

What is the Difference between a Moral Realist and a Moral Anti-realist?

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of how to distinguish moral realism from moral anti-realism. An influential view, prevalent primarily due to the work of Michael Dummett, appeals to semantic features of realism such as truth, bivalence, and surface form. However, minimalist accounts enable an anti-realist to appropriate any such semantic feature. The semantic characterisation is thus unable to distinguish adequately between moral realists and moral anti-realists. This is the problem of Creeping Minimalism. An alternative characterisation of the debate is proposed, making use of the distinctively metaphysical criteria of ontological inclusion/exclusion. Semantic minimalism is not an issue here, and the possibility of minimalism about ontology is shown to be incompatible with both realism and anti-realism, thus preventing the recurrence of Creeping Minimalism.

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Introduction

It used to be easy to tell a moral realist from a moral [anti-realist].
(Dreier 2004, 23)

The most prominent debates in metaethics have centred around the question of moral realism. The basic thought is that realists such as Moorean non-naturalists and Aristotelian naturalists believe in a moral reality, while anti-realists such as non-cognitivists and error theorists do not. But how exactly we are to spell out this difference is a tricky issue.

The linguistic turn gave us a movement spearheaded by Dummett which sought to cast metaphysical debates—in particular the issue of realism—in semantic terms. On this view, moral realism constitutively involves certain views about truth (that there are moral truths) or bivalence (that it holds for moral discourse) or some other semantic feature of moral discourse, while anti-realism denies one of the semantic claims in question. Part 1 of this paper concerns this semantic conception. I investigate the motivation behind the view, and set out a plausible formulation of it in chapter 1.

However, minimalist accounts of truth such as Horwich's (1998*b*) have recently become popular among moral anti-realists, apparently granting them free

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access to the semantic resource of truth (and consequently of bivalence) without the metaphysical baggage of realism. Furthermore, minimalist theories of other semantic notions are readily available, giving us the problem of Creeping Minimalism:

Minimalism sucks the substance out of heavy-duty metaphysical concepts. If successful, it can help [certain forms of anti-realism] recapture the ordinary realist language of ethics. But in so doing it also threatens to make [anti-realism] indistinguishable from realism.

(Dreier 2004, 26)

I discuss this problem in chapter 2, suggesting that it undermines the original motivations for casting the realism/anti-realism debate in semantic terms.

In Part 2 of this paper I set out a positive account of the difference between moral realism and moral anti-realism. This account takes at face value the basic thought that the difference between the two parties is that *in a fundamental sense* realists believe in a moral reality, while anti-realists do not¹. Specifically, realism and anti-realism are cast as distinctively metaphysical positions: moral realism involves the inclusion of moral entities in one's ontology, while the latter involves the exclusion of moral entities from one's ontology. Chapter 3 sets out this view in some detail, with discussion of what it is to include an entity in one's ontology (or exclude it therefrom).

¹I shall also have a recommendation for those who are suspicious that there is any such distinct sense.

Creeping Minimalism is revisited in chapter 4. The distinctively metaphysical characterisation of the realism debate has a clear advantage over the semantic characterisation as far as semantic minimalism goes. Moreover, I claim that the problem of Creeping Minimalism does not recur with respect to a minimalist stance on ontology, because to adopt a minimalist stance is precisely to eschew metaphysical commitments. Minimalism about ontology involves rejecting *all* metaphysical commitments, hence ontological minimalism is incompatible both with realism and with anti-realism, since these are metaphysical positions. This third minimalist view also provides an interesting perspective on the realism/anti-realism debate.

In chapter 5 I respond to seven objections one might raise against the metaphysical characterisation advanced here. Finding none of them decisive, I conclude that the difference (insofar as there is a difference) between a moral realist and a moral anti-realist is indeed essentially a difference in ontological commitment, where such commitments are distinctively metaphysical.

A few notes on terminology.

Nowadays it is commonplace to distinguish between the *moral* and the *normative*, which has a broader range of application. Some even distinguish between the *ethical* and the *moral* (e.g. Williams 2006, 6). I have broadly ignored these distinctions as they make little difference to the metametaethical task of characterising realism and anti-realism. However, ignoring these distinctions allows me

to integrate the arguments and views of authors who have different preferences in this regard.

For similar reasons, I have glossed over the issue of what the fundamental bearers of truth are. I have generally cast things in terms of *statements*, as it is in these terms that Dummett sets out his views. However, Horwich (1998*b*) argues that the adherent of his version of truth minimalism must accept *propositions* as the fundamental truth bearers. Still, as long as everyone grants that statements and propositions (etc.) can be “true” in a derivative sense, this issue seems unimportant to the issue at hand.

The terms “non-cognitivism”, “expressivism”, and “quasi-realism” are often run together. I think this is because in their most prominent forms (Blackburn 1984, Blackburn 1993, Blackburn 1998, Gibbard 1990, Gibbard 2003) they are found together. However, I take *non-cognitivism* to be the view simply that statements of the relevant sort do not express cognitive mental states², *expressivism* to be the view that statements of the relevant sort are meaningful in virtue of the mental states they express, and *quasi-realism* to be a form of expressivism (contrasting with early emotivist theories) which seeks to vindicate our realist-sounding discourse. Thus other views such as prescriptivism—in place of expressivism—can

²Three candidate analyses of a cognitive state are (i) a literal belief, (ii) a mental state whose content is truth-evaluable, and (iii) a mental state with a mind-to-world direction of fit.

be combined with non-cognitivism. And cognitivism is compatible with expressivism (whether quasi-realist or not)³. However, in the text I shall often use the term “expressivism” to refer specifically to *non-cognitivist* expressivism.

Working within the paradigm of a semantic characterisation of realism and anti-realism, Wright (1988) distinguishes between “anti-realism” (a view about truth) and “irrealism” (a subset of “anti-realism” which seeks to vindicate a valid role for descriptions of the relevant sort). I am unclear to what extent this distinction could be preserved by a purely metaphysical classification. I shall ignore the term “irrealism” and use “anti-realism” as a catch-all term for substantive metaphysical views which oppose realism.

Given the scope of this paper, I shall occasionally use the general terms “realism” and “anti-realism” to refer specifically to *moral* realism and anti-realism. I hope it will be clear from the context when this is the case. Likewise, I hope the context will make clear my usage of “ontological membership”. In particular, it is vital to observe the distinction between something’s “having ontological membership” in the sense of *being included in a theorist’s ontology* and in the sense of *being a fundamental constituent of reality*. I shall have more to say in chapter 3 about what it is to include something in one’s ontology and what the candidates for inclusion are.

³See Horgan & Timmons (2006) for a view of this kind. Indeed, one can adopt expressivism as a general semantic theory and then pick and choose cognitivism or non-cognitivism for each area of discourse individually (c.f. Schroeder 2008). I shall not apply my characterisation to cognitivist expressivism specifically, but hopefully its classification should be obvious once the details have been spelled out.

Part 1

Realism & Semantics

CHAPTER 1

The Semantic Characterisation of Realism and Anti-realism

In this chapter I shall sketch out the case for a semantic characterisation of moral realism. The first section will discuss three arguments Dummett seems to put forward for characterising realism in semantic terms. The second section will discuss Dummett's particular semantic characterisation with reference to his two necessary conditions for realism, and the relativity component of his view. Finally, the third section will provide an initial assessment of this classification scheme by applying it to various metaethical views.

1. Three arguments for a semantic characterisation of realism

1.1. First Argument: Without semantic constraints, metaphysical positions are under-constrained. In outline, Dummett's first argument is as follows. When realism about the external world is put in strictly metaphysical terms, it is a position with which it is virtually impossible to disagree:

Realism is the belief in a reality independent of our knowledge of it and of our means of attaining such knowledge, which renders our statements true when they are true and false when they are false. When realism is characterised in this highly general way, it behoves us all to be realists to a large degree.

(Dummett 2006, 65)

Thus in order to characterise the *substantive* position which realists in fact hold—and which they defend against the arguments of anti-realists—more needs to be built into the concept of realism. And the realm of semantics provides just such a resource:

The characterisation of some philosophical view concerning a particular topic as realistic has substance only by contrast with an opposing view that has been maintained or is at least imaginable. We may say that a philosopher is guilty of *extravagant realism* when he postulates facts of a spurious kind, in which there is no good reason to believe, as rendering our statements true or false.
(Dummett 2006, 65)

Of course, this is a loaded description of the so-called “extravagant” realist position, coloured by Dummett’s own predilection for anti-realism. Still, Dummett’s claim is that it is only when a semantic component is added to the view that realism about the external world becomes a controversial (that is, disputable) position. Specifically, the semantic component alluded to here is that such true statements as “There is a table in the room” are true in virtue of describing a fact (and false statements are false in virtue of conflicting with facts).¹

Similar things could be said about other forms of realism. For example, moral realism characterised in general metaphysical terms might be described as holding that there are moral properties which are instantiated (some things are good/bad/right/wrong/etc.), that much of morality exhibits objective features (some moral obligations extend universally for example), and so on. But there

¹But note that in the quote above Dummett brings in an epistemological dimension to the realist characterisation in addition to the semantic dimension.

are anti-realists who will subscribe to all such views (as we shall see in the next chapter). If we again include a semantic component in the characterisation of moral realism—involving the claim that moral statements are true when they are true in virtue of describing a fact, for example—then the realist position is at least made controversial.

So the conclusion of this argument is that we best understand any given realism/anti-realism debate by way of the semantic commitments made by realists and anti-realists, since it is only those commitments which introduce substantive disagreement between the two sides.

1.2. Second Argument: Without semantic constraints, we have no way to choose among metaphysical positions. Dummett's second argument is closely related to his first. The idea is that the only way to settle a metaphysical question is by way of semantic restrictions on the possibilities. (Or at least that is the only way to settle the metaphysical question of whether realism is true.)

Which depends on which—the semantics on the metaphysics or the metaphysics on the semantics? ... By what means can we determine the general character of reality without adverting to the character of the propositions we take as holding good of reality?

(Dummett 2006, 14)

The idea is that the adoption of certain positions on semantic issues will remove certain metaphysical positions from the table, in a way that cannot otherwise be achieved. The problem does not recur at the semantic level, because we have independent ways to settle such questions directly:

A semantic theory, to be acceptable, must pass a number of diverse tests. First, it must be a coherent theory in itself; and, in so complex a matter, this test is not negligible. Secondly, it must, at least by and large, deliver the *right* truth-conditions for our statements, those which, in virtue of our understanding of our language, we acknowledge as the conditions under which those statements would in fact be correct. Thirdly, it must make possible a plausible explanation of what it is in which a speaker's understanding of the words, phrases, and sentences of his language consists. ... And fourthly, given the account of understanding that can be constructed on the basis of that semantic theory, it must be comprehensible how we could come to acquire such an understanding of our language.

(Dummett 2006, 14–15)

Certainly, metaphysical theories can be rejected on grounds of incoherence, but perhaps this is a less demanding criterion for acceptability in metaphysics than in semantics. Supposing that we have two competing metaphysical theories which are both coherent, it is pertinent to ask what basis we could have for rejecting one over the other. I shall have more to say about this in a later section, but for now it is pertinent to note that “methodological doubts have led some to treat many core metaphysical questions as pseudo-questions, as poorly formed and unanswerable questions, or as trivially answerable and so not suitable subjects for deep metaphysical debates” (Thomasson 2012, 17). This is a well-established worry, and if one finds it cogent then so much the better for metaphysical debates if they can be resurrected as substantive disputes cast in semantic terms.

1.3. Third Argument: A semantic characterisation allows for better generalisation than a characterisation in terms of entities. In the opening of his article, “Realism”, Dummett (1982, 55) clearly but briefly sets out a third argument:

[We could say] that one may be a realist about certain entities—mental states, possible worlds, mathematical objects—and not about others. But it seems preferable to say that realism is a view about a certain class of *statements*—for instance, statements in the future tense, or ethical statements—since certain kinds of realism, for instance realism about the future or about ethics, do not seem readily classifiable as doctrines about a realm of entities.

Dummett does not say much else in support of this conclusion, but it has *prima facie* appeal. We could certainly dispute one of the examples he has chosen; we might think that realism about the future *is* readily classifiable as a doctrine about a realm of entities, namely those entities which exist only in the future (or perhaps about the future parts of objects if we are perdurantists). However, as long as we accept that there are certain kinds of realism that cannot be classified in terms of entities, this would support choosing an alternative classification in terms which are sufficiently general to capture all forms of realism whatever.

The moral case is much more convincing than the future case as an example of a kind of realism that cannot readily be classified in terms of entities. Two ways in which a moral realist might postulate entities that an anti-realist would dispute are: (i) an extravagant form of Platonism that took the Form of the Good as a literal object, and (ii) a form of non-reductivism about moral properties,

with an event ontology individuating events along the lines of Kim (1976), to the effect that every instantiation of a moral property is a separate, concrete (but non-physical) event. However, short of these extreme views, it does not seem that most moral realists are postulating *entities* whose existence moral anti-realists refuse to accept. Ignoring Platonic objects and exclusively moral concrete events, obvious candidate moral entities are such things as humans and other sentient beings, and perhaps the tools they use to perform moral and immoral acts; a moral anti-realist is certainly not committed to denying that these things exist. So we would do well to find a more general characterisation of realism that, in contrast to a characterisation in terms of entities, enables us to classify moral realism correctly along with other forms of realism.

At this point, a semantic characterisation seems appealing. For whatever it is about which one's views are realist or anti-realist, there will certainly be a corresponding area of discourse. If it turns out that there are certain semantic features which are able to provide a reliable and general guide to classifying views as realist or anti-realist, then we will have found an improvement on a characterisation in terms of entities. I shall discuss Dummett's proposals regarding just such features shortly.

Before leaving this argument, however, note that putting things in terms of entities is only one way of providing a metaphysical characterisation of the

realism debate. For example, we might instead suggest that, in the case of mental states, although all parties to the debate agree on the *entities* involved (i.e. people), they disagree on whether those entities instantiate mental *properties*. So although this argument from generalisability tells against one form of metaphysical characterisation—i.e. that in terms of entities—it does not rule out other general ways of characterising the debate in metaphysical terms, unless specifically shown to apply to each individual suggestion. Therefore this argument has as much force in favour of other metaphysical characterisations (or indeed epistemological characterisations) as any semantic characterisation, insofar as they all achieve a sufficient level of generality.

2. Features of realism according to Dummett

We have looked at Dummett's arguments in favour of thinking of realist and anti-realist positions in semantic terms, but what semantic features should our semantic characterisation include? In this section I shall go through three core features of Dummett's detailed semantic characterisation of realism: bivalence, taking surface form seriously, and relativity.

2.1. Bivalence. Dummett's first semantic criterion for realism is preservation of the principle of bivalence, according to which every statement (in the region of discourse under consideration) is either true or false. Early on, Dummett proposed that accepting the principle of bivalence for a given domain is both necessary and

sufficient for being a realist in that area.² However, he later rejected the idea that accepting bivalence in a given area is sufficient for realism, although he retained this as a necessary condition:

The very minimum that realism can be held to involve is that statements in the given class relate to some reality that exists independently of our knowledge of it, in such a way that that reality renders each statement in the class determinately true or false, again independently of whether we know, or are even able to discover, its truth-value. Thus realism involves acceptance, for statements of the given class, of the principle of bivalence, the principle that every statement is determinately either true or false. Acceptance of bivalence is not ... sufficient for realism, but it is necessary to it.

(Dummett 1982, 55)

Why might we think that bivalence has anything to do with realism? A persuasive example is the case of time. A realist about the past, for example, will presumably hold that any otherwise well-formed statement about the past is either true or false. Take the following sentence:

(**A**) It rained yesterday

Given realism about the past, we can assume that—relative to an appropriate context and ignoring issues of vagueness and so on—either it rained yesterday or it did not. If it did then (**A**) is true, and if it did not then (**A**) is false.

If we take acceptance of bivalence in a given area to be a necessary condition for realism in that area, then we can appeal to a failure of bivalence in

²See e.g. Dummett (1959, 14).

explaining why certain views about the past count as anti-realist. For example, consider the view that statements about past events, such as **(A)** are made true or false by (and only by) the present evidence that such events did or did not occur. A natural step for proponents of such a view to take in cases where there is presently no evidence either way is to hold that statements in these cases are *neither true nor false*, thus denying that bivalence holds for statements about the past.

However, there is good reason to reject the mere acceptance of bivalence for a given area as *sufficient* for realism in that area. For example, take statements about non-existents, such as:

(B) Tintin is bald

(C) Tintin is not bald

On Russell's (1905) analysis of definite descriptions, and treatment of proper names as disguised definite descriptions, positive claims such as **(B)** involve an existential claim, with the result that all such statements about non-existents are false. Meanwhile negative claims, such as **(C)**, are given an analysis with the effect that all such statements about non-existents come out true (if the negation is taken to be external) or false (if the negation is taken to be internal). Thus Russell's view upholds the principle of bivalence for statements about non-existents (barring issues of vagueness etc.). But that hardly makes Russell a realist about non-existents!

Are we really entitled to ignore vagueness here? Wright (1988, 27) thinks this is a “serious worry” for a characterisation of realism in terms of bivalence, but I shall give Dummett the benefit of the doubt here as it seems plausible that his relativity condition (see section 2.3 below) can come to the rescue. Briefly, when characterising two contrasting views on, say, the future as realist or anti-realist, our purposes might be served well by examining whether either view rejects bivalence in cases that do not involve vague terms, or alternatively by supposing each view to be combined with an account of vagueness that does not involve a rejection of the principle of bivalence, for example Williamson’s (1994) epistemic view. Since Dummett could distinguish between realist and anti-realist accounts of vagueness, this does not seem *ad hoc*: we want to find out if these views are realist or anti-realist *about the future*, rather than about any specific phenomenon whose potentially anti-realist semantics might infect statements about the future³.

2.2. Taking surface form seriously. Since acceptance of bivalence alone is not sufficient for realism then, what else according to Dummett is required?

Integral to any given version of realism [is] the interpretation of those statements at face value, that is to say, as genuinely having the semantic form that they appear on their surface to have.

(Dummett 1991, 325)

³Other worries include denials of bivalence in response to “liar” statements and to quantum mechanics. “Liar” statements infect every area of discourse, as Kripke (1975) discusses: “*many, probably most, of our ordinary assertions about truth and falsity are liable, if the empirical facts are extremely unfavorable, to exhibit paradoxical features*” (691, emphasis original). Quantum mechanics may be taken to provide reasons to deny bivalence in statements about the physical world *on a realistic understanding*. In principle this could infect any domain which supervenes on the physical (e.g. the moral). I lay these aside as well.

So on Dummett's classification, there is a set of positions which count as anti-realist in virtue of holding that statements of the relevant kind are understood indirectly, by means of translation into statements of some other kind. These are the reductionist views⁴:

Reductionism, properly so called, is the thesis that there exists a translation of statements of the given class into those of some other class, which I shall call the reductive class. This translation is proposed, not merely as preserving truth-values, but as part of an account of the meanings of statements of the given class ... Reductionism in this sense may indeed afford a ground for rejecting realism concerning statements of the given class, even when it does not provide any reason for repudiating the principle of bivalence as applied to them.

(Dummett 1982, 66)

So here we have an explanation of why a view might fail to be realist even if it upholds bivalence. Recall that we did not want Russell to count as a realist about non-existents just because he upheld the principle of bivalence for statements about non-existents. In the light of Dummett's comments on reductionism, we can see now that Russell failed to meet a second semantic criterion. For Russell's analysis of such statements involved *translating* them into existential statements, and therefore not taking their surface form seriously. More generally, the appeal of

⁴Note that these are not the same sort of views as those Dummett labels "reductivist" views, which merely introduce a dependence between the truth of statements of one class and the truth of statements of a reductive class, rather than making any claim about the *meanings* of such statements. Examples of *reductivist* views would be the identity theory and supervenience physicalism in philosophy of mind, which are not thereby excluded from counting as realist. Behaviourism, on the other hand (insofar as it provides a translation between psychological statements and statements about behaviour) is *reductionist*, and hence an anti-realist view on Dummett's account. See Dummett (1982, 70), and chapter 3, section 4.1 of this paper.

this criterion lies in the fact that, when denying that the surface form of a certain class of statements has much to do with its meaning, it is natural to say that we are denying that a *realistic* interpretation of such statements is appropriate.⁵

However, we could not simply take this criterion—of taking surface form seriously—to be both necessary *and sufficient* for realism. This is seen by considering the Fregean/Strawsonian position on non-existents (e.g. Strawson 1950). For this view takes the surface form of statements such as **(B)** and **(C)** seriously: they each purport to refer to a non-existent entity (Tintin) and respectively claim that he is bald or that he is not bald. It is just that in the case of non-existents reference failure occurs, leaving the statement in question neither true nor false. Again, this hardly makes Frege and Strawson realists about non-existents. Thus acceptance of bivalence needs to be added as a further necessary condition of realism in order to prevent the Fregean/Strawsonian view from being classified incorrectly as a realist view about non-existents.

2.3. Relativity. The features discussed in the preceding sections—acceptance of the principle of bivalence and taking the surface form of statements of the relevant kind seriously—constitute the two core semantic criteria in Dummett’s characterisation of realism, where failing to meet either condition renders a position anti-realist. While it is of course open to a Dummettian who accepts such a semantic characterisation of realism to update these particular criteria with further

⁵Not to be confused with a “literal” interpretation (see Dorr 2005, 24–25).

necessary conditions and/or qualifications, it is important to recognise a more general feature of Dummett's view: the relativity of realist/anti-realist status.

Both [Russell's and Frege's/Strawson's views on proper names] stand in opposition to a realism of a Meinongian kind ... We do not see either theory as anti-realist, because we no longer take Meinongian realism seriously, and our attention is concentrated upon the disagreement between Russell on the one hand and Frege and Strawson on the other. But it is a mistake to say that the dispute has nothing to do with any question concerning realism; and still more of a mistake to say that we can recognise this to be so from some formal characteristics of the competing views.

(Dummett 1982, 104)

That is, whether or not one's position in a metaphysical dispute counts as realist or anti-realist depends upon what the salient alternative is. Dummett's view is thus that we always have to consider the *local* debate when classifying views as realist or anti-realist, rather than simply checking off a list of criteria considered in isolation from any particular context.

3. Application to ethics

In this section, I shall apply Dummett's characterisation of realism to moral discourse specifically, since that is our particular area of interest. In order to approve of his classification in this particular sphere, we need to see (i) that moral realist views meet both of Dummett's necessary conditions (acceptance of bivalence and taking surface form seriously), and (ii) that moral anti-realist views fail to meet at least one of these conditions.

3.1. Moral realists. Consider Moorean realism, according to which moral properties are non-natural properties (e.g. Moore 1903). This view certainly takes the surface form of moral statements seriously: statements which apparently attribute moral properties to people (or objects or situations or whatever) are understood as doing exactly that. For example, a statement such as

(D) Little brother's act of lying was morally wrong

is understood straightforwardly as describing a state of affairs in which little brother's act of lying has the property of *being morally wrong*, in just the same way as one might understand

(E) Little brother's act of lying lasted fifteen seconds

as describing a state of affairs in which little brother's act of lying has the property of *lasting fifteen seconds*.

Bivalence also seems to be preserved by this kind of view. With regard to logic, attributions of moral properties are treated no differently to attributions of natural properties such as *lasting fifteen seconds*, and so we can expect that a proponent of this view will hold that bivalence applies to moral statements insofar as it applies to attributions of properties generally speaking. So Moorean realism seems to meet the two necessary conditions for realism that Dummett's view involves.

The same goes for some realist views on the naturalist side, such as neo-Aristotelian naturalism (e.g. Thomson's contribution to Harman & Thomson

1996) and Cornell realism (e.g. Boyd 1988). For these views take moral properties to be on a par with other natural properties. Thus bivalence can be accepted for statements about moral properties in just the same way as for statements about non-moral natural properties, and the surface form of moral statements is taken seriously since no translation is thought necessary.

Interestingly, however, another contemporary form of naturalism cannot be classified straightforwardly according to Dummett's scheme. Jackson's moral functionalism (e.g. Jackson 1998) can certainly meet the bivalence condition in the same way as other naturalist theories. However, things are more difficult with regard to the criterion of taking surface form seriously as it is unclear whether or not Jackson's account offers a translation⁶ of moral vocabulary; at least, exactly this is a point of dispute between Jackson and his opponents. For Jackson's view is certainly meant to have implications about the *meanings* of moral statements:

It is an implicit part ... of our *understanding* of ethical terms and sentences that they serve to mark distinctions among the descriptive ways things are.

(Jackson 1998, 125, emphasis added)

However, Jackson does not claim to provide a *translation* of normative vocabulary into descriptive vocabulary; rather, he claims that moral statements *just are* a species of descriptive statements:

Ethical language may be needed in practice to capture the similarities among the various descriptive ways that [the global supervenience of the ethical on the descriptive] tells us constitute

⁶C.f. footnote 4 above.

ethical nature, but ethical properties are, nevertheless, possibly infinitely disjunctive descriptive properties.

(Jackson 1998, 124)

It seems that if you believe that moral properties are inherently non-descriptive—*contra* Jackson—then you will conclude that what Jackson is in fact doing is providing a translation of (normative) moral statements into a reductive class (purely descriptive terms). But if you agree with Jackson, then you will say that there is no translation involved, and he is merely revealing moral statements to be descriptive in nature. It follows that whether or not Jackson is a realist (by Dummett’s standards) depends on whether he is right!

We might take this to indicate a serious problem with Dummett’s classification: given the correct classification scheme (and a set context) we might expect that everyone could agree at least on whether any given view counts as realist or not. More charitably, we might allow an extension to Dummett’s relativity claim, to the effect that not only is a position’s realist status relative to the local debate under consideration, but also to the individual classifier’s *other commitments*.

3.2. Anti-realism: expressivism and prescriptivism. Traditional forms of expressivism (e.g. Ayer 1946) and prescriptivism (e.g. Carnap 1935, Hare 1952) both involve a rejection of (truth) bivalence for moral statements. Traditional expressivists hold that moral statements express non-cognitive attitudes and are therefore not truth-evaluable, while traditional prescriptivists hold that moral statements are really something like commands and are therefore not truth-evaluable.

If moral statements are not truth-evaluable, then *a fortiori* bivalence⁷ fails for moral discourse. So both of these views fail to meet the bivalence condition of realism, and so are correctly classified as anti-realist.

We might worry that the failure of bivalence in this case does not seem to get at the root of why these views are anti-realist, since the failure of bivalence falls out of their denial that *any* moral statements are truth-evaluable. Nevertheless, the criterion of bivalence does successfully exclude them from realism, so presumably this worry can be dropped for the sake of increased generality. As we have seen, forms of anti-realism in other areas reject bivalence for completely different reasons, and perhaps there is nothing more specific than a rejection of bivalence that binds these anti-realist views together on this front.

It also seems that expressivist and prescriptivist views fail the condition of taking surface form seriously, for both tell a story about how moral statements are *really* to be understood. The expressivist claims that the semantic value of a moral statement is derived from the non-cognitive mental state it is used to express, while the prescriptivist holds that the semantic value is given by the prescription the moral statement is used to make. So these anti-realist views are effectively excluded from a realist classification because they fail to meet either of the two necessary conditions discussed. However, things are not so straightforward with

⁷Recall that the bivalence condition was formulated in terms of truth, rendering other forms of bivalence—such as whether or not a prescription has been followed—irrelevant.

more recent forms of expressivism and prescriptivism; the problems encountered in this respect will be the subject of the next chapter.

3.3. Anti-realism: error theory. Error theory (e.g. Mackie 1977) is a more delicate case than traditional expressivism or prescriptivism. For it both takes the surface form of moral statements seriously (moral statements are taken to purport to represent moral facts etc.) and accepts bivalence; it just holds that any (non-negative atomic) moral claim⁸ is false, thus trivially satisfying the bivalence condition for realism. But error theory is generally accepted *not* to be a realist view.

Dummett's classification has two options here. One is to stick with the semantic criteria we have already, and conclude that error theory—despite popular opinion—is a realist view after all, albeit a *limiting case*. The alternative is to include an additional semantic criterion to the effect that in order to count as a realist for a given area of discourse, one must hold that *some* (non-negative, atomic) statements within that area of discourse are true.⁹

⁸As opposed to negative claims such as “It is not the case that murder is wrong” and non-atomic claims such as “If murder is wrong then Charles won't kill Abigail”. See Pigden (2007) for why this formulation is required: “In order to escape self-refutation, error theorists like ... Mackie must pull in their horns. The claim should not be that *all* moral judgments are false but only that *non-negative atomic moral judgments* are false” (455).

⁹This move is explicitly made by Sayre-McCord (e.g. Sayre-McCord 1986, Sayre-McCord 2011). Peter Millican has suggested to me that the most plausible semantic characterisation would require the moral realist to hold that some (non-negative, atomic) moral statements are true *and that some are false*. For holding that all (non-negative, atomic) moral statements are true commits the realist to their triviality just as much as holding that they are all false.

One might worry that this latter option is *ad hoc*, but it seems a sensible criterion to include. After all, the motivation for the bivalence condition for realism was not that realism about a given area has a tendency to give all statements in that area a blanket truth-value, thus trivially satisfying bivalence. So with the addition of this simple, and attractive criterion, Dummett's classification can be reconciled with the prevailing view that error theory is not a realist position.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have:

- (1) Laid out three of Dummett's arguments for a semantic characterisation of realism;
- (2) Explored Dummett's particular characterisation of realism in semantic terms;
- (3) Carried out an initial assessment of the view by applying the classification scheme to various metaethical views.

Two of Dummett's arguments for a semantic characterisation—that without semantic constraints metaphysical positions are under-constrained and that without semantic constraints we have no way to choose among metaphysical positions—will be evaluated later, but they hold some plausibility for anyone tempted to view metaphysical questions as pseudo-questions. Dummett's third argument—that a

characterisation in terms of entities does not provide a general account of realism—was found to be plausible (the moral case being a good counterexample), but it told just as much in favour of other metaphysical characterisations as in favour of a semantic characterisation.

Dummett's two proposed necessary criteria for realism—acceptance of bivalence and taking surface form seriously—were found to have appeal, accurately characterising some paradigmatic moral realist positions as realist, and some traditional anti-realist positions as not realist. The case of error theory, however, suggested that an additional semantic criterion for moral realism was required: that *some* (non-negative, atomic) moral statements are true. The relativity involved in Dummett's view was also discussed, and the case of Jackson's moral functionalism highlighted how extreme this relativity might have to be.

CHAPTER 2

Minimalism and Meaning as Use

We saw in the previous chapter that Dummett's semantic criteria rightly exclude traditional non-cognitivist views of morality—such as Ayer's emotivism and Hare's prescriptivism—from counting as realist. There were two grounds for this: first, these anti-realists deny the truth-evaluability of moral statements, resulting in a denial of bivalence (acceptance of which was one of Dummett's necessary conditions of realism); secondly, they seem to give a story about how moral statements ought *really* to be understood, and therefore not to take the surface form of such statements seriously (thus failing Dummett's second necessary condition of realism).

However, recent forms of non-cognitivism have departed from some of the commitments of earlier versions, and so must be examined separately. In this chapter I shall investigate the effects of (i) minimalism about truth and (ii) the “meaning as use” view on the classification of moral non-cognitivism according to the semantic characterisation of realism discussed in the previous chapter. I shall focus on the case of expressivism, although much of the following could be applied to prescriptivism as well.

1. Expressivism and minimalism

1.1. Minimalism about truth. There is a category of deflationary theories of truth—an early version of which was the redundancy theory (e.g. Ramsey 1927)—which seek to downplay any theoretical weight that the concept of truth might be thought to have. The common element to such views is the idea that it is a mistake to assume that truth has much in the way of a metaphysical nature: rather, all we need to know about truth can be captured by certain platitudes, such as that from

(F) It is true that snow is white

one can infer

(G) Snow is white

and vice versa. Within this category, there is a collection of “minimalist” accounts of truth¹, but the one that has been most fully worked out is found in the work of Horwich (1998*b*, for the classic treatment). According to this view:

The function of the truth-predicate is not to *describe* propositions, as one might naively infer from its syntactic form, but rather to enable a certain type of generalization to be constructed.

(Horwich 1993, 141)

What kind of generalization?

On occasion we wish to adopt some attitude towards a proposition—for example, believing it, assuming it for the sake of argument, or desiring that it be the case—but find ourselves thwarted by ignorance of what exactly the proposition is. ... In such situations

¹See Dreier (1996, 29) for three formulations.

the concept of truth is invaluable. For it enables the construction of another proposition, intimately related to the one we can't identify, which is perfectly appropriate as the alternative object of our attitude.

(Horwich 1998*b*, 2–3)

The result is a theory of truth consisting solely of all the uncontroversial² instances of the equivalence schema

(H) It is true *that p* if and only if *p*

which together are taken to exhaust the concept of truth.

Horwich's theory also grants propositions conceptual priority over truth with the effect that any object of a propositional attitude is a proposition:

According to the advocate of propositions, whenever anyone has a belief, a desire, a hope, or any of the so-called propositional attitudes, then his state of mind consists in there being some relation between him and a special kind of entity: namely, the *thing* that is believed, desired to be the case, hoped for, etc.

(Horwich 1998*b*, 86)

Propositions, on Horwich's account, are the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity. Accordingly:

Every type of proposition—every possible object of belief, assertion, conjecture, and so on—will be a candidate for truth, for the device of generalization is no less useful when the propositions in question are normative than when they are naturalistic.

(Horwich 1993, 142–3)

²See Horwich (1998*b*, 40–2) for a discussion of “liar” sentences which lead him to restrict which instances of the equivalence schema are included in the theory.

Combined with a minimal, syntactic criterion of propositionhood, Horwich's minimalist theory stands in conflict with the rejection of truth-evaluability of moral statements involved in traditional non-cognitivist (e.g. emotivist) theories.

1.2. Minimalist expressivism. The two most significant contemporary moral expressivists, Blackburn and Gibbard, have expressed an inclination (in the case of Blackburn) or sympathy (in the case of Gibbard) towards a minimalist theory of truth. For example:

I do not say that we can talk as if kicking dogs were wrong, when “really” it isn't wrong. I say that it is wrong (so it is true that it is wrong, so it is really true that it is wrong, so this is an example of a moral truth, so there are moral truths).

(Blackburn 1998, 319)

Does [norm-expressivism] 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”.

(Gibbard 2003, x)

Despite the contrast with traditional non-cognitivism, this move has certain clear benefits for the expressivist project. For one thing, it accords well with ordinary usage of moral language, in which we routinely do attribute truth and falsity to moral statements. Statements like

(I) While it's true that murder is wrong, it's not true that one ought not to defend oneself against an attacker

do not strike us as *nonsense* after all.

In addition, if one grants that moral statements are truth-apt then one has access to the resources of classical logic as a structure for specifying inferential relations between sets of moral statements. Note, though, that the holding of these inferential relations cannot be *explained* by way of truth and classical logic, as the minimalist project aims to remove any substantive explanatory role which might be thrust upon the notion of truth.

The upshot is that an expressivist of this contemporary sort can endorse both (i) that some moral statements are true, and (ii) that (except in paradoxical or otherwise problematic cases) bivalence holds for moral discourse. That an expressivist can endorse the latter is not so obvious. Certainly an expressivist might have grounds for denying bivalence even having accepted minimalism about truth; she might give some story about how those moral statements which (she claims) express ambivalent attitudes are neither true nor false, for example. However, there is no reason why an expressivist is *forced* to make such a move, which leaves conceptual space for a minimalist expressivist who endorses bivalence for moral statements.

1.3. Minimalism and the semantic characterisation of realism. It seems then, that contemporary expressivists can meet two of the semantic criteria of realism discussed in the previous chapter merely by accepting the minimalist theory of truth. But given the lack of theoretic weight accorded to truth by this theory, it does not seem that these expressivists ought to be considered any less anti-realist on account of accepting that there are moral statements which are true according to the minimalist conception of truth. For it is part of the minimalist project to deny that there are any metaphysical consequences of claiming that statements in a given area are truth-evaluable. So even if there are semantic positions which constrain our metaphysics (as Dummett claims), the minimalist position is not one of them.

Thus insofar as we are taking semantics as a guide *through* metaphysics, rather than as a guide *around* it³, the fact that one of these expressivists accepts minimalism about truth cannot be enough to move them from the anti-realist camp into the realist camp. It is lucky for the semantic characterisation of realism, then, that merely accepting the minimalist theory of truth does not allow the expressivist to fulfil the remaining semantic criterion of realism that we have met: that of taking the surface form of statements of the relevant kind seriously. I shall discuss this criterion in the next section.

³Gardiner (2000, 10) argues this is Dummett's aim.

2. Taking surface form seriously

2.1. Meaning as use. Horwich’s minimalist theory of truth is a close ally of the “use theory of meaning” derived from the work of Wittgenstein. The basic idea is this:

For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word “meaning” ... this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

(Wittgenstein 2009, §43)

and a more fully worked out use theory has been provided by Horwich (1998*a*, 1995). The picture of meaning which the use theory aims to dismantle has meanings as entities (whether concrete or abstract) whose structures are in the main reflected in the syntactic form of the sentences which convey those meanings.

The use theory of meaning and the minimalist theory of truth support each other well. For the observation that the word “true” is used in diverse ways supports the minimalist claim that there is nothing much in common among attributions of truth to propositions in different contexts—that truth has no underlying nature. For example:

Although the “true” in “His claim that it might rain is true” is used to endorse something, the one in “We should try to believe only what is true” is not.

(Horwich 2005, 79)

That is, the minimalist theory of truth dissolves the apparent objection to the use theory that it cannot provide the (assumed to be single, homogeneous) meaning

of the word “true” since the word “true” is used in different ways. Hence it seems a good idea for a use theorist to accept a minimalist theory of truth.

Similarly, the use theory of meaning is an attractive option for anyone who accepts minimalism about truth, according to Horwich:

It would only be from an inflationary perspective on truth that one would have reason to expect a substantive, relational analysis of meaning.

(Horwich 1998*a*, 42)

By contrast, the use theory of meaning provides no such substantive analysis of meaning:

According to the use theory, although there exists a substantive property underlying the meaning of “dog” and another substantive property underlying the meaning of “electron”, and so on, there is no uniform analysis of “ x means f -ness”.

(Horwich 1998*a*, 42)

So the use theory of meaning is arguably the natural choice for those who accept minimalism about truth.

The use theory also sits well in combination with expressivism. For a straightforward way to understand the expressivist project is as explaining the meanings of items of moral language in terms of what people *use them to do*. Specifically, the expressivist claims that the meaning of moral terms is derived from the fact that they are used to express non-cognitive mental states. That is, we can view the relationship between the use theory of meaning and moral expressivism as that of determinable to determinant: moral expressivism is a particular

specification of how terms in a certain domain are used (and thereby become meaningful). Of course, the use theory sits equally well with certain other metaethical views such as prescriptivism, which tells us (roughly) that moral terms are meaningful in virtue of their being used to prescribe actions.

2.2. Taking surface form seriously and meaning as use. On the picture provided by the entity theory of meaning it is possible that the relationship between the structure of a meaning-entity and the structure of a particular sentence used to convey that meaning come apart. In that case, the structure of the sentence will not reflect the meaning tied to it, although in any given case we might naïvely suppose that it does. On the entity picture of meaning, it is straightforward to view moral non-cognitivism as refusing to take the surface form of moral sentences seriously. We can say that in normal non-normative cases, sentences of the form “ x is F ” have a structure which reflects the structure of the meaning conveyed, involving a property F being attributed to an object x . However, the story non-cognitivists tell in the case of moral sentences departs from this natural paradigm, in that the meanings of moral sentences are supposedly revealed by the non-cognitivists to have structures which do not align well with the structures of those sentences. So, for instance, an old-fashioned form of emotivism might hold that “Stealing is wrong” means something like “Stealing: Boo!”, and that in general giving the real meaning of a moral sentence of the form “ x is F ” will not require appeal to

a moral *property*. So according to such a view, the structure of the meaning of a moral sentence will not match the surface form of the sentence.

But in the eyes of the use theorist, all of this is mistaken. The meaning of a sentence is not exactly an entity with a structure for that sentence to reflect or fail to reflect. Rather, the meaning of the sentence is what you understand when you understand how to use that sentence. And we have no reason to start trying to compare the structure of a sentence with the structure of its meaning (what would that involve?) on this way of looking at things.

Add to this picture a minimalist account of properties consisting of all instances of the schema

(J) x has the property of being F if and only if x is F

and it becomes very difficult to claim that moral expressivists do not take the surface form of moral sentences seriously. For such expressivists will agree that sentences like

(K) Tax evasion is wrong

attribute a property (in this case wrongness) to an object (here an action). They simply provide an account of what it is to make that attribution, rather than—as we might suppose given the entity theory of meaning—telling us what the meaning of (K) is *other than* an attribution of a property. That is, the use theorist does not see the expressivist as providing a *translation* of moral sentences, simply an explication of their use and hence of their meaning (an explanatory pattern which

applies to all areas of discourse). Thus from this perspective, it is a mistake to think that expressivists fail to take the surface form of moral sentences seriously.

2.3. The consequence for the semantic characterisation of realism.

So it looks as though an expressivist who accepts the use theory of meaning together with minimalism about properties can meet Dummett's semantic criterion of taking surface form seriously. At least, that is how such an expressivist will view herself, for—as we saw was the case with Jackson's moral functionalism in the previous chapter—whether or not the expressivist does take moral statements at face value depends in part on whether she is right. Any critic who does not accept the use theory of meaning or minimalist account of properties will hold that the surface form of moral statements is not taken seriously by such expressivism, because this critic will view the expressivist project as ignoring (rather than dissolving) the discrepancy between the structure of meanings and the structure of moral statements.

Nevertheless, suppose that this collection of deflationary views is correct. In that case, we have the possibility of a moral expressivist position which holds the following:

- (1) Some moral statements are true;
- (2) Barring problem cases, bivalence holds for moral statements;

- (3) The surface forms of moral statements are to be taken seriously (moral statements which appear to attribute properties to objects are to be understood as doing exactly that, etc.).

That is, there is conceptual space for a moral expressivist theory which meets all three of the semantic criteria for realism discussed in the previous chapter. Since expressivism is standardly put forward as a paradigmatic anti-realist view, we appear to be forced to categorise this minimalist form of expressivism in a way that most would consider incorrect, if we accept the semantic characterisation of realism discussed in the previous chapter.

3. Three responses

In this section I shall discuss three responses available to anyone who wants to retain a semantic characterisation of realism.

3.1. Response 1: Add more semantic criteria. Our first reaction to this problem might be to propose an additional semantic criterion of realism that excludes these new forms of expressivism. So we might add a criterion such as

Representation Criterion: It is a necessary condition for a view to count as a realist view with respect to a given area that the view hold that statements of the relevant sort represent the facts when they are true and fail to represent the facts when they are not true.

We might suppose that what is distinctive about expressivism is its claim that the difference between descriptive and normative statements is that descriptive statements aim to represent the facts while normative statements do not, (but they aim to express non-cognitive attitudes instead). And historically, this would have been an accurate portrayal of expressivist theories.

However, now that minimalism is on the scene, this will not do. For we can easily generate a minimalist theory of representing the facts: it will consist of all uncontroversial instances of the schema

(L) “ p ” represents the facts if and only if p

so our **Representation Criterion** will fail to exclude any anti-realist views which accept this minimalist account of representing the facts⁴. The same goes for describing states of affairs, and referring to things, with the corresponding schemata:

(M) “ p ” describes the state of affairs in which p

(N) “ N ” refers to something if and only if it is identical to N ⁵

and this minimalist move seems to be an option no matter what semantic criterion is proposed. This is the problem of Creeping Minimalism (Dreier 2004): how are

⁴Blackburn (2005, 160–1) appears to deny that an expressivist could endorse the claim that moral statements represent: “the expressivist has to deny that minimalism applies across the board. The line will have to be that whatever we say about truth, there are things to say about the use of predicates and sentences that are sufficient to make the direction-of-fit metaphor appropriate [and] place ethics on the directive side rather than the representational side.” However, any such stopping point seems arbitrary and therefore *ad hoc*. Better is his (1998, 80) stance that “Just *because* of minimalism about truth and representation, there is no objection to tossing them in for free, at the end. But ... commitments must first be understood in other terms.” In that case, however, it is presumably to these “other terms” (i.e. non-semantic criteria) that we must look for the fundamental difference between expressivists and realists.

⁵See Horwich (1995, 73).

we to specify the difference between realism and anti-realism when minimalism allows the anti-realist to appropriate any feature of realism we might put forward as essential to the view?

This points to an irreparable fault in the semantic characterisation of realism insofar as this characterisation is intended to preserve the idea that realism is a metaphysical position. We saw in the last chapter that Dummett claims that we require semantics to guide us through metaphysics since without semantic constraints (i) we fail to establish substantive, determinate metaphysical positions, and (ii) we have no way of choosing among metaphysical positions. But what minimalism appears to show us is that two positions can differ in metaphysical terms while having the same semantic features. If true, this not only undermines Dummett's claims that semantic constraints on metaphysical positions are required, but also his third argument for a semantic characterisation—that it enables a great degree of generalisability. So at this point we have lost our motivation for a semantic characterisation entirely and we need to start looking for an alternative.

3.2. Response 2: Resort to relativism. One feature of Dummett's account that we have not looked at in depth is relativity. Instead of adding deflatable semantic criteria, could it not be that Dummett's relativity feature provides us with a way to classify minimalist expressivists as anti-realists successfully? I do not think so.

The relativity feature introduces the possibility that we might judge some view to be realist when contrasted with one alternative, but judge it to be anti-realist when contrasted with another. But if we are to apply this to the semantic characterisation of realism, then at the level of any particular local debate, one view will appear anti-realist relative to the other *only in virtue of a failure to endorse certain semantic features* (for example the principle of bivalence or truth-aptness) which are endorsed by the contrasting realist view. Since the minimalist move is available for any such semantic feature, it seems that an expressivist could match a realist theory semantic feature for semantic feature in any local debate. And she could do so without taking on any additional metaphysical commitments. So the relativity feature really has no bearing on this issue.

3.3. Response 3: Conclude that minimalist non-cognitivists are in fact realists. A third option would be to bite the bullet and accept the categorisation of minimalist expressivism yielded by the semantic characterisation. That is, we could simply accept that once an expressivist has gone fully minimalist and matched all the semantic features of competing realist views, that expressivist is a realist. It might seem that this move removes the problem entirely, and I think this is indeed the best response available to the supporter of the semantic characterisation of realism.

However, the cost of doing this is not simply one isolated unexpected categorisation. That would not be too problematic a consequence to accept, because

one thing we want from our characterisation of realism is a way of categorising difficult cases, and minimalist expressivism is a difficult case: we have already seen that there is much in common (semantically at least) between minimalist expressivism and paradigmatically realist views. But the whole point of minimalism about (for example) properties—from the point of view of the minimalist—is that you get to include properties in your theory without being forced to make any additional metaphysical commitments. That is, there is no difference in the *metaphysics* of the minimalist expressivist and the traditional expressivist in virtue of their acceptance of minimalist truth, facts, properties, etc.

Now, we might simply be convinced by Dummett's claims that no kind of substantive metaphysical commitment is possible without semantic constraints. In that case we shall view the minimalist as trying unsuccessfully to avoid metaphysical commitments despite adopting realist semantic features. The problem with this is that the actual practice of metaethics (and metaphysics more generally) does involve an understanding of metaphysical commitments such that adopting a minimalist account of truth, reference, or whatever does not involve any such commitments, and is therefore not enough to shift a theory from the anti-realist camp into the realist camp.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have investigated the ways in which minimalism about truth (and facts, properties, and the rest) and the use theory of meaning affect

the status of expressivism. What we find is that by adopting these metaphysically lightweight positions on semantic issues, an expressivist can meet all the semantic criteria we might require for realism on a semantic understanding of the realism/anti-realism debate. So anyone with a semantic characterisation of realism appears to be forced to contradict appearances and to claim that minimalism *does* involve substantial metaphysical commitments.

Dummett's account is therefore best seen as part of a *revisionary* project, rather than as a description of what is *currently* in dispute between realists and anti-realists. From his premises that it is only with semantic constraints that substantive metaphysical discourse becomes possible, the conclusion that we ought to recast metaphysical debates in semantic terms is a sensible one to draw. Once we have done that, how are we to draw the line between realist and anti-realist? Obviously by way of semantic criteria. And if it turns out that a couple of positions get recategorised then that is the price we have to pay in order to ensure that our debates are genuine.

Still, for those of us who are not fully convinced of the truth of those premises, the case of the minimalist expressivist will constitute evidence *against* the conclusion that we ought to recast metaphysical debates in semantic terms. This is because, as we have seen, it appears on the face of it that this view points to the existence of metaphysical constraints that cannot be captured by purely semantic constraints. In any case, what this paper aims to provide first and foremost is

a faithful account of the distinction between moral realism and moral anti-realism as currently practised (insofar as there is one), not a revisionary suggestion. It is to this task that I shall turn in Part 2.

The account I shall provide there will be cast in distinctively metaphysical terms, and therefore will not strike the devout Dummettian as latching onto any substantive debate. For someone like this it may well be in their interests to continue to argue for a revision of metaphysical practice, by way of a subsumption of metaphysics to semantics. However, I shall be suggesting an alternative stance for anyone who suspects that purely metaphysical debates lack substance.

Part 2

Realism & Metaphysics

CHAPTER 3

Realism and Anti-realism as Ontological Positions

In the first part of this paper I examined the project of giving a semantic characterisation of realism that has been prevalent largely due to the influence of Dummett. However, as we have seen, Dummett had a revisionary aim, and the upshot is that this characterisation does not capture the division between realists and anti-realists as it currently stands. In this second part I would like to propose an alternative characterisation which does apply to the current debate.

Dummett's revisionary aim came in response to a suspicion about the potential for substantive commitments in purely metaphysical debates. In the next chapter I shall return to the issue of minimalism, which will lead me to suggest an alternative direction for those suspicious of metaphysics. In this chapter, though, I shall lay out an initial formulation of the proposed characterisation, apply it to the various metaethical positions we have encountered, and consider an amendment to the proposal.

1. The proposed formulation

The initial formulation of my proposal is this. If there is (currently) a substantive dispute between moral realists and moral anti-realists, then the distinction between the two kinds of position is adequately captured by the following conditions:

Metaphysical Condition of Moral Realism: A position with respect to moral entities is a moral realist position if and only if someone who holds the position thereby includes some moral entities as members of her ontology.

And correspondingly:

Metaphysical Condition of Moral Anti-Realism: A position with respect to moral entities is a moral anti-realist position if and only if someone who holds the position thereby excludes all moral entities from membership of her ontology.

Naturally, in order to engage with this characterisation we shall need to have a clear idea of what it is to include something in one's ontology. I shall begin with this issue.

2. What is it to include something in one's ontology?

2.1. The independence of ontological membership and existence. The project of ontology is often glossed as the study of what *exists*. For example:

Many classical philosophical problems are problems in ontology: the question whether or not there is a god, or the problem of the

existence of universals, etc. These are all problems in ontology in the sense that they deal with whether or not a certain thing, or more broadly entity, exists.

(Hofweber 2013, §3.1)

However, we can actually provide a double dissociation between the question of existence and the question of ontology. That is, the concept of ontological membership is a technical one which, while related to our everyday concept of existence, can come apart from it in certain cases as will be shown in this section. It is important to recognise that the proposed metaphysical characterisation of realism and anti-realism is put in terms of the technical concept of *ontological membership* and not the everyday concept of existence.

We touched on Meinongian realism about non-existents in the first chapter. This involves including things in one's ontology which do not exist. So the very possibility of this view shows how the question of what to include in one's ontology can come apart from the question of what exists.

One might object by saying that, in a sense, the Meinongian holds that non-existents *do* exist. The idea might be that there is an everyday use of the word which is acceptably denied to non-existents, but that in a more fundamental sense the view does involve the claim that such things exist. However, this would be a merely verbal disagreement with the distinction I wish to draw between an everyday sense of "exists" and a technical notion of ontological membership. If one prefers to label the latter notion "existence" of a sort as well, then that is fine

as far as my proposal is concerned, provided that there are two distinct senses. I shall continue talking of “existence” versus “ontological membership” to make clear the distinction between these two concepts.

Still, for all the case of Meinongian realism shows, it could be that ontological membership is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of existence. However, we can also dissociate ontology and existence in the other direction. This is shown by the case of minimalism about propositions (or reference, or facts, etc.). For the minimalist may hold that

(O) I believe that tax evasion is wrong

is equivalent to

(P) The proposition *that tax evasion is wrong* is something I believe

from which we can infer

(Q) There exists the proposition *that tax evasion is wrong*

so *a fortiori* there exist propositions. But minimalism enables one to accept this conclusion *without* making any additional metaphysical commitments. Specifically, minimalism about propositions allows one to grant that propositions exist without including anything of the sort in one's ontology. Thus ontological membership is neither sufficient nor necessary for existence.

FIGURES 1–3 illustrate how ontological membership can come apart from existence with caricatures of three positions:

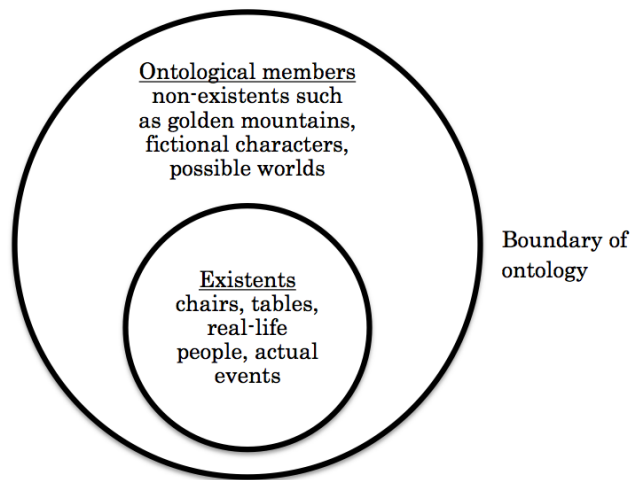


FIGURE 1. Meinongian Ontologist

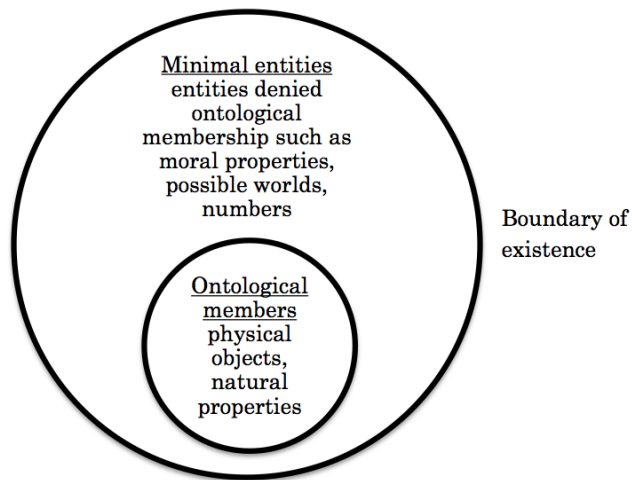


FIGURE 2. Minimalist Naturalist

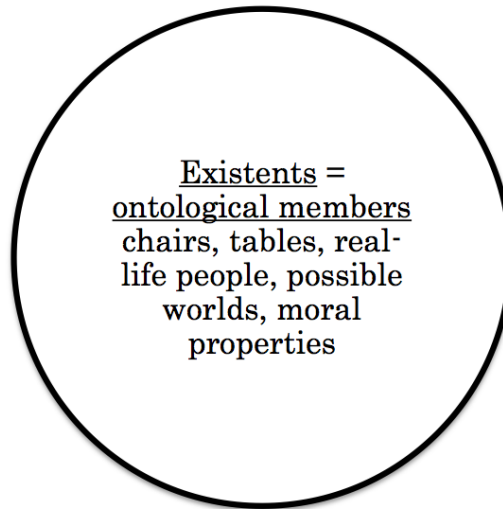


FIGURE 3. Lewisian Realist

Note that existing entities need not form a subset of entities with ontological membership, and likewise entities with ontological membership need not form a subset of existing entities. Indeed there is conceptual space for a view which holds that neither the set of entities with ontological membership nor the set of existing entities is a subset of the other (whether these sets overlap or not). This could be a broadly Meinongian view which nevertheless denied *some* entities ontological membership (for whatever reason) and granted those same entities minimal existence. It is doubtful that such a view could ever be motivated.

Nevertheless, the point of this section is simply that ontological membership and existence can (but need not) come apart in either direction. So the question of ontology cannot be taken to be simply the question of existence.

2.2. What do ontologists do if not investigate what exists? No doubt there are ontologists who do not see their practice as simply attempting to discover what exists in the everyday sense. But what exactly are they doing if not that? Here is one attempt to answer that question:

What we debate in the ontology room is the question what there is *strictly speaking*—what there *really, ultimately* is—what there is *in the most fundamental sense*. Of all the many meanings a quantifier like ‘something’ might have, one is *special*. This is the one in terms of which all the rest are to be analysed; it is the one such that to find out what there is in *this* sense would be to fulfil the traditional metaphysical goal of comprehending reality *as it is in itself*. When we do ontology, our quantifiers bear these special meanings.

(Dorr 2005, 20)

I think this suggestion manages to capture what it is that ontologists take themselves to be doing very well. One famous answer to this question of what there is *strictly speaking* is Quine's:

Our ontology is determined once we have fixed upon the overall conceptual scheme which is to accommodate science in the broadest sense.

(Quine 1948, 16–17)

where “To be assumed as an entity is, purely and simply, to be reckoned as the value of a variable” (Quine 1948, 13). Of course, there are philosophers who will

deny that there is any such question to answer as what there is *in the most fundamental sense* and that there is any such “special” interpretation of quantifiers. I shall have more to say about this in the next chapter.

Broadly speaking, there are three stances an ontologist can take with respect to a given sort of thing, following Putnam's (2004, 17–21) classification. First there is an “inflationary” ontological view which includes things of the kind under consideration in its ontology as an addition to the things already there; the inflationary theorist's ontology is larger for her handling of the sort of thing in question. In contrast to this there are two “deflationary” views. One is reductionism, which claims that “so-and-sos are nothing but such-and-suches” (19), i.e. that things of the sort under consideration are identical to, or can be reduced to, things of another sort that are already in its ontology, thereby finding a place for things of the relevant sort without adding any new items to the ontology. The other is eliminationism, which involves excluding things of the relevant kind from one's ontology.

Of course, one can mix and match these stances with respect to different kinds of thing. For example, one might be an inflationist about fundamental physical entities (add them to one's ontology), a reductionist about everyday objects (hold that inclusion of everyday objects in one's ontology is secured by the inclusion of fundamental physical entities), and an eliminationist about mental states

(exclude mental states from one's ontology). Indeed, it is plausible that any ontologist has to be inflationary in at least one respect, and perhaps any ontologist also has to be eliminationist about some kinds of entities as well. For to say that *in the most fundamental sense* there is nothing whatsoever, or everything (including everything that is impossible?) is at risk of flattening all distinctions such that there are no substantial ontological issues left.

2.3. The constituents of ontologies. It is important to bear in mind that including something in one's ontology is not necessarily to include a *concrete particular*. Certainly ontology deals with which objects there are, both concrete and abstract. But it also deals with whether or not there are (certain kinds of) events, states, forces, properties, relations, facts, propositions, etc., all of which might be grouped under the generic term "entities". Of course, one may hold that the only entities are objects, but this would be a substantive ontological position (if any is).

In fact, once we appreciate the full range of items included under the name "entities", it becomes difficult to accept Dummett's (1982, 55) claim, which we encountered in the first chapter, that "certain kinds of realism, for instance realism about the future or about ethics, do not seem readily classifiable as doctrines about a realm of entities". The two examples he gives can easily be given a first gloss along the lines of "Future events have ontological membership" or "Ethical properties have ontological membership". These classifications will need to be

fleshed out and defended, but those are issues for the *particular* classifications, rather than with the method of classifying positions in terms of entities. And with such a wide range of entities to choose from, it seems promising that we would be able to come up with a parallel story to explicate any other form of realism in terms of some entity or other. However, the aim of this paper is simply to provide a characterisation of the distinction between *moral* realism and anti-realism, so I shall restrict my discussion to the formulation of these views.

Here are several formulations of a non-eliminationist ontological view about moral entities:

Moral Concrete Particulars: Moral concrete particulars have ontological membership

Moral Properties: Moral properties have ontological membership

Moral Events: Moral events have ontological membership

Moral Facts: Moral facts have ontological membership

While any of these (alone or in combination) would suffice for a view to count as a moral realist view on the proposed characterisation, ontologists have different ideas about what categories of entities can be the constituents of an ontology (by which I mean whether ontologies are made up of, say, events rather than facts, as opposed to whether we should include, say, moral or natural entities in our ontologies). It is therefore important to make sure that merely adopting one or another view

about what categories of entity provide candidates for inclusion in one's ontology does not automatically commit one to (e.g. moral) realism or anti-realism.

Nominalism provides an example of how complications can arise. One sort of nominalist rejects abstract entities, granting ontological membership only to concrete entities¹. The entities generally alleged to be abstract objects include properties and facts (and perhaps events). Without reference to such things, it is unclear what a moral concrete particular could be. But for a thoroughgoing nominalist who excludes all properties, facts and events from her ontology (and *a fortiori* all *moral* properties, facts and events) and also excludes moral concrete particulars from her ontology, it seems that—according to the proposed characterisation—she is forced to be a moral anti-realist simply through her acceptance of nominalism. Can that be right?

In fact, a nominalist need not accept the view that properties, facts and events are abstract entities. Holding that any one of these is a species of concrete entity will enable the nominalist to accept **Moral Concrete Particulars**², and therefore to be counted as a realist on the proposed characterisation. However, if the charge that properties, facts and events are abstract is upheld by the nominalist, then the view does involve denying that there are moral properties, facts and events (along with all other properties, facts and events). So, in the absence of

¹The other sort rejects universals (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2011, §1). I focus on abstract entities but discussion of universals would follow a similar course.

²But see the discussion of events in section 2.4 below.

any other candidate for what a moral concrete particular might be, it seems right that this nominalist be categorised as a moral anti-realist.

One might object that this is too hasty and claim that it is quite clear what a moral concrete particular would be: we have very obvious candidates in human beings. If this claim is accepted, then the thoroughgoing form of nominalism will be categorised straightforwardly as a form of moral realism. However, a problem is generated for the proposed characterisation of realism and anti-realism. No form of moral anti-realism commits one to excluding human beings from one's ontology, while forms of anti-realism such as expressivism allow one to hold that human beings are moral entities. Thus it seems that these forms of anti-realism *do* include moral entities in their ontologies, leading them to receive the wrong classification on the proposed metaphysical characterisation of realism and anti-realism.

However, the objection is not sound. The central aim of ontology, as has been discussed, is to discover what there is *in the most fundamental sense*. In this matter it is critical to recognise the scope of the qualifier "in the most fundamental sense". Compare these two views:

Narrow Scope: Human beings are moral entities, and *in the most fundamental*

sense: there are human beings

Wide Scope: *In the most fundamental sense*: human beings are moral entities

and there are human beings

where the scope of “in the most fundamental sense” is taken to cover the whole of the rest of the sentence in **Wide Scope**. Now, **Narrow Scope** does not entail that *in the most fundamental sense* there are moral entities, whereas **Wide Scope** does. Hence, according to the proposed characterisation, a moral anti-realist can accept **Narrow Scope** but not **Wide Scope**.

In this way the objection is neutralised. A moral anti-realist can of course hold that there are human beings, and—just as she can say, via minimalism, that human beings have moral properties—she can say, via minimalism, that human beings are moral entities. But on the proposed characterisation she cannot say that *in the most fundamental sense* human beings are moral entities because that entails that *in the most fundamental sense* there are moral entities. This also means that the classification of the thoroughgoing form of nominalism discussed in connection with the objection will not be so straightforward. It will depend on whether the nominalist in question holds that human beings are moral entities *in the most fundamental sense* or not.

What this discussion makes clear is that the phrase “includes some moral entities as members of her ontology” in our criterion of moral realism, and the corresponding phrase “excludes all moral entities from membership of her ontology” in our criterion of moral anti-realism, must be understood in line with **Wide Scope** such that those entities *in the most fundamental sense* are (or would be) moral entities. Put this way, the case of nominalism does not force the proposed

characterisation of moral realism and anti-realism to make unappealing classifications. Similar complications arise in connection with event ontologies, to which I now turn.

2.4. Event ontologies. In chapter 1 we briefly encountered Kim's view (e.g. Kim 1976) which involves an event ontology (an ontology whose constituents are events), in which an event is analysed as a property exemplification by an object at a time. Importantly, each distinct property exemplification is a distinct event. One way in which we can categorise Kimian events is according to the kinds of properties which those events exemplify. In particular, we can categorise an event as a moral event just in case it exemplifies a moral property.

When it comes to categorising events, as was the case in the previous section, we need to be mindful of the scope of "in the most fundamental sense". For just as before there is a difference between these two claims:

Narrow Scope*: Each event in set M is a moral event, and *in the most fundamental sense*: each event in set M has ontological membership

Wide Scope*: *In the most fundamental sense*: each event in set M is a moral event and each event in set M has ontological membership

On a view of events like Kim's, things are straightforward in that either there are events which exemplify moral properties *in the most fundamental sense* or there are not. If there are no such events then there are no moral entities with ontological

membership³. If, on the other hand, there are events which—in a fundamental sense—exemplify moral properties (either *sui generis* or reducible to some other sort of property) then there are moral entities with ontological membership.

On a Davidsonian view (e.g. Davidson 1970*a*), things work out similarly. By analogy with the psychological case (e.g. Davidson 1970*b*), it seems that there are moral events according to this view if and only if there are events that can (faithfully) be described in moral language. But again, we must distinguish between describing events as moral *in an everyday sense* and describing events as moral *in the most fundamental sense*. If we do that, then we will have no difficulty in classifying a Davidsonian event ontologist as a moral realist or anti-realist according to the proposed characterisation, bearing in mind that the important question is whether she includes or excludes from her ontology entities which are *in the most fundamental sense* moral.

Thus the proposed metaphysical characterisation of the realism/anti-realism debate does not commit an event ontologist of either kind to moral realism or anti-realism merely because she has an event ontology. This conclusion mirrors our discussion of nominalism in the previous section. However, there are some complications which arise in connection with the ontological status of facts which do not lend themselves to the same explanatory strategy, which I shall discuss in the next section.

³I ignore the possibility of objects that are distinctively moral irrespective of their properties (including Forms), which might be capable of transferring their moral status to the events of which they are a constituent.

2.5. Facts and ontology. Mulligan & Correia (2013, §1.1, my labels) discern three major views on facts:

Truth Factualism: A fact is just a true truth-bearer.

State Factualism: A fact is just an obtaining state of affairs.

Entity Factualism: A fact is just a *sui generis* type of entity in which objects exemplify properties or stand in relations.

Correspondingly, we can distinguish three different ways of holding that there are moral facts:

Moral Truth Factualism: There are true moral propositions/statements/whatever.

Moral State Factualism: There are moral states of affairs which obtain.

Moral Entity Factualism: There are moral facts which are entities in which objects exemplify moral properties or stand in moral relations.

Obviously these positions are not mutually exclusive, except insofar as they are offered as *analyses* of what it is for there to be moral facts.

Now, on a minimalist account of truth, adopting **Moral Truth Factualism** need not commit you to any particular ontological position. So **Moral Truth Factualism** is compatible with both moral realism and moral anti-realism. Similar things can be said about **Moral State Factualism**, given minimalism about the obtaining of states of affairs.

If we consider versions of **Moral Truth Factualism** and **Moral State Factualism** understood in terms of metaphysically significant correspondence,

things are different. That is, take the view that propositions are true—when they are true—in virtue of corresponding with the way things are ontologically. Then by **Moral Truth Factualism**, there are moral facts if and only if there are moral propositions which correspond to some arrangement of those moral entities which count as ontological constituents and/or (perhaps) the moral features which entities included in one's ontology have *in the most fundamental sense*. Understood in this way, **Moral Truth Factualism** entails moral realism. Again, similar things can be said about **Moral State Factualism**.

Finally, **Moral Entity Factualism** may be taken in a minimalist sense, as with the other two, in which case it is compatible with both moral realism and moral anti-realism. It may also be understood to involve taking moral facts ontologically seriously, that is, as ontological constituents. There are two ways in which this might happen. One is that moral facts may be considered to *exist* in the most fundamental sense. In that case they will presumably be *composed* of the objects, properties and relations which are involved. Alternatively, one might consider it a category error to talk of facts “existing”, with the result that the ontological membership granted to facts would not entail their existence (analogous to the Meinongian move). Then it might not be appropriate to say that the relevant objects, properties and relations “compose” a given fact, but there will nevertheless be a very intimate relationship between them. Taking facts ontologically seriously

in either of these ways, combined with **Moral Entity Factualism** entails moral realism.

3. Applications to various metaethical positions

In this section I shall apply the proposed metaphysical characterisation to the various metaethical positions encountered in chapter 1. In each case the aim will be to identify the ontological stance taken by the position, in order to see which categorisation they are to be given: realist or anti-realist. Taking either an inflationary or a reductionist stance towards (any) moral entities involves including moral entities in one's ontology, hence realism; taking an eliminationist stance towards (all) moral entities involves excluding moral entities from one's ontology, hence anti-realism.

As a default, I shall apply the proposed characterisation to these views in terms of whether or not they include moral *properties* in their ontologies or not. It is important to bear in mind, however, that I could just as well have phrased things in terms of objects, events, facts, etc. in line with the corresponding ontological outlooks, as discussed in the previous section.

3.1. Moral non-naturalism. We have encountered two forms of moral non-naturalism: Moorean non-naturalism and Platonism. Both of these views count as inflationary ontological positions since they both involve admitting *sui generis* moral entities into their respective ontologies. Specifically, Moorean non-naturalism

includes moral properties, while Platonism includes (abstract) moral objects. On both views it is held that a reduction of the respective moral entities to non-moral entities is impossible.

Thus, in virtue of taking an inflationary ontological stance, both Moorean non-naturalism and Platonism are categorised—according to the proposed classification—as forms of realism. This is the result we were expecting.

3.2. Contemporary moral naturalism. There are two ways in which moral naturalist theories could go. One option is to reduce moral properties to other natural properties. This is the route of Jackson's (1998) moral functionalism. Neo-Aristotelians and Cornell realists might also want to take this route, so they might identify goodness with conduciveness to the satisfaction of human needs or of pleasure (for example), although they need not agree with Jackson in his claim that the *meaning* of moral concepts can be analysed in terms of other natural properties.

There is another option open to these naturalists, though. For they may deny that moral properties are reducible to *other* natural properties, while maintaining that they are nevertheless still natural properties (as opposed to *sui generis* properties) and therefore amenable to natural science in just the same way that, for example, biological properties are. This move could be made with reference

either to a science similar to—or continuous with—ethology (in the case of neo-Aristotelianism) or to a unique ethical science making use of distinctively ethical observation (in the case of Cornell realism).

Insofar as the moral naturalist has a naturalistic ontology (i.e. includes natural entities in her ontology), the former route constitutes a reductionist ontological stance, while the latter constitutes an inflationary ontological stance. Thus according to the proposed classification, either option would count as a realist view in virtue of including moral properties in its respective ontology, whether by way of the inclusion of other natural properties or separately.

Could a moral naturalist reject a naturalistic ontology?⁴ Certainly this would be in conflict with the ontological naturalism of Cornell realism. However, it is not obvious that a neo-Aristotelian *must* make any particular ontological claims at all. While she is committed to holding that moral properties are on a par with other natural properties, it seems compatible with her view to exclude natural properties from her ontology⁵: she might, for example, combine a view that identifies natural properties as those properties discoverable by science with instrumentalism about the properties discovered by science. A view of this sort, taking an eliminationist ontological stance, would be categorised as a moral (and

⁴Here I assume that moral naturalism involves merely the commitment that moral properties are (or are reducible to) natural properties, rather than both that and the inclusion of natural entities in one's ontology.

⁵Or even to avoid the ontological issue entirely; more on this in the next chapter.

scientific) *anti-realist* view, but this seems entirely appropriate even if it is somewhat unexpected that moral naturalism be compatible with anti-realism.

3.3. Error theory and non-cognitivism. Both error theory and non-cognitivism in their prominent forms are motivated in part by an exclusively naturalistic ontology. For example, Mackie is comfortable with natural properties, denies that moral properties can be reduced to natural properties, and due to discomfort with the “queerness” of anything that is not natural he is led to his conclusion that there aren’t any moral properties. By way of illustration:

If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.

(Mackie 1977, 38)

Meanwhile, Blackburn—as an example of a non-cognitivist—seeks to avoid Mackie’s hardline conclusion while matching him in terms of ontological naturalism and the denial that moral properties can be reduced to natural properties:

The natural world is the world revealed by the senses, and described by the natural sciences ... However we think of it, ethics seems to fit badly into that world. ... But we nearly all want to be naturalists and we all want a theory of ethics. So the problem is one of finding room for ethics, or of placing ethics within the disenchanted, non-ethical order which we inhabit, and of which we are a part.

(Blackburn 1998, 48–9)

Here I understand Blackburn's "naturalist" to be someone who thinks that *in the most fundamental sense* natural things are the only things there are, that is, that the only entities in her ontology are natural entities.

Thus, both of these views involve excluding moral entities from their exclusively naturalistic ontologies. Hence the proposed characterisation correctly classes them both as forms of anti-realism, irrespective of their semantics.

4. Independence: an amendment?

Having successfully classified several metaethical views using the proposed characterisation of the realism/anti-realism debate, I want now to turn to a potential objection. This is an objection neither to a metaphysical characterisation *per se*, nor to such a characterisation featuring the particular conditions we have already. However, it may be taken to speak in favour of amending this characterisation to include an independence dimension to realism. After a brief discussion of apparent counterexamples to the current proposal, I shall discuss how the independence dimension of Devitt's (1991) characterisation of realism provides a solution, followed by an alternative response making appeal to a dimension of "strength" applying within the category of realist theories.

4.1. Counterexamples to the proposed characterisation. Here is the worry: Putnam's threefold classification of ontological stances does not capture Dummett's (1982, 70) distinction between "reductivism" and "reductionism" which

was briefly discussed in chapter 1. What Dummett calls “reductivist” views merely introduce a dependence between the truth of statements of one class and the truth of statements of a reductive class, rather than making any claim about the *meanings* of such statements. In contrast, what Dummett calls “reductionist” views involve a translation of terms of a given class into terms of the reductive class, as an account of their meanings. Examples of Dummettian reductivist views would be the identity theory and supervenience physicalism in philosophy of mind, which are not thereby excluded from counting as realist on Dummett’s classification. Behaviourism, on the other hand—insofar as it provides a translation between psychological statements and statements about behaviour—is a form of Dummettian reductionism, and hence an anti-realist view on his classification, because the surface form is not taken seriously (*pace* the use theory of meaning).

This distinction does seem to divide views in a way that is relevant to their categorisation as realist or anti-realist. But on Putnam’s scheme, both Dummettian reductionist views and Dummettian reductivist views are labelled simply “reductionist”. All reductionist views in Putnam’s sense are categorised according to the proposed characterisation of realism and anti-realism as realist, in virtue of finding a place (albeit a place that is already occupied) in their ontology for entities of the relevant kind. Reliance upon this threefold classification will therefore leave the proposed characterisation unable to capture the important distinction between reductivism and reductionism in Dummett’s sense.

An obvious example of an anti-realist view which would be classified as reductionist according to Putnam's scheme is phenomenalism. For (roughly) understood in metaphysical terms, this view reduces external objects to sense-data, while including sense-data in its ontology. But phenomenalism hardly seems a paradigm of realism.

To give an example in ethics, a crude version of subjectivism might hold that a statement such as

(R) Tax evasion is wrong

literally *means*

(S) I disapprove of tax evasion

rather than merely that moral statements are meaningful in virtue of the non-cognitive states they express. Now, this is no longer generally considered to be a defensible view. However, if someone were to hold this crude view they would naturally be classed as an anti-realist. But they may well include selves, attitudes, and tax evasion in their ontology. That is, from the perspective of a given individual, moral properties are reduced to selves and attitudes whose inclusion in this kind of subjectivist's ontology is not ruled out. It therefore seems that according to the proposed metaphysical classification, a subjectivist of this sort could turn out to be a realist.

4.2. Devitt's independence condition of realism. Devitt, who favours a metaphysical characterisation of realism, includes an independence dimension in his formulation of realism in its most minimal form:

Weak, or Fig-Leaf, Realism: Something objectively exists *independently of the mental*. (Devitt 1991, 23, emphasis added)

I have already argued that the characterisation of realism should not be put in terms of *existence*, but rather the technical notion of *ontological membership*. Nevertheless, in this instance we must turn to the independence requirement to prevent the phenomenalist from being counted as a realist, since she reduces external objects to sense-data (which are not held to be independent of the mental despite being held to exist/hold ontological membership).

Devitt is concerned here with realism about the external world, but we could make use of the same suggestion with respect to subjectivism of the crude sort discussed above. That is, we could say that since this subjectivist reduces moral entities to mental entities, she cannot say that moral properties exist independently of the mental. Consequently, the acceptance of this independence criterion of realism in addition to the ontological criterion already proposed would enable us to exclude this crude subjectivism from the realist camp. Indeed, updating the metaphysical criterion of anti-realism to include a mind-independence disjunct would allow us to class the view as a form of anti-realism.

The updated characterisations of realism and anti-realism would then look something like this:

Alternative Metaphysical Condition of Moral Realism: A position with respect to moral entities is a form of moral realism if and only if someone who holds the position thereby includes moral entities as members of her ontology *and* those moral entities are independent of any mental entities.

Alternative Metaphysical Condition of Moral Anti-Realism: A position with respect to moral entities is a form of moral anti-realism if and only if someone who holds the position thereby excludes all moral entities from membership of her ontology *or* any moral entities that are included in her ontology are held to be identical to (or reducible to) mental entities.

Before turning to an alternative suggestion, it is important to note that the notion of *constitutive* dependence employed here is to be distinguished from that of merely *causal* dependence:

In asserting the independence and objectivity of the world, the realist does not mean to deny certain familiar causal relations involving minds. Beliefs, desires, sensations, and so forth cause behaviour which affects external reality, even creating some items (offspring). And reality acts on minds, causing beliefs, desires, sensations, and so on. These relations, long noted by folk theory and studied by science, pose no threat to realism [about the external world]. (Devitt 1991, 16)

The same can be said for the import of the interactive relationship between minds and moral properties on moral realism.

4.3. Strength and relativity. While the independence condition does enable us to distinguish between reductivist and reductionist (in Dummett's sense) positions without resorting to semantic criteria, it might seem somewhat heavy-handed. After all, both sorts of position at least hold that *something* corresponding to the entities under consideration is to be included in their respective ontologies. This seems like a metaphysically significant contrast with such views as error theory whose ontologies exclude *anything* corresponding to those entities.

We might also suspect that the independence condition, properly speaking, is a suitable criterion only for realism *about the external world*. For it is the condition of independence from the mental which really specifies which entities we are considering: to ask whether there is an external world just is to ask whether there are any entities whose existence is independent of the mental. But why should we include this criterion in characterising other forms of realism, and specifically moral realism? For a start, realism about the mental obviously does not involve the independence of mental entities from the mental!⁶

Here is my suggestion. First, we should retain ontological membership as the mark of realism, and ontological exclusion as the mark of anti-realism,

⁶To be clear, I do not intend here to be in disagreement with Devitt's characterisation of realism as quoted above, since the intended scope of that characterisation is clearly limited to realism about the external world.

in line with the original characterisation proposed at the start of this chapter (as opposed to the alternative characterisation considered in this section). But secondly, within the category of realist theories we can rank positions in terms of strength, a measure corresponding to the degree of independence held to exist between moral entities and mental entities. For example, here is a rough ranking of some metaethical positions from strong to weak:

- (1) A form of Platonism holding that the Forms have ontological membership entirely independently of any human event (inflationary stance);
- (2) A form of moral naturalism holding that goodness just is human survival, the rightness of an action just is its conduciveness to human survival, etc. (reductivist stance);
- (3) A form of metaethics holding that moral entities supervene on the practices and attitudes of humans, though they are not reducible to them (reductivist stance);
- (4) A form of moral naturalism holding that moral entities are reducible to pleasure and pain (reductionist stance);
- (5) A form of subjectivism holding that—from a given individual's perspective—the property of being wrong (for example) just is the property of being disapproved of by that individual (reductionist stance).

If one is friendly to Dummett's suggestion (encountered in chapter 1) that the realist status of a position is a *relative* matter, then one could rephrase this ranking of realist positions in relative terms. That is, a reductivist form of realism, holding that moral entities supervene on (among other things) the mental states of humans would count as an anti-realist theory relative to an inflationary position such as Platonism; but relative to a reductionist view such as the crude version of subjectivism we have been discussing, by contrast, the supervenience view would count as a realist position. I prefer the ranking in terms of strength because not only does it preserve the idea of a scale along which the strength of one's realism can range, but it also places particular emphasis on the key point of disagreement which lies between one group of theories and another: that of whether the entities in question are to have ontological membership *at all*. This seems the most salient point at which to draw the line between realism and anti-realism.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined a purely metaphysical characterisation of the moral realism/anti-realism debate, making use of conditions which, in the moral case, amount to:

Metaphysical Condition of Moral Realism: A position with respect to moral entities is a moral realist position if and only if someone who holds the position thereby includes some moral entities as members of her ontology.

Metaphysical Condition of Moral Anti-Realism: A position with respect to moral entities is a moral anti-realist position if and only if someone who holds the position thereby excludes all moral entities from membership of her ontology.

We have seen how ontological membership is a technical notion used by metaphysicians which can come apart from the everyday notion of existence. Specifically, to include entities of some sort as members of one's ontology is to hold that there are entities of that sort *in the most fundamental sense* (and that there is such a distinct sense). We have also seen how this characterisation can be applied despite diversity of opinion over what the constituents of an ontology are allowed to be.

Applying this characterisation to various metaethical views has resulted in agreeable categorisations both on the realist side (Platonism, Moorean non-naturalism, various moral naturalist theories) and on the anti-realist side (error theory and traditional forms of non-cognitivism). One source of apparent counterexamples came through consideration of Dummett's distinction between reductivist and reductionist theories. However, it was suggested that this can be resolved in the case of moral realism by appeal to a dimension of strength *within* the category of realist theories, corresponding to the degree of mind-independence involved in a given theory. Appeal to relativity provided an alternative resolution to this problem.

CHAPTER 4

Minimalism Again

In the previous chapter we applied our metaphysical characterisation of realism and anti-realism in terms of ontological membership to various metaethical views, finding the categorisations generally satisfactory. However, in Part 1 we saw that it was only with respect to minimalism that significant problems arose for the semantic characterisations of these views. In this chapter I shall discuss the effects of minimalism on various metaethical views as understood in terms of the proposed metaphysical characterisations. Through this discussion I shall also make clear the limits imposed on realism and anti-realism by these metaphysical characterisations, with the result that the problem of Creeping Minimalism is avoided.

1. Applying the proposed characterisation to minimalist positions

1.1. Realism. Devitt suggests that an abductive inference holds from realism to a correspondence theory of truth:

I think it plausible to suppose that ... from a Realist perspective, we need truth to explain the properties of symbols that enable them to play their wide variety of social roles. If we can show this, then we have an ‘inference to the best explanation’ ... from Realism, together with some observations about the properties and relations of the objects the Realist believes in, to a comprehensive theory including Correspondence Truth ... as a part.

(Devitt 1991, 44)

However, there is no *logical* incompatibility between realism about moral entities (i.e. granting them ontological membership) and minimalism about truth. For one might first accept minimalism about truth independently of any metaphysical issues, and then go on to hold that in certain domains such as ethics (concerning which one is a realist) true statements correspond to objects and properties with ontological membership, while in others (concerning which one is an anti-realist) the entities required for correspondence of this kind do not have ontological membership, even though some statements in these domains are nevertheless true. The endorsement of metaphysically significant correspondence in the case of moral statements shows that such a view would still be very much on the moral realist side of the debate, even though the position would be that in no case is it *in virtue of* this sort of correspondence that a given statement is true.

There is no difficulty for the proposed metaphysical characterisation of realism in categorising realist views which incorporate minimalism about semantic features as realist, because semantic features of realist views (minimalist or otherwise) are simply ignored. Whatever semantic features a realist may deflate, the inclusion of moral entities in her ontology will go unaffected and so her classification as a realist on the proposed characterisation will not change.

1.2. Blackburn's quasi-realism. As we saw in the previous chapter, Blackburn's quasi-realist project is motivated in part by an exclusively naturalistic ontology. However, since Blackburn is friendly to the minimalist account of truth,

he is free to hold both (i) that moral statements can be true or false, and (ii) that bivalence holds for moral statements¹. Similar things can be achieved with respect to other semantic notions (such as reference) by the incorporation of minimalist accounts of these into the quasi-realist view.

We saw in chapter 2 that this is what makes so much difficulty for the semantic characterisation of anti-realism. For without the adoption of these forms of minimalism, quasi-realism will undoubtedly be judged as anti-realist, and no minimalist addition changes the *metaphysics* of the view. So even with minimalist positions on truth, reference, facts, etc. the quasi-realist ought not to be reclassified as having a different (i.e. realist) metaphysical position. But these minimalist views can extend to cover whichever semantic criterion of realism we might construct, with the result that any semantic characterisation will be forced to reclassify quasi-realism as a form of realism at some point along this minimalist progression. Dummett himself may have been happy with this conclusion, given his revisionary aim of collapsing metaphysics down to semantics, but it cannot adequately capture the current debate between realists and anti-realists.

By contrast, the proposed metaphysical characterisation yields no danger of quasi-realism being incorrectly reclassified upon its adoption of some minimalist view or other. For the endorsement of moral truth, and of reference to moral entities, marks no change in the *ontological* commitments of the view. Since the ontology lurking behind quasi-realism is an exclusively naturalistic one, it follows

¹See Schroeder (2008, chapters 4 and 5) for relevant discussion.

that quasi-realism will not grant moral entities ontological membership, as long as moral entities are held not to be reducible to natural entities:

The expressivist thinks we can say interestingly what is involved for a subject *S* to think that *X* is good. It is for *S* to value it, and this can be explained in natural terms. ... If you go on to ask this strategist what it is for something to *be* good, the response is that this is not the subject of this theoretical concern—that is, not the subject of concern for those of us who, while naturalists, want a theory of ethics.

(Blackburn 1998, 50)

The view will thus remain in the category of anti-realism as classified by the proposed characterisation.

1.3. Gibbard’s norm-expressivism. The classification of Gibbard’s view is slightly more complicated than that of Blackburn’s. Ontologically speaking, Gibbard holds much the same naturalistic picture as Blackburn:

There are no peculiarly normative, non-natural properties, I’ve insisted—though there are natural properties of special normative interest.

(Gibbard 2003, 192)

And as a fellow moral expressivist, he holds that “to explain the meaning of a [moral] term [one must] explain what states of mind the term can be used to express” (Gibbard 2003, 7). However, he draws a distinction between concepts and properties, holding that the irreducibility of a given normative concept to naturalistic *concepts* need not imply that the normative concept does not pick out

a natural *property*, in the same way that one might hold that the distinct concepts *being water* and *being H₂O* pick out the same natural property:

If the concepts of meaning and of mental content are normative concepts, still the *properties* of meaning or thinking that such-and-such can be natural properties.

(Gibbard 2003, 192)

This distinction, in combination with his account of “planning”, leads Gibbard to the conclusion that normative properties are constitutively reducible to natural properties:

The property that constitutes being okay to do is constructed, I have said, from the properties of contingencies and options. ... [Contingencies and options] are, I argued, properties one can recognize. Suppose, then, we interpret broadly “natural properties” as including such “wild disjunctions” of recognitional properties, even if they are infinite. Then this is a broadly natural property.

(Gibbard 2003, 99)

What Gibbard’s position apparently amounts to, then, is a reductivist account, proposing a dependence between moral properties and natural properties, while denying that the meanings of moral statements can be analysed in purely natural terms (so the view is not reductionist in Dummett’s sense). And as we saw in the previous chapter, this kind of reductivist view is best categorised as a form of realism on the grounds that the holder of such a view includes entities of the type in question (in this case normative entities) in her ontology. Due to the constitutive dependence of normative properties on mental (recognitional) capacities, it will of

course count as a very weak form of realism, in line with the dimension of strength discussed in the previous chapter.

Now, this reduction is not straightforwardly a part of Gibbard's metaethical theory. Indeed, Gibbard does not directly argue that there is a single, determinate set of natural entities to which normative entities are reducible. In fact, his argument to that conclusion is transcendental: he argues that anyone who is involved in the activity of planning (i.e. any agent) is committed to the view that there are objective normative properties, and—via the supervenience of the normative on the natural—that any such properties can be reduced to natural properties.

Qua metaethical theorist, then, Gibbard does not actually include moral properties in his ontology: he makes no direct argument concerning the ontological membership of normative properties. It is only on the assumption that Gibbard accepts the conclusion of his own transcendental argument that we can characterise him *qua* planner as holding a metaethical view that grants ontological membership to normative properties. Thus Gibbard himself (we may presume) is a realist according to the proposed characterisation.

2. The limits of realism and anti-realism

2.1. Minimalism about ontological membership. The proposed metaphysical characterisation of moral realism and anti-realism, as we have just seen,

does very well in response to minimalism about various semantic features. Specifically, it is able to preserve the original metaphysical category of a view despite its subsequent adoption of any such minimalist theses. And in this respect the metaphysical characterisation is preferable to the alternative semantic characterisation.

But can the problem of Creeping Minimalism not extend into metaphysics to infect this metaphysical characterisation? Suppose we were a minimalist about ontological membership, holding something like the following collection of views:

- (T) “*N*” refers to some object *X* if and only if *X* is identical to *N*;
- (U) *X* exists if some expression “*N*” refers to *X*;
- (V) *X* has ontological membership if and only if *X* exists.

Then, since the anti-realist is happy to talk about the existence of moral properties (on a minimalist understanding of “existence”), could she not also happily talk about the ontological membership of moral properties by deflating ontology? If so, then Creeping Minimalism infects the proposed metaphysical characterisation just as much as it does semantic characterisations.

To see why the problem does not reappear for the metaphysical characterisation, it is important to be clear on the process involved in each step of the minimalist progression. The initial state of the debate is this: realists hold certain metaphysical commitments which are disputed by the corresponding anti-realists, who will also dispute certain of the realists’ semantic commitments insofar as those

commitments are taken to entail metaphysical commitments. From here, minimalism allows the anti-realist to reject such a connection between any given semantic commitment and any metaphysical commitment, and consequently to endorse each such semantic commitment. Due to the distinction between mere existence and ontological membership (a technical notion), minimalism even allows the anti-realist to endorse the existence of entities of the relevant kind (not exactly a semantic commitment) without taking on any additional metaphysical commitments.

But if the minimalist move is attempted with regard to ontological membership, then the anti-realist's aim must apparently be to include entities of the relevant kind as members of her ontology *still without taking on any metaphysical commitments*. At this point, however, there are no further domains in which one might take on metaphysical commitments, and so the position can no longer be a substantive metaphysical position. That is, the adoption of minimalism about ontological membership is *incompatible with either* of the metaphysical positions of realism and anti-realism.

The result is that minimalism about ontological membership does not yield an anti-realist position that is indistinguishable from some relevant realist position. Rather, it yields a position of a third type, neither realist nor anti-realist, one which declines to make any metaphysical commitments whatsoever. In this way the problem of Creeping Minimalism is avoided on the metaphysical characterisation of the realist/anti-realist debate.

What if an anti-realist were to adopt minimalism about ontological membership without adopting minimalism about some other (e.g. semantic) feature? Would this not allow her to retain some metaphysical commitments besides commitments about ontological membership? And would this not allow the threat of Creeping Minimalism to return to the metaphysical characterisation of the realism/anti-realism debate?

No. Consider the following inflationary semantic views:

- (W) “ p ” is true if and only if it corresponds to the facts;
- (X) “ N is F ” corresponds to the facts if and only if N refers to an object X and X has property F ;
- (Y) “ N ” refers to some object X if and only if relation R holds between X and “ N ”.

We cannot take these commitments as having metaphysical significance without the additional commitment that there might be such entities as those postulated here (facts, objects, properties, etc.) *in a fundamental, metaphysical sense*. That is, unless the issue of ontological membership is taken to be a metaphysically significant issue, no other commitments can be held to have metaphysical significance.

So minimalism about ontological membership really is beyond the limit of metaphysics. In the rest of this section I would like to explore what this view involves in a little more detail.

2.2. Ontology without metaphysics. Does it even make sense to be a minimalist about ontology? We might well think, given that the notion of ontological membership is a technical one used by metaphysicians, that it is directly contradictory to grant or deny ontological membership to a certain sort of entity while claiming that one is not thereby involved in any metaphysical commitments. If so, the threat of Creeping Minimalism retreats even further away. However, a more charitable understanding of ontological minimalism.

We might instead interpret the ontological minimalist as holding something like the following view: (i) that the aim of ontology is to establish what exists *strictly speaking*, (ii) that at some point, the question of ontological membership came to be viewed as separate from the question of mere existence, (iii) that this was a mistake since there is no further question of ontological membership besides the question of what exists. Carnap's (1950) discussion of "internal" versus "external" questions provides an early enunciation of the view that we cannot ask the second-order question of whether a system of entities exists, only the first-order question of which entities' existence the system countenances. Three and a half decades later, Fine's "Natural Ontological Attitude" with respect to scientific entities appears to be exactly the position of our ontological minimalist:

Let us say, then, that both realist and anti-realist accept the results of scientific investigations as 'true', on a par with more homely truths. (I realize that some antirealists would rather use a different word, but no matter.) And call this acceptance of scientific truths the "core position." What distinguishes realists

from antirealists, then, is what they add onto this core position. ... It seems to me that when we contrast the realist and the antirealist in terms of what they each want to add to the core position, a third alternative emerges—and an attractive one at that. It is the core position itself *and all by itself*.

(Fine 1984*b*, 96–97)

In the realm of ethics specifically, Putnam (2004) appears to have a view of this sort:

I see ... the attempt to provide an Ontological explanation of the objectivity of ethics as [an] attempt to provide *reasons which are not part of ethics for the truth of ethical statements*; and I see [this attempt] as deeply misguided.

(Putnam 2004, 3)

Although Putnam pronounces an “obituary on Ontology”, he remarks that “the capital letter here is intentional” (Putnam 2004, 2), so I take it that Putnam would have no problem granting things ontological membership in a lowercase, minimalist manner.

Thus it seems that realism and anti-realism do not exhaust logical space. In fact, there is a third position occupied by such philosophers as those just cited who decline to involve themselves in metaphysical commitments. Note, though, that this is not simply an abstention, but a total rejection of the terms on which a choice between realism and anti-realism must be made.

2.3. The minimalist view of the debate. One interesting result of minimalism about ontological membership is the view it entails of the players in the realism/anti-realism debate. For if granting something ontological membership

just is to hold that it exists, there are two ways to interpret anyone who grants entities of a certain sort ontological membership while holding that such entities do not exist (or vice versa). One way is to see such views as entailing a contradiction, with the result that no such realist or anti-realist position is coherent, and there is no substantive dispute between these realists and anti-realists. The other is to interpret realists and anti-realists as employing a distinction between genuine existence/ontological membership and an infelicitous (e.g. metaphorical) sort of appeal to existence/ontological membership. In this case, their dispute boils down to a *first-order* ethical dispute, rather than a second-order metaethical dispute. For example, suppose that a realist and a anti-realist both endorse

(**Z**) It is a fact that tax evasion is wrong

and consequently both hold that the moral fact that tax evasion is wrong exists, but what they claim to disagree about is whether to grant that moral fact ontological membership. The ontological minimalist could interpret the anti-realist's refusal to add this moral fact to her ontology as betraying her view that this moral fact does not literally exist after all (and that therefore (**Z**) is not literally true). So although the anti-realist may be happy for us to talk as if there is such a fact (perhaps she sees it as an important form of metaphor), she does not really think that tax evasion is wrong, whereas the realist does.

What about someone who holds (i) that everything to which they grant ontological membership exists, (ii) that nothing else does, but (iii) that they are nevertheless involved in Ontology in an uppercase, metaphysically significant sense? From the perspective of the ontological minimalist, this latter claim is either empty by virtue of collapsing metaphysics into (perfectly legitimate) first-order claims, or nonsense (if supposed to provide the resources necessary for distinctively metaphysical explanations²). If empty, then the view will be classed as a form of ontological minimalism; if nonsense, then it will be classed as a form of attempted realism.

Note that the view described here that realists and anti-realists fail to have any substantive dispute is not a form of *quietism*. Quietism is the view that no substantive dispute occurs because the two parties effectively *agree* on a substantive matter, and that they merely disagree on how to talk about it (or simply that they mistakenly take themselves to have substantive disagreement on account of the fact that they use different language to enunciate one and the same position). Dorr (2005) argues that quietism regarding a metaphysical matter can be shown to favour one view among the several competitors in the relevant field, in whose terms the quietist interprets the claims of the other views. If Dorr's argument is sound, then quietists can be "unmasked" (Dorr 2005, §17) as implicitly endorsing a particular metaphysical position, rather than standing

²C.f. my responses to Dreier's (2004) and Asay's (2013) characterisations of realism in chapter 5, sections 5 and 6.

above the fray. By contrast, the ontological minimalist does not hold that there is a position which (despite their claims to the contrary) is common to realists and anti-realists. Rather, she holds that there is *no such position* to be had. (And she is therefore immune to a Dorr-like move aiming to unveil her as holding one metaphysical position or another.)

Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the effect of minimalism of various kinds on several metaethical positions in the light of the proposed metaphysical characterisations of moral realism and anti-realism. As far as minimalism about semantic features and even existence (insofar as this is a distinct notion from ontological membership) go, these metaphysical characterisations fare better than the semantic characterisation discussed in Part 1: a clear distinction is maintained, and the problem of Creeping Minimalism can be avoided.

I have also discussed minimalism about *ontology*, arguing that even in this case the problem of Creeping Minimalism does not reappear since to be a minimalist about ontological membership is to relinquish any metaphysical position such as realism or anti-realism. The possibility of ontological minimalism therefore imposes a limit on the realism/anti-realism debate. Ontological minimalism also provides a radical view of the realism/anti-realism debate to the effect that disputes between realists and anti-realists either (i) are merely disagreements about first-order questions, or (ii) fail to engage in any substantive debate at all.

However, in the light of ontological minimalism we need to update our characterisations of moral realism and anti-realism to reflect the finding that ontological minimalists can include moral entities in (or even exclude them from) their ontologies without holding a distinctively metaphysical position. Thus:

Revised Metaphysical Condition of Moral Realism: A position with respect to moral entities is a moral realist position if and only if someone who holds the position thereby includes some moral entities as members of her ontology, *where including something in one's ontology is a distinctively metaphysical commitment.*

Revised Metaphysical Condition of Moral Anti-Realism: A position with respect to moral entities is a moral anti-realist position if and only if someone who holds the position thereby excludes all moral entities from membership of her ontology, *where excluding something from one's ontology is a distinctively metaphysical commitment.*

Here “distinctively metaphysical” can be taken to mean that such a commitment is not equivalent to any first-order commitment. This revised formulation allows us to ensure that ontological minimalists are not mistakenly classified as moral realists or anti-realists. It also respects the result that from the perspective of the ontological minimalist there are no such substantive positions as realism or anti-realism, since there is no such thing as a distinctively metaphysical commitment.

CHAPTER 5

Objections and Replies

In this final chapter, I shall briefly formulate and address seven objections to the metaphysical characterisation of the realism/anti-realism debate that I have put forward, before concluding this paper.

1. Against ontological membership as the mark of realism?

First of all, here is an objection to ontological membership as the central criterion of realism. We have seen how questions of ontological membership and existence can come apart. FIGURE 1 provides a taxonomy of several of the views on the status of moral entities that we have encountered:

		Moral entities have ontological membership?	
		Yes	No
Moral entities exist?	Yes	Traditional forms of realism	Blackburn's quasi-realism
	No	???	Mackie's error theory

FIGURE 1. Possible combinations of views on the ontological membership and existence of moral entities

What are we to make of the hitherto undiscussed position which combines the claim that moral entities have ontological membership with the denial that they exist? An example of this position would be a Meinongian error theorist who holds this collection of views:

- (1) All entities—whether existent or non-existent—have ontological membership.
- (2) Among those things which have ontological membership but do not exist are all the moral entities (moral properties, Platonic Forms, etc.).
- (3) All (non-negative, atomic) moral statements are false.

On the metaphysical characterisation, this view is categorised as a form of realism, while Blackburn's quasi-realism is categorised as a form of anti-realism. But isn't

this the wrong way round? How can a form of error theory count as realism? Quasi-realism at least allows us to talk wholeheartedly about moral truths, properties, etc.

With regard to quasi-realism, I have already discussed this view in detail (chapter 4, section 1.2) and stand behind its categorisation as anti-realist. The case of the Meinongian error theorist, however, is more troublesome. There is a sense in which the view clearly is realist, since it holds that moral entities are non-existents and it is realist about non-existents. This sense is adequately captured by the metaphysical characterisation. But what are we to make of the charge that this is a version of error theory—a supposedly anti-realist position?

At this point some clarification of the position of the error theorist is required. In fact, we can distinguish three potentially distinct¹ positions which might be labelled “error theory”:

Ontological Error Theory: No entities of the kind in question have ontological membership

Existential Error Theory: No entities of the kind in question exist

Semantic Error Theory: (Non-negative, atomic) statements in the relevant domain are uniformly false

and indeed there may be forms of “error theory” worthy of the name which consist in the conjunction of two or more of these views. Now, the Meinongian version of

¹Not everyone will judge the Ontological and Existential positions to be distinct (in particular the ontological minimalist will not).

error theory we are considering is incompatible with **Ontological Error Theory**.

This leaves us to consider the Meinongian theory as a combination of **Existential Error Theory** and **Semantic Error Theory**.

Taking **Existential Error Theory** first, the question is: is the proponent of this view a minimalist about existence? Put another way, does she think that accepting or denying existence to entities of some sort has metaphysical consequences for her view? If she is a minimalist, and thinks that no metaphysical consequences follow from denying that moral entities exist, then it seems that this component of the Meinongian version of error theory cannot have any bearing on whether it counts as realist or anti-realist, for these are metaphysical positions. If, on the other hand, she is not a minimalist, and she consequently views the claim that moral entities do not exist as metaphysically significant, then it does seem that this component of the position might have an impact on its status as realist or anti-realist.

Similar things can be said about **Semantic Error Theory**. If the proponent of this view is a minimalist about truth and falsity, then we cannot take her position that all (non-negative, atomic) moral statements are false to reflect any particular view about the nature of moral *reality*. If instead she takes this component of her view to have metaphysical consequences, then we cannot immediately conclude that the view is realist or anti-realist.

So if this Meinongian error theorist is a minimalist about both existence and truth, we can happily conclude that, despite holding some form of error theory, her view is a moral realist view. This is because the error-theoretic parts of her position are entirely separate from any metaphysical issues. The only part of her view which says anything about moral reality is the part which grants moral entities ontological membership, but this has nothing to do with her status as an error theorist. That one can be a moral error theorist² while still being a moral realist is an unexpected result. It should be uncontroversial, however, given that this result is only possible when the tenets of error theory are taken to carry no metaphysical weight.

What are we to make of the situation in which the Meinongian error theorist rejects minimalism about either existence or truth? It is no good for the metaphysical characterisation to point out (i) that the view grants moral entities ontological membership only insofar as they are non-existent entities, to all of which it grants ontological membership, (ii) that the only way of distinguishing among its views regarding entities of specific kinds is hence in terms of whether it holds them to exist, and to conclude (iii) that the position's realist/anti-realist status with respect to issues other than non-existent entities ought to be decided in terms of whether it holds that entities of the relevant sort exist. For in purely metaphysical terms this would be unable to distinguish between the minimalist

²It will have to be a very different form of error theory to that of Mackie (1977), which—as previously discussed—presupposes an exclusively non-moral ontology.

and the non-minimalist about existence; some sort of semantic criterion would be required to distinguish the metaphysically significant understanding of “exists” from the minimalist understanding.

So it seems that my view is committed to maintaining that this Meinongian form of error theory, in the case where minimalism about existence and truth is rejected, is nevertheless a moral realist view simply because the condition of ontological membership is met. I think I shall have to bite the bullet here and accept this result; the alternative is to allow semantic criteria back into the characterisation of realism, and that is what this entire paper has fought against. The shot can perhaps be softened by introducing another dimension of strength along which realist views can range: stronger forms of realism hold that more entities of the relevant kind *exist* in addition to granting them ontological membership, and that more statements of the relevant kind are *true* (all within the category of realism). An opposing dimension could be included in the characterisation of anti-realism, such that stronger forms of anti-realism deny the existence of more entities of the relevant kinds, and deny truth to more statements in the relevant domain.

2. A dilemma for the non-cognitivist who accepts semantic minimalism

Of course, there are truths, and truths.

(Fine 1984*b*, 96)

I shall now discuss an argument for the conclusion that a semantic characterisation of realism in terms of truth is perfectly adequate. That view was rejected in virtue of the fact that certain moral anti-realists (specifically non-cognitivists) are able to adopt a minimalist theory of truth, and consequently to agree with realists that moral statements are truth-evaluable, subject to bivalence, and that some of them are true. The semantic characterisation was brought into question because at this point it was unable to distinguish between realists and minimalist anti-realists (this was the problem of Creeping Minimalism).

However, rather than turning to ontological membership to solve this problem, one might simply deny that a non-cognitivist can consistently adopt a minimalist account of truth. If so, then the problem of Creeping Minimalism is solved: it is not that realists and anti-realists cannot be distinguished, but rather that anti-realists cross the boundary into realism the moment they adopt minimalism about truth. This would of course involve contradicting the minimalist's claims that no metaphysical consequences come from the adoption of a minimalist theory.

This argument comes in the form of a dilemma: *either* the non-cognitivist makes use of two types of truth, one of which grounds the distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive while the other applies to both the cognitive and the non-cognitive indiscriminately; *or* the non-cognitivist makes use of only one type of truth which applies to both the cognitive and the non-cognitive indiscriminately. On the former option, the non-cognitivist is not a thoroughgoing

minimalist, and the proponent of the semantic view can recast her semantic characterisation of the debate in terms of the non-minimalist type of truth which the non-cognitivist uses to ground the distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive. On the latter option, the non-cognitivist apparently loses the distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive which is crucial to her position, and the proponent of the semantic view gets to declare this metaethicist a realist.

This dilemma can be avoided, however, by careful attention to what is involved in the non-cognitivist's progression from a correspondence theory of truth to a minimalist theory. It is not that, having first established the difference between the cognitive and the non-cognitive in terms of truth-evaluability as understood from the perspective of the correspondence theorist, the non-cognitivist then simply declares the cognitive and the non-cognitive both—as defined in terms of correspondence truth—to be truth-evaluable given the newly adopted perspective of the minimalist. If that were the case then the dilemma really would apply.

What the progression in fact amounts to is a redefinition of the cognitive and the non-cognitive. I said earlier that minimalism and non-cognitivism sat well with a use theory of meaning. Although the minimalist grants that statements in both the cognitive realm and the non-cognitive realm attempt to *describe reality*, a distinction can nevertheless be drawn concerning what gives them their meaning (i.e. what they are used to do). An expressivist might even go so far as to claim that both sorts of statement are meaningful in virtue of expressing a certain kind of

mental state³. But she will propose a difference in their use at some level, perhaps grounding the cognitive/non-cognitive distinction in terms of the type of mental state expressed (which seems a natural way to go).

In this case the characterisation of the cognitive and the non-cognitive in terms of truth is dropped, and the non-cognitivist is free to drop the correspondence theory of truth completely in favour of the minimalist account, while maintaining a genuine distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive. Thus the dilemma is avoided, and we can conclude that non-cognitivism is compatible with minimalism about truth. Hence the problem of Creeping Minimalism cannot be dismissed so easily by a proponent of the semantic characterisation of the realism/anti-realism debate.

3. Ontological minimalism is anti-realism!

W. M. Urban once wrote a book called *Beyond Realism and Idealism*, about which it became customary to say “according to Urban, what lies beyond realism and idealism is idealism”.

(Rorty 1986, 110n)

As I have set things out, the ontological minimalist is neither a realist nor an anti-realist. This is because, on my view, both involve an attempt to make a metaphysically significant claim: that entities of a certain kind ought to be (respectively) included in or excluded from one’s ontology. But is ontological minimalism not simply another species of anti-realism?

³Schroeder (2008, chapter 7.1) gives compelling reasons for an expressivist to be an expressivist about *both* normative and descriptive discourse.

The worry is that there is no distinctive, third position contrasting with both realism and anti-realism, only the position of someone who has not yet made up her mind. As Rorty (1986, 110–111) puts it, “In the eyes of realists, an above-the-battle stance is merely disingenuous”. Insofar as the ontological minimalist declines to accept any metaphysical commitments, then, she merely *delays* the choice between realism and anti-realism, rather than *rejecting* the choice.

However, given this picture there are reasons to conclude that the ontological minimalist will align with the anti-realists when it comes down to it. This is because the ontological minimalist leaves no explanatory role for moral entities preserving ontological membership in a metaphysically significant sense. On her view, neither the truth of our moral statements, nor the rightness/wrongness of our actions, nor the outcomes of our moral choices, nor the content of our moral beliefs (etc.) need to be given metaphysical explanations which make reference to such entities. So we might suppose that, on grounds of parsimony, the ontological minimalist would exclude moral entities from her ontology, were she to answer the question.

In fact, I do not think this would be a good interpretation of the ontological minimalist for the realist (or indeed the anti-realist) to make. The ontological inflationist must insist that there is a genuine, metaphysically significant question of ontological membership to be answered here—which the ontological minimalist

disputes—but it would be infelicitous to impute an implicit answer to the minimalist. For the minimalist’s refusal to answer the question may reflect an aim more significant than simply the desire to avoid metaphysical commitments.

The minimalist’s problem with the metaphysical question may not be just that committing oneself one way or the other is unnecessary (though Fine 1984*a*, Fine 1984*b*, for example, seem to suggest it is), but that the fact that the question can be posed at all indicates that our language in this regard is deficient. That is, it is not that answering the question is surplus to requirements, but that even acknowledging the legitimacy of the question before declining to answer it requires one to engage with a vocabulary unsuited to our needs (as the minimalist sees it). And it might be that the only way to make progress in such circumstances is to drop the issue as phrased in the deficient vocabulary.

To illustrate with an analogy, Newtonian physics involves a single concept of mass, while relativistic physics has two mass concepts: inertial mass (a measure of an object’s resistance to acceleration) and gravitational mass (a measure of an object’s gravitational properties). Suppose that you, as a staunch Newtonian, met a relativity theorist, and asked her opinion on whether or not objects have Newtonian mass. The relativity theorist will have a difficult time answering the question because, although both relativistic mass concepts are genetically related to the Newtonian mass concept, neither is a clear candidate *as a translation* of the Newtonian term. But she could legitimately object if you bluntly classified her as

denying that objects have Newtonian mass. She neither accepts that nor leaves open the option of accepting it. Instead, she thinks we would do best to ignore the question⁴.

Likewise with the ontological minimalist: the option of excluding moral entities from her ontology in a metaphysically significant way is neither implicitly endorsed nor even left open as an option. Of course, if the ontological minimalist is wrong, and metaphysically significant ontological questions are not mere artefacts of a defective vocabulary, then this attempt to evade the question by claiming that the language is deficient is inadvertent subterfuge, and adding the anti-realist commitment of excluding moral entities from ontological membership would improve the position. But we should not (automatically⁵) interpret the ontological minimalist as an anti-realist in disguise.

4. Ontological minimalism is realism!

I shall now turn to an argument against ontological minimalism as a distinct, third position from the opposite direction: should we not classify the ontological minimalist as a realist? It seems that the minimalist is willing to say everything that the realist wants to say: moral statements are truth-evaluable, some are true, bivalence holds for the moral domain, moral entities exist, and even

⁴C.f. Carnap (1950)

⁵If the realists/anti-realists are right, then it is perfectly possible that someone could purport to be an ontological minimalist while implicitly accepting the anti-realist commitment of metaphysically significant ontological exclusion for entities of the relevant kind.

that moral entities have ontological membership! So is there really any principled reason not to apply the “realist” label to the minimalist?

Furthermore, one cannot simply stipulate whether or not one’s commitments are metaphysical. The minimalist claims that she adopts each realist tenet *without* taking on board the metaphysical commitments the realist endorses. But why allow her that? And if we refuse to allow the minimalist to make such moves, then we disallow Creeping Minimalism from the start, and can hang on to the semantic characterisation of realism, rather than adopting the proposed metaphysical characterisation of the debate!

In reply, the ontological minimalist sees two main differences between the realist and the minimalist. The first is percussive:

What then of the realist, what does he add to his core acceptance of the results of science as really true? My colleague, Charles Chastain, suggested what I think is the most graphic way of stating the answer—namely, that what the realist adds on is a desk-thumping, foot-stamping shout of “Really!”

(Fine 1984*b*, 97)

But a mere percussive difference will not be enough to convince a skeptic that minimalists are not secretly realists. It does not seem that any significant change in their respective views would be brought about if the realists simply stopped thumping their desks or if the minimalists started.

The second perceived difference is that the realist, in proposing a view which she takes to be both true and in conflict with anti-realist views, feels entitled to a sense of achievement. The realist claims that something has been done which expands our knowledge, rather than simply restating first-order moral claims. With the realist account in hand, we have answers to a new set of second-order questions: about what makes a given moral statement true or false, or what makes a given action right or wrong, or what a given moral term means. And these are taken to be *separate* questions from the first-order questions of, for example, why “Tax evasion is wrong” is true or equivalently why tax evasion is wrong (plausible first-order answer: because it increases social inequality), or what “is right” means (plausible first-order answer: that the weight of moral reasons speaks in favour of the relevant agent performing the action in question).

The ontological minimalist, on the other hand, sees this claim of achievement as a fraud. As we saw in the previous section, the minimalist takes issue with realists and anti-realists even trying to make space for these second-order questions. Her solution is to treat these additional questions with “benign neglect” (Rorty 1986, 113). So we should keep ontological minimalism clearly separate from realism, resolving the worry that the semantic characterisation of realism would be sufficient after all.

5. Dreier's "explanation" account

Dreier (2004) puts forward a view of the moral realism/anti-realism debate which would be happy with the negative case advanced here against the Dummett-inspired semantic characterisation. However, he puts forward an alternative positive account, according to which "The divide between realism and [anti-realism], at least in metaethics, rests on the substance of questions about metaphysical explanation" (42). Why would we think that this " 'explanation' explanation" (39) gives us the difference between realists and anti-realists? According to Dreier:

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 ... In particular, to explain what it is to make a moral judgment, we need not mention any normative properties.

(Dreier 2004, 39)

And the corresponding stories told for error theorists and prescriptivists will end the same way. Meanwhile, realists of both naturalist and non-naturalist stripe will mention normative properties in explaining what it is to make a moral judgment. Thus this account successfully categorises the traditional realist and anti-realist views as well as the more recent forms of minimalist non-cognitivism. It also appears to have an advantage over the characterisation proposed in this paper in that it avoids all the complications encountered in connection with ontological minimalism: since ontological minimalists need make no appeal to normative properties

to explain such things as what it is to make a normative judgment, they will be classed as anti-realists on Dreier's view.

Asay (2013, 217) presents a worry for Dreier's account:

Requests for explanations are deeply sensitive to context and pragmatic interests. For any given datum—such as the truth of ["Obama believes that torture is wrong"]—there are several explanatory demands that may be asked of it. It is too simple to think that there is some single, privileged explanation. ... It seems likely that explanatory resources involving moral properties are just one more thing that minimalism will make available to both sides of the chasm.

So, armed with a minimalist account of whatever is involved in a realist's explanation, the anti-realist might be able to proffer the very same explanation⁶, bringing into question the idea that a difference in terms of explanation can be maintained in the face of minimalism.

I do not think Asay's point as it stands is a particularly strong objection to Dreier's account, but in explaining why not we shall see how the characterisation proposed in this paper is actually more attractive than Dreier's view. For Dreier's account to resist Asay's objection, he does not need to show that there are explanations available to the realist which are not available to the anti-realist (which minimalism suggests cannot be done); instead he needs to show that there are explanations available to the anti-realist which are not available to the realist.

But minimalism only allows the anti-realist to appropriate realist explanations, it

⁶In fact, minimalism may undermine the idea that the realist's "explanation" has any explanatory power at all. Still, the point remains that every explanation the realist has, the anti-realist also has as soon as minimalism is brought into play.

does not let the realist appropriate anti-realist explanations! In the rest of this section I shall (i) discuss the best candidate for a type of explanation available to anti-realists but not to realists, (ii) show that, while this criterion does well in distinguishing *actual* moral realist and anti-realist positions, it fails to carve up *conceptual* space appropriately, and (iii) demonstrate that the proposed ontological characterisation does better in this regard.

Asay's point that we should not consider there to be a "single, privileged explanation" is a valuable one. Still, as long as there is one sort of explanation that lets the anti-realist—but not the realist—explain what it is to make a normative judgment without mentioning normative properties, then Dreier can simply rephrase his characterisation in terms of *that sort* of explanation specifically. As realists and anti-realists see it, generally speaking, there is such a form of explanation. Specifically, it is the sort that lets anti-realists give a metaphysical explanation of what it is to have a moral belief without appealing to moral entities⁷.

Why cannot realists help themselves to anti-realist explanations in this context? Because this kind of metaphysical explanation is offered as an account of what it is to have a moral belief *in the most fundamental sense*, that is, with reference to ontological constituents alone. The whole appeal of moral realism is

⁷Why focus on a metaphysical explanation? After all, realists and anti-realists alike might be tempted to give, for example, a neurological explanation (misguidedly in my view) of what it is to have a moral belief that makes no appeal to moral entities. However, the sort of explanation we are after here is one which will reflect what is distinctive of their views *qua* metaethicists.

that very straightforward explanations of moral beliefs are available which make reference to fundamentally moral ontological constituents, such that one does not have to go out of one's way to construct an explanation which leaves out moral properties. The appropriation of anti-realist explanations of this metaphysical sort would therefore introduce a great tension into any realist position. This sort of metaphysical explanation is the only obvious candidate for a type of explanation available to anti-realists but not to realists.

Note how the "explanation" account of the distinction between moral realism and anti-realism can roughly be recast in terms of ontological membership: anti-realists are those whose ontologies do not include moral properties to which appeal can be made in *the most fundamental* metaphysical explanations of (e.g.) moral belief, whereas realists are those whose ontologies do include moral properties to appeal to in such explanations. Thus the characterisation proposed in this paper not only captures the success of the "explanation" account in categorising metaethical views, but also *explains* its success. For the reason why the metaphysical explanations of realists differ from the metaphysical explanations of anti-realists is that they have different metaphysical resources; that is, they have different ontologies.

Having said that, the requirement that realists make appeal to moral properties in their explanations of (e.g.) moral belief is not a *logical* requirement, but comes merely from parsimony: why would one bother including items of a certain

sort in one's ontology if one thought nothing could be explained by their inclusion therein? Were anyone to go against parsimony and include moral properties in her ontology but accept an "anti-realist" (e.g. non-cognitivist) explanation of what it is to have a moral belief, then the ontological characterisation would classify them as a realist, while Dreier's "explanation" account would classify them as an anti-realist. Indeed if, in the most fundamental ontological sense, there really are moral entities, then realism is true whether or not our best explanations of what it is to have a moral belief make reference to them⁸. The ontological characterisation thus improves upon the "explanation" account by respecting the platitude that the difference between the moral realist and the moral anti-realist is that (in the most fundamental sense) the realist thinks moral phenomena are real while the anti-realist denies this is so.

Finally, note also that as soon as we have narrowed the sort of explanation under consideration down to one kind in particular—the most fundamental, metaphysical kind of explanation—we have lost the simplicity that the "explanation" account seemed to bring to the question of ontological minimalism. For the ontological minimalist declines to engage in this kind of explanation at all. So the

⁸C.f. Kahane's (2012, 18) similar point in favour of the independence of realism from semantic commitments.

only apparent advantage this view had over the proposed characterisation has to be renounced once the view is laid out in detail⁹.

6. Asay's truthmaker account

Asay (2013) presents what he takes to be a metaphysical characterisation of the realism/anti-realism debate. On Asay's view, there are three components to moral realism, rejection of any of which renders one a moral anti-realist:

Moral realists are those who (i) admit that there are moral truths, (ii) accept that those truths are made true by a realism-relevant (i.e., mind-independent) reality, and (iii) hold that the nature of the truthmaking relation that obtains between those truths and that reality is itself of a mind-independent variety ... Emotivists and error theorists reject (i), relativists, subjectivists, and constructivists reject (ii), and quasi-realists reject (iii).

(Asay 2013, 18)

The view seems to do well in categorising the various realist and anti-realist views discussed and it has the additional benefit of vindicating—to a certain extent—discussions of moral realism/anti-realism which have focused on the semantic features of truth and of correspondence. For not only is a commitment to moral truth a part of Asay's characterisation of realism, but we are also told what was *correct* about the idea that correspondence truth had anything to with realism: according to Asay, realism requires that moral statements be made true *by the right sorts of things in the world*. Acceptance of the correspondence account of *what truth is*

⁹Dreier discusses neither the ontological characterisation offered here nor the position of ontological minimalism, so it would be a mistake to attribute to him the specific view that the "explanation" account has an advantage over the ontological characterisation with regard to their handling of ontological minimalism.

was overly restrictive, but the weaker claim that, for the realist, the truth of moral statements has to depend on the right sorts of things is retained.

However, this latter feature of Asay's account belies an unsevered link to the semantic characterisation of the debate (besides the residual requirement that there be moral *truths*¹⁰). Asay (2013, 18) claims that "Truthmaker theory is available to all who are interested in ontology, and does not presuppose a substantive theory of truth". I agree that it does not presuppose a correspondence theory of truth over (e.g.) a verificationist theory of truth—or vice versa. But it seems to me that truthmaker theory is incompatible with the minimalist position on truth. If so, then it is not the case that "truthmaker theory is available to all who are interested in ontology" since anyone who is interested in ontology despite accepting minimalism about truth will be unable to endorse the claims of truthmaker theory.

How is truthmaker theory contrary to minimalism about truth? Minimalism rejects the idea that truth has anything in the way of a metaphysical nature, and therefore rejects the idea that the truth of moral (or any other) statements entails any sort of metaphysical dependence. And truthmaker theory introduces a metaphysical framework underlying truth of the very sort a minimalist rejects.

Of course, the minimalist about truth can endorse truthmaking relations in a *causal* sense; she might hold, for example, that what makes "Alfred is a

¹⁰See Kahane (2012) for reasons to doubt that realism *must* include the commitment that there are moral truths.

bachelor” true is the fact that Alfred is a social recluse and never meets anyone, or the fact that he has a repellant personality. She can even accept something closer to what the truthmaker theorist has in mind. Rundle (1979, 345), whom I take to speak for the minimalist, claims that there is “nothing suspect” in the use of the phrase “makes true” in cases such as “her being your mother’s sister’s child makes it true that she’s your cousin”. But that is not to say that the minimalist can accept the metaphysical commitments of truthmaker theory:

We can certainly allow that, for instance, it is in virtue of his being rich that Rockefeller can be described as ‘rich’ [i.e. that “Rockefeller is rich” is true]. Slightly more informatively, though without changing the issue, we can say that having a lot of money makes you rich ... But repetitions rather than explanations are all that these ways of speaking will produce; or, if explanations, explanations only of the meanings of words.

(Rundle 1979, 349)

The upshot is that Asay’s account fails to distinguish between realists and anti-realists who both accept minimalism about truth. For not only can a quasi-realist, equipped with minimalism about truth, accept (i) that there are moral truths, and (ii) that those truths are made true by a realism-relevant reality, but even (iii) that the nature of whatever truthmaking relation that obtains between those truths and that reality is *exactly what the realist who accepts minimalism about truth holds it to be*. Thus the problem of Creeping Minimalism infects Asay’s supposedly “metaphysical” characterisation of the realism/anti-realism debate, and the view offers no improvement over the purely semantic characterisation.

My proposal is that we sever all links to the semantic characterisation and thereby escape the problem of Creeping Minimalism. We cannot vindicate the semantic characterisation, but we can easily explain its prevalence with two observations: (i) for a long time metaethical divisions were perfectly aligned with semantic divisions, and (ii) at the same time many people were suspicious of metaphysics. Today, however, certain developments have split apart metaethical divisions from semantic divisions, and philosophers are more willing to engage in metaphysics as a distinct discipline. So in characterising differences between metaphysical positions we should have no qualms about adopting a characterisation which includes no semantic component at all.

7. The Dummettian characterisation vindicated?

Finally, an argument aimed at (but not against) the ontological minimalist. I argued in chapter 4 that from the perspective of the ontological minimalist, there is no substantive dispute between the realist and the anti-realist because neither holds a coherent position. But is this not supremely uncharitable? Would it not be better to interpret the debate as centering on some other issue regarding which there can be coherent positions, and to dismiss all this nonsense (as the ontological minimalist views it) about metaphysics as an unfortunate misunderstanding?

One obvious candidate for this recentering of the debate is ... semantics! Specifically, we could characterise the realist core as a (coherent) set of commitments about truth and bivalence (and anti-realism as the rejection of one of these commitments). This will involve a certain amount of reclassification (minimalist non-cognitivists will have to count as realists for example), but at least these philosophical positions will be vindicated as coherent and as engaged in substantive dispute with each other, so this seems a small price to pay. And while we are at it, why not simply call *this* “metaphysics” since there is no substantive alternative anyway?

Well, I suppose if everyone were an ontological minimalist this would be a fairly harmless way of reinterpreting historical doctrines. I am unsure how useful it would be, given that there are already labels enough for the many distinctions within the field of semantics; it is not clear to me that this transferred “realism”/“anti-realism” distinction would map onto any important division among semanticists. More importantly, however, not everyone is an ontological minimalist: there are plenty of people who take themselves to be engaging in metaphysics as a field in its own right. For these theorists, the problem of Creeping Minimalism is a serious threat unless the realism/anti-realism distinction is understood by way of purely metaphysical criteria. If ontological minimalists start unilaterally using these terms to latch onto a distinction in semantics, then this will simply add terminological confusion to a debate that is already difficult enough.

Indeed, as I see it, precisely this has happened. Dummett's revisionary project has led to semantic characterisations of realism and anti-realism becoming widely accepted by full-blooded metaphysicians who therefore fall foul of the problem of Creeping Minimalism. At the most general level, my alternative prescription boils down to two theses:

Hypothetical Metaphysical Characterisation of the Debate: If there is such a thing as metaphysics which constitutes a substantive field in its own right, then the best characterisation of realism and anti-realism about a given realm of entities is given by the distinctively metaphysical criteria of ontological inclusion/exclusion.

Revisionary Advice: If there is no such thing as metaphysics which constitutes a substantive field in its own right, then the best course of action is simply to renounce any metaphysical commitment, rather than to reinterpret the debate in terms of some other field.

I see relatively little benefit for the ontological minimalist in resurrecting metaphysics, but a great cost: widespread confusion.

Conclusion

In the first part of this paper, we examined the prevalent way of characterising the realism/anti-realism debate in semantic terms. Chapter 1 presented

Dummett's arguments for such a characterisation, and the features of his particular version. The main features of Dummett's particular semantic characterisation of realism were (i) bivalence, (ii) taking surface form seriously, and (iii) relativity (the claim that the classification of a view as realist or anti-realist must take into account *local* features of the debate).

We saw towards the end of chapter 1 that these criteria enable generally accurate categorisation of various metaethical views such as non-naturalist moral realism, naturalist moral realism (though Jackson's moral functionalism presented the intriguing possibility that a view's status as realist or anti-realist could depend on whether or not it is correct), traditional expressivism and traditional prescriptivism. Error theory presented a difficulty which could be solved either by viewing it as a *limiting case* of realism, or by including an additional semantic criterion, namely that the moral realist hold that some moral statements are *true*.

In chapter 2, we saw how the minimalist theory of truth and the use theory of meaning impact upon the ability of the semantic characterisation to classify views as realist or anti-realist successfully. These views enable an anti-realist—for example, an expressivist—to accept that there are true moral statements (and in turn that bivalence holds for moral discourse), and to insist that she takes the surface form of moral statements seriously. In general, a minimalist stance on some semantic feature enables one to hold that moral discourse displays that feature without thereby taking on any metaphysical commitments. But that means

that a moral anti-realist—by way of these minimalist manoeuvres—can meet any semantic criterion one might propose in one’s semantic characterisation of realism, without a change in metaphysical status (i.e. without becoming a realist in the process).

We saw that this spells trouble for any semantic characterisation. Dummett’s arguments (as discussed in chapter 1) in favour of a semantic characterisation were (i) that without semantic constraints metaphysical positions are unconstrained, (ii) that without semantic constraints we have no way to choose among metaphysical positions, and (iii) that a semantic characterisation allows for better generalisation than a characterisation in terms of entities. But if minimalism enables an anti-realist to adopt all of traditionally “realist” semantics while still maintaining a metaphysically distinct position, then (i) and (ii) are undermined, and (iii) is brought into question since the semantic characterisation is shown to be unable to provide a fully general account of the difference between realism and anti-realism.

In the second part of this paper, I have put forward a positive account of the difference between realism and anti-realism in distinctively metaphysical terms. Specifically, I have argued that the metaphysical debate between moral realists and moral anti-realists is best captured by the following criteria:

Revised Metaphysical Condition of Moral Realism: A position with respect

to moral entities is a moral realist position if and only if someone who

holds the position thereby includes some moral entities as members of her ontology, where including something in one's ontology is a distinctively metaphysical commitment.

Revised Metaphysical Condition of Moral Anti-Realism: A position with respect to moral entities is a moral anti-realist position if and only if someone who holds the position thereby excludes all moral entities from membership of her ontology, where excluding something from one's ontology is a distinctively metaphysical commitment.

As we saw in chapter 3, care is required (i) to recognise the diverse range of application of the term "entity", and (ii) to distinguish the distinctively metaphysical question of what to include in one's ontology from the potentially separate question of what exists. In that chapter, I also addressed various complications which arise from the diverse views on what the constituents of an ontology might be (concrete particulars, events, facts, properties, etc.). The upshot of that discussion was that we have to take the phrases "includes some moral entities as members of her ontology" and "excludes all moral entities from membership of her ontology" (as used within our conditions of moral realism and anti-realism) to involve entities which *in a fundamental sense* are (or would be) moral. That is, the moral status of such (proposed) entities must be amenable to the language of ontology. I considered and rejected an amendment to the metaphysical characterisation involving independence from the mental, suggesting that we distinguish *within the category of*

realist positions the degree of mind-independence that they countenance (although I admit that an appeal to relativity may be a viable option here as well). Meanwhile, we saw that a formulation along these lines adequately categorises various forms of realism (both naturalist and non-naturalist) as well as traditional forms of anti-realism (expressivism, prescriptivism, and error theory).

In chapter 4 we returned to the issue of minimalism. The metaphysical characterisation has a clear advantage over the semantic characterisation regarding the problem of Creeping Minimalism, at least as far as minimalism about *semantic* features goes, because adopting minimalism about any given semantic feature requires no ontological commitment, and thus makes no difference to the metaphysical categorisation of such a view. For example, if an expressivist is an anti-realist prior to adopting minimalism about truth (and/or reference, etc.), then she will not become a realist merely by virtue of adopting minimalism about truth (and/or reference, etc.). The same goes for minimalism about existence insofar as this is a separate issue from the metaphysically significant question of ontology.

In applying that principle to various metaethical theories, we found the surprising result that Gibbard was perhaps best viewed as a realist despite being an expressivist. This categorisation had nothing to do with Gibbard's semantics, but rather his apparent willingness to accept a *purely metaphysical* reduction of moral properties to naturalistic properties, and thereby to include moral entities in his ontology. The moral here is that we must not let the semantic paradigm (e.g.

expressivism) within which a given metaethical view is developed blind us to the metaphysical commitments of the theory taken as a whole.

In the second part of that chapter, we saw that the problem of Creeping Minimalism is not brought back into this metaphysical categorisation through the possibility of minimalism about ontology. This is because *to deflate ontology is to reject metaphysical commitments altogether*. So a minimalist about ontology can be neither a moral realist nor an anti-realist. That one is able to reject both moral realism and moral anti-realism might come as a surprise. But I think this is actually a very desirable result given that realism and anti-realism are metaphysical positions and that the ontological minimalist rejects metaphysical commitments outright.

Of course the metaphysical characterisation proposed here will mark a division between moral realists and moral anti-realists only on the assumption that it is possible to make distinctively metaphysical commitments by way of including things in—or excluding things from—one's ontology. For the ontological minimalist, the question of what to include in one's ontology is not a distinctively metaphysical question, and so from her perspective *no-one* is a coherent moral realist or a coherent moral anti-realist—there are no such positions to hold. Thus from the point of view of the ontological minimalist, the debate between those who take themselves to be moral realists and anti-realists must amount to a merely first-order moral debate or else ultimately nonsense.

I have not discussed the tricky issue of relativism. This is because I suspect that there are a great many views which come under the heading of “moral relativism”, such that some will come out as realist, some as anti-realist, some as ontologically minimalist, and perhaps some as indeterminate among these positions. Consideration of relativism also makes pertinent the issue of whether ontological membership itself admits of relativity, and if so how that could affect a view’s metaethical status. I have no settled view on these metametaphysical questions.

My discussion has been restricted to *moral* realism and anti-realism, but it seems that the proposed characterisation would be straightforwardly applicable to other realist/anti-realist debates. For example, I have suggested that realism about the future might be formulated as the inclusion of future events in one’s ontology, and anti-realism as the exclusion of such events from one’s ontology; realism about the external world we might view as granting ontological membership to mind-independent objects, where the independent component here specifies what it is to be an external object, rather than giving us a necessary feature of realism *per se*. At any rate, the proposed account may at least provide a default framework from which to build an adequate characterisation for any given realism debate.

In this final chapter I have raised and responded to seven objections, covering the following:

- (1) An objection to an ontological formulation from the possibility of a Meinongian error theorist;
- (2) An attempt to show that non-cognitivism is incompatible with minimalism about truth (and therefore that the problem of Creeping Minimalism does not infect the semantic characterisation of moral realism and anti-realism);
- (3) The claim that ontological minimalism is really just a form of anti-realism;
- (4) The claim that ontological minimalism is really just a form of realism;
- (5) Dreier's alternative characterisation in terms of metaphysical explanation;
- (6) Asay's alternative "metaphysical" characterisation in terms of truthmakers and truthmaking;
- (7) An attempt to vindicate Dummett's revisionary suggestion aimed at the ontological minimalist.

I hope my responses have been satisfactory. In particular, I would like to reiterate my response to the final objection here.

Supposing we are suspicious of metaphysics' claim to constitute a distinctive field of its own, ought we not to reinterpret metaphysical positions in terms of related fields whose substance we recognise? This is not a good idea: as long as there are significant numbers of people who do believe that metaphysics is a substantive field in its own right, an attempt to reorient the debate along non-metaphysical lines will cause—and has caused—a great deal of confusion. Better

to retain a purely metaphysical characterisation of our metaphysical debates, and simply reject such debates as nonsense if that is what we think they are.

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