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Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics. by David O. Brink

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death of his uncle, Pliny the Elder. "Joyce, Semiosis, and Semiotics" discusses Joyce's punning in *Finnegans Wake* as an example of the "encyclopedia model" of meaning, and furthermore as an example of a work whose interpretations are infinite but not arbitrary. "Abduction in Uqbar" uses Peirce's theory of abduction to make a point about the detective fiction of Borges and Casares. "Pirandello *Ridens*" gives a three-level reading of Pirandello's essay, "Humor". "Fakes and Forgeries" provides a complex typology of fakes and forgeries and argues that what is difficult is not deciding what a forgery is, but rather deciding what an authentic work is. This essay would be of interest to historians and philosophers of history, as well as to students of interpretation. "Semantics, Pragmatics, and Text Semiotics" attempts to show the unavoidable interplay between three sometimes isolated provinces of semiotics. "Presuppositions", written in collaboration with Patrizia Violi, discusses the problem of presuppositions from the viewpoint of an "encyclopedia" theory of semantics and shows the role of presuppositions in certain rhetorical strategies. Finally, "On Truth: A Fiction" recounts the third of three expeditions to Twin Earth and includes a transcript of a dialogue between a computer from Twin Earth and a scientist from Earth who is posing as a computer. This piece is very humorous and pulls together several themes from the book.

Like most of what Eco writes, *The Limits of Interpretation* is fascinating in many ways, full of insights, provocative ideas, *curiosa*, and clever turns. Sometimes cleverness gets the best of Eco, but in general the text is clear and accessible. Moreover, its overall thesis should find a sympathetic audience in those who have been alarmed by what might seem like recent excesses in hermeneutical theory. The book is, without a doubt, an excellent point of departure for those interested in the problems raised by the interpretation of texts.

David O. Brink, *Moral realism and the foundations of ethics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xii + 340 pp.

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Brink defends "moral realism, an externalist moral psychology, a coherentist moral epistemology, a nonreductive form of ethical naturalism, and an objective conception of utilitarianism" (p. 7). "Moral realism" holds that moral judgments make true or false claims about objective "moral facts," facts concerning "real objects and events whose existence and nature are largely independent of our theorizing" (p. 6); "externalism" denies any *conceptual* connection between moral claims and motivation or reasons for action; "coherentism" holds that "the degree of one's justification in holding *p* varies directly with the degree of coherence exhibited by the belief set of which *p* is a member" (p. 103); "nonreductive ethical naturalism" contends that moral properties are "constituted by...natural...properties even if moral terms are not definable by natural terms" (p. 9); and "objective utilitarianism" construes welfare "in largely nonsubjective terms" (p. 10).

In this reviewer's opinion Brink's defense of externalist moral realism [EMR] is not ultimately convincing. In particular, I think he fails to demonstrate EMR's superiority over internalist noncognitivism (IN). For the purposes of this review I will interpret IN, somewhat crudely, as holding (a) the "internalist" view that assent to a claim such as "I morally ought to A" [M] includes having some intention to A; and (b) the "noncognitivist" view that a moral claim's meaning consists primarily in this internalism, and, hence, that moral claims do not (except perhaps indirectly) "state facts." Apart from the "objectivity" issue itself, which will be considered later, Brink's central, general, arguments against IN are perhaps (a) that it fails to account for nonprescriptive, or non-"dynamic," uses of moral claims (pp. 26–27, 78–79), and (b) that it cannot properly account for the amoralist (chapter 3 and *passim*). Neither argument succeeds. The first fails to distinguish internalism's doctrine concerning *assent* to a moral claim from the "prescriptivist" doctrine that to *assert* such a claim is to "prescribe" that it be complied with; and one can accept the former doctrine while rejecting the latter.<sup>1</sup> Thus, one can admit that an ordinary citizen would not normally use "George Bush should resign" for the purpose of "telling," must less "trying to get," Bush to resign, and yet still insist that it is being used internalistically with all that that implies (that Bush could be said to assent to it only if he had some intention to resign; that debates about the reasons for it would be debates about the reasons for *Bush's resigning*, not [merely] debates about the reasons for having certain beliefs; etc.).<sup>2</sup> Turning to (b), Brink's "amoralist" might accept (that there are sufficient reasons for) M and yet still raise questions about whether (there are sufficient reasons) to A. Since IN holds that assenting to M includes intending to A (and hence, that to accept that there are sufficient reasons for M is to accept that there are sufficient reasons to A), Brink correctly observes that IN, unlike EMR, cannot regard the amoralist's questions as open questions; hence, he contends, the amoralist poses serious, substantive, questions which EMR can properly view as significant but which IN must unjustifiably dismiss. But IN dismisses no substantive practical questions; it differs from EMR simply in treating such questions as questions *within* morality. Consider, for instance, a simple externalist view according to which M merely makes the factual claim that A-ing would maximize pleasure. The amoralist's questions now become questions concerning whether, and why, to do what maximizes pleasure, questions which are indeed substantive questions. But *these* questions are not dismissed by IN; IN simply holds that, because moral claims are intrinsically practical, such questions must be answered as the basis for, or in the course of, deciding whether, and why, to accept M in the first place. Moreover, while IN does reject the amoralist's formulation of these questions (IN contends that the amoralist's "external" questions concerning whether [and why] to do what morality requires are "correctly" expressed as "internal" questions about what morality requires [and why it requires it]), it also provides an explanation for the seeming naturalness of the amoralist's formulation—viz., that the amoralist's formulation uses moral terms in conventional, or "inverted-commas," senses. And Brink's rebuttal to this explanation (that "it is simply unclear" that the amoralist is "using moral language in inverted commas," and that "we can imagine someone who regards what we take to be moral demands as moral demands—and not simply as conventional moral demands—and yet remains unmoved" [47–48]) is not merely bare assertion, persuasive only for readers who (unlike this reviewer) share his initial intuitions, but is inadequate in any case against versions of "moral" internalism which are less crude than IN.<sup>3</sup> Suppose, for instance, that moral claims are construed as encapsulating genuine, but only conditional or hypothetical, action-commitments—

specifically, that assenting to M includes intending to A if/where, but only if/where, one regards “other-regarding” considerations as controlling. This construal allows assenters to “remain unmoved” by moral claims (if self-interest supports doing B, an egoist can accept M without having any intention to A) without making such claims merely conventional (even for an egoistic assenter, M expresses *that assenter’s* view, not merely a conventional view, as to what to do where “other regarding” considerations are controlling—e.g., where the relevant alternatives are all egoistically equal); yet because such a construal retains a conceptual, if conditional, connection between assent and intention, it remains in the internalist camp.<sup>4</sup>

Brink’s more narrow arguments against IN, or for the comparatively greater plausibility of EMR, also seem to me to fail. Consider, for example, his contention that IN cannot account for the common notion that “one can be held responsible only for actions one could have known were wrong” (p. 27)—in particular, that it cannot contend that the relevant capacity is the capacity to see that an act possesses C, where C is a nonmoral characteristic an agent regards as wrong-making, for “people might be able to recognize C but not (be able to) recognize C as a wrong-making characteristic” (p. 28). The truth is that IN can incorporate this last point far more plausibly—and thus make far better sense of the notion at issue—than EMR. For IN can, and would interpret the relevant capacity as the capacity to regard C as constituting a reason *against doing* the act in question (IN would say, e.g., that regarding C as a wrong-making characteristic is—or entails—accepting the *imperative* principle “Do not perform actions which possess characteristic C”), whereas EMR has to interpret it merely as the capacity to regard C as constituting a reason for the factual belief that the act has (or lacks) a certain “moral” property. And where responsibility *for action* is in question, the more plausible interpretation seems to be IN’s.

The underlying problem here is that Brink—like most externalists, in my view—fails to appreciate the significance of the fact that, on any externalist account, moral claims, arguments, and theories are claims, arguments, and theories simply about *what to believe*, not about *what to do*; questions concerning what to do and why to do it become separate, “external,” questions.<sup>5</sup> Consider, for instance, Brink’s claim that EMR can make the best sense of the question whether it is self-defeating to use a given moral theory as a decision procedure (pp. 256ff., and compare the discussion of “esoteric” morality, pp. 87ff.). The truth is that EMR can make no sense whatever of using a moral theory as a decision procedure—and, thus, of this question. For to use a theory as a decision procedure is to view it as a theory about what to do, whereas a moral theory, according to EMR, is simply a theory about what to believe. (E.g., “accepting” utilitarianism, according to EMR, does not include *deciding to do* what maximizes welfare; it only includes *believing* that welfare-maximizing acts have the moral “property” of rightness. Questions about whether, and why, *to [decide to] do* what maximizes welfare are entirely “external” to morality.) Further, consider Brink’s seemingly noncontroversial assumption that to say that an act or attitude is morally right is to say that it is justified (the phrase “right or justified” is used throughout Chapter 8), whereas to say that it is morally wrong is to say that it is mistaken [indeed, he accuses noncognitivism of being unable to explain how “mistaken...attitudes are possible” (p. 31)]. If “justified” and “mistaken” are construed normally, as expressing support and opposition respectively, then this assumption is not consistent with EMR. For on EMR, to say that an act or attitude is (morally) right (or wrong) is not to make a claim *in favor of* (or *in opposition to*) that act or attitude, but is merely to make the factual claim

that that act or attitude has (or lacks) a certain property; hence, if “justified” is equated with “right” and “mistaken” with “wrong,” then to say that an act or attitude is (morally) justified (or mistaken) is not to make a claim in *favor* of (or in *opposition to*) that act or attitude, but is merely to make the factual claim that that act or attitude has (or lacks) a certain property). Thus, EMR can apply “justified” and “mistaken” in their ordinary senses only to beliefs; any application of these terms to actions is, again, “external” to morality. And this leads to a still more basic question: what sense can EMR make of the fundamental notion that acts may “conform to” or “conflict with” moral claims—e.g., that if I refrain from *A-ing* my actions “conflict with,” whereas if I in fact *A* my actions “conform to,” *M*? Since EMR rejects IN’s “assent” account (which says that my refraining from *A-ing* conflicts with *M* in the sense that it expresses my dissent from *M*); and since an account in terms of truth or “correctness” plainly fails (*M* may be correct even if I refrain from *A-ing* and incorrect even if I *A*); there seems nothing on which these “conflict” and “conformity” notions can get purchase. Space limitations preclude adequate discussion of this issue; but it is hard to see how the use of these notions can be explained unless the idea that morally obligatory actions are *to be done* while morally wrong actions are *to be avoided* is at least a background assumption or “norm”—unless, in short, externalist uses of moral claims are at best parasitic on theoretically more fundamental internalist uses.

Let us suppose, however, that EMR is articulated in a thoroughly consistent manner; and for the sake of argument let us grant that EMR accurately reflects the, or at least a, “standard use” of the “ordinary concept” of morality. Despite the implausible implications adumbrated above, Brink would apparently insist that EMR remains the preferred doctrine on the ground that it alone preserves morality’s “objectivity.” But the “objectivity” issue which has traditionally exercised moral theorists is whether questions about *what to do* can be given answers which are “objective” in the same sense as answers to questions about *what to believe*. And because EMR treats moral questions themselves as nothing but “what to believe” questions, it does not resolve, or even address *this* issue; it simply changes the subject. Suppose, for example, that one of Mill’s students responded to his explanation and defense of utilitarianism by saying “You’ve convinced me that all and only happiness-maximizing acts have the ‘objective property’ of moral rightness; but of course you’ve said nothing about *whether it’s ‘objectively correct’ to perform* such acts, and my decisions concerning what to do will be made, as always, on the basis of (e.g.) tradition.” Mill would surely say the student had failed to accept the theory’s central claims, and in fact had failed to grasp its entire point; yet according to EMR, the student has fully accepted Mill’s theory as a moral theory, including all the “objectivity” claims relevant thereto.

Moreover, it is doubtful whether Brink’s account of moral epistemology gives EMR even the irrelevant “objectivity” advantage which this change of subject should allow it to achieve. To begin with, note that, contrary to what Brink sometimes suggests, noncognitivist not only can—indeed, presumably must—adopt some form of “coherentism,” but that they can—and frequently do—make claims of the sort Brink himself emphasizes, including (a) that genuinely moral, not simply nonmoral, *reasoning* is possible (moral reasoning being interpreted as, e.g., imperative reasoning); thus, (b) that one’s moral claims can be required to meet standard “internal consistency” requirements; moreover, (c) that general moral principles and moral judgments about particular cases should be tested against each other using precisely the sort of “dialectical” process Brink discusses,

a process which concerns not just “bare consistency” but, e.g., justificatory and/or explanatory power; and even (d) that it not unreasonable to hope that, given our “common human nature,” moral disagreement would in fact be largely eliminated by the achievement of interpersonal factual agreement combined with intrapersonal moral “coherence.” If a view such as IN can incorporate all this—and if Brink is right that all factual, including scientific, disciplines must use a “coherentist” epistemology—then precisely how does IN fail to make morality “objective” in the way that, e.g., the physical sciences are “objective”? One might simply appeal to the fact that science is committed to “(physical) facts,” whereas IN eschews “moral facts”; but this seems entirely trivial unless it can be cashed out epistemologically (and indeed, since IN’s eschewing of “moral facts” allows it to retain internalism *without* being thereby forced explain how “moral facts” can have an “inherent connection” to action or choice—a “connection” which, notoriously, makes “moral facts” hopelessly mysterious—this “eschewing” seems, other things equal, a point in IN’s favor). Any substantive answer, in my view, must focus on the one place where IN’s moral coherentism and scientific coherentism significantly differ, viz., in the “initial credibility” tests of “particular case” claims, the tests which determine which such claims are to be dumped into the dialectical pot both to test and to be tested against more general principles and hypotheses. Since “particular case” scientific claims are true or false empirical claims, their “initial credibility” is tested by observation; by contrast, since “particular case” moral claims, according to IN, are imperatival expressions assent to which includes a commitment to action, their “initial credibility” is tested by what one is or would be willing to do (or approve others’ doing). And it can plausibly be claimed that observation is “objective” in a way that “what one is willing to do or approve” is not.

If Brink’s version of EMR is to achieve science-like “objectivity,” then, he must articulate a moral “initial credibility” test that is relevantly similar to ordinary observation. But he does not come close to providing, and indeed seems not fully to recognize the need for, any such articulation—a deficiency which again, I think, indicates a failure to understand and appreciate EMR’s implications. One specific difficulty, a difficulty which provides a clear example of this failure, is worth mentioning here. It is a commonplace that moral claims can be tested using “thought experiments” (i.e., hypothetical cases) whereas testing scientific claims requires actual cases. Brink “accounts” for this only by saying that thought experiments “play a larger role” in morality “both because it is often...regarded as immoral to assess moral theories by realizing the relevant counterfactuals, and because the desired test conditions for moral theories are often harder to produce” (p. 203). But the point is not that—indeed it is not even true that—producing actual cases in science is less likely to be either immoral or overly difficult; the point is rather that, whether actual cases are acceptably producible or not, “initial credibility” testing in science, unlike that in ethics, *requires* actual cases. And while IN has no difficulty explaining this difference (it need only note that observation requires actual cases whereas deciding what one would be willing to do or approve does not), it poses grave difficulties for EMR. For since, according to EMR, moral claims, like scientific claims, simply “state facts,” actual cases would seem to be as necessary in morality as in science (this being the implication Brink fails to appreciate).<sup>6</sup> Supporters of EMR thus face an unpleasant dilemma. If they simply accept this implication and insist that “initial credibility” testing of moral claims, like that of other factual claims, requires actual cases, then they are flying in the face of what seem to be plain facts about “initial credibility” testing of moral claims. Yet if, *a la* Brink, they reject or ignore this implication and

concede that moral claims can be tested using hypothetical cases, then standard objections to moral realism concerning the “mysteriousness” of moral facts and/or “moral intuition” apply with overwhelming force; they now owe us, yet Brink never provides, an explanation of how the *actual presence* of “moral” facts or properties in the circumstances in question can somehow be “apprehended” through the use of merely hypothetical cases.

The above criticisms should not be allowed to obscure the virtues of Brink’s book, which are considerable. It is well organized and clearly written, and its fully-documented presentations of opposing views are normally quite lucid (one consequence of these features being, as graduate students have told me, that it is a very valuable book to use in studying for qualifying exams). Moreover, a number of its arguments—particularly those in defense of “coherentism”—are admirably done. But it remains the case that, in this reviewer’s opinion, it fails to provide a convincing demonstration of EMR’s superiority over its major rivals.<sup>7</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., my “Assenting to ‘Ought’ Judgments,” *Noûs*, 17 (1983), footnote 2.

<sup>2</sup>*Sincere* assertion, of course, includes assent; and an adequate internalism must, as the crude characterization of IN given above does not, include an account of assent to moral claims directed to others (see “Assenting to ‘Ought’ Judgments,” 177–79). But none of this affects the legitimacy of the distinction emphasized in the text.

<sup>3</sup>It also, I think, fails to appreciate that what is *central* to the notion of “inverted commas” uses is not that such uses are “conventional” but that they are “parasitic” on, and make sense only against a background of, internalistic uses. [For a recent version of this point—a point which was of course emphasized by Hare—see James Dreier, “Internalism and Speaker Relativism,” *Ethics*, 101 (1990–91), pp. 6–26.]

<sup>4</sup>Dreier, *loc. cit.*, defends a somewhat different (though not unrelated) “less crude” version of internalism, a version which also sidesteps Brink’s “amoralist” argument.

<sup>5</sup>In response to a draft of this review, Brink objected that, though an externalist does represent moral propositions “as propositions to be believed,” they are nonetheless “propositions *about what one morally ought to do*.” But this simply fails to address the point, viz., that on an externalist conception “propositions about what one morally ought to do” are not claims about what to do, but simply about what to believe.

<sup>6</sup>Compare, for example, the “scientific-factual” question whether a certain combination of neural states constitutes a certain mental state with the (allegedly) “moral-factual” question whether a certain combination of social, political, and economic states constitutes racial injustice (a sample comparison derived from Brink himself [pp. 194–195 and *passim*], who contends that “mental state” and “moral” facts are analogous in significant respects: both are “higher-order” facts [possibly] constituted by combinations of “lower-order” facts; in each case one and the same “higher-order” fact may be constituted by a variety of different combinations of “lower-order” facts; etc.). To answer the “scientific-factual” question, one of course needs actual cases—one cannot simply “imagine” a certain combination of neural states and on the basis of that imagining pronounce that, where that combination exists, such and such a mental state exists. Hence, if the moral question about racial injustice were truly analogously factual, then answering it would also presumably require actual cases.

<sup>7</sup>I wish to thank Russ Shafer-Landau for helpful comments on an earlier draft.