1. Introduction: Ethics and Our Sensibilities

All the evening, alone, she questioned herself. Her trouble was terrible; but was it a thing of her imagination, engendered by an extravagant sensibility, or did it represent a clear-cut reality, and had the worst that was possible actually come to pass?

Henry James, *Washington Square* (chapter 30) (Catherine)

Like Catherine, we can question our own evaluative assessments of our circumstances. We seem to be able to separate the possibility, in thought, that our judgment represents a clear-cut reality from the possibility that the sentimental color of our world is a thing of our imagination. What this separation amounts to, though, is a question for metaethics.

Here is my way of characterizing a view in metaethics commonly called ‘sensibility theory’: our ethical sensibilities have explanatory priority over the ethical facts. This characterization is vague, or at least broad, for it encompasses two rather different approaches to metaethics. One is *constructivism*, according to which the ethical facts are constituted by our sensibilities. Another is *expressivism*, according to which the illuminating account of ethical language and thought proceeds by telling us about the state of mind expressed by that language and at work in that thought, adding that these states are products of our sensibility rather than our capacity for representation.

It is sometimes said that no sort of sensibility theory can make out a gap between the world as it is valued by our sensibility and its true value. However, on the face of things, there is an important difference between the two sorts of sensibility theory. The constructivist embraces the idea that value and our valuing *cannot* come far apart; for if our sensibilities had been different, then so would the values, the one change constituting the other as a change in the chocolate changes the soufflé or a change in the lighting changes the mood of a picture. The expressivist keeps this claim of constitution at arm’s length. What Catherine should think about the scenario in which her sensibility is extravagant is a matter for her actual sensibility to settle; no answer is delivered by the structure of value or the fundamental nature of normative thought as such.

So the two sorts of sensibility theory differ. What expressivists say is much closer to what realists say. That is no accident. Expressivists are (typically) *quasi-realists*, seeking to vindicate the realist-sounding deliverances of ordinary ethical thought and talk. Some philosophers think quasi-realism, and in
particular the departure from this particular feature of constructivism, lands expressivists in real trouble.

2. The Reliability Challenge and the Problem of Unexplained Coincidence

We have normative thoughts, and by and large, these thoughts are accurate. So I will assume. Why is it that our normative thoughts are mostly true?

There are different questions we could ask with those words. One of them can be answered by providing a representative list of normative thoughts and then noting that most of them are true. Maybe one of them is the belief that you ought not to make toast while bathing. That one is true because if you make toast while bathing you are apt to get a nasty electrical shock. Each thought is true for its own reason, and together these reasons, plus the fact that these are our beliefs, explain why most of our beliefs are true. But this is not the question that concerns me.

Another question can be answered like this: most of our normative beliefs are true because we got a pretty good education (I mean the one you got many years before you got a degree, of course). Human beings like us who get very bad educations might not know the important fact about toasters, for instance, but fortunately for us, we do. Lucky us!

But the question that concerns me is not that one; it is the next one. The normative beliefs we acquired by education and testimony were formed first by other human beings like us. The way we human beings generally form our normative beliefs is pretty reliable. We rely on intuitions, on our evaluative sensibilities, and in so doing we manage to get things right a lot. The question that concerns me is why we have such an accurate apparatus. Following Joshua Schechter, call the challenge of providing an explanation for this kind of accuracy ‘the reliability challenge’:

The logical propositions we believe (upon reflection and discussion) are by-and-large true and the logical propositions we disbelieve (upon reflection and discussion) are by-and-large false. The reliability challenge for logic is the challenge of explaining this fact.¹

Maybe there is no answer to the reliability challenge for the domain of the normative. It could just be very lucky that our apparatus for forming normative and evaluative beliefs is so accurate. That would be a Cosmic Coincidence. But it is a high cost to a metaethical theory if it has to say of the match between our normative beliefs and the normative truth that it is a Cosmic Coincidence. Call this, the Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence.

Sharon Street poses the challenge (explicitly for evaluative realism) in a particular form:

Evolutionary forces have played a tremendous role in shaping the content of human evaluative attitudes. The challenge for realist theories of value is to explain the relation between these evolutionary influences on our evaluative attitudes, on the one hand, and the independent evaluative truths that realism posits, on the other. Realism, I argue, can give no satisfactory account of this relation.\(^2\)

Richard Joyce pursues a similar line of argument,\(^3\) and both Street and Joyce have auxiliary arguments, but those will not concern me, except when I have to distinguish some of them from the main line that I take up here. I focus on Street for several reasons.\(^4\) To be sure it is clear, let me develop just one point, which Schechter makes as follows:

We have some understanding of how perception can yield veridical beliefs about the external world. We possess a sketch of how the mechanisms underlying perception work and understand how they may yield true beliefs. But this explanation doesn’t extend to the cases of logic, mathematics, modality, and other \textit{a priori} domains. Nor is there available any well-developed alternative account. We simply do not understand how we can be reliable about these domains, given that our beliefs were not arrived at via some kind of perception. (Schechter, 438)

The paradigm of an accurate belief-forming apparatus is our perceptual apparatus, which enables us to form accurate beliefs about, for example, temperature. When we ask why human beings like us have largely accurate beliefs about how hot things are, we do not want a catalogue of the beliefs we have plus an explanation, piecemeal, of why this one and that one are true. Instead, we want an explanation for how it comes to be that so much of what we believe about temperatures is correct. Plainly, the satisfying explanation goes by way of our perceptual sensitivity to temperatures. And the accuracy of our perceptual sensitivity to temperatures is, presumably, due to natural selection. Our ancestors had to be pretty good at detecting the temperatures of objects in their environment, and organisms with inaccurate detectors fared worse and left fewer descendants.

But there is no parallel explanation of why we reliably form normative beliefs. The best evolutionary explanation, as Street and Joyce argue, of our normative sensibilities makes no reference to the \textit{accuracy} of these sensibilities. Reciprocal altruism is a robust strategy; the disposition to feel angry at group members who do not do their share and guilt when one fails to do one’s own


\(^4\) One is that she is the one who has pressed the problem against quasi-realists; but see also Terence Cuneo, “Properties for Nothing, Facts for Free?” (unpublished ms.). I want to be clear, though, that I am particularly interested in the \textit{explanatory} challenge issued in Street’s work; there are more traditional problems of justification and warrant discussed there too, but they are not my subject in this paper.
share, for example, is adaptive. Of course, we can give one explanation of why we have these sensibilities, and then a separate explanation of why the beliefs the sensibilities produce are true. But these two will not add up to an explanation for why our normative belief-forming apparatus is accurate. As Schechter puts it, they will not answer the etiological question: how is it that we have a belief-forming mechanism that is reliable? We have the temperature sensitivity we do have because it is accurate. (Ancient organisms lacking it left fewer descendents.) That we have an accurate normative sensibility, by contrast, looks like a Cosmic Coincidence.

The Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence looks like a pretty serious problem for metaethical realism. It is not obviously deadly (see Wielenberg 2010; Enoch 2010). But it is certainly worrisome. By contrast, a certain kind of constructivism handles the reliability challenge nicely. Assume that values are constructions from our evaluative sensibilities, normative properties from our capacity for normative judgment. Then we could not have helped but get it right. Being nauseating just is a disposition to produce a nauseous feeling in us; had we evolved differently and been nauseated by different smells and sights, those other things would have been nauseating. So there is no Cosmic Coincidence in the reliability of our tendency to form beliefs about what is nauseating, even though nauseatingness is not an independent property that our ancestors were naturally selected to detect. A reliability challenge can be met by noting a dependence of our judgment on the world, as in the case of our beliefs about temperature, or by finding a dependence of the world on our sensibility, as in the case of being nauseating. Constructivism about value explains our reliability in the same way our reliability about the nauseous is explained.

Constructivism has its costs. Street’s version, for instance, has uneasy normative implications. For instance, it implies this Ugly Counterfactual:

(UC) If our sensibilities were more selfish and individualistic, feeding the distant hungry would be wrong.

This is hard to believe. But, if value and normativity are constructed from our sensibilities, then the values and norms would be different if only our sensibilities were different. Street thinks some such pills must be swallowed if we are to meet the reliability challenge and escape the Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence.

5. I think it is a particular problem for non-naturalist realism; Street disagrees, but this is not the place to enter into the matter, which may in the end be mainly terminological.


7. Schechter is doubtful that counterfactual dependence is the key here; I cannot decide whether he is right. Counterfactual dependence is a good explainer of accuracy, of ‘matching’ in general, but it is true that the very idea of an explanation of accuracy or matching is a separate idea.

8. One could remove this problem by rigidifying the evaluative and normative terms while keeping the descriptive relation to sensibilities in place, as in I. L. Humberstone and M. Davies, “Two Notions of Necessity,” *Philosophical Studies* (1980) 38:1, 1–30. Street does not make this move, but I see no obstacle to it. It is worth a further discussion, which I cannot offer here.
The standard story of metaethics has an episode in which theories like Street’s are discarded as morally implausible and expressivism is wheeled in to take their place. Expressivism has the same metaphysics and roughly the same epistemology as constructivism, but it manages to avoid the Ugly Counterfactual. Indeed, the quasi-realist version of expressivism claims to avoid all untoward and unappetizing consequences of Humean constructivism, reconstructing the language of realism without the metaphysical commitments. I will not rehearse the details of this standard story; I assume they are familiar.9 In short, the outward language that a quasi-realist speaks will agree with the pronouncements of a full-blooded realist, but underneath the ontology will be a thoroughly Humean one.

It comes as some surprise, then, that Street has accused quasi-realists of shirking the reliability challenge and being stuck with the Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence.10 Metaethics, she argues, is a harsh mistress, who will not let us have it both ways. You want the trappings of realism? Fine, but trappings cover a saddle, and you will be saddled with the burdens of realism as well.11

I will briefly lay out Street’s application of the reliability challenge to quasi-realists. Then I will report on how two quasi-realists have tried to answer, and I will say why these answers seem to me to miss the real point. Then section 4 will give a kind of inductive argument for the conclusion that there is no Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence for quasi-realists. That section forms the core of the paper.

But although I think this inductive argument is sound, I find it ultimately unsatisfying. It leaves something mysterious. For it does not tell us what answer a quasi-realist can give to the most straightforward version of the reliability challenge, and it does not tell us why it is okay for a quasi-realist to give no answer. In the last section I will lay some groundwork for a more satisfying answer, which I will not be able to complete.

3. Can Quasi-Realists Have It Both Ways?

Sharon Street’s question is whether quasi-realist theory can at once subscribe to a sparse and naturalistic ontology and still go on saying all the things that ordinary realists about normativity say. According to quasi-realists, for example, even as we embrace a fully naturalistic understanding of the nature and origins of normative judgment, we may go on affirming the mind-independence of value—insisting, for

11. Apologies if I have overburdened the metaphor.
instance, that it’s true independently of us and our attitudes that one ought not to kick dogs for fun or to starve oneself to death for the sake of a trim figure.

Her answer is that they cannot:

They must choose between a naturalistically palatable understanding of the nature and origins of normative judgment, on the one hand, and affirmations of the mind-independence of value, on the other. I conclude that quasi-realism—understood as an attempt to circumvent this choice and secure all the benefits of realism with none of the costs—fails.12

Street’s objection is one version of a familiar complaint. Insofar as quasi-realism succeeds in mimicking realist talk, it is said, the theory will no longer be able to distinguish itself from full-blown realism. I have discussed this general objection elsewhere;13 I will rehearse my own view about how to answer it later. But as far as I know, until Street’s paper we had not seen anything resembling her specific version of the objection. It is not so much that we are going to have to think of quasi-realism as just another brand of realism, as that the successful quasi-realist inherits not only the vindication of some common sense talk that realists boast of, but along with it the infamous difficulties with realist metaethics.14

The particular legacy that Street has in mind, of course, is the Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence. It arises for quasi-realists, she thinks, because they admit assertions and questions about ‘the independent normative truth as such’.15 This is an abstruse phrase, so let me bring it down to earth. The Unexplained Coincidence threatens, according to Street, when a metaethical theory admits of some independence counterfactuals, as I will call them. Here is one example:

(IC) Even if we were to approve of kicking dogs for fun, it would still be wrong to do it.

This is the commonsense language interpretation of the exotic remark, “It’s a normative fact, out there independent of us, that one ought not to kick dogs for fun.”16 And (IC) does present us with a perfectly good, perfectly

14. At the end of her paper, Street briefly discusses a couple of the historically important metaphysical objections to metaethical realism; I will not discuss those explicitly but it does seem to me that the approach to protecting the view against the Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence that I advocate should work equally well against these other objections.
15. See especially p. 11 and p. 20.
16. To be pursued on another occasion: as I see it, quasi-realism should have no interest in vindicating the exotic remarks. If my paraphrase misses what you think the exotic remark means, then, forget about the former. The discussion that follows is supposed to show how quasi-realists can interpret the ordinary moral thought that it would not have been less wrong

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comprehensible sense in which the moral truth is independent of us and our attitudes. The wrongness of doing such a heartless thing does not counterfactually depend on our normative sensibility.

The key point is that quasi-realists agree that (IC) and countless other independence counterfactuals are true. So if Street is right that it is these counterfactuals that get the Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence up and running, then it seems to follow that quasi-realism does inherit that problem when it provides a vindication of thoughts like the one expressed by (IC). Why does she think so? Well, the coincidence between our thoughts about nauseatingness and the facts about nauseatingness is not a problematic coincidence, because it is explained by dependence of the property on our feelings. There are no true independence counterfactuals for nauseatingness, and similarly, constructivists have an account of the match between thought and world: the value is dependent on us. So they deny (IC). That is what enables them to meet the reliability challenge. So it is very natural to think that accepting a big bunch of independence counterfactuals, and thus being committed to (something that could be exotically expressed saying that there is) an independent moral truth as such, is what saddles a theory with the Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence.

Schechter agrees. What raises the challenge is a set of theses together amounting to a kind of objectivity, he thinks. One of the theses is independence.

The truth of logical truths and the falsity of logical falsehoods do not depend on us. In particular, they do not depend on our thoughts, language, or social practices. (Schechter, 439)

Please mutate the mutatables to fit the present context.

Street has further elaboration of what she takes to be the difficulty for quasi-realism, but what has been said already is enough for my purposes. In short, a part of quasi-realism’s vindication of ordinary normative talk is its embracing of independence counterfactuals. Once a theory takes these counterfactuals on board, it loses the capacity to explain the match between our normative beliefs and the normative truth. For it cannot appeal to counterfactual dependence of value on sensibility, and for the reasons adduced in the presentation of the reliability challenge for realists there is no good explanation to be had by appealing to counterfactual dependence of sensibility on value. Without any sort of counterfactual dependence to appeal to, the explanation for the happy match between our normative beliefs and the normative truth is an Unexplained Coincidence.

The Replies

Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn have each replied to Street’s challenge. Each insists that quasi-realists can have it both ways (in Street’s words). We can develop the realist-sounding language in a scrupulously irrealist story, and at the end of the story we will find that the Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence simply does not arise. I think they must be right about this. But the details of their answers are troubling.

Blackburn reminds us of how quasi-realism vindicates independence counterfactuals (I will give some of the details shortly), and then asks a question.

This is the quasi-realist parsing of the phenomenon on which the talk of ‘independence’ that he is prepared to justify is built. But is what is thereby built a Cartesian realism, bringing scepticism, and the inadequacy of a Neurath’s boat-inspired epistemology, with it?

Blackburn calls the sort of realism in question ‘Cartesian’ because he thinks it leads to a Cartesian skepticism. There is certainly something to this. Street herself remarks,

one could argue that it is a hallmark of standard realist discourse that we are able, at the very least, to entertain radical skeptical hypotheses about ourselves in ways that don’t trivially answer themselves. (Street 2011, 23)

There is an interesting issue here about the aspirations of quasi-realism, but I will leave it aside here. But Blackburn is plainly right that for Street, the key component of realism also sets up a skeptical worry. Of course, he rejects the worry:

I am a little acquainted with both misery and happiness, and so I suspect are you: the former strikes me as worse than the latter—how does it strike you? Do you choose, recommend, desire and promote misery above happiness? I doubt it. I do not, therefore, have to justify my own ranking to you, for you share it. We are both of the party of mankind, and that is the only audience it is worth engaging in questions of moral justification. If the Cartesian sceptic is worried about this degree of insouciance, so much the worse for him. As in the rest of life we ignore him, or doubt his sincerity, but were we to meet him, we would ensure that he is not put in charge of public policy.


19. There really is a nice recapitulation of the history of philosophy in this exchange. Street’s own constructivist answer to the challenge is Berkeleyan; she reconnects us with the ‘external world’ of value by constructing that world out of the springs of our minds, so closing the gap, leaving no room for skepticism.
Quite right; we are fully entitled to ignore the Cartesian skeptic.\textsuperscript{20} Still, Blackburn’s retort is no answer at all to the reliability challenge, and for everything, he says quasi-realism may still be saddled with the Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence. To see this, imagine that an annoying Cartesian skeptic badgers us with doubts about our knowledge of middle-sized material objects. Suppose, after going a few rounds of “Yes, but can’t we also doubt \textit{that}?” with a Cartesian skeptic, I get tired of the game and resolve not to put him in charge of public policy. The skeptic changes tack. “Very well, let us banish the demons and just assume, with common sense, that our beliefs about this piece of wax are true. What explains why they are true?” Now I feel much better! I can tell the skeptic about how our sensory apparatus evolved; maybe a special story about how our ancestors with \textit{more accurate} sensors of temperature did better and left more descendents, and so on. And this is why we feel the heat, and \textit{accurately}, and so we have accurate beliefs about things like wax. So there is no difficult reliability challenge from the Cartesian. In this way, Blackburn’s label is inapt.

Like Blackburn, Gibbard would like to eat and have his quasi-cake. One way to pull off this trick is to distinguish two forms of realism: vast and tempered.

Whereas vast normative realism treats our judgments as indicators of facts separate from us, laying us open to the question of whether our judgments are truly indications at all of normative facts independent of us, any more than the judgments of exotic peoples are, this tempered normative realism does no such thing. It cultivates standards for when normative judgments are to be trusted, but doesn’t follow through on \textit{treating our judgments fully as indicators of independent facts}. (my emphasis)\textsuperscript{21}

Only a vast normative realism, one might think, would face the Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence. Quasi-realists can be happy to be quasi-tempered-realists (or perhaps quasi-realism is just a variety of tempered realism).

The problem is that it is very unclear what the vast/tempered distinction amounts to, aside from the claim that the latter does not have to concern itself with metaphysics. In the passage, all we are told is that tempered realism does not treat our judgments fully as indicators of independent facts. But on a straightforward reading, that just is not true. What does it mean for a (kind of) judgment to indicate a (kind of) fact? Well, when the judgments have contents, and these contents can be true or false, then it seems to me the judgments indicate the facts if and only if they covary with the facts. That is, when we find that for each \( p \) in the domain, our judges judge that \( p \) just when \( p \), then the judgments are indicators of the facts. And are these facts independent facts? They appear to be independent. After all, many independence counterfactuals

\textsuperscript{20} Or anyway, so it seems to me; I am not an epistemologist. Here Blackburn takes up the role of Hume in our historical reenactment. He always clamors for that part!

\textsuperscript{21} Gibbard, “How Much Realism?” p. 44. Here Gibbard is not describing his own view as ‘tempered’, but rather views like T. M. Scanlon’s. It is not clear to me exactly how his \textit{proprio voce} answer is supposed to go in this paper.
are true, and quasi-realists flatly reject the metaphysical dependence endorsed by constructivists. And in the next passage in the following, Gibbard says that they are independent.

So a tempered realist must mean something else; but it is unclear what he means. And the reliably true interpretation of ‘indicator’, and the independence counterfactuals interpretation of ‘independent facts’, those seem to be the ones that matter to the availability of a reliability challenge.

A vast normative realism holds normative facts up to the same epistemic standards as plain facts of our surroundings. Normative facts are bound to fail these tests. A half-way, tempered normative realism recognizes a gulf between these paradigm facts and normative facts. Normative facts, it holds, are sometimes independent of the aims and sensibilities of the people they apply to. Still, they needn’t have all the epistemic credentials of paradigm facts. (Gibbard 2011, 44)

But as I said, this is not enough. We have to be told about the difference between vast and tempered realist facts in such a way as to make it clear why the tempered ones do not need the epistemic credentials, or more specifically, why these facts do not support any Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence.

I agree with Blackburn and Gibbard: quasi-realists do not have a cosmic coincidence on their hands, whereas non-naturalist realists do. In the next section I will say why. But by this I mean I will explain why I agree. The argument is not going to explain why there is no Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence; it is just an argument that there is no Problem of the Unexplained Coincidence. I address the why question in section 5.

4. That There Is No Problem

“Imagine a language unlike English in containing no evaluative predicates.”

(Spreading the Word, 193)

Here is my argument that there is no Unexplained Coincidence Problem for quasi-realism. We start by imagining an impoverished version of English, like the one Blackburn imagined in Spreading the Word. Taking up the point of view of the speakers of this language, we ask whether there is any reliability challenge raised by their practice. I take it there is not. Then we add vocabulary, syntax, and some complexities to their language, in stages. I will argue at each stage that no new problem could enter at that stage. When we get to the end, we will find that the language is the quasi-realist language. The quasi-realist account of normative language, that is, will be, by hypothesis, true of this language. And we will have an argument that there is no problematic coincidence between the judgments of the speakers of this language and world. Because quasi-realism is the view that this quasi-realist language is our language, we will then have an argument that there is no problematic coincidence between our normative judgments and the world, if quasi-realism is true.
So imagine Blackburn’s stripped down version of English. Of course, it is controversial whether this can be imagined. Maybe all predicates of English are evaluative in some covert way. But I will assume not. To start, I want to imagine that there really is no way in this language of making evaluations. It is a purely descriptive version of English, which I will call E_d. Users can say which things they like and dislike, but in so doing, they will not be asserting evaluative propositions but only (if anything) saying that they evaluate this or that in one way or another (by reporting their attitudes).

Let me add that these speakers have attitudes that are like ours. They disapprove of the things that we disapprove of, approve of what we approve of, and because we have subtler and more fine-grained attitudes than plain approval and disapproval, suppose that they have those too and that they are like ours. These are attitudes, not beliefs, so there should be no suspicion that we are sneaking in something problematic at the first stage.

At this stage, I suppose, there will be no mysterious facts or correspondences to explain. Speakers of E_d might reflect happily that had things gone differently, they would have had attitudes that they in actual fact find repugnant (they actually feel repugnance at the possible state of affairs in which they are cold-hearted and selfish). So, they feel lucky that they are not so constituted. But, I take it, feeling lucky in this way is not feeling the presence of some striking coincidence in need of an explanation. There is no Problem of Unexplained Coincidence for them to formulate, at the Base stage.

Ayer Stage

Next, suppose that our impoverished speakers add a means to express (in the expressivist’s sense) their evaluative attitudes, in the way that Ayer suggested in Language Truth and Logic, with special tones of voice that have conventional meaning: a disapproving tone, an enthusiastic tone. In writing, these tones are marked with special exclamation marks; they mark sentences. Call the language at this stage, E_Ayer.

When speakers of E_Ayer want to express their disapproval of John’s having burnt the waffles at breakfast, they can say,

John burnt the waffles

(with the special punctuation mark, or if they say it aloud they use a disapproving tone of voice).

22. How can we be sure that there is no Unexplained Coincidence problem for non-cognitive attitudes? We need take no stand on this question. Here is the dialectical situation. Constructivists, like Street, accuse realists, and now also quasi-realists, of having a special problem that does not accrue to constructivist theories. But constructivists do not, qua constructivists, take any position on the question of what attitudes people (including us) have. So the attribution of attitudes is common ground between both sides, and cannot ground any problem for one side in particular.
Still, I suppose, there is no mysterious correspondence or coincidence to be explained. If Ann tells Ben, “I see that you enthusiastically approve of the fact that the Conservatives will win,” and Ben repays the compliment, and they find themselves in constant agreement expressed by tones, they might wonder at the coincidence of their attitudes, but presumably, things would be fully accounted for once they learned that they were raised in similar circumstances. (“Oh, you were in school at Eton? That explains it!”) After all, there are no new attitudes, no new states of mind that are introduced at this stage. They only have new ways to express the states of mind they already had. So, no new Cosmic Coincidence arrives at the Ayer stage.

**Predicate Stage**

Now it is time for $E_{Good}$, corresponding to (but not identical with) Blackburn’s language described in *Spreading the Word*. Blackburn introduces $B!$ and $H!$ as operators on gerunds, forming expressions of attitudes toward activities (very loosely construed—worrying about global warming is not an activity except for the neurotically anxious, but it is something plenty of sensible people do). Another set of operators form referring expressions from the new expressive sentences, and special connectives form sentences expressing higher-order attitudes toward the lower-order attitudes expressed by the embedded sentences. Here it is not at all important how the details go. What we want from $E_{Good}$ is a syntax capable of recursively generating complex expressions from simpler ones so as to have ways of expressing complex attitudes related to the simpler ones we already know how to express. Instead of operators, then, let us go straight to the devices that are closer to our natural language by introducing predicates. This will be our $E_{Good}$ although it is not the same language as the one in *Spreading the Word*.

One particularly useful feature of $E_{Good}$ is that it allows generalization in a way that was unavailable to $E_{Ayer}$. Suppose Ed knows that John burned the waffles and wants to express disapproval. John burned the waffles, he says, in the boo tone, or he puts the boo exclamation mark at the end. Ethel overheard, but not clearly; she knows that Ed expressed disapproval of something breakfast related that John did, but she cannot quite tell what. In $E_{Good}$, she can say, “John did something bad at breakfast.” She could not express this attitude in $E_{Ayer}$ by saying John did something at breakfast, because that would express her disapproval of John’s doing something at breakfast, which is not what she means to do.

Let us pause for a check of the dialectical situation. Someone might object that there is no way to construct $E_{Good}$ so as to be able to do what we want it to do. Maybe Blackburn failed, and maybe success is impossible. But that objection is out of place here. Admittedly, if the project cannot be carried out this far, then quasi-realism cannot be made good. But that is a quite different objection. What we want to see is whether there is an Unexplained

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Coincidence Problem, on the assumption that the general quasi-realist program can be carried out. So stipulate along with me.

So is there, at this stage, such a problem? I find it difficult to see how it could have arrived. As I have described the evolution of the language, the development from E_Ayer to E_Good only enables the language to express states of mind that the speakers have anyway, but could not express in the more primitive language. There is no Whorfian addition of capacities to think new thoughts riding on the back of the new syntax. (Any Whorfians are free to tell their own stories, of course, but this one is mine!) So if the E_Good speakers exhibit any striking match between psychological states and the world, so did the speakers of E_Ayer; no Quasi-Coincidence can enter when predicates arrive.  

There are still two more steps to take, and it is these steps that might seem most likely to bring the problems of realism down around the heads of our E-speakers and the anthropologists who study them. We have to take the Objectivity step and the Truth step.

**Truth Stage**

To get to E_T, we add a truth predicate applicable to the expressive sentences. It is deflationary, of course, in keeping with the general quasi-realist program, so we specify its use rather than giving semantics for it. We can use Paul Horwich’s approach: the use of the truth predicate is given by a set of ‘axioms’, the instances of schema T.  

So the set includes, for example,

\[ \text{It is true that the ASPCA does good work iff the ASPCA does good work} \]

Of course, in order to make sense out of these instances, we have to first solve the infamous Frege-Geach problem, otherwise we will not know how to understand an expressive sentence flanking the connective ‘iff’. We have stipulated it to be solved. And following Horwich, we can see how to reconstruct homilies about truth and the ordinary uses of the truth predicate by seeing what follows from the axioms.

24. It looks to some people like the problem must enter here, with the predicates, because it is here that what Blackburn calls ‘propositional reflection’ becomes plausible. The shape of the sentences, the outward form of people’s reasoning, the logic of expression, all seem to come together here to make the practice Quasi-Realist. My point is that the felt need for an explanation must be an illusion. For if an explanation for some coincidence were needed at the E_Good stage, then one would be needed at the E_Ayer stage, because all of the explananda are the same at the two stages. Maybe someone wants to put his *modus tollens* up against my *modus ponens* and conclude that the speakers of E_Ayer already face a reliability challenge. I think that is wrong, but in any case we can agree that the challenge does not arise with the move from E_Ayer to E_Good.


27. Once again, this is no mean feat, but if expressivism cannot get help from truth deflationism, it has bigger problems for its quasi-realist ambitions than the one we are considering here.

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The step from $E_{\text{Good}}$ to $E_T$ seems a likely place for the Problem of Unexplained Coincidence to enter. After all, the problematic question is most naturally put by asking why most of some group’s beliefs are true. Are there new coincidences for them to frame in their new language that they could not frame before?

Imagine Martha asking herself, “Why is it that so many of Fred’s evaluative thoughts are true?” Were she to speak $E_{\text{Good}}$, it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, for her to formulate this question. She could say something like, “Why is it that if Fred thinks that the ASPCA does good work then the ASPCA does good work, and if Fred thinks that sexism in philosophy is bad then sexism in philosophy is bad, and many other things very much like these?” But it is hard to hear this long conjunction as asking for an explanation of a big coincidence. It sounds like it is asking for a collection of explanations for a collection of small coincidences. But the Problem of Unexplained Coincidence is the problem of providing an explanation for a big coincidence. Using $E_T$, she can generalize more easily, asking why so many of Fred’s evaluative thoughts are true. Let us see what this amounts to.

To keep things manageable, let us imagine that all of our (or the $E_T$ speakers’) beliefs about which things are good, are true, and ask why. And to uncover what it is this amounts to, we will translate backward into the more primitive versions of the language. Consider first,

1. Everything we believe to be good is good.

Now, calling things ‘good’ is expressing approval for them. So (1) amounts to

2. We do the things we believe to be good

But this is not a full explication, because ‘good’ still appears in (2). Still, it appears in the context of a belief report, so we can eliminate it without introducing another exclamation mark, thus

3. We do the things we approve of

So far, so good. But it is harder to work out the upshot, in $E_T$, of the why question:

4. Why are all of our beliefs true?

The problem, of course, is that

5. *Why we do the things we approve of

is not grammatical in English or in $E_T$, nor is it the sort of ungrammatical string of which one naturally thinks, “I know what it means, but you can’t say it that way.”
Suppose we were working out the evolution of Hare’s prescriptivist language; then we would have formed the generalization,

(6) Do the things we prescribe!

And we would have to formulate a related why question. This time it is easy:

(7) Why do the things we prescribe?

This question asks for the features of certain actions in virtue of which we are being told to do them, or else it is asking for the features of a class of actions in virtue of which we are being told to do them. To see what this why question has in common with a why question formed from a descriptive sentence, imagine two exchanges:

First Exchange
Leaves are green.
Why? Give me an explanation.

Second Exchange
Rake up all the leaves.
Why? Give me an explanation.

So, if someone asserted (3), and I replied, “Give me an explanation,” what would my interlocutor say? She would, it seems clear, tell me about the features of the things we approve of in virtue of which she is enthusing about them. And there are two possibilities to consider. For one, she could tell me, about each of the things we approve of, why she is enthusiastic about our doing it. (Facts about herself explaining her enthusiasm would not be on point, I think; she would take those for granted and tell me about the features of the actions in question.) Second, she could tell me something about the whole class of things we approve of that invite her enthusiasm. So now we know what kind of answer (4) and (5) would be looking for.

And we can see now, too, that the only questions that can be made out, in the E1 version of (3), are normative questions. They ask for the grounds of normative (or evaluative) judgments, for the ‘good-makers’, as metaethicists say. This is not the question whose answer would explain an otherwise Unexplained Coincidence. That question, the one that is supposed to make trouble for realist metaethics, does not arise for our E-speakers. And so, if expressivism is correct, it does not arise for us.

Objectivity Stage

So far, each step has built on the previous one. This last step, the Objectivity step, is different; we are not adding complexity to the language, so it is not really a step in the induction.

We supposed that the members of the community we studied had attitudes like ours. At the complicating stages of the Just So story, we added expressive power to their language, to enable them to give voice to more of these attitudes. Now let us pay special attention to the attitude voiced by an Independence Conditional:

(IC) Even if we were to approve of kicking dogs for fun, it would still be wrong to do it.

Such remarks smack of objectivity of a certain kind. According to quasi-realism, (IC) expresses disapproval (of a particular sort) of kicking dogs for fun in a particular counterfactual situation: the situation in which we approve of kicking them for fun. Most of us, I imagine, do share this attitude. Our disapproval of unkindness to animals is conditional on some things, but not conditional on others. That is true of most of our attitudes; my admiration of Bach is not conditional on his religion, but is conditional on his musical genius, for example. Among the facts my attitudes may be conditional on, there are some special ones: facts about my own attitudes. I am in favor of (my) eating artichokes, but that favoring is conditional on my taste for artichokes; I do not favor (eating artichokes in circumstances in which I find them disgusting). Attitude toward eating things is normally conditional in this way. But attitude toward the treatment of animals is not. I do not disapprove of (kicking dogs in the rather remote situation in which dogs are heavily armored and find it pleasant to be kicked). But I do, still, disapprove of kicking them in the (also remote, I hope) situation in which I do not disapprove of kicking them. My disapproval is not conditional on itself, to put it in a paradoxical-sounding way.

It may look as if a special problem of explanation arises for thinkers who accept Independence Conditionals. And it may indeed be a special problem for realist theories. But it could not be a special problem for quasi-realists.

I am not a fan of rutabaga. If the waiter brings some on my plate, I will not eat it. I plan to ask the waiter to leave the rutabaga off my plate. My attitude toward rutabaga on my plate is a negative one. Now I contemplate a (not terribly remote) situation in which I develop a liking for rutabaga. Thinking about that situation, I find that I am (actually) in favor of there being some rutabaga on my plate; I make a contingency plan for such a situation, and the plan does not include any planning for asking the waiter to leave the rutabaga off my plate. Boo for rutabaga on my plate, I think, but in the situation in which I actually enjoy the stuff, hooray for rutabaga on my plate. So far, there is not supposed to be any striking coincidence between my state of mind and the facts

29. As I intend it, the conditionality of an attitude is built into the attitude. I do not mean that whether one has the attitude is contingent or conditional on this or that circumstance. It might be helpful to think of conditional preference: I can prefer A to B conditional on C, irrespective of whether I would prefer A to B should C obtain.

30. For Gibbard, of course, normative judgments express plans.

31. For Blackburn normative judgments express such attitudes.

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of the world that needs a special explanation. But then I change my attitude. I come to despise rutabaga in a strange, fanatical way: I want not to eat any even in the circumstances in which I like it; my attitude toward eating rutabaga ceases to be conditional on itself. Boo for my eating rutabaga even in those circumstances in which I enjoy it! This is a strange attitude. But, if I were to come to have it, would there be any new correspondence to be explained? People have different attitudes, and once they have them toward merely possible circumstances their attitudes can be conditional on some things and not others. Changing the contingencies on which my attitudes are conditional could not lead to any reliability challenge. It could not produce a big Unexplained Coincidence.

As for me, so for the speakers in our Just So story, the kind of objectivity that arises when attitudes are not conditional on their own existence, which is the kind that leads speakers to have thoughts expressed by Independence Conditionals, cannot bring with it a Problem of Unexplained Coincidence. Gibbard puts it this way:

Normative facts are out there, subsisting independently of us” might just be a fancy way of putting an aspect of a plan for living . . . “It’s a normative fact, out there independent of us, that one ought not to kick dogs for fun.” Accepting this might amount to planning to avoid kicking dogs for fun, planning this even for the contingency of being someone who approves of such fun, and who is surrounded by people who approve. The claim of independence, then, turns out to be internal to normative thinking—though arrayed in sumptuous rhetoric.32

5. The Gap Between What We Wanted and What We Got

If the Just So argument is sound, then there could be no Unexplained Coincidence Problem for quasi-realism. For there is no odd coincidence to be explained at the first, most primitive stage; and no new coincidence arrives at any of the later stages. The appearance of an Unexplained Coincidence Problem for quasi-realism must be an illusion.

But there is something unsatisfying about this argument. Even insofar as it is convincing, it leaves a puzzle. Why is there no Unexplained Coincidence Problem for quasi-realism? Even when I am convinced that something is true, I can still wonder why it is true. The Just So story convinces me that if quasi-realism is true there is no great coincidence that needs an explanation. But I would like an explanation for why no explanation is needed. There is no such second-order explanation in the Just So story, which means it is a less-than-satisfying argument.

Notice that as the original reliability challenge is put to realists, the quasi-realist just accepts all of the claims that make the challenge apt.

There are normative facts. We have normative beliefs about them. Our beliefs are generally true, and our method of forming beliefs is reliable. The facts are not counterfactually dependent on our beliefs.

Quasi-realists agree with each of these claims. So they agree that there is a broad match between the normative facts and our beliefs about them. What is the explanation for this match? There is no explanation by way of tracking, because there is no counterfactual dependence of fact on belief (that would be constructivism) and there is no counterfactual dependence of belief on fact (as there is in the case of ordinary perception). Apparently, there is no explanation of this broad match. If there is nevertheless no Problem of Unexplained Coincidence, why isn’t there?

Return to Gibbard’s reply to Street.

A vast normative realism holds normative facts up to the same epistemic standards as plain facts of our surroundings. Normative facts are bound to fail these tests. A half-way, tempered normative realism recognizes a gulf between these paradigm facts and normative facts. Normative facts, it holds, are sometimes independent of the aims and sensibilities of the people they apply to. Still, they needn’t have all the epistemic credentials of paradigm facts.

Quasi-realist, let us say, takes there to be paradigm facts and lesser facts, and a gulf between them. Normative facts are lesser facts. This is why the truth of our beliefs in them raises no Problem of Unexplained Coincidence, and is immune to a reliability challenge. But unless we have some account of what the difference is between paradigm facts and lesser ones, we should wonder why the difference, whatever it is, should matter. It cannot just be stipulated that the difference is whatever difference would make widespread accuracy in beliefs into something that needs no explanation.

Here is what one would like to say. Realists claim there are normative facts and that we have beliefs about them that are true. These big robust metaphysical claims demand an explanation in a metaphysical sense; they cry out for a further account of how the objects of the block letter terms have matched up in such an improbable-looking way. Quasi-realists are content with claims that sound the same but incur no ontological commitments whatsoever: there are normative facts, and our beliefs about them are true. But of course, the question is what the difference between the big robust facts and the ordinary (pickwickian) facts is supposed to be, that it can sustain the difference between what calls for explanation and what does not.

Gibbard offers us a way to see the difference: the Vast realist, he says, claims that “understanding normative properties and relations as objective matters of fact is basic to explaining how judgments of wrongness work,” while his Tempered version denies it. This is a reasonable distinction to draw. I will elaborate a bit; others (and I elsewhere) have expanded on it at some length.

A fact is explanatorily basic in the sense that our best (or, the correct) account of our thoughts and talk is partly in terms of it. The nature of our...
thoughts about hot and cold is partly in terms of the temperatures of things. According to quasi-realism, the best account of our normative and evaluative thoughts never mentions the right or the good, not even in disguise. So although there are facts about what is good and what is right, there are no facts of that sort. This seems to me to be the right way to draw the distinction we are after.

But if so, then the quasi-realist idea that we need no explanation for the coincidence between fact and belief, when they are not fact and belief, amounts to the idea that when we have beliefs whose nature is properly accounted without mention of the items in their contents, then our general reliability in forming them is not a real coincidence. (Maybe it is a quasi-coincidence.) People believe that $p$ and $q$ and $r$, and indeed $p$, and $q$, and $r$! But the facts that $p$ and that $q$ and that $r$ are no part of the metaphysical story of what we are up to when we think that $p$ and that $q$ and that $r$. So the match between our judgment and what is, calls for no explanation.

I must confess that I do not see why this should be so. The picture is suggestive, no doubt about it. All of the right concepts are lurking about the neighborhood. These things (the normative facts) do no explanatory heavy lifting, they are metaphysically lightweight, so phenomena involving them do not create real explanatory gaps. Only the items in the One True Grand Explanatory Story will call for serious explanations when they match up with other such items. These remarks sound like a good prolegomena to an explanation, and they would make good slogans. But they do not seem to me to get to the bottom of things. They do not provide any straight answer to the straight question: why does coincidence between fact and belief require explanation, and not coincidence between fact and belief?

So my conclusion is that, pace Street (and Schechter), we can see that the Problem of Unexplained Coincidence is not a problem for quasi-realism, but we, or at least I, cannot yet see quite why it is not.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to audiences at the Analytic Philosophy Symposium at the University of Texas, Austin, December 2011; the Eastern Meetings of the American Philosophical Association, December 2011 (and to Sharon Street in particular for organizing the session); an MIT Philosophy Colloquium in March 2012; the Columbia/NYU Graduate Philosophy Conference in April 2012; and the Nebraska Metaethics and Practical Reason Conference in April 2012. I especially thank David Sosa for being the first to point out an error in my first version of the argument; I was able to correct that error, at least.

33. You might say: it is really in terms of kinetic energy of molecules. Then if you think that heat is a certain kind of kinetic molecular energy, you should, I say, think there are heat facts.