# Chapter 1

# Introduction

This book seeks to establish two main conclusions. On the one hand, moral requirements and other elements of ethics are strongly objective in a number of senses that will be expounded in Chapters 2–8. On the other hand, the objectivity of ethics is itself an ethical matter that rests primarily on ethical considerations. It is not something that can adequately be contested or confirmed through non-ethical reasoning. Efforts to ground the objectivity of ethics on non-ethical foundations are misconceived and counterproductive. Moral realism – the doctrine that morality is indeed objective in the various respects to be elaborated here – is a moral doctrine.

This book will therefore be fighting battles on two fronts, but those fronts criss-cross complicatedly. Many philosophers who deny the objectivity of ethics have sought to base their arguments on non-ethical considerations of metaphysics or epistemology or anthropology. They take themselves to be impugning the intellectual solidity of ethical claims and values without advancing any such claims or endorsing any such values in the course of their reflections. Quite a few champions of ethical objectivity have responded in kind. They endeavor to counter the anti-realists by adducing alternative considerations of metaphysics or epistemology or anthropology that are thought to militate in favor of the objectivity of ethics. Hence, on both sides of the debates over the objective standing of ethics, many of the antagonists have supposed that the major points of contention are not themselves ethical matters. Those points of contention are about ethics rather than within ethics, or so the aforementioned antagonists believe.

Thus, while aiming to dispel doubts about ethical objectivity, this volume will likewise distance itself from the meta-ethical aspiration that unites many of the doubters and their realist opponents. As will be argued,

the chief differences between most issues of substantive ethics and most issues of meta-ethics reside in their levels of abstraction. Questions about the objectivity of ethics are often more abstract – sometimes much more abstract – than the familiar ethical problems that confront people from day to day. Nevertheless, those key questions concerning objectivity are not only about the domain of ethics but are also within it. My rebuttals of anti-realist doubts will frequently involve highly abstract argumentation, but they will generally be ethical ripostes that are grounded on ethical considerations. Most of the reasons for insisting on the objectivity of ethics are ethical reasons. Indeed, the efforts of many moral realists to base that objectivity solely or principally on non-ethical considerations are indicative of a curious lack of confidence in ethics. Such efforts convey the impression that ethical fundaments are not sufficiently sturdy to serve as their own supports; the assumption seems to be that some external buttressing is needed. By contrast, the present volume will persistently contend that basic ethical principles are their own rock-solid foundations. True in all possible worlds, they and their objectivity are unremittingly self-sustaining.

## 1.1. Two Preliminary Clarifications

My subsequent chapters will cumulatively delineate the different dimensions of ethical objectivity. Before we proceed any further, however, a couple of preliminary clarificatory remarks – applicable throughout this volume – are advisable. First is a matter of terminology. Although at most junctures in this book there will not really be any need for me to distinguish between "ethical" and "moral" (or between "ethics" and "morality"), I do not in fact use those terms interchangeably. The former term is more capacious than the latter. In other words, as understood here, the domain of ethics encompasses the domain of morality but also extends more widely. All moral propositions are ethical propositions, but not vice versa. In addition to comprising all matters that pertain to moral requirements and permissions and authorizations, the domain of ethics embraces a number of other evaluative and normative matters (concerning supererogatory deeds, basic virtues and vices, and the valuableness of sundry ways of life, for example). Though nearly all of my arguments and examples will concentrate on morality rather than on other precincts of ethics, many of the conclusions supported by those arguments and examples will be

applicable *mutatis mutandis* to ethics more broadly. Whenever my conclu-
sions are peculiar to morality – for instance, in Chapter 5's discussion of
the overridingness of moral requirements – the confined applicability
of those conclusions will be clear from the context or else will be stated
expressly.

A second preliminary item is a rough outline of the domain of ethics. The
whole of this book will gradually demarcate that domain more refinedly
by exploring many of the key characteristics of ethical phenomena. None-
theless, although a much more elaborate account of the ethical realm will
unfold throughout the remaining chapters, a terse comment at the outset
will help to underscore that realm's expansiveness.

Specifically, we should guard against thinking that the domain of
substantive ethics only comprises quite concrete moral matters such as
the permissibility of abortion or the legitimacy of reverse-discrimination
programs or the impermissibility of torture. Although those concrete
matters and the particular cruxes to which they give rise are of course within
the purview of substantive ethics, they are by no means the only things
within that purview. Rather, substantive ethics comprehends a vast array
of much more abstract propositions and problems as well. It embraces
all the standards and normative implications articulable in statements that
apply ethical predicates to objects of ethical assessment (such as actions or
situations or human beings). Many of those predicates, such as "morally
wrong" and "morally right" and "morally permissible" and "virtuous" and
"benevolent" and "evil" and "morally required," are wide-rangingly abstract.
Moreover, attributions of ethical properties come in a number of forms.
They include straightforward indicatives such as the thesis that abortion
is wrong, but they likewise extend to abstract counterfactual attributions
such as the claim that many activities would have been morally wrong even
if no one had ever believed them to be so. Numerous other complex forms
of ethical ascriptions are similarly possible. Still more important, among
those ascriptions are fundamental normative claims about things such as
the point of the human condition or the ultimate basis of moral require-
ments. As Ronald Dworkin contends, ethics "also includes claims about
morality as a whole that embed or presuppose direct or conditional or coun-
terfactual ascriptions of evaluative properties. The utilitarian claim that
the most fundamental point of morality is to maximize overall human
happiness, for example, assumes that human happiness is a good, and the
rival claim that its most fundamental point is to recognize and honor
the inherent worth of every human being assumes that human beings have

inherent worth."[1] These highly abstract normative theses belong to the domain of substantive ethics as much as do mid-level moral principles and narrowly focused moral verdicts.

Attentiveness to the distinction between abstract ethical propositions and concrete ethical propositions is of crucial importance throughout this book, for the perception of a fundamental divide between meta-ethics and substantive ethics has been very widespread among philosophers largely because the character of abstract ethical propositions as ethical propositions has been neglected. As we shall see (especially in Chapter 10's critique of the work of Richard Hare), a common tack for underscoring the ethics/meta-ethics division resides in an emphasis on the logical neutrality of meta-ethical doctrines among any number of concrete ethical positions. Philosophers correctly point out that theorists of diverse meta-ethical persuasions commit no logical errors when they converge with one another in their stances on concrete ethical issues such as abortion and voluntary euthanasia and gun control, and that theorists who share some meta-ethical outlook commit no logical errors when they quarrel heatedly with one another on those concrete issues. Much the same can be said with reference to the stances of theorists on quite abstract ethical matters such as the merits of consequentialism. Thinkers of disparate meta-ethical allegiances, such as Hare and John Mackie and G. E. Moore and Simon Blackburn and Peter Railton, have all favored consequentialism over deontological credos. Given that motley meta-ethical positions are logically consistent with either side of the consequentialist/deontological dichotomy – a dichotomy that is itself pitched at a high level of abstraction – it is not really surprising that very few philosophers have credited the notion that all or most meta-ethical positions are in fact substantive ethical positions.

Nevertheless, that widely disbelieved notion is correct, and this book will be arguing in support of it persistently. Though the relevant arguments will

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[1]   Dworkin 1996, 90. The whole of my current paragraph draws heavily on Dworkin's informal demarcation of the domain of substantive ethics. Within this paragraph, obviously, I am not attempting to provide a non-circular demarcation; indeed, one message of this book is that a non-circular demarcation of the domain of ethics is impossible. Instead, my purpose is to emphasize the expansiveness of that domain. (For a stimulating essay that is marred by its failure to attend to the distinction between abstract and concrete matters of ethics – and by its consequent failure to recognize that abstract matters of ethics are indeed substantively ethical – see Tasioulas 1998.)

emerge in subsequent chapters, the chief message of those arguments can be stated pithily here. Whereas most meta-ethical theses are logically neutral among a vast array of concrete moral stances, none of them (or virtually none of them) is logically neutral among *all* such stances. Let us briefly consider this point in connection with the relationship of supervenience between ethical properties and empirical properties – a relationship that will be discussed at length in Chapter 10. A thesis affirming the reign of supervenience in the ethical realm is almost entirely neutral logically in debates over the concrete ethical issues mentioned above. It is logically consistent with assertions of the moral permissibility of first-trimester abortions and with assertions of the moral impermissibility of such abortions, and it is likewise logically consistent with either negative answers or positive answers to questions about the moral permissibility of voluntary euthanasia or of gun control. It is similarly neutral logically between virtually all positive answers and virtually all negative answers to countless other ethical questions. Nonetheless, as we shall behold in Chapter 10, such a thesis does conflict with some concrete ethical positions (and also with some quite abstract ethical positions). Precisely because it conflicts with those positions, it itself is a substantive ethical doctrine. Its neutrality is sweepingly wide-ranging but not exhaustive. Although the ethical stances that clash with an affirmation of supervenience are undoubtedly incorrect and in some cases are decidedly peculiar, they are indeed ethical stances. By ruling those stances out as false, an affirmation of supervenience reveals its own substantive ethical bearings.

Other meta-ethical theses will similarly prove to have such bearings, as substantive ethical doctrines. Some of the concrete ethical implications of those theses pertain to counterfactual worlds rather than to the actual world – as we shall see, for example, in Chapter 2's engagement with response-centered accounts of morality – but the implications pertaining to those worlds are substantively ethical through and through. Also substantively ethical, then, are the meta-ethical claims that generate those implications. Though most such claims in their abstractness are logically neutral among myriads of heterogeneous ethical propositions, their logical neutrality is not comprehensive. As a result, there is no fundamental divide between the meta-ethical and the ethical. Meta-ethical theses are distinctive in the specific issues that they address, and many of those theses are distinctive in their levels of abstraction, but we should not make the mistake of thinking that their distinctiveness places them outside the domain of substantive ethical principles.

*1.1.1. Hume's Law*

When I maintain that a meta-ethical thesis is a substantive ethical doctrine if it is inconsistent with some substantive ethical position(s), I am presupposing that some version of what has come to be known as "Hume's Law" is correct:

HL    There is no valid argument in which all the premises are non-moral (and logically consistent) and in which the conclusion is a substantive moral proposition.

My reliance on HL may seem problematic, since HL has come under attack from certain quarters for the past few decades. Arthur Prior adduced several examples of arguments that appear to bridge the "is"/"ought" gap in a famous article published half a century ago (Prior 1960), and some other philosophers have subsequently come up with further apparent examples. Their arguments have convinced some highly astute meta-ethical theorists that HL is false. James Dreier, for instance, has opined that Prior's discussion is "an alarmingly simple refutation of Hume's Law" (Dreier 2002, 245). Hence, my presupposition of some version of HL is in need of vindication.

In pursuit of that purpose, I shall here briefly consider several supposed counterexamples to HL that have been marshaled in the relevant philosophical literature. We shall first look at Prior's three main counterexamples and at a cognate counterexample put forward much more recently by Mark Nelson, and we shall then look at one further specimen from an essay by Toomas Karmo.

Prior's formulations of his counterexamples to HL are needlessly elaborate. Hence, we shall ponder those counterexamples in the more concise forms in which they have been presented by Charles Pigden (Pigden 1989, 132):

CE-I    (1A) Tea-drinking is common in England.
        (2A) Therefore, either tea-drinking is common in England or all New Zealanders ought to be shot.
CE-II    (1B) There is no man over twenty feet high.
        (2B) Therefore, there is no man over twenty feet high who ought to show respect for elderly people.
CE-III    (1C) All undertakers are church officers.
        (2C) Therefore, if all church officers ought to be charitable, undertakers ought to be charitable.

We should probe these putative counterexamples to HL along with another one posed more recently by Mark Nelson (Nelson 2007, 214):

CE-IV    (1D) Stalin authorized the Katyn Massacre.
         (2D) Therefore, it is not the case that both (i) if Stalin author-
         ized the Katyn Massacre then Stalin was evil, and (ii) it is not
         the case that Stalin was evil.[2]

Building on some remarks by Prior himself (Prior 1960, 204), Pigden has soundly argued that the apt way of dealing with these apparent counterexamples to HL is to refine (or reconstrue) HL.

Borrowing some terminology from Prior, Pigden maintains that the moral predicate in the conclusion of each of these counterexamples is "contingently vacuous" (Pigden 1989, 133). He explicates that phrase as follows: "An expression E is contingently vacuous in the conclusion of a valid inference if the inference would remain valid if [every instance of] E were [uniformly] replaced by any expression whatsoever of the same grammatical type" (Pigden 1989, 133). Now, plainly, the moral elements of the conclusions in the counterexamples to HL above are contingently vacuous expressions. If we replace the predicate "ought to be shot" with "enjoy vanilla ice cream" in the conclusion (2A) of CE-I, the argument of CE-I remains valid. Likewise, if we replace "ought to show respect for elderly people" with "enjoys chocolate ice cream" in the conclusion (2B) of CE-II, the argument of CE-II remains valid. Similarly, if we uniformly replace each instance of "ought to be charitable" with "enjoy strawberry ice cream" in the conclusion (2C) of CE-III, the argument of CE-III remains valid. Finally, if we uniformly replace each instance of "was evil" with "enjoyed coffee ice cream" in the conclusion (2D) of CE-IV, the argument of CE-IV remains valid. In other words, as Pigden states, "the [moral predicates] which occur in the conclusions of [the supposed counterexamples to HL,] though not vacuous *tout court*, *are* vacuous *given the premises*. If the premises are true, we can replace those expressions at will with grammatically suitable substituends, without prejudice to the truth-values of the conclusions which contain them" (Pigden 1989, 133, emphases in original).

In light of Pigden's discussion of contingent vacuity, we should understand the phrase "a substantive moral proposition" in HL as "a proposition

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[2]   I have made a few very small modifications in Pigden's and Nelson's formulations. I have also very slightly modified Karmo's formulations below.

with at least one moral component that is neither intrinsically nor contingently vacuous." (A moral element contained in some conclusion *C* is intrinsically vacuous if *C* is itself a tautology. If every instance of that moral element in *C* is uniformly replaced with any expression whatsoever of the same grammatical type, the necessary truth of the tautology remains unaffected – which is why a tautological sentence that contains moral language does not in fact convey any substantive moral proposition.) Thus, since the moral portion of the conclusion in each of the four ostensible counterexamples to HL above is contingently vacuous, none of those ostensible counterexamples is a genuine counterexample. Every one of them is consistent with HL.

We have to approach Karmo's putative counterexample to HL somewhat differently. While discussing a couple of the seeming counterexamples on which we have already bestowed attention, Karmo discusses as well the following pattern of reasoning (Karmo 1988, 253):

CE-V  (1E) Everything that Alfie says is true.
       (2E) Alfie says that it ought to be the case that everyone is sincere.
       (3E) Therefore, it ought to be the case that everyone is sincere.

The moral element of the conclusion (3E) is neither intrinsically nor contingently vacuous. Hence, if we are to see why CE-V is not a genuine counterexample to HL, we shall have to go beyond what has been said so far.

Karmo himself believes that CE-V is not a genuine counterexample to HL, but his approach to the matter is excessively elaborate and highly problematic. My own approach, which again amounts to a refinement of HL, is more straightforward. Given that (3E) is a substantive moral conclusion, and given that (2E) is a non-moral premise, we need to concentrate on (1E). Is that major premise correctly classifiable as non-moral? It may initially appear to be, because it contains no directly moral terms. However, the absence of such terms is plainly not decisive, since (1E) universally quantifies over propositions – or over sentences – which it affirms as true. CE-V's minor premise, (2E), asserts in effect that at least one of the propositions over which (1E) has quantified is a substantive moral claim. Consequently, (1E) in combination with (2E) is a substantive moral premise; it cannot be the case that (2E) is true, unless (1E) indirectly affirms a substantive moral proposition. (An ascription of truth to a substantive moral proposition is an indirect affirmation thereof if the proposition itself is not directly stated or specified but is instead included within the scope

of the ascription through universal quantification over a domain to which the proposition belongs.[3] An indirect *denial* of a substantive moral proposition would involve an ascription of falsity rather than an ascription of truth.)

In light of this discussion, the referential scope of the phrase "premises [that] are non-moral" in HL should be understood to exclude not only any premise that directly affirms or denies some substantive moral proposition, but also any premise that in combination with some other premise(s) of the same argument is an indirect affirmation or denial of some substantive moral proposition. Accordingly, because (1E) in combination with (2E) is an indirect affirmation of a substantive moral proposition, (1E) does not count as a non-moral premise. Rather, it is a substantive moral premise. Consequently, CE-V does not stand as a genuine counterexample to HL. It is instead a straightforward moral argument – albeit an utterly unilluminating and dogmatic moral argument. HL, properly construed, withstands all the challenges that have been mounted against it.

### 1.1.2. What is abstractness?

In the present section and in many other parts of this book, I ascribe high levels of abstractness to most meta-ethical theses. Explicating the property of abstractness rigorously is no easy endeavor, as Hare rightly acknowledged (Hare 1989a, 51). His own brief account of the matter is unsatisfactory, since it is subject to numerous counterexamples. According to him, a principle $P_1$ is more abstract than another principle $P_2$ if and only if (i) it is analytically true that anything inconsistent with $P_2$ is consequently inconsistent with $P_1$, and (ii) it is not analytically true that anything inconsistent with $P_1$ is consequently inconsistent with $P_2$. Though such an account may have been adequate for Hare's limited purposes, it is plainly not adequate for the purposes of this book. After all, my discussion in this

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[3]  There can also be indirect affirmations of a substantive moral proposition that are existentially quantified rather than universally quantified. Somebody might construct a putative counterexample to HL that contains such an affirmation. (The premises in a putative counterexample of that sort would have to be more numerous than in CE-V.) My way of dealing with CE-V can be extended, with a number of adjustments, to an argument containing a premise that is an existentially quantified indirect affirmation or denial of a substantive moral proposition. However, because I am not aware of the marshaling of any argument with such a premise in the literature on HL, I shall not further address the matter here.

section has maintained that many abstract meta-ethical principles are logically neutral among concrete ethical principles that are contrary to one another. Given that the property of abstractness has been invoked thus, we cannot have recourse to Hare's explication of abstractness. Instead, that property should be cashed out by reference to the wide-rangingness of ethical principles. An ethical principle $P_1$ is more abstract than another ethical principle $P_2$ if and only if the falsity of $P_1$ would have a bearing on the truth-values of a wider range of ethical principles than would the falsity of $P_2$. When I attribute high levels of abstractness to most meta-ethical principles, abstractness is to be understood in the sense just specified.

### 1.1.3. A caveat about concrete convictions

The foregoing remarks about abstractness lead smoothly into a caveat that is operative throughout this book. At a number of junctures in my subsequent chapters, I draw upon some fairly concrete moral convictions in my discussions of various matters. In most cases, quite deliberately, the concrete convictions are largely or entirely uncontroversial. For example, everybody who is at all inclined to read this book will think that torturing babies for pleasure is not a morally legitimate mode of conduct. By resorting mainly to such uncontentious concrete claims, my discussions avoid the distractions that would be engendered by the adducing of concrete claims that are more debatable. (Of course, the uncontentiousness of any concrete moral thesis MT is neither necessary nor sufficient for its correctness. Nevertheless, when the correctness of MT is obvious to anyone possessed of competence in moral reflection, I can take that correctness for granted without divagating from the main threads of my discussions by marshaling arguments in support of MT.)

   At several points, however, my arguments have drawn upon concrete moral convictions that are not wholly uncontroversial. At some of those points – for example, in Chapter 5's discussion of cannibalism – the disputability of my concrete moral assumptions is explicitly flagged. What is of key importance is that my main theses about the objectivity of morality are detachable from most of my concrete convictions that are brought to bear on particular topics (whether those convictions are controversial or not). Plainly, this detachability is not due to a fundamental divide between the meta-ethical character of those main theses and the substantive ethical character of the concrete convictions. As is repeatedly contended in this book,

my abstract affirmations of the objectivity of morality are themselves expressive of substantive moral propositions. Hence, instead of being attributable to any distinction between the non-ethical and the ethical, the detachability of my general account of moral objectivity from most of my concrete moral beliefs is chiefly ascribable to the limited scope of each such belief. If some concrete moral conviction relied upon in this book is false, then its falsity obviously has a bearing on the specific topic(s) in regard to which the conviction has been invoked; in most cases, however, it does not threaten the correctness of any of my broader claims about the objectivity of morality.

Of course, nothing in the preceding paragraph implies that the falsity of a concrete moral proposition can never have a bearing on the truth-value of a much more abstract moral proposition. Indeed, the falsity of *any* concrete verdict that affirms or gainsays some particular instantiation of a moral property MP will have a bearing on the truth-values of quite a few abstract moral propositions – such as an abstract proposition maintaining that MP is never instantiated, an abstract proposition maintaining that no moral properties are ever instantiated, and so forth. My point in this discussion has simply been that, given the nature of this book's multi-faceted insistence on the objectivity of morality and given the contents of the concrete moral convictions that are invoked from time to time herein, most aspects of that insistence are detachable from most of those concrete convictions.

Having noted as much, we should nonetheless also recognize that some of my abstract claims about the objectivity of morality do indeed hinge on the truth of some of my concrete moral convictions. Most notably, when Chapter 10 holds that all applications of moral principles are subject to the constraint of supervenience, it is taking a position that cannot be correct unless my concrete convictions about the untenability of certain supervenience-defying moral assertions are also correct. If any of those concrete convictions were false, then my much more abstract claims about the all-encompassing sway of supervenience would not be fully sustainable. Similarly, some of Chapter 4's abstract claims about the uniform applicability of moral principles would not be fully sustainable.

Thus, although in most cases the truth-values of my abstract pronouncements on ethical objectivity are independent of the truth-values of the concrete moral views articulated in this book, not all of the former truth-values are independent of all of the latter. Quite predictable is this state of affairs, on the basis of what has been said in this section about the

relationship between the abstractions of meta-ethics and the concrete judgments of most ordinary moral deliberation. The abstractions are not logically neutral among *all* the concrete judgments, but are logically neutral among most of them.

## 1.2. Two Senses of "Ethics" or "Morality"

Substantive ethical judgments are to be distinguished from empirical findings, such as those involved in sociological or anthropological reports of the moral convictions harbored by various people (Dworkin 2006, 76–77). Aetiological accounts of moral convictions are not to be equated with those convictions themselves. Confusion easily arises on this score, because the terms "ethics" and "morality" and "morals" are ambiguous. Let us distinguish between two senses that can attach to each of those terms. (1) On the one hand, each of them can refer to the whole array of correct ethical/moral standards that truly determine the ethical/moral consequences of people's conduct, and to the diverse categories and properties associated with those standards. Most such correct standards, including all of them that are basic, are decisively applicable independently of their being endorsed and heeded. We can label those standards as "ethics *tout court*" or "morality *tout court*." (2) On the other hand, "ethics" or "morality" or "morals" can refer instead to the contents of the ethical/moral convictions that generally prevail among the members of some society (or of some set of societies). In that connection, each term would likewise denote the observable practices of ethical/moral deliberation and judgment that actually give expression to those prevailing convictions.

Insofar as "ethics" or "morality" or "morals" is indeed used with reference to the prevailing attitudes and practices of some society – or of some set of societies, such as Western European societies – it is being used empirically rather than normatively. When so used, each of those terms is referring to phenomena that are ascertainable only through observation, notwithstanding that the orientation or tenor of those phenomena is of course normative. Although a theoretical account of the moral convictions and practices that enjoy general currency in some society can be ethically prescriptive or evaluative, it can likewise be strictly descriptive or aetiological; the value-judgments made in the course of such an account might be focused solely on theoretical-explanatory considerations. When we are

pondering certain social practices or the normative outlooks that impel those practices, we can aptly adopt a social-scientific perspective from which we seek simply to discover and understand rather than to applaud or denounce. For example, somebody interested in studying the morals of Canadians might simply wish to apprehend whether certain attitudes and beliefs are held by Canadians, and might simply wish to trace those attitudes and beliefs to various environmental or sociological or historical determinants. Such a project could also involve some justificatory or condemnatory evaluations, but – if carried out by someone with a high tolerance for boredom – it could instead be confined perfectly well to empirical investigations and social-scientific explanations.

By contrast, when we use "ethics" or "morality" or "morals" in the first of the two senses specified above, we are referring to something that can only be approached through ethical prescriptions and evaluations. That is, when we seek to identify the ethical/moral standards that genuinely apply to people's conduct irrespective of whether those standards are recognized and followed, we are not proceeding from any austerely social-scientific perspective. All assertions that profess to specify the transcendently correct principles of ethics are ethical pronouncements, however abstract or complicatedly oblique they may be. (As will become apparent in the course of this book, the claims in the last few statements encompass those statements themselves. In other words, although they are very abstract and although they are consequently neutral among most ethical or moral doctrines, they are substantive ethical/moral pronouncements. They are not entirely neutral. Opposed to them on their same level of high abstraction are theses that likewise amount to ethical or moral positions.)

At more than one juncture, we shall see that a failure to keep in view the distinction between the two senses of "ethics" or "morals" or "morality" has led to confusion among some philosophers. Nobody should doubt that, when any one of those terms is used in the second sense delineated above, we can appositely raise and answer questions about its referent that are not themselves ethical or moral. Aetiological questions and other empirical questions are pertinent when they are broached in application to empirical phenomena. No ethical judgments are needed in the pursuit of such questions. Hence, given that one of the chief messages of this book is that nearly all non-tautological and non-self-contradictory claims about ethics or morality are ethical or moral in content, readers can tell that my discussions generally use "ethics" and "morality" and "morals" in the first sense of each term rather than in the second. Except where the context or

an explicit comment plainly indicates otherwise, those terms herein refer to acceptance-independent basic standards of conduct and to all the verdicts and derivative precepts that follow from those basic standards – rather than to the empirically ascertainable outlooks and practices that form the ethical life of this or that community. Moral realism is predominantly a theory about the former array of things rather than about the latter.

Note, incidentally, that my distinction between the two senses of "ethics" or "morality" or "morals" does not beg any questions against the doctrine of ethical relativism. Proponents of that doctrine, whose ideas will undergo scrutiny in Chapter 2, contend that there are no correct principles of morality beyond the varying arrays of moral precepts that are embraced within sundry communities. Roughly put, the relativists deny the ultimate sustainability of the division between the two senses of "morality" that I have adumbrated (though they do not deny that the first sense is of central prominence in moral discourse). In rejecting that division, however, they are presenting an account of morality *tout court* – in other words, an account of the referent of "morality" in the first of my two senses. Although they might propound some anthropological or sociological reports of the moral frameworks that obtain in certain societies, their main aim is to draw conclusions about morality *tout court*: namely, conclusions that collapse morality *tout court* into those frameworks. Hence, in the very process of impugning the tenability of my distinction between the two senses of "morality," relativists take a firm stance on the nature of morality *tout court*. Consequently, as will be seen, they are espousing a moral creed that is to be assessed primarily on moral grounds. Far from begging the question against relativism, then, my separation between the two senses of "morality" renders perspicuous what the relativists are claiming. Their doubts about that separation cannot be properly understood until the separation itself has been introduced and elucidated.

## 1.3. A Brief Conspectus

Both in ordinary ethical discourse and in philosophical disputation concerning ethics, people tend to invoke the notion of objectivity in a number of diverse forms. Much of the rest of this book will furnish a map of the terrain by recounting the major dimensions of ethical objectivity. Although most of the principal facets of ethical objectivity overlap, and

although each of them is fully compatible with the others, none of them is completely reducible to any of the others.

### *1.3.1. Ethical objectivity: a triadic framework*

Chapters 2–8 proceed within a tripartite classification. That is, we shall consider the central aspects of objectivity under three main categories: ontological, epistemic, and semantic. In the first category (covered chiefly by Chapters 2–5) are dimensions of objectivity that pertain to the nature and existence of ethical standards and relationships and properties, while in the second category – covered chiefly by Chapters 6 and 7 – are facets of objectivity that pertain to rational agents' judgments about those standards and relationships and properties. In the third category, covered chiefly by Chapter 8, are aspects of objectivity that bear on the connections between ethical matters and ethical assertions that express judgments about those matters.

The ontological dimensions of ethical objectivity explored in this book are mind-independence, determinate correctness, uniform applicability, and invariance; the epistemic dimensions are transindividual concurrence and impartiality; and the semantic dimension is truth-aptitude.

**Table 1** Principal dimensions of ethical objectivity

| *Genus of ethical objectivity* | *Species of ethical objectivity* | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ontological (Chapters 2–5) | 1 | Mind-independence |
| | 2 | Determinate correctness |
| | 3 | Uniform applicability |
| | 4 | Invariance |
| Epistemic (Chapters 6–7) | 5 | Transindividual concurrence |
| | 6 | Impartiality |
| Semantic (Chapter 8) | 7 | Truth-aptitude |

After we have investigated those seven principal facets of ethical objectivity, Chapter 9 will glance at some other varieties of objectivity that have frequently been discussed by moral and political philosophers. As will be argued, one of those additional aspects of objectivity – rational

compellingness – is not characteristic of ethics. Several of the remaining facets of objectivity (corrigibility, non-illusiveness, susceptibility to reasons, and cognitive reliability) are characteristic of ethics, but each of them is subsumable under one or more of the principal dimensions of ethical objectivity contained in Table 1. Hence, that table laconically delineates the full array of ways in which the sundry matters of ethics are objective. An insistence on the objectivity of such matters in all those ways is the hallmark of ethical realism.

Now, although this tripartite framework is invaluable for clarifying and systematizing the defense of moral realism that is mounted by this book, it necessitates two prominent caveats straightaway. First, the categories in my framework are by no means entirely impermeable. As will become especially evident in Chapters 3, 6, and 8, some of the issues addressed in this book are not fruitfully confined to a single category. In Chapter 3, for example, the ontological matter of determinate correctness has to be discussed in conjunction with the epistemic matter of intractable disagreement. In Chapter 6, conversely, our exploration of the epistemic matter of transindividual concurrence will lead us quite smoothly into mulling over the ontological matter of the causal inefficacy of moral properties. In yet another vein, Chapter 8 will examine some epistemic problems that have frequently been invoked by anti-realist philosophers to impugn the semantic objectivity of ethical assertions; epistemic matters and semantic matters are never simply equatable, but neither are they neatly disseverable. Thus, although the triadic ontological/epistemic/semantic schema followed in this book is highly serviceable for organizing the foci of my analyses, we should be alert to its porousness as well as to its solidity.

Second, my characterizations of the three categories in that schema are accurate, but only because they are fully consistent with the proposition that every dimension of ethical objectivity is fundamentally an ethical phenomenon. When we enquire into the nature and existence of ethical standards and relationships and properties, we are engaging in ethical enquiries. Much the same is true of investigations into the other facets of ethical objectivity. Most epistemic and semantic issues relating to the domain of ethics *tout court* are ethical issues, notwithstanding that they prescind from large swaths of the concrete ethical problems addressed by people in day-to-day life. Thus, although the matters broached in my discussions of ethical objectivity are indeed ontological and epistemic and semantic, they are profoundly ethical. Those matters belong to branches (highly abstract branches) of substantive ethics, or so this book will be arguing. With reference to the

ethical domain, most efforts to pin down what exists and what can be known and whether statements can be true are – implicitly or explicitly, wittingly or unwittingly – efforts to arrive at ethical judgments. Thus, for example, when this book later attributes to basic moral principles the properties of *a-priori* knowability and causal inefficacy and moral necessity and synthetic truth, those epistemological and ontological and semantic properties of such principles will all turn out to be ethical *au fond*. The questions addressed by my attributions of those properties are ethical, and the considerations that tell against or support any credible answers to those questions are ethical considerations.

As the title of this book indicates, then, my subsequent chapters will be expounding moral realism as a moral doctrine. They will insist on the veritable objectivity of ethics, while also arguing that the chief reasons for that objectivity are themselves ethical. At this early stage of the volume, such a position will doubtless puzzle many philosophers. Moral realism has long been defended and assailed as a meta-ethical doctrine that is based on austerely metaphysical and logical and epistemological considerations. Most of the participants in disputes over its merits have seen themselves as detached from substantive ethical concerns. As Dworkin has aptly observed, they generally believe that their perspectives on the domain of ethics are Archimedean (Dworkin 1996). That is, many of these disputants take themselves to be expatiating on the nature of ethical properties and ethical judgments without ascribing any such properties or engaging in any such judgments. Consequently, when this book proposes to defend moral realism as a moral doctrine, I may seem to be committing a crude category mistake. However, the succeeding chapters will endeavor to show that the ostensible mistake is in fact a singularly appropriate understanding of the doctrine of moral realism. Whatever some of the proponents of that doctrine may think, it is tenable only as a substantive moral credo (albeit at very high levels of abstraction). Like any theory of morality *tout court* – rather than of some particular moral practices or discourses – it is firmly within the domain of which it offers an account.

### 1.3.2. On the integratedness of ethical objectivity

Given the diversity of the several dimensions of objectivity that have been enumerated above, why should they all be grouped together under the heading of "objectivity"? Why should we see them as varieties of some single

overarching property? Three replies are pertinent here, in an ascending
order of importance. First, so long as the key conceptual distinctions
drawn in this book are adequately recognized in any alternative analytical
taxonomies, there is plainly room for such alternative approaches. In
other words, there is room for flexibility in selecting the labels with which
we mark those conceptual distinctions. For example, in a long and illum-
inating essay, Jules Coleman and Brian Leiter have perceptively highlighted
the distinction between mind-independence and determinate correctness
by designating only the former as objectivity (Coleman and Leiter 1995).
Instead of differentiating between the two properties by construing them
as separate dimensions of objectivity, Coleman and Leiter opt to contrast
them by differentiating between objectivity and determinacy. Now, although
their account is terminologically inconsistent with my own taxonomy, the
inconsistency is superficial. The cardinal conceptual distinctions drawn by
Coleman and Leiter are essentially the same as mine, even though the arrange-
ment of them is different. There is obviously room in moral philosophy
for these differing taxonomical frameworks. Hence, insofar as the questions
in the last paragraph are simply pointing to the credible possibility of alter-
native frameworks – in which some of the properties that I classify as dimen-
sions of objectivity would instead be contrasted with objectivity – those
questions do not pose any difficulties. Alternative ways of mapping the con-
ceptual terrain are indeed credibly possible.

Second, notwithstanding that alternative analytical schemes are indeed
quite feasible, the grouping together of the motley dimensions of objec-
tivity is warranted partly because each of them is frequently understood
as such a dimension in everyday discourse. Almost always, when somebody
inquires about the objectivity of morality *tout court* or about the objec-
tivity of some moral practice or judgment, the inquiry is centered on one
or more of the aspects of objectivity enumerated in Table 1. Each of those
aspects is very often understood and discussed as a type of objectivity. For
example, when people affirm or deny the objectivity of answers to moral
questions, they are frequently referring to the determinate correctness of
those answers. If there is no uniquely correct answer to some moral ques-
tion $Q$, then everybody enjoys discretion in choosing among the answers
to $Q$ that are not incorrect. In that respect, consequently, responses to $Q$
are subjective rather than objective. Ordinary discourse reflects this con-
nection between determinate correctness and objectivity, and between
indeterminacy and the dispositive role of subjectivity. It likewise reflects
the ways in which the other dimensions of ethical objectivity are indeed

such dimensions. Classifying those dimensions as species of a single over-arching property is in conformity with our normal patterns of speech and thought.

To be sure, the patterns of usage in everyday discourse are not unchallengeable or invariably decisive. Fine conceptual distinctions frequently get smudged or overlooked in the give-and-take of quotidian debates, and unglimpsed inconsistencies can proliferate when the participants in those debates fail to attend to the multiple meanings stored up in the language of "objectivity." Somebody looking at Table 1 might contend that such language is profusely ambiguous and that confusion will very likely ensue if philosophers invoke the notion of objectivity to cover so many distinct properties. I myself in some of my work on legal and moral rights have taken just such a stand in regard to the language of "rights" (Kramer 1998; Kramer and Steiner 2007). Because the term "right" is so promiscuously employed in ordinary discourse to refer to several different types of entitlements, and because discriminating among those types is essential for the avoidance of muddles in any philosophical analyses of moral or legal relations, such analyses should follow ordinary usage only in some respects and not in others. A quizzical reader of this chapter might initially be inclined to make a parallel point about the term "objectivity" and its cognates. Thus, although the appeals to everyday disputation in my preceding paragraph are important – since philosophical theories should generally aim to capture and respect the prevailing modes of linguistic usage unless there are ample grounds for departing therefrom – those appeals are not in themselves sufficient to clinch my approach to objectivity. We need to know whether ordinary discourse with its classing together of several distinct properties under the heading of "objectivity" is adequately reliable rather than promotive of confusion.

Third, then, is the most important reason for accepting that the features contained in Table 1 are all aspects of ethical objectivity. Each of those features is in opposition to an element of subjectivity. If any of those features were not characteristic of ethics *tout court*, then the ethical domain would be profoundly subjective in some respect(s). Likewise, if any one of those properties is missing from some ethical judgment or practice, then the judgment or practice is infected by subjectivity.

A full substantiation of the preceding paragraph's claims will unfold throughout the rest of this book, as we ponder each dimension of ethical objectivity in some depth. Even at this early stage, however, the opposition between each dimension and a corresponding dimension of subjectivity

should be quite evident. We have already noted, for example, that the absence of any determinately correct answer to some moral question *Q* would entail a dispositive role for the subjectivity of anyone who has to choose among the answers to *Q* that are not incorrect. Generally, if the discretion of some person engaging with a certain matter is significantly unrestricted because of a dearth of moral solidity, then markedly inconsistent judgments by that person concerning the specified matter would each on its own be cor-rect in the sense of not being incorrect. Such a situation of significantly untrammeled subjectivity is unproblematic when it pertains to only a very limited number of matters, but it would be pernicious if it obtained more broadly. At any rate, what is under the spotlight at present is not the noxiousness of a situation of significantly untrammeled subjectivity on a large scale, but the sheer fact that such a situation is squarely at odds with the determinate correctness of answers to moral questions. Determinate correctness is a type of objectivity because of that opposition between it and subjectivity. (Lest there be any misunderstanding, incidentally, I should underscore the difference between a state of significantly untram-meled subjectivity and a state of moral permissibility. Suppose that some act-type *x* is morally permissible in some context *C*. In that event, there is a determinately correct answer to the question whether *x* is morally per-mitted in *C*; the determinately correct answer is "yes." Suppose further that declining to do *x* in *C* is likewise permissible. There is consequently a deter-minately correct answer to the question whether declining to do *x* in *C* is morally permissible. Again, the determinately correct answer is "yes." Such a situation, then, is not characterized by significantly untrammeled subjectivity in any sense that is relevant here. In regard to doing or not doing *x* in *C*, the situation is fully determinate morally. If anyone believes that either doing *x* or declining to do *x* in *C* is morally impermissible, then her belief is determinately incorrect. Any morally dispositive workings of her subjectivity are bounded by the fact that doing *x* and declining to do *x* are each morally permissible. Yet the determinate moral status of doing *x* in *C* and the determinate moral status of not doing *x* in *C* are together such as to consist in full moral latitude for a person to select between those two courses of conduct. Moral unconstraint in selecting among courses of conduct, which obtains by virtue of one's being permitted to perform some act-type and permitted to refrain from performing that act-type, is not moral indeterminacy; at any rate, it is not moral indeterminacy of the sort expounded in this paragraph. If genuine moral indeterminacy prevailed – in relation to the performance of the act-type *x* and in relation to the

non-performance of that act-type – then there would not yet be any fact of the matter concerning the moral permissibility of doing *x*, and there would not yet be any fact of the matter concerning the moral permissibility of declining to do *x*.)

Each of the other facets of objectivity, similarly, is antithetical to a facet of subjectivity. We shall see as much in the next seven chapters. Though certain elements of subjectivity are indispensable in a number of ways for moral relations and moral judgments, other such elements contrast starkly with basic features of morality – basic features that belong together in a taxonomical analysis not only because each of them overlaps with some of the others to varying degrees, but even more because they are all united in opposition to inapt intrusions of subjectivity. So united, they together constitute the objectivity of morality.

### 1.3.3. The closing chapter

After Chapters 2-8 have collectively championed moral realism by exploring the seven main ways in which the domain of ethics is strongly objective, and after Chapter 9 has pondered a few ancillary dimensions of objectivity, Chapter 10 plumbs the relationship of supervenience between ethical properties and empirical properties. That is, it considers why every difference between the respective ethical properties of any two situations must be accompanied by some difference(s) between the respective empirical properties of those situations. Virtually all philosophers writing on the topic agree that the relationship of supervenience is logically or analytically necessary, and that it therefore amounts to a constraint on the applications of ethical principles that is antecedent to all such principles. Through explorations of relevant writings by Hare, Blackburn, and Russ Shafer-Landau, my tenth chapter takes issue with that widespread view of supervenience. Considerations of logic and the meanings of ethical terms are not in themselves sufficient to support the reign of supervenience. Only when that reign is recognized as an abstract and fundamental ethical principle can we adequately grasp why it does indeed moor all applications of ethical standards.

For at least three reasons, the chapter on supervenience is a fitting culmination to this book. First, as will become apparent, the topic of supervenience arises at more than one juncture in some of my other chapters. It is a topic that figures saliently in any exposition of the objectivity of

morality, for the constraint of supervenience is a significant restriction (though by no means the only significant restriction) on arbitrariness in the distribution of moral properties, and it is thus a significant restriction on any scope for arbitrariness in legitimate processes of moral decision-making. Second, by showing that that restriction on arbitrariness is fundamentally an ethical phenomenon, this book will accentuate the message that is expressed in its title. Moral realism – an insistence on the wide-ranging objectivity of morality – is a moral doctrine. Third, by sustainedly probing a central feature of the domain of morality, my final chapter illustrates the nature of meta-ethical enquiry when moral realism is defended as a moral doctrine. The original title of this book was *Against Meta-Ethics* (with *Moral Realism as a Moral Doctrine* as the subtitle), but, despite its catchiness, that title was discarded as inapposite. One reason for its inappositeness is that I have never remotely doubted that all the dimensions of ethical objectivity are subject to ordinary logical requirements; the charting of those requirements and their implications is one of the key tasks of meta-ethical theory. Even more important, my aim has never been to discredit the metaphysical and epistemological streams of meta-ethical philosophizing altogether. Rather, one of the paramount aims of this book is to highlight the substantive ethical character of most of the issues addressed within those streams. Properly attuned to the ethical bearings of those issues, meta-ethical philosophers can and should pursue their characteristic foci of enquiry.