involve anything worthy of criticism. But while the anti-realist will have to accept that such differences need involve nothing worth regarding as cognitive shortcoming – as deficiency in representation, substantially conceived – the ordinary view will remain available that shortcoming may nevertheless often be involved, albeit an irreducibly moral shortcoming, a type of failing which can be appreciated only from a committed moral point of view.

In general – I guess the point is obvious enough – the immediate price of anti-realism about morals is merely that the gravity of moral judgement will lack an external sanction. When one is asked, ‘Why bother to try to arrive at correct moral opinion?’, the only available answer will be: because such an opinion informs better conduct – better, that is, from a moral point of view. The value of moral truth will thus be an instrumental, moral value. It is common to think that there are, by contrast, intrinsic, general values associated with pure discovery, understanding and knowledge of the real world. Properly to characterise and to understand such values seems to me to be a very difficult task. In any case, for the moral anti-realist, that kind of value cannot attach to moral truth. But I think it has seemed important that it should only because of the tendency of philosophers to suppose that there is nothing for truth to be that is not associated with value of that sort.

‘What more could a sensible moral realist want?’ What those whose intuitive inclination is to moral realism really want, I suggest, is not truth as representation – realism as properly understood – but a certain kind of objectivity in moral appraisal: ideally, precisely that a tendency towards convergence in the conception of what is morally important and how much importance it has, be indeed intrinsic to moral thinking itself. How much, and what kinds of moral appraisal may indeed contain the seeds of such convergence seems to me a great – perhaps the greatest – unresolved question in moral philosophy. My argument has been that the question has nothing to do with moral realism, but arises within the anti-realist camp.13

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TRUTH IN ETHICS

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I shall start with two thoughts which prima facie present a difficulty right from the beginning. The first is that truth in ethics is an important subject. The second is that, on a plausible view of the matter, truth in ethics is not a very important subject.

The reason for these two considerations coming together is this. Truth in ethics might seem an important subject because it bears very closely on certain questions such as objectivity, the possibility of ethical knowledge, and hence – and this I take to be a particularly significant question in this area – the nature of ethical authority, if there is such a thing: that is, why one person’s views on ethical topics can be worth more than another’s. So if truth in ethics is related to such questions, truth in ethics should be an important subject.

However, on a plausible view of the matter, truth in ethics is not in itself such an important question, because the question of truth in ethics is not itself any of those questions about objectivity, the possibility of ethical knowledge, and so forth.

I think that in this point I agree effectively with Crispin Wright. This may be (indeed I think it is) contrary to some things I wrote quite a long time ago, particularly perhaps in ‘Consistency and Realism’,1 but I certainly don’t wish to go back over those old writings. Now, at least, I should like to say, and here I am broadly agreeing with Wright,2 that truth in itself isn’t much. As I think Wright has shown, the conclusion that truth in itself isn’t much follows from what I take to be an undeniable starting point, namely the soundness of Tarski’s equivalence. If we can start from anything in the question of truth, we can start from the idea that ‘p’ is true just in case that p.

Exactly how Tarski’s equivalence is to be formulated, for instance with regard to relativisation to a language or otherwise, is a further question, and indeed it is a question to which I shall return later. What is not undeniable is any given philosophical interpretation of what Tarski’s equivalence means. For instance,

Popper held that Tarski’s equivalence is the best expression of the correspondence theory of truth. Equally, it has been held that Tarski’s equivalence is the best expression of the redundancy theory of truth, because it displays the idea that truth is a fundamentally disquotational notion.

But Tarski’s equivalence does not express any such theory, and the fact that it’s been taken by authoritative and competent commentators to express both the correspondence theory and the redundancy theory seems itself good evidence that it does not express any such theory. In particular, Tarski’s equivalence does not express the redundancy theory. If you have Tarski’s equivalence and no more, that is not equivalent to the following theory: truth is explained by Tarski’s equivalence and no more.

However, we can learn something from the relations of Tarski’s equivalence to the redundancy theory, in favour of what (again like Wright) I shall call minimalism with respect to truth. The mere fact that an account of truth has to accommodate Tarski’s equivalence surely creates a strong presumption (for instance) that truth is not an epistemic concept.

It is certainly a necessary condition of qualifying for a truth predicate that ethical statements are statements: they are involved in speech acts of the assertive kind, they permit embedding and various other kinds of syntactic manipulation which are associated with the sorts of things that are statements, assertions, bearers of truth value. These syntactic phenomena, as we might call them, have to be honoured in any account of ethical statements. But how heavy a burden does the fact that these syntactic phenomena have to be honoured in any account of ethical statements impose on us? The answer depends on what our expectations are of semantic theory.

For instance, Hare made a definite semantic claim, namely that indicative and apparently assertoric moral statements were in fact universal imperatives. Of course that claim involved an immediate semantic problem, of how such an analysis could be reconciled with the surface phenomena, and this gave rise to the machinery of phrasics, neutrics, tropics, and so forth. A more recent example of someone who thinks that there is a heavy onus to discharge here is Alan Gibbard. Gibbard wishes to reconcile an expressive view of ethical statements with the syntactic phenomena, and in order to do this, he has produced a semantic theory that is a fairly elaborate model-theoretic account of norms.

On the other hand, if you look at Simon Blackburn’s ‘quasi-realism’, you see a different picture: it represents, I think, a different expectation of semantic theory. As I understand Blackburn’s view, he doesn’t require any more work at this point. That is to say, he doesn’t feel it necessary to do the kind of thing that Gibbard does in giving a model-theoretic or any similar semantics to reconcile the syntactic phenomena with an expressive view. The statements in question, on Blackburn’s view, simply behave like statements. He supplements this with a metaphysical or epistemological account, which he thinks explains why the statements, illusorily in his view, bear an appearance of realism.

I’m not going to pursue that issue. It’s not one on which I have any interesting view. I just draw attention to the fact that it’s a disputed question how big a weight has to be picked up simply in virtue of reconciling some general metaethical view about the status of ethical beliefs with the surface syntactic phenomena that allow ethical statements to be statements.

I’m going to assume minimalism in the following form. There are two sets of what might be called surface facts with regard to ethical discourse. First, it is well regimented syntactically in the mode of indicative assertion (it allows embedding, conditionals, and all the sorts of things we are familiar with in that department). Second, utterances are assessed under the title of truth for their appropriateness, acceptability, or whatever. (My reference to ‘appropriateness’ and ‘acceptability’ here are not meant to beg any questions against truth.)

We may also accept the fact – less on the surface – that such assessments of ethical statements do not directly take the content of the ethical assertions to be determined by the speaker’s psychological states. They are not taken to be truths in the mode of autobiographical subjectivism (except of course in very special cases where an ethical statement is of that character – some ethical statements, after all, are of an autobiographical character).

I take minimalism to say that the surface facts just mentioned do not by themselves determine the answer to substantive questions about realism, objectivism, cognitivism, or more generally the status of ethical statements, nor do they determine anything about.

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the authority, if there is such a thing, of some ethical speakers as against others. To answer those questions, you have to go beyond the surface facts and not just note the practices of assertion, denial, appropriate syntactic regimentation and so on, but ask for the point of the practices of assertion, denial, argument, inquiry and so on, in the course of which these surface facts are displayed. The substantive questions in ethics about realism, objectivism, cognitivism, and so on, are questions not just about the existence of the surface facts, nor indeed about the adequacy of the surface facts to support the application of the word ‘true’. The question is about the point in the ethical case of practices such as assertion, denial, and truth ascription.

At this point, we do encounter concepts of the cognitive kind. The point here is not that truth in ethics, any more than it is anywhere else, is itself a cognitive concept. It isn’t. Rather the question of how much truth in ethics comes to, what it does for us, how much we should care about it, can only be discussed in terms of concepts such as knowledge. It is this emphasis that leads into questions about the cognitive.

You might say, and I think this is quite a helpful way of viewing the matter, that such questions about the status of ethics (questions about realism, objectivism, cognitivism and so on) concern not so much whether the discourse of ethics can support ascriptions of truth, but rather what the value of truth is for ethics. It’s in the area of the value of truth that these issues come out.

This raises a point more general than one confined to ethics. If we consider the idea of the value of truth – and I’m not supposing that this is one homogeneous thing: there are quite a number of things that are the values of truth – a natural assumption is that what you have to do first is to determine what truth is for some region of discourse, and then you’ll be in a position to ask about the value of truth in relation to that region of discourse. However, what I’d like to suggest is, roughly speaking, that we should proceed the other way round: what we should do is hold on to a minimalist account of truth everywhere and then the question of the value of truth in a given area will help us to see what more we should say about truth in that area.

When I refer to the value of truth, I don’t mean the value of p’s being true. Just in virtue of Tarski’s equivalence, the value of p’s being true is typically the value of p, if there is such a thing. For instance, contrary to the evidences and contrary to what everybody else says, this lady believes that her child survived the crash. She is in fact right. It’s true her son survived the crash, and it is a good thing that her belief is true. But why it’s a good thing that her belief is true is simply that it’s a good thing that her son survived. This is not the value of truth, but the value of survival.

But there are other connections – and this is where the value of truth comes in – where the value of a belief’s being true is not just a matter of the value of p where p expresses that belief. The value of truth in general is constituted by our relations to such truths for various such relations. It involves such things as the value of getting to know the truth, of continuing to look for the truth, of asserting the truth because it’s true, of taking steps not to deceive oneself into thinking that p is false when it is in fact true, the value of identifying people whose information on the question whether p is likely to be true information, and so on. And it can involve such matters with which we’re all familiar, for instance, in the law of libel, whether truth is a defence, whether, for instance, utterances that would otherwise be negatively valued should receive some positive value because those utterances were true. In all these connections, it seems to me, we can further our understanding of truth beyond the minimalist universal account of truth, by understanding the values of truth and, indeed, truthfulness.

The way in which the term ‘truth’ has turned up in all these formulations, formulations I associate with what I broadly call the value of truth, is unfavourable to the redundancy theory. The fact that we want to use ‘truth’ in such interlocking ways in talking about the value of truth illustrates one of the dimensions in which our concept of truth has to go beyond what is offered by the redundancy theory. Certainly the limited treatment that the value of truth has received from the redundancy theory has not been particularly auspicious.

Horwich’s book, the best known recent exposition of the redundancy theory, provides an example.6 In it, there is a brief passage about the value of truth. Horwich says that when one attaches a value to truth, what one wants is to believe p if and only if p.7 He says ‘if and only if’, so it’s not only that I wish all my beliefs to be true, but that I wish to believe all truths. The desire for accuracy is conflated with the desire for omniscience. This is a mistake, but it is not an unmotivated slip on Horwich’s part. Horwich has grasped the point that in having an interest in the

truth I have an interest in acquiring some true beliefs and probably not trivial ones. That is, he doesn’t wish to commit himself to what Popper often pointed out, correctly, to be a weakness of the attitude towards truth shown by (for instance) quite a lot of Oxford philosophers, namely that their only motivation was to avoid error: as Popper pointed out, an easy way to do that is not to have any beliefs at all. Horwich’s formula, ‘I attach a value to truth if I want to believe that $p$ if and only if $p’$, does pay dim homage to the idea that you want to have some true beliefs as well as wanting all your beliefs to be true. But his formula, clearly, is a crude shot at what the value of truth could be.

Horwich attaches to his formula an unnecessary further claim, that the value of truth should principally be identified with the pragmatic value of the consequences of having true beliefs. That doesn’t follow at all. Why he might think it follows is clear: truth does so little work in redundancy theory that he’s very suspicious of any notion of the value of truth which transcends the value of my behaving in a way appropriate to $p$ when $p$, which is what he offers us.

Redundancy theory, as it has been developed so far, has not well handled the notion of the value of truth, and I think that the various motivations and interests we join under the heading of ‘the value of truth’ are such that minimalism will have to help itself to more than anything that is on offer from redundancy theory.

The value of truth in a given area, then, is a good focus for inquiry into how much further we should go beyond the surface facts which are the support of minimalism. The next point is, I think, important, but I shall have to leave it somewhat obscure because there is not time to develop it at adequate length. The fact that we are to investigate these questions in terms of the value of truth does not imply that we attach any particular value to truths about value. Truth is valuable to us, we seek truth, for various reasons, and it does not follow that we set any particular value on acquiring truth about value. People tend to say that, if it is important to have true beliefs, there can be nothing more important to have true beliefs about than questions of value. This simply assumes that the answers we need to questions about value must recommend themselves because they are truths; but whether this is so is one of the questions we want to investigate. What we must ask is how far the value that we attach to getting it right about values must itself take the form of the various things that we group under the value of truth. We must ask how far the authority of knowledge, for instance, the value of honest inquiry, and other values of truthfulness, all of which are very firmly rooted when we are dealing with non-value matters, carry over into inquiries (if that’s what we can call them) into value.

It’s worth for instance remembering here that when people have invoked the values of truth and truthfulness in political matters, their natural paradigm is not that of preserving truth about some moral matter: they want to preserve the capacity to think truthfully about other matters. When Orwell said in 1984, ‘Freedom is the freedom to say that twice two is four’, he was picking on precisely this point: it is manifest truth of various kinds, the resistance to lies, that the political order has to protect.

Another way one can put it is this: one of the things in valuing truth we have to protect ourselves against is wishful thinking, which along with self-deception is a particularly insidious enemy of truthfulness. Now, we might ask whether there is such a thing as wishful thinking about what is right. Or is it rather that we can get to wrong conclusions about what is right because we go in for wishful thinking about other things? The point I’m making is that we ought to ask how straightforwardly the values of truth with regard to self-deception, wishful thinking, and so on, carry over into the field of value.

I am not going to say anything more about this today, because at this point I’m going to remove a fiction which I have so far sustained and which it is important to remove. This fiction, which constantly affects discussions of this subject, is that there is a homogeneous class of ethical assertions, and that, in considering the advance beyond the minimalistic account, we need to say the same things about all of them. The surface facts are in common between all these statements, of course, because the surface facts are facts about them just as statements. But once we go beyond this we find that they have important differences, and these differences are important in relation to the issues about realism, cognitivism, and so on.

I have claimed elsewhere that an important distinction here is that between statements deploying what I call thin ethical concepts and statements deploying what I call thick ethical concepts. Thin ethical concepts are concepts like ‘good’, ‘right’, and ‘wrong’. ‘Abortion is wrong’, if anybody makes so unqualified a claim, is an ethical statement that deploys a thin, in fact the thinnest, ethical concept. Contrast with this ethical statements deploying concepts such as ‘cruel’, ‘brutal’, ‘dishonest’, ‘treacherous’, or which
describe people as chaste, kind-hearted, or whatever. Such statements, in my terms, deploy thick ethical concepts.

Quite a lot can be said about the distinction itself and how exactly it works, but, although I’m going to be saying more about thick concepts, I won’t elaborate on the distinction further. Obviously, in some sense, thick concepts have a higher empirical content. It’s worth adding, as Samuel Scheffler has pointed out, that there is an important class of concepts that lie between the thick and the thin, notably the concept of justice. There is more to it than to a concept like ‘right’: that an action is just is one reason it can be right. On the other hand, the content of ‘just’ is in a certain way indeterminate or disputable or open to a variety of conceptions.

I take it that assertions can be minimally true whether they deploy thin or thick concepts. The surface facts apply to all such assertions.

There is a range of pressures that move some philosophers to focus on thin concepts. Some think that thin concepts represent (you might say) the moral essence. These are people whom Susan Hurley has called ‘centralists’, people who think that a thick ethical concept is constructed around a central core of the thin, and that the ethical force of the thick really lies in the thin. There are other motivations more complexly related to the primacy of the thin: there is a certain fundamentally Kantian project in which the aim is to build ethical philosophy on thin ethical concepts, and I shall say something about this at the end. There are other writers who concentrate on the thin for the opposite reason, that they are hostile to the status of ethical discourse. They see the thin as the crucially weak spot, because it is about thin statements that people most spectacularly and manifestly disagree.

Other philosophers want to start with the thick. Some do this because they think it’s a peculiarly strong spot. I want to start with the thick. Certainly for the subject under discussion here it’s the right place to start, and, in a sense, I do think that it’s a peculiarly strong spot, but, as I shall explain, I don’t think it’s as strong as some of the neo-Aristotelian writers who favour this theme think it is. But I think that the reason for this is more interesting than those typically brought forward by subjectivist or expressivist critics.

When we think about thick concepts, statements containing such concepts manifestly satisfy the minimalist conditions (they fall in very easily with the surface facts) – but seemingly they display more. They seem to display the opportunity for a larger set of the notions associated with truth and indeed the value of truth. For instance, they involve the application of the concept of knowledge. They invite us to think that, with regard to statements involving these concepts, it might be pointless and helpful to say that some people as opposed to others might know. That’s so, I think, if we think of a plausible construction of the point of the concept of knowledge. If we have a construction on the lines of that offered in Edward Craig’s admirable Knowledge and the State of Nature, one in which the point of the concept of knowledge is that of helping us to identify reliable informants, then when we ask the question ‘Is there such a thing as ethical knowledge?’ we’ve got a point to the question – the point: is there such a thing, in ethics, as a helpful informant? If we concentrate on thick concepts, we do indeed have something like the notion of a helpful informant. We have the notion of a helpful advisor. This is somebody who may be better at seeing that a certain outcome, policy, or way of dealing with the situation falls under a concept of this kind, than we are in our unassisted state, and better than other people who are less good at thinking about such matters.

This does seem to be a way in which the concept of knowledge can be brought into ethics that doesn’t run into the difficulties encountered by other ways of bringing in that concept. For instance, it looks a lot better than a model of ethical knowledge as theoretical. We’ve all been brought up to know that in a sense there are no moral experts, yet people are in a way trying to recreate the notion of a moral expert in relation to applied ethics. There are areas in which having a degree in (e.g.) medical ethics is thought to qualify someone for making a certain class of judgements. The idea of such an expertise is implausible – not many people are going to say ‘Well, I didn’t understand the professor’s argument for his conclusion that abortion is wrong, but since he is qualified in the subject, abortion probably is wrong.’ But even if we think there is something wrong about the theoretical model of moral expertise, we do have an idea of a helpful advisor, who can see that something falls under a certain thick concept; he or she can see, for instance, the situation as being an example of treachery, something that hadn’t occurred to the rest of us. In this, there seems to be a handle
for the application of the concept of knowledge. If that’s right, then we have a bit more than the minimalism associated with the surface facts. For here we have a value attached to the notion of finding the truth that ties in with, is of a piece with, the general point (under a plausible construction) of the concept of knowledge.

It’s worth saying also that, although this is a useful way of looking at a certain class of advisors, it isn’t in my view correct to suppose that a helpful and constructive advocate of a moral outlook has to be construed as someone who knows that outlook to be true. I think there are ways in which someone can be a helpful and constructive advocate of a moral outlook without that being the centre of the argument at all. For instance, he may be able to show you by his discourse that that moral outlook will help you, will make your life more of a life, will set you free, and this can be true of other projects which are not assessed primarily in the dimension of the true. The point will be, not that the moral outlook is true, but that the moral outlook can give you a life worth living (though you may think ‘a life worth living’ is itself an ethical concept that involves the notion of the truth).

Let us grant that under thick concepts we can extend the set of interests associated with the value of truth beyond the territory of minimalism and the surface facts. Let us grant that this is a dimension in which the concept of knowledge can begin to do some work. We then face the point that not everyone shares the same thick concepts. The vocabulary of thick concepts is not homogeneous in a pluralistic society, nor homogeneous over time or between different societies.

This is well illustrated if we think about a formula David Wiggins has introduced, ‘there is nothing else to think but that p’. Wiggins has introduced us to a situation in which I wonder what to think, you then explain that for this and this and this reason things stand in a certain way, and I conclude that there is nothing else to think but that p. In Wiggins’s argument, this is associated with the notion of a vindicatory explanation, which for him is tied up with a very broadly Piercean notion of truth. I leave that aside and concentrate on the formula ‘there is nothing else to think but that p’. Wiggins thinks this formula can be applied equally to ethical and non-ethical propositions. Just as there can be nothing else to think but that the sum of these numbers is 3,456, or that this tyre has a hole in it, so there may be nothing else to think but that this action is cruel.

Wiggins’s formula is implicitly relativised in various ways. Obviously it’s relativised to someone in a certain evidential situation. There is a less obvious relativisation as well. For clearly in all these cases it won’t literally be true that there is nothing else to think about the given situation or circumstance but that p. There is always more than one true thing to think about any situation. What ‘there is nothing else to think but that p’ must mean is: there is nothing else to think, given the question whether p. This implicitly relativises the claim to those who use the concepts involved in the question whether p, and this is extremely important.

Consider the case of the boys who torture the cat. The boys do a wanton and hideous thing to the cat, which causes the cat great pain. Wiggins says there is nothing else to think but that it was a cruel thing to do. Unfortunately, however, there is something else to think but that it was a cruel thing to do – for instance that it was fun, which is what the boys thought. True, if you use the concept ‘cruel’, there is nothing else to think but that their behaviour was cruel. But there is nothing in the situation, or in the discourse of these other people, that can recruit somebody into using the concept ‘cruel’ if they don’t already, unless of course on this occasion they learn that concept. They might be so shocked or upset by the situation that they acquire the concept.

This draws our attention to an extremely important form of ethical difference – namely that between those who do and those who don’t use a certain concept. There was a marvellous moment in one of Oscar Wilde’s trials when counsel read to Wilde a passage from one of his works and asked ‘Mr. Wilde, don’t you think that’s obscene?’ Wilde replied ‘“Obscene” is not a word of mine.’ This illustrates that the question of what your repertoire of thick concepts is reveals your own or your society’s ethical attitude. An important difference between different ethical cultures concerns what thick ethical concepts do any work in them. There can also be a diachronic difference here. An example is the concept of chastity. This concept used to do a lot of work in relation to sexual ethics. (I take it the concept of chastity is one that has some depth – that is, it doesn’t simply mean ‘celibate’ but rather ties together a range of ideas about sexual purity.)

This phenomenon underlies a claim which I made in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy in terms that some people have found confusing or unnecessarily provocative – namely the claim that 11 ‘Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism and Motivating Moral Beliefs’, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 91 (1990-91).
reflection in ethics can destroy knowledge. I would in any case like to say that all I claimed was that reflection can destroy knowledge, not that it must do so, but it has been disputed whether it even can destroy knowledge. If the situation is simply that what people used to believe to be true, they now believe to be false, they wouldn't think of what they earlier believed as being, at that earlier time, knowledge. Nor did I mean something unintelligible, namely that the very thing that used to be true has now become false. What I had in mind was the situation in which they no longer have the concept with which they used to express a certain class of beliefs. They lose a concept, and so cease to have a disposition that expresses itself in categorising the world in those terms.

It's also important that they don't have to say that they've made a discovery, e.g., that there is no such virtue as chastity. If they discovered this, they'd have to regard their earlier remarks, or the remarks of their ancestors in this regard, as presumably either false or in some way failing through presuppositional failure. It would be like discovering there was no such thing as phlogiston. They might say that there was no such virtue as chastity, but the point I want to emphasise is that this isn't forced on them. Least of all is it forced on them by the surface facts, or indeed even by a rather wider range of semantic facts.

I don't think there is a grave problem in formulating this problem, if anyone wants to, in terms that fit into an elementary theory of truth. Statements of the kind 'X is chaste' and 'X is not chaste' are true, when they're true, in some language $L$, which is a certain ethical language but not the same as our ethical language $L_0$, because the languages differ at least in the respect that one contains the concept of chastity and the other one doesn't. This doesn't mean that when some speaker of $L$ gives approval to an utterance of another speaker of $L$, he or she is awarding that speaker only the qualified approval 'what you said was true in $L$'. As David Lewis has pointed out, if a person's utterance is true in $L$, and the person is speaking $L$, then the person's utterance is true. To use an illustration introduced by Philip Percival in a recent article, Borg's performance on what we call the tennis court made him the victor at tennis. Of course there is another possible game, quennis, at which he was the loser (roughly, you lose at quennis just in case you win at tennis.) But the fact is that Borg was playing tennis, so he was indeed the winner, since that was the game he was playing.

It's not that his winning is something qualified - that he is a 'winner at tennis'. Indeed, what defines his winning is the concept of winning at tennis, just as what governs these people's utterances is truthfulness in $L$; but they get the marks for saying true things precisely because they're speaking $L$.

Someone can come to understand this ethical language $L$ without its being that person's own language. That's the ethnographic stance. A person who is exposed to the society can, for instance, impersonate an $L$-speaker. The visitor to the society is, let us say, an $L_0$-speaker. He impersonates $L$-speakers, and may temporarily become indistinguishable from an $L$-speaker even to himself. There are whole days perhaps in which his world is the world of the $L$-speaker. In this case, he will in speaking follow the rule of truthfulness-in-$L$. Reverting to his role as external commentator, he may remark that the utterances of a given $L$-speaker are true. He will be following the rule of truthfulness-in-$L$.

What he can't do is to generate a Tarski-equivalent right hand side in his own language $L_0$ for the claim that (e.g.) 'X is chaste' is true in $L$. The reason he can't do this is that, given the way in which we set up the case, the expressive powers of his own language are different from those of the native language precisely in the respect that the native language contains an ethical concept which his doesn't. If we suppose his ethical language is based largely on thin ethical concepts, you might say the expressive powers of his language are weaker. Of course someone identified with his language would say that, even if it is expressively weaker, it is ethically stronger because it lacks all this apparatus of ethical concepts that the natives' language contains.

Granted the fact, which I find undeniable, that different societies' thick concepts are not simply homogeneous, don't simply map on to each other, we have a perfectly coherent account of what truthfulness in $L$ is and what its relation can be to the language of an observer.

I've suggested that thick concepts provide the most promising area in ethics for delivering more than minimal truth, more than simply the surface facts. They provide examples of ethical statements that can not only be true but also be pointfully be said to be known by people. But of course these facts don't remove all disagreement. This is not simply because some or all of the parties are ignorant, but because of a lack of conceptual homogeneity. The practical judgements that follow from the use of ethical concepts in one such ethical language or culture are not the same as those that

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follow from the use of other thick ethical concepts, or again from the use of thin concepts in other ethical languages. As the ethnographic stance illustrates, this doesn’t mean these languages are mutually unintelligible. You can learn the other language by the well-known method of pretending to be a speaker of it, by identifying historically, ethnographically, or simply sympathetically with a speaker of it. It still doesn’t become, by that fact, your language.

Since the application of thick ethical concepts typically gives reasons for courses of action, we get, as a result, univocal disagreements at the level of practical reason that can be expressed in thin concepts. For we get to a matter of practical decision where we get some term like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and one group thinks a certain course of action is right and another group thinks it wrong. Those thin concepts I take to be, at the end of the line, univocal. That is a focused disagreement. A focused disagreement doesn’t represent all the bases of the disagreement, which lie in two different ethical languages or different ethical structures of the world, but it certainly is a disagreement.

I should say in passing that, although I am sure there has to be a univocal sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ closely related to practical reason such that these two parties can come to understand that what one thinks is right the other thinks is wrong, I’m not in the least clear that this is identical with the terms ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ that turn up so often in ethics. I don’t know what these terms, in the ways they are so often used in ethics, mean (I’m not sure that those who use these terms in ethics know what they mean either.) But at some level very near to practical decision there has to be a term that is used univocally in different cultures.

We know that when people say that they want real truth in ethics, above all when they say that they want objectivity in ethics, they want more than the local language of thick concepts and the associated minimal truth. Perhaps we are now in a position to see what it is they want. They want there to be one canonical, homogeneous ethical language. They want it to be conceptually homogeneous across cultures, and across disagreements within our culture (across pluralism).

At this point we encounter two strategies. The Kantians and Utilitarians take the piece of the ethical language that is seemingly, and hoped to be, univocal – the thin bit – and try to get it to do all the ethical conceptual work. This gives us conceptual homogeneity (at least it does if we get it working better than the use of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ actually works). The trouble is that it leaves us with all the disagreements, and the endlessly unhelpful debates about which theory or decision procedure or constructive undertaking can, as it were, be wished on the other party in a way that will give us not only conceptually univocal and homogeneous conclusions but also a substantively identical decision procedure. Under certain assumptions where it is very near to a political order, and the constraints on the political order are quite high, and so on, one can get a little way in that direction. But experience tends to show that it’s not going to get all the way in generating precisely the kind of outlook that can be saluted as objective and agreed.

The other strategy is to behave as the neo-Aristotelians do. They rightly concentrate on the thick part, which offers a high order of such things as convergence and knowledge, and so promises substantive additions to mere minimalism. The trouble is that the thick part isn’t conceptually homogeneous. Not everybody shares the same such language.

There are, again, two different ways of proceeding from this point. You can simply ignore the fact that not everybody shares the same thick ethical concepts. This is the method adopted by those who go on as though it were Aristotle’s, or possibly St. Thomas’s, time: the move from an older world to late twentieth-century Los Angeles is made in one large jump, which is sociologically optimistic, to say the least of it. I don’t think this way is very helpful. These neo-Aristotelians are rather too Aristotelian.

The other way is to assume that there must be an underlying theory of the virtues such that cultural variation, while acknowledged, can be understood as a surface adaptation. On this view, there is a kind of deep structure to thick ethical concepts, and we can understand local variants as appropriate relativisations to circumstances (e.g., in certain social circumstances thinking in terms of chastity really is appropriate). Alternatively, we may be given a deep structure account together with a theory of error, so it will be said, e.g., that chastity never was a good concept for thinking about sexual behaviour, because it was always a patriarchally imposed device. In such a case, you have the promise of a theory of error which is non-trivial, if difficult to honour.

Given the aim to go beyond minimal truth and the surface facts and uncover one canonical, homogeneous set of thick ethical concepts, one has to accept (what some neo-Aristotelian theorists ignore) the facts of historical and social variation, which are simply undeniable. The project then becomes that of understanding those
variations in terms of a deep structure of thick concepts together with appropriate social relativisations and, possibly, a theory of error. I think the most optimistic thing to be said about this project is that we simply don’t know whether it can succeed. Perhaps it’s possible that some such structure might emerge. But I still doubt it. I also doubt to what extent it would be other than an ethical project. The ethical dimension of such assessment — of such a trans-historical, trans-social, interpretation — will be so high that I do not know whether it could actually gain ground that might be acknowledged by all parties as being a step beyond minimalist truth into objectivism.

There are two points to be emphasised, whatever one’s thoughts or hopes about this project are.

The first is that no such theory now exists. To pretend that it does is simply bluff. When writers remark ‘there is really only one set of virtues that contribute to human flourishing, and they are differently interpreted under different societal arrangements’, they are drawing on an account which we don’t know to contain any funds at all.

The second point is that the answers to these questions are not entailed by conclusions in the theory of truth for ethical statements. We’ve got minimal truth and we have the surface facts and we can respect the surface facts and under favourable circumstances we can have more than that. We can have convergence, and we can have (I suggest) some knowledge. Some issues of objectivity which seek to go beyond this lead to questions of what ethical concepts we should have, and how we should answer questions of what ethical concepts we should have. But that issue is not going to be resolved by further investigations of ethical truth as such. It’s not a semantic issue we’re concerned with here. It’s a blend of an ethical issue on the one hand and an anthropological or hermeneutical issue on the other.

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Objective and Subjective in Ethics, with Two Postscripts about Truth

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I

Objective/nonobjective: The suggestion I defend is this. A subject matter is objective (or relates to an objective reality) if and only if there are questions about it (and enough questions about it) that admit of answers that are substantially true — simply and plainly true, that is.

What is plain truth? What is truth like? Elsewhere (see also the two postscripts), I have tried to show how one might enumerate the marks of the concept of truth, and on what basis. (‘Marks’ in Frege’s sense: see ‘Concept and Object’.) Here, and for present purposes, perhaps it will be enough to illustrate how, contrary to what might be expected, it is conceivable that moral beliefs or judgements should possess one of the most, meta-ethically speaking, troublesome marks of truth. The mark might be given like this: If it is true that p, then, in so far as it can be known that p, someone can believe that p precisely because p. The argument for this requirement upon truth can be derived from the exigencies of interpretation, or it can be derived from our intuitive idea that for a subject matter to be aimed at truth is for it to be aimed to furnish those who involve themselves in it with grounds for various beliefs which are grounds for the truth of those beliefs.

Let it be clear that to show that it is not excluded that moral judgements should have the mark of truth we are concerned with here is not yet to show that they can have all the other marks that truth would require. The most that it can demonstrate is how moral judgements might indeed possess one potentially troublesome mark, if things look not too bleak in respect of the others.

‘To believe that p precisely because p’. This is only a slogan, to be understood in the light of diverse examples, in which we seek to show a common pattern. The common pattern is something like this: one comes to believe that p precisely because p only if the best full explanation of one’s coming to believe that p requires the giver of the explanation to adduce in his explanation either the very fact that p or something which leaves no room to deny that p. This is to