

## MORAL REALISMS AND MORAL DILEMMAS\*

ONE of the most common ways to argue against the objectivity or reality of morality is to present moral dilemmas that cannot be resolved in any objective way. Many of these arguments are unconvincing.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, I will argue that moral dilemmas do show that extreme universal moral realism is false.<sup>2</sup> I must begin by defining both moral realism and moral dilemmas.

## I. WHAT MORAL REALISM IS

Moral realism has been very popular recently, but its various defenders define it in various ways: as the claim that moral judgments must obey the law of excluded middle, as the claim that moral facts can enter into causal or explanatory relations, as the claim that moral judgments are independent of the mind, etc. Since 'moral realism' is a technical term, no such definition is the only correct one. When I define 'moral realism', I hope that my definition falls within common usage, but I do not claim that all other definitions are wrong. My aim is simply to specify the claim against which I argue.

I define 'moral realism' as a claim that moral judgments are independent of certain mental states. To say that moral judgments or their truth values depend on certain mental states is to say that, necessarily, the truth values of those judgments would change if the mental states changed in relevant ways, but other factors remained

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<sup>1</sup> The most famous argument is in Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," P. Mairet, trans., in W. Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1957), pp. 297/8. A more precise version was given by Bernard Williams in "Ethical Consistency" and "Consistency and Realism," in *Problems of the Self* (New York: Cambridge, 1973), pp. 166–206. Williams's argument was refuted, however, by Philippa Foot in "Moral Realism and Moral Dilemma," this JOURNAL, LXXX, 7 (July 1983): 379–398. See also Ross Harrison, "Ethical Consistency," in Harrison, ed., *Rational Action* (New York: Cambridge, 1979), pp. 29–45. Williams's argument is different from mine because he considers only judgments of a single agent, whereas I compare the judgments and choices of different agents in relevantly similar moral dilemmas.

<sup>2</sup> My argument is derived from several predecessors: Peter Winch, "The Universalizability of Moral Judgments," in *Ethics and Action* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 151–170; Alasdair MacIntyre, "What Morality Is Not," in *Against the Self-images of the Age* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University Press, 1978), pp. 97–100; and David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXII (1976): 366–372. Winch and MacIntyre direct their arguments against universalizability, but Wiggins shows that such arguments have implications for moral realism.

the same. Moral realists deny that the truth values of moral judgments must change under such conditions.

When moral realism is defined in terms of independence, it is crucial to specify exactly what moral judgments are supposed to be independent of. The truth values of moral judgments might be independent of certain mental states but not of others (e.g., of desires, choices, and moral beliefs, but not of nonmoral beliefs or cognitive abilities), or they might be independent of the mental states of one person but not of another (e.g., the person making the judgment but not the agent who is judged),<sup>3</sup> or they might be independent of actual beliefs and desires but not of what someone would believe or desire under ideal conditions of some kind.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, some moral judgments might be independent of such factors even though others are not.<sup>5</sup>

This variety of factors produces many degrees of moral realism. Moderate moral realists claim that moral judgments are independent of some but not all of the above factors. However, since I want to argue against the extreme view that moral judgments are independent of all of these factors, I need to define moral realism in an extreme way. I will call the truth conditions of a moral judgment *realistic* only if whether or not they hold is independent of the actual and ideal moral beliefs and choices of the person judged and of the person who makes the judgment. A moral judgment is then realistic just in case its truth conditions are realistic. A moral theory is a version of moral realism only if it claims that *every* moral judgment is realistic. Thus, moral realism is the claim that some moral judgments are true<sup>6</sup> and every moral judgment is true if and only if certain

<sup>3</sup> E.g., R. M. Hare [*The Language of Morals* (New York: Oxford, 1952)] claims that the acceptability of moral judgments depends on the moral principles of the judge; Williams ["Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge, 1981), pp. 101–113] claims that the acceptability of moral judgments depends on the motivations of the judged; and Gilbert Harman [*The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford, 1977)] claims that the truth values of moral judgments depend on the motivations of both judge and judged. None of these theories is realistic on my definition.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., the truth values of moral judgments depend on ideal but not actual mental states, according to Roderick Firth in "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XII, 3 (March 1952): 317–345. Contrast R. B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1959), pp. 265–269. Brandt makes ideal mental states determine whether moral judgments are justified but not whether they are true. Thus, Brandt's theory, unlike Firth's, is compatible with moral realism on my definition.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., David Wiggins (p. 370) claims that valuations can correspond to an independent reality, but practical judgments cannot.

<sup>6</sup> This condition must be added to exclude error theories like that of J. L. Mackie, *Ethics* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 35.

conditions hold which are independent of the actual and ideal moral beliefs and choices of the judger and the judged. Moral realism then implies, for example, that, if abortion is morally wrong, it would still be morally wrong even if everyone who obtains or judges an abortion believed it was not wrong and, furthermore, would choose it (when possible) even if he/she were fully informed, rational, impartial, etc. Weaker theories can be called "moral realism," but the argument below will be directed against this extreme universal version of moral realism. I will return later to weaker theories to see which of them can escape the argument.

## II. WHAT MORAL DILEMMAS ARE

Having defined 'moral realism', I now need to define 'moral dilemmas'. Moral dilemmas are usually defined as situations where an agent ought to adopt incompatible alternatives; but the term 'ought' is unspecific in several important ways. Consequently, I will define *moral dilemmas* as situations where there is a moral requirement for an agent to adopt each of two incompatible alternatives and where neither moral requirement overrides the other (because they are equal or incomparable).<sup>7</sup>

This definition might seem to beg the question against moral realism or antirealism by referring to requirements and overriding. I am using the term 'moral requirement', however, in a broad, neutral sense. A *moral reason* to adopt (or not to adopt) an alternative is or is provided by a fact that the alternative has some morally relevant property or consequence, such as that it fulfills a promise (or is unfair or a lie) or avoids causing (or causes) pain, death, or loss of freedom. A moral reason is a *requirement* if it would be morally wrong not to act on it without any moral justification or excuse. Moral realists then claim that the facts that provide moral requirements are independent of certain mental states. Moral antirealists can claim that the relevant facts are about mental states or that which facts provide moral requirements depends on certain mental states. Thus, moral realists and antirealists can both agree that there are moral requirements in my sense.

The notion of overriding is similarly neutral. One moral requirement *overrides* another only if the former is stronger over all in some morally relevant way, so that it is morally wrong to violate the former requirement. It is not enough that one of the moral requirements can somehow be ranked above the other. An agent might favor one requirement merely because doing so maximized the agent's self-in-

<sup>7</sup> I argued for this definition in "Moral Dilemmas and Incomparability," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, xxii, 4 (October 1985): 321-329.

terest or merely because of a flip of a coin, but such rankings do not show that one moral requirement is stronger in a morally relevant way.<sup>8</sup> In order for one moral requirement to override another, there must be some ranking that has the essential features of morality, whatever they are.

Moral realists and antirealists disagree about what is essential to morality and thus about which rankings are morally relevant and about which situations are moral dilemmas. Moral realists must claim that a ranking is not morally relevant unless it is realistic, i.e., unless the higher moral requirement is so strong that anyone who violates it does what is morally wrong, regardless of his or her actual and ideal moral beliefs and choices. If this is the case, I will say that the stronger moral requirement *realistically overrides* the other. Conflicts between moral requirements that cannot be ranked realistically can be called *realistic moral dilemmas*.

In some realistic moral dilemmas, moral antirealists might still claim that there is a personal moral ranking, i.e., that one and only one moral requirement is such that it would be morally wrong for the individual agent to violate it, even though similar acts would not be wrong for all other agents. If there is a personal moral ranking, the situation is not a personal moral dilemma, and moral antirealists might refuse to call the situation a "moral dilemma" at all. Nonetheless, such situations can still be realistic moral dilemmas, and moral realists might insist that they are moral dilemmas. Whether or not they are called "moral dilemmas," it is such conflicts between moral requirements that can be ranked personally but not realistically which cause trouble for moral realism. I will count such situations as moral dilemmas so that I can ask simply whether moral realism can handle moral dilemmas.

Thus, moral dilemmas can be defined as situations where there is a moral requirement for an agent to adopt each of incompatible alternatives, but where neither moral requirement is overridden in any way that is both morally relevant and realistic. This definition may not capture common usage, if there is any, but it does pick out the kind of situation that I will discuss.

### III. THE ARGUMENT

Given these definitions, I can now present my argument against extreme moral realism from moral dilemmas. My strategy will be to compare moral judgments of different agents in relevantly similar moral dilemmas. The basic idea is that realistic moral facts do not

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ruth Barcan Marcus, "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency," this JOURNAL, LXXVII, 3 (March 1980): 121-136, pp. 135/6.

favor either alternative in a moral dilemma, but different agents can still personally favor different alternatives, and then their personal rankings or choices can determine what they ought to do. Since moral realists deny that any moral judgments depend on such mental factors as moral beliefs or choices, extreme universal moral realism is false.

The argument is clearer if we look at an example of a moral dilemma. Suppose Jim promised a professional colleague to finish a project by a certain date, but, through no fault of his own, he is late and has only one day left. On the other hand, today is his daughter's birthday, and the family usually goes sailing on her birthday. Jim did not promise to go, but he is expected to come along, and his daughter will be disappointed if he does not. Thus, Jim cannot keep his professional promise without causing some pain to his daughter. I assume that there is a moral requirement to keep the promise and a moral requirement not to cause the pain, but the importance of the promise and the amount of pain are balanced so that neither requirement realistically overrides the other. The promise is not so important that it would be morally wrong for anyone to break it in a relevantly similar situation. Also, the pain is not so great that it would be morally wrong for anyone to cause it in a relevantly similar situation. The conflicting moral requirements might be described as equal or incomparable, but Jim's situation is a realistic moral dilemma in either case.<sup>9</sup>

Now suppose that Jack is in a moral dilemma that is similar to Jim's in all respects that could be morally relevant according to moral realism. Jack's keeping his promise would cause just as much pain to Jack's family as Jim's keeping his promise would cause to Jim's family. Jack's promise is just as important professionally as Jim's. Thus, just as in Jim's case, neither moral requirement realistically overrides the other in Jack's case.

Despite such realistic similarities, Jim and Jack still personally rank the moral requirements differently. Jim believes that his daughter's pain is more important to him than his professional promise, because he chooses to be a family man committed to a family way of life. In contrast, Jack personally ranks his professional duty and promise more highly than the moral requirement not to cause pain to his daughter, because he chooses to be a professional man committed to

<sup>9</sup> A critic might deny that moral dilemmas are possible, but I argue for the possibility of moral dilemmas in "Moral Dilemmas and Incomparability;" and I respond to counterarguments in "'Ought' Conversationally Implies 'Can,'" *Philosophical Review*, xciii, 2 (April 1984): 249-261; and in "Moral Dilemmas and 'Ought and Ought Not'," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, forthcoming.

the professional way of life. Jack and Jim consider exactly the same realistic factors, and both consider only factors that both agree are morally relevant. Neither person's choice or personal ranking depends on any error, ignorance, irrationality, or partiality. Neither way of life is morally wrong, since neither person is so committed to his way of life that he would violate a realistically overriding moral requirement in order to further his family or profession. Nonetheless, Jim and Jack arrive at different personal rankings of the moral requirements.

The crucial question for moral realism is: Which moral judgments are true in this situation? I will discuss judgments about what each agent ought to do, and I will distinguish different interpretations of these judgments. Nonetheless, my conclusions can be extended to other moral judgments.

The argument against extreme moral realism now runs as follows:

- (1) Jack ought to keep his promise.
- (2) Jim ought not to keep his promise.<sup>10</sup>
- (3) If Jim ought not to keep his promise, then it is not the case that Jim ought to keep his promise.
- (4) Therefore, it is not the case that Jim ought to keep his promise.
- (5) Therefore, whether or not an agent ought to keep his promise depends on the agent's choice and personal ranking.
- (6) If moral realism were true, what an agent ought to do would not depend on the agent's choice or personal ranking.
- (7) Therefore, moral realism is false.

(1) and (2) are the judgments that cause trouble for moral realism. (3) is an assumption that is needed to derive (4). (5) follows from (1), (4), and the supposition that there is no relevant difference between Jack and Jim other than their personal rankings and choices. (6) is supposed to follow from the definition of 'moral realism'. (7) follows from (5) and (6).

The crucial premises of the argument are then (1), (2), and (3). It might seem easy for a moral realist to escape simply by denying (1) or (2), i.e., by denying either that Jack ought to keep his promise or that Jim ought not to keep his promise (or both). However, whether this denial is plausible depends on how (1) and (2) are interpreted; so we need to consider various interpretations of the term 'ought'. The

<sup>10</sup> A moral realist might respond that it is not really true that Jim ought not to keep his promise, but only that he ought not to hurt his daughter. However, I assume here and throughout that 'ought' is extensional enough that an agent ought not to do what is sufficient for something (else) that he ought not to do. Jim cannot keep his promise without hurting his daughter. Thus, if Jim ought not to hurt his daughter, he ought not to keep his promise.

argument is sound only if there is a single interpretation of 'ought' on which (1), (2), and (3) are all true.

#### IV. REALISTIC INTERPRETATIONS

There are many interpretations of 'ought' on which the argument fails. One interpretation is that an agent ought to do that for which there is a moral reason that is not realistically overridden. On this interpretation, (1) and (2) follow from the supposition that Jack and Jim are in moral dilemmas; so moral realists cannot deny these premises. However, premise (3) then claims that, if Jim has a non-realistically-overridden moral reason not to keep his promise, he cannot also have a non-realistically-overridden moral reason to keep his promise. This is false, because Jim is in a moral dilemma, so he has non-realistically-overridden moral reasons both to keep and not to keep his promise. Since the same judgments are true of Jack and of any other agent in a similar dilemma, this interpretation of 'ought' causes no trouble for moral realism. This response can be extended to any interpretation where both 'ought' and 'ought not' can be true. On any such interpretation, (3) is false; so the argument fails.

A stronger interpretation of 'ought' is that an agent ought to do only that for which there are realistically overriding moral reasons. On this interpretation, premise (3) is true, because, if there are realistically overriding moral reasons to do something, there cannot also be realistically overriding moral reasons not to do the same thing. However, premises (1) and (2) are not true on this interpretation. (1) now claims that Jack has a realistically overriding moral reason to keep his promise, but this cannot be true, since Jack is in a moral dilemma. (2) is false for similar reasons, so the argument fails to refute moral realism. Similar responses apply to all other realistic interpretations that make 'ought' contrary to 'ought not'.

Thus, on some realistic interpretations, both Jack and Jim both ought and ought not to keep their promises, but, on other realistic interpretations, both Jack and Jim neither ought nor ought not to keep their promises. If such different interpretations are confused, the above argument might seem to refute moral realism. However, on each realistic interpretation, the same moral judgments are true of both agents; so their truth values need not depend on any subjective difference between the agents. Consequently, the possibility of moral dilemmas is compatible with realistic truth conditions for at least some moral judgments: judgments about what there is a moral reason or requirement to do; judgments about which moral reasons or requirements realistically override which; and judgments where 'ought' is interpreted in terms of moral reasons and requirements and their relative realistic strengths. These are the only moral judg-

ments that are essential for moral dilemmas, as moral realists define them; so moral realists can consistently accept the possibility of moral dilemmas, as they see them.

#### V. ANTIREALISTIC INTERPRETATIONS

This still does not settle the issue, because realistic interpretations miss the point of the antirealist argument. The point is that moral dilemmas create a need for another kind of judgment that does more than merely describe moral requirements and their relative realistic strengths. Since neither moral requirement realistically overrides the other, no realistic moral judgment can help the agent choose. But the agent must and can choose, and the choice need not be arbitrary, since it can be based on personal factors. When an agent has chosen on a personal basis, the agent often says "I ought to do this" or "This is what I ought to do" or even "I have decided that I ought to do this." It is such judgments with 'ought' that cause problems for moral realism. Since they cannot depend on any realistic factor, they must depend on some nonrealistic factor.

Some moral antirealists interpret such judgments by claiming that they are used merely to *express* a decision or a commitment.<sup>11</sup> This is often true, but it is not enough to refute moral realism. Moral realists can admit that moral judgments are often used for speech acts such as to express decisions and commitments; they deny only that the truth values of moral judgments depend on decisions and personal commitments. Thus, the argument against moral realism would confuse speech acts with truth conditions if it depended on any such interpretation of 'ought'.

In order to refute moral realism, judgments with 'ought' must be interpreted so that their truth values depend on some subjective factor. But not just any subjective factor will do. Some agents choose without any reason at all, but then it is not true that they *ought* to do as they choose. Other agents choose on the basis of self-interest, and then they prudentially ought to do as they choose; but it is still not true that they *morally* ought to do as they choose. Such cases cause no trouble for moral realism.

The troubling cases are when an agent chooses an alternative because of his commitment to what can be called "a way of life." This notion is vague, but what is important here is that a way of life includes a tendency to rank one kind of value above another and to choose accordingly. Such rankings are moral beliefs, and such ways of life can be chosen. But moral realists deny that such mental factors as choices and moral beliefs affect the truth values of moral judg-

<sup>11</sup> Such speech acts are emphasized in Winch, p. 165; and MacIntyre, p. 98.

ments. Thus, moral realists must deny that the truth values of moral judgments depend on the way of life of the judged agent.

However, such ways of life *do* affect what agents ought to do in some moral dilemmas. If Jim asked me what he ought to do, I would tell him that he ought to break his promise in order to avoid hurting his daughter. Why? Because this choice is required by his commitment to a way of life that is morally and rationally permissible, so to choose otherwise would show a lack of integrity on his part. Jim's family way of life is rationally permissible, because his choice of it does not depend on any defect such as error, ignorance, irrationality, or partiality. Jim's family way of life is also morally permissible, because he is not so committed that he would help his family if there were a realistically overriding moral requirement not to do so. Still, if he hurt his family when there was no realistically overriding moral reason to do so, he would violate his way of life and his integrity.

Furthermore, the agent's commitments and personal rankings are the proper basis for choices in situations of this kind. Since the situation is a moral dilemma, the choice cannot be based on realistic moral factors or on other people's interests, since these are balanced. The personal rankings of the people affected cannot be used to decide, since several people are affected and their rankings might conflict. It might seem that the person making the judgment can use her own ranking, but there is no justification for imposing a ranking on an agent when the agent can reject that ranking without any rational or moral defect. The judge might not even be affected by the choice, but the agent is responsible for the decision; so it is the agent's own ranking and way of life that determine what he ought to do. Therefore, even if the judge is committed to the professional way of life, it is still true that Jim ought not to hurt his daughter.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, if Jack asked me what he ought to do, I would tell him that he ought to keep his professional promise and to hurt his daughter. This different judgment is true, because Jack is committed to a different way of life, a professional way of life which is also morally and rationally permissible. If he violated his professional obligation when he had no realistically overriding moral reason to do so, this would show a lack of integrity on Jack's part. Thus, Jack ought to do what Jim ought not to do, and vice versa, even though their situations are similar in all respects that can be morally relevant according to moral realism.

<sup>12</sup> It is not clear whether Jim must or is required to break his promise, since it is not clear whether a choice contrary to his way of life would make him liable to punishment in one of its many forms. In any case, my argument does not require this stronger judgment.

In order to interpret such judgments, moral antirealists need to build ways of life, choices, or personal rankings into the truth conditions of moral judgments. There are many ways to do this, but let me suggest one: An agent ought to do something if (and only if) there is a moral reason for the agent to do it, this reason is not overridden realistically, and the agent personally ranks this reason higher than any conflicting moral reason because it fits best into a rationally and morally permissible way of life that the agent chooses without depending on any defect such as error, ignorance, irrationality, or partiality. This interpretation does not capture everyone's use of 'ought', but it is coherent and does capture the point of the antirealist argument.

On this interpretation, Jack ought to keep his promise and to hurt his daughter, but Jim ought not to keep his promise or to hurt his daughter; so (1) and (2) are true. On this interpretation (3) is also true, since, if keeping his promise fits best into a way of life, breaking the same promise in the same situation cannot also fit best into the same way of life. The argument thus shows that, on such interpretations, judgments with 'ought' do not have realistic truth conditions. Therefore, extreme universal moral realism is false.

#### VI. RESPONSES

Several objections might be raised to this argument. First, moral realists might respond that the antirealist interpretation of 'ought' fails to capture common usage, but moral realism is a claim about common usage; so the antirealist interpretation fails to refute moral realism. However, this response either overestimates what antirealists need to claim or underestimates the flexibility of common usage. The argument is not supposed to show that no moral judgments are realistic; so moral antirealists need not claim that their interpretation captures all uses of 'ought'. And the antirealist interpretation does capture some uses of 'ought' that do not violate any rules of common usage. It is not unintelligible to claim that an agent's way of life affects what that agent ought to do, at least in special cases such as moral dilemmas. Many competent English speakers make or assume such judgments.

Moral realists might try to explain such uses in terms of speech acts and pragmatic effects rather than truth conditions. No pragmatic explanation, however, seems to be adequate, because it seems true that Jack ought to keep his promise but not that Jim ought to keep his promise, regardless of which speech act is done or which pragmatic effect is intended. This suggests that the agents' ways of life determine the truth values of the judgments rather than only their speech acts and pragmatic effects. Thus, the first response fails.

A second response might be to deny that, on the antirealist inter-

pretation, judgments with 'ought' are *moral* judgments (see Marcus, *op. cit.*, pp. 135/6). If such judgments are not moral judgments, then moral realists can admit that they lack realistic truth conditions but still claim nonetheless that all moral judgments have realistic truth conditions. Premise (6) of the above argument is then false; so the argument fails to refute moral realism.

It must be admitted that many judgments with 'ought' are not moral judgments. For example, if someone judges that Jim ought to break his promise, but only because breaking his promise is in his interest, then this judgment with 'ought' is not a moral judgment. I specified above, however, that Jack and Jim do not consider any nonmoral factors, and I also assume that the judge considers only moral factors and the agents' rankings of them.

If so, there is no good reason to deny that judgments with 'ought' on the antirealist interpretation are moral judgments. Such judgments have all the essential features of moral judgments. Regarding content, they concern harm to others. Regarding force, they can override nonmoral judgments. Regarding form, the tricky question is whether judgments with 'ought' on the antirealist interpretation are universalizable. They are in one way but not in another. These judgments are universalizable in the sense that all agents who choose the same way of life ought to do the same acts in relevantly similar situations. They are not universalizable in the stronger sense that similar judgments are true of all agents in relevantly similar situations, since not all agents choose the same way of life. However, it begs the question to assume that moral judgments must be universalizable in this strong sense. This definition of morality assumes that differences in choices and ways of life are never morally relevant—but that is precisely the issue between moral realists and antirealists. Furthermore, if moral realists define moral judgments so that no judgment is moral unless it is realistic, it becomes circular for them to claim that all moral judgments are realistic (cf. MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, 99). This claim does not become completely empty, since moral realists still claim that some judgments are both realistically true and moral. Nonetheless, the universality of moral realism—the claim that not only some but all moral judgments are realistic—rests solely on a definition. And there is still no non-question-begging justification for excluding the antirealistic judgments from the domain of morality. In the absence of any such justification, I conclude that these antirealistic judgments are moral judgments; so the second response fails.

As a third response, moral realists might argue that, even though different moral judgments are true of the two agents, there must be some morally relevant difference between the agents if they are

committed to different ways of life. Similar actions by different agents can cause different amounts of harm when the agents are committed to different ways of life. If Jim hurts his daughter, his self-esteem and his daughter's trust will be damaged. Some similar effects might flow from Jack's hurting his daughter, but the harm will be less, since he will not have violated his way of life, and, if his daughter knows this, she should expect and understand such treatment. Similarly, if Jack breaks his promise, he will lose more self-esteem and professional trust than Jim will lose if he breaks his, since Jack is committed to the professional way of life, but Jim is not. A moral realist can cite such differences in order to explain why Jack ought to keep his promise but it is not true that Jim ought to keep his.

This response, however, avoids the problem without solving it. Even if the agent's way of life does affect how much harm each alternative would cause, the situations can still be redescribed as moral dilemmas, simply by adding extra harms onto one alternative to balance the harm caused by violating the agent's way of life. For example, suppose Jim made his promise to more of his professional colleagues, so there will be more professional loss if he breaks it. Jim's breaking his promise can then cause just as much harm as Jack's breaking his, even though it is not supported as strongly by Jim's way of life. Similarly, suppose Jack has more children who will be hurt along with his daughter if he keeps his professional promise, so that Jack's promise breaking prevents just as much harm as Jim's does, even though Jim's way of life supports his promise breaking more strongly. With some such changes, the example can be described so that neither moral requirement realistically overrides the other, even though the way of life of each agent supports one alternative above the other. The agents are then in realistic moral dilemmas, and the argument goes through as before.

A final response is that moral realists do not deny that the truth values of moral judgments can depend on past choices, since they admit that whether an act is morally wrong can depend on whether the agent chose to promise to do it.<sup>13</sup> Promises, however, are not like commitments to ways of life. Promises are speech acts; so one can choose to make a promise but never make or even be in a position to make that promise, and then no obligation is created. And a promise does create an obligation even if there is no subjective intention to fulfill it. Thus, promises themselves, rather than choices or any other

<sup>13</sup> Geoff Sayre McCord raised this objection in correspondence. Similar points apply to obligations that arise from decisions to have children, etc.

subjective accompaniment, are what make such moral judgments true for a moral realist. In contrast, Jim's and Jack's subjective commitments determine what they ought to do, on the anti-realist interpretation, even if their commitments are not reflected in any objective actions or speech prior to this moral dilemma. Furthermore, personal rankings are moral beliefs, but moral realists deny the claim that whether or not one has a moral obligation to keep a promise depends on one's moral beliefs. Thus, the argument shows that the truth values of moral judgments in moral dilemmas depend on more subjective factors than in standard cases of promising. If moral realists admit that the truth values of moral judgments can depend on such subjective factors as the way of life chosen by the agent, then they grant all that the argument attempts to show.

Moral realists might have other responses, and the argument does rely on some intuitions that might be questioned; so the argument is not a conclusive proof. Nonetheless, in the absence of any adequate response, I conclude that some moral judgments do not have realistic truth conditions, and so extreme universal moral realism is false.

#### VII. QUALIFICATIONS

It is important to realize what this argument does not claim to show. The argument does not try to prove that every version of moral realism is false. It is aimed at only the most extreme version. Less extreme versions of moral realism are not affected by the argument.

First, the argument is directed against only universal moral realism, not partial moral realism. The argument shows only that some moral judgments lack realistic truth conditions, but other moral judgments still might have realistic truth conditions. The argument does raise the problem of where to draw the line, and it might shift the burden of proof. Still, the argument does not directly attack the claim that some, but not all, moral judgments have realistic truth conditions. And that is all that some moral realists wanted to claim anyway.

Second, even for those moral judgments which the argument shows not to be realistic, the argument refutes only the extreme claim that their truth conditions are independent of even ideal mental states of agents. It is not plausible to make judgments with 'ought' depend on the agent's choice, if the agent would choose differently if he or she were informed or rational. Thus, judgments with 'ought' depend at most on ideal, not actual, choices, so the argument does not refute a moderate moral realist (or objectivist) who claims independence from actual, but not ideal, mental states.

Third, the argument shows dependence on the choices and beliefs of only the agent, not the judge. On the antirealist interpretation,

anyone can judge that Jim ought to break his promise and that Jack ought to keep his promise. The truth of these judgments does not depend on who makes the judgment.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the argument can be accepted by moderate moral realists who claim the truth values of moral judgments are independent of only the judger's mental states. This is enough to make moral judgments parallel to some scientific judgments, such as psychological judgments, so some moderate moral realists might be content with this much independence.

These qualifications should allay the fears of opponents who think that my argument leads to an unacceptable form of subjectivism or relativism. If extreme moral realism were the only alternative to moral relativism, it would be disturbing to find that extreme moral realism is false. However, my argument applies only to some moral judgments and only in moral dilemmas, so it does not lead all the way to wholesale relativism.

This might seem to take the sting out of my conclusion. However, it is important to realize that moral realism has its limits, because these limits make moral realism more plausible. Extreme moral realism underestimates the complexity of moral life when it overlooks the importance of individual choices and moral beliefs in moral dilemmas. More limited moral realism can recognize that such subjective factors are morally relevant in moral dilemmas, and it can still impose realistic limits on choices so as to avoid the problems of wholesale relativism. Thus, limited moral realism can accept the insights and avoid the problems of more extreme theories.

Nonetheless, I have not argued that limited moral realism is true. There are several other arguments against moral realism, and some apply to limited moral realism as well as to extreme moral realism. These other arguments would have to be refuted in order to defend even limited moral realism. I am not sure whether this can be done. In any case, all I have tried to do here is to show that the only version of moral realism that might be defensible is limited moral realism.

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<sup>14</sup> Contrast Winch (p. 153) and MacIntyre (p. 98), who claim that their antirealist judgments can be made only in the first person, since their interpretations emphasize speech acts that can be done only in the first person. Cf. fn. 11.