

Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?†

PHILIPPA FOOT*

This paper is about the moral subjectivism that, for the last sixty years or so, has dominated moral philosophy in England, America, and other countries in which analytic philosophy is taught. This is the subjectivism—often called ‘noncognitivism’—that came to the fore with A. J. Ayer, C. L. Stevenson and Richard Hare, informed the work of John Mackie and many others, and has lately appeared, refreshed, in Allan Gibbard’s ‘expressivist’ account of ‘normative’ language.¹ Simon Blackburn, reviewing Gibbard’s *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, has said that he hopes this book will set the agenda for moral philosophy for the next fifty years. I myself, for all my admiration for Gibbard, hope that it will not do that. So I should say why I believe that these non-cognitivist theories—one and all—are based on a mistake.

To identify the common characteristic of the apparently somewhat diverse moral philosophies that I have just grouped together, and also to do justice to them, it will be good to start by asking how the whole non-cognitivist business began. One finds its deepest roots in Hume. But more immediately, Ayer and Stevenson’s emotivism, like Hare’s prescriptivism, came into being as a result of ‘the linguistic turn’, popularized by logical positivism but developing far beyond it. For with ‘linguistic philosophy’ came the idea of explaining the singularity of moral judgment in terms of a special use of language, called ‘evaluation’ but more akin to exclamation and command than to anything one would normally mean by that term. With this idea, it seemed possible, at last, to say clearly what G. E. Moore had meant, or should have meant, when he insisted that goodness

* Griffin Professor of Philosophy, Eminentus, UCLA. Hon. Fellow, Somerville College, Oxford.

† This paper is a revised text of the Hart Lecture delivered in Oxford University on 10 May 1994. It has given me great pleasure to prepare it in honour of Herbert Hart, whose work is so much admired throughout the world, and whose presence is now much missed in Oxford. Many thanks for help from Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence and, most especially, Michael Thompson to whose work I am greatly indebted.

¹ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Gollancz, London, 1936; C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1945; R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1965; J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977; A. Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990. I should mention here that although he has not abandoned his attack on what he calls ‘Descriptivism’ Hare does not want to be called either a subjectivist or a noncognitivist. See R. M. Hare, ‘Objective Prescriptions’, in A. P. Griffiths (ed) *Ethics*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures 1993, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994.

was a special kind of 'non-natural' property.² In the development of emotivism and prescriptivism the idea of a special ('non-natural') property was replaced by that of a special and essentially practical use of language. And this, it seemed, was a great discovery. The language of evaluation was 'emotive'. It expressed a speaker's feelings and attitudes, as well as inducing similar feelings and attitudes in others. Those who had these 'attitudes' 'favoured' the things they called 'good': the idea of an attitude being linked to a tendency to act. Such also was the doctrine of A. J. Ayer; and a little later R. M. Hare tied 'evaluation' even more closely to individual action, in his theory of universalized imperatives by which a speaker exhorted others and, in the acceptance of a first person imperative, committed himself to choose what he called 'good'. So 'prescriptivism'—a distinctive version of the doctrine that I have in my sights—was added to the emotivism with which it had started out. In an explicit definition of the 'prescriptive' use of language Hare wrote

We say something prescriptive if and only if, for some act A, some situation S and some person P, if P were to assent (orally) to what we say, and not, in S, do A, he logically must be assenting insincerely.³

I shall come back to this definition later on. But first, something more general about the theories I am attacking. It is characteristic of those I have mentioned, and others inspired by them, to suggest that the making of any sincere moral judgment requires the presence of individual feeling, attitude, or intention, and thus goes beyond 'description' or 'assertion of fact'. It was recognized, of course, that the language contains many terms like 'courage' or 'justice' designed for description *as well as* moral judgment, but it was said that their 'descriptive' content could not reach all the way to moral evaluation, the speaker's feelings or commitments to action having to be added if that were to be on the scene. Hence the apparently unquestionable distinction between 'descriptive' and 'evaluative' language, more or less taken for granted in much of contemporary ethics.

In early versions of these theories it was suggested that only a demand for consistency set any limits on the classes of actions to which words such as 'morally good' or 'morally bad' could be applied. So the extra feature supposedly involved in moral judgment could stand on its own, ready to form the core of alien moral systems confronting, or even directly contradicting, our own, and if no linguistic device existed for expressing 'moral approval' or 'moral disapproval' in their purity, this was held to be merely an accident of language. Thus, these early theories were radically subjectivist, allowing the possibility even of bizarre so-called 'moral judgments' about the wrongness of running around trees right handed or looking at hedgehogs in the light of the moon, and thus opening up limitless possibilities of irresolvable moral conflict. Nowadays it is commonly admitted, I believe, that there is some content restriction on what can intelligibly

² G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1903.

³ R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981, 21.

be said to be a system of morality. Moreover, Hare himself has suggested that a fairly tight form of utilitarianism can actually be obtained from universalized prescriptivism.⁴ So it is not the old battle against a 'free for all' subjectivism that I want to fight. The mistake that I referred to in my title is one I claim to find in the later, as in the earlier, versions of noncognitivism. Even if the very tightest limitations on 'descriptive content' were accepted—even Bentham's suggestion that when used in conjunction with the greatest happiness principle, words such as 'ought' and 'right' have meaning and otherwise not—'description' would still not, according to these theories, reach all the way to moral judgment. Someone convinced of the utility—or whatever—of certain kinds of action would not—indeed could not—straightforwardly and with sincerity make the judgment about their moral goodness unless he found in himself the right feelings and attitudes, or was ready to take the step of committing himself to act in a particular way. For moral evaluation, something 'conative' had to be present as well as belief in matters of fact.

What all these theories try to do, then, is to give the *conditions of use* of sentences such as 'It is morally objectionable to break promises', in terms of something that must be true about the speaker. He must have certain feelings or attitudes; he must commit himself to acting in a certain way; he must at least feel remorse if he does not so act. *Meaning was thus to be explained in terms of a speaker's attitude, intentions, or state of mind.* And this opened up a gap between moral judgments and assertions, with the idea that truth conditions give, and may exhaust, the meaning of the latter but not the former. Thus it seemed that *fact*, complementary to assertion, had been distinguished from *value*, complementary to the expression of feeling, attitude or commitment to action. Propositions about matters of fact were assertible if their truth conditions are fulfilled, but moral judgments, through conditions of utterance, were essentially linked to an individual speaker's subjective state.

It is this kind of thing that seems to me all wrong. That is what I intended in suggesting that moral subjectivism 'rests on a mistake'. So what, then, is the mistake? It is the mistake of so construing what is 'special' about moral judgment that the grounds of a moral judgment do not reach all the way to it. Whatever 'grounds' may have been given, someone may be unready, indeed unable, to make the moral judgment, because he has not *got* the attitude or feeling, is not *in* the 'conative' state of mind, is not *ready* to take the decision to act: whatever it is that the theory says is required. It is this gap between ground and moral judgment that I am denying. In my view there are no such conditions on moral judgment and therefore no such gap.

It was not, however, a fit of collective madness that seized moral philosophers in the thirties, and still grips them today. Their theories were devised to take account of something that really is a feature of moral judgment: the 'action guiding' character of morality, which Hume had insisted on and taken as the

⁴ See R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1963.

foundation of his moral philosophy. Morality, Hume had said, is necessarily practical, serving to produce and prevent action, and I shall call this 'Hume's practicality requirement'.⁵ Nor am I denying that his demand must be met. My contention is rather that the theories I am attacking tried to meet it in the wrong way. This, substantially, is what this paper is about.

If I am to prove my thesis I must, of course, produce an alternative to the noncognitivist way of showing that moral judgment is essentially 'action guiding'. So what is my own account of the matter? It is, to state it briefly, that Hume's demand is met by the (most unHumean) thought that acting morally is part of practical rationality.

Now I am quite aware that to make this suggestion will seem most foolhardy: a case of putting one's head, philosophically speaking, into the lion's mouth. For is it not difficult to establish even coincidence between moral and rational action? What, after all, about those problem cases where justice or charity forbids the only way out of a tight corner, and the life of the agent may even be at stake? Isn't the demonstration of the rationality of just action a problem with which David Gauthier, for instance, has been wrestling for years, with great energy and skill?⁶ And isn't this the fence at which I myself have repeatedly fallen, trying now this way now that of getting over—from 'Moral Beliefs' in 1958 to 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives' in 1972?⁷ All of this is true, and if I am hopeful of greater success this time round it is because I think I now see why I couldn't have managed it before. Roughly speaking it was because I still held a more or less Humean theory of reasons for action, taking it for granted that reasons had to be based on an agent's desires. To be sure, in 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives' I had (rather inconsistently with my doubts about the rational status of morals) allowed considerations of self-interest an independent 'reason-giving' force. But this didn't help with the rationality of disinterested justice, which rationality I was, rather scandalously, inclined to restrict to those whose desires were such as to allow them to be described as lovers of justice. I have therefore, rightly, been accused by my critics of reintroducing subjectivity at the level of rationality while insisting on objectivity in the criteria of moral right and wrong.

In common with others, I took it for granted at that time that a discussion of the rationality of moral action would start from some theory or other about what reasons for action must be: rather favouring a desire-fulfilment theory, with some special allowance for the force of considerations of self-interest. I now believe that both the self-interest theory of rationality, and the theory of rationality as desire fulfilment are mistaken. Moreover there seems to be a mistake of *strategy* involved in trying to fit the rationality of moral action into either theory; such an enterprise implying that we first come to a theory of rational action, and then

⁵ See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, part 2.

⁶ See D. Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986.

⁷ P. R. Foot, 'Moral Beliefs', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol 59 (1958–9) and 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives', *The Philosophical Review*, vol 89, no 3, July 1972.

try as best we can to slot in the rationality of acts of justice and charity.

That this was a mistake of strategy was suggested to me by my friend the late Warren Quinn, and while I do not think that he really developed the idea himself, the same thought is implicit in his attack on end-neutral, Humean, theories of rationality, in an important article 'Putting Rationality in its Place' that has just been reprinted in the collection of his papers called *Morality and Action*, following his very sadly early death.⁸ What, asked Quinn, would be *so important* about practical rationality if it were rational to seek to fulfil any, even a despicable, desire? In asking this he was questioning whether it is right to think that moral action has to be brought under a pre-established concept of practical rationality, and this seems to me to be very important indeed. My own view is, and perhaps his was, that there is no question here of 'fitting in' *in either direction*. I do not, therefore, want to canvas the rival claims of self-interest or maximum satisfaction of desires as accounts of practical rationality, and then try, as Gauthier and many others do, to explain the rationality of moral actions in terms of the one that wins out. But nor do I think, on the other side, that the whole of practical rationality can be brought under the umbrella of 'morality', as we usually understand that term.

As I see it, the rationality of, say, telling the truth, keeping promises, or helping a neighbour, is *on a par* with the rationality of self-preserving action, and of the careful and cognisant pursuit of other innocent ends; each being a part or aspect of practical rationality. The different considerations are on a par, moreover, in that a judgment about what is required by practical rationality must take account of their interaction: of the weight of the ones we call non-moral as well as those we call moral. For it is not always rational to give help where it is needed, to keep a promise, or even, I believe, absolutely always to speak the truth. If it is to be said that 'moral considerations' are always 'overriding' it cannot be *these* considerations that we refer to, but must rather be the overall 'moral judgment' about what, in all the circumstances, should be done. Sorting out this particular point of precedence is, I think, a matter of keeping one's head and remembering that some expressions do and some do not imply overall judgment: imprudence, for instance, being by definition contrary to rationality, but self-sacrifice not. Leaving aside this complication, we may think of the different requirements of rationality in action as on a par. And I shall argue later that there is a unity to these different grounds of practical rationality that may not be obvious right away.

Before coming to that, however, I have to argue that just and charitable actions are indeed requirements of practical rationality. How can I now find a way of showing that reason may demand that promises be kept, truth told, or succour given, even when that is contrary to self-interest or to heart's desire?

The demonstration should start, I believe, with some observations on the nature of a moral virtue. It is in the concept of a moral virtue that in so far as

⁸ W. S. Quinn, *Morality and Action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994.

someone possesses it his actions are good; which is to say that he acts well. Moral virtues bring it about that one who has them acts well, and we must enquire as to what this does and does not mean.

What, for instance, distinguishes a just person from one who is unjust? The fact that he keeps his contracts? That cannot be right, because circumstances may make it impossible for him to do so. Nor is it that he saves life rather than kills innocent people, for by blameless mishap he may kill rather than save. 'Of course,' someone will say at this point, 'it is the just person's intention not what he actually brings about that counts.' But why not say, then, that it is the distinguishing characteristic of the just that *for them certain considerations count as reasons for action?* (And as reasons of a certain weight.) And will it not be the same with other virtues, as for instance the virtues of charity, courage, and temperance? Those who possess these virtues possess them in so far as they recognize certain considerations (such as the fact of a promise, or of a neighbour's need) as powerful, and in many circumstances compelling, reasons for acting. They recognize the reasons, and act on them.

Thus the description 'just', as applied to a man or woman, speaks of how it is with them in respect of the acceptance of a certain group of considerations as reasons for action. If justice is a virtue, this is what the virtue of justice rectifies, ie makes good. It is no part of moral goodness—which is goodness of character—that someone should be physically strong, should move well, or talk well, or see well. But he must act well, in a sense that is given primarily at least by his recognition of the force of particular considerations as reasons for acting: that and the influence that this has on what he does. The just person *aims* at keeping his promises, paying what he owes, and defending those whose rights are being violated, so far as such actions are required by the virtue of justice. Likewise, he recognizes certain limitations on what he may do even for some virtue-given end; as he may not kill an innocent person even for the sake of stopping someone else from killing a greater number, though he may, as Elizabeth Anscombe has remarked, destroy someone's property to stop the spread of a fire. And again he acts accordingly. Similarly, if charity is a virtue, this is because it makes its possessor's action good in the area of aims such as the relief of poverty. Here again, recognizing particular considerations as reasons for action, he acts on these reasons as he should.

Now in describing moral virtues in terms of a) the recognition of particular considerations as reasons for acting, and b) the relevant action, I have only been expressing very familiar and time-honoured ideas of moral goodness. But how can it be denied that I have at the same time been talking about practical rationality? The discussion has been about human goodness in respect of reason-recognition and reason-following, and if this is not practical rationality I should like to know what is! The reply from those who hold a preconceived theory of practical rationality will be, no doubt, that rationality is the following of perceived self-interest; alternatively that it is the pursuit, careful and cognisant, of the maximum satisfaction of present desires: each respondent suggesting that one

of these rival theories gives *the* concept of practical rationality. At the very least, they may argue, such theories give a *different* idea of practical rationality, to set beside the one that emerged from our discussion of justice and charity as virtues having to do with the following of reasons. But I suggested earlier that this was a mistake: that we should not think in terms of rival theories, but of the different parts of practical rationality, no one of which should be mistaken for the whole. An action can be contrary to practical rationality in that it is dishonest or disrespectful of others' rights, *or* that it is foolishly imprudent; *or*, again, that the agent is eg careless, timid, or half-hearted in going for what he wants.

Given that there are at least so many different cases, which it may or may not be useful to categorize, it is not surprising that the blanket term 'practical irrationality', and cognates such as 'contrary to practical reason', may go along with different subsidiary descriptions. I do not want to argue about bits of linguistic usage: about where, for instance, the particular term 'irrational', or again 'unreasonable', is or isn't at home. It is obvious that some terms such as 'silly' or 'foolish', and perhaps also 'irrational', do not correctly describe the actions of, for instance, the Great Train Robbers; even though in being dishonest, and careless of the life of the train driver, what they did was contrary to justice, and so to practical rationality. It makes for nothing but confusion to centre an argument about practical reason around one particular expression cut off from its genuine application, as Allan Gibbard does in supposing moral judgment to be expressible in terms of what does or does not 'make sense'. As if *that* were the way to say what was wrong with the train robbers' actions, or with the notorious landlord Rachmann's dealings with his tenants!

There is no doubt but that there are different kinds of cases of contrary-to-reasonness, and not surprisingly it is possible to contravene rationality in more than one way at the same time. I once read of a burglar who was caught because he sat down to watch television in the house he was burgling, thus adding the contrary-to-reasonness of imprudence to that of dishonesty. Because his actions were faulty in that he did not hurry away with the swag, we can say, if we like, that he *should* have done so. It does not follow, however, that he would have acted well if he had avoided imprudence, because it is not possible to act with full practical rationality in the pursuit of a bad end.

It is, I think, possible to see, even if not as yet very clearly, the common thread linking these different parts of practical rationality. The root notion is that of the goodness of human beings in respect of their actions; which means, to repeat, goodness of the will rather than of such things as sight or dexterity, concentration or memory. Kant was perfectly right in saying that moral goodness was goodness of the will; the idea of practical rationality is throughout a concept of this kind. He seems to have gone wrong, however, in thinking that an abstract idea of practical reason applicable to rational beings as such could take us all the way to anything like our own moral code. For the evaluation of human action depends also on essential features of specifically human life.

Elizabeth Anscombe brings out this dependence of morality on the life of our species in a passage in her article 'Promising and its Justice'. There she points out facts about human life that make it necessary for human beings to be able to bind each other to action through institutions such as promising. (There are so few other ways in which one person can reliably get another to do what he wants. And what hangs on this may, we might add, be something very important, such as that his children should be cared for after his death.)

Anscombe writes:

[G]etting one another to do things without the application of physical force is a necessity for human life, and that far beyond what could be secured by . . . other means.

[Such a procedure is] . . . an instrument whose use is part and parcel of an enormous amount of human activity and hence of human good; of the supplying both of human needs and of human wants so far as the satisfactions of these are compossible. . . . It is scarcely possible to live in a society without encountering it and even being involved in it.⁹

Anscombe is pointing here to what she has elsewhere called an 'Aristotelian necessity': that which is necessary because and in so far as good hangs on it.¹⁰ We invoke the same idea when we say that it is necessary for plants to have water, for birds to build nests, for wolves to hunt in packs, and for lionesses to teach their cubs to kill. These 'Aristotelian necessities' depend on what the particular species of plants and animals need, on their natural habitat, and the ways of making out that are in their repertoire. These things together determine what it is for members of a particular species to be as they should be, and to do that which they should do.¹¹ And for all the enormous differences between the life of humans and that of plants or animals, we can see that human defects and excellences are similarly related to what human beings are and what they do. We do not need to be able to dive like gannets, nor to see in the dark like owls; but our memory and concentration must be such as to allow us to learn language, and our sight such that we can recognize faces at a glance; while like lionesses human parents are defective if they do not teach their young the skills that they need to survive. Moreover, in that we are social animals, we depend on each other as do wolves that hunt in packs, with co-operation such as our own depending on special factors such as conventional arrangements. Like the animals we do things which will benefit others rather than ourselves: there is no good case for assessing the goodness of human action by reference only to good that each person brings to himself. Is it, one wonders, some lingering shadow of the thoroughly discredited doctrine of psychological egoism—of the belief that all *human* action is directed to the good of the agent himself—that inclines us to

⁹ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1981, vol III, 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 15, 18–19, 100–101, 139.

¹¹ I have written here of species, but it might be better to use the words 'life form' as Michael Thompson does. See his article 'The Representation of Life' in R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence and W. S. Quinn (eds) *Virtues and Reasons*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995. Here I am particularly indebted to his work.

an egoistic concept of practical rationality? I do not know what else should make us think that the evaluation of reason-following behaviour must be altogether different in its conceptual structure from the evaluation of the behaviour of an animal. And it will surely not be denied that there is something wrong with a free-riding wolf, who eats but does not take part in the hunt, as with a member of the species of dancing bees who finds a source of nectar but does not let other bees know where it is. These 'free-riding' individuals of a species whose members work together are just as *defective* as those who have defective hearing, sight, or powers of locomotion.

I am therefore, quite seriously, likening the basis of moral evaluation to that of the evaluation of behaviour in animals. I would stress, however, that it is important not to underestimate the degree to which human communication and reasoning changes the scene. The goods that hang on human co-operation, and hang too on such things as respect for truth, art and scholarship, are much more diverse, and much harder to delineate than are animal *goods*. Animals are different also from us in that to do what they should do—what is needed and is within their capacity—they do not have to understand what is going on; whereas a human being can and should understand that, and why, there is reason for, say, keeping a promise, or behaving fairly. This last may seem a tall order, but this human understanding is not anything hard to come by. We all know enough to say 'How could we get on without justice?', 'Where would we be if no one helped anyone else?' or 'How could we manage if there were no way of making decisions for us all?'

Anyone who thinks about it can see that for human beings the teaching and following of morality is something necessary. We can't get on without it. And this is the nub of the proper answer to the challenge that I made in 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives', where I asked why it should be thought rational to follow morality, but not to obey duelling rules or silly rules of etiquette. In that article I myself made a rotten job of answering my own question because, still under the influence of Humean ideas of practical rationality, I thought irrelevant what is now turning out to be most relevant. (It was, I remember, a remark of Rosalind Hursthouse's that put me right about this.)

Later on, Warren Quinn helped me by pointing out that after this change I could at least claim to have found the basis for a unified theory of rationality. For if moral virtues are an 'Aristotelian necessity' for human beings so too is a reasonable modicum of self-interest. Once grown, we can look out for ourselves much better than anyone else can do it for us.¹² Good hangs, too, on the careful and cognisant pursuit of many more particular ends.

It is time now for me to return to the main line of my argument against noncognitivism. It is because I see practical rationality as determined in this way

¹² In theory, this could, of course, be different for some other kinds of rational beings. Perhaps they would find it impossible to think calmly about *their own* future, and would have invented a kind of 'buddy system' by which each person had someone else to look out for him. We should find this extremely inconvenient except in bringing up children when they are small.

that I claim to be able to interpret the 'action-guidingness' of moral judgment in terms of the practical rationality of moral action. And please notice that I have not reintroduced, via the concept of practical rationality itself a subjective (agent-centred) condition on moral judgment. For I have not subscribed to a desire-based, Humean, theory of practical rationality: nor have I any reason to go along with Gibbard's 'expressivist' account of what it is we are doing when we say that certain action is rational. Nothing of that kind has had any part in what I have said.

If I am right, therefore, about judgments of practical rationality and their ground, and right in seeing the kind of thing that Elizabeth Anscombe said about promising as simply one particular application of general (*species-based*) criteria of evaluation, I can claim to see how, in principle, a non-subjectivist—indeed cognitivist—reply might be given to Hume's demand that morality be shown to be 'necessarily practical'. Considerations about such things as promising, neighbourliness and help for those in trouble, have, I maintain, the same kind of connection with action as do considerations of self-interest or of means to our ends: the connection going in each case through the concept of practical rationality and the facts of human life. So I think that we can see as hopeful the project of producing a cognitivist alternative to theories such as emotivism, prescriptivism and expressivism: an alternative that takes care of just what they were trying to take care of, in the way of a necessary connection between moral judgment and action.

I am sure that it will be objected at this point that even if, along these lines, a certain conceptual link has been shown to hold between moral language and action, via the fact that a moral judgment speaks of what there is reason to do, this will not have put the connection in the right place. For, it will be said, a relation has not been shown that holds between moral judgment and the action of *each and every individual*. This, however, I would dispute. On a 'practical rationality' account, a moral judgment says something about the action of any individual to whom it applies; namely something about the reason that there is for *him* to do it or not do it; whether or not he recognizes that, and whether or not, if he does recognize it, he also acts on it as he should. Moreover, it can explain moral action in an individual who knows that he has reason to act morally; because acting on reasons is a basic mode of operation in human beings. This too is part of my account of the way in which morality is necessarily practical: it serves to produce and prevent action, *because the understanding of reasons can do that*.

We must be careful, however, not to tie moral judgment too closely to action. One who is the subject of a true moral judgment does not always do what it says he should do, since he may not recognize its truth, and may not act on it even if he does. In spite of recognizing the force of Hume's 'practicality requirement' we must allow for ignorance, for weakness of will, and also for the phenomenon of shamelessness. It should be seen as an advantage, not a disadvantage, if the 'rationality' account leaves room for this last. No doubt quite open shamelessness

is fairly rare (even in 1994) at least in the circles in which most philosophers live. But it is important to recognize that shamelessness can co-exist with the use of moral language, and to see that this shamelessness is not the same as insincerity. I have read, for instance, of a member of a group of city louts out for a day in the country to hunt down some small inoffensive animal, who, though described as 'the conscience of the group', said: 'I know I'm on earth 70 years and that I'm not going anywhere else. If I choose to spend my day out in the countryside doing whatever I feel like then that's what I'll do.' And again of a certain Brooklyn machine politician who had the gall to say that while people think it hard to stand up for what is right, what is really hard is what he was doing, 'standing up day after day, week after week, for what is wrong'. Like Alec D'Urberville in Hardy's novel, this politician might have said 'I have lived bad, and I shall die bad', meaning what he said, but without the slightest intention to reform.

There are, it is true, some who try to hide their shamelessness by making an attack on morality. But more people than we like to admit are simply shameless. Do they then not 'endorse the norm' of justice and charity, to use Gibbard's words for what he sees as the 'state of mind' that is 'expressed' in moral judgment? Well I do not know what is meant by this somewhat contrived expression. I suppose that most criminals do not think much about the topic of morality, being in this rather like Alan Clark who, when confronted with a nasty fact about the arms trade, is reported to have said: 'I do not much fill my mind with what one set of foreigners do to another.' I suppose one can evade either 'endorsing' or not 'endorsing' morality, or part of morality, by simply refusing to think about it; and I suppose that most of us do that at times. But D'Urberville seems not, on the night he seduced Tess, to have pushed morality out of sight, when he said 'I have lived bad, and I shall die bad', and it is important to contrast his mentality with the point of view of those whom we may call '(ideological) immoralists', as eg Thrasymachus, Callicles, Nietzsche, or Gide. For the latter queried whether human goodness and badness are what they are supposed to be, whereas D'Urberville implicitly endorsed ordinary moral opinion, as did the Brooklyn machine politician, and perhaps also the 'city hunter' who seems to have thought that there was reason for him to let harmless animals live. By contrast with these shameless individuals, the immoralists are bringing arguments in favour of some different standard of human goodness.¹³

I am not, of course, denying that there are many ambiguous cases; but the two poles, of shamelessness and immoralism, nevertheless exist. And it is not the shameless but those who in their heart of hearts agree with, say, Thrasymachus or Nietzsche who are *insincere* if they speak as we do about what is right and wrong.

It follows, therefore, from the line of argument of this paper that Hare, who said that moral language was 'prescriptive', and who so defined the prescriptive

¹³ And so, in Gavin Lawrence's graphic term we have *them* in our net.

use of language that anyone who assents to a prescriptive proposition that in circumstances C an action A is morally wrong, but nevertheless does A in C, is as a matter of logic insincere—said something that is not true. Moral judgments, while we may want to call them ‘prescriptive’ for some other reason, are not ‘prescriptive’ *in this sense*. So no good reason has so far been given for thinking that there is any kind of ‘logical gap’ between a moral judgment and its grounds.

At this point, however, I must return to the subject of the ‘practicality’ of morality, to see how my account of it works out in face of a rather different version of noncognitivism that is popular today. I pointed out earlier that noncognitivism starts out from the obviously correct idea that moral judgment has a special connection with the actions which, as Hume said, it ‘serves to produce and prevent’. Nor is this a contingent connection. It is in the concept of morality that the thought that something ought to be done has a relation to action lacked by such thoughts as that the earth is round, or strawberries sweet, or many lives lost in wars. In this paper I have accepted this premise but interpreted it differently, suggesting that it is because moral action is a requirement of practical rationality that it has a special connection with the will. But it is just here that some of my noncognitivist opponents will move in, scenting victory. For they will insist that the fact of an agent’s having reason to do something (say to keep promises) is itself dependent on his feelings, passions, or desires. And so, they will argue, if a moral judgment about what I ought to do implies that I have reason so to act, the judgment would seem to imply not just ‘cognitions’ but also something ‘conative’: something having to do with an engagement of the will. A noncognitivist, neo-Humean theory of reasons for action is thus being called in to support a neo-Humean account of moral judgment.

To many of its contemporary proponents this account of reasons for action will probably seem particularly telling against an account of the practical aspect of morality such as the one I have given. For they too think of one who makes a moral judgment as necessarily having reason to act. A person’s moral views suffice on occasion to explain his action: the moral judgment gave him a ‘motivating reason’ to do what he did. And this, my opponents believe, implies a fact about him: a fact about his attitudes, feelings or desires.

In the form in which this argument is now often put forward it begins, therefore, from the premise that moral judgments are ‘motivating reasons’ for action; by which it is meant that people do things simply because they think that they ought to do so. And this is followed by a particular account of what it is for anyone to have such a motivating, action-explaining, reason as part of his ‘psychological state’.

The seduction of this account of reasons for action is considerable. It rests, no doubt, on what John McDowell has called the ‘hydraulic’ picture of the psychological determinants of action: a picture of desires as forces moving the will in certain directions, with action the result of a combination of belief and desire.¹⁴ Such a picture is just as suspect as McDowell says it is; but

¹⁴ See J. McDowell, ‘Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?’, *The Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume*, 1978, 13–29.

what, we must ask, has ever given us such a picture? Where does *its* seduction lie?

To answer this question it will be useful to consider an article by Michael Smith in which what he calls 'the Humean theory of motivation' is defended. He writes

. . . the distinctive feature of a motivating reason to \emptyset is that in virtue of having such a reason an agent is in a state that is *potentially explanatory* of his \emptyset ing. . . [And] it would seem to be part of our concept of what it is for an agent's reasons to have the potential to explain his behaviour that his having these reasons is a fact about him; that is, that the goals that such reasons embody are *his* goals.¹⁵

We are likely to be seduced by this because it is natural to think in the following way:

Take as an example that of someone who throws away his supply of cigarettes. He does so because he wants to give up smoking. And he wants to give up smoking because he wants a healthy old age. The series goes on—A for the sake of B—but it can't go on for ever.¹⁶ And must it not end with something that the agent 'just wants'; in other words with some 'conative' element in his individual psychological state?

The question is meant to be rhetorical; but the answer to it is 'No'. For what, we must ask, gives the agent this goal? Does he find himself trembling at the thought of cancer at fifty? Is he in a state of anxiety at the thought of how much he smokes? Perhaps. But nothing of this kind has to be part of the story, as Smith himself admits. So why do we say that what gets the whole thing going must be a desire or other 'conative' element in the subject's 'psychological state'? Suppose instead that it is the recognition that there is reason for him, as for anyone else, to look after his future so far as circumstances allow? Why should not this be where the series of questions 'why?' comes to an end? Those already in thrall to the 'hydraulic' picture of the workings of the mind will deny it. Others may, however, consider the question *why should we not take the recognition of a reason for acting as bringing the series to a close?* Recognition of a reason gives the rational person a goal; and this recognition is, according to the argument of the present paper, based on facts and concepts not on some prior attitude, feeling or goal. The only fact about the individual's state of mind that is required for the explanatory force of the proposition about the requirement of rationality is that he does not (for some bizarre reason) deny its truth. He only needs to know, like most adults, that it is silly to disregard one's own future without special reason to do so. No special explanation is needed of why men take reasonable care of their own future; an explanation is needed when they do not. Nor does human co-operation need a special explanation. Most people know that it is, for instance, unreasonable to take benefits and give nothing in return.

¹⁵ M. Smith, 'The Humean Theory of Motivation', *Mind*, NS XCVI, (1987) 38.

¹⁶ Cp David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix I.

In denying the neo-Humean account of reasons for action in general it is, however, important to stress that there are some that do depend on what a particular person wants. If I want to see the Taj Mahal I have reason to buy a ticket to India as someone who detests all things Eastern does not. The imperative is, as Kant would say, hypothetical: if I no longer want to go the reason may well disappear. Another obvious example is that of someone who, feeling hungry and having no food in the house, goes down the road to buy something to eat. If he were not hungry he would not have this reason to go, and unless there were some other reason in the offing the facts about the food shop and the empty larder could not explain why he went to the shop.

My conclusion is, therefore, that neither directly (through conditions on sincere moral utterances) nor indirectly (through the thought that moral judgment can explain action) does the acceptance of 'Hume's practicality requirement' give any support to noncognitivism in ethics. Nor has any reason been given for the existence of a 'logical gap' between a moral judgment and its grounds. The premises of a moral argument give grounds for an assertion about what it is morally good—and therefore about what it is practically rational—to do. And for anything that has been shown to the contrary, these premises could entail the conclusion, though I have certainly not argued that this is so. I have very little idea of how much 'play' there will in the end turn out to be in disagreements between moralities, and how many grey areas, and irreconcilable opinions we shall want to recognize. One can keep an open mind about that.

What then is to be said about the relation between 'fact' and 'value'? The thesis of this paper is that the grounding of a moral argument is ultimately in facts about human life—facts of the kind that Anscombe mentioned in talking about the good that hangs on the institution of promising, and of the kind that I spoke of in saying why it was a part of rationality for human beings to take special care each for his or her own future. In my view, therefore, a moral evaluation does not stand over against the statement of a matter of fact, but rather has to do with facts about a particular subject matter, as do evaluations of such things as sight and hearing in animals, and other aspects of their behaviour. Nobody would, I think, take it as other than a plain matter of fact that there is something wrong with the hearing of a gull that cannot distinguish the cry of its own chick, as with the sight of an owl that cannot see in the dark. Similarly, it is obvious that there are objective, factual evaluations of such things as human sight, hearing, memory, and concentration, based on the life-form of our own species. Why, then, does it seem so monstrous a suggestion that the evaluation of the human will should be determined by facts about the nature of human beings and the life of our own species? Undoubtedly the resistance has something to do with the thought that the goodness of good action has a special relation to choice. But as I have tried to show, this special relation is not what noncognitivists think it, but rather lies in the fact that moral action is rational action, and in the fact that human beings are creatures with the power to recognize reasons for action and to act on them.