

META-ETHICS AND THE PROBLEM OF CREEPING MINIMALISM

James Dreier
Brown University

This is a paper about the problem of realism in meta-ethics (and, I hope, also in other areas, but that hope is so far pretty speculative). But it is not about the problem of whether realism is true. It is about the problem of what realism *is*. More specifically, it is about the question of what divides meta-ethical realists from irrealists. I start with a potted history of the Good Old Days.

I. The Good Old Days

It used to be easy to tell a moral realist from a moral irrealist. You could just ask, “Is there really such a thing as moral wrongness?” Realists of all stripes, from Bentham to Moore to Warnock, would all say, “Of course there is,” while irrealists (as we now call them retrospectively) from Mackie to Ayer say not.

In the Good Old Days, there were two kinds of irrealists. Non-factualists like Ayer denied that moral judgments express any sort of proposition at all, while Error Theorists like Mackie insisted that they do express propositions, only uniformly false ones.¹ Ayer’s radicalism was at the level of language, denying that simple declarative sentences play the linguistic role of stating facts or expressing our beliefs, and instead construing them as “simply evincing” our feelings, which, he famously stressed, “is not at all the same as saying that [we] have them” (Ayer 1971, p. 109). Mackie’s radicalism, by contrast, was at the level of ontology. The *semantics* of *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* is essentially the same as the semantics of *Principia Ethica*. The difference is that Mackie doesn’t believe in that simple, non-natural quality that Moore (thought he had) put at the center of his metaphysics of morals. This distinction, between Mackie’s sort of irrealism and Ayer’s, is familiar and meta-ethicists have been fairly comfortable with it.

Ayer said repeatedly that moral judgments cannot be true or false. When he said so, he had apparently forgotten his own view about truth, and later emotivists (or as we now generally call them, and as I will be calling them hereafter, expressivists) have tried to detach that part of the

theory. Here is what Ayer said about truth, in Chapter Five of *Language, Truth, and Logic*:

Reverting to the analysis of truth, we find that in all sentences of the form “p is true,” the phrase “is true” is logically superfluous. When, for example, one says that the proposition “Queen Anne is dead” is true, all that one is saying is that Queen Anne is dead. And similarly, when one says that the proposition “Oxford is the capital of England” is false, all that one is saying is that Oxford is not the capital of England. Thus, to say that a proposition is true is just to assert it, and to say that it is false is just to assert its contradictory. And this indicates that the terms “true” and “false” connote nothing, but function in the sentence simply as marks of assertion and denial. And in that case there can be no sense in asking us to analyse the concept of “truth”. (Ayer 1971, pp. 88–9)

We conclude, then, that there is no problem of truth as it is ordinarily conceived. The traditional conception of truth as a “real quality” or “real relation” is due, like most philosophical mistakes, to a failure to analyse sentences correctly. There are sentences, such as the two we have just analysed, in which the word “truth” seems to stand for something real; and this leads the speculative philosopher to enquire what this “something” is. Naturally he fails to obtain a satisfactory answer, since his question is illegitimate. For our analysis has shown that the word “truth” does not stand for anything, in the way such a question requires. (89)

I’d like to make three points about these excerpts. First, most plainly, Ayer anticipates some much more sophisticated deflationary or minimalist theories of truth, including the Creeping Minimalism trend I am going to be talking about shortly. Second, had Ayer taken his own lesson to heart, he could not possibly have written about the meaning of ethical statements as he in fact did, since by his own remarks on truth there is no obvious content to the insistence that moral statements cannot be true or false. (He has provided no sense at all to the notion of something’s *being* true or false, for instance; if he were to do so, presumably it would be some kind of extension of the minimalist notion, so that ethical statements, like almost any grammatical indicative sentence, are trivially capable of being true or false.) Third, the form of the “analysis” of ‘truth’ that Ayer gives has a great deal in common with the form of the analysis of ‘good’ that expressivists and emotivists have always given. “I will not tell you anything about the property associated with this predicate”, they always say, “because this is not one of those predicates that you can come to understand by being supplied with its denotation; instead, I will tell you what people do by calling things good [or true] and bad [or false].” That the Minimalist conception of truth and the expressivist conception of ethics fit together so well has not been much noticed.²

Nonetheless, Ayer was certainly expressing a crucial feature of his meta-ethics when he said it, even if he wasn’t expressing it very well, by his own lights.

For the denial of bivalence is the hallmark of *anti-realism*, to be distinguished from *irrealism* though often seen as its ally in the grand scheme of things. Anti-realism about a part of language claims that sentences in that part cannot be true or false, because there are no facts to make them true or false. Thus, I suppose, an example of anti-realism in common sense would be our ordinary view of sentences like ‘Juliet Capulet was born on a Tuesday.’

By this criterion, Mackie is no anti-realist about ethics, nor is an atheist an anti-realist about gods. Atheists agree that the facts of the world make false the statement that there is one God and he is Allah; error theorists likewise agree that the absence from the world of the property of evil makes false the statement that some evil men repent.

That ‘realism’ can be contrasted either with ‘irrealism’ or with ‘anti-realism’ has made the terminology somewhat confusing.³ Nevertheless the distinctions themselves seemed clear enough, as long as terminology could be kept straight. But more recently, the standard ways of telling a realist from an irrealist have begun to break down. Simon Blackburn counts himself among Ayer’s inheritors, and so would just about any of his fellow travelers or his critics count him, but if you ask Blackburn whether there really is any such thing as moral wrongness, he will (unless you catch him an especially unguarded moment) say that there certainly is, and he’ll probably go on to list a few examples of morally wrong laws or institutions, just for good measure.⁴ Ask Allan Gibbard whether some things are objectively worth pursuing and, expressivist though he is, he’ll tell you that some are. And practically all expressivists are happy to say that the sentence “Slavery is wrong” expresses a proposition, a true one, a fact.

What has happened? I think two trends have threatened the Good Old Ways of drawing the big meta-ethical watershed distinction: Accommodation (on the part of irrealists) and Creeping Minimalism. For one thing, expressivists have as part of their aim to accommodate moral language as it is actually used, to vindicate its ordinary use insofar as possible. We speak of moral judgments being true, of moral facts, and so expressivist theory now includes accounts of how such talk works and what it is for. Saying that it is a fact that slavery is wrong does seem to have as much of a place in our ordinary thinking as saying that slavery is wrong has. Indeed, it seems to have just about the *same* place. Saying that it’s a fact, or that it is true, or that slavery really is wrong, all seem to be emphatic ways of saying that slavery is wrong. That’s the second thing that’s happened: a renewal of interest in and popularity of ‘minimalist’ theories of facts and truth. Against the advice of some and at the behest of others, expressivists nowadays tend to embrace minimalism.⁵

II. Creeping Minimalism

Minimalism about truth, in one prominent form, says that the collected instances of the schema

‘S’ is true iff S

together imply everything there is to know about truth. Since we know, if we take all of our lessons from Expressivists, just how to use normative sentences, we know also how to use predications of truth of normative sentences. This is a bit too snappy, but it conveys the gist of the matter.

Minimalism about propositions says that the collected instances of the schema

‘S’ expresses the proposition that S

likewise equip you with all you need to know about propositions. The expression ‘the proposition that’ serves as a logical-grammatical device to form noun phrases out of sentences, helpful for generalizing. Since ethical sentences are meaningful (and embed grammatically into *that* clauses), there are, trivially, ethical propositions. And facts come free with true propositions.

Minimalism about properties says that the collected instances of the schema

x has the property of being F iff x is F

together embody all there is to know about properties. There is a property for each intelligible predicate, but no ontological commitment involved in accepting these minimal, deflated properties. Once we understand that ‘wrong’ and the like behave logically and grammatically as predicates, there is no further question of whether there is a property of being wrong.

Minimalism sucks the substance out of heavy-duty metaphysical concepts. If successful, it can help Expressivism recapture the ordinary realist language of ethics. But in so doing it also threatens to make irrealism indistinguishable from realism. That is the problem of Creeping Minimalism.

III. Cognitivist Expressivism?

Maybe all of this means that today’s expressivists are not really irrealists at all, but just another kind of realist. *Not so fast*. There is a new popular way of drawing the irrealist line, using a distinction from philosophy of mind. Factual judgment expresses belief. Moral judgment (normative judgment generally, but here we’ll stick to moral judgment) expresses a more desire-like state, maybe preference, maybe valuing, maybe some emotion—at any rate, what Hume called a passion. If you think that the state of mind expressed by ordinary moral judgment is a state whose point is *to match the way the world is*, you’re still a realist. If you think the state of mind expressed is one whose point is *to bring the world into line*, then welcome to the expressivist camp: you bear the watermark of irrealism.

But recently, Mark Timmons and Terry Horgan have assaulted even this last bit of watershed. Horgan and Timmons now defend what they call *Cognitivist Expressivism*. Let me now explain their view, which advances the program of Creeping Minimalism *cum* Accommodation. Then I will try to make it clear that there is a serious problem lurking, one which Horgan and Timmons do not seem to appreciate.

Here are four theses that frame Timmons' treatment.⁶

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|-----------------------------------|---|
| MG (<i>moral grammar</i>) | Moral language has the surface grammar of genuinely assertive language. |
| SA (<i>semantic assumption</i>) | All genuinely assertive discourse is descriptive discourse. |
| SU (<i>semantic unity</i>) | The surface grammar of sentences reveals the true semantic workings of the sentences. |
| D | Moral sentences are descriptive. |

As Timmons sees it, contemporary descriptivists reason from MG, SA, and SU as premises, and draw D as their conclusion. Contemporary expressivists, on the other hand, have found good reasons to deny D, so they reason from MG, SA, and the denial of D, to reach the denial of SU as a conclusion. The surface grammar of moral language, they say, is misleading. Timmons points out that SA functions as an unquestioned assumption common to descriptivists and expressivists (MG seems unquestionable!), and that once questioned it is difficult to defend. Why should we think that the notion of assertion is tied conceptually to description? What is wrong with the idea of non-descriptive assertions? Notice how in keeping with the minimalist trend this suggestion is. There is no interesting deep property that marks the genuinely assertoric from the non-assertoric, but only the grammatical features that a sentence wears on its sleeve. As a result, there is little of semantic or philosophical importance that rides on the back of assertion. From a sentence's making a genuine assertion, it doesn't follow that the sentence describes anything. The minimalist theme sounded here derives largely from the work of Crispin Wright (whom Timmons cites and quotes often). Also drawn from Wright is a similarly minimalist line on the notion of belief.

Aren't *beliefs*, by definition, representational? Isn't whatever expresses a belief, thereby a description? So it has seemed to contemporary descriptivists and expressivists alike. But maybe this common assumption too needs shaking up. Here is Wright: "assertion has the following analytical tie to belief: if someone makes an assertion, and is supposed sincere, it follows that she has a belief whose content can be captured by means of the sentence used."⁷ Once we've gone minimalist about assertion, then, belief can't be far behind. Any state of mind expressed by a declarative sentence, S, automatically, minimalistically counts as a belief that S. There needn't be much of anything that ties together

all of the states called “belief”, nothing over and above their being those states expressed by declarative sentences.

Timmons’ theory (which he calls Assertoric Non-Descriptivism in his book, but more recently Cognitivist Expressivism) is distinguished from contemporary expressivist views by its acceptance of the realist-sounding claims that moral judgments express beliefs, and that they are genuine assertions. It shares with expressivism the view that the judgments are not descriptions, and also the view that the states of mind expressed are not representations. Here are a few relevant points of contrast and comparison among a few meta-ethical theories collected in a table.

	<i>Old Emotivism</i>	<i>New Expressivism</i>	<i>Cognitivist Expressivism</i>	<i>Raving Realism</i>
Are there moral truths?... facts?...propositions?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are moral statements assertions? Do they express beliefs?	No	No	Yes	Yes
Do moral statements describe? Do the states they express represent?	No	No	No	Yes

New Expressivism arose from Old Emotivism by admitting innocuous talk of truth, facts, and propositions, but remained apart from Realism by insisting that in speaking the moral truth we aren’t asserting or describing, and we aren’t expressing our beliefs but some non-representational state of mind. Now comes Cognitivist Expressivism, inching closer to Realism by admitting innocuous talk of moral assertion and moral belief, but remaining irrealist by maintaining that the utterances aren’t descriptions and the states don’t represent things. Each move is lubricated by semantic minimalism: no metaphysical commitment comes with truth, no deep semantics with assertion, each notion is licensed automatically by syntax.

Now, it is very easy to wonder whether Cognitivist Expressivism really occupies any new place, or if instead it might just be a new notation. All the expressivists I know, at any rate, would be happy to agree that there is no problem in ordinary conversation if we speak of “moral beliefs” and “ethical assertions”. In fact, I think the terminology that Timmons adopts from Putnam can make this point quite neatly. He uses the block lettered ‘PROPERTIES’, ‘RELATIONS’, ‘FACTS’, ‘OBJECTS’, and ‘WORLD’ to denote the metaphysically inflated, mind-independent (as Timmons says) things that are supposed to set realism apart from irrealism. He draws a nice contrast between realist and irrealist glosses on truth. The realist says

‘P’ is true if and only if ‘P’ corresponds to the FACTS

while the irrealist either brings the last word back into its ordinary lowercase form, or else expresses the platitude this way:

‘P’ is true if and only if things are as ‘P’ says they are.

We probably ought to distinguish ASSERTION from assertion, and BELIEF from belief, as well. An assertion is just something with the right form (an utterance of a declarative sentence in the right circumstances). A belief is just a state expressed by an assertion, and it has the content given by disquotation of the sentence asserted. But an ASSERTION is something grander, more inflated, and a BELIEF has to be representational. Now if we do help ourselves to this terminology, then it looks like Timmons will agree with an expressivist about everything! Do moral judgments express BELIEFS? No. Do they express beliefs? Yes. Are they assertions? Yes. ASSERTIONS? No. Well, which should we be using in philosophical theories, the block letter versions of these key expressions, or the lowercase versions? That, I hope everyone will agree, is a silly question.

IV. Where is Meta-ethics Now?

Here is the trouble. First, we can add a few more block letter terms to our stock. DESCRIPTION is what moral sentences do not provide and attributions of shapes do, but I insist that moral sentences are descriptions, not as a matter of metaphysics but just as a matter of ordinary language. If someone asked you to describe the character of Macbeth, you might start by saying that Macbeth is a good man turned bad by ambition. (Trite, but true.) REPRESENTATION is what so-called moral beliefs do not achieve, according to irrealists, but there is plainly an ordinary sense of ‘representation’ that applies full well to moral beliefs. Once Minimalism gets creeping, it’s hard to see how to stop it.

Now if we were stuck with the lowercase terms, we might have a very hard time explaining or even expressing an irrealist view like Timmons’s.⁸ So it is fortunate that we have and understand the block letter versions.

But I’m sure you see what’s coming: it is not very easy to say just what these block letter terms are supposed to mean. Timmons, for example, says that they are supposed to denote parts of “a mind-independent world of entities, properties, relations, or, more simply, facts (construed as constellations of the former)” (Timmons, p. 116). But that explanation, adequate though it may seem to convey the idea, can’t be literally correct. For consider that a Cognitive Expressivist happily agrees with common sense that slavery is morally wrong, and that there is a property, moral wrongness, that slavery has. Now we ask him whether this property is in any way dependent on his mind. Well, he is surely not going to say that slavery would *not* be morally wrong, if only we slavery-haters mellowed out a

little. So the wrongness of slavery is mind-independent after all. But Timmons does not conclude that it is a PROPERTY. So a PROPERTY cannot merely be a mind-independent property. One would almost like to define a PROPERTY as a MIND-INDEPENDENT property, but that doesn't look very promising.

It may seem like bad faith or just an annoying tease to accuse Cognitivist Expressivism of collapsing into realism, but that is, after all, the problem of Creeping Minimalism. And a couple of passages from *Morality Without Foundations* strongly suggest such a collapse when read free of the surrounding theorizing. For instance, Timmons repeatedly denies that moral sentences are analyzable in non-moral terms, and repeatedly denies that the content of a moral sentence can be given in any but the trivial, disquotational way. "In response to questions of the form, 'What is the content of p?' (where p is a moral sentence), the reply is simply p. The content of 'Apartheid is wrong' is [that] apartheid is wrong." (Timmons, p. 147) And here is how Timmons describes Moore's meta-ethical position from our contemporary perspective:

[H]is view does still count as a version of non-naturalism by contemporary standards. Moore thought that goodness supervenes on more basic natural properties of things, but he did not think that one could describe or characterize the property of goodness, without remainder, in non-moral terms. In fact, Moore held that the property of goodness was *sui generis*, by which he meant that not only is it ontologically simple (not composed of parts), but that its nature cannot be expressed in non-moral terms. (48)

Moore and Timmons agree that there is such a thing as goodness, that it is a property, that our moral thoughts are beliefs, that our moral utterances are assertions. They agree that goodness supervenes on basic natural properties, and they agree that goodness cannot be reduced, "without remainder", to natural properties. Moore said that goodness is *sui generis*. Does Timmons deny it? Surely not. Creeping Minimalism prevents him.

In the end, we always have our naturalism. Moore delights us by rejecting naturalism altogether and insisting, perversely, that goodness is a simple, non-natural property. Meta-ethicists who lean toward irrealism (and I count myself with Timmons among them) comfort ourselves with that distance from Moore's extravagance. We should not be too comfortable. Moore never explained, even to his own permanent satisfaction, what he meant by a "natural" property, and his only attempt was an abysmal failure.⁹ He decided later that the difference between natural and non-natural intrinsic properties is that

an intrinsic property is 'natural' if and only if, in ascribing it to a natural object, you are *to some extent* 'describing' that object...and that hence an intrinsic property. e.g. the sense of 'good' with which we are concerned, is not 'natural' if, in ascribing it to a natural object you are not...describing that *object to any extent at all*.¹⁰

I'll have more to say about Moore in the final section. For now I just want to note that in Moore, 'non-natural' seems to mean nothing more than 'non-descriptive'. Timmons is a non-naturalist, according to Moore's definition.

Some people¹¹ see this problem as a problem for irrealists. How are they going to state their view, and especially, how are they going to say why—in what way—they aren't realists? Yes, that's a problem. But I don't see the problem as especially a problem for accommodating irrealists, myself. For one thing, whose problem it appears to be seems to depend on where you start. Suppose you'd never done a shred of meta-ethical thinking before, and you started out with Simon Blackburn's "How To Be a Moral Anti-Realist" (in his 1993), in which a story is told (sketched) about how creatures like us might start to talk and think the way we do when we are "moralizing". The story convinces you. Now you meet a self-styled moral realist, who tells you that there is something missing from the story you've come to accept. How is this realist going to say what that something is?

In fact, it seems to me, the problem is not a problem *for* realists or *for* irrealists, but more a problem in meta-meta-ethics. It's not as if one side had better be able to come up with something clever to say about how to distinguish realism from irrealism or else the other side wins. It's rather that those of us who feel confident that there *is* some difference between the two meta-ethical camps should be concerned that we don't know how to say what that difference is.

V. Gibbard

One finds more or less the same worry in Allan Gibbard's new book, *Thinking How to Live*. In the Preface, Gibbard briefly (but elegantly) explains the general expressivist program he favors. Then he writes:

Does this mean that there are no facts of what I ought to do, no truths and falsehoods? Previously I thought so, but other philosophers challenged me to say what this denial could mean. In this book, I withdraw the denial and turn non-committal. In one sense there clearly are "facts" of what a person ought to do, and in a sense of the word 'true' there is a truth of the matter. That's a minimalist sense, in which "It's *true* that pain is to be avoided" just amounts to saying that pain is to be avoided—and likewise for "It's a fact that". Perhaps, as I used to think, there are senses too in which we can sensibly debate whether *ought* conclusions are true or false. Nothing in this book, though, depends on whether there is any such sense. (Gibbard 2003, x [preface])

Here it sounds like Gibbard doesn't really care anymore whether his own view is realist or irrealist. Well, if the question is what label to use for his own view, I suppose that's not something to care much about. But there is more than that (I think!). What is at stake is, it seems to me, a real, substantive question. Suppose you follow Simon Blackburn or Allan Gibbard or Mark Timmons

(and Terry Horgan) through the difficult, sometimes illuminating, sometimes perplexing contours of irrealist theorizing, and you come to the end. And you find yourself saying what G. E. Moore used to say. And you find yourself saying nothing that G. E. Moore wouldn't have been perfectly happy with. Or you have a long conversation with Russ Shafer-Landau¹² and he keeps asking you what it is that he'd have to believe to change from his full-blown non-naturalist realism to the sophisticated irrealism of the author you just read. You try repeatedly, and so does Russ, but you can't find a thing. Does this bother you? Remember Blackburn's famous slogan is, "It's not what you say at the end of the day, but how you got there that matters." So it doesn't bother him much. And it may not bother Gibbard. *But it sure bothers me.*

VI. Suggestions

I am pretty sure that there must be something at issue between throwback Mooreans and sophisticated Expressivists. I am *not absolutely* sure. The view (a metaphilosophical view, maybe) that there really isn't anything to divide the two types of theorist certainly deserves to be taken seriously. Nonetheless, I will not address this 'quietist' position. I will assume, rather than argue, that there is something at issue between realists and irrealists. What might it be? I will consider suggestions from a paper by John Hawthorne and Huw Price, from one by Kit Fine, and from Allan Gibbard's recent book. Then I'll synthesize the three suggestions. In the last section of the paper, I'll apply the synthesized suggestions to a test case and try to answer two important questions about it.

Hawthorne and Price on Function

John Hawthorne and Huw Price (1996) consider a problem similar to ours, and their suggestion for solving it seems relevant. The problem is how to make expressivism (non-cognitivism, as they call it) compatible with minimalism. The threat is a familiar one: if expressivism is the view that moral judgments aren't truth-apt, or that they don't express beliefs, or don't state facts, then minimalism threatens to make it trivially false. Hawthorne and Price stand up (as they say) for expressivists by offering a way to characterize the view without the usual semantic or psychological theses. They argue that what is distinctive about expressivism is its *functional pluralism*. "[M]ost generally construed, non-cognitivism is a doctrine about the functions of parts of language....[T]he non-cognitivist's essential claim is that the function of ethical discourse is different from that of, say, scientific discourse, in some philosophically significant respect—in such a way, for example, as to make attempts to reduce ethical talk to scientific talk inappropriate." (285) So the characterization is still broadly semantic, only it doesn't rely on any inflated notions of truth, fact, proposition, or the like.

To flesh out their suggestion, Hawthorne and Price point to Allan Gibbard's *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. There Gibbard followed the old-fashioned non-

cognitivist practice of denying that normative judgments state facts, and claiming that strictly speaking normative sentences cannot be true or false. But Gibbard then asked himself, “on the account as I am now giving it, after all, normative terms act much like other terms. What are we denying if we claim that normative judgements are not strictly factual?”¹³ His answer, Hawthorne and Price note, has to do with explanation. “If [my] account is on the right track, then our normative capacities can be explained without supposing that there is a special kind of normative fact to which they typically respond.”¹⁴ Hawthorne and Price remark:

The point we wish to emphasise is that this move is not a necessary condition of the claim that normative judgements have a distinctive functional role. Gibbard could quite well have taken the same deflationary attitude to factuality as he takes to belief, and accepted that there are normative facts—and yet continued to insist that in virtue of the fact that normative judgements express motivational states, there can be no reduction of normative claims to naturalistic claims...[T]he general point is that the philosophically interesting work of non-cognitivism—the work, in particular, of blocking reductionist moves—is done by the functional characterisation. (287)

Now the idea behind characterizing expressivism in terms of ‘functional pluralism’ is to protect it from minimalism. That’s not quite the same as the project of distinguishing sophisticated expressivism from realism, since for all Hawthorne and Price say, expressivism might turn out to be a variety of realism. Still, we might take up the suggestion for our purposes: if the idea of a special function (for moral expressions or concepts) can protect expressivism from disappearing into the maw of creeping minimalism, perhaps it can distinguish the result from full-blooded realism too.

The thought is at least on the right track. Realists, and especially the Moorean realists who resist reduction, think that we can best understand normative belief by understanding its special objects. Irrealists, and especially sophisticated expressivists, think that what’s special about normative belief is not its object but, as Hawthorne and Price put it, its special function. I don’t think we should be quite satisfied with importing the Hawthorne/Price characterization untouched, though, since it is not entirely clear that it will draw the boundaries in the intuitively right places. It seems consistent with realism that moral beliefs, for example, should *turn out* to have a special function. Maybe the nature of moral properties passes along some striking character to beliefs about properties with that nature. Compare the (controversial) idea that scientific beliefs about atomic charge play a certain role in theorizing, or in the planning of experiments: supposing that they do, it may be at least partly the nature of fundamental scientific properties like charge that they play this role. To agree that scientific beliefs about charge do play a special role, then, is not to subscribe to irrealism about atomic charge.

I'll say what I think is the proper place for the Hawthorne/Price suggestion below. Before I do, I'll introduce two other suggestions for distinguishing realism from sophisticated expressivist irrationalism.

Kit Fine's "Question of Realism"

Fine is interested in my question, but writ large. Actually, he is interested in two very large questions, only one of which is a magnification of mine. (The other has to do with the notion of what is "fundamental", which I will not address.) Fine thinks of the 'Question of Realism' in meta-ethics, that is, the question of what it is that divides (as he puts it) Factualist from Nonfactualists, as just an instance of a very general question in metaphysics. His other main example is the question of Realism in (the philosophy of) mathematics. So, for instance, he imagines a formalist in mathematics becoming convinced that there should be no problem at all in speaking of "truth" of mathematical sentences, much as our expressivists no longer cringe from such realist-sounding talk in ethics. And Fine worries that once the minimalist conception of truth becomes common ground, it becomes difficult to see what the question is.

Nor does it help to appeal to other obvious factual characteristics of propositions in place of candidacy for truth or falsehood. One might suggest that a factual proposition is one capable of being believed or asserted, or of figuring in inferences, or of being embedded in larger linguistic contexts. But the same point applies. For in the ordinary sense of 'believe', 'assert', etc., we do have moral beliefs and make moral assertions, we do draw moral conclusions, and we do embed moral propositions in larger linguistic contexts; and similarly for the propositions of mathematics or of science or of other disputed areas. Indeed, once given one of these characteristics, the rest seem to follow—their possession is, for the most part, a "package deal." There therefore seems to be no reasonable hope of identifying a non-skeptical form of factuality in terms of the possession of some of these characteristics as opposed to others....The antifactualist should therefore be a *quasi-realist* and attribute to the nonfactual all those features that were traditionally thought to belong to the factual. But if the nonfactual is not to be distinguished from the factual in terms of the obvious trappings of factuality, then how is it to be distinguished? What, in a word, is the difference between *quasi* realism and *genuine* realism? (Fine 2001, p. 5)

I'm no expert (to say the least!) on the problem of mathematical Platonism. I do suspect that there are close parallels between the issues that confront meta-ethicists (or meta-meta-ethicists like me) and those of meta-mathematics, so I am pleased to see Fine apparently worried about the same thing.

Now let me try to synopsise Fine's suggestion. (I will leave out some subtleties.) We start with a *protected* normative statement, for instance:

(E) Edith said that abortion is wrong.

This is not really a normative statement at all. The embedded normative statement is protected.¹⁵ The idea is that we want a statement that both parties can agree to be “factual” (in the intuitive sense, the one we are trying to explicate), so an unembedded normative statement won’t do.¹⁶ Now we ask each theorist to fill in the blank:

(G) Its being the case that (E) consists of nothing more than _____.

Here (G) is supposed to be what Fine calls a statement of *ground*. For example, its being the case that the couple Jack and Jill are married consists of nothing more than its being the case that Jack is married to Jill.¹⁷

Fine’s idea is that a sophisticated expressivist will fill in the blank with something like ‘its being the case that Edith expressed her shame-related attitude toward abortion’ (well, certainly something more sophisticated than that), while a realist will include something about wrongness. Of course, lazy theorists might just try more or less repeating (E) (‘Edith’s having said that abortion is wrong’), but we must try not to let them get away with it. We want the *most fundamental* explanation available, as Fine puts it; less exotically, we want the most illuminating explanation, I would say.

The relation of ‘consisting of nothing more than’ is somewhat obscure. Compare some things we might want to say about objects. A statue, we might say, consists of nothing more than the clay that composes it. Here the relation is *composition*. And, it is sometimes said that facts, too, can be related to facts by composition.¹⁸ Composition need not be identity. The piece of clay has different modal and temporal properties from the statue, since it may survive (and will survive) some sorts of destruction of the statue. But composition is as common sense a relation as we’re likely to come by, so there is presumably no objection to citing it. Not for statues, at least. For facts, or properties, things are less clear. Can one fact be composed of (the same parts as) another? Do facts have parts? Do properties? If they don’t literally have parts, what is the literal relation that facts bear to facts analogous to the part-whole relation that objects bear to objects? There is some worry that without an explicit account of what it is for a fact to consist of nothing more than (another) fact, Fine’s suggestion is not enough clearer than the distinction it is supposed to explain.

Still, it does seem to me that some progress is made. Suppose David claims that the fact that the explosion caused the death consists in nothing more than the fact that the explosion and the death occurred and had the explosion not occurred the death would not have. We know something about David’s metaphysics of causation. Suppose he adds that the fact that the death would not have occurred if the explosion had not consists of nothing more basic or fundamental, that there is no way to say what it consists in other than by repeating that fact. Then we feel like we understand where in the catalogue of

metaphysical views of causation to find David's. This understanding may be an illusion, but to think that *nothing* has been conveyed is to be unduly skeptical about metaphysical talk. The problem of creeping minimalism doesn't require such extreme skepticism to be seen as a problem.

Fine's suggested criterion for distinguishing realism from minimalist-compatible irrealism has to do with what the view says about what protected statements in the target area consist in, what it is in virtue of which they obtain. Hawthorne and Price's criterion has to do with the special function that expressions or concepts in the target area play in language or thought. The criteria do not seem to be the same. But they are closely related. I spell out below how they are tied together. Before I do, I have one more suggestion to canvass.

Gibbard on Explanation

Consider this passage from Gibbard:

Almost all of what descriptivists insist on can be embraced and explained by an expressivist. That is a principal lesson of this book. Questions of what we ought to do are questions of what to do, questions we pose in deliberation—and this explains the phenomena to which descriptivists appeal. Indeed, I argue that a form of non-naturalism is correct in a way, as far as it goes—but that it is incomplete. A non-naturalist “moral realist” can present certain features of ethical concepts as brute truths: that, for example, whether an act is right or wrong depends on its natural properties. No metaphysics of non-natural properties *explains* these truths; with this some non-naturalistic moral realists agree. (Gibbard 2003, p. 20)

Gibbard's point is that he and the non-naturalist (roughly, the Moorean) can agree that moral judgments “state facts” (in the minimalist sense), and that these facts have various odd-looking features (they are “intrinsically action-guiding”, perhaps); they can also agree that no metaphysics of non-natural properties explains the various odd features. Gibbard would like to convince us that his story of how people could come to speak and think in terms just like our own normative terms is the true story of how we *do* come to speak and think in normative ways. He thinks that his story explains the various odd features of normative thought and discourse, and that he can do it without mentioning or positing any normative properties. The normative properties are what emerge at the end of the story (remember Blackburn's slogan).

I think a serious-minded realist would disagree. I think that to be a serious-minded moral realist, you must complain that Gibbard's story, interesting as it may be, has left something out, namely, the moral properties. In this way his own understanding of what separates his meta-ethical position from a Moorean one resembles Fine's test: an irrealist says that the best explanation of normative thought and talk involves no reference to the normative properties themselves,

while a realist says that the best explanation must be in terms of those normative properties. Compare Gibbard's remarks to the contrast between a realist and irrealist treatment of (E). The explanation of what (E)'s truth consists in must include somewhere that Edith is related in a certain way to abortion and moral wrongness, according to a realist. It could include that fact in disguise; maybe a reductive naturalist moral realist will be willing to say that (E)'s being the case consists of nothing more than Edith's reporting that abortion has this or that natural property. And, I *think* that a serious-minded realist might even accept a story that Allan Gibbard tells about how beings like us begin to speak and think in normative terms, only she cannot accept that it is the complete story. She must say that Gibbard's story is incomplete on the grounds that it leaves out the moral properties themselves.

Gibbard again:

How does my position fall short of full ethical realism?...Begin with the slogans I've been proclaiming: Questions of what we ought to do are questions of what to do. Finish your deliberation, conclude what to do, and you've concluded what you ought to do. These crude sayings will, of course, need qualification, but the distinctive claim of an expressivist is that dicta like these, suitably worked out, account for the subject matter of ethics.

If a self-avowed realist agrees, the two of us may have no quarrel. I don't, however, know of any "ethical realist" who accepts slogans like these explicitly. Indeed, many philosophers think that an explanation from the starting points I adopt can't be made to work...(Gibbard 2003, p. 19)

These paragraphs again suggest that what is distinctive about expressivism is how it seeks to *explain* various phenomena of ordinary moral (and other normative) thought and talk.

So, Fine and Gibbard agree that sophisticated expressivism is to be distinguished from heavy-duty realism according to whether normative properties are said to play any role in the explanation of certain phenomena. Hawthorne and Price say that the hallmark of expressivism is that it assigns to normative expressions or concepts a special functional role. Let me now integrate the lessons from Hawthorne and Price, Fine, and Gibbard.

Synthesis

Here is one more passage from (Gibbard 2003)

Expressivist quasi-realism, though, if it succeeds, might show something special and important that distinguishes normative facts. We can explain belief in them, it might be said, without helping ourselves to normative facts at the outset, to facts of what's good or bad, or to facts of what is the thing to do. This would contrast with a standard realist's mode of explanation—

appropriate, in my view, for naturalistic thoughts. To explain belief in natural fact adequately, we must assume a natural world of which we are a part. We must start with a realm of naturalistic facts. (187)

The contrast is explicitly between belief in natural fact and normative belief, and Gibbard says that the difference (according to his expressivism) is that only the first is explained in terms of the facts believed. But what sort of explanation does he mean? Is it true that beliefs about the natural world are best explained only by mentioning those facts themselves? You might have many scientific beliefs—beliefs, I mean, with a scientific content, or justifiable by scientific methods. You believe that the moon is a quarter of a million miles away. Why? What is the explanation for your belief? Maybe you got the information from the Discovery Channel. Or, maybe you misheard somebody talking about the moons of Mars. The best explanation for your belief that the moon is a quarter of a million miles away need not involve the moon itself, nor the fact that it is a quarter of a million miles away.

That's not the sort of explanation that Gibbard means. He isn't talking about the etiology of your belief. At least, I don't think he is; sometimes he does seem to think that a causal, historical sort of explanation is the relevant kind.

And why, as I keep asking, does what we ought to do matter for what to do? Non-naturalism lets us ask this question but offers no answer; I say that the concept of ought just *is* the concept of what to do. Why do we, in a natural world, have non-naturalistic concepts? Because we think what to do, I explain. (Gibbard 2003, p. 184)

Here it sounds like Gibbard is speculating about causes, telling a "just so" story. Why do Gila monsters match their surroundings in color? Because the ones that did years ago produced more offspring than the ones that didn't, and skin color is highly heritable. Why do we, in a natural world, have non-naturalistic concepts? Because we think what to do.

But I think that's not what Gibbard means. He means, or anyway he should mean, what Fine means. The explanation of your belief that the moon is a quarter of a million miles away, in this context, is that in virtue of which it is true to say of you that you believe it. And Gibbard is speculating that an account of what naturalistic belief consists in will appeal to naturalistic facts.¹⁹ So, Fine's suggestion complements Gibbard's.

Hawthorne and Price fit in, too, if we construe them right.²⁰ The hallmark of expressivism, they say, is the 'distinctive functional role' it attributes to normative judgment. We should add that expressivism doesn't merely *attribute* a distinctive functional role to normative judgment, but also makes the stronger claim that having the functional role *constitutes* being the normative judgment. As we noticed earlier, one can take a perfectly realist attitude toward a given

domain while thinking that judgments about that given domain are going to play a distinctive functional role. The point, I think, is that expressivists are distinguished by their claim that there is nothing to making a normative judgment over and above being in a state that plays a certain “non-cognitive” psychological role, a role more like desire than it is like factual belief. In particular, to explain what it is to make a moral judgment, we need not mention any normative properties. So Hawthorne and Price’s characterization of expressivism turns out to mesh with Fine’s criterion for distinguishing irrealism, and also with Gibbard’s understanding of what distinguishes his own sophisticated expressivism from realism. I’ll call the integrated account of the distinction, the “explanation” explanation.

VII. Application

To finish, I’ll run through a test case: how does the integrated “explanation” explanation make out the difference between Gibbard’s meta-ethics (in *Thinking How to Live*) and G. E. Moore’s?

Moore and Gibbard agree that moral judgments state facts. They agree that there is a property of intrinsic goodness. They agree that some of our moral judgments are true and some false. All these realist-sounding things are now happily conceded by Gibbard. Furthermore, Moore and Gibbard agree that the ethical, and more generally the normative, is not reducible to the natural (or more generally to the descriptive), and that it supervenes on the natural. That is a lot of agreement. One might think that the watershed disagreement is over Moore’s exciting claim that good is a *sui generis*, simple non-natural property. I think in a way this is right, but the situation is stickier than has generally been thought.²¹ One main problem is that it is very difficult to figure out what Moore meant by calling good a “non-natural” property. Here is his official account of “natural” properties in *Principia Ethica*:

There is, indeed, no difficulty about the ‘objects’ themselves, in the sense in which I have just used the term. It is easy to say which of them are natural, and which (if any) are not natural. But when we begin to consider the properties of objects, then I fear the problem is more difficult. Which among the properties of natural objects are natural properties and which are not? For I do not deny that good is a property of certain natural objects: certain of them, I think, are good; and yet I have said that ‘good’ itself is not a natural property. Well, my test for these too also concerns their existence in time. Can we imagine ‘good’ as existing by itself in time, and not merely as a property of some natural object? For myself, I cannot so imagine it, whereas with the greater number of properties of objects—those which I call the natural properties—their existence does seem to me to be independent of the existence of those objects. They are, in fact, rather parts of which the object is made up than mere predicates which attach to it. If they were all taken away, no object would be left, not even a bare substance: for they are in themselves substantial and give to the object all the substance it has.

But this is not so with good. If indeed good were a feeling, as some would have us believe, then it would exist in time. But that is why to call it so is to commit the naturalistic fallacy. It will always remain pertinent to ask, whether the feeling is itself good; and if so, then good cannot itself be identical with any feeling. (Moore 1903, p. 41 §26)

This test always sounded like nonsense to me. The length of a carrot does not seem to me to be anything like a part of the carrot; the weight of a neutron doesn't seem to be a part of the neutron; I cannot in any way imagine the property of having a mass of one kilogram existing apart from any massive object. Those are some paradigmatically natural properties, so if they can't pass the test it's not even a remotely plausible test. I was pleased, therefore, to find out that Moore admitted in reply to C. D. Broad: "This suggestion which I made in *Principia* seems to me now to be utterly silly and preposterous" (Schilpp 1968, pp. 581–2). And then, "I agree, then, that in *Principia* I did not give any tenable explanation of what I meant by saying that 'good' was not a natural property." He goes on to say that he thinks (in 1968) that what he meant (in 1903) by 'natural' is what he later, in "The Conception of Intrinsic Value", meant by 'intrinsic'. Moore's distinction there between intrinsic properties and others is puzzling, not least because intrinsic value turns out not to be an intrinsic property, although it is a property and it is had by its objects intrinsically. I try to sort through the complications in (Dreier, forthcoming). For present purposes, here is what I take to be the key passage:

[T]here must be some characteristic belonging to intrinsic properties which predicates of value never possess. And it seems to me quite obvious that there is; only I can't see what it is....I can only vaguely express the kind of difference I feel there to be by saying that intrinsic properties seem to describe the intrinsic nature of what possesses them in a sense in which predicates of value never do. If you could enumerate all the intrinsic properties a given thing possessed, you would have given a complete description of it, and would not need to mention any predicates of value it possessed; whereas no description of a given thing could be complete which omitted any intrinsic property. (Moore 1922, pp. 272–3)

The best we can do with these vague (as Moore admits them to be) thoughts is to conclude that Moore was distinguishing between *descriptive* predicates and predicates of *value*. That is what he *meant* by calling some properties "intrinsic": he meant that they *describe* the inherent nature of their object. And that's why it seemed obvious to him that evaluative predicates are not "intrinsic", in his sense, even though their proper application may be completely determined by the inherent nature of the object. Evaluative predicates, like 'intrinsically good', are not intrinsic precisely in that they are not descriptive. And if we can take Moore at his word, that is also the distinction he had in mind when he said in *Principia Ethica* that good is not a natural property. He meant that it is not

descriptive. The exciting and (to many) implausible thesis that good is a non-natural property turns out to be the popular and mundane thesis that evaluative terms are not reducible to descriptive ones.

That would leave us with no way of distinguishing Moore's meta-ethics from Gibbard's, except that, fortunately, we have new tools. Suppose that Julia sincerely asserts the sentence, 'Knowledge is intrinsically good.' She believes, then, that knowledge is intrinsically good.

(J) Julia believes that knowledge is intrinsically good.

Now Moore and Gibbard agree that (J)'s being true does not consist in the fact that Julia believes that knowledge produces happiness, or the fact that Julia believes that the gods love knowledge for its own sake, or any other fact about naturalistic facts that Julia believes. The embedded evaluative proposition, the proposition that knowledge is intrinsically good, is not reducible to or derivable from any naturalistic proposition, and Julia's believing it is not the same as her believing some naturalistic proposition—indeed, one of the best ways to see that the embedded proposition couldn't be a naturalistic one is to see that (J) cannot be made true just by Julia's coming to believe some plain, non-evaluative fact or falsehood. So much is common ground between hyper-realists like Moore and expressivists like Gibbard. What the "explanation" explanation tells us is that the division between them must lie in their differing explanations of (J). According to a Moorean, (J) must consist in Julia's standing in a certain doxastic relation to knowledge and intrinsic goodness. Just what this relation is, Moore does not say, and in the hundred or so years since quite a number of philosophers have worried that the epistemology of *Principia* is hard to swallow. Still, a complete Moorean account of what (J) consists in must appeal to the property of intrinsic goodness. By contrast, Gibbard's expressivist account will explain (J) by reference to the sort of planning state that Julia is in: perhaps she has decided to include knowledge among her non-instrumental aims. In any case, the state she is in, when (J) is true, is distinguished by the special role that it plays in planning what to do.

The account I've attributed to Moore is not easy to support textually. Maybe Moore never held any such view. My main point is that something like this view is needed to give content to the way Moore's meta-ethics has been understood. It has largely been a kind of stalking horse, a metaphysically extravagant position that more naturalistically inclined meta-ethicists have tried to find their ways around. Emotivism, and prescriptivism, and their descendant expressivism, are all clever ways of recognizing the power of Moore's anti-reductionism without taking on his non-naturalism. But what does that non-naturalism amount to? It must, it seems to me, amount to the idea that the property of goodness enters into explanations of phenomena that expressivists would explain by other means. Indeed, the irreducibility we've just been looking at is among those phenomena, and the best way to explain it is, I

speculate, just what most clearly separates the sophisticated expressivist from the Moorean realist.

Remember this sentence, which I quoted above, from (Moore 1922): “I can only vaguely express the kind of difference I feel there to be by saying that intrinsic properties seem to describe the intrinsic nature of what possesses them in a sense in which predicates of value never do.” It seems wrong to say that *properties* describe. Surely it’s the predicates that express the properties that describe. Language describes objects and their natures. But Moore says “properties”. Of course, that could be a bit of use/mention carelessness. Even if it is, I think it’s a significant one. Moore appreciates the distinction between describing and evaluating, and he thinks it is that distinction that bars any reduction of the ethical to the natural. The metaphysical commitment of his view is that the distinction between describing and evaluating is (underwritten by) a distinction between types of properties: descriptive properties and evaluative properties. Compare Hare’s (1952) explanation: description is a different speech act from evaluation and prescription, accomplished by mention of the same properties but differing in purpose and pragmatics. And Gibbard’s:

Once we distinguish properties from concepts, we have no need for non-natural properties to help us explain the special features of normative concepts. Distinguish two families, then, the property family and the concept family. States of affairs are built from properties, relations, and the like, whereas thoughts are built from concepts: property concepts and relation concepts, among others. Only the thoughts and concepts and not states of affairs, I have been saying, need involve anything non-naturalistic. There is no such thing as a specially normative state of affairs; all states of affairs are natural. We do, though, have normative thoughts, and they are distinct from naturalistic thoughts. (Gibbard 2003, p. 181)

The reduction of thoughts and judgments like Julia’s to judgments of natural fact is blocked by the different role that the concept of intrinsic value plays in thought—specifically in planning—from the role that any naturalistic concept might play.

Crucial to maintaining the distinction, in meta-ethics, in the twenty-first century, between realism and irrealism is the possibility that concepts (and meanings) can differ in ways other than by their content. Or, if the difference between normative (or evaluative, or “planning”) concepts and descriptive (naturalistic) ones can also be stated as a difference in content, then at least it must be a comprehensible, substantive question whether the difference in concept *is explained by* (or if you prefer *amounts to no more than*) a difference in content, on the one hand, or rather it is explained by (amounts to) something else entirely, which in turn explains the difference in content. The divide between realism and irrealism, at least in meta-ethics, rests on the substance of questions about metaphysical explanation.

Notes

1. To be precise, the moral judgments with existential commitment to moral properties are all false. Strictly speaking, the moral judgment *that no activity is ever wrong unless it causes harm to others* is true, according to Mackie, since no activity is ever wrong at all.
2. But see (O’Leary-Hawthorne and Price 1996).
3. (Wright 1988) helps distinguish.
4. See for example his “Truth, Realism, and the Regulation of Theory” in (Blackburn 1993), especially pp. 16–17.
5. See (Divers and Miller 1994), and also (Dreier 1996).
6. I should say that this part of the argument follows Timmons’s book, *Morality without Foundations*; it is not clear to me how much of this material Terry Horgan agrees with, but see (Horgan and Timmons forthcoming).
7. (Wright 1992, p. 14), cited by Timmons at p. 143.
8. The point is familiar from (Wright 1988), see especially p. 35.
9. I try to figure out what exactly Moore meant by denying that good is a ‘natural property’ in “Was Moore a Moorean?”, forthcoming. See §40 of (Moore 1903), and especially p. 582 of Moore’s “Reply to My Critics” in (Schilpp 1968).
10. (Schilpp 1968, p. 591), where Moore is explaining the view developed in his *Philosophical Studies*.
11. Famously (Wright 1988); also (Rosen 1998).
12. See (Shafer-Landau) 2003.
13. Gibbard 1990, p. 105; quoted in (O’Leary-Hawthorne and Price 1996), p. 287.
14. Gibbard 1990, p. 107; quoted in (O’Leary-Hawthorne and Price 1996), p. 287. Gibbard says a number of other similar things in *Thinking How to Live*, but I’ve stuck with the one that Hawthorne and Price quote to follow their suggestion more closely. Below, when I discuss Gibbard’s own idea in more detail, I will quote from (Gibbard 2003).
15. I believe I got the term ‘protected’ in this usage from (Humberstone 1997).
16. There is a rather serious potential complication if one of the parties to the dispute has some doubts about the “factual” nature of indirect discourse reports, for then (E) will not be uncontroversially factual. Some philosophers do have their doubts. For one thing, it is a popular (though according to me confused) view that semantic language is automatically normative language. Even if that’s not true, there might be other reasons to doubt that indirect discourse *reports facts*. Fine’s test faces real trouble if the interlocutors cannot find a suitable protected context.
17. (Fine 2001, p. 15) The point, I take it, is that some metaphysician might have a stake in reducing, or otherwise metaphysically grounding, facts about *couples*. All such facts have to be grounded in facts about individuals. It’s not so much that someone might have doubts about the factuality of couples statements, as that one might be quite sure that they were somehow less fundamental than the facts about individuals; but I do not fully understand Fine’s points about fundamentality.
18. For example, (Shafer-Landau 2003) says that one possible view about the relation between the moral and the natural, the one that he endorses in fact, is that “natural facts do exhaustively compose moral ones. There is nothing to a case of generosity, or viciousness, or dutiful action, other than the natural

- features that constitute such properties.” (p. 75) This example seems to be closely parallel to the case of the statue being composed of its clay, since the relation between the clay and the statue is also naturally said to be “constitution”.
19. To the very facts that are also the objects of beliefs? Gibbard is not specific. By Fine’s criterion, a realist about the moon should say that belief that the moon is a quarter of a million miles away consists in some fact that includes the moon, presumably the fact of standing in some representation relation to the moon. Gibbard is not committed to so much, but I don’t see why he would resist Fine’s suggestion here.
 20. By ‘right’ I just mean ‘most congenial to my purposes,’ and not ‘as intended by the authors,’ though I don’t see anything in (O’Leary-Hawthorne and Price 1996) to contradict my construal.
 21. See (Dreier forthcoming) for my best attempt to figure out what Moore’s positive view was, including what he meant by calling good “non-natural”. The conclusion I reach in that paper fits closely with the general approach of the present paper.

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