

# REVISITING THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE CONTEMPORARY MORAL REALISM/ANTI-REALISM DEBATE

[Çağdaş Realizm/Antirealizm Tartışmasında Dilin Rolünü Yeniden Değerlendirmek]

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## **Abstract**

In the debate between moral realists and anti-realists in metaethics, one of the perennial and recurring issues revolves around the problem of language, particularly the meaning of ethical terms. This paper examines the role of language in the moral realism/anti-realism controversy. It argues that the semantic approach (that focuses on the meaning of moral terms) is still a fertile ground in the debate that requires further investigation for the following reasons: (i) it is not yet

well explored as much as the ontological and epistemological approaches; (ii) the question of semantic challenge arising from the linguistic ambiguity charged against moral realism still persists; and (iii) the ontological and the epistemological approaches in the debate rest on the semantic nature of moral terms. Basically, the main objective of this paper is to examine how the unguarded ontological usage of language by the moral realists put moral anti-realism in a more defensible position in the debate. In the final analysis, the paper concludes that despite moral realists' ontological claim about moral facts, and their epistemological explanations about how moral facts can be known, the linguistic confusion inherent in their claims suggest how and why moral anti-realism appears more consistent with reality.

**Keywords:** Anti-realism; Moral Facts; Moral Realism; Language, Semantic Approach.

## Introduction

The debate between moral realists and anti-realists is not a novel one in meta-ethics. It could be judged as one of the important debates in the history of meta-ethics because some other meta-ethical debates are connected to it in one way or the other. Scholars such as A. J. Ayer, C.L. Stevenson, R.M. Hare, G.E. Moore, Bernard William, David O. Brink, Richard N. Boyd, and Simon Blackburn have made considerable efforts to explore the controversy from both ontological and epistemological approaches.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, an important question such as “what is the import of this debate?” may be asked. In fact, some individuals may query whether the theoretical debate between moral realists and anti-realists still have any relevance today? We respond in affirmative. Why? Even though, the core issues are theoretical, but they are still much relevant today. Theory is like the structure behind the observables. As a way of creating a background for this paper, it is imperative to revisit some of the core issues generated in the debate. Essentially, moral realists and anti-realists disagree on the reality of moral facts. Are there moral facts out there for us to encounter? Are

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<sup>1</sup> **Ontological Approach:** This approach addresses the question of whether there are moral facts involving moral entities, relations and properties that do not consist in what anyone’s attitudes are or would be under any conditions.

**Epistemological Approach:** This approach deals with the manner of our epistemic access to ontological moral reality. Given that moral properties like value and moral entities like reasons are not detectable by the known senses, and given their causal redundancy, how could we perceive them or even know that they exist? That is, the claim that moral facts exist does not support the idea that we could learn about them.

**Semantic Approach:** This approach is about language. It concerns with whether moral claims/sentences represent or report facts that can be evaluated as true or false. For details see, Stephen Finlay, “Four Faces of Moral Realism” in *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 2 issue 6 (2007), pp. 820-49. Also, Sayre-McCord, Geoffery, “Moral Realism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), forthcoming URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/moral-realism/>>.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Pölzler, “Can the Empirical Sciences Contribute to the Moral Realism/Anti-realism Debate?” in *Synthese*. Vol. Vol. 195, No.11, (2018):4907.

those facts mind independent? Whose position is more plausible; realist or antirealist? How do we resolve the disagreement? What is the role of language in the realist and anti-realist debate? Paying attention to these important questions reveals how and why it's important to justify research in this area. The reason is because, for most of its history, the question of the existence of objective moral truths has mainly been addressed through rational argument and reflection. (Polzler, 2018, p.4907). The focus of this paper is to revisit the debate, consider the import of the last question raised above, and make some contributions because philosophical debates do not end.

The paper is divided into three main sections. In the first section, we consider the argument from linguistic ambiguity since this is one of the prominent arguments used by anti-realists to discredit realists' position. In the second section, we outline the role that our day-to-day language plays in observational evidence since the realists rely heavily on this argument to prove the objectivity of moral facts. This will also involve critical reflection on the verifiability argument in relation to the ontology of moral facts. In the third section, we focus on the argument from evidence for moral diversity since the anti-realists used this argument to prove the subjectivity of moral statements and experiences. The paper will conclude that moral anti-realism is more plausible and better defended than moral realism through the analysis of language since it is more appealing and inclined to our daily experiences.

### **Argument from Linguistic Ambiguity**

Linguistic ambiguity is a quality of language that makes speech or written text open to multiple interpretations. It is the quality of making meaning difficult or impossible to understand. A

linguistic expression is said to be ambiguous in philosophy when it can be analyzed in multiple ways. By this, linguistic ambiguity renders an issue problematic since it hinders precise language processing and understanding because it creates two possibly coexistent interpretations of a particular issue. Ambiguity evokes distinctive alternative meanings within a single linguistic form. In the words of Jan Albert Van Laar, "... this leads to misunderstanding and equivocation in communications and dialogues" (Lear, 2010, p.125). One of the major arguments against moral realism is the argument from linguistic ambiguity. For the critics such as Gilbert Harman and David Anderson, moral realism is deficient because it leads to linguistic confusion. In logic, ambiguity occurs when the meaning of a word or a phrase "shift and change within the course of an argument". (Copi and Cohen, 2000, p.143). This fallacy is applicable to the moral realist claim about the existence of moral facts. The definition of facts as what make a proposition true is said to be ambiguous. The controversy is that "What is the case" and "what is true" do not really have the same meaning.

Nevertheless, the ambiguity noted here is that facts could be defined either in terms of "a reality" or "truth/ true proposition". Thus, when we mention moral facts, the problem is that, in what sense are we using the word "fact"? The puzzle is that, when we argue that -there are moral facts: are we talking about "moral reality" or "moral truths/ true moral propositions?". That is, our day-to-day conversations are guided by certain moral facts. This ambiguity points to the fact that it is equally possible to do without such moral facts altogether in our day-to-day moral conversation without any harm to the conversations. Moreover, if either definition is correct, we suffer from a redundancy of philosophical concepts. We can eliminate fact and still retain our meaningful ethical discussion so long as the search for fact is not the primary aim of ethics as

Gilbert Harman argued. This is one way by which moral anti-realism is considered to be more plausible than moral realism. To further explain the above view, Gilbert Harman argues that moral facts are mere metaphysical danglers, hanging in the air and not related to anything else at all. We are better off without such things. (Harman, 2006, p.25).

Thus, in order to avert the trouble of the linguistic ambiguity over the meaning of the concept ‘moral facts’, it is better to do away with the so-called fact and concentrate on our moral discussion as Harman suggested. For instance, to use Harman’s example, we know that torturing people for fun is wrong because we have empathy for each other and not because there is any objective moral fact somewhere that makes it wrong. (Harman, 2006, p.25). This is also the way a typical moral emotivist such as C.L. Stevenson will argue. However, moral realists may reply that it is because such moral facts exist that informed our knowledge of the wrongness of torturing people for fun. To respond to the realists, the point made by Harman above can be better exemplified in this manner. I am aware that the act of punishing a person unjustly is morally wrong. Thus, it will be unwise for me to be troubling myself looking for the fact that underwrites the wrongness of such act since any morally upright person will agree with me on this matter. We must not define “meaning” in a way that would make meaning vary from its dynamic usage.

Dorothy Walsh warns;

We should provide for this associative atmosphere surrounding the common-sense use of the term "fact." To do so will, of course, entail the recognition that there may be a non-factual ingredient in "what is the case," and, also, that the substitution of "it is true" for "it is a fact" involves a shift of meaning. (1943, p.647).

Thus, the way the word ‘fact’ is being used whether as a “moral fact” or “empirical/natural fact” by the moral realists needs reconsideration because the ordinary meaning of the word ‘fact’

point to something non- abstract. Although, analytic philosophers proposed many different theories of language and methods of attacking philosophical problems, they all embraced this fundamental doctrine: ‘philosophical puzzles, problems, and contradictions are not found in the world, but in the things, we say about the world’. (Lawhead, 2002, p.499). Are there moral facts about certain human actions and inactions? Consider the following cases:

### **Case 1**

Recently, it was reported in the electronic and print media that a police sergeant defiled a two-year-old girl in Lagos Nigeria. The action attracted widespread condemnation. The condemnation was prompted by the general belief that the action is wrong. Granted that the action is wrong, is the wrongness factual?

### **Case 2**

some years ago, a sixty-year-old member of the National Assembly in Nigeria got married to a twelve-year-old girl. While some members of the public approved of the act, another section of the society condemned the act. Some people felt that the action is right while others felt the action is wrong.

### **Case 3**

In February 2014, a Court in Nigeria sentenced a man to death by hanging for stabbing (seventy-six times) his wife to death. The judgement was applauded by the general public and the man’s act was generally disapproved.

What do we make out of each of these cases? Let us start with case 1. Is it morally right or wrong for an adult to rape a two-year-old girl? Ordinarily, one may think the question is a bad one because the wrongness of the act is so obvious that no one should ever think of raising it. Unfortunately, we condemn the act partly because of our moral sensibility (our capacity to perceive moral issues within a particular idea, background, opinion or state of mind). In view of this, it appears to us that there could not be any justification for the act itself. What kind of society will approve the defilement of a two-year-old girl? The moral antirealists supported by

this paper is that we do not need moral realists' facts to demonstrate the wrongness of an act of raping a two-year-old girl. As rightly argued by Gilbert Harman, our approval or otherwise of an act is due to our moral orientation, not due to the existence of any moral facts. (Harman, 2006, p.625).

What about case 2? Should the society permit a sixty-year-old man to marry a twelve-year-old girl? Is the act right or wrong? Unfortunately, the act is approved and disapproved on different religious grounds. While some Muslims approved of the act, members of other religious groups reject it. We may want to adduce different reasons why the act is wrong. It does not mean that we would be able to produce enough of such reasons that will entail the conclusion that the act is wrong here. Part of the reasons why it is always difficult to bridge the gap between "is" statement and "ought" statement is that moral facts as maintained by moral anti-realists are not part of the fabric of the universe. (Olanipekun, 20204, p.51). Let us also consider case 3.

Just like case 1, the wrongness of stabbing a fellow human being to death appears very wrong. No one accepts a society in which everyone is free to stab others to death. In view of this, it appears that the wrongness of the act is objective. Unfortunately, this is not so. Anything could have happened. Suppose it is discovered that the act was performed in self-defence. Or better put the act was carried out due to temporary insanity to prevent victim in this case from stabbing the offender in this case eighty times. One could actually argue that such acts are hypothetically wrong. That their moral value depends on external factors. Thus, the wrongness or rightness of an act is not in the act itself but in the way we, men and women in the society interpret the act in the light of our beliefs and religious upbringing. What can we deduce from the three cases? The three



cases show that moral facts, even if they exist, are irrelevant in the determination of the rightness or wrongness of an action.

Moral concepts tend to have a kind of semantic depth starting from our grasp upon the concepts, together perhaps with some practical grasp upon the conditions of their application, we can proceed to investigate, to experience and verify the features of the real world answering to these concepts such as moral facts. Beyond this, the trouble for the moral realists on the issue of moral facts started from the realistic account given on these concepts because they are designed to pick out features of the world of indefinite complexity in a way that transcends our practical understanding in their metaphysical explanations.

Similarly, the aforementioned linguistic confusion is further traceable to the activity of the semantic realists. Semantic realists are of the view that a statement is “interpreted realistically if it asserts a claim about how things are independent of the epistemic perspective of human beings.” (Anderson, 1995, p.2). In other words, semantic realism holds that all external world statements should receive a realist interpretation. For instance, whenever I speak of a table in my room, this statement must be interpreted in such a way that the existence of such a table will be objective and independent of the epistemic perspective of human beings. The issue here is whether or not the semantic realist criterion is applicable to moral realists’ claim about moral facts. Claims in ethics are quite different from claims in empirical science because the objects of study in both are different in kind. For instance, let us consider these two claims: (a) water boils at 100<sup>0</sup> Celsius; and (b) it is morally wrong to kill another person. From all indications one could boldly say that the first statement is quite different from the second. The first claim could

be empirically verified while the second claim could not be so verified. However, the moral realists could respond to the above charge that it is not in all cases that whatever exist must be empirically verifiable. For instance, it is believed that spirits exist, but spirits are not empirically verifiable. Similarly, one could argue that moral facts exist even though they are not empirically verifiable. A possible rejoinder to the moral realists' response could be that moral realists often confuse us about the way they often use the concept "moral fact" as if it is an empirical fact with an objective and independent existence. And of course, empirical fact will require an empirical verification or observation. The point leads to the next argument in support of moral anti-realism. The moral realists' claim that there are moral facts is problematic. The claim lacks observational evidence. To say that there are moral facts is like saying that there are things that are really there in the world for our observation. In our view, moral facts lack such observational evidence.

### **Observational Evidence/Verifiability Argument<sup>2</sup>**

How do we come about moral facts? The question is germane in view of the moral realists' existential claim. The claim that there are moral facts demands the need to know the source and possibly the identity of such moral facts. (Famakinwa, 1997, p.92). The question about how we come to observe moral facts, how such moral facts are verified and how our day-to-day language possibly generates such facts are germane in view of the moral realists' claim regarding the reality of moral facts. There is no doubt that the moral realists' claim about the reality of moral facts raises a genuine philosophical problem not just for the moral philosophers, but also for the logical positivists. Specifically, the actual problem for the moral

realist rests on the lack of observational evidence in support of moral fact. According to the analytic philosophers, “Facts are the evidences that can be verified empirically”. (McGlynn and Toner, 1961, p.82). As mentioned earlier, members of the Vienna circle suggest the verifiability criterion of meaning. As already mentioned, their aim among other things is to develop a logically adequate theory of language that would provide a criterion of linguistic meaning. The criterion is designed to sieve meaningless metaphysical statements from meaningful statements and, finally, to set out the epistemological and logical foundation for science. (Lawhead, 2002, 506).

With a view to achieving their aims, Vienna Circle philosophers formulated their famous verification principle. The principle is based on the conviction that all meaning has to be verified in experience. (Ayer, 1960, p.74). The trouble noted by the logical positivist is that some philosophers, especially, the moral realists are fond of using all sorts of expressions that could not be verified one of which is “moral facts”. In view of the above, the moral realists’ claim that there are moral facts does not necessarily correspond with reality. In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein identifies three classes of propositions:

- i. Propositions with sense.
- ii. Senseless propositions.
- iii. Nonsensical propositions.

For Wittgenstein, a propositional sign is used to express a thought. (Wittgenstein, 1969, p.21). A proposition with sense is a proposition verifiable in sense experience. A proposition is also a thought because a thought is a proposition with sense. The proposition “The table in my office

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<sup>2</sup> Though this argument is originally traceable to the logical positivists, my intension here is to reinforce the argument in favour of moral anti-realism.

has four legs” is sensible because it could be verified through direct observation and therefore meaningful. Basically, a proposition is a picture of reality and if we understand a proposition then we know the situation it represents...and how it must describe reality completely. (Wittgenstein, 1969, pp.39-41). Propositions in arithmetic, mathematics and symbols in logic are senseless. The arithmetical claim “ $2+2 = 4$ ” though meaningful, it’s not a picture of reality. Figure “2” is not part of the structure of the universe. A logical symbol like “ $\sim P$ ” does not say anything about reality because “nothing in reality corresponds to the sign “ $\sim$ ”. (Wittgenstein, 1969, p.45).

Metaphysical propositions are nonsensical because they do not picture reality. They are nonsensical but not senseless. Unfortunately, moral facts do not fall into any class of meaningful propositions. Propositions in religion and ethics are nonsensical because they do not picture reality. The verification principle states that a sentence has meaning if and only if it is in principle empirically confirmable. (McGlynn and Toner, 1961, p.79). The phrase “empirically confirmable” simply means “able to be verified” in some ways by experience. Moral realists got it all wrong by creating more problem in ethical domain when they claim that there are moral facts because it is in the nature of facts to be verifiable. Any fact that is not verifiable is meaningless or nonsensical as far as the logical positivists are concerned.

In other words, moral anti-realist’s conception suggests that it is in the nature of facts to be verified whether in principle or in practice (experience as the case may be). This actually generated a problem for the moral realists who employ the use of the word “fact” loosely in a metaphysical way. It shows that the metaphysics of this sort cannot tell us what particular things exist because if moral facts actually exist as the realists’ claim, why is it that they are not known?

In other words, one could probably argue that moral realists have no convincing evidence to support or demonstrate the ontological status of moral facts.

Now, what is the possible response of the moral realists to our position? In fairness to moral realists, it seems there are certain actions that we reject or accept in actual human society. The action of a father who consistently rapes his daughter is usually disapproved. Most of us find such an action repulsive. The defilement of a two-year old girl by an adult is generally disapproved. No society accepts stealing or the punishment of an innocent person. All these point to the fact that there are certain instances that we all agree on some issues. Not every human moral conduct or misconduct is socially acceptable. Kwame Gyekye in his book, *Beyond Culture: Perceiving a Common Humanity*, is of the view that there are “certain values that are intrinsic or concomitant to the notion of an organized and functioning human society.” (Gyekye, 2004, p.46). There are human values shared by all human beings. Does this mean that there are moral facts? Does the fact that there are human values mean that there are moral facts? We do not doubt the fact that certain human values are shared by all human beings. In agreement with moral anti-realists, our position is that, the mere fact that some human beings agree about certain moral issues does not establish the fact that there are moral facts and that such facts are part of the structure of the universe. It is important to know that moral facts and moral decisions are not the same. Moral realists confuse moral decisions for moral facts. The very fact that human beings have the capacities to arrive at specific decisions does not mean that those decisions are factual or represent moral facts.

In “*Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology*”, Carnap bares his mind on certain expressions which suggest “the reality of abstract entities”. (Demopoulos, 2011, p. 647). On this note, it is natural to view the controversy that separates the moral realists and the anti-realists as the one that concerns the opposing views of the theories which postulate unobservable entities such as moral facts. Thus, if Carnap’s proposal that anything that is not verifiable is not real regarding framework choice and abstract entities could be shown to apply *mutatis mutandis* to a case which, like the case of the reality of moral facts, unlike the reality of atoms is very plausible represented as a choice of linguistic framework, then this would be a reason to reject the position/postulation of the realists even for the case of abstract entities such as moral facts. This rejection is predicated on the fact that moral fact is quite different in kind from atoms. Harman elaborates on the problem with moral realism thus:

Facts about proton can affect what we observe, since a proton passing through a cloud of fibre can cause a vapour trail that reflects light to your eye in a way that, given your scientific training and psychological set, leads you to judge that what you see is a proton. But there does not seem to be any way in which the actual rightness or wrongness of a given situation can have any effect on your perceptual apparatus. (Harman, 1977, p.6).

This emphasis underlies the point that there is a way by which non-moral facts are open to empirical observation and verification which the so-called moral facts are not. In other words, Harman’s position is that; the scientific realm is accessible to observation and verification in a way the moral realm is not. (Harman, 1988, p.124). For instance, the fact that water boils at 100<sup>0</sup> Celsius is accessible to observation and verification in a way that “it is wrong not to give alms” is not. Thus, moral judgements are not empirically proven just as the law gravity can be proven.

However, moral realists' possible response to the above charge could be that since moral facts are not the same as empirical facts, moral facts do not necessarily need empirical proving. Meanwhile, one could reply the realists that the use of the concept "moral facts" is superfluous. It also causes confusion creates unnecessary gap in the moral domain between moral realists and antirealists. And since moral facts are not the same as empirical facts, why the use of the word "fact" in the first place? This objection finds support in the work of Trycia Nabunya. According to Nabunya, "there exist a contextual gap relating to the nature of moral realism and antirealism and its implication for moral discourse and practice." (Nabunya, 2024, p.1). The above said gap could easily be traced to the controversy that surrounds the realists' usage of the concept "moral facts".

Caleb Robb argues that moral realism appears to be the most consistent of moral theories. (Robb, 2022, p.22). but this seems not to be the case. the reason is because, another view that strengthens moral anti- realism against moral realism is the one coming from Bishop Berkeley's principle. Bishop George Berkeley's thesis of *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived) is considered to be a viable thesis in defence of the view that moral anti-realism is more plausible than moral realism. Thus, if there are moral facts at all, their existence must be dependent on the mind that is perceiving them or must be humanly verifiable and should not be said to be standing out there independent of moral agent that possesses the power of moral consciousness. For instance, it would be absurd to think that moral facts exist in a world populated by zero human being or in animal kingdom where there is absence of cognising mind. This to a large extent shows that the role/place of human beings is significant in the conception of moral facts if there is anything like that. Does Berkeley's idealism really support our thesis that moral

antirealism is more plausible than moral realism? Berkeley's idealism denies the existence of material things. The so called "matter" is the combination of different ideas. So, the only real things are ideas not material substance. Hence, according to Berkeley, "to be is to be perceived or the perceiver". Does this position really deny the existence of moral facts? In our view, though the position does not directly deny the reality of moral facts, it implies it. The only real thing is the contents of the mind. This is compatible with the moral anti-realists' view that the rightness and wrongness of human action or omission is mind dependent. Therefore, Berkeley's view that denies the reality of matter will imply the denial of moral facts. Moral facts, in the sense in which they are conceived by moral realists, are not qualified to be described as ideas because they cannot be perceived the way we ordinarily perceive an object like a chair and because the realists claim that they are independent or that they have objective reality. In the next section we briefly examine the point about human moral diversity.

### **Argument from the Evidence for Moral Diversity**

This argument is developed to strengthen the view that moral anti-realism is more plausible than moral realism. A complete anti-realist treatment of the semantic of moral terms would of course require examining the notion of *objectivity* since the moral realists defended the view that the so-called moral facts are objective or have independent and objective existence. (Olanipekun, 2024, p.65). Granted that our everyday moral concepts as they are built into our language do presuppose objective moral facts, our contemporary experiences suggest that there are no such objective/independent moral facts. In ordinary language, to be objective means "not influenced by personal feelings or opinion in considering and representing facts". (i.e. not depend on the



mind for existence). For a realist like Geoffrey Sayre-Mc Cord; Moral objectivists hold that the appropriate truth-conditions make no reference to anyone's subjective states or to the capacities, conventions, or practices of any group of people. (Sayre-McCord,1988, p.20).

But, are there genuine problems with this thesis of the moral realists? The answer is in the affirmative. For example, J. L. Mackie in his *Argument from Queerness* denies the reality of moral facts. According to Mackie, the claims that values are objective are not part of the fabric of the world...if there were objective values, then they will be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. (Mackie, 1988, p.111).

As rightly maintained by Mackie, if there are objective moral facts, then why the current level of controversies and different views both at the level of the individual and community in moral discourse? In other words, if there are objective moral facts, why is it that some people deny this objectivity? According to Richard Boyd, moral anti- realism has "relativist" features (Boyd, 1988, p.224). This point can be illustrated by reflection on the conflicts of opinion in recent years between Nigeria and The British government over the issue of "same sex marriage". Countries like the United States of America and Britain approve the practice of same sex marriage. In Nigeria, the practice is rejected as immoral. Thus, if there are objective moral facts about same sex marriage, why the current divergent views on its practice across the globe? Thus, this suggests that we must not jettison moral relativism as long as each nation such as the USA and Nigeria could have different views and standpoints over such moral issue. It is on this note that Harman thinks that ethical relativism – the view that "there is no single true morality" –must be true because it is a "reasonable inference from the most plausible explanation of moral diversity"

(Harman, 1996, p.8). Harman's reason is a version of explanatory inadequacy of moral facts thesis.

To drive home the argument in support of the plausibility of moral anti-realism, one objection to moral realist's account of the semantics of moral terms is considered here. The observed diversity of moral concepts among various cultural communities as well as individual groups within a culture suggests that it will not be possible to assign a single objective criterion to multifarious moral disputes. For instance, there are different opinions about the morality of slavery. While the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europeans considered slavery as an "objective just act", the present 21<sup>st</sup> Century Europeans saw it as an unjust and inhuman treatment. The point here is that there could be a radical shift in moral views even within the same society at different historical periods even as related to the meaning and the interpretation of the so-called moral facts. However, the moral realists could defend their view that what is important is that there are moral facts. The notion that moral facts could shift in meaning and interpretations in different era is not important. Critics could easily respond to the moral realists that they are mainly trying to run away from the problem. The problem about the observed diversity of moral concepts among various cultural communities as well as individual groups within a culture that suggests possible diverse criteria to multifarious moral disputes has not be solved.

In fact, the issue of "child marriage" mentioned earlier is another controversial issue. In Egypt, child marriage is considered morally permissible based on their religious beliefs and social convention. In Nigeria, the practice is considered immoral. It was on this ground that a former governor of a State in Nigeria was castigated when he got married to a thirteen-year-old girl from

Egypt. Other examples that strengthen the argument are the issue of euthanasia, abortion and so on. Our position is not to completely deny objectivity universally, because it is admitted that we could obtain some level of objectivity in natural sciences as well as in mathematics. For example, water boils at 100<sup>0</sup> Celsius and  $2+2 =4$  are universal truths that are not subject to relativistic debate in any culture or society. However, objectivity may be difficult to come by in ethics due to the complexity of the human nature because the so-called moral facts are nothing but facts about human beings.

### **Conclusion**

In meta-ethics, there are three main approaches to the debate between moral realism and anti-realism. The approaches are ontological, epistemological and semantic. Scholars such as A. J. Ayer, C.L. Stevenson, R.M. Hare, J.L. Mackie, Gilbert Harman, G.E. Moore, Bernard William, David O. Brink, Richard N. Boyd, and Simon Blackburn have made considerable efforts in discussing the ontological and epistemological theses/approaches. However, aside these two approaches, the semantic thesis is also a fertile ground in the debate because it is not yet fully explored. This paper explored the semantic approach in the debate between moral realism and anti-realism. Basically, this paper examined the effect and implication of language as enshrined in the philosophical defense of the plausibility of moral anti-realism. Thus, despite moral realists' ontological claim and epistemological explanation, the paper demonstrated how and why moral anti-realism is more consistent with reality through the analysis of language. In fact, for Michael Klenk a realist defense against the semantic challenge may be but a pyrrhic victory. (Klenk, 2021, p.1). This paper argued that it is doubtful if such victory is even visible at all in the first place.

From the argument based on linguistic ambiguity, it was found that a fallacy of ambiguity is committed when moral realists claim that there are moral facts. This is owing to the fact that the so-called moral facts could be interpreted in more than one way. It was equally found that based on argument from the evidence of moral diversity, objectivity may be difficult to come by in ethics due to the complexity of the human nature. Based on verifiability argument, it was established that the very fact that human beings have the capacities to arrive at specific decisions does not mean that those decisions are factual because philosophers would prefer for all facts be part of the natural world and it seems mysterious to say that some facts are not. The plausibility of anti-realism, in any of these areas, depends largely on the noted problems associated with moral realism and realists' claims.

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