

Truth in Morals

The Challenge

“If we want to talk about values—about how to live and how to treat other people—we must start with bigger philosophical issues. Before we can sensibly think about whether honesty and equality are genuine values we must first consider, as a distinct threshold matter, whether there are any such things as values. It would not be sensible to debate how many angels can sit on a pin without first asking whether there are any angels at all; it would be equally silly to puzzle about whether self-sacrifice is good without first asking whether there is any such thing as goodness and, if so, what kind of thing it is.

“Can beliefs about value—that it is wrong to steal, for instance—actually be *true*? Or, for that matter, false? If so, what in the world can make such a belief true or false? Where do such values *come from*? God? But what if there is no god? Can values be just *out there*, part of what there really, finally, is? If so, how can we human beings be *in touch* with them? If some value judgments are true and others false, how can we human beings discover which are which? Even friends disagree about what is right and wrong; and of course we disagree even more strikingly with people of other cultures and ages. How can we think, without appalling arrogance, that we are right and others are just wrong? From what neutral perspective could the truth finally be tested and settled?

“Obviously we can’t solve these puzzles just by repeating our value judgments. It would be unhelpful to insist that wrongness must exist in the universe because torturing babies for the fun of it is wrong. Or that I am in touch with moral truth because I know that torturing babies is wrong. That would just beg the question: torturing babies is not wrong if there is no such thing as wrongness in the universe, and I can’t know that torturing babies is wrong unless I can be in touch with the truth about wrongness. No, these deep philosophical questions about the nature of the universe or the status of value judgments are not themselves questions about what is good or bad, right or wrong, wonderful or ugly. They belong not to ordinary ethical or moral or aesthetic rumination but to other, more technical departments of philosophy: to metaphysics or epistemology or the philosophy of language. That is why it is so important to distinguish two very different parts of moral philosophy: ordinary, first-order, substantive questions about what is good or bad, right or wrong, that call for value judgment, and philosophical, second-order, ‘meta-ethical,’ questions *about* those value judgments that call not for further value judgments but for philosophical theories of a quite different sort.”

I apologize. I have been teasing for three paragraphs; I don’t believe a single word of what I just wrote in quotes. I wanted to set out a philosophical opinion that is dear to a fox’s heart and that has in my view hindered a proper understanding of all the topics we explore in this book. I stated my own contrary opinion in Chapter 1: morality and other departments of value are philosophically independent. Answers to large questions about moral truth and knowledge must be sought within those departments, not outside them. A substantive theory of value must include, not wait for, a theory of truth in value.

That there are truths about value is an obvious, inescapable fact. When people have decisions to make, the question of what decision they should make is inescapable, and it can be answered only by noticing reasons for acting one way or another; it can be answered only in that way because that is what the question, just as a matter of what it means, inescapably calls for. No doubt the best answer on some occasion is that *nothing* is any better to do than anything else. Some unfortunate people find a more dramatic answer unavoidable: they think nothing is *ever* the best or right thing to do. But these are as much substantive, first-order, value judgments about what to do as are more positive answers. They draw on the same kinds of arguments, and they claim truth in just the same way.

You will have gathered from Chapter 1 how I use the important words “ethics” and “morality.” An ethical judgment makes a claim about what people should do to live well: what they should aim to be and achieve in their own lives. A moral judgment makes a claim about how people must treat other people.¹ Moral and ethical questions are inescapable dimensions of the inescapable question of what to do. They are inescapably pertinent even though, of course, they are not invariably noticed. Much of what I do makes my own life a better or worse one. In many circumstances much of what I do will affect others. What should I therefore do? The answers you give might be negative. You may suppose that it makes no difference how you live your life and that any concern for the lives of other people would be a mistake. But if you have any reasons for those distressing opinions, these must be ethical or moral reasons.

Grand metaphysical theories about what kinds of entities there are in the universe can have nothing to do with the case. You can be witheringly skeptical about morality, but only in virtue of not being skeptical about the nature of value further down. You may think that morality is bunk because there is no god. But you can think that only if you hold some moral theory that assigns exclusive moral authority to a supernatural being. These are the main conclusions of the first part of the book. I do not reject moral or ethical skepticism here: those are the subject of later parts. But I do reject Archimedean skepticism: skepticism that denies any basis for itself in morality or ethics. I reject the idea of an external, meta-ethical inspection of moral truth. I insist that any sensible moral skepticism must be internal to morality.

That is not a popular view among philosophers. They think what I quoted earlier: that the most fundamental questions about morality are not themselves moral, but rather metaphysical, questions. They think it would be a defeat for our ordinary ethical and moral convictions if we discovered that these were grounded in nothing but other ethical or moral convictions: they call the idea that it makes no sense to ask for anything else “quietism,” which suggests a dirty secret kept dark. I believe—and will argue—that this opinion radically misunderstands what value judgments are. But its modern popularity means that something of a struggle is needed to free ourselves from its influence and to accept what should be obvious: that some answer to the question what to do must be the right one, even if this is that nothing is any better than anything else. The live question is not whether moral or ethical judgments can be true, but which are true.

Moral philosophers often reply that we must (in a phrase they particularly like) *earn* the right to suppose that ethical or moral judgments can be true. They mean that we must construct some plausible argument of the kind my teasing paragraphs imagined: some nonmoral metaphysical argument showing that there is some kind of entity or property in the world—perhaps morally charged particles or morons—whose existence and configuration can make a moral judgment true. But in fact there is only one way we can “earn” the right to think that some moral judgment is true, and this has nothing to do with physics or metaphysics. If I want to earn the right to call the proposition that abortion is always wrong true, then I have to provide moral arguments for that very strong opinion. There just is no other way.

However, I fear that this statement is just what the critics mean by “helping myself” to the possibility of truth. Part One defends this supposed larceny. Moral theory has become very complex in recent decades—it has produced a larger bestiary of “isms,” I believe, than any other part of philosophy.² So Part One has several currents to navigate. This chapter describes what I take to be the ordinary person’s view—or in any case the view that I shall describe that way. It holds that moral judgments can be true or false and that moral argument is needed to establish which are which. I elaborate, later in the chapter, the distinction I have already drawn between two different kinds of skepticism about the ordinary view—external skepticism, which claims to argue from entirely nonmoral assumptions, and skepticism that is internal to morality because it does not. Chapter 3 confronts external skepticism; Chapter 4 takes up crucial questions about the relation between the truth of moral convictions and the best explanation of why we hold the convictions we do; and Chapter 5 introduces what, in its global form, is by far the most threatening kind of skepticism—internal skepticism.

The Ordinary View

Someone who sticks pins into babies for the fun of hearing them scream is morally depraved. Don’t you agree? You probably hold other, more controversial opinions about right and wrong as well. Perhaps you think that torturing suspected terrorists is morally wrong, for instance. Or, on the contrary, that it is morally justified or even required. You think that your opinions on these matters report the truth and that those who disagree with you are making a mistake, though you might perhaps find it more natural to say that your con-

victions are right or correct rather than true. You also think, I imagine, that sticking pins into babies or torturing terrorists would be wrong even if no one actually objected to it or was repulsed by the idea. Even you. You probably think, that is, that the truth of your moral convictions does not depend on what anyone thinks or feels. You might say, to make plain that that is what you think, that torturing babies for fun is “really” or “objectively” wicked. This attitude toward moral truth—that at least some moral opinions are objectively true in this way—is very common. I shall call it the “ordinary” view.

There is more to the ordinary view, some of it negative. You don't think that the wrongness of torturing babies or terrorists is just a matter of scientific discovery. You don't suppose that you could prove your opinion sound, or even provide evidence for it, just by some kind of experiment or observation. You could of course show, by experiment or observation, the consequences of torturing babies—the physical and psychological harm it inflicts, for example. But you couldn't show in that way that it is wrong to produce those consequences. You need a moral argument of some kind to do that, and moral argument is not a matter of scientific or empirical demonstration. Of course you don't conduct moral arguments with yourself—or anyone else—before forming your moral opinions. You just see or know that certain acts are wrong: these are your immediate reactions when you are presented with or imagine those acts. But you don't think that this kind of “seeing” provides evidence the way ordinary seeing does. If you see a burglar climbing through a window, you can cite your observation as a reason why the police should attend. But you wouldn't cite your seeing that the Iraq invasion was wrong as a reason why others who don't immediately agree should think it was. The difference is plain enough. The burglar's smashing the window caused you to see him smashing the window, so your observation is indeed evidence that he did smash it. But it would be absurd to think that the wrongness of the Iraq invasion caused you to think it wrong. You drew on the store of your convictions, education, and experience in judging the invasion as you did. If for some reason you wanted to defend your judgment, or consider it more carefully, you couldn't just cite what you saw. You would have to compose something by way of a moral argument.

You would be puzzled if someone told you that when you express a moral opinion you are not really saying anything. That you are only venting your spleen, or projecting some attitude, or declaring how you propose to live, so that it would be a mistake to think that what you had said is even a candidate

for being true. You would agree, in response to that suggestion, that when you announce your opinion that torture is wrong you are doing some or all of these other things as well. Unless you are insincere, you are exhibiting your disapproval of torture and indicating at least something about your more general moral attitudes. But indicating or expressing these emotions or commitments is something you do through saying that torture is wrong, not instead of it. Even if you are insincere and only feigning your convictions and emotions, you are still, nevertheless, declaring that torture is wrong, and what you say is nevertheless true even if you don't believe it.

This ordinary view is committed to taking moral judgment at face value. If the Iraq war was wrong, then it is a fact—something that is the case—that it was wrong. On the ordinary view, that is, the war was *really* wrong. If your taste runs to drama, and you thought that war seeking regime change is always immoral, you might say that the wrongness of such war is a fixed, eternal feature of the universe. On the ordinary view, moreover, people who think that cheating is wrong recognize, in that opinion, a strong reason not to cheat, and to disapprove of other people who cheat. But thinking an act wrong is not the same thing as not wanting to do it: a thought is a judgment, not a motive. On the ordinary view, general questions about the basis of morality—about what makes a particular moral judgment true—are themselves moral questions. Is God the author of all morality? Can something be wrong even if everyone thinks it right? Is morality relative to place and time? Can something be right in one country or circumstance but wrong in another? These are abstract and theoretical questions, but they are still moral questions. They must be answered out of moral conscience and conviction, just like more ordinary questions about right and wrong.

Worries

That is the set of opinions and assumptions that I call the ordinary view. I assume that most people more or less unthinkingly hold that view. If you are philosophically disposed, however, then you may hold this ordinary view with some diffidence and concern because you may have some difficulty answering the philosophical challenges set out in the paragraphs I put in quotes earlier. First, you may be concerned about the kinds of entities or properties that we can sensibly suppose the universe to contain. Statements about the physical world are made true by the actual state of the physical world—its

continents, quarks, and dispositions. We can have evidence—very often through observation of scientific instruments—about what the actual state of the physical world is. That evidence, we might say, provides an argument for our opinions about the physical world. But it is the physical world itself, the way the quarks actually spin, not the evidence we can assemble, that determines whether our opinions are actually true or false. Our evidence might be ever so powerful, but our conclusions nevertheless wrong, because, as a matter of brute fact, the world is not the way we think we have proved it is.

If we try to apply these familiar distinctions to our moral convictions, however, trouble appears. What do moral facts consist in? The ordinary view insists that moral judgments are not made true by historical events or people's opinions or emotions or anything else in the physical or mental world. But then what *can* make a moral conviction true? If you think the Iraq war immoral, then you can cite various historical facts—that the war was bound to cause huge suffering and was launched on the basis of evidently inadequate intelligence, for example—that you believe justify your opinion. But it is hard to imagine any distinct state of the world—any configuration of morons, for instance—that can make your moral opinion true the way physical particles can make a physical opinion true. It is hard to imagine any distinct state of the world for which your case can be said to be *evidence*.

Second, there is an apparently separate puzzle about how human beings might be thought to know moral truths, or even to form justified beliefs about them. The ordinary view holds that people do not become aware of moral facts the way they become aware of physical facts. Physical facts impinge on human minds: we perceive them, or we perceive evidence for them. Cosmologists take the observations of their huge radio telescopes to have been caused by ancient emissions from the edges of the universe; cardiologists take the shape of electrocardiogram printouts to be caused by a beating heart. But the ordinary view insists that moral facts cannot create any impression of themselves in human minds: moral judgment is not a matter of perception the way color judgment is. How then can we be “in touch with” moral truth? What could justify your assumption that the various events that make up your case about the Iraq war really do argue adequately for its morality or immorality?

These two puzzles—and others that we shall uncover later—have for centuries encouraged learned scholars and great philosophers to reject different aspects of the ordinary view. I shall call those who do that “skeptics,” but I

use that word in a special sense to include anyone who denies that moral judgments can be objectively true—true, that is, not in virtue of the attitudes or beliefs anyone has but true without regard to any such attitudes or beliefs. An unsophisticated form of such skepticism, which is often called “postmodernism,” has been much in vogue in the unconfident departments of Western universities: in faculties of art history, comparative literature, and anthropology, for example, and for a time in law schools as well.³ Devotees declare that even our most confident convictions about what is right or wicked are just emblems of ideology, just badges of power, just the rules of the local language games we happen to play. But as we shall see, many philosophers have been more subtle and inventive in their skepticism. In the balance of this chapter I distinguish different versions of philosophical skepticism about morality; in the rest of Part One we concentrate on arguments for each of those versions.

Two Important Distinctions

Internal and External Skepticism

Two distinctions are essential to my continuing argument; I set them out in more detail now. The first distinguishes internal from external skepticism about morality. I assume that people’s moral convictions form at least a loose set or system of interconnected propositions with a distinct subject matter: people have convictions at different levels of abstraction about what is right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy. When we puzzle about a moral issue, we can bring a variety of these convictions to bear: we can appeal to more abstract or general convictions to test more concrete judgments about what to do or think. Someone asking herself whether it would be wrong to leave an unhappy marriage might reflect on more general issues about what people owe other people they have asked to trust them, for instance, or about the moral responsibilities children bring. She might then weigh her sense of those responsibilities against what might seem to her a competing responsibility to make something of her own life or perhaps competing responsibilities she believes she has assumed to someone else. Such reflection, we can say, is internal to morality because it claims to reach moral conclusions from more general assumptions that are themselves moral in character and subject matter. Moral reflection of that kind takes account of ordinary

nonmoral facts as well, of course: facts about the impact of divorce on children's welfare, for instance. However, it appeals to such nonmoral facts only by way of drawing concrete implications from more general moral claims.

But someone can step back from the entire set of his moral ideas and reflect about these ideas as a whole. He can ask external questions *about* his or other people's moral values rather than internal questions *of* moral value. These include social-scientific questions: whether, for example, our economic or other circumstances explain why we are drawn to moral convictions that other cultures with different circumstances reject. This distinction between internal and external questions can be made about any body of ideas. We distinguish mathematical claims, which are internal to the domain of mathematics, from questions about mathematical practice. The question whether Fermat's theorem has at last been proved is an internal question of mathematics; the question whether a higher percentage of students study calculus now than formerly is an external question about mathematics. Philosophers use a different vocabulary to make the same distinction: they distinguish between "first-order" or "substantive" questions within a system of ideas and "second-order" or "meta" questions about that system of ideas. The claim that torturing babies is immoral is a first-order, substantive claim; the hypothesis that this opinion is almost universally held is a second-order or meta-claim.

Internal skepticism about morality is a first-order, substantive moral judgment. It appeals to more abstract judgments about morality in order to deny that certain more concrete or applied judgments are true. External skepticism, on the contrary, purports to rely entirely on second-order, external statements about morality. Some external skeptics rely on social facts of the kind I described earlier: they say that the historical and geographical diversity of moral opinions shows that no such opinion can be objectively true, for example. But the most sophisticated external skeptics rely, as I said earlier, on metaphysical theses about the kind of entities the universe contains. They assume that these metaphysical theses are external statements about morality rather than internal judgments of morality. So, as the metaphor suggests, internal skepticism stands within first-order, substantive morality while external skepticism is supposedly Archimedean: it stands above morality and judges it from outside. Internal skeptics cannot be skeptical about morality all the way down, because they must assume the truth of some very general moral claim in order to establish their skepticism about other moral claims. They rely on morality to denigrate morality. External skeptics do claim to be

skeptical about morality all the way down. They are able to denigrate moral truth, they say, without relying on it.

Error and Status Skepticism

We need a further distinction within external skepticism: between error and status skepticism. Error skeptics hold that all moral judgments are false. An error skeptic might read the ordinary view as assuming that moral entities exist: that the universe contains not only quarks, mesons, and other very small physical particles but also what I called morons, special particles whose configuration might make it true that people should not torture babies and that optional military invasions seeking regime change are immoral. He might then declare that because there are no moral particles, it is a mistake to say that torturing babies is wrong or that invading Iraq was immoral. This is not internal skepticism, because it does not purport to rely on even counterfactual moral judgments for its authority. It is external skepticism because it purports to rely only on value-neutral metaphysics: it relies only on the metaphysical claim that there are no moral particles.

Status skeptics disagree: they are skeptical of the ordinary view in a different way. The ordinary view treats moral judgments as descriptions of how things actually are: they are claims of moral fact. Status skeptics deny moral judgment that status: they believe it is a mistake to treat them as descriptions of anything. They distinguish between description and other activities like coughing, expressing emotion, issuing a command, or embracing a commitment, and they hold that expressing a moral opinion is not describing but something that belongs in the latter group of activities. Status skeptics therefore do not say, as error skeptics do, that morality is a misconceived enterprise. They say it is a misunderstood enterprise.

Status skepticism evolved rapidly during the twentieth century. Initial forms were crude: A. J. Ayer, for example, in his famous little book *Language, Truth, and Logic*, insisted that moral judgments are no different from other vehicles for venting emotions. Someone who declares that tax cheating is wrong is only, in effect, shouting "Boo tax cheating."⁴ Later versions of status skepticism became more sophisticated. Richard Hare, for instance, whose work was very influential, treated moral judgments as disguised and generalized commands.⁵ "Cheating is wrong" should be understood as "Don't cheat." For Hare, however, the preference expressed by a moral judgment is very special: it

is universal in its content so that it embraces everyone who is situated in the way it assumes, including the speaker. Hare's analysis is still status-skeptical, however, because, like Ayer's puffs of emotion, his preference expressions are not candidates for truth or falsity.

These early versions wore their skepticism on the sleeve. Hare said that a Nazi who would apply his strictures to himself, should he turn out to be a Jew, has not made a moral mistake. Later in the century external skepticism became more ambiguous. Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn, for examples, have called themselves, variously, "noncognitivists," "expressivists," "projectivists," and "quasi-realists," which suggests sharp disagreement with the ordinary view. Gibbard says that moral judgments should be understood as expressing acceptance of a plan for living: not "as beliefs with such and such content" but rather as "sentiments or attitudes, perhaps, or as universal preferences, states of norm acceptance—or states of planning."⁶ But Blackburn and Gibbard both labor to show how, on their view, an expressivist who takes this view of moral judgment can nevertheless sensibly speak of moral judgments as true or false, and that he can also mimic in other, more complex, ways how people who hold the ordinary view speak about moral issues. But they treat these claims of truth as part of an activity that is nevertheless, they insist, different from describing how things are.

Internal Skepticism

Because internal skeptics rely on the truth of substantive moral claims, they can only be partial error skeptics. There is no internal status skepticism. Internal skeptics differ from one another in the scope of their skepticism. Some internal skepticism is quite circumscribed and topical. Many people think, for instance, that the choices that adult partners make about the mechanics of sex raise no moral issues: they think that all judgments that condemn certain sexual choices are false. They ground this limited skepticism in positive opinions about what makes acts right or wrong; they do not believe that the details of adult consensual sex, whether heterosexual or homosexual, have any right- or wrong-making features. Other people are internal error skeptics about the place of morality in foreign policy. They say that it makes no sense to suppose that a nation's trade policy can be either morally right or wrong. They reject positive moral judgments that many other people hold—that American policy in Latin America has often been unjust, for example—by

appealing to the more general moral judgment that a nation's officials should always act with only the interests of their own citizens in mind.

Other versions of internal error skepticism are much broader, and some are near global because they reject all moral judgments except counterfactual ones. The popular opinion I mentioned—that because there is no god, nothing is right or wrong—is a piece of global internal skepticism; it is based on the moral conviction that a supernatural will is the only possible basis for positive morality. The more modern opinion that morality is empty because all human behavior is causally determined by prior events beyond anyone's control is also internally skeptical; it is based on the moral conviction that it is unfair to blame people or hold them responsible for behavior that they could not have avoided. (We consider that popular moral conviction in Chapter 10.) Another now popular opinion holds that no universal moral claim is sound because morality is relative to culture; this view, too, is internally skeptical because it relies on the conviction that morality rises only out of the practices of particular communities. Yet another form of global internal skepticism notices that human beings are incredibly small and evaporating parts of an inconceivably vast and durable universe and concludes that nothing we do can matter—morally or otherwise—anyway.⁷ True, the moral convictions on which these examples of global internal skepticism rely are counterfactual convictions: they assume that the positive moral claims they reject would be valid if certain conditions were satisfied—if a god did exist or moral conventions were uniform across cultures or the universe was much smaller. Still, even these counterfactual convictions are substantive moral judgments.

I have no quarrel with any form of internal skepticism in this part of the book. Internal skepticism does not deny what I wish to establish: that philosophical challenges to the truth of moral judgments are themselves substantive moral theories. It does not deny—on the contrary it assumes—that moral judgments are capable of truth. We shall be much concerned with internal skepticism later in the book, because my positive claims about personal and political morality presume that no global form of internal skepticism is correct. However, we should at least notice now an important distinction often overlooked. We must distinguish internal skepticism from uncertainty. I may be uncertain whether abortion is wrong: I may think the arguments on both sides reasonable and not know which, if either, is stronger. But uncertainty is not the same as skepticism. Uncertainty is a default position: if I have no firm conviction either way, then I am uncertain. But skepticism is not a

default position: I need as strong an argument for the skeptical thesis that morality has nothing to do with abortion as for any positive view on the matter. We return to the important distinction between skepticism and uncertainty in Chapter 5.

The Appeal of Status Skepticism

Both forms of external skepticism—error and status skepticism—are different from the biological and social-scientific theories I mentioned earlier. Neo-Darwinian theories about the development of moral beliefs and institutions, for instance, are external but in no way skeptical. There is no inconsistency in holding the following set of opinions: (1) that a wired-in condemnation of murder had survival value in the ancestral savannahs, (2) that this fact figures in the best explanation why moral condemnation of murder is so widespread across history and cultures, and (3) that it is objectively true that murder is morally wrong. The first two of these claims are anthropological and the third is moral; there can be no conflict in combining the moral with the anthropological in this way.⁸ So external skeptics cannot rely only on anthropology or any other biological or social science. They rely on a very different kind of putatively external theory: they rely on philosophical theories about what there is in the universe or about the conditions under which people can be thought to acquire responsible belief.

In one way internal and external skepticism are in sharp contrast. Internal skepticism would be self-defeating if it denied that moral judgments are candidates for truth; it cannot rely on any coruscating metaphysics that has that consequence. External skepticism, on the other hand, cannot leave any moral judgments standing as candidates for truth: it must show them all to be error or all to have some status that rules out their being true. External skepticism would be immediately self-defeating if it exempted any substantive moral judgment from its skeptical scope.

In another way, however, internal skepticism and external error skepticism are alike. Internal skepticism plays for keeps. It has direct implications for action: if someone is internally skeptical about sexual morality, he cannot consistently censure people for their sexual choices or lobby for outlawing homosexuality on moral grounds. If he believes that morality is dead because there is no god, then he must not ostracize others because they have behaved badly. External error skepticism also plays for keeps: an error skeptic may dislike

the war in Iraq, but he cannot claim that the American invasion was immoral. External status skeptics, on the contrary, insist that their form of skepticism is neutral about moral claims and controversies and permits them to engage in moral condemnation with as much fervor as anyone else. Suppose we conclude, with the status skeptic, that moral claims are only projections of emotion onto a morally barren world. We will have changed our minds about the status of our moral convictions, but not about the content of those convictions. We can continue to insist that terrorism is always wrong, or that it is sometimes justified, or to offer or deny any other moral opinion we may entertain. The later status skeptics (assuming they are skeptics) even allow us to insist that our convictions are objectively true. We only say to ourselves (silently in order not to blunt the impact of what we say out loud) that in so insisting we are only projecting more complex attitudes.

This apparent neutrality gives status skepticism a seductive appeal. I said earlier that some of us are troubled by the philosophical challenges I described. We cannot believe in morons. And we have other reasons for shrinking from bold assertion that our moral beliefs are true: it seems arrogant, in the face of great cultural diversity, to claim that everyone who disagrees with us is in error. But any form of error skepticism seems out of the question. We can't really believe that there is nothing morally objectionable about suicide bombers or genocide or racial discrimination or forced clitoridectomy. External status skepticism offers people torn in that way exactly what they want. It is agreeably ecumenical. It allows its partisans to be as metaphysically and culturally modest as anyone might wish, to abandon all claims as to their own morality's ultimate truth or even superiority to other moralities. But it allows them to do this while still embracing their convictions as enthusiastically as ever, denouncing genocide or abortion or slavery or gender discrimination or welfare cheats with all their former vigor. They need only say that they have revised their view, not about the substance, but about the status, of their convictions. They no longer claim that their convictions mirror an external reality. But they still hold these convictions with the same intensity. They can be as willing to fight or even die for their beliefs as they ever were, but now with a difference. They can have their moral convictions and lose them too. Richard Rorty called this state of mind "irony."⁹

External status skepticism is therefore much more popular among academic philosophers now than global internal skepticism or external error skepticism has ever been, and it is status skepticism that has infected contemporary intel-

lectual life. I shall therefore concentrate on that form of skepticism, but I mean my arguments in the next few chapters to embrace all forms of external skepticism and, indeed, all forms of what might seem the opposite view: that we can have external, nonmoral reasons for believing that our moral opinions can be true. (Because the latter claim is often called philosophical “realism,” I will sometimes refer to those who hold it as “realists.”) Philosophy can neither impeach nor validate any value judgment while standing wholly outside that judgment’s domain. Internal skepticism is the only skeptical game in town. Perhaps it is neither true nor false that abortion is wicked or that the American Constitution condemns all racial preference or that Beethoven was a greater creative artist than Picasso. But if so, this is not because there can be no right answer to such questions for reasons prior or external to value, but because that *is* the right answer internally, as a matter of sound moral or legal or aesthetic judgment. (I explore that possibility in Chapter 5.) We can’t be skeptical about any domain of value all the way down.

Disappointment?

I have tried to answer the two questions that I said give people pause about the ordinary view: What makes a moral judgment true? When are we justified in thinking a moral judgment true? My answer to the first is that moral judgments are made true, when they are true, by an adequate moral argument for their truth. Of course that invites the further question: What makes a moral argument adequate? The answer must be: a further moral argument for its adequacy. And so forth. That is not to say that a moral judgment is made true by the arguments that are in fact made for it: these arguments may not be adequate. Nor that it is made true by its consistency with other moral judgments. I argue in Chapter 6 that coherence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of truth. We can say nothing more helpful than what I just said: a moral judgment is made true by an adequate case for its truth.

When are we justified in supposing a moral judgment true? My answer: when we are justified in thinking that our arguments for holding it true are adequate arguments. That is, we have exactly the reasons for thinking we are right in our convictions that we have for thinking our convictions right. This may seem unhelpful, because it supplies no independent verification. You might be reminded of Wittgenstein’s newspaper reader who doubted what he read and so bought another copy to check. However, he did not act responsibly,

and we can. We can ask whether we have thought about the moral issues in the right way. What way is that? I offer an answer in Chapter 6. But I emphasize there, again, that a theory of moral responsibility is itself a moral theory: it is part of the same overall moral theory as the opinions whose responsibility it is meant to check. Is it reasoning in a circle to answer the question of reasons in that way? Yes, but no more circular than the reliance we place on part of our science to compose a theory of scientific method to check our science.

These answers to the two ancient questions will strike many readers as disappointing. I believe there are two reasons for this attitude, one a mistake and the other an encouragement. First the mistake: my answers disappoint because the ancient questions seem to expect a different kind of answer. They expect answers that step outside morality to find a nonmoral account of moral truth and moral responsibility. But that expectation is confused: it rests on a failure to grasp the independence of morality and other dimensions of value. Any theory about what makes a moral conviction true or what are good reasons for accepting it must be itself a moral theory and therefore must include a moral premise or presupposition. Philosophers have long demanded a moral theory that is not a moral theory. But if we want a genuine moral ontology or epistemology, we must construct it from within morality. Do you want something more? I hope to show you that you do not even know what more you could want. I hope you will come to find these initial answers not disappointing but illuminating.

The second, more encouraging, explanation for your dissatisfaction is that my answers are too abstract and compressed: they point to but do not provide the further moral theory we need. The suggestion that a scientific proposition is true if it matches reality is actually as circular and opaque as my two answers. It seems more helpful because we offer it against the background of a huge and impressive science that gives the idea of matching reality substantial content: we think we know how to decide whether a piece of chemistry does that trick. We need the same structure and complexity for a moral ontology or a moral epistemology: we need much more than the bare claim that morality is made true by adequate argument. We need a further theory about the structure of adequate arguments. We need not just the idea of moral responsibility but some account of what that is.

These are projects for Part Two. I argue there that we should treat moral reasoning as a form of interpretive reasoning and that we can achieve moral responsibility only by aiming at the most comprehensive account we can

achieve of a larger system of value in which our moral opinions figure. That interpretive goal provides the structure of adequate argument. It defines moral responsibility. It does not guarantee that the arguments we construct in that way are adequate; it does not guarantee moral truth. But when we find our arguments adequate, after that kind of comprehensive reflection, we have earned the right to live by them. What stops us, then, from claiming that we are certain they are true? Only our sense, confirmed by wide experience, that better interpretive arguments may be found. We must take care to respect the distance between responsibility and truth. But we cannot explain that distance except by appealing once again to the idea of good and better argument. We cannot escape from morality's independence, no matter how strenuously we struggle. Every effort we make to find a trap door out of morality confirms that we do not yet understand what morality is.