

**David Brink. *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge University Press. 1989.**

A book review by David Sztybel, Ph.D.  
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David Brink has written an influential book that plausibly presents a coherentist theory of moral justification, and one of the most respectable and thoughtful versions of utilitarian theory. It is a study that is labyrinthine in its reasoning and distinctions, and I cannot hope to reflect all of its sophistication in this review. Brink declares in his Preface that “the book should be accessible to a fairly wide audience with varied interests and backgrounds.” However, the book is highly academic, narrowly philosophical in its focus, often simply referring to numbers that refer to numbered lists of positions and using highly technical terms without the benefit of definitions. Utilitarianism is a view that is commonly beset with various objections, and Brink does an excellent job of heading off such objections mainly by relying on a version of indirect utilitarianism. Perhaps coherentism is the answer to moral epistemology although I have to wonder. I cannot settle that issue here. Still, Brink devotes much of the book to showing that moral realism—the thesis that things really are good and bad or right and wrong in the ethical sense—can be presumed to be correct based on his arguments. Those arguments I will try to show are insufficient to make good any such presumption, and at most contribute to the intelligibility of moral realism, a much more modest though still important benchmark. Although I disagree with his utilitarianism, his is one of the classier defenses of utilitarianism that erases many of the objectionable aspects of the theory.

Brink argues that moral realism is a view we start with and should keep on holding unless there is a serious reason to believe otherwise:

We begin as (tacit) realists about ethics. Moral claims make assertions, which can be true or false; some people are morally more perceptive than others; and people’s moral views have not only changed over time but have improved in many cases (e.g., as regards slavery). (Brink 1989, 23)<sup>1</sup>

It may be that some of us or even many of us start out as moral realists. Many of us though might not, and those are the people who might be more likely to end up as moral anti-realists later in life. Some parents teach moral anti-realism, in effect, from the time that people are children. They say that almost everyone believes that certain things are wrong, but that people have different opinions about whether certain acts are right or wrong. Some probably cautiously instruct in moral anti-realism only later, fearing that it might undermine a child’s need for firm rules and structure, and the child’s possible inability to comprehend so abstract a notion as anti-realism. Brink overgeneralizes here. So his following statement seems to be not so much a part of establishing a presumption in favor of moral realism, but is simply presumptuous: “Moral realism should be our

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<sup>1</sup> All subsequent references to the above text will be made parenthetically, by page number, within the body of this review.

metaethical starting point, and we should give it up only if it does involve unacceptable metaphysical and epistemological commitments.” (24)

Still, Brink offers reasons for what he supposes to be the superior plausibility of moral realism compared to anti-realism. He notes how we use moral language in everyday life:

Moral judgments are typically expressed in language employing the declarative mood; we engage in moral argument and deliberation; we regard people as capable both of making moral mistakes and of correcting their moral views; we often feel constrained by what we take to be the moral requirements that are in some sense imposed from without and independent of us. These phenomena are held to demonstrate the realist or cognitivist character of commonsense morality; morality seems to concern matters of fact that people can and sometimes do recognize and debate about. I think that these phenomenological claims are correct and important, in part on their face and in larger part because they reflect, and are confirmed by, various philosophical presuppositions of inquiry in general, and moral inquiry in particular. (24)

I concede that Brink is largely correct about how we use moral terms: declaring, arguing, correction, being constrained by independent moral standards; but all of this can be accounted for with reference to a widely accepted social morality, one that overlaps in different societies to some extent. So Brink does not acknowledge the compatibility of these phenomena with moral anti-realism, or noncognitivism (the idea that we can have no knowledge of moral realities in the sense of moral realism). Therefore he begs the question. He also ignores other commonsense phenomena that can be taken to be specifically suggestive of moral anti-realism—although moral realism is also a possibility regardless. There is often deep disagreement in ethics which is not resolved through rational discussion. There are different cultural moralities and it is acknowledged by many that there may be no ultimate ethic to decide matters. We often accept commonsense talk to be mistaken, as in the idea of the sun “setting” below the Earth’s horizon, so commonsense declarations about ethics are not taken for granted by anyone who is shrewd along these lines. Thus, commonsense is strictly ambiguous about the question of moral realism and there can be no “presumption” either way without begging the question. Yet he concludes that: “Realism, and realism alone, provides a *natural* explanation or justification of the way in which we do and can conduct ourselves in moral thought and inquiry.” (24) Again, the ability of anti-realism to accommodate all of these phenomena is either overlooked or underestimated.

He notes that noncognitivist theories typically analyze moral statements such as A. J. Ayer stating that calling something good or right is equivalent to saying “Yay!” and calling something bad or wrong is much the same as “Boo!” Or C. L. Stevenson finds that moral statements involving “ought” express a pro-attitude towards something, and seek to influence others to behave in the same manner. However, Brink rightly notes that “we can make moral judgments with no intention of expressing one’s feelings and with no intention or even hope of influencing others’ conduct.” (26) This is quite true, and an excellent criticism of such forms of noncognitivism. It does not, however, address more sophisticated forms of anti-realism such as is professed by J. L. Mackie, who holds that

people are commonly deceived or under the illusion that things are really good and bad and thus really right or wrong in the moral sense. Mackie does not require, therefore, the expression of feelings or attempts to sway others, although the latter especially may sometimes be the case. If we do not refute the strongest version of an opposing view, we do not refute the opposition at all.

Brink cites the interesting case of the amoralist, who is indifferent to moral considerations, although he or she may well agree that certain things are morally right or wrong. He notes that amoralists do not advocate that others adopt his or her morality (actually an amoralist may deceptively and manipulatively try to sway others, e.g., to benefit the amoralist in a way that another might find “just”). Again, anti-realism can be formulated independently of the need to sway others. But even on Stevenson’s analysis, a distinction could be made between *moral judgments*, which involve advocacy, and *amoral judgments*, which obviously do not. Stevenson is under no obligation to conflate the two together.

Brink notes a frequent boast of noncognitivists that since their theories commonly analyze ethics in terms of feelings or attitudes, they can better account for moral motivation, whereas merely agreeing to the “fact” of objective value need not motivate at all, as David Hume observed. The thesis that moral motivation follows from accepting moral ideas is called “internalism.” The idea here is that motivation is internal to morality or an understanding of it. Externalism holds that moral motivation is a matter quite distinct from morality itself, and depends on factors such as personality, social upbringing, attempts to influence one’s conduct, etc. Brink claims that it is less helpful to think of ethics as internalist, since, again, the example of the amoralist shows that one can agree to moral “realities” without being motivated to be moral. This is definitely persuasive, I find. However, anti-realists are not obliged to embrace internalism, and indeed Mackie’s illusionist thesis can be construed in ways that reject internalism.

Brink claims that moral realism better accounts for the action-guiding character of morality. However, anti-realists again are not taken seriously insofar as the strongest conceivable version is not considered. Mackie could easily say that ethics is widely action-guiding for those under the supposed “illusion” that ethics is based on compelling realities. Pragmatically, one could also say that it is socially useful that ethics be action-guiding. However, suppose an anti-realist considers ethics to be largely illusory to the extent that it ceases to be action-guiding for that individual, except perhaps as a point of reference for understanding society. It would beg the question against anti-realism to assume that there is anything truly wrong with such a position.

Another objection to anti-realism is that it supposedly cannot account for the possibility of an “esoteric” morality. Brink is thinking here especially of forms of “indirect utilitarianism” which claim that it maximizes utility or happiness *not* to use utilitarian reasoning when deciding matters of ethics. This is truly an odd and paradoxical doctrine of “do as I do but not as I say,” almost, so it is not clear that it is a defect of any framework that is unable to account for such an arcane possibility. Yet anti-realism is by no means unable to account for esoteric morality. Those who are convinced of utilitarianism, either under the “illusion” of moral realism or pragmatically (that utility-maximizing is [one of] the most socially useful ethics, perhaps among others), may hold a version of indirect utilitarianism. It might then be further objected that if anti-realism is true, one cannot strictly require an esoteric morality, but such an

objection would beg the question that indirect utilitarianism is correct and that moral anti-realism is incorrect, which is too much to assume. Thus another ill-conceived objection fails.

Brink indicates that although anti-realists are fond of pointing out that moral absolutists are intolerant and dogmatic, anti-realism offers no special credentials in this department. That is because there is nothing really wrong with either vice on anti-realism, whereas it is open for moral realists to claim that intolerant and dogmatic people are mistaken in their approach. Brink does a great job of stating this objection. Many anti-realists indeed have a defective account insofar as they make special claims to tolerance, for example. However, it is no threat to a modified anti-realism. It cannot be objected that moral anti-realism fails to absolutely vindicate tolerance without begging the question in favor of moral realism and against anti-realism. Again, this objection is truly indecisive.

Finally, Brink tries to show us that only the moral realist could make sense of moral expertise, since it implies that there are lay and professional levels of *knowledge*. However, this is naïve. Anti-realists can still show that there are experts in applying one or even a variety of moral frameworks, some of them theoretical and others more broadly cultural. To demand anything further, that there be the kind of experts who give single, definitive answers to questions of ethics, again would just beg the question against the anti-realists. Yet on the basis of these arguments, Brink is prepared to state that he has “already established a presumption in favor of moral realism.” (132) On the contrary, I have shown that on the basis of his arguments which span the first 100-odd pages of his book, one cannot rightly presume either way.

Brink defends the two related methods of reflective equilibrium and coherentism in ethical theory. Reflective equilibrium, a concept originating with John Rawls, tries to harmonize the sometimes conflicting considerations of general moral principles, moral rules, and particular moral judgments in specific contexts. The definition of coherence is left vague: “The degree of a belief system’s coherence is a function of the logical, probabilistic, and explanatory relations obtaining among members of the belief system.” (103) There are traditional objections that a coherent belief system will not necessarily have contact with reality as it is, and also that there is the danger of an infinite regress of justification as well as logical circularity. These are important matters, and Brink deals with them using a very sophisticated command of concepts and distinctions. I am not convinced he is right, but will not use this occasion to try to show he may be wrong.

Brink mounts a defense of intuitionism as a method in ethics against common objections although he eventually rejects intuitionism. Intuitionism accepts that basic beliefs in moral theories are “intuitions,” and we can deduce practical conclusions from them in conjunction with nonmoral facts about the world. For example, a utilitarian may intuit that utilitarianism is correct, and then find that a given course of action will probably make everyone happiest. It would follow as a valid conclusion that this action is morally right. Brink notes two objections against intuitionism that he thinks can be rebutted: “intuitionism is committed to the implausible claim that cognizers possess a special faculty for the perception of moral facts and properties.” (108) He notes that none of the versions of intuitionism need rely on making reference to a *faculty* of intuitions. The four varieties of intuitionism he distinguishes are: (1) strong versions of subjective intuitionism hold that intuitions are indubitable; (2) weak versions of subjective

intuitionism say that intuitions are only *prima facie* indubitable; (3) objective intuitionists of the strong kind say that intuitions are infallibly true; whereas (4) the weak objective intuitionist may say that the intuitions are only probably true. It is quite true that these intuitionists need not refer to a faculty in the way that they *speak*. The real question is: are intuitions best conceived as the result of a faculty, or if not, what exactly is their origin and nature? Intuitions occur in a mind. They are thoughts. Some mental ideas come from perception, others from the use of logic, but intuition, since it is not inferred, involves none of this. How can we have thoughts without thinking, or sensations without sensing, memories without memory, feelings without the ability to feel, etc. Can we have intuitions without intuiting? Mental occurrences tend to occur in relation to a faculty. Why should intuition be an exception? Or if it is exceptional, the real problem is that the genesis of intuitions remains a mystery. Is it prejudice? Cultural indoctrination? So the objection still has purchase: mental ideas from faculties are widely accepted, but an intuitive faculty is implausible. Any alternative origin for intuitions seems likewise implausible. Intuitions lack justification because they are basic beliefs, and it is an open question that they might be beliefs that lack justification but *ought* to be justified if they are not self-evidently true as is sometimes claimed. That is, intuitions seem unreasonable or prejudicial unless a case can be made to the contrary. But just such a case seems impossible since intuitions are not reasoned. Brink has not defused this objection.

The second objection is that “intuitionism must be embarrassed by the existence of conflicting moral beliefs.” (108) Brink claims that an intuitionist can appeal to the principle of noncontradiction to deny the existence of conflicting intuitions. Yet such an appeal only suggests that only one set of intuitions could be right. It does not get rid of the diversity of ethical intuitions by finding what *is* supposedly right. Brink considers the problem that intuition can justify cognizers in believing contradictory propositions. Brink splits hairs here and points out that one can accept the existence of conflicting moral beliefs without conceding that they are conflicting moral intuitions. (111-112) We may doubt whether moral disagreement is possible after a full investigation. (112) Some of the conflicting moral beliefs may not be “genuine moral intuitions.” (112) Again, this reply is very weak. Intuitions are basic moral beliefs. Each ethical theory has different basic ethical beliefs. It cannot be said that any one theory does not involve “genuine moral intuitions” without begging the question in favor of those intuitions considered “genuine,” and against those considered “fake” or whatever. The appeal to a full process of reasoning is also weak. We are not supplied with the course of reasoning that we are supposed to believe will vindicate one set of intuitions. How can reasoning vindicate intuitions anyway if they are characteristically not rational or not inferred from anything? But Brink does not at all offer a plausible reading of the picture of competing ethical theories, each “genuinely” resting on its own basic beliefs. Fully articulated and “argued” we have basic beliefs that supposedly do not need to be argued for since they are allegedly intuited, and we have practical implications that predictably fall along the lines of the given theory. An ethical egoist may not render assistance to a stranger whereas a utilitarian may feel obliged to render such service. The full process of reasoning in this situation of comparing theories just leads to a range of different views, not a decision between different intuitions. Can we “intuit” that some intuitions are not genuine? That begs the issue. Yet this is all there is to Brink’s reply to these key objections. It is very surprising that he concludes this way as if he has decisively parried

each concern, whereas in fact he has not even begun to allay these worries. He claims for his own methodology that a view being counterintuitive counts against the theory, but that counterintuitive beliefs can be overcome if it can be shown that the theory overall is plausible. (66)

Brink's own attack on intuitionism is that it is associated with foundationalism, the view that a theory is based on one or more foundational beliefs or ideas. Brink makes a case that such beliefs cannot both be about the world and provide a reason why the belief must be or is probably true. He states that all beliefs need to be justified with reference to second-order beliefs about the kind of belief that  $p$  is, and why those kinds of beliefs should be considered reliable. (108) This is a plausible line of reasoning. How could statements that are not trivial truths, such as definitional statements that all bachelors are unmarried males, be self-justifying?

R. M. Hare, Ronald Dworkin, David Lyons, and Richard Brandt object that reliance on considered beliefs make coherentism and reflective equilibrium intuitionist. I think they are right. Brink associates intuitionism only with foundationalism, but that is by no means part of the definition of intuitionism. True, intuitions are revisable in reflective equilibrium, but it still relies on balancing between intuitions of principle, rules, and particular moral judgments as far as I can tell.

Brink addresses three major challenges to moral realism, with mixed success.

He examines the familiar is-ought problem of Hume. From premises that state how the world is, how can we possibly deduce what "ought" to be? There is no "ought" in our premises, so how do they suddenly appear in our conclusions? Brink points out that we can provide "bridge premises" such as: "Choosing the most utility-maximizing course of action is morally right." In that case, an "is" statement that a given action maximizes happiness can lead to the conclusion that we morally ought to do the action. Technically, Brink is correct. Unfortunately, the is-ought problem is not one which claims that there could be no standard arguments for ethical conclusions. We can always supply missing premises as he says. The deeper worry is that from the world of scientific fact, where in the world is value or ought? Brink does not say. He considers the idea that moral facts emerge "sui generis" or "out of nowhere," but he claims that is acceptable since that would be true of any discipline: physicists might "think outside the box" of their discipline and make reference to laws of chemistry, and Brink argues that the terms of chemistry would come "out of nowhere" so far as the framework of physics is concerned. At least I think this is what Brink is saying; it is rather unclear to me at least just what he is arguing here. However, chemistry does not come from "nowhere" but from an investigation of chemicals. Brink does not establish the *sui generis* nature of the hard sciences. But whence derives "ought"? Brink's dodge apparently does not save him.

Brink tries to answer other anti-realist objections to moral realism besides the is-ought thesis. It has been said that moral facts even if they existed could not explain any nonmoral facts. However, Brink gives the plausible example that someone intending to keep a promise, a moral fact, helps explain the nonmoral fact of what they actually set about doing in the world. This is a legitimate counter-example in my view and it is to Brink's credit that he provides it. Still, it does not show that moral realism is evident or true. But the objection is met, and that is Brink's point here. Even a (hypothetically?) possible reality such as objective value, if it exists, could possibly explain someone's actions if they knowingly accord with it.

Then there is the anti-realist objection that there is moral disagreement and the best explanation of this is moral anti-realism. Brink helpfully points out that moral realism is compatible with not all disputes being resolvable: some decisions may end in a tie. We might not reach unanimity because some parties are hopelessly confused or wedded to their mistakes. Sometimes initial disagreements can be resolved. (204) He points out that “moral progress” has been made, (209) although here again he reflects his ill-argued presumption that moral realism is true. A moral anti-realist could merely say that our behaviours more closely align with commonly accepted moral beliefs, but these beliefs are ultimately neither right or wrong, and there is nothing “really” wrong with failing to accord with those beliefs.

Even though Brink establishes the intelligibility of moral realism, he has not established any presumption in favor of the realists, so he really has not defended realism per se in any strong sense. Yet he states that he has provided “cumulative support for moral realism,” (212) and as a result the doctrine is not only defensible but “quite plausible.” (212) I agree that Brink has contributed to the plausibility of moral realism. The problem is, he has not shown that anti-realism lacks an equal measure of plausibility as realism since, for all his arguments, either thesis might be wholly true or false.

The next part of Brink’s book, its final chapter, is a defense of what he calls “objective utilitarianism.” It is not meant as a “full-blown defense,” (213) but only I suppose a provisional statement of the theory. Interestingly, Brink avoids the two most popular theories of value for utilitarians: good = pleasure and bad = pain; and good = preference-satisfaction and bad = preference-frustration. Some things are objectively valuable, he maintains, regardless of anyone’s psychological states (221) such as:

...certain character traits, the exercise of certain capacities, and the development of certain relations with others and to the world, and that the value of such a life is independent of the pleasure it contains and whether or not this sort of life is desired or would be desired in some preferred epistemic state. (221)

He claims that a refutation of hedonism is Robert Nozick’s experience machine: we want a life with *actual* character traits, etc., not experiences of these fed to us by an ingenious machine hooked up to our brains while our bodies are substantively inert. (223-224) He also points out that we do or prefer things because they are valuable; we do not find things valuable just because we prefer them. (225) I find this to be a plausible enough statement, although technically it begs the question against those whom I call “preferentialists” in their theory of value. The valuable can still be construed as what is most apt to satisfy someone’s preferences in an ideal state, which may differ from their actual preferences. Brink points out that a Nazi or a person obsessed with writing as small as possible have impoverished lives, although they may be very pleasant or satisfying of desires. (227) He concedes that the objective component of value is compatible with a “purely objective theory or within a mixed theory.” (231) This concession is very wise. Less plausible is his claim that rational egoism is compatible with much of the other-regarding nature of objective utilitarianism, on the presupposition that one’s own objective good includes positively relating to others. (242-243) A pure egoist, whose ethical egoism is conceded as a premise, might not find serving others “fulfilling” at all, and it may seem obtuse to insist it is after all fulfilling although it might

never seem so to that agent whose egoism is not only allowed, but indicated as normative for that agent. We should not confuse “objective utilitarian” theories of fulfillment with more properly egoistic theories of fulfillment. Brink claims that a unified theory is more likely to be verified by coherentism, and utilitarianism is very “unified.” (250-251) However this is no strong vindication of utilitarianism. Any theory that is self-consistent may be unified enough for truth-seeking purposes, although the principle of parsimony (simplicity of logical formulation being preferable since many assertions are a priori less likely to be true) cannot be ignored either.

He makes a familiar distinction between utilitarianism as a theory of what is right and utilitarianism as a decision-making procedure, (256) claiming that many of the chief objections to utilitarianism can be rebutted by using this distinction. He holds that moral agents should avoid direct utilitarian calculations, and instead it would maximize happiness if everyone lived by firm rules, cultivated certain character traits, kept their commitments, and avoid sacrificing individuals to the greater good. Perhaps utilitarianism should not even be publicized as a way to decide moral matters! (260) Indirect utilitarianism should involve respecting others and not causing significant and avoidable harm, Brink claims. (264) Having such firm rules against harm is justified because “our time, information and cognitive abilities are limited; and our calculations are subject to various forms of bias and distortion.” (265) Other features include respecting individual projects, (266) minimizing rights violations, and being “distribution-sensitive” when it comes to justice. He associates the need for fairness with the objective intrinsic good, as he construes it, of social cooperation. (273) This version of utilitarianism does indeed provide a reasonable answer to the concern that the theory causes odious harms for the greater good, is not just, and so on.

But there is an ad hoc character to indirect utilitarianism. There is a recognition that utilitarianism does not decide how one acts. So what *does* determine the way one deliberates? It seems to emerge out of nowhere, or perhaps just tradition, and almost anything can be argued to be “for the greatest good.” If a theory such as best caring ethics could strictly justify being virtuous, sticking to strict rules against harming, acting for others just for them and not for the sake of maximal utility, and being strict about keeping commitments then that would be an advantage for best caring ethics. In avoiding any kind of “indirect best caring ethics,” the latter theory would also have the advantages of:

- (1) greater clarity;
- (2) parsimony;
- (3) being more directly inspiring;
- (4) more deeply self-consistent;
- (5) more straightforward in its approach to moral education;
- (6) less exhibiting of tension between theory and practice;
- (7) no psychic disconnect since a best caring agent would directly apply an ethic rather than try to “forget about it” in ordinary life—just to what extent remains problematically unclear in the case of indirect utilitarianism.

Brink claims he addresses concerns about the separateness of persons, but he does not address the argument that:

- (1) significance is in relation to individual sentient beings;
- (2) the best is a form of significance; therefore
- (3) the best is to be conceived as plural, in reference to each and every sentient being.

Instead Brink uncritically assumes that what is best for maximizing utility is the ultimate criterion of moral rightness. Best utility? But nothing is significant to a mere thing such as utility. And affirming what is best to each individual—you, me, this person, that person, etc.—brings us back to the constellation theory of what is best that is a part of best caring ethics.<sup>2</sup> Not only might the indirect utilitarian conception mean that a perfectly knowing “angel” could support medical vivisection, if it can be calculated to be overall utile, but this unrealistic conception of what is “best” is not indeed formed around a conception consistent with the metaphysical separateness of persons. For associated with that is the metaphysical separateness of *significance to persons*. Brink’s book is very good, and indeed aims for maximal goodness, however indirectly. But at the end of the day: is it good enough? In fact, it would be difficult to surpass Brink’s efforts in this landmark volume.

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<sup>2</sup> David Sztybel, “The Rights of Animal Persons,” *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 4 (1) (2006): 1-37.