OUTLINE OF AN ARGUMENT FOR MORAL REALISM

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Until quite recently, the term "moral realism" has hardly been used at all in moral philosophy. However, "realism" is of course a well-known label in other areas of philosophy. It is sometimes contrasted with "nominalism", sometimes with "idealism" and "phenomenalism", sometimes with "instrumentalism" and "conventionalism", and sometimes with "verificationism". In moral philosophy, what corresponds most closely to these contrasts are the traditional distinctions between naturalism, nonnaturalism, and noncognitivism (see e.g. Brandt 1959, Chapters 7-9). These three views are concerned with the nature of moral statements or with the meaning of moral language. Roughly speaking, naturalism is the view that moral statements are simply a kind of empirical statements. In other words, it is the view that moral sentences are used to express statements of empirical fact. Nonnaturalism is the view that moral statements are factual (and synthetic) but not empirical. Finally, noncognitivism is the view that so-called "moral statements" are no real statements at all — at least, they are not factual statements; moral sentences are not used to express any statements of fact. The best-known forms of noncognitivism are emotivism and prescriptivism. Thus, for example, emotivism can be described as the view that moral convictions are attitudes, not beliefs. More often, it is stated somewhat as follows: moral sentences are used to express the speaker's attitude and to invite others to share that attitude.

It might seem natural to use the term "moral realism" to denote naturalism and nonnaturalism. For according to these views, moral statements are factual. But what does it mean to say that moral statements are "factual"? Perhaps it means that they are (synthetic and) either true or false. If so, there is a certain complication here, since some noncognitivists are also inclined to hold that moral statements
are true or false. For example, the well-known emotivist Charles L. Stevenson says that they are. He writes:

So let us agree, in deference to our language, to say that ethical judgments are either true or false (Stevenson 1963, p. 216).

However, what he means by this is presumably something like the following: (1) Sentences of the form "It is true that \( p \)" and "It is false that \( p \)" are linguistically permissible if and only if "\( p \)" is replaced by a sentence in the declarative mood; (2) The sentences by which we express our moral convictions are normally in the declarative mood; (3) If "\( p \)" is replaced by some well-formed sentence in the declarative mood, the sentence "It is true that \( p \)" has the same meaning as "\( p \)"; and (4) Ethical or moral sentences express attitudes and, hence, sentences of the form "It is true that \( p \)" and "It is false that \( p \)" express attitudes when "\( p \)" is replaced by an ethical sentence (op. cit., pp. 216-220). On this view, then, to believe that a certain moral statement is true is not to believe in the existence of some fact or state of affairs. It is not to believe anything about the way the world is. It is simply to have a certain attitude.

By contrast, when people say — as they often do — that moral statements or moral convictions are neither true nor false, they are probably using "true" and "false" in a stronger and more ontological sense. Hence, they are not really contradicting Stevenson's view. I suggest that they are using "true" and "false" in a realistic sense which may be roughly characterized as follows. A statement is true (in the realistic sense) if and only if it corresponds to reality, i.e. if and only if it describes a fact which exists independently of anyone's acceptance of the statement, i.e. if and only if it ascribes some property to some existing entity and this entity really has the property in question. Similarly, a statement is false (in the realistic sense) if and only if it corresponds to or describes a fact which does not exist. The notions of truth and falsity which I have in mind have been explained by Roderick M. Chisholm as follows:

A belief or assertion is true provided, first, that it is a belief or assertion with respect to a certain state of affairs that that state of affairs exists, and provided, secondly, that that state of affairs does exist; and a belief or assertion is false provided, first, that it is a belief or assertion with respect to a certain state of affairs that that state of affairs exists, and provided, secondly, that that state of affairs does not exist (Chisholm 1966, p. 103).