

The Oxford Handbook of Moral Realism

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CHAPTER

20 Oh, All the Wrongs I Could Have Performed! Or: Why Care about Morality, Robustly Realistically Understood

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Abstract

Suppose someone is brought up as an orthodox Jew, and so only eats kosher, is very conservative sexually, etc. Suppose they then find out that this Judaism stuff is just all a big mistake. If they then regret all the shrimp they could have eaten, all the sex!, this makes perfect sense. Not so, however, if someone finds out that moral realism is false, and they now regret all the fun they could have had hurting people's feeling, etc. Even if this does make sense, there's a strong disanalogy between the moral and the religious case. This asymmetry, on a realist picture of morality, calls for explanation. This chapter tries to explain it. The discussion engages some topics familiar from objections to Robust realism—the why-be-moral challenge, the status of de-dicto moral motivation, and whether and why we should care about the moral properties, robustly realistically understood.

Keywords: Moral realism, robust realism, de dicto moral motivation, why be moral, morality

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SUPPOSE that someone is brought up as an orthodox Jew, and so only eats kosher, is very conservative sexually, etc. Suppose they then come to believe that this Judaism stuff—at least in its orthodox, literal reading—is just all a big mistake, perhaps because there is no God. If they then regret all the fun they could have had, all the shrimp they could have eaten, all the sex they could have had!—well, if they regret all this now, this makes perfect sense.

Now suppose that someone is brought up as a moralist,[1] and so they restrict their pursuit of their own self-interest and other things they care about by the interests of others, their rights, and perhaps other morally important considerations. They then come to view morality in the same way the lapsed theist from the previous paragraph views religion—they think that it is all grounded in some error, perhaps, that there are no moral truths. Perhaps they come to adopt some kind of moral nihilism, or something ↳ like Mackie's

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(1977) error theory.[2] And they now regret all the fun they could have had, how much more they could have promoted their self-interest, all the money they could have made, if they were only willing to hurt people's feelings, and so on. This doesn't seem to make sense. Even if it does, there's a fairly strong disanalogy between the moral and the religious case: As experienced by the lapsed orthodox Jew, "All the sex I could have had"-regrets, and maybe even "all the sins[3] I could have performed"-regrets, make perfect sense. But "all the wrongs[4] I could have performed"-regrets from the now (purportedly) disillusioned moralist are at least suspicious, and so are—though to a lesser degree—"all the money I could have made"-regrets. (Below we'll call these all-the-sins-regrets and all-the-wrongs-regrets, respectively.) At the very least, we wouldn't be surprised if such regrets were not there for the lapsed moralist, as we would be surprised if they were absent for the lapsed orthodox Jew. The details of the religious-moral asymmetry here may not (yet) be entirely clear, but it's hard to deny that there is such an asymmetry.

This asymmetry calls for explanation. What is it about the nature of moral commitments that makes all-the-wrongs-regrets suspicious, and what is it about them that makes them different from religious ones in the ways that this little thought experiment makes salient? In morality, it seems, moral beliefs and motivations are to an extent immune to changes in one's beliefs *about* then, one's metaethical beliefs[5], in a way which does not seem to be the case in the religious case. What explains this? Now, perhaps some metaethical views—views that tie moral judgments and facts very closely to motivation—can explain these phenomena rather easily: Your gustatory preferences, it seems safe to assume, are immune to your philosophical views about such preferences, and are nothing like the religious person's religious commitments. So it's not surprising that a change of philosophical mind here—say, coming to believe an
p. 436 error theory about gustatory judgments—will not lead to your regretting having missed on all the ↳ opportunities to have guava juice (if you didn't like it then, you probably don't like it now). So metaethical views that understand moral judgment as more closely resembling gustatory preferences can explain why all-the-wrongs-regrets are suspicious, in a way that distinguishes between them and all-the-sins-regrets. But the explanatory challenge is harder for moral realists, and perhaps even more so for robust moral realists, according to whom moral judgments have the kind of objectivity and force that on some theological views religious ones do.[6] In this chapter, we address this challenge as a challenge to robust moral realism.

Thinking about this explanatory challenge also throws interesting light on several related discussions: the question whether the virtuous are motivated by de re or de dicto moral motivation (or both), the why-be-moral challenge, and worries that robust realism makes it mysterious why we should care about the moral facts and properties (all the way out there in Plato's heaven, as it were).

The solution we will be suggesting is that there is an important difference between the way in which it is plausible to think of the moralist's moral commitments (not to act wrongly) as conditional on his or her moralism and the way in which it is plausible to think of the theist's religious commitments (not to sin) as dependent on his or her theism. The conditionals capturing these commitments should be seen as junk-knowledge in the former case, but not in at least many instances of the latter.

Not everyone, we've come to see, is immediately struck by the asymmetry we are out to explain. If you're not, don't despair on this chapter just yet. Questions often get clarified during the attempts to answer them. That a phenomenon calls for explanation is sometimes more clearly seen after some attempts at explaining it fail. By the end of this chapter, we believe, thinking about our initial challenge will end up being productive in ways many of which are available to you even if you are not immediately struck by the strength of the phenomenon we want explained.

After making some preliminary clarifications (in Section 1), we proceed in Section 2 to discuss the distinction between de re and de dicto moral motivation as well as a common suspicion against the latter, concluding that those alone do not offer a sufficient explanation for the moral-religious asymmetry in the thought experiment we started with. Then, in Section 3, we discuss the relation between our puzzle and the

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why-be-moral challenge (mostly in Dreier's recent version). In Section 4 we discuss the related worry that it's not clear why moral properties—robustly realistically understood—are ones we should care about
p. 437 (mostly in Dasgupta's recent version). Finally, in Section 5, we ↳ tell our preferred story of why all-the-wrongs-regrets do not make sense, noting under what conditions this story will also explain the religious-moral asymmetry.

1. Clarifying the Challenge

We want to make three clarifications about our explanatory challenge: about the relevant kind of mistake or change of mind; about different examples; and about the point of view of the observer or theorist.

1.1 Different Kinds of Mistakes

There are mistakes, and then there are mistakes. The mistake that our thought experiment focuses on is of a global, perhaps meta- kind. We want to distinguish it from two other kinds of mistake.

The first is a local moral mistake. Suppose that I put a lot of time and thought into advising graduate students. And there are opportunity costs, as it were, in terms of time for research, for watching sports, and so on. A part of my reason for doing so (though see the next section for worries about this way of putting things) is that I think it's morally important to do so. But I may be mistaken about this. Suppose that someone convinces me that putting all this work into advising graduate students is really just a way of giving them an unfair advantage over those graduate students whose advisors are less conscientious. The job market is ridiculously competitive, after all, and I'm just helping my students jump the queue. When I change my mind about the moral importance of being a conscientious graduate student advisor—because I find out about relevant nonmoral facts I hadn't thought of, or because I appreciate differently the weight of some moral considerations—I may very well regret spending all that time on helping my students jump the queue. All that snooker I could have watched! There's nothing mysterious about such a regret-response to a local moral change of mind. This kind of mistake is analogous to an orthodox Jew finding out that, say, there's no halachic rule against eating some delicacy that he had thought was nonkosher. In both these cases, regret makes perfect sense. These are not the kind of cases we want to focus on (though they will be significant again in the next section).

The second kind of mistake—or a change of mind—that we want to distinguish from the one we'll be focusing on is the one analogous to an orthodox Jew coming to believe that actually, the One True Religion is not orthodox Judaism, but some other religion. In morality, the analogue of that would be (we think) that of a Kantian who converts to utilitarianism, or the other way around. This kind of change of mind is, of course, much more global than the one in the previous paragraph, but it remains within the moral or religious domain. In the religious case, if the orthodox Jew converts to a religion that is much more liberal on sex (or
p. 438 on food), "All the sex I could have had"-thoughts again ↳ seem to make perfect sense. In the moral case, though, we are less confident: Think of a Kantian who takes care not to treat people as a mere means, but then converts to utilitarianism, and comes to regret all the ways he could have instrumentalized people to maximize overall wellbeing. This kind of regret doesn't seem entirely unproblematic, but nor is it clear to us that it's objectionable—certainly not as clear as it is in the case we started with. Let us put such cases to one side for now (they will return).

The change of mind about morality that we are interested in is analogous specifically to that of the committed religious person who *turns atheist*, who has come to accept a metareligion error theory. With regard to morality, this is not the person who has come to believe that the things that matter morally are different from those he had thought mattered morally, but rather the person who, perhaps roughly, has

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come to believe that *nothing matters morally*. It is the disanalogy on this level that we want to insist on—the relevant regrets make perfect sense in the religious case, but not (or less) in many moral cases. It is this asymmetry that we want explained.

One final clarification: Our lapsed moralist is not a *global* nihilist, she or he does not now believe that *nothing matters*, only that *nothing morally matters*. This is important, because it's not clear how even to make sense of regret given this more global nihilism—in order to feel regret, it seems, one must *care*.[7] In this way too we keep the case of the lapsed moralist analogous to that of the lapsed orthodox Jew, whose newly accepted error theory is just about the religious, not about all things normative.

1.2 Examples Matter

You may think that there's something about our choice of examples that illegitimately skews the evidence, and artificially strengthens the disanalogy with the religious case. Regretting all those cases in which I refrained from hurting people—certainly under this description—seems sadistic. Who *would* regret that, independently of whatever they thought about morality? In the moral case we started with, in other words, there were victims. In the religious case, not so (who is hurt if an orthodox Jew stops keeping kosher, or is being more sexually liberal?). The presence of a victim, though, seems to matter significantly. So in introducing the contrast between the religious and the moral cases, we weren't sufficiently careful to keep all other things equal. What we need are religious cases with victims, and also moral cases without them.

There *is*, we agree, a problem with the examples, but it's not clear that it can be fixed. We can think of religious commandments whose violations hurt some people, but the paradigmatic cases—not to murder, not to humiliate others, perhaps even to love thy neighbor—will arguably overlap with moral duties, and so will not do for fleshing out intuitions that may distinguish between the two (this, of course, is why we
p. 439 focused on ↳ victimless sins;[8] it goes without saying that there are many purported sins that also constitute wrongs). And it is doubtful that there *are* entirely victimless wrongs.[9] In other words, the distinction between offenses with victims and those without them is in our context *very* close to the distinction between morality and (the relevant parts of) religion, and so assuming it away may be dangerously close to assuming the explanandum away rather than to help zeroing in on the explanans. We suggest, then, proceeding with the examples we started with, but with caution, remaining open to the possibility that the presence of a victim makes an important difference here (as elsewhere). Indeed, that the presence of victims may make an important difference may motivate an attempt to explain the disanalogy in terms of the distinction between de re and de dicto moral motivation, an attempt that we discuss in Section 2, below.

1.3 The Observer's Point of View

Another attempt at explaining away the moral-religious asymmetry emphasizes the intuitive difference that the observer's normative perspective probably makes here. Perhaps you agreed about the intuitive difference between the religious and the moral case because you are an atheist and a moralist. That is, you believe that the religious Jew converted from falsehood to truth, and the moralist converted from truth to falsehood. Then, when asked whether the relevant regrets make sense, you replaced your own beliefs for the protagonists': Perhaps you agreed that all-the-sins-regrets make sense, because sex is good, and severe religious restrictions on it are misplaced. And perhaps you agreed that all-the-wrongs-regrets don't make sense because one shouldn't act wrongly, one shouldn't hurt people. If so, what explains the initial intuitive appeal of the asymmetry (and explains away the asymmetry itself) is not something about the nature of religious and moral commitments, but rather something about the substantive, normative commitments of the likely reader of this text.[10]

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There is something to this thought, we are sure. But still, enough of an asymmetry survives. Even an orthodox Jew can appreciate, it seems to us, that there is a way in which all-the-sins-regrets—from the
p. 440 point of view of a lapsed orthodox Jew—make perfect ↳ sense.[11] It is this, internal, "from the perspective of" kind of sense-making that we want to focus on, and that we claim is not there in the case of the past-moralist.

2. De Re and De Dicto Moral Motivation

Michael Smith (1994; 1997)—and following him, everyone else—famously distinguishes between de re and de dicto moral motivation. Suppose that in the circumstances I find myself, the right thing to do would be to read carefully my graduate student's work, and give her detailed feedback. And suppose, furthermore, that I am indeed motivated to do so. If I am so motivated *because* it is the right thing to do, if I don't care much about her and her interests, or anyway this is not what motivates me in this case, but what motivates me is something like a respect for rightness or for the moral law, if I'd be motivated differently had different actions been right—then I am motivated to act morally *de dicto*, under this (moral) description. If, however, I am motivated by a deep concern for my student and her interests, or by the unfairness she would suffer if deprived of reasonably good supervision—certainly, if explicitly moral questions about what's right here don't even cross my mind—then my motivation to act morally is *de re*—I am motivated to act in a way that is in fact morally called for, but not under that description, not *because* it is the right thing to do. Smith argued that the virtuous are motivated by the moral de re—by suffering, humiliation, justice, fairness, wellbeing, the substantive things that make a moral difference, rather than by the *fact that* they make a moral difference, or by the moral de dicto.

Everything here is controversial, and we'll get to some complications shortly. For now, though, this initial gloss of the distinction and its significance suffices to show how it can do relevant explanatory work. For the virtuous[12] moralist, on this picture, is motivated to act in ways that are respectful of others and their interests, that are helpful, that are compassionate, that are considerate (and so on), not *because that's what morality requires*. It's not as if he or she arrives on the morally loaded scene with the single motivation to act rightly, then looking around for ways of acting that amount, in the circumstances, to acting rightly. This would be precisely the moral fetishism Smith warned about, and a person with such motivation may perhaps be a moralist, but is certainly not virtuous. The virtuous moralist will care about those things that
p. 441 matter morally de re, about the ↳ interests of those involved, about the suffering that can be alleviated (and also the suffering that cannot), about what is fair, and so on. And this explains why all-the-wrongs-regrets do not seem to make sense: Upon coming to accept Mackie, our lapsed moralist is no longer committed to the moral judgments they used to be committed to. In particular, perhaps, they no longer believe that it's morally important not to hurt others' interests in all sorts of ways. But this change in moral beliefs need not express itself in a motivational change—after all, explicitly moral beliefs did not play a significant role in our protagonist's motivational structure. They are motivated by morality de re, not de dicto. And in de re terms, nothing has changed. If our protagonist was motivated by someone else's need, then that need is still there, as is our protagonist's relevant motivation. True, our protagonist no longer believes that this need matters morally, but this change of mind is divorced from his or her de re moral motivation. Assuming, as seems very likely, that regret is much more closely associated with motivation than with cold, motivationally detached beliefs, we have an explanation for why it is that all-the-wrongs-regrets do not make sense, at least not for our virtuous lapsed moralist.

The analogous explanation does not seem to apply to the religious case, so we may have here an explanation of the moral-religious asymmetry as well. Now, we should be very cautious here, because the thought that anything of substance and relevance can be said about religion and the religious in general is ludicrous—these phenomena are extremely wide and diverse, of course. But it is safe to say[13] that at least in many cases,

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at least within the major Western religions, the pious are expected to be motivated by the religious de dicto.[14] Indeed, in many cases such a motive has a special positive religious status—the religious are expected to do as God commands precisely because God commands as He does. This does not necessarily mean that the religious are expected to *only* be motivated by the religious de dicto. There may be nothing wrong with motivational overdetermination. But—rather minimally, and crucially for our purposes here—on many occasions there need be nothing religiously problematic or objectionable about having a de dicto religious motivation. Thus, it makes perfect sense, within a Jewish orthodox context, to avoid eating shrimp precisely because shrimp is not kosher, or to avoid certain sexual practices precisely because they are contrary to religious laws. Indeed, it is sometimes emphasized that there is no religious violation involved
p. 442 in ↳ being drawn to forbidden sexual practices, only in *acting* on such impulses or desires.[15] If so, when one deserts one's religious commitments and the de dicto religious motivation is lost, regretting not having eaten shrimp and not having engaged in those sexual practices seems to make perfect sense.

Here is another way of putting what is essentially the same point. There need be nothing wrong with someone who is deeply religiously committed, and who experiences at least some religious commandments as a *constraint* on what he would otherwise have done. But, if the morally virtuous are motivated by morality only de re, then *there is* something wrong with someone who experiences morality as a constraint on what she would otherwise have done. It's not as if the morally virtuous are tempted to act in all these immoral ways, except that they are strong enough to resist such temptation, because of their respect for the moral law (understood de dicto). The virtuous—at least the perfectly virtuous—have no need for such respect for the law,[16] as they are motivated directly by the things that matter morally. So: If (some) religious commitments may very well serve a constraining role in the motivation of the pious, there's no wonder that when such constraints are (thought to be) lifted (because the person loses his or her faith, say), regret about the lost options makes sense. And if the moral commitments of the morally virtuous do *not* play a similarly constraining role, then there's no room for the analogous regrets in the moral case. The distinction between de re and de dicto moral motivation seems to do a good job of explaining the moral-religious asymmetry.

Now, as already noted, Smith's claims about the distinction between de re and de dicto moral motivation are controversial. Many think that at least sometimes, at least for the nonideally virtuous, de-dicto moral
p. 443 motivation also has an important role to play.[17] So ↳ it's important to see how minimal the claim needed here is, and how plausible it is, even if the stronger claims made by Smith cannot withstand criticism. First, with regard to the moral-religious asymmetry, all that's needed for an explanation in terms of the de-re-de-dicto distinction to succeed is that the significance of this distinction plays out in different ways in the moral and the religious contexts. And this seems true *even if moral motivation de dicto is often virtuous*. After all, even if this is so—if, for instance, moral motivation de dicto has an important role to play in cases of moral uncertainty, or if motivational overdetermination is often virtuous—still it's clear that moral motivation de re has some kind of priority, that being motivated *only* by moral motivation de dicto at least falls short of the ideal. But this is precisely not the case when it comes to the religious case, where—so we've argued—at least in many cases motivation de dicto *is* the ideal, and motivation de re is either neutral or even to be frowned upon. So even if Smith is too quick to dismiss de re moral motivation, the distinction between de re and de dicto motivation can explain, at least partly, the asymmetry between the regret of the lapsed theist and that of the lapsed moralist. And for similar reasons, the de-re-de-dicto distinction can explain, at least to an extent, the awkwardness of all-the-wrongs-regrets, even if de dicto moral motivation is sometimes perfectly acceptable. It can do that because regretting all the wrongs one could have performed indicates an absence of moral motivation de re, and even if moral motivation de dicto is sometimes virtuous, still moral motivation de re has privileged status. So its absence is, at the very least, often problematic. Perhaps, if smith is wrong and de dicto moral motivation is not always and necessarily fetishistic, the force of the explanation in terms of the de-re-de-dicto motivation loses some of its force, then. But it does not collapse entirely.

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Despite its advantages, though, we don't think that the explanation in terms of the distinction between de re and de dicto moral motivation gives the full picture of the moral-religious asymmetry we started with.[18] The problem is that it doesn't have the required scope. Recall local moral mistakes and changes of mind, and the regret that may follow them, such as my regretting having spent so much time giving my graduate students detailed feedback (because I thought—falsely, as I've later come to think—this was morally required) instead of watching snooker. Such regrets, we noted in the previous section, make perfect sense, and are in this way (and perhaps in others too) crucially different from the suspicious regret of the lapsed moralist. So an adequate explanation of the suspiciousness of the latter must not include in its scope also
p. 444 the former. But the explanation in terms of the de-re-de-dicto distinction seems to fail this test. The ↳ de re motivations, after all, are supposedly insensitive to changes in even local moral beliefs[19]. So an explanation of what's suspicious about all-the-wrongs-regrets that relies heavily on the distinction between de re and de dicto moral motivation classifies local moral regrets together with all-the-wrongs-regrets, and deems them equally suspicious. This is unacceptable.

More can be said, of course. Perhaps some further apparatus can be added in order to distinguish between the status of (suspicious) all-the-wrongs-regrets and (legitimate) local regrets. But at this point we think that enough has been said to at least cast doubt about the de-re-de-dicto explanation of our phenomenon. And as you will see, the explanation we end up endorsing—in Section 5—will not have a similar shortcoming (and will be related to the de-re-de-dicto explanation).

3. Why Be Moral?

One natural thought to have about why it is that all-the-wrongs-regrets don't seem to make sense is that this is so simply because morality (understood in a de-dicto-ish way) doesn't matter. And this natural thought shows how the traditional why-be-moral challenge (for instance, but not only) to moral realism is relevant here.

It is not entirely clear how to understand the why-be-moral challenge. It is often put normatively—roughly, as asking for a reason to be moral, or indeed for a reason to do what one has reason to do, or some such—but when it is thus put, robust realists are quick to point out that it is based on a confusion—or perhaps on several different confusions.[20] Recently, though, Jamie Dreier (2015a; 2015b) has presented what we believe is a better version of the challenge, one that is free from such confusions.[21] On Dreier's suggestion, the challenge is not normative—asking for a reason to do what morality or rationality requires—but rather *explanatory*. Using a notion of rationality that is not meant to capture reason-responsiveness in a general, objective sense, but something more closely related to internal coherence (2015a, 174–5), Dreier presents the challenge, which he calls the New Normative Question, thus: "Why is it irrational to fail to be motivated to do what one believes one ought to do?" (177).

We want to acknowledge, right off the bat, that this is a legitimate challenge to robust realists (and perhaps to others as well): It does seem that often, and perhaps always and necessarily, if one believes that one
p. 445 ought to do something, but is nevertheless ↳ not motivated at all—not even a little bit[22]—to do that thing, some internal tension is involved. Here's an even weaker claim, that captures, we think, the Dreier point, and is even harder to resist, partly because it can be put in a way that clearly avoids any judgment-internalist assumptions:[23] When someone believes he or she ought to do something, but is nonetheless not at all motivated to do it, this at the very least calls for explanation. The thing to expect is that they *would* be so motivated. If they aren't, this calls for explanation, at least in the following minimal sense: A theory that can offer an explanation of this fact is pro tanto better, for this reason, than theories that cannot, it gains plausibility points compared to those that cannot offer such an explanation.

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We don't share the suspicion that realists cannot supply the needed explanation,[24] and we'll have more to say about this below. But it's easy to see why realists should at least be worried, for on some alternative views such an explanation is more clearly and readily available. Any metaethical view, for instance, on which there's a very close connection between accepting a moral judgment and motivation (perhaps expressivist views, and some subjectivist or contextualist views or naturalist reductive views that tie the nature of moral facts to something about us and our desires, say) should be able to solve "the New Normative Question" with relative ease. If, however, moral judgments express beliefs, and true moral judgments depict facts all the way out there in Plato's heaven, it becomes harder to explain why one can't have such a belief, and without any internal tension lack the relevant motivation. We could, of course, accept such a connection as brute, but that would hardly be ideal—at the very least, going brute will have its cost in plausibility points.

What we want to focus on here, though, is the relation between Dreier's New Normative Question and the explanatory challenge we started with—namely, the need to explain why it is that all-the-wrongs-regrets do not make sense for the lapsed moralist, at least not nearly as much as all-the-sins-regrets do for the lapsed orthodox Jew. For there is a certain tension here that you may find surprising.

The intuitive datum—that there's something off about all-the-wrongs-regrets—restricts the scope of Dreier's explanandum, or at least a natural extension thereof. Dreier's explanandum, to repeat, is that it's irrational to fail to be motivated to do what one believes one ought to do, and if you accept that it *is* irrational, you may expect that more generally one's motivations will track changes in one's moral beliefs. But our intuitive datum, once coupled with a plausible assumption about a tight connection between regret and motivation, draws attention to a way in which it's *not* rational to change what one cares about when one changes one's moral beliefs (because of one's metaethical ones). When the moralist comes to accept the error theory, and so presumably to desert all of her first-order moral judgments,[25] she does *not* seem to be
p. 446 irrational in any way ↳ when she still cares about the moral de re, when she still cares about not harming others' interests or dignity, say.

The contrast with the religious case is again telling: We can ask analogues of why-be-moral questions: Why adhere to the Commandments, for instance? Here too we may have a normative challenge in mind, but we may also have an explanatory one, à la Dreier: At least for an Orthodox Jew, it seems that there's something irrational in coming to believe that one is religiously required to act in a certain way, and not be at all motivated to act in that way. In the religious case, though, it seems easy to come up with explanations (without going noncognitivist about religious commitment): Something about the divine source of religious commandments, say, or about reward and punishment, can easily explain why it would be irrational (for the believer) not to be motivated in a way that's sensitive to his beliefs about his religious obligations. And arguably, this is a part of the reason why all-the-sins-regrets make sense. The lapsed Orthodox Jew no longer believes in the divine source of the relevant commandments, he no longer believes in the reward and punishment mechanism he used to believe in, and this is why he no longer accepts a reason to abide by the relevant religious obligations. Meanwhile, the reasons to eat shrimp and to engage in all those sexual practices are still very much in place (as they always have been). Hence the regret.

But the stories that make such a regret sensible in the religious case do not extend to the moral case. And the fact that they don't seems to be a part of what distinguishes between all-the-sins-regrets and all-the-wrongs-regrets. Whatever explanation there is of the irrationality of not being motivated to do something when one believes one ought to—whatever answer there is to Dreier's New Normative Question—it doesn't seem to extend to the case of the lapsed moralist. Hence the restriction on Dreier's explanandum.

We don't think this is a problem for Dreier. Indeed, on the explanation of the religious-moral asymmetry that we present below (in Section 5), the lapsed moralist does not after all desert her or his first-order moral convictions, so even the appearance of the need to restrict Dreier's explanandum will disappear. And the

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notion of rationality he is working with may—we're really not sure—allow him to say that there *is* something irrational about our lapsed moralist, if he remains motivated by his old moral beliefs.[26] What the discussion in this section shows, though, is that a solution to our puzzle—why all-the-wrongs-regrets are suspicious in a way in which all-the-sins-regrets are not—is unlikely to fall out of a general response to the why-be-moral challenge, at least not in Dreier's version.

p. 447 Dreier's New Normative Question remains a challenge, then. It will be easier to address it together with Dasgupta's related recent challenge, to which we now turn.

4. Why Care about These Non-Natural Properties?

The fact that the lapsed orthodox Jew's all-the-sins-regrets make perfect sense can be seen as evidence that—at least in the eyes of the religiously committed—religious obligations matter. The religiously committed only avoided some of these sexual practices precisely because he took them to be religiously forbidden, and he used to care deeply about that. If so, perhaps the fact that it doesn't make sense for the lapsed moralist to have all-the-wrongs-regrets may serve as some evidence for the claim that moral realists lack the resources to vindicate caring about morality.

Here's an oft-quoted passage from Nowell-Smith:

> If there are sui generis properties of rightness and wrongness, then learning about them might well be as exciting as learning about spiral nebulae or watersprouts. But what if I am not interested? Why should I *do* anything about these newly-revealed objects? Some things, I have now learnt, are right and others wrong; but why should I do what is right and eschew what is wrong?
>
> (Nowell-Smith 1954, 41; quoted in Dasgupta 2017, 298)

Despite the rhetorical strength of this way of putting things, it is not very helpful. For one thing, the challenge is here put in normative terms (what I *should* do about these interesting things). But if the question is normative, it invites a normative answer, and then the robust realist seems perfectly entitled to insist that the challenge doesn't make much more sense than asking why we should do what we should do; hardly the devastating challenge it is intended to be.

Recently, however, Shamik Dasgupta (2017) has given a new shape to this fairly old thought. Like Dreier, Dasgupta is happy to leave this intra-normative challenge (the "internal" one) behind, and focus on an explanatory challenge instead. Here is how he puts the challenge at one point: "More generally, the external objection asks what makes the nonnaturalist's sui generis property fit to play whatever role she believes it to play in normative theory." (303) Dasgupta uses an analogy to Divine Command Theory (DCT) in order to press his objection. Even if DCT is true, it owes us an answer to the question "What is it that makes the orders of this being fit to play the role of generating obligations?". And the DCT-ist is happy to step up to the explanatory plate—after all, there *is* something very special about the apparatus the DCT-ist uses here—God is special in what seems like relevant ways, and His commands are special (partly because they are
p. 448 commands, and partly because they are His). So it's not mysterious, on DCT, ↳ why it is that those supernatural properties (and not others, for instance) are the ones fit to play the relevant role in normative theory. By comparison, the robust realist[27]—argues Dasgupta—has much less to offer, perhaps nothing. Why is it, Dasgupta asks the realist, that those non-natural properties—rather than other non-natural properties, or no properties at all—are fit to play the normative role they play in your theory? And the robust realist seems to have nothing to say.

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Dasgupta emphasizes that the somewhat dismissive responses realists have been giving[28]—perhaps because of problems with common ways of putting the challenge (like Nowell-Smith's above, or Korsgaard's (1997, 240))—will not work. Robust realists can't respond "Why, these *are* the normative properties, so of course they are fit to play the role those play in normative theory," any more than the DCT-ist can respond with "Why, these *are* the supernatural facts that constitute rightness, so of course they are fit to play the rightness-role." The difference, though, is that the DCT-ist acknowledges the explanatory need, and responds to it, whereas the realist shuts his eyes and pretends that there's no explanatory problem to begin with. So says Dasgupta.

We shamelessly respond, on behalf of the robust realist, in the way that Dasgupta anticipates:[29] We say that there's nothing wrong, or almost nothing wrong, with accepting that nothing explains why it is that some non-natural properties are fit to play the relevant roles in normative theory. Let's use Dasgupta's (305) example: So focus on the property *goodness*, and assume that its role is to be action-guiding. Now suppose that the robust realist argues that her favorite non-natural property P *just is* goodness. Dasgupta insists that there must be an explanation why it is that P is fit to serve the action-guiding role.[30] We say: No, there mustn't. That P is fit to play the action-guiding role is a brute fact about P. Sometimes, there may be such explanation—if P, say, is not a basic normative property (in a fairly intuitive sense of "basic"), an explanation in more fundamental normative terms may be available. But if P is a basic normative property, then this is where such explanations come to an end. Insisting that there must be more really amounts to a refusal to take seriously robust realism as a view about the metaphysics of morals.

Interestingly, it is here that the analogy with DCT breaks down. If someone offers an account of rightness or
p. 449 obligations in terms of some expressions by some creature, ↳ without offering any explanation why it's *this* creature, and *those* expressions of hers, that constitute obligations, this is sufficient ground for rejecting the theory. But this is because on such a theory, the rightness-facts and properties are not metaphysically fundamental, they are metaphysically grounded in some creature's will. So it's crucial to say which creature, and to explain why (and as we saw, the DCT-ist has a story to tell). The robust realist, by contrast, thinks of the most fundamental moral facts and properties as fundamental, entirely ungrounded.[31] This is why the robust realist is entitled to claim bruteness where the DCT-ist is not.

So we are going to insist that rejecting the call to explain how it is that the relevant non-natural properties play the relevant normative role is not a deal-breaker, it is not a severe flaw that renders robust realism unacceptable. Is it a flaw at all, though? Does robust realism lose any plausibility points because of its refusal to offer an explanation here? We're not entirely sure. On the one hand, we are inclined to say that it does lose *some* plausibility points, simply because it's almost always the case that as between two (otherwise equally good) competing theories, a theory that classifies a phenomenon as brute is less good as a theory than the one that offers an informative explanation of that phenomenon.[32] On the other hand, though, we don't feel the force of this consideration: Us robust realists have told you from the get-go, as it were, that we take the basic moral (or normative) facts to be entirely fundamental, that there's nothing in virtue of which these facts obtain.[33] You may have been skeptical of this all along. Fair enough.[34] But we don't see that any additional reason for skepticism is given by Dasgupta's challenge.

This concludes, then, our response to Dasgupta's version of the why-care-about-these-non-natural-properties challenge. This response does not aspire to positively showing a robust-realist-friendly reason to care about morality—it merely aims to reject the thought that something about robust realism somehow makes caring about morality less sensible, but this suffices to disarm this objection to robust realism. Much more can be said here—perhaps especially because Dasgupta's metaethical challenge is *very* closely related to a much more general metaphysical challenge, which Dasgupta discusses in another paper (2018). But
p. 450 here we have to return to our main order of ↳ business—tying what has been said back to Dreier's challenge, and then to the religious-moral asymmetry we're trying to explain throughout this chapter.

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(Nevertheless, we comment on the more general metaphysical context of Dasgupta's challenge in a long footnote.[35])

Even though Dreier puts things differently, and even though Dasgupta reads Dreier as engaging the "internal" objection to realism (and himself to be addressing a different, "external" one), there are close connections between the two discussions. Dasgupta asks for an explanation of what it is about the relevant non-natural properties that makes them fit to play the relevant normative role. Dreier asks for an explanation of the irrationality of having a normative belief without having the relevant motivation. These are different explananda, but if we plug in some plausible auxiliary premises—say, about the normative role of those non-natural properties having something to do with motivation (or action-guiding, say), and perhaps about the relation between fitness and rationality—they become very similar.[36] And our response to Dreier will be very close to our response to Dasgupta.

What explains the internal tension (designated by Dreier's use of "irrationality") that is present when someone believes that something is good but is not motivated accordingly is *the nature of goodness*. It lies in the nature of goodness that good things are to be desired.[37] And nothing explains *that*. That it makes sense
p. 451 to desire the good (or ↳ something close to this) is a fundamental, ungrounded normative truth. This doesn't guarantee, of course, that everyone desires the good. And we're not sure it guarantees the irrationality of failing to desire what one takes to be good. Then again, we're not sure that failing to desire what one believes to be good is always and necessarily irrational (even in Dreier's sense). Recall, though, the weaker, more plausible explanandum we mention above, in Section 3: If someone takes something to be good, but is not motivated accordingly, this is surprising, it calls for explanation. If this is what needs explaining, the point above suffices: Goodness, by its nature, is to be desired. So if you believe that something is good but you don't want to pursue or promote or engage with it, this is surprising. Perhaps this reply to Dreier's New Normative Question doesn't give you all you wanted. If so, we're inclined to repeat the discussion above, about whether Dasgupta's challenge costs the robust realist plausibility points, and if so, how many. We are in the same situation vis-à-vis Dreier as we were vis-à-vis Dasgupta.

But now it's time to get back to the moral-religious asymmetry. The initial suspicion was that perhaps what explains it is that while it's clear why, on the religious orthodox view, one should care about religious obligations, it is not clear why, on the moral realist view, one should care about moral obligations. Of course, had this been true, this would have explained the asymmetry, but at a very high price for the realist —it's very little comfort for the realist, after all, if he can explain this asymmetry by accepting the claim that there's no reason to care about morality, or that Nowell-Smith is right to suggest that indifference toward the realist's favorite non-natural properties is unproblematic. What we've been arguing, though, is that the realist has a reply to Dasgupta, and Dreier, and related worries. While this (if true) is good news, it means that we still need an explanation for the moral-religious asymmetry.

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5. Junk Knowledge and Regret

The thought-experiment we started with is about regret *after* changing one's mind (about God, or about morality). But now think of things *before* the conversion to atheism and to error theory. What conditionals should the orthodox Jew, who also accepts a straightforwardly realist interpretation to theist discourse, believe with the antecedent "If there is no God, …"?[38] And what conditionals should the moralist—who also accepts a straightforwardly realist interpretation of moral discourse[39]—believe that start with "If there are
p. 452 no moral facts, …"? It seems plausible, we think, ↳ that this orthodox Jew should believe conditionals like "If there is no God (or if orthodox Judaism is false, or some such), then there's no reason not to eat shrimp or engage in much more liberal sexual practices." And the moral realist should believe conditionals like "If there are no (non-natural) moral facts, then there's no (moral) reason not to hurt people's feelings."[40] So far, then, symmetry is retained. But, we want to suggest in this final section, this is where the symmetry ends, because our two protagonists should treat these conditionals very differently. In particular, the orthodox Jew should be willing to use such conditionals in modus-ponens inferences, should he or she come to believe their respective antecedents. (But we qualify this statement toward the end of this section). The moral realist, however, should not—he or she should think of this conditional as an instance of "junk knowledge." That is, knowledge that cannot play the more standard role such conditionals play in reasoning.

To see this, it will be helpful to consider another recent objection to robust realism—the suggestion that there is something *morally* objectionable about moral realism.[41] This objection—recently put forward, with different details and nuances, by Melis Erdur, Matt Bedke, and Max Hayward[42]—claims that moral realism commits one to objectionable moral views, or (at least) that moral realists, if they are rational, will have morally objectionable dispositions.

The different versions of the objection vary in details, but they all develop a similar suspicion, that starts with conditionals robust realists are committed to. Robust realists[43] believe, for instance, that moral facts are non-natural facts that do not constitutively depend on us and our perspectives in any way. But this belief commits them to the conditional

> (C1) If there are no non-natural facts, then nothing is wrong.

Also, realists seem to be committed to more specific conditionals. For instance, you may initially think that pain is intrinsically bad, whether it occurs in humans or in dogs. But if you're a robust realist, you're also committed to the conditional:

p. 453

> (C2) If human pain and dog pain have no non-natural property in common, then (seeing that human pain is intrinsically bad, and that intrinsic badness according to robust realism is a non-natural property), dog pain is not intrinsically bad.

This already seems bad enough. But things get even worse. How should realists respond to metaphysical evidence about the existence and distribution of non-natural properties, say, a fully reliable oracle that testifies that the universe is natural (so that the antecedent of (C1) is true), or that human pain and dog pain share no non-natural properties (so that the antecedent of (C2) is true)? The most natural response seems to be to adopt the consequents of these conditionals. If there are no non-natural properties, then the realist—who is committed to something like the thought that non-natural mattering is the only way things *could* matter—should conclude that nothing matters.[44] And if dog pain and human pain share no non-natural properties (and if the realist believes, or even knows, as much), then the antecedent of (C2) is true, and given her commitment to (C2), the realist should now endorse its consequent. This, however, seems morally repugnant—surely, dog pain *is* intrinsically bad, and while it's perhaps not inconceivable that we should

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come across evidence that will convince us otherwise, surely the oracle's metaphysical proclamations are not evidence of this kind. The only alternative for the realist seems to be to resist a modus-ponens inference whose premises she accepts—a clearly irrational move. So realists are either irrational or immoral.[45]

To see how we can respond, suppose that I believe—based on both empirical evidence and philosophical analysis—that having a brain is a necessary condition for having thoughts. So I believe, for any creature or object, that if it doesn't have a brain, it doesn't have thoughts. And because I know my first-year logic, I accept the following conditional, which is entailed by this view:

> (C3) If I don't have a brain, I don't have thoughts.

Furthermore, I believe (C3) rather firmly and confidently, because it obviously follows from the generalization which I believe firmly and confidently—namely, that having a brain is necessary for having thoughts.

p. 454 Suppose I then receive evidence—from an oracle, perhaps, or from a reliable scan-technician—that in fact my skull is empty, and I do not have a brain. Am I supposed to draw the modus-ponens inference, and conclude that I don't have any thoughts? Of course not. Rather, I should take back my commitment to the conditional (C3). Clearly, I have thoughts. If I don't have a brain, this is conclusive reason to reject the theory according to which having a brain is necessary for having thoughts.[46]

A natural way of thinking about my belief in—perhaps knowledge of—(C3) is as "junk knowledge." That is, a known proposition that can nevertheless not play the knowledge-extending role more commonly played by similarly known propositions.[47] I may very well know (C3), but I can't use it in the canonical inferential way, namely, as a premise in a modus-ponens inference. There need be nothing mysterious about this, of course: In this specific case, the reason for this is probably that my way of knowing that the consequent is false neither depends on nor is undercut by evidence either for the antecedent or for the conditional as a whole. This fact, perhaps together with the fact that I am (justifiably) so much more confident in the denial of the consequent than in the conditional, is why conclusive evidence for the antecedent is guaranteed to be evidence against the conditional rather than evidence for the consequent. And this is why while I may very well know (C3), I cannot use it in the standard modus-ponens kind of way.

As we're sure you've already realized, we want to say something very similar about (C1) and (C2).[48] If I am a robust realist, then seeing that these conditionals (perhaps more precisely put, or slightly massaged) follow from robust realism, I believe them as well. But this doesn't commit me in any way to responding to the oracle's metaphysical proclamations by drawing the relevant modus-ponens inferences. Rather, given the evidence about the truth of the antecedents, the thing to do is to reevaluate one's commitment to the conditionals (and to robust realism), and reject them on the combined strength of the plausibility of the negation of their consequents, and the evidence for their antecedents.

William Fitzpatrick (2018, 558), in responding to an earlier version of Bedke's argument (2014), makes what is essentially this point, though he does not refer to the more general phenomenon of junk knowledge.[49] And both Bedke and Hayward respond. But once we put things in the broader epistemological context—the phenomenon of junk knowledge—their responses can be seen to fail. Consider Hayward first.

Hayward compares conditionals like (C1) and (C2) with what he calls (7) "Ivan's Conditional": "If God is
p. 455 dead, then everything is permitted." But this comparison is ↳ misleading. When Dostoyevsky's Ivan puts forward this conditional, presumably he has *precisely* the modus-ponens inference in mind. Indeed, licensing that inference is presumably the very *point*, for Ivan, of accepting and asserting the conditional. So if that conditional turns out to be an instance of junk knowledge, the very point of accepting it is defeated. But when robust realists accept conditionals like (C1) and (C2), we don't do so in order to use them in modus-ponens inferences. Rather, we accept them because they follow from our theory, a theory that

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presumably has other theoretical advantages. So if our (purported) knowledge of (C1) and (C2) ends up being junk knowledge, this is not a problem at all—our reasons for endorsing them are not in any way undercut by them being junk knowledge. In this respect too, the situation is precisely analogous to that with (C3). We accept (C3)—that if I don't have a brain I don't have thoughts—not out of anticipation of using it in a modus-ponens inference, but because it follows from a more general theory that we have sufficient reason to believe. If it ends up being junk knowledge, that's no problem at all.

Hayward also seems to think that if the realist is willing to give up on (C1) and (C2) in the face of conclusive evidence for their antecedents, this creates a coherence problem for the realist: "If moral claims could be ''true'' and authoritative even in a world without non-natural facts, why posit facts of this kind?" (16). But this trades on the ambiguity of "could". The realist who thinks that realism is metaphysically necessary agrees, of course, that moral claims metaphysically-could be true only in a world with non-natural facts. But that is consistent with the *epistemic* possibility to the contrary: So long as the realist concedes, as any reasonable realist should, that he or she is fallible in her commitment to realism, they must concede that it's epistemically possible that their metaethics is false, and then, it's epistemically possible that the relevant moral judgments are true in a naturalist world.[50] And as can be seen from the example of (C3), again there's nothing special or ad hoc about this claim of the realist. Someone can believe not just that (C3) is true, but also that it's metaphysically necessary, without committing herself to modus-ponensing her way to (C3)'s consequent upon coming to believe its antecedent.

p. 456 Bedke too recognizes the possibility of rejecting the conditionals rather than accepting their consequents. And a central thought for Bedke here is that if this is the line the realist takes, this shows that his commitment to realism is "maximally fragile," and indeed perhaps unintelligible (11, 15). But this is plainly false, as can be seen from the (C3) example. The fact that we're not willing to take evidence for (C3)'s antecedent as reason to believe its consequent doesn't show in any way that we don't really believe (C3), or that we believe it only in some minimal sense, or that it's "maximally fragile." It may be quite robust—depending on how strongly (C3) is embedded in a more general theory about minds and brains, and on how strong the evidence is for that theory. Note also that the fact that (C1) and (C2) are instances of junk knowledge in no way shows that *robust realism* is. Robust realism may have other important implications, may be knowledge-extending in other ways and in other contexts, indeed may entail other conditionals that can perfectly well play their standard role in modus-ponens inferences. So pursuing the junk knowledge line in no way compromises the strength of the realist's commitment to robust realism, nor does it reduce its significance.[51]

More should be said in response to Bedke. In particular, we should distinguish between highly idealized, hypothetical, oracle-style scenarios—where the junk-knowledge line suffices as a response—and less heavily idealized cases, where what we have is not a perfectly reliable oracle, but the messy kind of evidence we usually have, both for normative claims and for metaethical ones. In the latter case, the junk knowledge line may need some help from the observation that in some such messy scenarios, it makes perfect sense to reduce one's confidence in some normative claims based on evidence for or against relevant metaphysical claims (like the distribution of non-natural properties). But for our purposes here, giving more details will not be necessary.[52] Instead, let's get back to the attempt to explain the religious-moral asymmetry, and why it is that all-the-wrongs-regrets do not make sense.

If the junk-knowledge line on conditionals like (C1) works, this means that a well-informed robust realist knows that should he or she come to believe that robust realism is false (or something to that extent), they will not (and should not) infer the conditional's consequent. Rather, they will (as they should) re-evaluate their commitment to the conditional, and come to reject it. If so, the rational thing for a lapsed moral realist to do is, of course, to maintain his commitment to any number of moral judgments, and come to reject the thought that moral realism (or the existence of non-natural properties) is a necessary condition for their truth. If so, *of course* he shouldn't now regret all the wrongs he could have performed—he still thinks they

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p. 457 are wrong, and so in the relevant ↳ respects, really nothing has changed. Put differently, upon coming to believe the antecedent of (C1), the lapsed robust realist wouldn't (and shouldn't) infer the conditional's consequent, which results in endorsing an extreme error theory. Rather, he would (and should) reject the conditional, thereby rejecting robust realism but accepting some other (perhaps not fully explicit or determinate) metaethical view that still allows belief in the negation of the consequent.

The case of the lapsed moralist who is also a rather extreme error-theorist is a bit harder, because believing the error theory may be inconsistent with still adhering to the relevant first-order judgments.[53] So let us say the following: Either one can continue to adhere to moral judgments consistently with endorsing an error theory, or one cannot. If one can, then the discussion above applies. If not, then adherents of the error theory either continue to adhere—inconsistently—to some moral judgments, or else they desert them. If they remain faithful to their moral judgments, then the fact that they now do so in a way that is inconsistent with something else they believe (the error theory) doesn't matter for the purposes of explaining why they won't regret all the wrongs they could have performed—they still believe they are wrong, after all. So the only remaining problematic case is that of the error-theory-convert who has abandoned, because of their new commitment to the error theory, their moral beliefs. We doubt that there are many people who fit this description.[54] And this is important. For what we are after is not necessarily an explanation of why it is that all-the-wrongs-regrets are always and necessarily irrational. Rather, what we are after is an explanation for why there is something off about such regrets, and in particular, why they make much less sense than their religious analogues. And we now have such an explanation at hand: For most people, in most cases, conditionals with fancy meta-ethical or metaphysical antecedents and moral consequents are junk knowledge; so upon coming to change their minds about the former, they don't really change their minds about the latter (nor should they);[55] so as far as the intelligibility of regret is concerned, nothing has changed.

p. 458 Actually, it is an interesting—and unobvious—question what to say here of the religious case. The shrimp case, to repeat, is easy: The reasonable thing for an orthodox Jew to think about this is that *if Jewish orthodoxy is false* (perhaps because there is no God), *then there's no obligation to refrain from eating shrimp*. Furthermore, we're sure (and one of us can testify) that for many orthodox Jews this is not a junk-knowledge conditional, nor should it be.[56] So if they come to believe its antecedent, they should be happy to infer its consequent, and then regrets over the lost opportunities for eating shrimp make sense. But how about other cases? Think of an orthodox Jew who is also a Divine Command Theorist of sorts, so she believes that the "source" of all moral obligations is God's commands. She also believes that we (morally) ought not to humiliate people. So she seems committed to the following conditional: "*If God doesn't exist, it's not the case that we ought not to humiliate people*." What will she do if she comes to believe the antecedent? What *should* she do? One possible answer treats this case precisely as it does the shrimp case. But this seems to miss something important: She may very well treat the conditional as junk knowledge, and upon coming to believe its antecedent remain faithful to the denial of its consequent, and come to reject the conditional. As a psychological matter, different religious people (and different Divine Command Theorists) probably differ in their responses to such scenarios. As a normative matter, we think that the junk-knowledge line is the more promising one here (but not, of course, in the shrimp case), but this may be because, well, humiliating people is morally wrong, and eating shrimp (arguably) is not. If this is so, what we get is that it makes sense, for the lapsed orthodox Jew, to regret all the shrimp he could have eaten, and perhaps also all the sex he could have had, but not all the ways he could have acted that would have humiliated others (and similarly for other religious obligations that are also, independently, moral ones). This seems like a plausible result.

Notice that the conditionals from the previous paragraph are particular instances of Hayward's "Ivan's Conditional" from a few pages back. And the discussion here shows, first, that not all instances of Ivan's Conditional are relevantly alike; and second, that such conditionals may play a different inferential role for different people. For some, a specific conditional of this kind may amount to junk knowledge (if, say, they

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have and acknowledge an independent reason to reject its consequent), and for others this may not be so. If so, it becomes an interesting question to pose to believers—and to theological views, and to Divine Command Theorists—how they view different instances of Ivan's Conditional.

Recall our objection to the explanation in terms of the de-re-de-dicto distinction in Section 2. There, we argued that such a story implausibly classifies regrets over missed opportunities after a local change in moral beliefs ("all the snooker I could have watched!") together with all-the-wrongs-regrets. So it's
p. 459 important to see that the ↳ problem does not arise for our explanation in this section. After all, even the conscientious thesis advisor may believe the following conditional:

> (C4) If giving my graduate students detailed feedback is not morally required, then there's nothing wrong with watching more snooker instead.

And there's no reason to think that (C4), for the conscientious thesis advisor, amounts to junk knowledge. Upon coming to believe its antecedent, he or she can unproblematically infer to its consequent. This is why the regret over those missed snooker hours makes sense.

Let us finish with the following three related observations. First, note that our explanation of the asymmetry in terms of junk knowledge can serve not merely as a response to the challenge for robust realists, but also to gain insight on the relations between first- and second-order moral and religious commitments more generally. In the moral case one's first-order commitments are typically much more resilient than the metaethical ones. Hence, upon realizing that one's metaethical commitments—robust realist or otherwise—cannot stand, one would (and should) retain one's first-order moral commitments, and settle for a less committed metaethics. In the religious case, by contrast, it seems that one's first-order religious commitments are typically much more sensitive to the second-order ones. So upon realizing that God doesn't exist, for example, the religious person would not feel the pressure to retain many of her or his first-order religious commitments, and thus to embrace a less committed view of religious discourse (as not committed, say, to the existence of God after all). Rather, she or he would abandon their first-order religious commitments altogether.

Second, in the religious case, even if one cares about the religious obligations de dicto, this doesn't mean that more de re thoughts (and more de re motivation) are irrelevant. At the very least, they may serve an *epistemic* role. The fact that humiliation is wrong may serve as evidence that God indeed frowns upon such humiliation.[57] And something similar can be said, it seems to us, about moral motivation de re and de dicto, thus showing yet another way in which the two are more closely related than some seem to assume. De re moral thoughts and motivation may play an epistemic role in helping us come up with the right moral theory or moral principles, about which we should care also de dicto.

Third, this last point extends to more purely moral cases as well in a way that takes us back to one of the two kinds of mistake (or change of mind) that we put to one side in Section 1 above. Recall that we distinguished the lapsed moralist (who converted, as it were, to the error theory) from the person who undergoes an intramoral conversion, say from Kantianism to Utilitarianism. As we noted there, our intuitions about the
p. 460 appropriateness of regret are less clear in that case—should the lapsed Kantian now regret all the ↳ good he could have promoted, if only he had been willing to treat people as mere means, or to ignore the separateness of persons? We still don't have an answer to this question, but we think that our discussion allows us to better understand it. Suppose, for simplicity, that some version of Kantianism and some version of Utilitarianism are the only two moral theories. Our protagonist, while still a Kantian, presumably accepted the following conditional: "If Kantianism is false, there's no specific moral objection to treating people as mere means." Now, she has come to accept this conditional's antecedent. Should she infer its consequent? Or should she now come to reject the conditional, on the combined strength of her evidence for its antecedent and against its conclusion? The question may depend on why it is that she initially found the

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consequent so implausible. If this was just because its negation followed from her then-believed moral theory, we get one answer. If she found the rejection of the consequent plausible on independent grounds, we get another. Thinking about such conditionals may thus help you better understand the role of moral theory in your own moral commitments.

6. Conclusion

This has been long, and the discussion was not entirely linear, so it may be helpful to draw all the threads together.

Our main order of business has been to explain why there's something suspicious about all-the-wrongs-regrets, and in particular, why they are more suspicious then all-the-sins-regrets. After rejecting three possible explanations—one that fully relies on the de-re-de-dicto distinction, one that connects the challenge to the traditional why-be-moral challenge, and one that connects it to the why-care-about-these-non-natural-entities challenge—we presented an explanation that utilizes the idea that the robust realist's commitment to relevant conditionals amounts to seeing them as junk-knowledge.

You may think that this last point (from Section 5) weakens the extent to which Sections 3 and 4 succeed in responding to Dreier's and Dasgupta's challenges. At the end of the day, on the emerging picture, should we or shouldn't we care about morality, robustly realistically understood? We answer in the positive, of course. We should care about morality, often de re, but perhaps also sometimes de dicto. Nothing about robust realism makes these intuitively plausible claims any less available. It's just that—as is evidenced by the junk knowledge line—this commitment often takes priority over our meta*ethical* commitments.[58] This result, it seems to us, is as it should be.

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Notes

1 We mean this term to be the analogue of "theist": The "moralist," as we'll be using this term, is someone who takes morality seriously, who—even if not quite a robust metaethical realist—still rejects nihilism and error theory. So we do not intend any of the bad, perhaps moralistic overtones this term has come to have in some circles.

2 We are not invested, of course, in Mackie exegesis. Some parts of his text lend themselves more easily than others to this (orthodox) reading. For (unorthodox) discussion, see Ridge (2020).

3 Having turned atheist, our protagonist no longer believes anything *is* a sin. So the use of "sin" in the sentence in the text should be understood in an inverted-commas way, referring to (roughly) what the religious people around here think of as sins.

4 Having turned error theorist or a nihilist, our protagonist no longer believes anything *is* a wrong. So the use of "wrong" in the sentence in the text should be understood in an inverted-commas way, referring to (roughly) what the moralists around here think of as wrongs.

5 In what follows we think of the explanatory challenge as primarily a challenge for robust realism. But we don't think of the protagonist in our opening example as a robust realist. He or she are—at least as a first pass—a naïve moralist, without highly refined metaethical beliefs (though, of course, perhaps with implicit metaethical commitments that us theorists may want to flesh out and render explicit). The point in the text here is that with regard to such moralists, their moral judgments and motivations are to an extent immune to second-order revisions. This is the phenomenon to be explained (alongside the asymmetry with the religious case). Coming up with such an explanation is a task for theorists, and we focus here on discharging this theoretical task from a robust realist perspective.
We remain neutral here on whether other ways of coping with this challenge are available to naturalist realists.
We thank David Copp and Paul Bloomfield for pressing us on this and related issues.

6 At least one of us *is* a robust realist (see Enoch (2011)), and has been accused in the past (at least in conversations with Hartry Field) of adhering to the robust realism religion.
We're not sure to what extent what we say in this chapter—both the explanatory challenge, and the attempts at

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addressing it—applies to other, naturalist forms of moral realism. We suspect that the challenge arises, but that different explanations are available, at different costs, to robust realists and to (different kinds of) naturalist realists. Be that as it may, in this chapter we discuss things only from a robust realist perspective.

7 For some discussion of the likely causal effects of believing in such global nihilism, and of the relevant philosophical upshots, see Kahane (2017).

8 There are going to be classificatory controversies. For instance, the nature of sexual sins in orthodox Judaism would be classified as sins against another (and so not victimless) by some, but as sins against God (and so victimless) by others, Maimonides chief among them. We thank Jed Lewinsohn for this point.

9 By "entirely victimless wrongs" we mean to refer to moral wrongs, if there are any, where no victim is involved *in any way* —no one is harmed, no one is likely to be harmed, no one is intended to be harmed, and so on.

10 Related to this point is also the literature on imaginative resistance (e.g., Szabó Gendler 2000)—for it may be hard for us to imagine things other than the ones we value being of value. We thank Preston Werner for this point.

11 We're not sure what we want to say about the analogous case—namely, whether even an error-theorist should be able to recognize the sense in which all-the-wrongs-regrets do *not* make sense. But seeing that this chapter addresses the challenge from the point of view of the moral realist, we don't have to decide this interesting issue. We get back to the error theorist's point of view on this in the final section.

12 This is rather crude on what virtue consists in (as Paul Bloomfield noted). We acknowledge that there's room here for doing serious virtue theory, and seeing where it gets us regarding Smith's distinction. For our purposes, though, we don't need more details and accuracy here.

13 For a subtle discussion in the Jewish context that vindicates the point in the text (though possibly just with regard to a subset of Jewish commandments), see Lewinsohn (2016) and Weinshtock Saadon (2022). We thank Aaron Segal for relevant discussion.

14 Smith (1994, 81) uses—when introducing the distinction between de re and de dicto moral motivation—a disanalogy with the *legal* case. The legal case may more closely resemble the religious than the moral, but even with regard to the legal case things are not all that simple. At least with regard to the criminal law in reasonably just states, it does seem that the morally virtuous will not need the criminal law in order to avoid doing the bad things it prohibits doing. As for the *legally* virtuous—well, it's not clear who those are. It's true that the law sees no flaw in someone who avoids crimes because they are crimes (that is, who is motivated by the legal de dicto). But we doubt that much can be learned from this, because much more generally the criminal law, by and large, cares about avoiding crimes, not about why it is that one avoids committing a crime.

15 This is a common thing one hears in some orthodox circles—but, we think, not in others—about homosexual urges and acting on them.

For a Maimonides-inspired discussion of whether there's a flaw in desiring the religiously forbidden, again see Lewinsohn (2016, 244–5), and the references there. Maimonides contrasts the wholehearted, who is not drawn to the bad, with the continent, who is, but who overcomes temptation—and contrasts "the philosophers" who prefer the former with the Jewish "sages" who are more impressed by the latter. Lewinsohn shows that (Maimonides shows that) even if "the philosophers" are right about some commandments—perhaps those that are "between man and his fellow," and so the closest religious thing to moral obligations—still the sages may be right about others—perhaps those that are "between man and God".

The details are not that important for our purposes here, but the point in the text stands—at least in Judaism, at least in an important subset of cases, religious motivation de dicto is seen positively.

16 The Kantian overtones are intended, of course, but no serious scholarly commitments here are. It's not clear how exactly to understand the Kantian idea of a respect for the moral law, and we don't have a view on that. And there's also more than one way to understand the (perhaps Aristotelian) idea that the perfectly virtuous are best not at overcoming temptation, but rather in their constitution, so that they are not tempted in the first place. For our purposes in the text, we don't need the virtuous to be immune to any temptation whatsoever. We just need them to be immune to temptation that cannot be overcome without something like moral motivation understood de dicto.

17 See, for instance, Svavarsdottir (1999), Sliwa (2016), Aboodi (2017), Johnson King (2020). And in the context of a challenge specifically for Robust Realism, there is special reason not to rely too closely on Smith's rejection of moral motivation de dicto, as robust realists have other reasons—independently of the explanatory challenge discussed in this chapter—to reject this claim. For discussion, see Enoch (2011, Chapter 9), and the references there.

18 Also, notice that our intuitive starting point doesn't sit well with Smith's insistence—in the same context in which he puts forward his claims about de dicto moral motivation and fetishism—that when the virtuous change their mind about some moral matters, their motivation reliably changes accordingly. At least in the case of the lapsed moralist, we're relying on the intuition that there is something suspicious about their motivations changing "accordingly." This is not the kind of

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case Smith seems to have had in mind, perhaps because this is a change first in a *meta*ethical opinion, and only derivatively in one's moral judgments. It's not clear to us whether this is a problem for Smith.

19 Smith, of course, thinks that moral beliefs are themselves much more intimately connected to motivations than robust realists take them to be. But we've restricted our discussion here to the robust realist perspective.

20 See the references in Dreier (2015a) to Parfit. See also Enoch (2011, 242–247).

21 There may be other ways of understanding "the" why-be-moral challenge, of course. We focus on this one, partly because it seems an especially clear challenge that avoids the confusions characteristic of some other statements of the challenge, and partly because it is interesting. But we are not committed to all other understandings of it being confused, of course.

22 As in discussions of judgment-internalism, the condition in the text can be met even if the relevant motivation is on some occasions defeated by other motivations.

23 Dreier is a judgment-internalist, but it's not clear that this challenge of his presupposes such internalism. Be that as it may, the formulation that follows clearly avoids such a presupposition.

24 See Dreier's (2015a, 178) comment on Parfit.

25 But see section 5.

26 Recall that Dreier works with an internal-coherence notion of rationality. It is not implausible to think that before the conversion to error theory, the mental life of our moralist (who has a bunch of moral beliefs, and is motivated accordingly) exemplifies a certain kind of internal coherence that, after conversion (with the same motivations, so without all-the-wrongs-regrets, but also with a belief in the error theory) lacks. Indeed, Dreier may argue that the appearance that there is something irrational about changing one's motivations (and regretting all those missed opportunities) stems from an implicit shift to a more substantive notion of rationality.

27 Divine Command Theorists (DCT-ists) are voluntarists, and so are not robust realists in the sense we're using this term (and Dasgupta too contrasts DCT-ists with robust realists). If this way of putting things makes you uncomfortable, feel free to add "who is not a DCT-ist" to "robust realist" in the text.

28 This includes Enoch (2011, 242–247).

29 "Admittedly, there is nothing incoherent about [the response we are about to give]. In fact, I think this is the non-naturalist's only refuge, and I have no decisive argument against it. Still, once exposed for what it is, it seems to me a clearly unattractive position" (307). We return below to the question of how unattractive it is.

30 Dasgupta emphasizes that the robust realist cannot get this "for free," by insisting that P *is* goodness, and that goodness is action-guiding. Rather, Dasgupta insists plausibly enough, the robust realist must *first* be willing to attribute to P the action-guiding role, and only *later on*, as it were, should she be willing to identify P and goodness. Otherwise, the realist is not "playing fair," in the sense Dasgupta (301) takes from Lewis (1994).

31 Though some intricate grounding-related issues arise. See Enoch (2019).
For closely related points see Kramer (2009, throughout) and Chappell (2019, 128).

32 Though this may have to be qualified to something like initially surprising or striking phenomena, those that intuitively seem to call for explanation. And there are complications down that route: There are going to be controversies over what calls for explanation (the basic physical constants, for instance? That there's something rather than nothing?); and it's anything but clear how precisely to understanding the property of strikingness. For some (skeptical) discussion, see Baras (2022).
One way of understanding the next point in the text is as claiming that the phenomenon Dasgupta accuses realists of failing to explain does not in fact call for explanation.

33 Preston Werner insisted that this is not so—that robust realists more often put things in terms of the *irreducibility* rather than the *ungroundability* of moral or normative facts. He's right, but this may be due to the sociology of the field. Grounding talk was not that big in 2011 (Parfit 2011; Enoch 2011) and certainly not in 2005 (Huemer 2005) or 2003 (Shafer-Landau 2003). We think that a robust realism worth its name will also go for ungroundability. For some relevant discussion, see Enoch (2019) and Wygoda Cohen (2021).

34 Though see the discussion of "sheer queerness" in Enoch (2011, 134–136).

35 Dasgupta (2018) puts forward an argument against metaphysical realism that is similar in structure to his argument against robust metaethical realism. Using the predicate "elite" to designate the special properties that our scientific inquiries should focus on, Dasgupta says (288):

> "My objection to realism therefore rests on three familiar premises:
>
> 1. Eliteness is theory-guiding.
> 2. If naturalness is theory-guiding, there must be some explanation of why naturalness is theory-guiding.
> 3. There is no explanation of why naturalness would be theory-guiding."

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In the metaethical case, we rejected the analogue of premise (2). In the metaphysical case, though, we want to accept premise (2), and reject premise (3), *relying on robust metanormative realism*. That is, once we are entitled to help ourselves to fundamental, ungrounded normative facts (because, well, robust metanormative realism is true) we can use them in order to explain why we should guide our theory by naturalness (or some such). In other words, we only need to go for bruteness once—once we've done that for the metanormative argument, we have enough explanatory resources to take care of the metaphysical challenge as well. In a way that metaethicists of all stripes should find satisfying, when metaphysics seems in trouble, it's metaethics (or more precisely, metanormativity) that comes to the rescue. (In personal correspondence, Dasgupta agreed that the way to save metaphysics from his challenge may depend on defending robust metanormative realism from his metaethical challenge).

Of course, this is very quick and underdeveloped. But if this is a promising line to take, this adds quite a few plausibility points to robust realism, because, as Lewis (1986, vii) notes, the fact that systematic philosophy goes more easily if we may presuppose a hypothesis is a reason to believe it.

36 The similarity is perhaps clearest when Dreier (2015a, 161) asks what makes Scanlon's relation R special, compared to some other (non-natural) relation Q.

37 Dreier's explanandum is put in terms of beliefs about what one ought to do, not about the good. So in order to complete the response to Dreier, either a similar story must be told about *ought*, or a fairly strong connection must be defended between the good and what one ought to do, or both.

38 Again see Lewinsohn (2016), and the rabbinic sources there cited.

39 We here tie these two together, not because they are equivalent or some such, but because of the constraints of our project here—we are trying to offer an account of the moralist and the lapsed moralist from a robust realist perspective. We're not assuming that all moralists are robust realists—just that the story we are after should be consistent with robust realism.

40 This does not mean, of course, that (the realist should believe that) expressivists, say, don't have reasons not to hurt people. There are non-natural moral facts, the robust realist believes, and those apply to the expressivist as they do to everyone else.

41 The discussion that follows draws on Enoch (2022).

42 Erdur (2016), Bedke (2019), Hayward (2019).

43 At the outset we noted that while the explanatory challenge this chapter addresses arises in an especially troubling way to robust realists, the protagonist in the example need not be a robust realist—any kind of metaethically naïve moral realist or moralist will do. Still, here we proceed to talk as if the protagonist too must be a robust realist—simply because this is how the people to whom we respond here put their objections. Both the objections and our reply can be rephrased in ways that avoid the commitment (for the protagonists) to robust realism.

44 This is very close to Hayward's (2019, 2) way of putting things. Hayward's main target is Parfit, who endorses conditionals like (C1) explicitly—Hayward calls them Parfit-conditionals. We do not intend to defend Parfit, who may be vulnerable to Hayward's objection. We merely claim that robust realism is not similarly vulnerable.

45 This dilemma is Bedke's way of putting things. For more details regarding Hayward's and Bedke's objections, again see Enoch (2022).

Erdur's version is different from both—she emphasizes the implausibility of the thought that what grounds the wrongness of pain (say) is non-natural stuff in Plato's heaven, rather than the very worldly fact that *it hurts*. We think that the way out of Erdur's challenge proceeds via a distinction between normative and metaphysical grounding (see, for instance, Enoch 2019 and the references there), so that the realist is only committed to the non-natural stuff metaphysically (but not normatively) grounding moral facts. For a similar response (in different terms), see Blanchard (2019).

46 I (DE) heard this example many, many years ago, from Stephen Schiffer in a conversation whose context I don't now remember (but it was not in metaethics).

This example works very well for our purposes here, but is nevertheless not without shortcomings: One may believe (C3) not because it follows from the general theory as in the text, but simply because its consequent is absurd. So let us stipulate that this is not the case here—perhaps (C3) hadn't occurred to me until it was pointed out to me that it follows from a general theory that I believe.

47 Sorensen (1988).

48 Chappell (2019) pursues a *very* similar line.

49 He also makes some other points, with some of which we are not sure that we agree.

50 In this paragraph in the text we are using "epistemic possibility" somewhat loosely. On some understandings, a proposition p is epistemically possible for a believer B iff the evidence available to B together with ideal reasoning do not suffice to rule out p. (See, for instance, Kment (2017, section 1), and the many references there.) On such an understanding, it's not clear that what we say in the text is true. The sense of epistemic possibility we're after is the sense

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in which it's true to say such things as "For all we know, Goldbach's Conjecture may be false," even if Goldbach's Conjecture—as we will find out at some point in the future—is true, metaphysically and perhaps conceptually necessary, and knowable a priori. When Hayward and Bedke ask us realists to imagine a case in which highly surprising evidence comes in, evidence that may give us conclusive reasons to change our minds about metaphysically necessary claims, this is the relevant sense. For comparison, consider: What would you believe if all the mathematicians suddenly agreed that some new genius found a flaw in the proof of Fermat's Last Theorem, and that some computer program came up with a counterexample? Well, you would believe that Fermat's Theorem is false. This counterfactual in no way shows that you don't really believe that it's true, as a matter of a fairly strong necessity, nor does it show that there's any incoherence in your belief (that it's true and necessary) and your disposition (to give up on that belief in the relevant, highly surprising, counterfactual scenario).

51 In correspondence, Bedke explained that he's thinking of "maximal fragility" as restricted in the way suggested in the text—that is, the belief in robust realism is guaranteed to be defeated by evidence for the relevant normative judgment (such as the antecedents of (C1) and (C2). Thus understood, he's right that the belief in realism is "maximally fragile," but his choice of terminology is misleading. "Maximal fragility" in this sense is consistent with robustness vis-à-vis many kinds of evidence. In other words, the claim that his belief in realism is "maximally fragile" in this stipulated sense is no embarrassment at all for the realist.

52 Again, see Enoch (2022).

53 Kramer (2017) makes similar points about the error theory.
Mackie (1977) famously thought otherwise, and in the second half of that book it sure seems as if he's doing normative ethics with the rest of us. But it's not clear how to reconcile all of this with his error theory (it may even give some reason not to read him as a straightforward error theorist).

54 At least one error theorist is famous for claiming not to believe his own error theory. See Streumer (2017). And see Bedke (2014) for arguments for the conclusion that error theorists tend to retain their first-order moral judgments.

55 This raises a much wider question (for which we are thankful to Paul Bloomfield): How often should we change (other) beliefs upon coming to believe a fancy new philosophical theory, say, in metaphysics? In the opposite direction, how often should we treat conditionals with a philosophical antecedent and more down-to-earth consequent as junk knowledge? Bloomfield indicated that he thought in many, perhaps most cases of this kind such conditionals are junk knowledge. We agree that this is sometimes the case, but are not sure—and obviously, can't further discuss this—how often this is so. Think, for instance (as Paul Bloomfield encouraged us to think) of mathematical Platonists, who believe that mathematical discourse is committed to the existence of abstract objects. They accept such conditionals as "If 2 + 3 = 5, then there are abstract objects," which is logically equivalent to "If abstract objects do not exist, it's not the case that 2 + 3 = 5." Do they accept this conditional as junk knowledge? If the oracle tells them that there are no abstract objects, will they be disposed to give up the belief that 2 + 3 = 5? We suspect that they won't, and we don't think that they should be. But more may be said here.

56 This, for instance, is Maimonides's view as presented by Lewinsohn (2016).

57 On some theological views, the *metaphysical* priority goes the other way. But this doesn't preclude an *epistemic* priority as in the text here.

58 Nor does this mean that we shouldn't care about metaethics. Metaethics is interesting, and this may be enough. And metaethics may have, in other contexts, first-order, normative implications that do not constitute junk-knowledge.

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