2) How does Midgley argue for her claim that "moral isolationism would lay down a general ban on moral reasoning"? Do you think she is right about this?
3) What "logical difficulty" does Midgley think moral isolationism faces? Can the moral isolationist respond convincingly to this difficulty?
4) Moral isolationism is often motivated by the thought that we should be tolerant and respectful of other cultures. Yet Midgley argues that these concerns actually require us to *reject* moral isolationism. What are her reasons for thinking this? Are they good ones?
5) At the end of her essay, Midgley mentions that our culture today has been influenced by many different cultural traditions. What problems does this raise for moral isolationism?

18

Realism

Michael Smith

Michael Smith presents the outlines of a view known to philosophers as *moral realism*. Realism claims that moral judgments can be true independently of what anyone happens to believe of them. Smith endorses this conception of morality, but recognizes that there are many objections to be answered. One of the most important of these is based on the idea that moral facts must somehow be able to motivate us, in part by providing us reasons for action. And yet how we are motivated, and what reasons we have, seem to be subjective, not objective, matters. Our motives and reasons seem to depend on what we care about—and yet the content of morality, if it really is objective, is not going to depend on what we want.

Smith seeks to show that the objectivity of morality is compatible with these motivational and reason-giving requirements. He does this by defending the view that moral duties are those that we would all agree to, were we each fully informed and perfectly rational. Moral rules originate in agreement that stems from judgments made from an ideal perspective.

If Smith is correct, then morality is objective—its standards are those that ideal judges would agree on. We can each be mistaken about our moral duty, because we can fail to have all the needed information to make a decision, or fail to be fully rational (or both). And moral duties will supply us with reasons for action, even if we don't care about

Michael Smith, "Realism" from *Ethics* (1994), ed. Peter Singer, pp. 170–176. By permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

doing our duty. They supply us with such reasons because our more enlightened selves would endorse these duties, and we have reason to follow the advice of our fully informed, perfectly rational counterparts. And we will be moved to do our duty, provided that we are rational. Someone who is rational will act on the best reasons that apply to her, and these, says Smith, are moral reasons that stem from what we would agree to if were judging things from the best possible vantage point. In this way, Smith offers an account of morality that can explain why it is objective, why it provides us reason to obey it, and why it will motivate rational people.

Most of us take moral appraisal pretty much for granted. To the extent that we worry, we simply worry about *getting it right*. Philosophers too worry about getting the answers to moral questions right. However, traditionally, they have also been worried about the whole business of moral appraisal itself. The problem they have grappled with emerges when we focus on two distinctive features of moral practice; for, surprisingly, these features pull against each other, threatening to make the very idea of morality look altogether incoherent.

The first feature is implicit in our concern to get the answers to moral questions *right*, for this concern presupposes that there are correct answers to moral questions to be had, and thus that there exists a domain of distinctively *moral* facts. Moreover, we seem to think that these facts have a particular character, for the only relevant determinant of the rightness of an act would seem to be the circumstances in which that action takes place. Agents whose circumstances are identical face the same moral choice: if they perform the same act then either they both act rightly or they both act wrongly.

Something like this conception of moral facts seems to explain our pre-occupation with moral argument. Since we are all in the same boat, so, it seems, we think that a conversation in which agents carefully muster and assess each other's reasons for and against their moral opinions is the best way to discover what the moral facts are. If the participants are open-minded and thinking clearly then we seem to think that such an argument should result in a *convergence* in moral opinion—a convergence upon the truth.

We may summarise this first feature of moral practice as follows: we seem to think that moral questions have correct answers, that these answers are made correct by objective moral facts, that these facts are determined by circumstances, and that, by arguing, we can discover what these facts are. The term "objective" here simply signifies the possibility of a convergence in moral views of the kind just mentioned.

Consider now the second feature. Suppose we reflect and decide that we did the wrong thing in (say) refusing to give to famine relief. It seems we come to think we failed to do something for which there was a good reason. And this has motivational implications. For now imagine the situation if we refuse again when next the opportunity arises. We will have refused to do what we think we have good reason to do, and this will occasion serious puzzlement. An explanation of some sort will need to be forthcoming (perhaps weakness of will or irrationality of some other kind). Why? Because, other things being equal, having a moral opinion seems to require having a corresponding reason, and therefore motivation, to act accordingly.

These two distinctive features of moral practice—the *objectivity* and the *practicality* of moral judgement—are widely thought to have both metaphysical and psychological implications. However, and unfortunately, these implications are the exact opposite of each other. In order to see why, we need to pause for a moment to reflect on the nature of human psychology.

According to the standard picture of human psychology—a picture we owe to David Hume—there are two main kinds of psychological state. On the one hand there are beliefs, states that purport to represent the way the world is. Since our beliefs purport to represent the world, they are subject to rational criticism: specifically, they are assessable in terms of truth and falsehood. And on the other hand there are also desires, states that represent how the world is to be. Desires are unlike beliefs in that they do not even purport to represent the way the world is. They are therefore not assessable in terms of truth and falsehood. Indeed, according to the standard picture, our desires are not subject to any sort of rational criticism at all. The fact that we have a certain desire is, with a proviso to be mentioned presently, simply a fact about ourselves to be acknowledged. In themselves, desires are all on a par, rationally neutral.

This is important, for it suggests that though facts about the world may rightly affect our beliefs, such facts should, again with a proviso to be mentioned presently, have no rational impact upon our desires. They

may of course, have some *non*-rational impact. Seeing a spider, I may be overcome with a morbid fear and desire never to be near one. However this is not a change in my desires mandated by reason. It is a *non*-rational change in my desires.

Now for the proviso. Suppose, contrary to the example just given, I acquire an aversion to spiders because I come to believe, falsely, that they have an unpleasant odour. This is certainly an irrational aversion. However, this is not contrary to the spirit of the standard picture. For my aversion is *based on* a further desire and belief: my desire not to smell that unpleasant odour and my belief that that odour is given off by spiders. Since I can be rationally criticised for having the belief, as it is false, so I can be rationally criticised for having the aversion it helps to produce. The proviso is thus fairly minor: desires are subject to rational criticism, but only insofar as they are based on irrational beliefs. Desires that do not have this feature are not subject to rational criticism at all.

According to the standard picture, then, there are two kinds of psychological state—beliefs and desires—utterly distinct and different from each other. This picture is important because it provides us with a model for understanding human action. A human action is the product of these two forces: a desire representing the way the world is to be and a belief telling us how the world is, and thus how it has to be changed, so as to make it that way.

We said earlier that the objectivity and the practicality of moral judgement have both metaphysical and psychological implications. We can now say what they are. Consider first the objectivity of moral judgement: the idea that there are moral facts, determined by circumstances, and that, by arguing, we can discover what these objective moral facts are. This implies, metaphysically, that amongst the various facts there are in the world there aren't just facts about (say) the consequences of our actions on the well-being of sentient creatures, there are also distinctively *moral* facts: facts about the rightness and wrongness of our actions having these consequences. And, psychologically, the implication is thus that when we make a moral judgement we express our *beliefs* about the way these moral facts are. Our moral beliefs are representations of the way the world is *morally*.

Given the standard picture of human psychology, there is a further psychological implication. For whether or not people who have a certain moral belief desire to act accordingly must now be seen as a further and entirely separate question. They may happen to have a corresponding

desire, they may not. However, either way, they cannot be rationally criticised.

But now consider the second feature, the practicality of moral judgement, the idea that to have a moral opinion simply *is*, contrary to what has just been said, to have a corresponding reason, and thus motivation, to act accordingly. Psychologically, since making a moral judgement entails having a certain desire, and no recognition of a fact about the world could rationally compel us to have one desire rather than another, this seems to imply that our judgement must really simply *be* an expression of that desire. And this psychological implication has a metaphysical counterpart. For, contrary to initial appearance, it seems that when we judge it right to give to famine relief (say), we *are not* responding to any moral fact. In judging it right to give to famine relief, we are really simply expressing our desire that people give to famine relief. It is as if we were yelling "Hooray for giving to famine relief!"—no mention of a moral fact there, in fact, no factual claim at all.

We are now in a position to see why philosophers have been worried about the whole business of moral appraisal. The problem is that the *objectivity* and the *practicality* of moral judgement pull in quite opposite directions from each other. The objectivity of moral judgement suggests that there are moral facts, determined by circumstances, and that our moral judgements express our beliefs about what these facts are. But though this is presupposed by moral argument, it leaves it entirely mysterious how or why having a moral view has special links with what we are motivated to do. And the practicality of moral judgement suggests just the opposite, that our moral judgements express our desires. While this seems presupposed in the link between moral judgement and motivation, it leaves it entirely mysterious how or why moral judgements can be the subject of moral argument.

The very idea of morality may therefore be incoherent, for what is required to make sense of a moral judgement is a queer sort of fact about the universe: a fact whose recognition necessarily impacts upon our desires. But the standard picture of human psychology tells us that there are no such facts. Nothing could be everything a moral judgement purports to be—or so the standard picture tells us.

At long last we are in a position to see what this essay is about. For *moral realism* is simply the metaphysical view that there exist moral facts. The psychological counterpart to realism is cognitivism, the view that moral judgements express our beliefs about what these moral facts are.

Moral realism thus contrasts with two alternative metaphysical views: *irrealism* and *moral nihilism*. According to the irrealists, there are no moral facts, but neither are moral facts required to make sense of moral practice. We can happily acknowledge that our moral judgements simply express our desires about how people behave. This is non-cognitivism, the psychological counterpart to irrealism. By contrast, according to the moral nihilists, the irrealists are right that there are no moral facts, but wrong about what is required to make sense of moral practice. Without moral facts moral practice is all a sham, much like religious practice without belief in God.

Which, then, should we believe: realism, irrealism or nihilism? I favour realism. Let me say why. We have assumed from the outset that judgements of right and wrong are judgements about our reasons for action. But though these judgements seem to concern a realm of facts about our reasons, what casts doubt on this is the standard picture of human psychology. For it tells us that, since judgements about our reasons have motivational implications, so they must really simply be expressions of our desires. It seems to me that here we see the real devil of the piece: the standard picture of human psychology's tacit conflation of *reasons* with *motives*. Seeing why this is so enables us to see why we may legitimately talk about our *beliefs* about the reasons we have, and why having such beliefs makes it rational to have corresponding desires; why such beliefs have motivational implications.

Imagine giving the baby a bath. As you do, it begins to scream uncontrollably. Nothing you do seems to help. As you watch, you are overcome with a desire to drown it in the bathwater. You are *motivated* to drown the baby. Does this entail that you have a *reason* to drown the baby? Commonsense tells us that, since this desire is not *worth* satisfying, it does not provide you with such a reason; that, in this case, you are motivated to do something you have *no* reason to do. But can the standard picture agree with commonsense on this score? No, it cannot. For your desire to drown the baby need be based on no false belief, and, as such, the standard picture tells us it is beyond rational criticism. There is no sense in which it is not worth satisfying—or so the standard picture tells us. But this is surely wrong.

The problem is that the standard picture gives no special privilege to what we would want if we were 'cool, calm, and collected'. Yet commonsense tells us that not being cool, calm, and collected may lead to all sorts of irrational emotional outbursts. Having those desires that we would have if

we were cool, calm, and collected thus seems to be an *independent* rational ideal. When cool, calm, and collected, you would want that the baby isn't drowned, no matter how much it screams, and no matter how overcome you may be, in your uncool, uncalm, and uncollected state, with a desire to drown it. This is why you have no reason to drown the baby. It seems to me that this insight is the key to reconciling the objectivity with the practicality of moral judgement.

Judgements of right and wrong express our beliefs about our reasons. But what sort of fact is a fact about our reasons? The preceding discussion suggests that they are not facts about what we *actually* desire, as the standard picture would have it, but are rather facts about what we *would* desire if we were in certain idealised conditions of reflection: if, say, we were well informed, cool, calm, and collected.

According to this account, then, I have a reason to give to famine relief in my particular circumstances just in case, if I were in such idealised conditions of reflection, I would desire that, even when in my particular circumstances, I give to famine relief. Now this sort of fact may certainly be the object of a belief. And moreover having such a belief—a belief about our reasons—certainly seems to rationally require of us that we have corresponding desires.

In order to see this, suppose I believe I would desire to give to famine relief if I were cool, calm, and collected but, being uncool, uncalm, and uncollected, I don't desire to give to famine relief. Am I rationally criticizable for not having the desire? I surely am. After all, from my own point of view my beliefs and desires form a more coherent, and thus a rationally preferable, package if I do in fact desire what I believe I would desire if I were cool, calm, and collected. This is because, since it is an independent rational ideal to have the desires I would have if I were cool, calm, and collected so, from my own point of view, if I believe that I would have a certain desire under such conditions and yet fail to have it, my beliefs and desires fail to meet this ideal. To believe that I would desire to give to famine relief if I were cool, calm, and collected and yet fail to desire to give to famine relief is thus to manifest a commonly recognizable species of rational failure.

If this is right then, contrary to the standard picture, a broader class of desires may be rationally criticized. The desires of those who fail to desire to do what they believe they have reason to do can be rationally criticized even though they may not be based on any false belief. And, if this is right, then the standard picture is wrong to suggest that a judgement

with motivational implications must really be the expression of a desire. For a judgement about an agent's reasons has motivational implications—the rational agent is motivated accordingly—and yet it is the expression of a belief.

Have we said enough to solve the problem facing the moral realist? Not yet. Moral judgements aren't *just* judgements about the reasons we have. They are judgements about the reasons we have *where those reasons are determined entirely by our circumstances*. People in the same circumstances face the same moral choice: if they do the same then either they both act rightly (they both do what they have reason to do) or they both act wrongly (they both do what they have reason not to do). Does the account of reasons we have given support this?

Suppose our circumstances are identical. Is it right for each of us to give to famine relief? According to the story just told, it is right that I give to famine relief just in case I have a reason to do so, and I have such a reason just in case, if I were in idealised conditions of reflection—well informed, cool, calm, and collected—I would desire to give to famine relief. And the same is true of you. If our circumstances are the same then, supposedly, we should both have such a reason or both lack such a reason. But do we?

The question is whether, if we were well informed, cool, calm, and collected, we would all *converge* in the desires we have. Would we converge or would there always be the possibility of some non-rationally-explicable difference in our desires *even under such conditions*? The standard picture of human psychology now returns to center-stage. For it tells us that there is always the possibility of some non-rationally-explicable difference in our desires *even under such idealised conditions of reflection*. This is the residue of the standard picture's conception of desire as a psychological state that is beyond rational criticism.

If there is such a possibility then the realist's attempt to reconcile the objectivity and the practicality of moral judgement simply fails. For we are forced to accept that there is a *fundamental relativity* in the reasons we have. What we have reason to do is relative to what we would desire under idealised conditions of reflection, and this may differ from person to person. It is not wholly determined by our circumstances, as moral facts are supposed to be.

Many philosophers believe that there is always such a possibility; that our reasons are fundamentally relative. But this seems unwarranted to me. For it seems to me that moral practice is itself the forum in which we will *discover* whether there is a fundamental relativity in our reasons.

After all, in moral practice we attempt to change people's moral beliefs by engaging them in rational argument: i.e. by getting their beliefs to approximate those they would have under more idealised conditions of reflection. And sometimes we succeed. When we succeed, other things being equal, we succeed in changing their desires. How, then, can we say in advance that this procedure will never result in a massive *convergence* in moral beliefs? And, if it did result in a massive convergence in our moral beliefs—and thus in our desires—then why not say that this convergence would itself be best explained by the fact that the beliefs and desires that emerge have some *privileged* rational status? Something like such a convergence on certain mathematical judgements in mathematical practice lies behind our conviction that those claims enjoy a privileged rational status. So why not think that a like convergence in moral practice would show that those moral judgements and concerns enjoy the same privileged rational status? At this point, the standard picture's insistence that there is a fundamental relativity in our reasons begins to sound all too much like a hollow dogma.

The kind of moral realism described here endorses a conception of moral facts that is a far cry from the picture noted at the outset: moral facts as queer facts about the universe whose recognition necessarily impacts upon our desires. The realist has eschewed queer facts about the universe in favour of a more 'subjectivist' conception of moral facts. The realist's point, however, is that such a conception of moral facts may make them subjective only in the innocuous sense that they are facts about our reasons: i.e. facts about what we would *want* under certain idealised conditions of reflection. For wants are, admittedly, states enjoyed by subjects. But moral facts remain objective insofar as they are facts about what *we*, not just *you* or *I*, would want under such conditions. The existence of a moral fact—say, the rightness of giving to famine relief in certain circumstances—requires that, under idealised conditions of reflection, rational creatures would *converge* upon a desire to give to famine relief in such circumstances.

Of course, it must be said that moral argument has not yet produced the sort of convergence in our desires that would make the idea of a moral fact—a fact about the reasons we have entirely determined by our circumstances—look plausible. But neither has moral argument had much of a history in times in which we can engage in free reflection unhampered by a false biology (the Aristotelian tradition) or a false belief in God (the Judeo-Christian tradition). It remains to be seen whether sustained moral

argument can elicit the requisite convergence in our moral beliefs, and corresponding desires, to make the idea of a moral fact look plausible. The kind of moral realism described here holds out the hope that it will. Only time will tell.

Michael Smith: Realism

1) Smith claims that "objectivity" is "a distinctive feature of moral practice." What exactly does he mean by *objectivity*? Do you agree that it is a standard feature of everyday moral practice?
2) Smith says that "practicality" is a second distinctive feature of morality. What does he mean by *practicality*? Do you agree that this is also a standard feature of moral practice?
3) According to the "standard picture of human psychology" Smith presents, desires cannot be rationally criticized, with one exception. What is the exception? Allowing for this exception, does this picture of human psychology seem correct?
4) Smith suggests that "the very idea of morality may be incoherent," because morality seems to involve believing in "a queer sort of fact." What sort of fact is Smith referring to? Is this sort of fact so strange that we should deny its existence?
5) What are the differences between the three metaphysical views Smith presents: moral realism, irrealism, and moral nihilism? Which view do you think is most plausible, and why?
6) Smith thinks it is important to distinguish between *motives* and *reasons*. What does he think is the difference between the two? Do you find his account of reasons convincing? Why or why not?
7) According to Smith's theory, moral facts exist only if we would all have the same desires in ideal conditions. Why does Smith's theory require this convergence? Is it plausible to think that we would converge in this way?

19

Proof

Renford Bambrough

In this excerpt from his book *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge* (1979), Renford Bambrough (1926–1999) tries to undermine the most common arguments aimed at showing that we can never have moral knowledge. He also offers a positive argument designed to vindicate the existence of moral knowledge.

Bambrough's positive argument is quite simple. We know that a child about to undergo a very painful operation ought to be given an anesthetic. Therefore, as Bambrough sees it, we have at least one piece of moral knowledge. And of course we have many others—cases in which we can't help but believe that certain actions would be morally required, or morally forbidden.

Bambrough then considers some classic objections to the possibility of moral knowledge. Four of these deserve special mention. First, moral disagreement appears to be far greater than scientific disagreement, and this discrepancy is to be explained by the (alleged) fact that morality is not objective, and so cannot yield moral knowledge. The second objection is that our moral opinions are simply products of our environment and upbringing, and thus cannot be reliable. The third is that moral claims are not statements of fact, but rather expressions of feelings, and so cannot be true, and therefore cannot be known. The last is that there are no recognized methods for resolving