Rational and moral action: a critical survey of rational choice theory

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1. Introduction

When we require that people are able to justify their actions, we are asking them to give us reasons that would make sense to other people in similar situations. Within this context I discuss in this chapter normative judgements as imperatives for actions. This approach to justifying reasons takes this issue beyond the requirement that justified actions are actions that receive the impartial sympathy of other agents. Of course, it is to be applauded when an action receives approval, but occasionally reasons that justify an action are closer to imperatives for actions than to the desire to acquire approval and avoid disapproval. We should discuss the following questions: why should we do what we, according to other people, ought to do? Why should we care about the opinion of other people? Why should we believe that they know what is good for us? Why do they think that, when we
deliberate, we will conceive of their arguments as reason giving? These are the kind of questions that are at the background of this chapter. The answers to these questions depend to a large degree on one’s conception of the status of normative judgments.

In the following sections I confront Mackie’s moral skepticism with moral objectivism. From Mackie’s point of view value judgments are subjective and, therefore, not authoritative, while objective, factual assertions are not meant to recommend anything. From the point of view of moral objectivism the fact-value distinction is greatly exaggerated in the domain of human practices. What the good is that an agent should achieve, or the bad he should avoid, is determined by the facts of human nature, the (material and social) world we live in and the situations in which individuals are placed.

A frequently cited argument that moral oughts have no authority is that many human beings do not obey them. The question whether the authority of moral maxims depends on their motivational impact is a major issue in the debate. Essential in this discussion is the distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. I conclude that it is unreasonable to equate the authority of moral considerations with motivational efficacy. Moral demands do not motivate in a causal way, and they do not have to, to be authoritative. Moral considerations can engage the will and move us to action, but we are not determined to act by them.

To discuss these questions I have to turn to philosophy, especially to moral philosophy. In moral philosophy a distinction is made between ‘normative’ and ‘analytical’ theories. Normative theories, as for instance utilitarianism, try to answer questions as “what makes right actions right” or “what are moral duties”. In the analytical theories one tries to answer questions like “what is the nature of moral judgment.” Preceding the presentation of the confrontation between Mackie and his opponents it may be instructive to say something about the special position that philosophy occupies within the sciences.
2. Philosophy and science

There is a view of philosophy that says that philosophy is not a science like other disciplines that have some aspect of reality as their subject matter. Philosophy delivers no a priori knowledge about society, because the sciences already cover reality exhaustively. It can only provide second-order knowledge by analyzing and clarifying the concepts that the sciences employ.

Wittgenstein thought that philosophical problems find their origin in misconceptions concerning language and it was the philosopher’s task to solve such problems by clarifying the logical structure of language. But Popper argued that epistemological problems affect science and its position in society, and that these kinds of problems are not located in linguistic confusions. Instead of acquiring knowledge, philosophy should inquire into the structure of knowledge. As philosophy of science she might hope to regain a central position in science. But after a while the ‘boom’ of a philosophy of science faded, whereas the philosophy departments were still asked to provide answers to the same age-old questions about practical (concrete) experiences and the meaning of life with which philosophers have always been concerned. These were questions that the other disciplines could not answer because their methodological prescriptions told them to concentrate on repeatable experiments. The focus on the expressive aspects of the world; the world of meaning in which what is, is accompanied by what ought to be, gives philosophy her peculiar character. This orientation of philosophy has irrevocably confronted her with two major questions: the status of normative recommendations and the fact/value distinction. Both questions are interconnected and crucial in the way they are encountered is the position that is taken with regard to the dispute ‘how ethics is placed’.

We can distinguish two persisting differences of opinion depending upon how the problem of “placing ethics” is identified (see Darwall et.al.,1992). The first concerns the
question whether there is a substantial contrast or discontinuity between science and ethics. The second concerns the contrast between cognitivism and non-cognitivism. The positions taken in the first debate depend on the contrast between facts on the one hand and values and norms on the other. The principal positions taken in the second debate turn on the authority of moral imperatives.

What makes ethics problematic? Those who claim a commitment to (natural) science manifest themselves in two ways in philosophical theory: in the view that philosophy must pursue knowledge via empirical methods or in the view that a given domain of inquiry can only yield true or false judgments if those judgments are identical with, reducible to, or supervenient on, factual statements of the sort that are allowed by scientific theories. They point out that no physical property has a built-in connection to action, while moral expressions undeniably have and conclude that statements such as “being the right thing to do” are ontological queer. Nature does not possess interests, intentions or points of view.

To explain some of the background of the cognitivist-noncognitivist controversy, which is closely related to the discussion mentioned above, I refer to the ‘internalist-externalist debate’. This debate is about the status of (‘external’) reasons in motivating people. The controversy is about the question whether there are moral considerations that generate reasons whose authority over us is objective. (see chapter XVII)

The positions taken in both discussions do not exclude each other. Therefore, we can distinguish four combinations. The combination of cognitivism and continuity yields moral realism. The combination of non-cognitivism with continuity is an incoherent position. The principal positions are the combination of non-cognitivism and discontinuity, which yields moral subjectivism, and the combination of cognitivism and discontinuity, which yields moral objectivism. That the discontinuity thesis can be combined with two sharply different positions regarding the nature of
moral norms is due to the different ways in which the contrast between science and ethics can be perceived. Moral realism will not be discussed. I concentrate on the difference between moral subjectivism and moral objectivism.

Subjectivism relies on the argument that there is no objective moral reality “out there” for moral beliefs to match. There are no moral facts. The idea of an objective truth about morality is, therefore, an illusion. We cannot regard any belief as reliable unless we think that the best causal explanation of why we hold it refers to the state of affairs it describes. This test is appropriate to beliefs about the physical world, but nothing in the content of moral opinions invites or justifies such a test.

The subjectivist view is dominated by a concern with the place of values in the natural world. They either argue that there are no irreducible moral facts, or that these facts are not admissible by scientific criteria, i.e., that ethical inquiry is discontinuous with scientific inquiry. Our ethical truths are perspectival and parochial.

The objectivists emphasize the difference in method between sciences, i.e., between natural science and ethics. They stress the intentional nature of human action. The task of social science (here, ethics) is not to explain human actions causally but to make them intelligible.

3. Moral scepticism

Mackie is essentially concerned with moral knowledge or the lack of it. Moral scepticism is, in his view, the claim that moral considerations have no place in practical reasoning, except as emotions. In conformity with the non-cognitivist tradition, he argues that moral judgments do not make assertions that are either true or false, but rather express the speaker's own attitudes or feelings towards the matter under discussion. The standing of the judgment ‘X is good’ is no more than the assertion ‘I approve of X, do so as well’. The authority of norms is explained as a psychosocial phenomenon. We have the expressivist variant, the non-cognitivist version and the
‘error theory’. In all these versions the authority of moral principles is understood to be merely in the head.

Mackie contends that much of moral language is irreconcilable with science for two reasons. First, such language refers to objects or properties that are metaphysically “queer” by virtue of their being inherently prescriptive (not factual or natural). Second, if such objects as moral values or properties existed they would have to be discovered by intuitive, almost magical, capacity.

He observes that thinking about the objectivity of values has a firm basis in ordinary thought. This assumption has been incorporated in the basic conventional meaning of moral terms. The claim to objectivity can and should be questioned. “But the denial of objective values will have to be put forward not as the result of an analytic approach, but as an ‘error theory’, a theory that although most people in making moral judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false. It is this that makes the name ‘moral scepticism’ appropriate.” (Mackie, 1998, 91) He wonders how objective values would look like, for they must be very different from anything he had ever seen in the world. And assuming that values supervene on natural facts, what is the connection between a natural fact and a moral judgement? "What is the connection between the natural fact that an action is a piece of deliberate cruelty and the moral fact that it is wrong? " (Ib., 96) How is the common sense belief in the objectivity of moral values established and why is it so resistant to criticism? Mackie’s explanation is that moral attitudes are at least partly social in origin. "Socially established - and socially necessary- patterns of behavior put pressure on individuals, and each individual tends to internalize these pressures and to join in requiring these patterns of behavior of him and of others.(..) We want our moral judgments to be authoritative for other agents as well as for ourselves: objective validity would give them the authority required." (Ib., 97) The main reasons why a person accepts these principles is that it is in his or her interest to do so if others do it too. Collective goods
can be realized, practices can be regulated and, furthermore, there is clearly some connection between morality and concern and respect for others. One develops a morality on the supposition that others are developing similar concerns and respect for others. Moral principles are merely useful conventions, but the chance that they are respected is increased when people believe that they represent some ‘objective truth’. The ‘error-theory’, although clearly wrong, is a social good.\textsuperscript{244} This explains why it is upheld, but it does not, in any way, establish the objectivity of the authority of moral principles.

Mackie is right, of course, that moral considerations are social constructions, like conventions. But people have developed normative expectations that they will be applied. Which normative expectations prevail and to what extent they are obeyed can be investigated. And we can have knowledge about moral concepts and normative expectations as social facts. (see Rawls, 1999, 288) Mackie confuses the objectivity of values (as social facts) with the truth of values and he equates truth with essentialism.

Mackie believes that the real task of science is to reveal the essence of the world. The essence of the world is captured by its primary qualities. The distinction between primary and secondary qualities associates with two notions: the essence of reality and its appearance. The notion of the material world as it may be scientifically understood is opposed to its being merely appearance.\textsuperscript{245} In order to stick to their real task,\textsuperscript{244} It looks as if Mackie considers the error-theory to be part of folk-psychology and that he welcomes this because it has good consequences.\textsuperscript{245} This distinction between primary and secondary qualities is completely different from the distinction in the chapters that follow. Here it refers to the distinction between scientific knowledge and common knowledge or folk psychology. (see Egan, 2006 for a discussion about these interpretations of primary and secondary qualities). In the other chapters in Part III this distinction refers to quite other things. "Primary qualities are qualities which things have in themselves. Secondary qualities are qualities which things have to provoke sensations or reactions." (Dworkin, 1999, 101) Secondary qualities supervene on primary qualities.
it is important, Mackie believes, that scientists should limit themselves to facts as much as possible. But the fact-value distinction is nowadays no longer seen as a clear-cut distinction. Scientist cannot escape the fate of producing ideas of objects that are mind-dependent. Therefore, they produce explanations of the world which link the material world as conceived under primary qualities with psychological phenomena such as secondary qualities and with cultural phenomena. (see also Williams, 1978) Putnam argues that the question 'what does the world consist of?' only makes sense within a theory or description. There is more than one true theory or description of the world. Objects do not exists independently from conceptual schemes. Objects are as much made as discovered, as much products of our conceptual moves as of the ‘objective’ factor in our experiences. All input to knowledge is to some extent shaped by our concepts. There is no decisive reason to regard scientific statements as purely factual, nor is there decisive reason to regard all normative statements as unfounded suggestions. What makes a statement rationally acceptable is, in large part, its coherence and fit. A fact is something that is rational to believe. (Putnam, 1981, 54ff) Though Putnam sticks to the conclusion that the fact/value distinction is not tenable, he does not suggest that anything goes, because our justified perceptions of facts are constrained by the concepts of rationality and relevance.

4. Moral objectivism

Nagel denies that the objectivity of moral reasoning depends on its having an external reference. "There is no moral analogue of the external world - a universe of moral facts that impinge on us causally. Moral thought is not concerned with description and explanation of what happens, but with decisions, actions and their justification". (Nagel, 1997, 101/2) It is practical reasoning that governs the relations among actions, desires and beliefs. Nagel points to one of the main elements of moral objectivism: the concern with practical
reasoning. The other essential characteristic is its cognitivism. Cognitivists criticize the noncognitivist' creed that morality originates in the desires and emotions of the individual. Such an idea contradicts the ordinary understanding of ethics. How can we agree that it is rational to choose the better life, when it is just a matter of taste whether one lives a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ life? An adequate theory of the nature of ethics must provide a plausible account of the way that reason supports moral judgments. Cognitivists resort to the term “necessity” to describe the nature of the authority of such norms. They assume that the authority of norms can be ‘seen’ or ‘discovered’ by human beings.

The scepticism that is based on the argument that moral properties are not physical properties and that, consequently, there is no moral reality to match moral beliefs, does not convince opponents of moral scepticism, like Dworkin. He, of course, 'does not insist that moral properties are natural properties; neither does he assert that there is a direct causal correspondence between a moral fact and a moral belief. But there is a great difference between the thesis that we have no causal explanation of the rightness of our moral beliefs and the thesis that we have no reason for thinking so'. (Dworkin, 1996, 122) Moral claims are objectively correct or incorrect, but when one gives an explanation of what makes them so, Dworkin argues, that explanation does not run through the relation between those statements and the world, but rather through the relation between accepting those statements and practical reason. In studying ethics we are studying ourselves. In the human sciences we are not just interpreting the world but interpreting that part of it that includes our interpretation of it and our ambitions to change it through our actions.

We can conceive of action as the making of meaning, as practical reason expressing or realizing itself. The question of the realism of values is, in this perspective, deeply obscure. What matters is the reality of our moral beliefs. We can attribute reality to ethical beliefs if we can assign to them an
explanatory role in relation to our practical activities. (Grice, 1991) Reasons for action exhibit a complex structure. Much of our practical thinking is concerned with figuring out which considerations are relevant to a given decision within a more general framework of principles of reasoning. These principles specify the adequacy or inadequacy of various considerations as reason for one or another judgment-sensitive attitude. Our practical thinking is concerned with adopting, interpreting and modifying these principles as well as with deciding whether we have sufficient reason for acting in particular ways. "The universality of reason judgment is a formal consequence of the fact that taking something to be a reason for acting is not a mere pro-attitude towards some action, but rather a judgment that takes certain considerations as sufficient grounds for its conclusion. Whenever we make judgments about our own reasons, we are committed to claims about the reasons that other people have or would have under similar circumstances. We thus have wholly self-regarding reasons for having views about the correctness of the judgments people make about the reasons they have since these judgments imply conclusions about the reasons we have". (Scanlon, 1998, 74)

Correctness in judgment is not determined by grounding them in facts of nature, but is just a matter of coming up to standards of shared practices. And these shared practices reflect that human beliefs, interests, dispositions, and so on, make up a 'form of life.' A form of life that consists in part in a certain shared set of values. "We live our lives in a setting of morally essential social institutions, conventions, and practices, on the one hand and of prudentially essential personal commitments and involvements on the other." (Griffin, 1996, 94) Both the goals of individual flourishing and our moral demands must be rendered compatible in our normative point of view, and in our social nature. (see also McDowell, 1995)
5. Moral imperatives

To formulate a maxim means to formulate a generic formula like: “I am to do A when in circumstances C in order to fulfill purpose P”. The exercise of practical judgment presupposed by every action, then, just is the endorsement of a maxim. (Brewer, 2002, 541 ff) In the case of moral maxims, we should formulate a maxim as a recommendation to apply a general moral motive, for instance, the motive that Scanlon formulates for an action: “the desire to be able to justify one’s actions to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject.” (Scanlon, 1982, 116) Furthermore, we should make a distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives. It is the legacy of Kant that maxims became associated with universal principles that have the force of moral obligations. To clarify our thoughts we should take Kant’s distinction between a categorical and a hypothetical imperative as point of departure. When we are discussing moral issues, the imperative “you ought to Ø” will be a categorical imperative when you ought to Ø irrespective of any desire for any further end to which Ø-ing might contribute. A categorical imperative expresses a reason for action that is unconditional. In Kant’s approach the source of morality is not in the emotions of single agents or in social agreements, but in the will of the rational autonomous agent. The autonomous agent must only act on principles that he would be willing to have everyone follow as “universal laws”. Kant’s formulation of his categorical imperative is: ‘act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.’ The principle contains no reference to what anybody wants neither to anything that lies beyond the agent’s capacity to will (‘ought’ implies ‘can’). It is part of a moral theory for autonomous agents. 246

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246 Since the force of religion to support moral principles is declining, citizens have to learn to constrain themselves. People capable of such self-control are autonomous people in the view of Kant.
The intuitive idea behind the thought that a universality test can provide a criterion of moral acceptability may be expressed quite simply as the thought that if we are to act as morally worthy beings, we should not single ourselves out for special considerations or treatment. To universalize is to consider from the start whether other persons could do what one proposes for oneself. “[T]he categorical imperative is to provide the will with a ‘determining ground’ that treats the good of all rational beings, as opposed to a man’s individual objectives, as the overall aim of his behavior”. (Müller, 1974, 217) In Kant’s ethical theory the social virtues are seen as morally required because they are necessary requirements for action in an interdependent world. “The interest of a Kantian universality test is that it aims to ground an ethical theory on notions of consistency and rationality rather than upon considerations of desire and preference” (O’Neill, 1989, 103).

A universality test can provide a rational foundation for ethics and support a serious respect for the diversity of content of distinct ethical practices and traditions.

The character of the moral imperative has evoked extensive discussions. Philosophers have persistently had trouble distinguishing between the authority and the motivational efficacy of a reason. In part because of the influence of Hume, they have tended to think that the authority-giving feature of any normative reason was its motivational efficacy.

A number of moral theorists have tried to analyze ethical behavior and beliefs by basing the understanding of moral directives on the idea that they are hypothetical imperatives. This approach to morality is an attempt to construct a moral theory that purports to salvage the objective authority of some moral norms, by representing the authority of morality as at bottom the authority of rationality, understood as a merely instrumental faculty. It is rational to conform to a moral principle in order to realize a non-moral end that is

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247 When you deliberate how you treat other people you should always ask yourself “how would I like to be treated by them in these circumstances”.
desired. Foot, for instance, has argued that the influence of moral requirements is conditional on the presence of desires, which are lacked by those who question whether they have reason to conform. Kant may have thought "that moral rules are universally valid in that they are inescapable, that no one can contract out of morality, and above all that no one can say that, as he does not happen to care about the ends of morality, morality does not apply to him". (Foot, 1978, 171) But Foot wonders what makes the moral 'should' relevantly different from the 'should' appearing in normative statements of other kinds (as, e.g., concerning the rules of etiquette; Foot, ib., 172). People only conform to normative requirements when such requirements are connected to one of their desires. Quite often the refusal to see any distinction between moral and non-moral ought is based on this kind of argument.

Anscombe just about 50 years ago formulated the critique of obligation-centered concepts. In her opinion the terms ‘should’ or ‘ought’ or ‘need’ relate to good and bad but not necessarily in a specific moral sense (for instance in: ‘this machine needs oil’, or ‘should/ought be oiled’). "They acquire their special sense by being equated in the relevant contexts with ‘is obliged’ or ‘is bound’ or ‘is required to’, in the sense in which one is bound or obliged by law." (Anscombe, 1997 (1958), 30)

Foot shares, as we noticed, Anscombe opinion that one should not make a difference between the moral and non-

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248 Foot has been criticized for this comparison, which seems to neglect that moral considerations are of another kind than rules of etiquette. Not humiliating a person, or offending him in public, is something quite different from the formalities of greetings. In another article Foot has expressed her uneasiness about linking these different kinds of 'oughts'. (Foot, 1981) But more recently she again expressed the opinion that there is no real difference between the moral and the non-moral ‘ought’. (Foot, 2001)

249 How did this come about? Anscombe thinks the answer is in history. Between Aristotle and us came Christianity with its law conception of ethics. Outside the law conception of ethics the notion of the “morally ought” has no reasonable sense. Ethics should start anew and begin with considering the concept of virtue.
moral ought. She thinks it clouds our understanding by suggesting that there is a special meaning for words such as “ought”. Foot explains her objection by pointing out the formal similarities between ‘moral’ and non-moral evaluations. Various observations have been made about the relation between the concepts of reasons and goodness with no distinction between non-moral and moral action. The grounding of a moral judgment is ultimately based on facts about human life. Acting morally is part of practical rationality. A judgment of what is required by practical rationality must take into account the weight of moral as well as non-moral arguments. "The way an individual ‘should be’ is determined by his/her particular life form, by what is needed for development, self-maintenance and reproduction, by the whole of his/her practices." (Foot, 2001, 33) There is no reason to treat moral evaluations differently from other relations concerning the human will. 250 In fact “ought” is very close to “should” and if we speak of a moral context this usually simply indicates the presence of a reason for acting that has to do with others rather than with oneself. (Foot, 2001, 80) 251

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250 “[T]he rationality of, say, telling the truth, keeping promises, or helping a neighbor is on a par with the rationality of self-preserving actions, ...” (Foot, 2001, 11) This bears resemblance with Parfit’s equation of other-care and self-care. (see chapter I)

Also from the utilitarian point of view there is no need to invoke a special motivation to act moral (prudential), for in the utilitarian tradition morality is primarily a servant of non-moral values. It is simply one of the many values people cherish, together with economic abundance, political freedom, peace, good health, artistic creativity and so on. "Indeed, in a rational society moral criteria cannot always take precedence over other social interests." (Harsanyi, 1985, 54) Thus people will balance moral and non-moral considerations so as to maximize their well-being.

251 Williams warned that a system of morality might become a system of moralism through the misuse of the concept of moral obligation. This misuse leads to emphasize a series of contrasts: "(...) morality makes people think that, without its very special obligation, there is only inclination; without its utter voluntarism, there is only force; without its ultimate pure justice, there is no justice." (Williams, 1985, 196)
Foot joins Raz in the rejection of the duality between rational and moral thought. Rationality is always connected with reasons to act, as are moral considerations. It is wrong to think that our rational considerations are separated from our moral ones. Moral reasons are an inextricable part of a complex of reasons. Conflicts between moral and non-moral considerations are just like conflicts between various non-moral considerations. "Sacrifices for morality’s sake are like all sacrifices, a matter of giving up something one cares a lot about for the sake of something else one cares about. (..) It is simply a special case of a conflict of reasons." (Raz, 1999, 318/9) This, of course, is true, but it does not alter the fact that moral reasons can have an authority that non-moral reasons lack, as Raz himself admits when he refers to categorical reasons. 252

The equation of the authority of maxims with motivation has given birth to the “overridingness thesis”, which tries to capture the essence of the authority of moral norms. (Shriffin, 1999) The overridingness thesis says that if one is a moral agent, one has reason to perform that action which is all-things-considered morally required. It will not come as a surprise that there are two main strategies of arguments for this thesis: one that emphasizes rationality and one that emphasizes morality as its source.

Concerning the first strategy, it is thought that a moral claim only provides a reason for a particular person when that claim connects with his motivational set because it furthers his interests and projects. (Ib., 775) The second account of overridingness portrays morality as a comprehensive and inclusive system of thought. (Ib., 783)

252 Categorical reasons are reasons whose stringency or weight is independent of the human will. Categorical reasons, such as the reason we have not to kill, have stringency which is unaffected by whether or not they serve our goals. Categorical requirements are a diverse class, and many of them are not even thought of as moral (they are, e.g., rules of etiquette) (even conventions seem to have a greater weight than other non-moral reasons). All categorical requirements have the potential to conflict with well-being. (Raz, 1999, 321/22).
One cannot genuinely commit to being a moral agent for just a day, a week, or whenever one feels sufficiently inclined. The moral point of view takes into account how other sorts of objectives relate to moral objectives. Conflicts may arise. An agent may reasonably feel torn between what morality requires and his other projects, concerns and commitments. The agent does not act irrationally if he was to defy a moral requirement and would have acted on reasons provided by other ends. But when a moral perspective has to do with adopting a comprehensive perspective, then to fail to do what is morally required is inconsistent with one’s identity as a moral agent. (Ib., 787)

The first account is in fact the claim of the hypothetical imperative. A normative reason is authoritative if and only if it is in the agent’s interest to conform to it. The normative principle is instrumentally authoritative. It has got nothing to do with moral overridingness proper, which implies moral ends.

In the second account it is agreed that moral claims can be objective and need not be sustained by any desire to have force. "A failure to see reasons to act virtuously stems, not from the lack of a desire, but from the lack of a distinctive way of seeing situations." (McDowell, 1978, 23) Someone who thinks that he should act morally will act morally, McDowell believes. But only when we implicitly assume that he already is a moral character, will moral requirements not merely override but silence other considerations.

Williams also thinks that moral considerations can, in contrast to other motivations, present themselves as objective demands. This kind of grounding of moral life is an intelligible form of objectivity, but, he immediately adds, there is no convincing argument that moral arguments play the motivational role in practical reason that Kant ascribed to them. In the Kantian kind of argument the requirements of practical reason will be met only by leading a life in which moral considerations play a constitutive, in particular, a motivational role. (Williams, 1998, 191)
Both McDowell and Williams believe that moral considerations can be objectively grounded, but this does not guarantee their motivational efficacy. Only in the case of moral agents is this condition satisfied. Thus, when the answer to the question whether moral maxims are authoritative depends on the answer to the question whether agents always obey them, then the conclusion is that they are not, unless the agent is a moral character, i.e., is a virtuous person.  

6. Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the status of normative reasons. The thesis that moral considerations claim authority provoked two main kinds of criticism. The first denied any authority to normative reasons because of the status of ethics. Mackie defended the unity of science and therewith the unity of the scientific method. He made it abundantly clear that ethics fails to satisfy the standards of this method. Since ethics cannot claim a scientific status (normative statements do not refer to any moral fact), normative statements are downgraded to merely subjective utterances. The second kind of criticism uses a counterfactual kind of reasoning: it is a fact that normative reasons do not motivate all people all the time; this proves that they cannot claim any truth, for else it would be contrary to reason not to follow them. Normative reasons cannot override conflicting interests, which proves that they are just conflicting reasons.

To understand norms we must understand the reasons that sustain them. Norms generate directive reasons that may or may not be compelling. This way of thinking about morality is closest to the way that the authority of reasons feels to us -

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253 Pincoff (1998) divided moral theory into an 'ethics of rules' and an 'ethics of virtues'. The ethics of rules conceives of the subject matter of moral theory as the evaluation of actions and asks "what ought we to do". Virtue ethics puts a primary emphasis on virtue-centered concepts rather then on obligation-centered concepts. (see Crisp and Slote, 1997)
that is, it approximates what the experience of ‘having reasons’ is like for those who understand and act from reasons. (Railton, 1999) Thus, a reason can be authoritative even if it fails to move us. And since we can make this distinction, we must be working with a notion of authority that is not informed by motivational efficacy. Perhaps we better understand the normative necessity by emphasizing the relationship between certain aspects of the world and us, with our beliefs, choices, intentions etc. Indeed, it is part of our understanding of normative authority that it applies to creatures that can defy it. “We are ‘necessitated’ to act from (..) reasons, not determined (..) to act from them” (Hampton, 1998, 105). This formulation stipulates that we are moved to act from moral reasons because we understand their normative necessity. They keep their authority over us even when we do not act in accordance with these reasons. “It is then our attitude when we are “mentally attuned” by reason, and no mere submission -even though we precisely recognize that it is not simply up to us what we make of it. This is the experience of normative authority.” (Railton, 1999, 347) Our moral understanding will be communicable to others in the form of a recommendation.

In conclusion, then, what constitutes the ‘authority’ of moral considerations? I will mention four considerations. In the first place, a moral consideration "is a reason for an agent if and only if (and because) it constitutes, or suitably connects with, the practical good, i.e., with what an agent must do to be acting well." (Lawrence, 1995, 124) The central, or defining, question of practical reason is: ‘what should I do’. Its formal answer is: ‘do what is best’ or ‘act well’. In the second place, the ‘should’ is not one of causal or logical necessity. It is not required that we explain the action, but that we explain its intentional nature. It is neither required that the agent has a desire to do what would be the best thing for him to do. Desires can function as reasons, but the source of the desire being a reason lies not in itself. (see chapter XVII) Third, since goodness supervenes on natural properties, all moral considerations concern actions with a substantive content.
Therefore, there are objective facts (concerning objects, practices, states of affairs) that determine what is good or bad in the given circumstances (this will be discussed extensively in the next chapter). They also determine the truth and falsity of the agent’s evaluations - his beliefs about what in the light of his conceptions of the facts is good, bad or best for him to do. Fourth, "excellence in practical reasoning, or practical deliberation, consists primarily in having a generally correct understanding of what is good or bad in human life, and bringing it to bear correctly on, or rather realizing it correctly in the situation in hand so as to act well." (Lawrence, 1995, 133)