

This paper was published in the *Oxford Handbook of Moral Realism*, edited by Paul Bloomfield and David Copp. Oxford University Press 2023.

## Real Ethics

We remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all the everyday language-games because the clothing of our language makes everything alike.

Wittgenstein 1953 Pt. II, XI, p. 224

### 1. Glimmerings

My engagement with issues about realism predated my real introduction to philosophy, which only started when I went up to Cambridge. For while I was still at school, wrapped up in Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry, a master gave me G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* to read, hoping no doubt to create a veneer of culture that might deceive Cambridge's interviewers. I there read Moore's argument that beauty cannot lie in the eye of the beholder, for we can readily imagine a beautiful scene to which nobody is a witness, or equally imagine an unseen ugly wasteland. I immediately felt, and tried to convince anyone who would listen, that although Moore was right that we do not suppose the beauty or ugliness of a scene to vary with whether we also suppose there to be any actual observer of it, this was nevertheless a rotten argument. For as I observed we do not escape the deliverances of our own aesthetic sensibilities as we perform these acts of imagination, and this is surely enough to support the idea that beauty is, as it were, down to us, lying in the eye or the imagination of the beholder. It was only much later that I learned that Berkeley's spokesman Philonous makes the identical reply to Hylas, in the service of a more wide-ranging idealism.

I suppose that three traits that have stayed with me were already visible here in embryonic form, perhaps vindicating William James' view that often our philosophies are a matter of temperament as much as argument. One was a scientist's ambition to explain things, and a belief that we wouldn't properly understand aesthetics without paying attention to human psychology and its variations. This gave me a second trait, a lurking sympathy with the anti-realist side of things, at least in this case, where attention to our psychology seemed to offer more in the way of explanatory promise than Moore could. The third trait was a conviction that this was going to be a tricky debate to conduct and that quick knockdown arguments would need sceptical attention. These last two traits are not always comfortable bedfellows, although I later hoped to reconcile them in the character of the quasi-realist, who tried to help anti-realism, in the forms of the that it had principally taken in discussions of ethics, modals, probability and conditionals. I now somewhat regret the term "quasi-realism", largely because I now think that "realism" has diversified, diluted, and dissipated enough to lose any utility as a landmark, and I shall try to explain why in what follows.

## **2. Flavours of Realism.**

For the first twenty years or so of my life in professional philosophy I thought it was reasonably clear what might be meant by realism in ethics. The starting point was that realism was to be a theory *about* ethics. It purported to clarify or explain or at any rate to describe some salient feature of ethical discourse. It used features of our thought and talk to support the theory. It was only later that this became doubtful, for reasons I shall go on to describe. But let us first explore this starting point.

The leading image behind realism, in connection with ethics, mathematics, possible worlds, probabilities, and other contested areas is simple enough. It is that what we say or believe is made true, when it is, by the way the world is. Realism is the idea that there is something that needs to exist to make up or constitute this. As we describe this something we can be right or wrong about it, just as we can be right or wrong as we talk about chairs and rocks. We are right or wrong according to whether this part of reality answers to our descriptions of it. It is often added that this reality is independent of us, in the sense that how we think about it does not affect it (this does not imply that our ethical judgments about a situation are independent of the states of mind of persons in that situation). The independence in question can be put by insisting that discussion and thought is aimed at discovery rather than invention. Or it is sometimes insisted that there are objective moral reasons that bear on people whether or not they take any notice of them. Their subjective states are one thing, but the objective reasons another. It might be thought that it is this objective correlate that puts beef or biff or backbone into our subjective states. A major task of philosophy, indeed its fundamental task, is to understand the nature of these realities, and then the nature of our knowledge of them.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, pursuing this task in the case of ethics, G. E. Moore distinguished two directions such an investigation might take. It might classify the reality in question as just some part of the familiar natural world—the world that is open to us through empirical observation and scientific theory. If we know everything about the natural world, then our knowledge also embraces ethics. This has the advantage that ethical reality is nothing but a part of the natural world. Unfortunately, Moore argued, it does this by failing to recognize that however full our description of the natural

world might be, there is always a residual question, an open question. Is the natural reality we describe actually good or not? Is the behaviour we describe right or not? The fact that these are always open questions suggests strongly that we have to go beyond mere descriptions of how things are in their natural respects, in order to settle questions of value. A comprehensive description of a situation might suggest an ethical verdict, but it does not itself contain it, nor would it be contradictory to admit the description but dissent from the verdict.

Sticking with the realistic starting point this drove Moore to supposing that morality must instead answer to something else, a different way the world is, made by the “non-natural” properties of things.<sup>1</sup> Having established this to his satisfaction Moore unfortunately had to remain embarrassingly silent about what these non-natural properties were. He suggested they would be known by “intuition”, but couldn’t fill the term with any detail, for since they lie outside the causal networks of the natural world, they lie beyond sense experience as well. And he also couldn’t explain why on earth we would care about them. His problem was in effect one that beset Plato. Plato offered the famous Myth of the Cave to suggest how the person who is to know the Good has to struggle from the darkness of the cave up to the light, where eventually he or she can look directly at the sun itself, the giver of light and warmth and life. The vision has a celestial, other-worldly object, but Plato offers no way of connecting the metaphor of the sun as an object of sight with mundane problems and their moral solutions. Nor does he offer any help in understanding how the heroes who achieve the vision do any better than anyone

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper I talk of morality, ethics, and normativity interchangeably. Any differences between them do not matter to the points I hope to make.

else when they return to the cave to communicate with and perhaps help the benighted souls who were unable to journey to the light.

So the dilemma Moore bequeathed to realism in ethics was to choose between naturalism, mundane, familiar, but wrong, and non-naturalism, strange, spooky, inviting more questions than it answered, yet apparently compulsory.

Both these views, naturalism and non-naturalism or “intuitionism”, share the realism, supposing that there is some part of reality—the ethical part—that it is the task of good ethics to describe truly. As we think about simple descriptions of our sensory environments we are familiar with, and happy with, the chairs and tables and rocks of which we speak. If there were no such things, there would be no facts about them, and no truths about them to voice. If we are to be similarly content speaking of moral properties, or referring to such things as rights, duties, or values, we must stand by the analogy to physical space and its denizens. It is just that we may have to expand our conception of the environment we inhabit. In connection with ethics, we either need moral properties as well as natural ones, as intuitionism holds, or a reduction of moral properties to natural ones, finding a way past Moore’s challenge.

The task I have pursued has been to uproot this realist analogy. It is the task of explaining and justifying the features of language and thought that wrongly tempted people to this view. I could never for a moment believe that confidence that it is wrong to stamp on babies for fun, or that a child’s grief is a reason for sympathy, is only defensible if we acknowledge some spooky metaphysical reality lying outside and beyond the natural events of pain and grief. I feel about the choice between intuitionism and naturalism as the literary critic F. R. Leavis did in a different connection, remarking ‘When people line up

so promptly one suspects...that the differences are not of a kind that has much to do with thinking' (Leavis 1968 p. 171)

### 3. A Way Out

The approach I adopted, as had many writers discontent with Moore's view, was a descendant of Scottish sentimental theories of the eighteenth century. It was once unhappily called emotivism, and unhappily too called prescriptivism, projectivism, or non-cognitivism. In its contemporary form it has dropped many of its older, misleading, connotations, and is probably best known as expressivism, although for reasons I shall come to, it might be better if that name also follows its predecessors to the grave. In any case it is primarily a theory about the nature of normative commitment. Like its Scottish ancestors it concentrates on what is done by communicating normative and evaluative judgments, and says that their function is drawn from the enormous reservoir of preferences, desires, concerns, attitudes, policies, recommendations, commitments, agreements, demands, allowances, prohibitions, and other practical stances that altogether make up our social lives. The function of ethical language and thought is to discuss, defend, and perhaps improve these building blocks of human life. Without these practical concerns, there would be no ethics, just as without the pleasures that beauty and form give, there would be no aesthetics.

Realists may complain that the sentimental tradition is all very well, but that it doesn't tell us what moral states of affairs *consist in* (I am grateful to Sarah Stroud for emphasizing this worry). It tells us what we do by saying that stamping on babies for fun is wrong, but it leaves us no sense of what the state of affairs, or the fact, of stamping on babies being wrong actually *is*. What is its truth-maker, the aspect of the way the world is

that is responsible for this fact? What is the fact that it describes? People have similarly worried that Hume's theory of causation tells us when a causal interpretation of happenings strikes us, but it did not tell us what *constituted* the relationship whereby one event necessitates another. Ramsey thought that with the language of probability and chance we discuss and refine the degrees of confidence to hold in forthcoming events, but this does not tell us what probabilities and chances *actually are*. Ryle thought that with conditionals we offer "inference tickets" licensing the move from antecedent to conclusion, but this does not give us the constitution of hypothetical *facts* (Ryle, G. 1950). All these theories proceed instead by describing what we do as we think and speak in such terms, without getting involved in constitutive questions. This is their strength, but realists will complain that the strength is only gained by leaving out what they regard as the most important part of any adequate theory. My Cambridge teacher Casimir Lewy used to declaim against Ryle's theory that conditionals function as inference tickets, asking passionately "*Yes, but what issued these inference tickets?*". The same question, especially in connection with counterfactuals was the major weapon deployed by realists such as David Armstrong (1983) and C. B. Martin (2008). But although it silenced his students at the time, Lewy's question has a simple enough answer. It is we who issue the inference tickets, as we observe the pattern of events, and in the light of them monitor each other's inferential movements.

The constitutive demand betrays a hankering for a metaphysics of facts or states of affairs. Realists about ethics may feel that they alone give this constitutive task its proper place. But they may find it hard to articulate what would count as its successful execution. The Moorean alternatives are either to stay within a normative vocabulary,

perhaps offering lame visual analogies like Plato, or to attempt naturalistic reductions, perhaps offering not analyses falling foul of the Open Question argument, as clusters of natural properties containing such things as happiness, opportunities, freedom, health and others, which are indeed held to be good. My problem with that is not what it gives us, but what it leaves out. That is, it leaves us flatly referring to this cluster of natural properties that may indeed be components of a good life. But the normative guise or mode of presentation of any such cluster is left out. What is left out is the crucial implication that such-and-such a cluster is the one of which to approve, or the one that ought to be chosen or protected. Without this ethics goes missing. The missing element is precisely that which expressivists put in the forefront (I discuss this at more length in Blackburn 2015).

Expressivists think that the metaphysical hankering is a mistake, akin to that of hunting the Snark without any conception of what it might be, and using a map to guide you that has no points of reference but is instead a “perfect and absolute blank” (Carroll 1876, p. 16). However, we faced what has often seemed to be a formidable obstacle, and this is where quasi-realism came in. The obstacle is that in the things we say in discussing ethical matters are clothed in the vocabulary of truth and falsehood, objectivity and reason. We say, for instance, that it is true, or a fact, and certainly not just a matter of opinion that it is wrong to stamp on babies for fun. And where there are truths and facts isn't it compulsory to have a view about what they consist in, or what constitutes them?

#### **4. Creeping Minimalism?**

In the good old days people knew expressivists about ethics were supposed to evade Moore by saying that there were no moral properties, and no moral facts, so sentences



expressing moral commitments did not describe or represent anything and were not even candidates for truth or falsity.

Quasi-realism was the project of showing that expressivists need not be so self-denying. It set out to show that it should be no surprise that an ethics that exists in order for us to monitor our own attitudes and those of others should take on a propositional form identical with that of other mundane commitments. The root of ethics would be as the sentimentalists had said, and the justification of our propensity for a propositional mode of expression would be the way in which it facilitates inference and reasoning. This form enabled reasoning and inference to function in normative matters as in others and it could perfectly well end up with us saying that it is true, or a fact that, say, it is wrong to stamp on babies for fun. Or it could end up with our saying that such an activity would be deplorable or vile, and having said that we could be said to be attributing the property of deplorability or vileness to it.

A nice parallel is the way in which talking in terms of probabilities and chances facilitates discussion of appropriate betting rates or degrees of confidence in the occurrence of events. It is a pity that this approach, pioneered by Frank Ramsey and Bruno de Finetti, got tarred with the brush of “subjectivism” since while it is indeed subjects (we ourselves) who have degrees of confidence, direct evidence from frequencies and indirect evidence from scientific theories can make chances as objective as anything else. For instance, there are no two things to think about the chance of a Carbon 14 isotope decaying in approximately 5,700 years. It is very close to .5. And the chance of any one particle decaying is the same as that of any other. Any other opinion in physics is

just wrong. It could not be part of a useful theory with which to meet the future (Ramsey 1929, p. 149).

Towards the end of the twentieth century the quasi-realist enterprise was aided immeasurably by the increasing popularity of deflationist or minimalist views in the philosophy of truth, and in semantic theory in general. Such views had a distinguished lineage, beginning with Frege, and common to Ramsey, Wittgenstein, and Quine. The details differ but the shared element is that if we start with an assertoric sentence, say 'ducks quack' and we assent to it, it then makes no difference if we add further affirmations of truth. Thus 'I believe that ducks quack' can transform into 'I believe that it is true that ducks quack', 'I believe that it is a fact that ducks quack', and 'I believe that it is true that it is a fact that ducks quack' and so on for ever, without actually affecting the content of what was said at the beginning. There is no increased depth or change of subject matter, and in fact no difference at all between the content of the first remark and the content of the last. There could at most be a difference of emphasis, as if you said 'ducks quack' while shaking your fist or thumping the table.

This simple observation has profound consequences. I said in the last section that realism purports to be a theory *about* ethics and its nature—a metaethical theory, in the jargon. And it uses features of our thought and talk to motivate that theory. But now we can ask: which features? Primarily, as already mentioned, the way in which we think in terms of normative truth, or normative facts, or the ways in which these are supposed to be independent of us and in that sense objective. Now if 'it is true that  $p$ ' or 'it is a fact that  $p$ ' were likewise themselves remarks *about* a proposition, we could see the appeal of such an argument. But if, as deflationism holds, they are not such remarks, but merely

ways of staying within the moral and the normative, then there is a serious mismatch between the evidence and the conclusion. According to the deflationist 'It is true that  $p$ ' or 'It is a fact that  $p$ ' are neither of them metaethical remarks, comments on the status or metaphysical make-up of the fact that  $p$ . So they shouldn't be taken as evidence for one theory or another attempting to tell us something about that, such as realism is.

One line, probably most prominent in the voluminous writings of the legal theorist Ronald Dworkin, was to keep the label 'realist' but jettison the idea that this was a view *about* the nature of normative commitment. All that was necessary, according to Dworkin, was that you hold some normative view. If you hold that it is wrong to stamp on babies for fun, then you are a normative realist. Since all right-thinking people do think this, all right-thinking people are normative realists (Dworkin 1996). Curiously, although all expressivists have shared this thought—all of us disapprove of stamping on babies for fun—Dworkin nevertheless fulminated against expressivism, identifying it with scepticism or perhaps nihilism, this being the view that there are actually no obligations, duties, rights or values. But the sentimentalist tradition has had few nihilists in its ranks (Ayer 1936, Chapter 6 being the embarrassing exception). In fact nihilism is much more likely to be a consequence of a metaethical realism when that takes one of the Moorean or Platonic forms, and then honestly confronting the unfortunate fact that the quest for a credible metaphysics collapses, subsides into error theory and scepticism (Mackie 1977).

It is now over thirty years since I began to worry whether the triumphant quasi-realist would better be called a queasy realist, for if Dworkin were right the label of realism is there for free, for all of us (Blackburn, 1986, 1993). In the years following the idea has gained considerable momentum. As soon as you say, for instance that you ought

not to stamp on babies for fun you are committed to there being moral truths and moral facts, for by deflationism or minimalism ‘it is true that  $p$ ’ and ‘it is a fact that  $p$ ’ are simple implications of  $p$  itself. And similarly for moral properties, and, as the minimalist tide rises, the claim that we describe them, represent them, and believe in them. However this would scarcely be a victory for realists in the old debate, since in that debate realism was a theory *about* the nature of ethics. But under the deflationist dispensation such prized sayings as ‘there are real moral facts and truths’ amount to no more than elementary implications of first-order theses that nobody except perhaps fictionalists, error theorists, or nihilists queried. There was therefore no real ‘...ism’ left in ‘realism’—no theory about normativity and its epistemology and no successful search for something that normative relations ‘consist in’. Any trophies realists won this way are made of tin rather than silver.

As the deflationist tide rose the negative theses that characterized expressivism in the good old days were to be jettisoned, and as Jamie Dreier noticed in a landmark paper the good old days mostly went with them (Dreier 2004). According to Dworkin this was not to be regretted, since there were never really any meta-ethical issues at stake. According to others we might be able to cling on to some kind of litmus test, such as a thick, theory-laden conception of real belief, whereby moral commitments could be said not to be real beliefs (Jackson, Oppy and Smith 1994). But no such suggestion caught on, for after all, ‘beliefs’ in any ordinary sense were as wide ranging as other propositional attitudes, covering conditionals, necessities, probability statements or moral commitments without evident strain.

I was flattered that in his paper Dreier talked of Blackburn’s “famous slogan” that it's not what you say at the end of the day, but how you got there that matters. I did not

know that the slogan was famous, but it did and still does encapsulate my belief that there are contrasting ways of justifying and explaining the propositional forms and inferential powers of evaluative, modal, and conditional commitments, and that a route taking us through expressivism has virtues of economy, simplicity, and explanatory power that blunter realisms lack. More on this in the final section.

The arrival of deflationism was certainly useful to quasi-realism. But it did not solve all the problems. It is not entirely plain sailing to explain why our propensity for propositional clothing goes as far as it does, and no further. Why, a critic might ask, should we give ourselves moral propositions, and their truth and falsity, if we do not think of commands, or desires and policies, as themselves true or false? If moral commitments have a close affinity with these things, is it not surprising that we go as far as we do? As I have indicated, the answer must be that it is necessary, or at least useful, for us to have a grammar that enables us to map out the inferential moves that normative commitments have. Precisely because they are going to be insisted upon, they are going to be discussed as acceptable or not.

It is also worth noticing that similar transformations (into a propositional form) are naturally made with commands. If the President instructs the Defence Chief to put troops on the streets, he might meet the pained question “if we are to do that, are we also to shoot into the crowds?” Latin has the gerundive case to enable inferences of this kind: in “Carthago delenda est” the gerundive has become an adjective, and the imperative to destroy Carthage as it were crosses the boundary into being a proposition, and debatable.

Nietzsche noticed the transformation and saw it as a sinister result of the ‘protracted and domineering fundamental feeling on the part of a ruling order...they say

“this *is* this and this”, they seal every thing and every event with a sound, and, as it were, take possession of it.’ (Nietzsche 1887, Essay 1, §2). It is certainly true that Cato could exert more influence by transplanting his plan to destroy Carthage from being “let’s destroy Carthage” into “Carthage must be destroyed”, as if Carthage were itself calling out for destruction. Nietzsche had a low opinion of the move imagining that it involves us in a delusion, the error we make according to Mackie’s “error theory”. But I offer a more generous account of the function. I share Nietzsche’s desire for an evolutionary or genealogical story, but I see it as pointing us to a Darwinian adaptation, rather than a delusion.

### 5. The Neo-Pragmatist Alliance.

In recent years expressivism has also gained a new lease of life from its association with the wider movement of neo-pragmatism. The alliance has been welcome, for who would not feel fortified by finding themselves standing alongside a tradition boasting such philosophers as Ramsey, Wittgenstein, and Sellars? I feel embarrassed to say that while I had always recognized the first pair as major pioneers, I was ignorant of the extent to which Sellars also had foreseen the shape that expressivist insights should take. In (Price 2015) Huw Price reminds us of this, quoting a salient passage demonstrating Sellars’s affinity with quasi-realism:

We have learned the hard way that the core truth of ‘emotivism’ is not only compatible with, but absurd without, ungrudging recognition of the fact, so properly stressed (if mis-assimilated to the model of describing) by ‘ethical rationalists,’ that ethical discourse as ethical discourse is a mode of rational discourse. It is my purpose to argue that the core truth of Hume’s philosophy of causation is not only compatible with, but absurd without, ungrudging recognition of those features of causal discourse as a mode of rational discourse on which the ‘metaphysical rationalists’ laid such stress but also mis-assimilated to describing. (Sellars 1958 p. 285.)

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We should note that Sellars was happy to use a negative or contrastive characterisation of his position, as indeed were Ramsey and Wittgenstein, for whom the core function of many indicative sentences needed to be contrasted with that of describing things. It is still a live issue within the church of pragmatism whether this contrast should remain, or whether a general deflationism removes it along with other landmarks (Kraut 1990, pp. 157–83).

In the case of causal modalities, although Sellars starts by following Hume and Ryle, the end point is rather different. He imagines a diachronic process, whereby causal and counterfactual inferences become cemented into descriptive content that, confined to registering uniformities, would originally have been innocent of them. A later passage in the same paper expands this point. Talking of ramifications of causal vocabulary and ideas he says that

It is therefore important to realize that the presence in the object language of the causal modalities (and of the logical modalities and of the deontic modalities) serves not only to express existing commitments, but also to provide the framework for the thinking by which we reason our way (in a manner appropriate to the specific subject matter) into the making of new commitments and the abandonment of old...(1958 p. 303)

He gives as examples the kinds of sentence that rationalists and realists like to showcase, such as ‘There are causal connections which have not yet been discovered’, and we can add ‘There are obligations which have not yet been recognized’, or ‘There are qualities which no one has yet experienced’. Sellars argued that these quantifications need not describe hidden abstract objects, and should not excite metaphysical or ‘realist’ imaginings. They too are expressive, simply showing that we are open to the possibilities of inquiry and discovery in their respective areas. In a similar vein someone thinking of

the half-lives of undiscovered radioactive isotopes will think that there are probabilities that are yet unknown. Such quantifications arise from what Sellars called 'language militant', a nice metaphor showing that we countenance the possibility of future changes and improvements in meanings themselves, which we might be marched towards by new reasonings or experiences. A rather different tack is taken here by one of Sellars's most loyal followers, Robert Brandom, who has no qualms about supposing that his 'analytic pragmatism' ends up with full-scale realism, even about morals, modals, or conditionals (Brandom 2008, pp. 201–36, queried in Price 2017 pp. 157–8). Although I applaud Brandom's linkage of pragmatism with 'algebraic' inferential clarity, which was also the goal of quasi-realism, my reaction is still that it is how you get there that counts, so that the label 'realism' is best avoided.

Pragmatists, with their interest in genealogy as opposed to analysis, are happy to emphasize Sellars's diachronic change. In spite of the scepticism quoted above a salient example would be the genealogy Nietzsche himself sketches, whereby a notion of justice, originally deriving as Hume described from conventions governing transactions between roughly equal parties, becomes ever more extensive through time, eventually applying in circumstances and ways that quite disguise its origins (Queloz 2017, pp. 1–23).

The ungrudging recognition that Sellars recommends gives us the right way of dealing with the Frege-Geach problem. This is in effect to invert it. Far from being a sticking point, the inferential functions of sentences that express the propositional reflections of attitudes, plans or policies are exactly what explain the fact that they are in our lexicon. This is why we have 'lying is wrong', as opposed to: 'boo to lying!', just as we have 'Carthage is to be destroyed' as well as 'Destroy Carthage!' In other words, rather



than it being a problem that we seamlessly use such sentences in complex and indirect contexts, happily negating them or putting them in the antecedents of conditionals, it is precisely the inferential power that this transformation unlocks that explains why we go in for propositional expression of the commitments in the first place. If we did not want to locate attitudes and practical policies within complex webs, subject to constraints of coherence and consistency, we would not need propositional expression, but could rest content with atomic expressions, such as ejaculations, imperatives, or optatives. But since we do want coherence and consistency, we want an inferential ('algebraic') discipline, and this is what the indicative form gives us.

So are Sellars and Wittgenstein right that it remains useful to contrast the function of normative language with description, or would they do better to succumb to the deflationist tide? One motivation for keeping the contrast emerges in a paper in which Michael Williams identifies three elements in any pragmatist explanation of the meaning of a sentence in terms of its use: an inferential component, an epistemological component, and a functional description explaining what this bit of the language does for us (Williams 2010). These clauses give the essential contrast between normative vocabularies and empirical vocabularies, in that the latter are tied to 'language entry' rules, requiring that a report be made as the result of a reliable disposition to a differential response to some feature, whereas the former, while free from language-entry rules, are tied to language-exit rules, in the way they guide and grade policies, preferences, and actions. It is of course, the detachment from language entry rules that underlies the point of Moore's Open Question Argument that there is no *semantic* obstacle to querying and rejecting any particular standard for a normative judgment. Moore failed to realize that

this is precisely because its use is fixed at the other end, so to speak, in the practical direction in which it seeks to steer us. Indeed much later Moore candidly admitted that the bare possibility of positions like emotivism had not occurred to him at the time of *Principia Ethica* or his later book *Ethics* (Moore 1952 p. 546) It is also, one might add, an excuse for the negative theses of the good old days, for if the rules governing moral and evaluative (and modal and conditional) language make no use of any notion of reliable response to a feature, it is not stretching things very far to suggest that they are not describing or representing any feature either. Some may think that the minimalist tide has obliterated that landmark, but it was certainly useful to Ramsey, Wittgenstein, Austin, and Sellars in its day. And just as it was negative about the idea that normative and modal languages describe anything, so it was firmly negative about the need for a metaphysics of what it is that they describe. The urge to leave metaphysics and receptivity to metaphysical facts out from our understanding of normativity and modality was always a driver of anti-realism in its various forms.

## 6. Semantics and Metasemantics

With truth deflated a lot of other points of reference can get the air taken out of them with it: facts, reference, representation, description, and properties are amongst them. So as soon as we commit ourselves to any normative judgment, we might hear ourselves admitting that the judgment is true, that there is a fact of the matter, that the attribution of a normative property is correct, and it seems anything else that used to be part of the negative content of anti-realism.

One line of thought that opens up here is exploited in many papers by Huw Price. Price is a dyed-in-the-wool semantic minimalist, but nevertheless recognizes that there is

a pull towards a notion that he calls e-representation, which can obtain between terms and features of the environment to which they are tied by causal relations. The terms that e-represent will be ones that directly or indirectly require the reliable dispositions to differential responses for a user to be able to use them in reports of environmental features. It is this language-entry requirement that marks them out. Price holds that e-representation is a niche area within the much wider field of i-representation, this being certified for terms by the inferential relations of sentences within which they occur. So although causal responsiveness may play a large role in deciding, for instance, that Wittgenstein's builders refer to their slabs and beams, it is the inferential power associated with names and descriptions that allows us to say that we equally refer to fictional characters, abstract objects, and for that matter possible worlds, causal powers, or rights and obligations.

Although it is not central to issues surrounding normativity it may be worth pausing briefly to offer one helping hand to neo-pragmatism in general. I believe that this movement took a wrong turn in the hands of Richard Rorty. Rorty seems to have thought of himself as following Dewey in having a general suspicion of semantic terms, notably reference, representation and truth, across the board. I do not know if there is evidence of Dewey sharing that suspicion. It is more certain that he disliked a particular *theory* of how semantic or intentional powers come about. Dewey wrote that:

The basic fallacy in representative realism is that while it actually depends upon the inferential phase of enquiry, it fails to interpret the immediate quality and the related idea in terms of their functions in inquiry. On the contrary it views representative power as an inherent property of sensations and ideas as such, treating them as "representations" in and of themselves. Dualism or bifurcation of mental and physical existence is a necessary result, presented, however, not as a result but as a given fact...psychological or mental existences which are then endowed with the miraculous power of standing for and

pointing to existences of a different order. <sup>2</sup> (Dewey 1968, p. 514–5)

The complaint is that by making representative power an intrinsic self-standing property of ideas or concepts or any ‘thing’ we simply generate mystery. For, since physical things like inscriptions and sounds evidently do not have these intrinsic powers, we add the false idea of a dualism of mind, where there must reside things such as ideas or concepts that do have such powers, and the inert external world where nothing does. It is the idea that semantic properties are intrinsic to some *thing* or other that is the target, not the propriety of semantic terminology itself. It is interesting to note how this point is echoed in Wittgenstein’s attack on the idea of a rule as a presence in the mind with the power to determine applications and non-applications across an indefinitely large, or even infinite, range of cases, and also in his attack on the notion that to understand the command to bring a red flower, you must first conjure up an image in the mind for your flower to match.

As far as this goes, neither Dewey nor Wittgenstein are enemies of reference or representation, or indeed intentional powers in general (how could one be?). It is just that the false theory forgets to embed semantic notions in the overall uses of terms, or what Dewey calls the ‘inferential phases of inquiry’. Even Wittgenstein’s builders have practices made possible by their single-word communications, and going beyond them we know when we are talking of slabs rather than beams, hammers rather than screwdrivers, and shapes rather than sizes because we have an indefinite range of such practices whose success is only explicable by this knowledge. Amongst those practices are those of communicating what is to be fetched, and what is not, and understanding that

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communication. We can then see how reference and representation fall into place as a summary description of these practical abilities.

Because these explanations of meaning in terms of use are substantial metalinguistic descriptions of pieces of vocabulary it is potentially misleading to talk in Price's terms of a generalized semantic minimalism. The Oxford dictionaries tell us that "semantic" means relating to meaning in logic or language. They do not insist that you have to be talking about meaning in any particular way in order to be involved in semantics, but you are to talk about signs and how they mean what they do. Semantic descriptions are substantial, in the sense both that they are contingent—it is not necessary that any particular expression should mean what it does—and that they put real conditions of use on any population of which they are true. Those conditions clearly employ, but go beyond, mere causal relations with elements of the environment, for those might not by themselves bring about the shared attention and shared dispositions that sameness of reference and representation require.

It was always bizarre of Rorty to put a total embargo on reference, representation, and truth, as if we cannot be said to pay attention to the things in our environment and their properties, nor use language to induce the sharing of this attention. But with this much semantics on the table we do not have to creep all the way with minimalism. We can see a substantive use for the idea of representing and describing things in our sensed environment or parts of our physical environment causally connected with those things, and reinstate a contrast between our sayings answering to the world, and they being injunctions or expressions of preferences or plans that the world be made to conform to them. In this way a background of pragmatism, explaining meaning in terms of use, can

coincide with fine-grained distinctions of function. It also implies that like the pragmatists of the good old days we can maintain negative theses, for as well as saying what a semantic account of words such as 'ought' would be, we can insist on what it is not. It is nothing like such an account for terms whose use is partly defined by language entry rules, and this is enough to reinstate functional, and semantic, diversity. This is compatible with deflationism about truth, since that is not a contribution to the semantics of sentences—the functions that enable them to express propositions about which truth is claimed. It is notable that at the same time as he introduced the deflationist view of truth Ramsey suggested exactly the same division of labour (Ramsey 1927, pp. 38–9).

However, I do not want to overstress the way the bifurcation, or multifurcation, of function implies semantic divisions. In my view it is the division of function that is itself important, and that must not be occluded by the end result that 'the clothing of language makes everything look the same'. Price himself not only recognizes but stresses and insists upon differences of function, but I interpret him as thinking that these give us different things to say *about* the semantics of different terms, but do not, as it were, trickle down to make the semantics themselves different. They remain at a meta-semantic level. I do not say that this usage is wrong but I do think it is optional, both because there is nothing forced or unnatural about wrapping the functional differences into the semantic description of terms, and because it suggests that theorists in the good old days were wholly wrong in employing negative semantic bearings as a way of identifying their insights. I think it is more charitable to give them a perfectly good excuse for having done so.

## 7. Perspicuous Explanations.

As already mentioned above, the difficulty of making 'realism' into a significant '...ism', can be brushed off by denying that there is in fact space for metaethical theory at all. So it is necessary to repeat that there are many issues where expressivism coupled with quasi-realism provides a satisfying, economical source of explanations of facets of our thinking and our language where not only substantive realisms but both the hollow realism of Dworkin and Derek Parfit's 'non-metaphysical, non-natural normative cognitivism' offer nothing at all, or just mystery (Dworkin 2011; Parfit 2011).

Consider first the case of two persons with very different ideas, say about a moral feature such as the justice of some social arrangement. Why do we want to say that they disagree, rather than that they are simply talking past each other? Not because they are both responding to the same features of the arrangement, for if they have different standards they may well not do so. Perhaps because they cognize the same non-natural property? But why think that? Even if we free reference from confinement to causally related things, we don't thereby justify ideas of our cognition of, or reference to, non-natural normative properties and relations. For reference surely requires an ability to identify and count and reidentify the objects of reference, and there is no non-naturalist realist, or Parfitian cognitivist, account on offer of how that is achieved. Parfit liked to compare his own acquaintance with reasons to a mathematician's acquaintance with abstract structures. But if one mathematician decided to treat set theory in terms including the Axiom of Choice, and another decides to avoid it, and if all the consequences remain outside any impact on applied mathematics, we may well suppose that they have two different structures in their minds, but no disagreement. Similarly we

have no method for counting non-natural properties. If there is one, there may be many. If we ask why we suppose that two people talking about, say, good traits of character are talking about the same thing, there will there is no empirically certain mark of them having in mind the same non-natural property or concept, save the practical upshots they associate with it. But once those practical upshots are doing all the work, the metaphysics and the cognitions equally drop away as irrelevant, and there will be no litmus test for a shared topic that does not eventually join forces with the language exit consequences, or in other words, with expressivism. The right answer stares us in the face. It is that they disagree because they share a practical topic: namely, trying to establish in which defensible direction social policy should move. They need not actually be planning to do anything to further social justice. But feelings prime one for action, even when one does not intend to light the touch paper. Practical attitudes of preference, encouragement and hope are implicated by the vocabulary, and their direction is the shared concern.

Secondly, what explains the analytic nature of the supervenience of the normative on the natural? Not some particular topology of modal and normative space, but the simple requirement that whether we are assessing and grading apples, or courses of action, or anything else, the rule is that we do so in the light of the subjacent, natural or empirical features these things present. You simply do not understand the practice of grading examination papers unless you realize that it is to be done in the light of what the candidate has written (an immaculate account of this argument is in Mitchell 2017, pp. 2903–2925).

Thirdly, what explains the fact that we care as we do about duties, rights, obligations, and values? If they introduce a separate object of concern, not found in the



natural world it should seem very odd, even before we ask for an epistemology. Why should they worm their way into our motivations? The expressivist answer is instantaneous: normative terms constitute the language in which we talk of whatever it is that we care about. Any other object of care, such as 'normative reason' would threaten actually to compete with the objects of care that naturally fill our humane views, such as welfare, happiness, and the absence of misery. (Hayward 2017; Lenman 2014)

Fourthly, realism encourages mystification and eventually scepticism about normative epistemology, as John Mackie supposed, and as has been argued at length more recently by Sharon Street (2006) and Richard Joyce (2016). Street's argument is basically that there is no Darwinian reason why getting moral propositions *right* would have any adaptive benefits, for we succeed or not in the natural world and our successes and failures have only natural explanations. Hence there is no reason to suppose that we have evolved to get them right. We do just as well, in the natural world, by being completely off-track about them, assuming of course that there is no reduction of moral properties to natural properties.

Although Street has tried to extend this argument to cast doubt on moral epistemology as the expressivist might conceive of it, her argument depends on saddling the expressivist with hospitality to a conception of moral truth that invites wholesale Cartesian scepticism (Street 2011). The only alternative, she appears to think, is her own kind of constructivism that exempts people from moral assessment if there is nothing in their own practical stance that entails such assessment. She says of a hideous villain that 'If Caligula is aware of all the non-normative facts and has recognized every normative conclusion that follows from his own values in combination with those facts, then there is

nothing he is failing to see'. (2011, p. 371) This is reminiscent of Bernard Williams's problem with so-called external and internal reasons, except that even Williams allowed that we could say, of his confirmed wife beater who has no resources enabling to see that what he is doing is wrong, that he was dreadful, insensitive, cruel and so forth. Williams only drew the line, unnecessarily, at our saying in our own voice that there is good reason for this character to change his ways. I can see no justification for this self-denial, and similarly an expressivist should find Street's attitude to Caligula highly regrettable. Caligula failed to see the disgusting impropriety of delighting in causing distress and pain, and like the wife-beater failed to see that the distress and pain of other people were good reasons for him to change his ways. It was his acting in the light of this moral defect that made him the monster that he was. Saying this, of course, we stay within *our own* moral and practical points of view, as we have to do, since we are voicing our own detestation of him. But we open no door to an unknowable view from nowhere, inviting Cartesian scepticism.

For expressivism the epistemological problem is whether we know how to run our lives, and the answer has to be that with a birthright of decent sentiments, moulded by upbringing, socialization, respect for a common point of view with others, and benefiting from experience of how things turn out, then often enough we do. We know to prefer happiness to misery, truth to lies, promise-keeping to arbitrary promise-breaking, law to chaos, and so on. We do indeed become puzzled and face intractable choices and dilemmas, but there is no question of being wrong across the board. We also know how to choose means to ends, so in countless particular ways, we know how to make things

better, or how to avoid them getting worse. There is no other general problem of practical moral epistemology.

We should note that minimalism does not creep over these explanatory benefits. If realism were correct about what we need in order to underwrite normative reasonings—unidentifiable properties, sui generis supervenience relations, bizarre objects of concern, and unknowable principles—it would either offer us nothing, as in Dworkin or Parfit, or simply serve to drag us down to the scepticism of Mackie, Street and Joyce. Fortunately it is not.

Simon Blackburn  
Cambridge, June 2020

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