginalized groups come to be seen as equals, but that the various inter- and intra-personal social-psychological mechanisms that he has posited are “an *essential* part of the explanation” of why we see such patterns (p. 28, emphasis added). More specifically, Railton argues that we will get a tendency for greater equality in societies where individuals have, among other things, overlapping interests, the potential for conflicting interests, and an ability to influence one another, *precisely because* there are

mechanism[s] whereby individuals whose interests are denied are led to form common values and make common cause along lines of shared interests, thereby placing pressure on social practices to approximate more closely to social rationality. (p. 28)

Thus, we should see morality as supporting progressive inquiry because, under the circumstances in question, our moral judgments and norms will improve in virtue of having been shaped by the (mind-independent) social-psychological mechanisms.

However, while Railton is certainly right that some sort of social-psychological processes are involved in bringing about changes to our moral norms, we should question whether his social-psychological mechanisms (or something like them) are essential to explaining these changes, and so question whether we have any reason to see moral inquiry as progressive rather than merely convergent. Notice for instance that the ideal observer proposal that we've been considering can also explain the general tendency for marginalized groups to be seen as equals. A society with the features Railton cites—namely, a society where individuals have overlapping interests, the potential for conflicting interests, and the ability for influence—will be a society whose members will tend to be more knowledgeable of the (non-moral) facts of the world, and more aware of how their preferences and interests compare with those of others. Because of this, the moral judgments and norms of the society will tend to better approximate what would be approved of by an ideal observer. But this means that the (mind-independent) social-psychological mechanisms are not essential to explaining how a society can come to develop more equitable moral norms—an appeal to a plainly mind-dependent notion of informed approval will suffice. So again, the realists' hope for a way to vindicate the analogy falls short.<sup>21</sup>

While there may be additional strategies realists could employ to revive their argument, we have good reason to think they too must fail. For one, we have seen

<sup>21</sup> Nichols (2004, pp. 161–164) and Lillehammer (2007, Chap. 6) develop different, but compatible, lines of argument against the thought that morality supports progressive inquiry.

that the three most prominent proposals in the literature have fallen short. Moreover, in examining them, we have identified a series of important differences between morality and science—only science seems able to support (robust) belief independent explanation, deep error, and progressive inquiry. These differences indicate that any new strategy the realist might propose will be incapable of securing a suitably robust analogy between the critical practices of morality and those of science.<sup>22</sup>

## 5 Conclusions and implications

We have seen that if the realist's analogy argument is to support his moral realism, he must provide us with an account of the manner in which moral inquiry is supposed to be analogous with scientific inquiry. But we've learned that answering this question puts the realist between the horns of a dilemma. If establishing the analogy with the critical practices of science only requires a thin degree of similarity—a breezy plausibility—then, though the analogy holds, it fails to support a claim to realism. But attempts to identify a more robust commonality fall short—such commonalities either fail to warrant a claim to realism (e.g., unnoticed error), or rely on things that our moral discourse doesn't support (e.g., progressive inquiry). So we should conclude that, despite its prominence, the analogy argument fails to vindicate naturalistic moral realism. Moreover, to the extent that these realists are right that their account provides best hope of addressing the traditional metaphysical and epistemological worries that undermine alternative realist proposals,<sup>23</sup> then the dilemma carries force not just against view like those of Railton, Boyd, Brink, Sturgeon, and Bloomfield, but moral realism more generally.

Yet a close look at our critical practices doesn't just present a compelling case against the naturalistic moral realists' analogy argument (and perhaps realism more generally). It also sharpens our understanding of what moral objectivity amounts to, and how it differs from the objectivity that we find in discourse like science and fashion. First, we've learned that science exhibits a unique set of critical practices: Unlike both morality and fashion, science supports robust belief independent

<sup>22</sup> A final realist strategy: The realist could respond, not by tackling the second horn of the dilemma, but rather by denying that there is a dilemma in the first place. In particular, were he able to make a plausible case for fashion realism, then the tension in the analogy argument that the dilemma seeks to exploit would disappear. One might add that a plausible case for fashion realism can be developed on the model of aesthetic value proposed in Railton (1997).

Why this strategy fails: As discussed above (§3), a realist account of our primary use of predicates like 'is fashionable' and 'is chic' fits poorly with the robust connections that our judgments about what's fashionable have with fluid social conventions and individual tastes. So there's little reason to think that this strategy would work. In fact, this very point is nicely illustrated by Railton's proposal: He acknowledges that his account of aesthetic value is importantly different from his account of moral value in that only for the former are the values in question sensitive to culturally variable factors (1997, pp. 116, 124). In light of this, it is difficult to see how his account of aesthetic value could be used to make a case for fashion realism. Moreover, it's also worth noting that Railton does not present his account of aesthetic value as an account of *realism*; rather, he presents it as an account that is capable of securing robust forms of objectivity. In so doing, I believe we might understand him as acknowledging a central theme of this essay—namely, that securing robust forms of objectivity does *not* require a realist metaphysics.

<sup>23</sup> On this point, see Railton (1986a), Boyd (1988, pp. 181–187), and Brink (1984, 1989, pp. 11–13).

explanations, deep error, and progressive inquiry. Moreover, the fact that science supports such robust critical practices helps explain why we take it to be the paradigm of an objective discourse. Second, there are important differences in the nature of the critical practices that are common to morality and fashion—differences that help capture the thought that morality is more objective than fashion. As we have seen, only for morality do claims of unnoticed error and genuine disagreement seem plausible. Moreover, we can give a principled explanation for why this is: We saw above that fashion serves two primary functions: facilitating expressions of individuality, and helping coordinate and specify group membership. Though morality may not completely eschew such functions, its primary concerns lie elsewhere. Unlike fashion, morality is typically thought to be more concerned with other-regarding considerations. Moreover, whereas fashion assessment tends to take the narrow perspective of particular groups (e.g., the preppies), moral assessment is commonly seen as involving a perspective that is disinterested and impartial. So given that morality and fashion serve these different functions, it makes sense that we tend to view morality as a more objective discourse—one that places greater significance on idealization and abstraction, and so one that is capable of supporting a richer (more objective) set of critical practices.

Bringing these insights about the nature of the objectivity in our scientific, moral, and fashion discourses together, and combining them with what we have learned about the realists' analogy argument, draws out a final implication—namely, that morality may be best understood on a constructivist model. Contrary to what many moral realists suppose, we have seen that a constructivist metaphysics can support a robust set of critical practices.<sup>24</sup> More importantly, we have also seen that varieties of moral constructivism that make use of abstraction and idealization are likely to be better positioned to capture the form of objectivity that this investigation has shown to be distinctive of morality.<sup>25</sup> This indicates that constructivism could provide a powerful and appealing account of our moral discourse and practice.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Sturgeon (1985), Railton (Railton 1986a, b, p. 4), Brink (1989, Chap. 2), and others seem to be motivated, at least to some extent, by the thought that a constructivist account could not capture the distinctive critical practices of morality.

<sup>25</sup> While I have been using an absolutist ideal observer form of constructivism throughout much of the essay, I do not believe that this is the only form of constructivism that could capture the distinctive critical practices of our moral discourse, much less the best. But that is an argument for another time.

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