

**MAYNOOTH
PHILOSOPHICAL
PAPERS
ISSUE 4
(2007)**

**An Anthology of Current Research from the
Department of Philosophy, NUI Maynooth**

Issue Editor: Cyril McDonnell

General Editor: Thomas A. F. Kelly

Red, Riotous and Wrong: Is the Secondary Quality Analogy an Unpalatable Doctrine?

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I

In recent analytical moral theory a debate has been raging for some time now about the merits and demerits of realism about morality. Two main schools of moral realists have emerged on opposite sides of the Atlantic. In the US various naturalist realists — prominent amongst them, the so-called Cornell realists — have canvassed various versions of the view that moral properties are real and are either reducible to, or are constituted out of natural properties.¹ In the UK moral realism has taken a somewhat different direction. More under the thrall of Moore and the ‘open question argument’ than the Americans, the British realists have tended to reject the naturalist path and have tried to find some way in which to defend a conception of moral properties in which such properties are seen as objective and mind-independent, without thereby being reduced, to or constituted out of natural properties.²

Hanging over and haunting this British project is, of course, the spectre of Moorean ‘non-natural properties’, and British realists find themselves constantly confronted with one or other version of a constraint succinctly expressed by Panayot Butchvarov as follows: ‘The alleged reality of ethical properties must be understood in a straightforward, familiar and unsurprising fashion. What it is for something to be real or exist is perhaps the deepest philosophical problem, but one does realism in ethics no service by resting it on highly dubious and unclear solutions to that problem.’³

One way in which a number of British realists have attempted to meet Butchvarov’s constraint has been to canvass for an analogy between moral properties and secondary qualities like colours. The overall argument runs somewhat as follows: surely secondary qualities, like colours, are straightforward, familiar and unsurprising properties of things and surely it would also be agreed that such qualities are real, mind-independent features of the world, i.e. features whose existence does not depend on their being actually perceived. At the same time it would be agreed that there is, nevertheless, an extent to which such qualities also depend *in some way* on the presence of perceivers with appropriate perceptual systems. As a key supporter of the analogy, John McDowell, put it: ‘(colours) [...] are not brutally there — not there independently of our sensibility — though [...] this does not prevent us from supposing that they are there independently of any particular [...] experience of them.’⁴ Secondary qualities, it is maintained, exhibit an intriguing combination of objective and subjective dimensions which enable us at one and the same time, to concede that they are undoubtedly part of the furniture of the world, while also conceding that the presence of observers like us, with perceptual faculties like ours, is necessary for some aspects of that furniture to be ‘lit up’.⁵

Reflecting on this intriguing combination of subjectivity and objectivity, philosophers like McDowell, Wiggins and McNaughton have argued that we

might locate moral properties epistemologically and ontologically by analogy with secondary qualities. When we say that persons or their actions are just or unjust, fair or unfair, courageous or cowardly or, more generally, right or wrong, good or evil we are, on the one hand, claiming that what we are saying is true — i.e. that things really are as we say they are — while, on the other, we would readily concede that terms like good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust etc. only have application in an order of things in which persons with moral sensibilities like ours are present. McNaughton puts this combination of claims neatly as follows: ‘[just as ...] our mode of perception does not create colours, but makes us able to see them’ so also ‘moral properties are not to be thought of as created by [us] [...] but as real properties which can only be experienced by beings who share a whole network of responses with us.’⁶

One final aspect of the secondary quality analogy (hereafter the SQA) merits a brief mention. By locating a key pole of morality in a wide-ranging conception of human responsiveness, the supporters of the SQA also hope to capture one of the most widely shared positions in contemporary analytical moral theory: internalism i.e. the view that moral considerations are intrinsically action-guiding. Realists who construe moral considerations as beliefs have well-known and widely discussed problems squaring their belief-based realisms with internalism, and, given the widespread support for internalism, such problems are often seen as bad news for those realists. However, supporters of the SQA, by basing morality partly in a conception of human responsiveness which straddles the cognitive and emotive sides of our being, seem well placed to meet the constraints of internalism. If our moral responses engage with how we feel, as well as what we believe, then room for internalism seems clearly available.

The SQA, or ‘sensibility’ account of moral properties thus holds many attractions for realists and it has been widely discussed over the past three decades. However, it has not gone unchallenged. It has been challenged by realists like Jonathan Dancy, who maintain that it does not deliver a sufficiently robust realism, and by anti-realists like Simon Blackburn, who has claimed that there are so many disanalogies between moral properties and secondary qualities that the view lacks plausibility.⁷ Under the weight of the opposition, overt support for the SQA has waned in recent years, though there remain those who still see promise in the interesting combination of features which it offers to realists.⁸

II

In a recent paper on the analogy, Elijah Millgram has offered a novel criticism of the SQA, claiming that support for it carries with it potentially unpalatable and embarrassing implications. Millgram’s claim is that the SQA carries with it the implication that moral familiarity would breed, if not moral contempt, then, at the very least, a growing moral indifference to evil. Millgram argues that this conclusion follows from a combination of the SQA — with its key thought that our detection of, and response to moral properties are rooted in our moral sensibilities — and an alleged simple and indisputable fact about human beings and their sensibilities i.e. that the more we are exposed to this or that phenomenon, the less and less acute our responses and reactions to the phenomenon in question become — leading to a point at which we may well become indifferent to, or bored by the phenomenon in question.

Following Wiggins,⁹ Millgram takes ‘funny’ as a plausible candidate for a secondary quality and argues that while we may respond on the first, second and perhaps even on a few subsequent occasions, to the same joke by finding it riotously funny, surely by the hundredth telling the humour of the joke will have faded and we will no longer find it funny at all, will no longer react to it as we did at the outset. We may even bring ourselves to say ‘the joke isn’t funny anymore’.¹⁰ Moreover, we see nothing wrong with our responses on such occasions and we readily accept that the joke in question has — as we may put it — passed its sell-by date as far as its ‘funniness’ is concerned.

Applied to moral cases this reading of the SQA and its implications seems rather disturbing. To use Millgram’s own example: our responses to the first and second holocausts may carry with them an appropriate sense of horror and moral outrage, but what of the hundredth holocaust? Just as in the case of the joke, doesn’t the SQA suggest that we would greet that hundredth holocaust with a world-weary indifference, and perhaps without any sense of horror or moral outrage at all? Moreover, and still more disturbing, doesn’t the SQA suggest that in the holocaust case, as in the joke case, our new, jaded response is a wholly appropriate one — it seems right to say that this latest holocaust is not really wrong or evil at all, that is not the response it provokes. Thus, just as the initial funniness of the joke has faded and all but disappeared with time and familiarity, so also the wrongness or evil of the holocausts have faded and all but disappeared with time and familiarity. Just as the once riotous is no longer even funny, so also the once morally horrific is no longer even morally eyebrow raising.

It seems central to Millgram’s criticism of the SQA that he takes it that the *whole story* about moral values which supporters of the SQA can tell is a story entirely in terms of the *actual* reactions which moral phenomena *actually* elicit from us on a given occasion. It is true that he briefly adverts to McDowell’s talk of such responses being also *merited*¹¹, but he goes on to construe this claim of McDowell’s in terms of the agent’s responses to his/her moral sensibility and claims that an iteration of the initial attack on the SQA would deal with any such ‘higher-order’ move to defend it.¹² Millgram’s key point is that the SQA implies not just that we will *in fact* respond to similar moral evils etc with diminishing outrage, but that such a response is to be deemed *wholly appropriate* — a conclusion which he thinks is surely unpalatable. He concludes as follows:

It is widely thought to be a feature of our moral concepts that repeated application of such a concept in like circumstances is correct in *all* instances, if correct in *any* [...]. It is a feature of our moral sensibilities that *their* repeated exercise in like circumstances gives rise to reactions that are not constant but systematically changing. It follows either that a secondary quality account of value is not a suitable account of moral or ethical value, or that it is a radically revisionist one.¹³

Now I do not wish to engage here in a wide-ranging defence of the SQA — it is liable to a wide range of difficulties and problems¹⁴ — but merely to argue that, as generally presented, it has available to it resources which can protect it from the kind of attack mounted by Millgram. I will confine myself here to making four points — one very general point about how to understand the SQA and three more specific points about those dimensions of the theoretical setting of the SQA which provide the needed protection against Millgram’s attack.

III

(i) *How to Understand the SQA*

Twice in the course of his brief paper Millgram suggests that supporters of the SQA take it that moral values either ‘are’, or ‘are to be understood as’ secondary qualities.¹⁵ This suggestion of an equation of values with secondary qualities blurs a key point being made by the supporters of the SQA. What they argue for is an *analogy* between values and secondary qualities — an analogy intended to throw some light on the epistemological and ontological status of moral properties. To say that A and B are analogous is not to say that they can be equated with each other, but that there are interesting similarities to be noted in how we are to understand them and place them in our scheme of things. In all such claims there is a recognition that there are also differences to be noted — often differences of some significance. John McDowell e.g. is quick to point to such significant differences in his account of the SQA and to highlight the point that the analogy is intended as just that: an analogy.¹⁶ Thus, in discussing the SQA it is of vital importance to recognise that its supporters see secondary qualities only as offering us a useful epistemic and ontological model — a model which — suitably adapted — can then be applied to values and can throw some light on the epistemic and ontological dimensions of our thoughts about values. The SQA is not to be understood as offering us an exact parallel which will hold up all along the line. As Richard Norman recently put it, ‘the value of the secondary quality analogy is that it enables us to hold on to the idea of *objectivity* alongside an acceptance of a certain kind of anthropomorphism.’¹⁷ Millgram, in his account of the SQA, does not pay sufficient attention to this general point about how to take the analogy and this colours his presentation of it and his discussion of its implications.

(ii) *The SQA and the Language of ‘Reactions’*

In addition to this misleading general setting of his discussion, Millgram also seems inclined to understand the SQA account of our detection of, and response to moral situations in an overly mechanical manner. The word he most often uses in his discussion of it is ‘reactions’, and in doing so he conveys the impression that supporters of the SQA are inclined to see our moral responses as simply involving the moral agent in reacting to certain features of the world in the way in which it might be reasonable to suggest that colour perception involves such relatively simple reactions. Now it is, of course, true that supporters of the SQA do occasionally talk in such a manner, but by and large their claims are made in terms of our possessing a complex form of moral sensibility which enables and facilitates us to respond appropriately to the demands which we find being made on us in this or that moral situation. These moral responses are not simply reactions in the way we might think of colour perceptions as involving such reactions, rather do they have their place in a more wide-ranging and sophisticated account of what it is for a moral agent to respond to a moral demand.

Thus e.g. David Wiggins explicitly draws a distinction between mere reactions to features of the world and the complex and sophisticated manner in which supporters of the SQA understand the sensibility side of the analogy story. Over time, Wiggins notes, our capacities to respond are developed and fine-tuned in a way which takes the SQA account some way beyond any simple

feature/reaction story. Thus he notes: ‘Finer perceptions can both intensify and refine responses. Intenser responses can further heighten and refine perceptions. And more and more refined responses can lead to further and finer and more variegated or more intense responses *and* perceptions.’¹⁸

So any suggestion that the SQA is committed to some rather simple feature/reaction account of moral knowledge or moral responsiveness oversimplifies the case regularly made and emphasised by the leading supporters of versions of the analogy. In her recent over-view of the moral realism debate, Margaret Little highlights this side of the SQA: ‘just as one needs a certain sensory apparatus to see red things, one needs a certain emotional and motivational palette to see cruel or kind things [...], [but the moral] sensibility in question is not understood as some mechanistic disposition to react. It is instead a practice of responding that is partly constituted by judgments of appropriateness.’¹⁹

(iii) Appropriate Responses and Appropriate Agents

Mention of ‘appropriateness’ brings me to a further dimension of the SQA. Supporters of the SQA do not confine the refinements of their theory to a offering a more complex account of the way in which we should understand what a moral sensibility is like — they also regularly emphasise the point that it is only persons of a certain sort who should be taken as paradigms of what a *moral agent* should be like, and thus as exhibiting the appropriate sort of moral sensibility. For John McDowell, with his Aristotelian leanings, this comes down to the point that it is only virtuous persons who are, in the end, to be taken as possessors of appropriate moral sensibilities and thus as reliable detectors of moral value. In both ‘Virtue and Reason’ and ‘Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives?’ McDowell emphasises these points. In the latter, stressing the importance to moral perception of an appropriate process of character formation, he notes that ‘in moral upbringing what one learns is [...] to see situations in a special light’ and in the former he says, focusing specifically on the moral actions of a virtuous agent, that a ‘*kind person* has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement that situations impose on behaviour [...]. The sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity.’²⁰ Similar thoughts are present in Wiggins’s comments in the later sections of his paper ‘A Sensible Subjectivism?’.

These thoughts may be applied to Millgram’s remarks about jokes and holocausts. As far as jokes are concerned, while we might agree with Millgram that being ‘an occasion for laughter’ is certainly connected with ‘what it is to be funny’, surely we would balk at his simple equation of the two.²¹ Surely Wiggins is nearer the mark when, in offering a more developed notion of our comic sensibility, he says that ‘when we dispute whether x is really funny, there is a whole wealth of considerations and explanations we can adduce [...]. We can do a little better than say that the funny is that which makes people laugh’.²² A person with a developed and sophisticated sense of humour — i.e. an appropriate comic agent — may well agree with Millgram that repetitions of trivial ‘knock-knock’ jokes may bore, fade and finally entirely lose their humour, while resisting the suggestion that such fading is also a feature of the comic moments of a play by Oscar Wilde. As Wiggins notes: ‘A feeble jest or infantile practical joke does not deserve to be grouped with the class of things that a *true judge* would find genuinely funny’.²³

Similarly, to those with sophisticated and well-developed moral sensibilities — i.e. virtuous persons — there is little likelihood that the hundredth holocaust will be greeted with a ‘ho-hum’ as Millgram suggests.²⁴ Moral agents with adequately developed sensibilities can be generally relied upon to respond *appropriately* to the demands of the situations in which they find themselves. These responses are, on the SQA, viewed as informed and developed responses to features of those situations - features which are rooted in the moral situations involved and which merit or demand a certain sort of response from appropriately moralised agents. As McDowell puts it: ‘One cannot share a virtuous person’s view of a situation in which it seems to him that virtue requires some action, but see no reason to act in that way.’²⁵ To a virtuous person it is not just the detection of the evil characteristics of holocausts which trigger off the demand for a condemnatory response, it is also a matter of the type of person a virtuous person is. The response has its roots in the virtuous person’s moral sensibility and for as long as that person’s moral sensibility remains intact the response will be the same and will not tend to fade with repetition.

(iv) Repetitions of Jokes and Holocausts

The suggestion that moral situations, like jokes, may be subject to such repetition brings me to my final comment on Millgram’s criticism of the SQA. Jokes — particularly trivial ‘knock-knock’ jokes — may easily lend themselves to the sort of repetition which Millgram suggests will lead to the evaporation of their funniness. However, is the same true with regard to moral situations like holocausts? More specifically, would those who canvass for the SQA be likely to think it true?

The leading supporters of the SQA would be inclined to offer a negative reply to this question. As supporters of the SQA are generally particularists they would surely be inclined to the view that moral situations do not repeat themselves in the way which Millgram’s criticism requires. They resist the suggestion that morality can be codified and are inclined — on that account — to reject the claim Millgram makes that the application of a moral concept ‘is correct in all situations if correct in any’.²⁶ Wiggins, e.g., explicitly queries the applicability here of supervenience — one of the concepts upon which Millgram hangs his case at this point.²⁷

McDowell is perhaps the most ardent supporter of the particularist side of the SQA story. Time and again he rejects the idea that morality is a matter of applying concepts in a rule governed manner, always in the same way to situations which repeat themselves with sufficient clarity to licence such codifiability. True to his Aristotelian roots he sees virtuous agents not as agents who have learned how to apply a set of rules over a range of cases, but as agents who, through appropriate character formation, have developed a sensitivity to the salient features of moral situations which enables them to respond to such situations on a case-by-case basis. In ‘Virtue and reason’ he puts the point directly: ‘Occasion by occasion, one knows what to do, if one does, not by applying universal principles but by being a certain kind of person: one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way.’²⁸ If asked how such a person would proceed in dealing with moral questions, McDowell is equally forthcoming: ‘It is by virtue of his seeing this particular fact rather than that one as the salient fact

about the situation that he is moved to act by this concern rather than that one. The perception of saliences is the shape taken here by the appreciation of particular cases.²⁹

From such a perspective it is the vista of fading responses to a succession of holocausts which begins to fade. For the particularist the very idea that even simple moral situations could repeat themselves in the manner of ‘knock-knock’ jokes is a non-starter — not to mention the suggestion that complex moral situations like holocausts could do so. In the absence of such moral repetitions Millgram’s final point about the general applicability of moral concepts and the alleged fickleness of human responses also loses its force.

IV Conclusion

All in all, then, Millgram’s case against the SQA requires for its success not only a somewhat misleading presentation of the overall role of the analogy, but also the ignoring of a range of features which are part and parcel of the theoretical setting internal to which the analogy is generally set out and defended. The supporters of the SQA make much of the complexity of the notion of a moral sensibility and specifically reject the idea that it implies a simple feature/reaction capacity. They also make much of the idea that it is the complex and developed sensibilities of moral agents who have been appropriately educated — virtuous agents — which are in question and, finally, they tend to be particularists and thus to reject the idea that moral situations repeat themselves and can be codified in the way Millgram’s account would require. With a proper appreciation that the SQA is intended only as an analogy, and with these additional features of its theoretical setting in place, the SQA — whatever its other difficulties — does not carry the unpalatable implications Millgram attributes to it.

NOTES

¹ The most prominent US moral realists are Nicholas Sturgeon, Richard Boyd, Peter Railton and David Brink. For a discussion of their work see, e.g., Alexander Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003), chapters 8 and 9.

² See part 2 of Margaret Little’s ‘Recent Work on Moral Realism’, in *Philosophical Books*, 35 (1994), 225–233.

³ Panayot Butchvarov, *Skepticism in Ethics* (Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 4.

⁴ John McDowell, ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’, in J. McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 131–150 (p. 146).

⁵ When it comes to *moral* realism, these moves enable supporters of the analogy to recognise that in any talk of a ‘moral reality’ the notion of ‘reality’ must be understood as crucially involving moral agents. As David McNaughton puts it, the very idea of a moral realism which left moral agents out of the picture would be completely implausible. See D. McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p.94.

⁶ McNaughton, p. 95.

⁷ See Jonathan Dancy, ‘Two conceptions of moral realism’, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 60 (1986), pp. 167–86; and Simon Blackburn, ‘Errors and the

phenomenology of value' in his *Essays in Quasi-realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 149–165.

⁸ See, e.g., James Rachels, 'Introduction', in *Ethical Theory: The Question of Objectivity*, Vol. 1, ed. by J. Rachels (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 1–18 (p.15); Richard Norman, 'Making sense of moral realism', in *Philosophical Investigations*, 20 (1997), 117–135; and Peter Sandøe, 'The Perceptual Paradigm of Moral Epistemology', in *The Danish Yearbook of Philosophy*, 27 (1992), pp. 45-71.

⁹ David Wiggins, 'A Sensible Subjectivism?', in D. Wiggins, *Need, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 185–214 (p. 195).

¹⁰ Elijah Millgram, 'Moral Values and Secondary Qualities', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 36 (1999), 253–55 (p. 254).

¹¹ See McDowell, p. 143.

¹² Millgram, p. 254.

¹³ Millgram, p. 255.

¹⁴ For an influential and wide-ranging assault on the SQA, see David Sosa, 'Pathetic Ethics', in *Arguing about Metaethics*, ed. by Andrew Fisher and Simon Kirchin (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 241–284.

¹⁵ Millgram, pp. 253 and 254 respectively.

¹⁶ McDowell, pp.138 and 143.

¹⁷ Richard Norman, p. 131.

¹⁸ Wiggins, p. 196. McNaughton has some interesting things to say on this point in his discussion of a person's gradual appropriation of a musical sensibility which enables a proper appreciation of jazz. See *Moral Vision*, p. 58.

¹⁹ Little, pp. 227–228.

²⁰ Both papers appear in McDowell's collection *Mind, Value and Reality*, and the quotations are from that book, pp. 85 and 51 respectively.

²¹ Millgram, p. 253.

²² Wiggins, p. 195.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

²⁴ Millgram, p. 254.

²⁵ McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, p. 90.

²⁶ Millgram, p. 255.

²⁷ See Wiggins, p. 197.

²⁸ J. McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason' in McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, pp. 50–73 (p. 73).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

